

THE NINE BOOKS
OF
THE DANISH HISTORY
OF
Saxo Grammaticus
IN TWO VOLUMES

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*WITH SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON SAXO'S SOURCES,
HISTORICAL METHODS, AND FOLK-LORE*

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APPENDIX II.

SAXO'S HAMLET.

I.

GOETHE is said to have been so struck by Saxo's tale of Amleth, that he thought of himself treating it freely, without reference to Shakspeare. For Shakspeare, reading Belleforest or his translator, rejected or changed so many traits that the story of Amleth became almost as different as his soul. Leaving aside Belleforest, with his innocent diffuse platitudes, and the earlier play from which Shakspeare may have worked, let us press out the likenesses, and the differences, between the rich barbarous tale which Saxo wrought out of motley sources, and that tale whose message to the modern world, so far from becoming exhausted, increases.

Amleth, like Hamlet, is a prince, whose father is slain by his jealous uncle, and whose mother Gerutha (Gertrude) incestuously marries the murderer, Feng. Feng's guilt is open, and he crowns his crimes by pretending he had slain his brother for Gerutha's good; Shakspeare drops these points. Amleth then feigns madness. We know how Shakspeare so subtilises this motive that the degree

of reality in Hamlet's distraction is disputed, some thinking it wholly real, some wholly feigned, while others, without attempting to draw a rigid line, hold that Hamlet is an actor who flings himself into a part which presently invades his very self. But there is no doubt about Amleth; he not only feigns, but feigns in order to execute a revenge, on the fanciful cruelty of whose long-considered plan—a whole palace and company of feasters to be wrapped in one net and flame of destruction—we are led to think that he sates his imagination for a whole year in advance. Hence the whole play of doubts upon Hamlet's intellect, and of vacillations upon his will, is excluded from the very idea of the old story. Shakspeare also omits the tricks by which Amleth both hides and symbolises his intention, such as the "crooks" pointed in the fire, and his riddles, which, indeed, are absent in Belleforest. But the attribute of riddling speech is, in Hamlet, infinitely developed, and the temptations set in the way of the two princes have marked likenesses. Amleth's foster-sister is a vague presentiment of Ophelia, even as the friend who warns Amleth against her is of Horatio. Then follows the eavesdropping prototype of Polonius, whom Hamlet runs through* in his scene with his mother.

In Shakspeare or his immediate source the girl is made his daughter; in Saxo they have no connection. Hamlet's harangue to his mother is descended straight from Amleth, and the two may be compared in detail. This speech, as it stands in Saxo's rhetoric, is evidently his own, and thus constitutes the chief place where Shakspeare, of course

*Saxo's "straw" becomes in Belleforest and Shakspeare the hangings behind which the listener lurks.

unwittingly, bears traces of his very words. Then follows the embassy to Britain, and the motive of the doomed man causing the death of his executioner by altering the names in the warrant. But, agreeably to the root-idea of Saxo's version, Amleth, before departure, has laid his plans, and bidden his converted mother net the fatal hangings, which with the crooks, are to encompass his vengeance. Hamlet has no such plan, nor do we hear of any such adventures of his in England as those which are detailed of Amleth, and which form the link with the post-Shakspearean portion of his tale in Saxo's Fourth Book. Amleth's return and the fashion of his vengeance, of course differ; and the difference is due not merely to the impossibility of burning a whole palace upon an Elizabethan stage, but to the radical difference of the heroes. Amleth has to fulfil his plan with indiscriminate slaughter, and then to reign. Hamlet only punishes the criminal, and this by accident, at the last moment before his own destruction. The sole points in common are that both the uncle and the mother are killed. After this point Amleth enters on a wholly new set of adventures which Shakspeare, though he found them in Belleforest, did not need.

"Two points in Amleth's soul" are yet to mention. Saxo makes him not only long-headed and full of equivocations, but punctilious of verbal truthfulness. He lies, that is, wishes to deceive, but his words, if he is to be challenged afterwards, will bear a truthful colour. "Though his words did not lack truth, there was nothing to betoken the truth." He is also preternaturally obser-

vant of small things. These traits are transformed in Hamlet, who is continually giving double answers, not from love of truth, but from love of mockery, as if to satisfy his delight in fooling others; and who has also sudden formidable outbursts of penetration, as with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But the point for remark is, that nearly all the differences of motive between Shakspeare and Saxo depend on their different conceptions of the prince's character: Amleth being quite sane and quite resolute, Hamlet neither.

We cannot wonder at Goethe having seen rich artistic possibilities in Saxo.* Into none of his tales does Saxo put more of himself; for colour of incident, as in the burning of the palace, for sweep and power of declamation, as in the harangue to the Danes, he has written nothing to equal the story of Amleth, unless it be the story of Starkad. It must be granted that Saxo's blemishes appear also; he is unwieldy in his narrative, and he leaves difficulties without explaining them. His tale cannot always be understood as he gives it. What is the meaning of Amleth's dark answers? What is the sense of the message through the gadfly? We can answer some of these questions, but Saxo does not. He acquiesces in and reports these seeming puerilities without trying to smooth them down, or seeing that the reader will be thrown out. Yet this defect of the artist is a merit of the reporter. It avouches his fidelity, and we are let into some of the secrets of his workmanship and of his sources. What

*Uhland, one of the first men who tried to collate Saxo with Norse authorities, speaks aptly of the "broad copiousness, romantic ornamentation, and sharp-wittedness" evident in the tale. (*Werke*, v. 205-9.)

APPENDIX II

sources he may have had for his story or stories of Amleth, and some parallels that may be found for these, I now briefly consider.

II.

The tale of Saxo falls into *two parts*, divided by the accession of Amleth to power (the former part only, and not all of that, being used by Shakspeare). These parts, whether or no they were connected originally, are closely connected in Saxo. Amleth's relations, both with the King of Denmark and the King of Britain, are quite continuous; and his adventures in Scotland are partly linked to his past by the storied shield. By this, Hermutrude recognises Amleth for the famous hero who revenged his father. Thus Saxo offers us not two stories, but two chapters in the same story. This is important for those who would decompose Amleth into two distinct heroes, one belonging to the Third and one to the Fourth Book. Such theorists have to admit either that Saxo deliberately invented the above links between the two, or that he took the legend in some form later than what they profess to be the original one. We must note, then, what indications Saxo himself gives of his sources, and what undoubted parallels can be found. The following are materials for a judgment.

It is clear from one passage that Saxo had *two* versions before him for at least a single trait. When Amleth detects a taint in the King of England's liquor, it is found to come from a well spoilt with sword-rust; but "others relate" that he "detected some bees that had