

by Saxo Grammaticus

AMLETH'S REVENGE

This, the first recorded version of the Hamlet story, was written by a Danish cleric some four hundred years before Shakespeare.

Feng has murdered his brother, the King of Denmark and the father of Amleth, and has married the queen. Amleth, the heir to the throne, feels that his life is threatened.

Seeing this, but not wanting to arouse his uncle's suspicions by intelligent action, Amleth behaved like a witless fool, pretending to have taken leave of his senses, by which ruse he not only concealed his intelligence but also saved his life. Day in and day out he sat listless at his mother's hearth, covered in dust and dirt, or flung himself on the floor and rolled in all the grime and filth. With befouled face and smeared visage he resembled a grotesque and ridiculous fool. His every word was utter nonsense, and all his actions denoted profound folly. In short, one would scarcely have thought him a man at all, but an absurd freak of some perverse fate. Sometimes he would sit by the hearth, poking the embers with his fingers, and



twisting branches into crooks which he would harden in the fire and furnish with barbs to make them hold tighter. When asked what he was about, he would say that he was making spearheads for his father's revenge. This reply evoked no little amusement, all men deriding such an absurd and idle

pursuit, but afterward this very work helped him to carry out his purpose. At the same time, it was his diligence and care that first aroused suspicion that all was a ruse on his part; for his very persistence in such a pastime revealed the hidden skill of the craftsman; and no one could believe that a simpleton would be so nimble-fingered and ingenious. Last, he would lay the hardened stakes in a pile and most carefully hide them.

For this reason, there were some who pronounced him sane enough, and said that he only concealed his intelligence under a

show of simplicity, cunningly hiding his real mind beneath a feigned manner. The surest way of detecting his ruse (they said) would be to bring to him at some secluded place a fair woman who might tempt him to lust, for the natural desire for a woman's embrace was so intense that it could not be held back by cunning—the instinct too powerful to be subdued by guile. If then the apathy were feigned, he would forthwith seize the opportunity and yield to his strong desire. So men were commissioned who would ride deep into the forest with the young man, and there tempt him in this manner. Now among them it so happened that there was a foster brother of Amleth, who had not forgotten how they had been brought up together, and who rated the memory of their past fellowship higher than the present command. Thus, in joining the other appointed companions it was his intention to warn Amleth rather than to entrap him, for he had little doubt that certain death awaited him if he betrayed but the slightest sign of sanity, and especially if he embraced a woman in their sight: an outcome of which Amleth himself was well aware. When they bade him mount his horse he therefore deliberately seated himself the wrong way round, turning his back to the horse's head and his face toward its tail, and laying the reins round its tail, as if to check the horse's wild career from there. By this ingenious device he made a mockery of his uncle's trick and frustrated his evil design. Ludicrous it was indeed to see the horse run off unreined, with the rider holding on by its tail.

The company finally set off toward the place they had appointed for the meeting. On their way to that place they came down to the beach and his companions found there the rudder of a ship that had been wrecked, saying what a huge knife it was they had come upon. Amleth replied: "Ah, but that is

for carving the biggest ham with," whereby he of course meant the wild ocean that the rudder matched. When they passed the sand dunes, and would have had him believe that the sand was flour, he answered that it had surely been ground by the beating of the surf. When his companions praised his reply, he retorted that he had indeed spoken shrewdly.

They now left him to himself, that he might more easily gain courage for the satisfaction of his lust, and the woman whom his uncle had intended for him came forward to meet him, as if accidentally, at a secluded spot. He would also have enjoyed her, had not his foster brother secretly revealed to him their schemes.

Having been forewarned by his former kinsman, he took the woman in his arms and carried her off to a remote and impassable fen. There he lay with her, and begged her earnestly to reveal it to no one. The young woman was as avid to promise silence as Amleth was to plead for it, for they had been friendly as of old, having been fostered together and brought up in the same charge.

They now accompanied him home again; and when all jestingly inquired if he had controlled his desire, he announced that he had enjoyed the maid.

They then questioned the maid, but she declared that he had done no such thing, and they accepted her denial, especially as the attendants were unaware of what had occurred.

Now all being confounded, and none capable of opening the secret lock of the young man's wisdom, a friend of Feng, one more gifted with assurance than with sagacity, spoke up and said that such unfathomable cunning could not be made to betray itself by ordinary stratagem—the man was too obstinate to be mastered by a common plot, nor would craftiness so

versatile be caught in so simple a trap. Therefore, on deeper reflection he thought of a more subtle means, one which would not be difficult to apply, and which would surely discover all they desired to know. Feng was deliberately to absent himself on the pretext of an important errand, and Amleth was to be closeted alone with his mother; but first a man should be stationed in some concealed place, unknown to either of them, so that he might listen closely to what they talked of. For if the son had any wits at all, he would speak freely and openly in his mother's hearing, and would not fear to confide in her. He declared himself ready to do the spying himself, in case he be judged quick to advise but slow to perform. Pleased with this advice, Feng departed, pretending to go on a long journey.

