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Author(s): Piotr Sadowski

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Piotr Sadowski

THE "COSMIC CAESURA" THEME IN THE HAMLET STORY: A STUDY IN COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and interpret the mythologem of the cosmic caesura as it occurs in a number of traditional narratives centered around the story of Hamlet, of which Shakespeare's play is the best-known poetic elaboration. The subject of analysis here, though, is not, or not only, Shakespeare's play, but a whole range of texts, chiefly of mythological nature and Scandinavian provenance, all of them versions of what may be called the Hamlet myth.[1]

It is well known that Shakespeare did not invent Hamlet's story himself, but the nature of his sources remains obscure. Critics agree that there must have existed an "Ur-Hamlet," a lost play written either by Shakespeare or some other dramatist of the period.[2] As regards the sources of that "Ur-Hamlet," though, no matter who actually wrote it, there is little doubt. The fountain from which the

[1] Israel Gollancz, *Hamlet in Iceland* (London: David Nutt, 1898), and *The Sources of Hamlet: With Essay on the Legend* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926); Rudolf Zenker, *Boeve-Amlethus: Das Altfranzösische Epos von Boeve de Hamtone und der Ursprung der Hamletsage,* Literar-historische Forschungen 32 (Berlin: E. Felber, 1905); A. M. Taylor, *A New Look at the Old Sources of Hamlet* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), passim; Piotr Sadowski, "Hamlet as a Mythical Hero: A Multi-Variate Analysis of the Associations between 'Hamletic' Figures and Their Attributes," in *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* (Tenerife), no. 9 (1984), pp. 41–54.

[2] Henry R. D. Anders, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dissertation on Shakespeare's Reading and the Immediate Sources of His Works* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1904), p. 127; Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare's Sources, Comedies and Tragedies* (London: Methuen & Co., 1957), 1:110, 256.

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Hamlet story sprang, later to be remade and elaborated by the Elizabethan playwrights, was a twelfth-century Danish chronicle by Saxo Grammaticus, the *Gesta Danorum,* from which a part containing Hamlet's story was made accessible to Renaissance England by way of a French author, François Belleforest, in whose *Histories Tragiques* (1570) a free translation of Saxo's Latin account appeared.[3] Thus the starting point in our consideration of the cosmic caesura theme in the Hamlet story is, first of all, Saxo's chronicle, an invaluable collection of myths and legends of the ancient Northmen.

Both the assumed objective and the character of the sources, however, compel one to follow an approach which transcends, in a way, that usually adopted in Shakespearian or Hamletic studies. In order to analyze the said mythologem in all its complexity and symbolic depth, one has to overstep the purely literary approach, with its emphasis on analysis of epoch, writer, and text, for the sake of a more general cultural perspective that uses the methods of comparative mythology supported by cultural anthropology to point out and examine both universal and culture-specific features of the theme.

Mythology as a cultural phenomenon may be defined as an organized system of magicoreligious beliefs that, together with rules of ethical behavior, ritual practices, and the social institutions and artifacts associated with them, constitutes that sphere of man's spiritual culture that is called religion.[4] It should further be stated that any given system of magicoreligious beliefs aims to provide a general model of the world which is meant to satisfy the specifically human needs of a generalized knowledge of the world and a sense of life on a given level of man's cultural evolution. For A. Wierciński the need of a sense of life determines the supreme value and goal of one's activities, this according to one's individual, sociocultural, and species-specific characteristics.[5] At least since the late Paleolithic times and until the decline of the Middle Ages, this need was being satisfied by religious worldviews, in which mythical narratives provided basic patterns of explanation and interpretation of the principles governing man and the universe. The language by means of which myths realize their regulating and explanatory functions uses signs and images of a predominantly symbolic character. For the purpose of our analysis,

[3] Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet,* pp. 85, 318–19.

[4] Andrzej Wierciński, *Antropogeneza—ewolucja cywilizacji* [Anthropogenesis—the evolution of civilization] (Warsaw: Warszawskie Centrum Studenckiego Ruchu Naukowego, 1981), p. 31.

