Lund Journal of English Studies, 2024
Volume 5, DOI https://doi.org/10.48148/ljes.v5i.26015
ISSN 2003-7597

Vita Haroldi and *Hamlet*—a flight of the imagination

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Abstract. This discursive article was inspired by a reading of *Vita Haroldi* and in seeing similarities to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the introduction I examine the possible links between the medieval survival story *Vita Haroldi* and *Hamlet*. Part One explicates three potential approaches to a study of early modern English literature: the traitorous letter trope, the historiography of the death of medieval English kings, and the interest of leading lights in Elizabethan England in Anglo-Saxon law and the church. Part Two implements these approaches in a brief reading and interpretation of *Hamlet*. Both the play *Hamlet* and the character of Prince Hamlet are situated in a transition from the medieval to the early modern; from a faith-based world to a rational one, from a focus on revenge to one on justice.

1. Introduction

The *Vita Haroldi*[1] is a medieval manuscript which deals primarily with the story of King Harold Godwinson after his defeat at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. It is one of many "survival stories", tales of supposedly dead kings who had survived to live a godly life, from the Middle Ages and was composed and transcribed in the early 13th and 14th centuries. According to this legend, Harold Godwinson, the last "English" king, did not die at the battle of Hastings and to be later buried at Waltham Cross Abbey, a church he had endowed. Instead, he had been rescued, his injured body being recognised by some local peasants and taken to their cottage, whereafter he recuperated with the help of the medical expertise of a Saracen woman. On his recovery Harold is supposed to have unavailingly sought help in Europe to regain the throne, and thereafter gone on a pilgrimage to Rome, become a religious hermit and eventually died near Chester. Royal survival stories were relatively well-known in medieval England and include Edward II, Richard II and most famously the legend of King Arthur immortalised by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Particular to the *Vita Haroldi* is the episode in which Harold's father is sent on an errand to Denmark by King Canute. With him Harold Godwin has three messages to Canute's thanes in Denmark. Harold opens the messages and discovers that he is to be taken prisoner and

[1] The manuscript of the *Vita Haroldi* is held by the British Library as part of the Harley Collection, 3776.

executed. Harold reinscribes the messages with the import that he should be welcomed and allowed to marry the King's sister. Harold succeeds in this and eventually returns to England with his wife and becomes a respected and powerful earl.

The similarities of this episode to the one in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*[2] are too obvious not to presume some link between the two. However, as scholars of *Hamlet* are well aware the acknowledged source of Shakespeare's play is the story of Amleth which is found in Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Kings of Denmark*, also composed in the early 13th century, a version of which reached England from a French translation of 1571.

Any potential direct link between the *Vita Haroldi* and *Hamlet* is clearly weakened if one examines the provenance of the manuscript held in the Harley Collection at the British Library. The original manuscript was transcribed sometime in the 12th–13th centuries and kept at the Waltham Cross Abbey which had been endowed by Harold Godwinson. In 1540 this Abbey was among the last of the monasteries to be dissolved and its contents and monks dispersed. The British library provenance states that the current manuscript in the library dates from around 1345 and was copied from an earlier, non-extant version from the early 13th century. Following the dissolution of the Abbey, the manuscript came into the possession of the Norfolk family, the pre-eminent Catholic family in England. The 4th duke of Norfolk was executed in 1572 and the *Vita Haroldi* appears to have been kept at Naworth Castle, Cumberland and presumably not accessible to playwrights in the capital.[3]

This article, as its title implies, is not intended as a rigorous and stringent presentation of a research thesis. Rather, it is work-in-progress; the product of exploring fields of enquiry engendered by a reading of a mediaeval survival story, *Vita Haroldi* and seeing similarities to an early modern English classic drama, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this respect, it is essentially a discursive and somewhat eclectic article. Initially I explicate three approaches to my study of a piece of early modern English literature: the traitorous letter trope, the historiography of the death of medieval English kings, and the interest of leading lights in Elizabethan England in Anglo-Saxon law and the church. I follow this exposition by implementing these approaches in

