
December 2015

Hamlet and Amleth, Princes of Denmark: Shakespeare and Saxo Grammaticus as historians and kingly actions in the Hamlet/Amleth narrative

Megan Arnott
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>



Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Medieval Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Arnott, Megan (2015) "Hamlet and Amleth, Princes of Denmark: Shakespeare and Saxo Grammaticus as historians and kingly actions in the Hamlet/Amleth narrative," *The Hilltop Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 6. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol8/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

Hamlet and Amleth, Princes of Denmark: Shakespeare and Saxo Grammaticus as Historians and Kingly Actions in the Hamlet/Amleth Narrative

By Megan Arnott
 Department of English
 meganmelissa.m.arnott@wmich.edu

Introduction

Shakespeare played a decisive role in creating a Middle Ages for the generations that came after him. In the introduction to *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, Curtis Perry and John Watkins note that “almost any book written on the Hundred Years War or the Wars of the Roses begins by explaining just how Shakespeare got it wrong. He conflated characters, condensed chronologies, cleaned up some careers, and sullied others” (Perry and Watkins 1). The two tetralogies, which include *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1* and *Part 2*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI Part 1-3*, and *Richard III*, comprise the body of work that is commonly studied for medievalisms, and in these plays Shakespeare’s interpretation of the past demonstrates nation building, ‘Englishness,’ and a concern about the nature of power (Perry and Watkins 16). A different kind of engagement with the medieval past is occurring in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, though *Hamlet* is no less concerned with nations and power. Set in a contemporary Danish court, the play draws on the medieval Scandinavian tradition of Amleth, a version of which was recorded in the thirteenth-century, in Books III and IV of Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (“The Deeds of the Danes”). Both *Hamlet* and the tetralogies are manipulating medieval material, but the tetralogies fictionalize an English past in a way that makes readers reflect on historical events. *Hamlet* is not a medievalist text like *Henry V* or *Richard III*, which adapt medieval historical events for dramatic purposes. Perhaps it is more medieval, because it is an adaptation of a medieval tale, inheriting the medieval themes from the original telling, even when the medieval history is removed, whereas the tetralogies are more original constructions. In fact, in this regard *Gesta Danorum* bears more similarity to these ‘Wars of the Roses’ texts because the *Gesta Danorum* records and creates a national past for Denmark, in a way that is similar to how Shakespeare’s tetralogies create a national past for England. The tetralogies look back to a recent medieval past from an early modern perspective, and the *Gesta Danorum* is looking to an ancient and early medieval past from the High Middle Ages. *Hamlet* and the Amleth narrative in *Gesta Danorum* both tell the same story, but represent two different ways of interacting with a tale from the past. The way the two stories play off of each other when read together brings out the differences between the way that Shakespeare and Saxo Grammaticus act as antiquarians in this instance. The *Gesta Danorum* uses the Amleth narrative as an instructive instance of history and *Hamlet* spins a medieval tale into an entertaining yarn, more recognizable for its contemporary themes than for its references to the past. Both texts look to ancient/early medieval Scandinavian tradition to make arguments about kingship which will be relevant to the author and to their respective audiences.

By looking at *Gesta Danorum* Amleth through a *Hamlet* lens, we see the text in two parts—the part of the narrative that coincides with the events in *Hamlet*, and the events which extend past the *Hamlet* narrative. In that light, the Amleth story opens before the start of the play, beginning when brothers Orvendil and Fengi are given joint rule of Jutland by Rørik in Book III. Orvendil is a successful pirate and wins Gerutha, the daughter of Rørik, as his wife. In a fit of jealousy Fengi kills his brother. This brings us into the action of *Hamlet*. Amleth, Orvendil’s son (and Rørik’s nephew), feigns madness, though that is not enough to fool his

uncle Fengi, who abstains from killing Amleth himself for political reasons. After being sent on a mission to England that Fengi hoped would bring on his death, Amleth returns at his own funeral and takes revenge on Fengi for his father's death. This would be where the play narrative ends. Davidson suggests that the story leading up to Fengi's death could be a separate narrative from that which continues because it is told in Amleth's speech to his people and again in a depiction on Amleth's shield. The idea that it may be a separate tale only complicates the transmission history between *Gesta Danorum* and *Hamlet*, as we shall see (Davidson 91). Fengi's death marks the end of Book III and Book IV opens on Amleth addressing his people, taking over the governance of Jutland and having further dealings in both England and Scotland, before being killed by Rørik's successor (and Amleth's cousin) Viglek.