[5] Ibid., p. 137; Andrzej Wierciński, "The Human World Models—an Evolutionary View," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on "Biological Evolution"* (Bari, Italy, 1986), in press.

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symbol can be defined as a sign, either natural or made up, to which in the process of thinking are attached imaginative associations of objects, phenomena, or states perceptible in the environment, or ideas and emotions born in the human psyche. The character of imaginative associations makes it possible to tie to the initial sign a vast network of symbolic associations and analogies, sometimes forming a complicated and intricate superstructure of related images, ideas, and concepts.[6] An associative analysis made along these lines will be applied to the "cosmic caesura" mythologem in the Hamlet story.

As has been mentioned, the main source for the mythical background of the Hamlet figure is Saxo's Danish chronicle. Books 3 and 4 include the story of Amleth, a much-harassed and dispossessed son of Horwendil, governor of Jutland. The relevant episode refers to Amleth's fresh return from Britain and his desire to execute a long-planned vengeance on Feng, his stepfather and Horwendil's slayer. Just prior to his departure for Britain, Amleth had told his mother to hang the walls with knitted tapestry and to pretend to perform obsequies for him a year thence. Now, having returned in the time of feasting, Amleth

> took out of his bosom the stakes he had long ago prepared, and went into the building [Feng's hall], where the ground lay covered with the bodies of the nobles wheezing off their sleep and their debauch. Then, cutting away its supports, he brought down the hanging his mother had knitted, which covered the inner as well as the outer walls of the hall. This he flung upon the snorers, and then applying the crooked stakes, he knotted and bound them in such insoluble intricacy, that no one of the men beneath, however hard he might struggle, could contrive to rise. After this he set fire to the place. The flames spread, scattering the conflagration far and wide. It enveloped the whole dwelling, destroyed the palace, and burnt them all while they were either buried in deep sleep or vainly striving to arise.[7]

With slight modifications the situation just described is repeated in another affiliated Hamletic text, this time from Iceland, known from a seventeenth-century manuscript entitled "Hamlet the Fool: The Icelandic Saga of Ambales."[8] Having spent years in exile, Ambales finally returned to his native Cimbria to claim his legacy. He took the wooden stakes he had prepared and put them in a leather bag. Thus equipped he went into the hall, crept to the king's table, and placed

[6] See also Andrzej Wierciński, "Symbol and Symbolization," *Etnologia Polona* (Warsaw) 9 (1983): 33–44.

[7] Saxo Grammaticus, *The First Nine Books of the Danish History,* trans. Oliver Elton (London: David Nutt, 1894), p. 113.

[8] See Gollancz, *Hamlet in Iceland,* pp. 2–191.

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his sack under it. Afterward he resorted to his usual imbecile ways to amuse the company. When the guests finally sat at the table Ambales crept silently under the benches and by means of his wooden stakes fixed their gowns to the ground, without anybody taking notice of that. Then he waited until everybody was drunk and senseless and secretly left the hall together with his mother and faithful adherents. As they crossed the threshold sparks of fire burst out of the sack, and soon the hall was aflame. The horrified banqueters tried vainly to get up, and finally the king, together with nearly two thousand people gathered in the hall, was burned.

The motif of burning the hostile palace is also used in the *Hrolfsaga Kraka* in the subplot about two dispossessed brothers and alleged fools, Harald and Haldan in the Danish version,[9] or Helgi and Hroar in the Norse version,[10] as well as in the *Volsunga Saga,* in the revenge story about Sigmund and Sinfiotli.[11]