[2] Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet.* G.R. Hibbard ed. OUP, 1987 and The Folio Society, 2007

[3] For a further discussion of *Vita Haroldi* see the following:
de Gray Birch, Walter ed and translated. *Vita Haroldi. The Romance of the Life of Harold, King of England*. London: Eliot Stock 1885. http://www.archive.org/details/ vitaharoldiroman00britiala downloaded 12/9/2021.
Millar, E. G., 'A Manuscript from Waltham Abbey in the Harleian Collection', *British Museum Quarterly*, 7 (no. 4), (May 1933), 112-18.
Parker, Eleanor Catherine, *Dragon Lords: The History and Legends of Viking England*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018) pp 128–130.
Winters, William, 'Historical Notes on Some of the Ancient Manuscripts Formerly Belonging to the Monastic Library of Waltham Holy Cross', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1877), 203–66 (pp. 229–30).

a brief reading and interpretation of *Hamlet*. Both the play *Hamlet* and the character of Prince Hamlet are posited in a transition from the Medieval to the Early Modern; from a religious, faith-based world to a rational one, from a focus on revenge to one on justice.

2. Tropes, Histographies and Anglo-Saxonists

The Traitorous Letter Trope

Both the attempt on a young lord's life and the traitorous letter trope appear, however, in a number of manuscripts dating from around the early Middle Ages and are often linked to Norse history or sagas. As already mentioned, it is found in *Amleth* part of Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Kings of Denmark*, and also in *Hemingstháttr* and *Heimskringla,* two Norse sagas.[4] There are also a number of wider connections that suggest that this trope and indeed the plot of the story of *Hamlet* belong to a much wider cultural context stretching from the Norse countries through Europe to the Middle East and India. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*[5] entry draws attention to the similarities of Saxo's version to the classical tale of Lucius Junius Brutus as told by Livy, by Valerius Maximus, and by Dionysius of Halicarnassus and further resemblances are said to exist in the *Ambale's Saga* with the tales of Bellerophon, of Heracles, and of Servius Tullius. This concerns especially the episode of the traitorous letter (ordering the death of the bearer), also found in the Old French (13th-century) *Dit de l'empereur Constant*, and further afield in various Arabian and Indian tales. The entry goes on to point out that there are also striking similarities between the story of Amleth and that of Kai Khosrow in the *Shahnameh* (Book of the King) of the Persian poet Firdausi. In ancient Egyptian mythology, a similar tale of a king who is murdered by a jealous brother but avenged by his son appears in the narrative of Osiris, Set and Horus.

That patterns emerge in the historiographic narratives of various cultures should not surprise us. It is, after all, a historiography of the exercise of power and an exploration of power relationships in a world dominated by clan structures with family feuds and internal conflicts as each figure struggles for the right to exercise power. In the cases cited above, a pattern

[4] *Hemingsthátt*r is the life story, written down in the 13th century in Icelandic, of Heming Àskláson, a Norwegian who fought for Harold at both Stamford Bridge and Hastings. At the end of the story it tells of Harold being wounded but not slain and surviving together with Àskálon. See Evans 157, 158. *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturlsun's well known history of the Norwegian kings written around 1230, also inludes survival stories relating to Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson. See Evans 158, 159.

[5] Chisholm, H., ed. *Encyclopaedia Brittanica Vol XII*, 894–896, 1911. Under the entry for 'Hamlet'. Accessed online Google Books 3rd Nov 2023.

emerges of elderly incumbents who feel threatened and thereby seek to remove a younger challenger by subterfuge. In contrast the younger challenger shows intelligence, wiliness, and determination in outwitting his adversary.