Whether you are looking at *Hamlet* through the lens of the *Gesta Danorum* or not, the play opens *in media res*. At the beginning of the play Hamlet's uncle Claudius has already married Gertrude, Hamlet's mother and widow of King Hamlet, Prince Hamlet's father. Hamlet's father's ghost reveals to the protagonist that he was murdered by his brother Claudius. Hamlet is able to stall his enemies and further reveal the guilt of his uncle Claudius by feigning madness. Hamlet confronts his mother about Claudius and accidentally kills Claudius's spy Polonius, father of Ophelia, the woman who seems to be in love with Hamlet. Ophelia becomes deranged and drowns, most likely as an act of suicide, though it might also have been an accident. Claudius tries to send Hamlet to England to be killed by the English on Claudius's behalf, but when this plan fails, as it did in Saxo Grammaticus's tale, Claudius arranges for Laertes, Polonius's son and hence Hamlet's enemy, to fence with Hamlet, but with a poisoned-tipped foil. In this match Laertes kills Hamlet, but Hamlet kills both Laertes and Claudius with the same foil. Gertrude dies by drinking poison Claudius laid out for Hamlet in case the fencing match did not go as planned. Prince Fortinbras of Norway, whose advance has been threatened throughout the play, steps in at the end and takes the Danish crown.

The events in *Gesta Danorum* and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* are similar enough to posit a direct relation between the texts, but different enough and separated enough by time for the relation to be unknown. It is the *Gesta Danorum* specifically, and less the rest of the medieval Scandinavian tradition of Amleth, that starts the textual journey to becoming *Hamlet*, though other sources, which will be discussed later, cannot definitively be ruled out. For instance, if the killing of Fengi is a separate tradition, which may have been indicated by its retelling within the text, it may have been transmitted from parallel sources, though again the similarities between the stories suggest some sort of transmission link between the two texts. Work that has been done in this area is summed up by William F. Hansen: "I do not, however, take up the old problem of the origin of the Hamlet story, not because the question is uninteresting, but because it appears to be unanswerable" (Hansen xi-ii). Scholars, interested in the historicity of either text, have done some work in tracing the Amleth tradition. A text of *Gesta Danorum* was printed in Paris in 1514 and a copy of the Amleth story was told by François de Belleforest in the fifth volume of *Histoires tragiques* in 1570 (Hansen 66). This is supposedly a transitional text, though Davidson, not unbiased as an editor of Saxo Grammaticus, sides with Yngve Olsson in arguing that Shakespeare instead used a simple Latin version of the *Gesta Danorum* as his source material, dispensing with possible intermediaries (Davidson 67). An earlier *Hamlet*, no longer extant, was acted in 1589, and it is believed to have been the work of Thomas Kyd, though Philip Edwards indicates that that also is uncertain (Edwards 3). The textual tradition of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* itself is complicated, as there is not one definitive text for how *Hamlet* was acted on the stage in Shakespeare's day (Edwards 8). There is also a suggestion that Shakespeare was with the acting troupe that went to Elsinore in 1586; this does not offer any clear suggestions as to what impact this may have made on the playwright, but suggests further ambiguous

Danish inspiration for the play, either through sources or through contact with Elsinore (Strigley 178).