In all the above instances the destruction of the hostile palace follows the annihilation of the enemy and is the realization of Hamlet's long-awaited vengeance. There are reasons not to discard the motif as a mere conventional literary device but to treat it as a symbolic expression of certain independent ideas, deriving—as the forthcoming evidence will suggest—from cosmological conceptions of the pagan Norsemen and of other peoples. For example, almost universal in the archaic world is the belief in a direct correspondence between cosmogony and the ritual beginning of "something new": the laying of the foundation stone in the creation of a building, the installation of a new ruler, the founding of a new city or state, et cetera. At the roots of these widespread ritual practices lies man's deep, religious need to reproduce the cosmogony at the outset of a new undertaking and to place the activities of the human world in a cosmic frame of reference.[12] Similar rites referring to the cosmogony were also performed at the installation ceremonies of a new sovereign, whose enthronement was thus associated with the end of the "era of darkness" and the beginning of a paradisaic period. For instance, Ashurbanipal regarded himself as a regenerator of the cosmos, for "since the time the gods in their friendliness did set me on the throne of my fathers, Ramman has sent forth his rain . . . the harvest was plentiful, the corn was abundant . . . , the cattle multiplied exceedingly." Nebuchadnezzar in

9 Saxo Grammaticus, bk. 7.
10 "Fornaldr Sögur Nordrland I," MS, Copenhagen, 1829–30, after Zenker, pp. 121–22.
11 After Hélène Adeline Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen from the Eddas and Sagas* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1914), pp. 251–63.
12 Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 76.

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turn says of himself: "A reign of abundance, years of exuberance in my country I cause to be." Mircea Eliade finds this archaic and universal conception in Homer, Hesiod, in the Old Testament, in China, and elsewhere.[13]

It should also be observed in this connection that, just as the erection of a new building or the installation of a new sovereign has a cosmic analogy, the reverse is also true: that is, the destruction of a building or the dethronement of a ruler corresponds to the mythical end of the world. Similarly Hamlet's burning down the hall together with his adversaries also finds a cosmic analogy in certain eschatological conceptions of the ancient Scandinavians. The events woven around the Germanic end of the world are known to us chiefly through an Eddaic "apocalyptic" poem, the *Völuspa.* The prophetic songs of the poem connect the Twilight of the Gods, the so-called Ragnarök, with the coming of the three giantmaids, the Norns, personifications of cosmic destiny, which bring the Golden Age of the gods to an end. The Doom of the Gods is also linked to the first war fought between the Asir and the Vanir (two divine parties) and more immediately with the death of the Lord of the Age of the Gods, Balder.[14] The cosmic disaster is preceded by the violation of social norms, such as the occurrence of notorious fratricide, for instance. Soon afterward the released Cosmic Wolf Fenrir swallows the Sun, the dog Hel takes the Moon at one bite, while the stars turn from their places in heaven.[15] Another fearsome monster, the hell hound Garmar, who was chained in the Bottomless Pit, breaks free at that time, and the World Serpent Yormungardr is annihilated by the god Thor, one of the Asir. The ash Yggdrasill, the Cosmic Tree on which rests the Germanic cosmos, begins to tremble, and at last the sun grows dark, and the earth sinks under the sea.[16]

The crucial moment of the cosmic catastrophe as rendered in the *Völuspa* is the shaking and destruction of Yggdrasill, the World Tree and support of the sky vault, the kind of Cosmic Pillar known from probably all archaic cosmologies and attested to already for the early shamanic complex.[17] The cosmic order depends on the stability of the Cosmic Axis, which supports the roof of heaven and allows for

[13] Ibid., pp. 128 ff.

[14] After John Arnott MacCulloch, "Eddic Mythology," in *The Mythology of All Races,* ed. John Arnott MacCulloch et al. (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 2:337.

[15] Brian Branston, *Gods of the North* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1955), p. 277.

[16] Ibid., pp. 278–81.

[17] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 261 ff.