The Historiography of the Death of Kings in Mediaeval England

Historical narratives often display features we normally associate with fictional narratives, with the use of tropes, motifs and topoi. As Michael Evans explicates in his *The Death of Kings*, medieval chronicles were characterised by a desire to demonstrate the unfolding of divine providence in human affairs (xi). [6] History for these chroniclers, mostly clerics, was essentially the struggle between good and evil, not least the moral implications of the death of kings. The historical account displays a moral attitude to the individual who has died, whether in battle, murdered or peacefully. This emphasis on the moral implication of the death of a king is reinforced by the dual functions of a monarch as both the secular head of state and the spiritual head of his people. Kings were anointed in God's name and could only be removed by the judgement of God (xiv, xv). In his study, Evans determines a number of topoi which he examines under the following headings: death and burial, death as divine punishment, the corruption of the body, father and son, killing the king, once and future kings and royal saints and martyrs (xii).

The nature of the narrative of the death of kings is well illustrated by considering the two deaths that initiate and conclude this medieval period in English history, namely the deaths of Harold Godwinson at Hastings in 1066 and the death of Richard III on Bosworth field in 1485. Both kings died in battle and were defeated by challengers who considered themselves to have a better claim to the throne. In Harold's case he is described both as having been struck in the eye, a stroke of providence, a piece of divine punishment, and hacked to death with his body in pieces, a secular insurance that death was absolute. The Norman explanation has always been that Harold suffered divine punishment as he was anointed by a corrupt Archbishop, while William, in contrast, was favoured with divine judgement, despite the fact that Harold was elected by the English nobles to become king after Edward (33–35). However, it is also said that William had Harold's body parts brought together and buried near the shore at Hastings (79). Later stories tell of his burial at Waltham Cross Abbey, and he later became the subject of a survival myth which circulated after the early 13th century (150–159). By treating Harold's

[6] Evans, Michael. *The Death of Kings: Royal Deaths in Medieval England*. Bloomsbury, 2006. Further references in parenthesis.

remains with some decency William ensured that the burial rites also ensured a continuity of succession to the new king. Thus, the act of killing Harold was not deemed as regicide and contrary to God's will (79).

The historians of Richard III's death have always been very careful in portraying him as evil, a regicide, seducer of the queen, and murderer of young heirs to the throne. His death on Bosworth field was thus a divine punishment (120). But even here the victor was careful to ensure that the body was whole, was carried naked on horseback for the populace to confirm his fate as he was buried in an unremarkable grave near Leicester Cathedral, far from the, by then, accepted abode of dead kings, Westminster Abbey (25–26). Henry's was not an act of regicide; neither was it a usurpation of the throne. The continuity of the monarchy was maintained, as was its spiritual and secular status.

Between these two epoch-defining deaths England was ruled by 18 kings; two of these were deposed (Edward II and Richard II), nine met violent deaths, four of whom were murdered (including Henry VI and Edward V) and many potential heirs were disposed of, not least in the Wars of the Roses (16–23). In the early period after the Norman conquest, many kings were buried on their estates abroad, i.e., in France and in the later period in Westminster Abbey which was to emerge as the royal national shrine (23–26). While Harold's death by divine providence was also followed by that of William Rufus (shot by an arrow when hunting), also critical of the clergy, many other kings died of a surfeit of good living (such as King John), also contrary to Christ's teachings and the corruption of the body after death was as much a judgment on the king's corruption in life as a natural disintegration of the body (37, 64). Incorruptible in death as in life and vice versa. Essential to any death of a royal was the need to have confessed, to have died with a clear conscience with one's God (xv). To die unshriven, which could easily happen in battle or by murder, was to place the soul in purgatory (60, 75).

Family dynasties, perhaps naturally, encourage tension between king and heir, between father and son and the medieval period was no exception, particularly as the incumbent grew old and less virulent. Equally, at times when kings had been deposed or murdered, it was essential for the new king to remove or eliminate potential claimants to the throne (the princes in the tower). Nevertheless, in a highly religious period the killing of the king was considered a monstrous act against God's anointed (120, 145). It became necessary to maintain a semblance of legality by persuading kings to abdicate, and their later death was often by means intended to show no signs of physical injury, of murder. The new king should not be associated with a heinous crime, and dead kings were often given some form of reinstatement to ensure the continuity of the monarchy: the king is dead, long live the king (147).