Proving the influence of the earlier text on the former is impossible and undoubtedly unimportant, because the texts are separated by, among other things, time, place, genre, and author. And yet the existence of both versions of this story impacts the way that both are read. Hamlet presides over the mental space of at least the English readers of the *Gesta Danorum*, and the presence of the medieval tale (including the clear, though hard to define, link between the two texts) makes the play a work of medievalism. Edwards identifies the following as the most important changes from the medieval tale to the Elizabethan play:

1. The murder becomes secret; 2. A ghost tells Hamlet of the murder and urges revenge;
 3. Laertes and young Fortinbras are introduced; 4. Ophelia's role is extended and elevated; 5. The players and their play are introduced; 6. Hamlet dies as he kills the king.
- (Edwards 2)

Differences and similarities between the two texts may occur for any number of reasons, but looking at the texts through this comparative lens brings out certain readings. Thinking about the play as an expression of medievalism influences the way we read the text. Instead of trying to sort out the exact medieval influences on Shakespeare's work, it is more fruitful to see how having knowledge of the medieval tale, and the *Gesta Danorum* in particular, directs our understanding of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

Saxo Grammaticus wrote the *Gesta Danorum* ("Deeds of the Danes") over many years. Scholars argue about the order in which the books were written, but the completion of the work probably occurred between 1208 and 1218 (Davidson 1). In the Preface Saxo states that he is writing this work on behalf of his patron and in the service of constructing a national identity:

cum ceterae nationes rerum suarum titulis gloriari, uoluptatemque ex maiorum recordacione percipere soleant, Danorum maximus pontifex Absalon patriam nostram, cuius illustrande maxima semper cupiditate flagrabat.

because other nations are in the habit of vaunting the fame of their achievements, and joy in recollecting their ancestors, Absalon, Archbishop of Denmark, had always been fired with a passionate zeal to glorify our fatherland.

(3)

As Saxo points out, he is engaging in a literary trend, prominent in this period of the Middle Ages, of creating a national history and identity for his community (Davidson 6). Saxo writes in Latin because works of national history, like Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* and Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, tended to be, though were not always, written in Latin (Hansen 40).

The first books of the *Gesta Danorum* discuss the distant and largely mythic past, in which a dragon fight that occurs in Book II does not seem out of place. The story of Amleth, his father Orvendil and his evil uncle Fengi fit into this legendary section of the text. Saxo argues for the historicity of these stories by attributing them to sources: the Preface gives credit to sources such as Danish oral tradition and the "*Tylensium industria*" (diligence of the men of Iceland) who continue to "*officia continuae sobrietatis exeruant, omniaque vitae momenta ad excolendam alienorum operum noticiam conferre soleant*" (pursue a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds) (5). Based on the way Saxo treats his early material, and the way that other texts are similarly constructed, it is clear that these fanciful tales do not break with the expectations of Saxo's audience; for them the legendary past was more fantastic than the more recent one, but events in the early books and events in the later books both depict, for that audience, the Danish past.

It is not possible to confirm Saxo's sources, so there is no way to know what material they covered exactly or what Saxo may have added himself to the narrative. Nevertheless, between Saxo's claims and extant external sources there is enough evidence to suggest the Amleth tale is rooted in longstanding Scandinavian traditions. Hansen, studying the Amleth narrative in Saxo Grammaticus, has identified five medieval Danish chronicles that give a very truncated version of the life of Amleth (*Annales Ryenses* [The Annals of Ryd], *Annales Slesvicensis* [The Annals of Slesvig], *Runekrøniken* [The Runic Chronicle], *Gesta Danorum pa danskæ* [The History of the Danes in Danish], and *Sagnkrøniken* [The Legend Chronicle]), which suggests a wide knowledge in Denmark (Hansen 147-9). Sources in Iceland also suggest there was a longstanding tradition there. The *Ambales Saga*, recorded after the Middle Ages, tells a romantic version of the same story as found in Saxo (Hansen 38). There is also, dating from about two centuries before the *Gesta Danorum*, a reference by an Icelandic poet to 'Amloði's meal,' referring to sand (Hansen 5). This mirrors the event in the *Gesta Danorum* where, in his feigned madness, Amleth refers to the sand on the shore as flour that "eadem albicantibus maris procellis permolita esse" (had been ground by the foaming billows when it was stormy) (79). Hansen demonstrates that there may be a link between this story and Scandinavian words for fool: "as a common noun *amlóði* is current in Icelandic in the sense of 'an imbecile, weak person,' and it survives in Norwegian dialect as *amlod* 'a fool'" (Hansen 6).