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communication between the three main cosmic planes: the Nether World, the mid-plane of the Earth, and Heaven. The disturbance of the Cosmic Axis, pictured as the shaking or breaking of the World Pillar or Tree, followed by the demolition of the structure supported by it, is thus an inseparable constituent of the cosmic catastrophe. In the Scandinavian tradition the memory of the stirring of Yggdrasill, which denotes the approaching Doom of the Gods and the end of the existing cosmic structure, was still vivid in the popular mind long after the Christianization of Scandinavia. In fact Yggdrasill was linked with the so-called Varträd, or "Ward-trees," growing beside Swedish houses, which, if cut down, brought the prosperity of the house to an end.[18] Further examples of this kind of imagery may be found in Persian mythology. For instance, it is said that Amiran (Ahriman, the devil figure) was once grappling with a staff that God had fixed in the ground, its other end touching the sky. However hard he tried he could not stir it, and later he was bound to this tree on Mount Kazbek. The tradition says that, had Amiran pulled out the staff, the world would have been brought to an end.[19] Similarly a Chinese myth associates the fall of the Han dynasty with the "rain of the stars" and the "subsiding of the Mount Ming."[20]

The same sort of analogy, expressed in the North in the prophetic songs of the *Edda,* must surely liken the episode of bringing the hostile palace and its inhabitants to ruin in the Hamletic myth to the end of the world. Hamlet (Amleth, Ambales, Amlodhi, etc.) in the role of culture hero appears on the local, "earthly" level as an avenger against the tyrant ruler, whom he succeeds as the lawful and just sovereign.[21] On the other hand, in the cosmological perspective, Hamlet's appearance, particularly his revenge, marks the caesura between the two world ages: that of the "dark period" of Satan's oppression and lawlessness and that of the new Golden Age. The burning of the palace together with the people inside repeats the cosmic destruction of the World Temple (which stands for the cosmos) and the annihilation of the old gods. Sometimes the regenerator and purifier of time, the one who is to "set right the time" which happened

18 MacCulloch, p. 333.

19 Maria Składankowa, *Mity Królewskiej Księgi: Symbole i wzorce mityczne w "wzahname"* [The myths of the "Book of the Kings": Symbols and mythic patterns in the "Shahname"] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1981), pp. 121–22.

20 Marcel Granet, *Cywilizacja chińska* [Chinese civilization] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973), p. 56.

21 The only exception is Shakespeare's Hamlet, who, as is well known, dies a prince. In the Scandinavian versions of the story, however, the revenge is always succeeded by a long period of rightful reign.

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to be "out of joint,"[22] must also sacrifice himself for the benefit of the "new age" to come: let us recall the role ascribed to Hamlet by Shakespeare, or even the story of Samson, whom the Philistines

> stood between the pillars . . . Samson said to the boy who held his hand, "Put me where I can feel the pillars which support the temple, so that I may lean against them." The temple was full of men and women, and all the lords of the Philistines were there, and there were about three thousand men and women on the roof watching Samson as he fought.
>
> Samson called on the Lord and said, "Remember me, O Lord God, remember me: give me strength only this once. O God, and let me at one stroke be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." He put his arms round the two central pillars which supported the temple, his right arm round one and his left round the other, and braced himself and said, "Let me die with the Philistines."
>
> Then Samson leaned forward with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and on all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those he had killed in his life.[23]

Further support for the thesis of a wide dissemination of the destruction-of-the palace motif as an expression of the catastrophic turn of the world ages can be found in the *Popol-Vuh* or "Book of Council" of the Quiche Indians of pre-Columbian Guatemala. The hero, named Zipacna, sees 400 youths dragging a huge log to use as a ridgepole for their house. Zipacna carries the tree alone without effort to the spot where a hole had been dug for the post that will support the ridgepole. The youths, jealous and afraid, try to kill Zipacna by crushing him in the hole, but he escapes, waits until they get drunk and fall asleep, and finally brings down the house on their heads. The youths are removed collectively to the sky, and the Pleiades are named after them.[24] A Polynesian parallel relates in turn how a powerful Maori hero named Whakatau, bent on vengeance, "laid hold of the end of the rope which had passed round the posts of the house, and, rushing out, pulled it with all his strength, and straightaway the house fell down, crushing all within it, so that the whole tribe perished, and Whakatau set it on fire."[25]

[22] William Shakespeare, "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Cleveland: World Syndicate Co., 1927), act 1, scene 5.

[23] Judges 16:26–30.