For a number of dead kings this meant the appearance of survival stories in popular sentiment as the dead and often long-gone king was said to have survived and continued to live a life of piousness and good deeds with the potential of returning to his flock and leading them into righteousness. This rehabilitation of dead kings found expression towards the end of the medieval period as both monarchs and populace were made aware of the tradition of Anglo-Saxon royal martyrs, such as King Edmund and King Edward the Confessor (176). Henry V's procession through London after the battle of Agincourt included images of and references to St. Edmund, St. George and Oswaild all of whom died fighting the pagan foreigner. St. Edmund and St. Edward were seen as martyrs and virgin saints from a golden age of England, and the cult of Edward the Confessor was promoted by Henry III, as was the cult of a pious Henry VI promoted by Henry VII.

It should be remembered that Shakespeare was also instrumental in shaping the historiographical narrative of the medieval period from a Tudor perspective. He is credited with 9 plays on the medieval English monarchs: *King John*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI Parts 1–3* and *Richard III*, all of which have in one way, or another influenced our perception of the period. Shakespeare's later plays, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* explore instances from a pre-medieval period, but this should not surprise us given the interest shown in the pre-conquest, Anglo-Saxon period in English history by leading circles in the government, church and the law. The interests of these leading personalities focused on religion, law and language.

Anglo-Saxon Studies and the Creation of Englishness in Elizabethan England

One of the key personalities in the resurgence of Anglo-Saxon studies was William Parker (1504–1575), Master of Corpus Christi College Cambridge and from 1559 onwards Archbishop of Canterbury. He and his associates attempted an inventory of historical texts and other works following the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s.[7] This urge to collate material from a pre-conquest past was driven in many respects by the need to stabilise the status of the Church of England under Elizabeth and to show that prior to the Conquest the Church in England had a great deal of freedom from Papal control (4).

This movement was not confined to England. Protestant churches across Europe were seeking to establish the faults of the Roman church and to promote the rights of the Protestant

[7] Graham, Timothy & Watson, Andrew G, *The Recovery of the Past in Early Elizabethan England: Documents by John Bale and John Joscelyn from the circle of Matthew Parker*. [published for the Cambridge Bibliographical Society], Cambridge University Library, 1998.Further references in parenthesis.

church. In July 1560, members of a group of protestant clergy in Magdeburg sent a letter to Elizabeth I of England asking for documents from the Church in England to support their critique of Rome. This request was passed on to Parker who requested John Bale to compile an inventory of works under the headings supplied by the Magdeburg group and their locations, in reply to their request (6–8). John Bale (1495–1563), something of an eclectic cleric attached to Canterbury, had compiled bibliographies of historical material since the 1530s, some of which had been published in 1548, 1557 and 1559. Bale was an avowed opponent of the Catholic Church and ardent advocate of the pre-conquest Church in England.

Parker was an ardent collector of Old English texts in the 1550s and 1560s. One of Parker's chaplains, John Joscelyn was also active in exploring Anglo-Saxon documents. From 1565 to 1567, he compiled a list of Anglo-Saxon texts which are now in the Cotton Collection and consist of 15 items of Anglo-Saxon saints' lives *Eadmer Historia Noborum*, Anglo-Saxon history from 959 to 975 and six copies of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Seven texts were in Latin (9, 10). Thus, by the mid-1560s Parker and his circle were well aware of Old English texts and were familiar with them, being able to read and comment on language. Joscelyn in particular was interested in Anglo-Saxon history and compiled a list of works on history that extended up to the end of the Middle Ages and was constantly modified until his death in 1603. Thereafter, this list became part of the Cotton collection (11–13). These lists compiled by Bale and Joscelyn are important sources for an understanding of who held and who read works in Old English and on Anglo-Saxon history and religion. These comprise members of the court and from the official classes in the capital, London. They form mostly a known circle with mutual interconnections, though they omit universities and other libraries (14).