So Saxo Grammaticus constructs his 'history' by bringing together a narrative out of a combination of these sources. It is important to analyze Saxo's role as an historian because of how much historicity and the textual tradition have been the mainstay of English scholarship on the *Gesta Danorum*, directly because of the popularity of *Hamlet*. When scholars have gone looking for Hamlet sources or an historical Hamlet they have been led here, and have been disappointed with the historicity (Welsh 4). And many have been led here: Philip Edwards, in his introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition, does not overestimate *Hamlet*'s importance when he states "it is probably safe to say that in the world's literature no single work has been so extensively written about as *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*" (Edwards 32). Hilda Ellis Davidson, in her introduction to Peter Fisher's translation of the first nine books of Saxo Grammaticus, shows how English scholarship of the text has centered around the Amleth story (Davidson 2). Hansen's work, while about the Amleth tale, is called *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*, even though Hamlet and Amleth are not etymologically related (Hansen 6). Therefore, while it is clear that Shakespeare (or at least the sources for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) chose that English name based on its resemblance to Amleth, there is no reason to suppose the Amleth of Saxo Grammaticus should be Anglicized for modern readers as Hamlet in translation or scholarship, unless it is to remind Shakespearean readers why they are researching Saxo Grammaticus in the first place. Davidson attributes the first translation of Saxo into English by O. Elton in 1894 to the popularity of Shakespeare's play (Davidson 67). English speaking scholars (and filmmakers, taking into consideration Gabriel Axel's 1994 *Royal Deceit*, which tells the *Gesta Danorum*'s Amleth story, but only the parts that correspond with the play) have trouble representing Saxo Grammaticus outside of the lens of *Hamlet*.

Saxo is not just a compiler of sources, but a deliberate editor and creator of a specific narrative. The text may be pulling different sources for the Amleth story together, but Davidson has demonstrated that the narrative that comes out of the first books of Saxo Grammaticus specifically explores the ideology of kingship. Amleth is not just a story of a Danish king that should be included because this is a text about Danish kings, but a story that demonstrates different principles of good and bad kingship, and so is a kind of exemplar (Davidson 6). The text does not try to be objective but regularly interjects with value judgements about a king's actions. For instance, summing up Amleth's actions at the end of Book III the text states that "[i]taque et se sollerter tuatus et parentem strenue ultus, fortiori

an sapientior existimari debeat, incertum reliquit" (considering the skill with which he preserved himself and the energy with which he exacted atonement, one can hardly decide which to extol more, his courage or his wisdom) (84). When describing Fengi the text says:

[a]t ubi datus parricidio locus, cruenta manu funestam mentis satiavit. Trucidati quoque fratris uxore potitus incestam parricidio adiecit... Idem actrocitatem facti tanta calliditatis audacia texit, ut sceleris excusationem benevolentiae simulatione componeret parricidium que pietatis nomine coloraret.

[o]nce given an opportunity to dispatch him, Fengi dyed his hand in blood to satisfy his black desires. Besides butchering his brother he added incest to fratricide by taking possession of his wife... Fengi covered up this foul deed with such presumptuous cunning that he manufactured an excuse of kindheartedness for his crime, and gave the murder a coloring of scrupulous conduct (77).

The text helps the reader to make judgements about characters' actions when the actions themselves might be interpreted either way. For instance, the king of England is treated negatively as having a "*curam adumbratis*" (malignant purpose) when he plots to kill Amleth to avenge Fengi, despite the fact that the king of England exchanged oaths with Fengi that they would do this (88). This action is not very different from Amleth's vengeance, but the text leaves us in no doubt that killing Fengi was justified whereas killing Amleth is an evil plot on the part of the king of England. *Gesta Danorum* frames the Amleth story as a tale of two kings, one bad and one good, by using language that specifically makes value judgements about both kings' actions and by including this story in a text that is interested in this overarching theme of kings; since the other narratives in the text are about kings, we are bound to notice the kingly actions in the Amleth story.