[24] *Popol-Vuh,* trans. H. Czarnocka and C. M. Casas (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1980), pp. 50–53.

[25] George Grey, *Polynesian Mythology* (Christchurch and London, 1956); 1st Eng. ed., 1855, pp. 97 ff., cited in Giorgio De Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1977), p. 174.

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Another Polynesian version of the motif relates the exploits of Tuamotuan Tahaki, an avenger of his father in a true "Hamletic" fashion. Apart from the destruction-of-the-palace parallel, there is also the netlike object used by the hero, which brings to mind Amleth's and also Ambales' instruments of revenge. For example, the story goes on to say how after long travels Tahaki arrived at the house of the goblin band who tortured his father. In order to rescue his father, Tahaki conjured up on the goblins "the intense cold of Havaiki" (the Other World), which put them to sleep. Then Tahaki gathered up a net, carried it to the door, and set fire to the house. When the goblins shouted out in terror, "Where is the door?" Takahi called out, "Here it is." They thought it was one of their own band, and so they rushed headlong into the net, and Tahaki burned them up in the fire.[26] It would seem that the use of the net as an instrument of vengeance and the subsequent burning down of the house are analogous to Amleth's covering the drunken foes with a netlike carpet and the burning of the immobilized company. On the cosmological plane the situation may symbolize the capture of the chthonic, watery monster embodying the forces of Chaos that hinders the establishment of order in the world at a decisive point in the history of the universe. For instance, the net device enlarged to cosmic proportions was used by Marduk, a chief Mesopotamian male deity, in his cosmogonic struggle with the monster Tiamat, out of whose dismembered body the world was created.[27] Closer to the mythological sources of Hamlet there is in Norse myth the motif of catching Loki, the devil figure, with a net in the river.[28] It should also be added that the ultimate annihilation of Loki coincides with the Ragnarök, the world's end, just as Amleth's trapping the enemy is immediately followed by the destruction of the palace, associated, as has been shown earlier, with the eschatological conceptions of the pagan Norsemen. Also, and one cannot exclude this possibility, catching people with a net and subsequently burning them may refer to the global initiatory death of the whole human species at the end of the eschatological cycle: the collective passage through water and then through fire in a final expiration of the earth.

The elements common to all the above instances of the destruction-of-the-palace motif are: (1) the hero in the role of a demiurge who destroys the World Temple in order to create the cosmos anew; (2)

[26] J. P. Stimson, "The Legends of Mauri and Tahaki," in *Bulletin,* Bernice Panaki Bishop Museum, 127 (Honolulu, 1934), pp. 51, 56, cited in Santillana and von Dechend, p. 175.

[27] *Enuma Elish,* trans. K. Łyczkowska, *Euhemer* (Warsaw), vol. 2 (1979).

[28] Branston (n. 14 above), p. 276.

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the old cosmos brought to ruin by the shaking of the supporting pole, the axis mundi; and (3) people who perish together with the old world, victims of the cosmic catastrophe of which another variant is a universal deluge myth.

On the other hand, damaging the palace in the Hamlet saga is additionally linked to the sacrificial death by fire of the enemy, which may be reminiscent of a local, North European, more exactly Celtic, tradition: that is, Hamlet's burning the palace along with the men inside may recall an ancient custom of the British Druids, who used to make human sacrifices in the form of great wicker images filled with men and animals and then set them on fire.[29] At the time of the Viking expansion and penetration of Britain and Ireland, between the seventh and tenth centuries A.D., the Druids and their ceremonies already belonged to the distant past; but descriptions of those archaic rites and peoples were still present both in the popular memory and in mythological cycles written down by the Irish monks. The latter must have appealed especially to the pugnacious heathen Vikings for their vivid descriptions of heroes trapped in the so-called *bruidne* or hostelries and their subsequent incineration. Irish tales such as *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* and *Mesca Ulad* are, according to A. Ross, the expression of folk memories of early shrines in which the gods were honored and human sacrifices carried out according to tribal rites.[30] To the cycle of such tales belongs also the Irish story of Labraid Loingsech, the divine ancestor of the tribe of Login (i.e., the people of Leinster), which had been handed down to us through a ninth-century manuscript. The story describes the exploits of a disinherited, fatherless hero sent into exile—another "Hamletic" figure—who eventually returns and traps his foes in an iron house which he then sets ablaze.[31]