If Parker and his colleagues were principally concerned with using the Anglo-Saxon Christian Church as a polemic for the Church of England, there were other leading figures in the state administration and the legal profession who also showed an interest in the Anglo-Saxon period and its language.[8] This interest also led to a profound proficiency in the language. William Lambarde (1536–1601) wrote a legal text in Anglo-Saxon in 1596 and Lawrence Nowell (1530–1570) published works on Anglo-Saxon and was influential in leading literary circles including discussions and exchanges with William Cecil, Arthur Golding, Roger Ascham, Edward Coke and Francis Bacon (3–4). This coterie scholarship meant a widening of knowledge on the Anglo-Saxons, particularly in the field of law where Lambarde published

[8] Brackmann, Rebecca. *The Elizabethan Invention of Anglo-Saxon England: Laurence Nowell, William Lambarde, and the Study of Old English (Studies in Renaissance Literature) [Electronic source]*.Boydell and Brewer Ltd, 2012. Accessed September 2021. Further references in parenthesis.

copies of Old English laws in 1568 and Nowell translated the laws of King Alfred (4, 9). While Lamarde was primarily concerned with the importance of common law in the English legal system, Nowell was essentially and linguistics scholar. As an indication of the level of their importance Nowell was secretary to William Cecil, the Earl of Burleigh and Elizabeth's Secretary of State and Lord High Treasurer and Lambarde was at Lincolns Inn the Courts of Requests and the Chancery, eventually becoming Keeper of the Rolls (12, 13, 15, 18).

Cecil found the knowledge of Anglo-Saxon texts a useful tool in propagating an independent protestant England. Nowell and Lambarde collaborated on the study of Old English laws which resulted in the publication in 1568 of *Archaionomia* a translation of Anglo-Saxon law codes. In 1581 he published *Eirenarcha,* a handbook for justices of the peace and later wrote and lectured on the history of the English legal system with an emphasis on its common law antecedents in Anglo-Saxon England (17).[9]

These personalities had three major foci in their study of Old English/Anglo-Saxon England: language, laws and place names and history. Cecil fosters this interest as a means of creating a distinct English identity which is rooted in the common past, a common language, a common legal system and common places and customs (19–20). To promote this both Lambarde and Nowell produced lists of place names and maps with their Anglo-Saxon names and etymologies. Attempts were made to standardise Old English, such as the Aelfric "Glossary and Grammar", which also spilled over into a discussion of Early Modern English and the need for standards (22). The superiority of the English legal system of Common Law was promulgated by Lambarde throughout his life (23, 25). Laws he argued were followed by good English subjects, and those not obeying the law had their nationality and loyalty questioned. Laws were likened to city walls, defending those within and rejecting those without and upholding the legal traditions of common law with their origins in the Anglo-Saxon world was a means of defending the nation and the integrity of the realm (192, 200, 210).

3. And *Hamlet*?

Having discussed three avenues of approach to a study of early modern English literature, it is now incumbent on me to show how these relate, in some respects, to a reading of Shakespeare's

[9] See also the *Encyclopedia Britannic*a entry on 'Common Law' and role it plays in Tudor England in contrast to Roman Law and the conflct between the Protestant Accession and the Catholic Church.

Hamlet, or indeed any of Shakespeare's plays, not least those dealing with the history of England's medieval monarchs.

There is no doubt that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* employs the same switched-message and death-threat trope that is central to the *Vita Haroldi.* However, the acknowledged source of Shakespeare's play is primarily the story of *Amleth* found in Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Kings of Denmark,* a version of which reached England from a French version by Belleforest of 1571. This too is part of a wider cultural context in which similar incidents are narrated in stories from Ancient Greece and Rome, Egypt and Arabian and Indian tales, and, given the English context, the Norse Sagas. In this respect, G. R. Hibbard suggests in his "General Introduction" to the Oxford edition of *Hamlet*[10] that Shakesperare was aware of the Classical context of this trope from his knowledge of the classical tale of Lucius Junius Brutus as told by Livy, which he would have encountered when writing *The Rape of Lucrene*, *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar,* the last of which being written before *Hamlet* and seemingly performed parallel to it (6). In this respect both the *Vita Haroldi* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* share a common multi-cultural trope employed by generations of storytellers in their narratives of power. This wider Classical context fits well in the renaissance culture of early modern England and given its Norse antecedents would also be relevant to the more narrow, English focus of the pre-conquest Anglo-Saxonists.