The *Gesta Danorum* makes Amleth particularly effective amongst other kings. The proto-Hamlet story, emphasizing Amleth's cunning and revenge upon his uncle, is repeated, as has been mentioned, but the text also focuses on the unusual kingly qualities Amleth demonstrated during his feigned madness, including his ability to speak the truth (as a king should, according to the text) while trying to keep up this ruse: "*[f]alsitatis enim alienus haberi cupiens, ita astutian veriloquio permiscebat, ut nec dictis veracitas deeset, nec acuminis modus verorum indicio prodetur*" (Amleth wanted to be held a stranger to falsehood, yet he mingled artfulness with plain speaking, so that he adhered to the truth without letting it show through to betray his acute mind) (79). The jockeying for position amongst nobles and within noble families, the wide travel, the political machinations through marriage, and the death in open battle with other kings are all interesting aspects of this story, each contributing to the characterization of Amleth as a good king, though the clever way that Amleth brings revenge on his uncle is what comes under focus when the tale is paired with *Hamlet*.

There are no political reasons why Saxo needs to portray Amleth so positively. This king is a minor king of Jutland, and not descended from, or contributing descendants to, the main Zealand line that Saxo is keenly interested in. Just as the setting of Shakespeare's play in Denmark allows the play to open up to universal themes in England, this example is removed by dynasty as well as temporally from any royal audience the *Gesta Danorum* has, allowing the lessons of kingship to be universal. When talking about Fengi the text can give advice like "*neque enim apud principes fides mendacio deest, ubi scurriles interdum gratia redditur, obtrektoribus honos*" (if buffoons are sometimes favored and slanderers honored, people will certainly believe the lies of princes) and "*quisquis enim uni se flagicio dederit, in aliud mox procliuor ruit, ita alterum incitamentum est*" (whoever commits himself to one crime soon finds himself sliding downhill towards the next), offering morals for any leader (77). Amleth possesses the basic qualities necessary for a good king, including noble birth,

intelligence, martial power, and ambition, all of which are relevant for Saxo Grammaticus's depiction of a good king.

The retention of Denmark in *Hamlet* is significant, not least of all because the story could have been set elsewhere to match the change in epoch. By keeping the play in Denmark the setting serves as a place both familiar and foreign to the audience. By keeping it familiar, English audiences recognize it as a real place. Gunnar Sjørgen shows that Elsinore is meant to resonate with an English audience because it was one of two ports English ships would have been familiar with (Sjørgen 69). Other places where an historical Denmark asserts itself is in the reference to the intemperate drinking, which Michael Srigley argues was a well-known aspect of the Danish court of Christian IV, a contemporary of Shakespeare (Srigley 168). It is mentioned several times as characteristic of the Danes, often by Hamlet, who states "though I am native here/ And to the manner born, it is a custom/ More honoured in the breach than the observance" (1.4.13-16). Wittenberg was a well-known school where there were many Danish students, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are aristocratic Danish names (Srigley 168). However, while the references to a specific Denmark enrich the setting of the play, no references deny the universality of the Elsinore of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. If some names are distinctly Danish, others are Greek (Laertes, Ophelia), Latin or Neo-Latin (Claudius, Cornelius, Marcellus, Polonius), or Italian (Horatio, Barnardo) (Hansen 85). Edwards remarks that "Fortinbras, with its Frenchness ('Strong-arm'), is an odd name for a Norwegian king and his son" (Edwards 70). Polonius's reference to Danskers in 2.1.7 represents the confusion, because while it is clearly meant to be Danes, Sjørgen shows the word actually meant people from Danzig (Gdansk) in Poland, and that there is a strange geography at play, with a confusion between the borders of Denmark, Norway, and Poland (Sjørgen 69). Of course, Shakespeare may be representing a legitimate understanding of continental geography that did not correspond with reality, but regardless, the placement of Norway and Poland on the borders of Denmark tighten the action of the play, making the setting more claustrophobic, which has been noted during stagings of the play, so that it is not necessarily a mistake (Duffy 141). This is Denmark, but it is not just Denmark. Denmark is a stand-in for a state that is familiar, but not too familiar. In 2.2 when Hamlet exclaims "Denmark's a prison," Rosenkrantz replies "Then is the world one" (2.2.233-34). The choice and portrayal of Denmark is important to the message of kingship in *Hamlet*, because Denmark is recognizable to the English audience as a real place, and yet the way it is described would be foreign to people of Denmark. The general change of time, from a tale of the past to a tale of the imprecise present, allows the universality of the emotional components of the play to be augmented by a real, yet universal Denmark. Consequently, the ideas about kingship put forth in the play are not specific to Denmark, but can be applied to all kings, and all nations, or at least to power structures familiar to Elizabethan audiences. When Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* are juxtaposed, the reader is drawn to what it means to be king or to hold power. Unlike *Gesta Danorum*, it is not as important that it seem a real time or place to its audience.