Thus the cosmic caesura theme in the form of the destruction-of-the-palace motif, peculiar to the stories of Amleth and the Icelandic Ambales, to say nothing of other related or parallel accounts, reveals a wide range of symbolic connotations, transcending even the local Scandinavian cultural tradition from which the story of Hamlet originally sprang. The destruction-of-the-palace motif in the Hamlet story is thus the result of blending certain universal cosmological conceptions with ritual practices characteristic of the British Celts to

29 Caesar, bk. 6, 16.

30 Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 56, 59.

31 After M. Dillon et al., *Ze świata Celtów* [The celtic realms] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1975), p. 244.

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form an independent mythical image, linked with the figure of Hamlet in his role as avenger-purifier of time.

But the demolition of the old cosmic structure and the "sinners" trapped there is only one part of the cosmic caesura theme. Usually the annihilation of the cosmos is followed by a new cosmos, in agreement with the universal death-and-rebirth pattern. In other words, on the ruins of the old structure the regenerated and purified "new earth" is soon established. In the Norse eschatology it is said that after all the gods are killed in the Ragnarök, "new earth and new heaven with new gods emerges," and "a new sun appears, the daughter of the one swallowed by the Wolf."[32] The final stanzas of the *Völuspa* deal precisely with the renewal of the world, associated with the return of Balder, the Lord of the new Golden Age:

> On fields unsown will fruits spring forth,
> All evils vanish; Balder comes back.
> . . . .
> A hall I see, brighter than the sun,
> O'erlaid with gold, on Gimle stand;
> There dwell for ever the righteous hosts,
> Enjoying delights eternally.[33]

Thus a new earth without ills emerges, where fruits unsown ripen—a typical Elysium or Golden Age world. The Norse myth speaks of other deities apart from Balder who are responsible for peace and prosperity, among whom the sea god Njord occupies a remarkable position. Originally a Vanir—that is, connected with vegetation cults—Njord is known as the ruler of the wind who calms the sea, storm, and fire. Men call on him in seafaring and hunting. He is the sea god of riches, as well as of general wealth and prosperity: "as rich as Njord" says an old Icelandic phrase.[34]

Closely akin to Njord in his functions is his son Frey, who rules over rain and the increase of the earth and is responsible for the fruitful season and prosperity of men. In the *Ynglinga Saga* by Snorri Sturluson, Frey is called a rich and generous god, under whom peace and fruitfulness abound. He took the realm after Njord and was referred to as "Lord of the Swedes."[35] The heathen Danes in turn ascribed to Frey the so-called Peace of Frodi, a period of good times in all lands, often spoken of in Northern literature. For instance, the

[32] "Gylfaginning LIII," after Branston, pp. 287–88.
[33] After MacCulloch (n. 13 above), pp. 345–46.
[34] Ibid., pp. 101 ff.
[35] Ibid., pp. 108, 110, 113–14.

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"Frodi-Peace" is mentioned by Snorri ("Skaldskaparmal," 42), coupled with the name of Christ, for world peace associated with the birth of the Messiah is also a Christian belief: "Caesar Augustus imposed peace on all the world. At that time Christ was born. But because Frodi was mightiest of all kings in the Northern lands, the peace was called after him wherever the Danish tongue is spoken, and men called it the Frodi-peace."[36] Snorri adds that during that Golden Age no man injured another, even if he was his brother's or father's slayer. No thief or robber was known and, writes Saxo Grammaticus, Frodi was able to hang up an arm ring of gold in three parts of his kingdom which no one for many years dared touch.[37] Historical chronology, however, does not connect mythical Frodi with the age of Caesar Augustus but with the period around the fifth century A.D., when a historically attested Danish king, Frode III, ruled over the whole of Scandinavia, then still at a stage of relative linguistic and cultural uniformity.[38] After a final victory over the Norwegians Frode III established peace and unified law in the whole of his kingdom stretching from Russia in the east to the Rhine in the west. The political disintegration and internal decay which began after Frode's death eventually ended in the emergence of four separate Scandinavian kingdoms: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries—the states that indulged in constant reciprocal hostility and war in the regions of the Baltic and North Seas.[39]