Now the man who had given counsel went secretly to the closet where Amleth was admitted to his mother, and hid in the straw on the floor. Amleth, however, was equal to the plot. Suspecting the presence of an eavesdropper, he at first had recourse to his usual folly: crowing like a cock, beating his arms as if flapping wings, treading on the straw, and jumping on it to find out if anyone was hiding there beneath it. Feeling something firm under his feet, he thrust his sword into the spot, struck the eavesdropper who lay hidden there, and dragging him from his concealment slew him. Then he cut the body to pieces, boiled them in hot water, and flung them into the gutter for the pigs to eat, the miserable limbs being fouled in stinking mire.

Having thus frustrated this plot, he returned to the chamber; and when his

mother set up a loud wailing and began to lament her son's madness, he cried: "How dare you, infamous woman, make such false complaints, which are no more than a cloak for your own grievous offense? Wanton like a harlot, you consented to a wicked and abominable marriage, incestuously embracing your husband's murderer, and kissing and caressing the man who slew the father of your child. So does the mare join with the stallion that triumphs; only brute beasts couple indiscriminately. And now, like them, you have wiped out the memory of your former mate. It is not without reason that I now behave like a fool, for I have little doubt that he who took his brother's

life will proceed just as cruelly with his kindred. Better, therefore, to behave foolishly than to display one's wits, and so to save one's life by posing madness and frenzy. It remains my steadfast purpose to avenge my father; but I await a favorable opportunity and will bide my time. There is a time for all things; against a dark and pitiless heart one must use intelligence and ingenuity. For your part, you have no need to bewail my madness, but ought rather to grieve for your own shame. You certainly have cause to weep — not for others, but because you have suffered harm to your own soul. Now see that you hold your peace!" Thus scornfully did he chide his mother, recalling her to the path of virtue, and urging her to set past love above her present lust.

When Feng returned, he could nowhere find the crafty eavesdropper, though he searched long and diligently for him. No one had seen him anywhere. When Amleth, too, was asked jestingly if he had seen any trace

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of him, he replied that he had gone to the privy and, falling through the hole, had been smothered in filth, and so had been devoured by the pigs that went there. This statement contained only the bare truth, yet seemed to those who heard it so foolish that they ridiculed it.

Now Feng grew suspicious of his stepson, and being convinced of his guile resolved to make away with him, but dared not for fear of his uncle Rorik, as well as for fear of his wife; for which reason he found it expedient to request the king of Britain to slay Amleth, and by so doing feign innocence himself

while another did the deed. Anxious to conceal his own cruelty, he thus chose to sully his friend's reputation rather than to bring disgrace on himself. Amleth, on departing from his mother, secretly charged her to hang the hall with woven tapestries, and in a year falsely to mourn his death, promising that he would return at that time. Two of Feng's retainers went with him, bearing a rod that was engraved with runes that enjoined the king of Britain to slay the youth who had been sent to him. But, while the others lay asleep, Amleth searched their belongings, found there the message, read the instructions, and, erasing the runes that were engraved on the rod, carved other symbols in their place, altering the words of the message so as to transfer the death sentence from himself to his companions. Besides averting his own doom and destruction, and plunging others into the misery intended for himself, he also falsely added, in the name of Feng, a petition to the king of Britain that he should give his daughter in marriage to the intelligent young man he was sending him.

Arriving in Britain, the envoys waited on the king and presented to him their letter, which they believed would encompass their companion's death but which contained their own death warrant. Betraying no sign of his intentions, the king hospitably invited them to a banquet. Here Amleth thrust aside everything which was on the king's table, as if the food offered to him were poor, to

everyone's surprise abstaining from the rich feast, and touching neither food nor drink. All were amazed by this foreign young man who disdained the sumptuous dishes on the king's table and refused all the delicacies as if they had been

poor peasant fare.

When the banquet was over and the king took leave of his companions for the night, he instructed one of them to steal into the bedchamber and secretly listen to the conversation of the foreign guests in the night. Now Amleth, when asked by his companions how it was that the evening before he had left all the feast untouched, as if it had been poison, replied that the bread had been saturated with blood, that the liquor tasted of iron, and that the meat reeked of corpses and had the rotten stench of the grave. Furthermore, he said that the king had the eyes of a slave, and the queen had exhibited three acts of a servant. Thus, it was not so much the banquet as the hosts that he had found fault with. His companions now held his old weakness against him, and taunted him with all manner of abuse for blaming what should be praised, speaking ill of what was good, affronting an excellent king and a gentle lady with shameless talk, and making a laughingstock of those who merited praise.

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retainer, declared that whoever spoke thus must be either the wisest or most foolish of mortals, when in so few words he could display such perfect acumen. Summoning his steward, he asked where he had got the bread. The steward replying that his own baker had made it, the king asked where the corn had grown from which the flour had been made, and whether there was any sign that anyone had been slain there. He replied that near the king's palace was a field, strewn with the bones of slaughtered men, and bearing traces of former carnage; and that, expecting a specially good harvest from this, compared with the rest, he had sown it in the spring in hopes of a rich crop. Therefore, it might well be that the bread had caught a taint from the congealed blood. Hearing this, and believing that Amleth had spoken the truth, the king next inquired where the pork had come from. The steward replied that by neglect his pigs had escaped from their sty and had eaten the rotten corpse of a robber, and that this might be the reason why the meat had been tainted. Perceiving the truth of Amleth's words in this matter also, the king then asked what he had mixed in the mead. When he heard that it had been brewed from honey and water, he demanded to be shown the spring, and ordered men to dig there, and they found several rusty swords, which could have tainted the water.