This lack of specificity is significantly different from the *Gesta Danorum*, since Saxo's purpose is to create a specifically national history, one that sets Denmark apart from other countries, but that demonstrates Denmark is likewise as worthy as others of a national history. Despite this lack, *Hamlet* is still similar to Saxo and to the tetralogies because it is similarly interested in nation building. Perry, commenting on Benedict Anderson, demonstrates the early modern fascination with the "imagined community" of England (Perry 173). The idea of an imagined nation does not have to be limited to depictions of one's own nation. *Hamlet*, like the tetralogies, is concerned with nation and statehood, organized around a central kingship. The medieval narrative has been brought closer to audiences by updating the Danish references, but maintains distance from home and relation to the original tale by retaining Denmark as a location. Most importantly, it retains the theme of kingship from *Gesta*

Danorum, although it is no longer Germanic kingship, or even medieval kingship from the High Middle Ages, but the age of absolute central rule, i.e. the age of monarchs like Elizabeth and Henry IV of France who were able to control large territories directly by means of elaborate bureaucracies (Perry 175). Analyzing Elizabethan plays that engage with the Middle Ages, Perry states that “for though these plays stage certain kinds of cultural heterogeneity ... Helgerson is clearly correct to argue that they are ultimately plays about the consolidation of royal power conceived of as central to a brand of national identity” (Perry 174). *Hamlet* is engaging with the Middle Ages, though in a way that puts history on the backburner.

Drinking at funerals, fostering, and sworn brotherhood, all of which are part of the social and political structure of the kingdom in *Gesta Danorum*, have different places in the social and political structure in *Hamlet*, though they have not entirely disappeared (Hansen 83). When looking at the importance of the social and political structure to Amleth’s motivations (the importance of lineage to kingship and societal expectations of revenge dictate his actions), this draws attention to the importance of the political structure to Hamlet’s motivations. An elective monarchy is an aspect of Germanic kingship, old-fashioned even by Saxo Grammaticus’s time. The *Gesta Danorum* balances an antiquarian idea of what Germanic kingship was in a mythic heroic age and what kingship looked like at the beginning of the thirteenth-century. In the *Gesta Danorum* it is common for brothers to take over kingship, as royal blood and kingly qualities are more important than primogeniture. Fengi and Orvendil ruled together. Edwards argues that for Elizabethan audiences this was very antiquated, and that they had a “deep emotional commitment to primogeniture and the right of a son to inherit” (Edwards 42). He goes on to say that “for the audience, the system is a legalism which runs counter to their instinctive sense of rightness” (Edwards 42). The people who elect kings, an important group in the Migration Age depicted in *Gesta Danorum*, are called the “rabble” in the Elizabethan play:

The rabble call him lord,
 And as the world were now but to begin,
 Antiquity forgot, custom not known,
 The ratifiers and props of every word,
 They cry ‘Choose we! Laertes shall be king.’
 Caps, hands and tongues applaud it to the clouds,
 ‘Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!’ (4.5.102-08)

This is not an ancient Germanic election, but simply a country that does not honor those who are the kings by right of primogeniture. This affects Hamlet, who is the offended party. His loss of a father is also the loss of a promised office, which should have been his by right of primogeniture.