The reign of the historical Frode III, as well as the mythical "Frodi-Peace," belong essentially to the Golden Age on both the historical and mythical planes and can therefore be treated as a caesura separating two qualitatively distinct epochs. On the mythical plane the peaceful reign of an ideal ruler is always connected by analogy with the initial *illud tempus,* the beginnings of time, before the disintegrating forces of Chaos came into play. In the Danish tradition Frode III is said to have been a descendant of the first mythical Danish king named Scyld, the founder of the Scyldings, the Danish royal house, who had come to Denmark from the sea. In the opening section of *Beowulf,* it is said that a ship laden with treasure came from the sea to Denmark and brought a child, who afterward became king of the land. At the end of a long and prosperous reign,

[36] After Branston, p. 134; Guerber (n. 10 above), p. 128; Santillana and von Dechend, p. 87; MacCulloch, p. 114.

[37] Saxo Grammaticus, pp. 164, 169–70; *Die Edda: Lieder Edda und Erzählende Edda* (Leipzig: Koehler & Umelang, 1925), p. 102.

[38] M. Adamus, *Tajemnice sag i run* [The mysteries of the sagas and runes] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1970), p. 204.

[39] Ibid., pp. 206, 208, 225.

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he departed over the sea as he had come, for the Danes loaded a ship with weapons and precious things and laid their king's dead body upon it, letting the sea bear it away.[40] In the classical world the first king and ruler of the Golden Age is Kronos-Saturn, who, according to Hesiod, was given by Zeus "a living and an abode far from people, and made . . . [to] dwell at the ends of the earth . . . , untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed . . . , for whom the grain-giving earth brings honey and sweet fruit."[41] And in perfect accordance with mythical conceptions about the periodicity of time is the idea that Kronos, in his "temporal" aspect, will rise one day in order to return and restore the once-present Golden Age. The mere notion of gods, emperors, or heroes sleeping makes it clear that they are expected to awake and return one day, be it Kronos, Quetzalcoatl, or King Arthur. Welsh folktales still say that when Arthur comes back from his "island of the blessed," Avalon, the Saxon rule over Britain will be brought to an end.[42]

An ideal ruler thus places himself at the turning point of the culture's mythic history, and as his appearance commences "the age of peace and plenty" so his departure brings the Golden Age to an end. And this "critical" or "decisive" aspect of the appearance of Hamletic figures is well marked in the texts, which either unequivocally or covertly associate the hero with the caesura between two world ages. If in Shakespeare Hamlet's mission is to "set right the time" because it happened to be "out of joint," so in Saxo, Amleth speaks of himself as the one who has "wiped off [his] country's shame."[43] Also, the very arrangement of the material on Amleth in Saxo's chronicle underscores the caesura between the hero's adolescence, that ended in his act of revenge (bk. 3), and the later incidents—his installation on the throne, adventures in England, et cetera—found in book 4. The division and the change of Amleth's character from book 3 to book 4 are so sharp that they have given rise to the opinion that Saxo's account deals actually with two distinct heroic personages, which by some accident bear the same name.[44] Not inclined to share this opinion, I am rather prone to suspect, with I. Gollancz, that the arrangement of Saxo's material may have been influenced by a Roman

[40] *Beowulf,* a verse translation by Michael Alexander (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 51–52.

[41] Hesiod, *Roboty i dnie* [Of works and days] (Lwów, 1902), pp. 166–73.

[42] After C. Czarnowski, *Dzieła* [Works] (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1956), 3:66.

[43] Saxo Grammaticus, p. 139.