A further aspect pertinent to the story in *Hamlet* is the manner in which Hamlet deals with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two former fellow students at Wittenburg and now courtiers in Denmark who are to accompany Hamlet to England, where, in letters they carry with them, Claudius desires the English King to kill Hamlet (4.3 60–70 and 5.2 20–25).[11] During the journey Hamlet discovers the commission and rewrites it demanding the death of the bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with "no shriving-time allowed" (5.2, 39–48). This desire is accomplished and confirmed by the English ambassadors (5.2 320–325). Hamlet's actions here are in stark contrast to his procrastination in the killing of Claudius and also raise moral questions around guilt, revenge and justice. While clearly sycophants of the king, there is no direct evidence that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are aware of or complicit in the request for Hamlet's execution, since Claudius makes clear his intentions in a soliloquy, alone on the stage. While it may be argued theirs is poetic justice, Hamlet's ruthlessness in having these two

[10] Hibbard, G.R. ed. 'General Introduction', William Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* OUP, 1987. Folio Society 2007. pp1–66

[11] All citations from *Hamlet* are in parenthesis giving Act, Scene and Lines and refer to the Oxford ediction cited in footnote 10.

courtiers summarily despatched, while he delays his revenge for his father's death, is in keeping with the behaviour of the original Amleth, which Hibbard suggests is in keeping with traditional revenge but also with the hauteur of a Renaissance Prince who sees these courtiers as lesser beings (54). In contrast when dealing with Claudius his act needs to be to be an act of justice as well as revenge. In this respect, his behaviour is in keeping with the problems faced by other regicides in a world in which spiritual and temporal power are conflated in the person of the king.

As explicated above, the killing of a king, in particular as an act of revenge, was not an uncomplicated matter in the medieval period and was equally problematic at the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. Indeed, both Gertrude, who is appalled at the idea of killing a king: 'As kill a king' (3.4.31) and Claudius: 'There's such a divinity doth hedge a king/That treason can but peep to what it would,' (4.5.121–22), invoke the inviolate nature of the Christian monarch (59, 61).[12] Thus something more is needed than a simple lust for revenge. While the original Amleth could proceed single-mindedly with an act of revenge Hamlet's position is more complicated as he struggles with a clear conscience to achieve both revenge and justice. Indeed, Hamlet's consciousness is central to the play (37).

Belleforest had already prefaced his account of Amleth's story by questioning the legimiticy of private revenge and instead arguing for a defence of writing history on moral and religious grounds (11). This immediately situates Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a morality play and focuses on Hamlet's conscience in justifying the revenge of his father's death with the need for a legal, moral and Christian retribution, while lacking the necessary evidence for his acts. Hamlet suspects foul play and is convinced of it after his encounter with his father's ghost and is indeed required by the Ghost to avenge his death in the manner of a Norse saga. But this is the sum of his evidence. The story put about of old Hamlet's death is that he was stung by a serpent whilst sleeping, yet the Ghost maintains he was poisoned by Claudius. With no outward evidence of murder and with only an invisible ghost to substantiate his claims, Hamlet has little within the law to press for charges of treason against his uncle. In seeking to convince himself of Claudius' guilt Hamlet sets up the play within the play to prick the present king's conscience and expose his involvement. In so doing, he also makes himself a target for Claudius' suspicions, and being without support at the Danish court Hamlet's position is most precarious. It is first when he returns from England with the letter Claudius wrote, taken from Rosencrantz

[12] We should also bear in mind that the same arguments were to apply when Charles I was tried for treason and executed half-century later on 30th January 1649. See: Keay, Anna. *The Restless Republic.* William Collins, 2023. pp 29, 32.

and Guildenstern, requesting the King of England to kill Hamlet, that he has essentially any semblance of a case that could be made against his uncle.