When the system falls apart, and royalty cannot be maintained, the state falls apart. An interesting similarity between *Gesta Danorum* and *Hamlet* is the conflation between the person of the king and the political body that makes up the nation. *Gesta Danorum* means “Deeds of the Danes,” but it is a history of the deeds of exclusively Danish kings. A history of the people is a history of the kings, and this is true of the other Latin national histories that Saxo references. It is interesting, then, to see the way the king stands in for the country in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Rosencrantz, talking about the office of the king, says that “Never alone/ Did the king sigh, but with a general groan” (3.3.22-23). Laertes, when convincing Ophelia not to pursue Hamlet, says that he may have lost interest because

He may not, as unvalued persons do,
 Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
 The sanctity and health of this whole state,
 And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
 Unto the voice and yielding of that body

Whereof he is the head. (1.3.19-24)

The king must act for the country. In the play, not only are kings responsible for the state, but they stand in for it. Claudius and King Hamlet are both referred to as Denmark, the King of Norway is called Norway and it is the same for England; when Claudius sends a message to the King of England for Hamlet to be killed, he says “Do it England,/ For like the hectic in my blood he rages,/ And thou must cure me” (4.3.61-63). Therefore, there is added significance to Marcellus’s line that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.5.90) and to Hamlet’s statement that “Denmark’s a prison” (2.2.233) because in both cases it shows how there is something wrong in the state, and also in the mental capacity of him who embodies the state.

In the *Gesta Danorum* Amleth’s madness is a political act. Amleth uses it to save himself from the same fate as his father: “*eoque calliditatis genere non solum ingenium texit, uerum etiam salute defendit*” (this piece of artfulness, besides concealing his true wisdom, safeguarded his life) (88). This is what made the tale distinct from the other tales of kingship in this large body of work, and why it gets passed down to us. But the nature of Hamlet’s madness is different. If the act of madness is also for self-preservation, it is of a different kind. Saxo Grammaticus praises Amleth for his cunning, but there are no narratorial interjections directing the audience’s reading in *Hamlet*; Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia in his madness does not seem praiseworthy, though the ambiguity of his madness is part of what draws in audiences. In Saxo Grammaticus the madness is a way for Amleth to remain connected to his world, and to ensure his proper inheritance. The ‘antic disposition’ marks Hamlet’s alienation from his world, and brings on Claudius’s suspicion that something is wrong (Edwards 46). Claudius’s guilt is revealed through feigned (or maybe real) madness, which allows for political action on Hamlet’s part, but Fengi’s guilt is known by everyone and Amleth’s madness is a stalling technique, allowing him to kill Fengi when he is ready. Madness in both texts is a way of enacting family and dynastic politics, though the madness in the two texts has opposite effects; Hamlet uses it to bring on his political action and Amleth uses it to stall his.

Hamlet’s character is more complex than Amleth, as *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is arguably more (psychologically) complex than *Gesta Danorum*, but both texts end their narratives by commenting on how royal a personage the protagonist could have been if fate had been kinder. *Gesta Danorum* ends the tale of Amleth by talking about his death in battle: “[h]ic Amlethi exitus gemit, qui, si parem naturae atque fortunae indulgentiam expertus fuisset, aequasset fulgore superos, Herculeam virtutibus opera transcendisset” (such was Amleth’s departure. If fate had tended him as kindly as nature, he would have shone as brightly as the gods and his courage would have allowed him to surpass the labours of Hercules) (92). Fortinbras, who arrives just in time in *Hamlet* to pick up the political pieces, commands:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal; and for his passage,
The soldier’s music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him. (5.2.374-379)

The two texts talk about the character of the royal personage, because both texts share an interest in expressing an ideology of kingship in addition to a narrative. Looking at *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* through the lens of the *Gesta Danorum*, what Shakespeare highlights in the medieval tradition is the variety of ways that kings shaped their state and how the character of a king is important to his ability to rule.