Realizing now that Amleth had given good reasons for his fastidiousness, and supposing that in scorning him for the meanness of his eyes he had been alluding to his ignoble birth, the king went secretly to his mother and questioned her about his father. She replied that she had known no man save the king; but on threatening to draw the truth from her by torture, he learnt that he was the son of a slave. By this forced confession his doubts and the slighting of his birth by Amleth were confirmed. Ashamed

at his own fate, but agreeably surprised by the young man's intelligence, he inquired of Amleth why he had imputed to the queen the habits of a slave. Annoyed though he indeed was because his guest, in the night's conversation, had found fault with his wife's courtly behavior, he was now forced to hear that she had been born a thrall. For Amleth said that he had observed three actions of a bondwoman in her. First, she had, like a servant, drawn her mantle over her head. Second, she had lifted up her gown when she walked. Third, she had picked her teeth with a splinter and chewed the scraps of food she dug out. Amleth also said that her mother had been a thrall taken in war, which fact enabled him to tell that she was as much a slave by birth as she was by habit.

The king esteemed Amleth's intelligence like the wisdom of heaven itself; he gave him his daughter in marriage and honored his word as evidence from above. In order to carry out Feng's bidding to the full, the king hanged Amleth's escorts the next day. This service Amleth interpreted as a wrong done to himself, and pretended to be angered by it, whereupon, the king, for blood money, gave him gold, which he melted down in fire and secretly poured into two hollow sticks.

Amleth dwelt with the king for a year, but then begged leave of absence and returned home, taking with him of the king's treasures only the two sticks filled with gold. Going ashore in Jutland, he laid aside his present conduct and resumed all his former habits, deliberately giving a ridiculous air to his manner in place of his normal behavior. Besmirched with filth, he entered the banquet hall, where his funeral celebration was just then taking place. All present were astonished, as his death had been falsely reported. Fear turned gradually to mirth as the guests ridiculed one another because the man whose funeral they were attending had suddenly appeared in the flesh amidst them.

Then they inquired about his companions, and, showing them the two sticks he had brought with him, Amleth said: "They are both here." This observation was true, for although most of the funeral guests thought his words foolish, he showed them, in place of the hanged men, the blood money he had received for them. Later he joined the other cupbearers at table and plied the guests with liquor in order to increase the merriment; and so that his long dress should not hamper his movements, he fastened it round his loins with his sword belt. From time to time he deliberately drew his sword from its scabbard, wounding himself at the fingertips, whereupon the bystanders had a steel pin driven through the sword and scabbard. In order to carry out his plot in greater safety, he diligently filled the noblemen's cups, making them heavy and stupid with drink, lulling them into such a drowsy intoxication that they could not stand on their legs. They staggered about until they fell to rest in the king's hall, making their beds right in the banquet room. Finding them now in the state that suited his purpose, and so seeing his chance to obtain his revenge, he gathered up the crooks that he had previously made in his robe, and going with them into the banquet hall, where the nobles lay sprawling on the floor, vomiting in their drunkenness, cut the supports of the tapestries that his mother had made and that hung on the walls of the hall. Having cut

down the hangings and laid them over the sleepers, he took out the crooked stakes, and fixed the hangings so thoroughly and tightly that none of those who lay beneath them had the strength to get up, struggle as he might. He then set fire to the house; and the fire spread far and wide, the flames leaping hither and thither and enveloping the whole house, so that the royal palace was reduced to ashes and all within perished, whether they lay fast asleep or made fruitless attempts to escape. Next he went to Feng's closet — he had some time before been conducted by his men to bed — and taking Feng's sword, which hung by his bedside, hung up his own in its place. Then, rousing his uncle, he told him that his nobles were perishing in the flames, and that Amleth was there with his old crooks, intending to exact due vengeance for his father's murder. At these words, Feng sprang from his bed, but failing to find his own sword, was cut down as he vainly endeavored to draw the other from its scabbard.

Valiant and of immortal memory was the hero who shrewdly behaved like a fool, and under a guise of madness with wondrous art concealed a superior intelligence; for by his stratagem he not only saved himself but also succeeded in avenging his father. Cunningly he defended himself and manfully he avenged his parent, so that it is hard to say which was the greater: his courage or his wits. ■

One of the earliest versions of the Hamlet story was written by a Danish cleric, Saxo Grammaticus (1150? – 1200). The historical Amleth, however, is quite different from Shakespeare's melancholy Dane. Make a list of all the characters in this story (named and unnamed) and briefly outline their role in the story. As you read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, consult your lists and keep track of the ways in which Shakespeare adapts Saxo Grammaticus' tale.

Create a poster illustrating a scene or a character in this tale. You may even choose to create a movie poster, assuming that this story has been turned into a major film. Be sure to include your casting choices for the major characters in the story.