[44] Robert Gordon Latham, *Two Dissertations on the Hamlet of Saxo Grammaticus and of Shakespeare* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1872), pp. 15 ff.

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account of Brutus, another Hamlet-like figure, an alleged fool and the avenger against King Tarquinius, described by Livy in his *History of Rome*.[45] The story of Brutus fills the last chapters of book 1 and the first chapters of book 2 of Livy's report, the former ending with Brutus's election to consulship, and the latter beginning with the consul's address to the excited crowd—very much like Saxo's account.

Apart from this purely formal clue, there is also evidence of a historical nature to support the "decisiveness" of Brutus's appearance and, by way of analogy, Amleth's, too. M. Grant observes that the struggle with the Tarquinians (which forms the background of the Brutus story) marks the end of the monarchy in Rome (ca. sixth century B.C.) and the subsequent rise of the republic.[46] The Tarquinian dynasty was of alien, Etruscan origin, and the last non-Roman ruler, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, was, as Livy reports, a tyrant defeated and replaced by Brutus and the glorious republic. The incidents woven around the fall of the Tarquinians and connected with the story of Brutus are thus a borderline between mythology and history. At least this is what Livy himself suggests in his account,[47] and after him Saxo in the division of his own text on Amleth.

It should finally be remarked that in comparison with the twofold division of both Livy's and Saxo's narratives, the story of Hamlet as rendered by Shakespeare follows the incidents delineated in the first part of either of the mentioned sources. They end with the fall of the usurper. The fact that Shakespeare's Hamlet dies while still a prince is thus the playwright's own invention because in the remaining variants the period of lawlessness always ends with the restoration of the just reign with the Hamletic figure as king. However, the ideal ruler motif is not entirely absent in Shakespeare, who has Fortinbras, a would-be incarnation of the just-killed prince, allude to Hamlet's possible fate with the following words:

> Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage;
> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have prov'd most royally.
>
> [Act 5, scene 2]

Potentially an ideal ruler figure, Shakespeare's Hamlet nevertheless quits the scene together with the "old gods" representing the passing

45 Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet* (n. 1 above), pp. 32–33.

46 M. Grant, *Mity Rzymskie* [Roman myths] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1978), pp. 178–79, 181.

47 Livy, *Dzieje Rzymu od założenia miasta* [The history of Rome] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1968), 1:58; also Grant, pp. 201, 204.

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order and leaves the future of his world in uncertainty. "The rest is silence" are his last words, and here the old mythical pattern seems to be broken. The caesura motif in Shakespeare's play indicates quite pessimistically that the old world has been brought to a close, with no or little hope for a new Golden Age to come. In fact, it is the Golden Age, that of "Merry England" of the Elizabethan Renaissance, which is declining. The "decisiveness" of "Hamlet," as a play, accidentally or not, written at the *turn* of the sixteenth century, consists in its standing at the threshold between two epochs: the Renaissance and the baroque or, in broader terms, between medieval and modern times. In England the feeling of a general deterioration of things, nostalgia, and melancholy for the passing world all were confirmed by the decline of the Tudors and the unsettled problem of succession. The "old gods" die out, and an outsider, like Fortinbras, comes to the throne.

As can be supposed, this hidden message of the play may have been well understood by Shakespeare's audience, for whom mythical thinking, operating as it does with analogies and symbolic associations, was still a commonplace. People living in the age of transition must still have been very sensitive to motifs and elements of a mythical nature, stirring in their minds symbolic images and associations not yet tamed by the Age of Reason with its emphasis on intellect and a here-and-now attitude toward the world. Despite the first overtures of rationalism and scientific reasoning, the mythical thinking of both Shakespeare and his audience, fed by popular fairy tales, legends, and stories from pre-Christian Britain and Scandinavia, the classical world, and the biblical tradition, continued to be very vivid. In short, the conscious or subconscious mythicosymbolic associations operating in Shakespeare's plays and in the minds of his audience were much more a part of his age than of ours.

University of Warsaw

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