The need for a solid case against Claudius contributes to Hamlet's prevarication, but it is implicit in his character. Educated at Wittenberg University, Hamlet is portrayed as the ideal Renaissance prince, *l'huomo universal*, in Hibbard's description (6). Ophelia despairs of Hamlet's decent into madness and recalls him as 'The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;/Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state,/the glass of fashion and the mould of form,/Th'observed of all observers . . . /that noble and most sovereign reason' (3.1.153–6; 158). Her rendering of his character is consolidated by Fortinbras' closing epitaph 'Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage; for he was likely, had he been put on,/ To have proved most royally; and for his passage,/The soldier's music and the rites of war /Speak loudly for him' (5.2.349–353). It is implied that in the nature of this prince of Denmark there is a man who thinks first and acts later.

Thus, what characterises Hamlet's behaviour is not simply a fear of facing the demands placed upon him for revenge, but the need for this to be a matter of justice and in his dying words to Horatio, he asks not for his soul to be saved, but asks that Horatio '. . .report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied' (5.2.292–3), a request to which Horatio willingly complies by declaring he will 'speak to th' yet unknowing world/How these things came about' (5.2.332–3).

4. Concluding Remarks

I began this article by reflecting on the potential links between *Vita Haroldi* and *Hamlet*; a medieval survival story and an early modern drama. My exploration of three approaches: the traitorous letter trope, the medieval historiography of the death of kings, and the Elizabethan interest in pre-conquest law and the Church, has provided a framework for a reading of *Hamlet* that indicates residual elements of medival narrative conflated with the shift in sensitivities associated with the early modern period.

The above characterisation of Hamlet's dilemma is also consistent with the changes taking place in society as a whole as it moved from the certainties of the medieval world into the doubts of the modern age. The reawakened interest in the preconquest period among the intellectual elites in Elizabethan England, would have found in this story parallels to their own

interest in a reassertion of England's history, and by extension the assertion of the Protestant Church of England.

That this story forms part of a wider pattern of power politics explored in the intimate setting of the Danish court is also not to be underestimated in the late-Elizabethan context. Here Shakespeare is able to explore the implications of regicide for the immediate members of a royal family. The killing of a king was not only a political act but also an irreligious act–a sacrilege, a crime against God. In the mediaeval world where the legitimacy of the monarch was explicitly through being God's secular presence on Earth, the murder of old Hamlet was a heinous crime; to expose it and revenge it was the duty of a true Christian, but also the duty of a true son. Thus, revenging old Hamlet would expose the young Hamlet to Claudius' fear of exposure, but would also mark him as a contender, and a legitimate one, for secular power.

Throughout the play, it is clear that Hamlet's life is in danger and while he seeks to reconcile his need for revenge with a need for rational evidence, for justice, he is also aware that as he nears his target, his own life is in mortal danger in a royal court where he has few friends. The intricacies of this situation are played out through his soliloquies as he seeks to respond to the various shifts in his situation, and his cerebral need to convince himself that his desired course of action is rational, as becomes a courtier, and scholar from the university of Wittenburg, the home of Protestantism. His tragedy is his failure to escape from the twisted logic of the medieval world and step into the role of the modern enlightened monarch.

These themes are also to be seen in several of Shakespeare's other plays notably those dealing with the pre-Tudor kings of England, but *Hamlet* situates itself clearly in the transition from the certainties of Medieval Christianity to the rational doubt of the Early Modern: a shift from revenge to justice.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to members of the staff of the English subject at Lund University. In particular to Kiki Lindell Tersmeden who provided sound advice and references on how to follow up my initial curiosity regarding *Vita Haroldi* and *Hamlet.* My thanks also to the editorial staff of *LJES* for their help with my manuscript and to the subject librarian Mikael Borg with help in retrieving references.

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