The texts together evoke a sense of history because that is one thing Saxo Grammaticus claims his text is, and because the *Gesta Danorum* comes up when we are trying to locate sources or history for Shakespeare; the existence of the *Gesta Danorum*, rightly or not, lends

historical weight to Shakespeare's narrative. *Hamlet* is not considered a historical fiction text in the same way that the tetralogies are (it is not a work of fiction grounded in real historical events and characters recognizable to the audience), but it has colored the popular interpretation of any possible historical Amleth that may have lived, as well as real locations in Denmark. Saxo Grammaticus says "*insignis eius sepulture ac nomine campus apud Iutiam exstat*" (there is a plain in Jutland famous as [Amleth's] burial place and named after him) (92). Hansen states that there was either a medieval tradition associating Ammelhede with Amleth, or that a succession of etymologists have made the association (Hansen 145). However, it is at Elsinore, in Zealand, not Jutland, where this tale, and at times a supposed 'historical' personage, have been commemorated. Starting in the eighteenth-century, tourists came to Elsinore, modern Danish Helsingør, because of its association with the play. Hansen jokes that "some tourists were inevitably disappointed to discover in Elsinore a castle that was too recent for Hamlet's time, but others cheerfully began to remake Elsinore to fit their expectations" (Hansen 90). According to Hansen, it was in the nineteenth-century that businessmen tried to profit from Elsinore as the 'actual' burial place of the 'actual' Hamlet (Hansen 90). Though it is no longer associated with a 'historical' Hamlet, the first sentence on Denmark's tourism website about Helsingør states "in Helsingør lies Kronborg Castle, made famous as Elsinore in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (Denmark.dk). Shakespeare's mark lies over our interpretation of Danish medieval history, as well as Danish landscape.

As Davidson says, it is "no longer in fashion" to identify literary characters with historical figures (Davidson 68). And yet, our interpretations are influenced by the interpretations of older historians and literary critics who did find it fashionable. As Perry and Watkins point out,

if every medieval biographer and historian knows that Shakespeare got it wrong, they still talk about him as if his fictions not only prompted their investigations but somehow continue to authorize them in the minds of the reading public. (Perry and Watkins 1)

Shakespeare's play and Saxo Grammaticus's national history use the past to construct their tales in distinctly different ways. Both are engaged in a kind of medievalism; where Saxo asks readers to think about how a tale of the medieval past can offer a moral for the present, Shakespeare uses the past to talk about the present, without as specifically asking his audience to think about the tale as history. But both *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* and *Gesta Danorum* discuss the relationship between king and state and conclude that the king is the state, and vice versa. Amleth must root out what is rotten in the state of Denmark as much as Hamlet must, though for both that means different things. Shakespeare roots Amleth in our mind as Hamlet as surely as he roots the characters of the medieval English kings into the introductions of history books.

References

- Davidson, Hilda Ellis. Ed. *The History of the Danes Books I-IX*. Trans. Peter Fisher. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996. Print.
- Duffy, Robert A. "Gade, Olivier, Richardson: Visual Strategy in Hamlet Adaptation." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 4.2 (Spring 1976): 141-152. Print.
- Edwards, Philip. "Introduction." *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 1-71. Print.
- Grammaticus, Saxo. - approximately 1204. *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*. Strassburg: K.J. Trübner, 1886.
- Hansen, William F. *Saxo Grammaticus and the life of Hamlet: a translation, history, and commentary*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

- Hapgood, Robert. "Recent stage, film, and critical interpretations." *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 72-82. Print.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Helsingør." 2013. *Denmark DK: The Official Website of Denmark*. Web. 13 April 2013. <<http://denmark.dk/en/quick-facts/map-of-denmark/helsingoer/>>.
- Perry, Curtis and John Watkins. "Introduction." *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 1-20. Print.
- Perry, Curtis. "'For They Are Englishmen': National Identities and the Early Modern Drama of Medieval Conquest." *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 172-198. Print.
- Royal Deceit*. Dir. Gabriel Axel. Perf. Christian Bale. 1994. Netflix.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Ed. Philip Edwards. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Sjögren, Gunnar. "The Geography of Hamlet." *Shakespeare and Scandinavia: a collection of Nordic studies*. Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 2002. 64-71. Print.
- Sorelius, Gunnar. "Introduction." *Shakespeare and Scandinavia: a collection of Nordic studies*. Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 2002. 9-11. Print.
- Srigley, Michael. "'Heavy-headed revel east and west': Hamlet and Christian IV of Denmark." *Shakespeare and Scandinavia: a collection of Nordic studies*. Mississauga: Associated Universities Presses, 2002. 168-192. Print.
- Welsh, Alexander. *Hamlet and his Modern Guises*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Print.