

TIME AND DESTINY — IN SEARCH OF THE COSMOLOGICAL  
CONCEPTIONS UNDERLYING HAMLET'S STORY

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It is for the sake of making certain things clear at the beginning to say that the following considerations will have relatively little direct historical reference to Shakespeare's immortal play, though the implications of the presented material are by no means insignificant for the understanding of the play's overall message. Technically, our analysis concerns not so much Shakespeare's text itself but a body of traditional, epic narratives and poetry, chiefly of Scandinavian provenience, and regarded as mythological, mostly pagan, sources of Shakespeare's play (cf. Gollancz (1898, 1926), Zenker (1905), Taylor (1968)). In it, that is, in the mythico-religious tradition of the ancient Norsemen, we shall try to search for the symbolic meaning of such concepts as Time, World-Ages, the Cosmic Caesura, and Destiny; concepts that seem crucial to any system of values and ideas which aspires to provide answers to the basic existential questions concerning the principles governing the Universe and, consequently, man. Since this is exactly what troubles Hamlet at the threshold of the Baroque epoch, it does not seem entirely unjustified to examine the way in which the ideas in question presented themselves to the people of pre-Christian era, more precisely, to the pagan Norsemen, from whose mythico-religious tradition the original Hamlet story is to be derived.

It is well known that Shakespeare did not invent Hamlet's story himself, but only used and poetically transformed the plot that had already been at hand. The critics agree that there must have existed a postulated "Ur-Hamlet", a lost play written either by Shakespeare himself or some other dramatist of the period, most probably by Kyd. (Anders 1904 : 127, Muir 1957 : 110, 256). As regards in turn the source of the lost play, there is probably no doubt that the fountain from which sprang the whole Hamlet story,

remade and elaborated by the Elizabethan playwrights into a drama, was a part of a twelfth century Danish Chronicle by Saxo Grammaticus (1979) the *Gesta Danorum*, made known in Renaissance England by a French author, Francois Belleforest, in whose *Histories Tragiques* (1570) is included a free translation of Saxo's Latin account (Gollancz 1926 : 85, 318—19). In the Chronicle, there is nothing of Shakespeare's delicate and melancholy prince, though the main elements of the plot are present: the fratricide, the marrying of the queen by the murderer, the persecuted son feigning lunacy and seeking his revenge. But Saxo's Amleth (for this is the original Danish name) is first of all a true Germanic hero, the warrior and the king, like many other mythico-legendary personages of the Norse heroic tradition (Sadowski 1984a : 41—54, 1984b).

However, in order to approach the assumed goal, that is, to analyze the cosmological connotations of the Hamlet story, some methodological remarks are necessary. Namely a distinction is drawn here between literary studies proper and what is called comparative mythology. Accordingly, myth is understood as an anonymous narrative expressing the manifold experience of numberless generations in a symbolic language. Unlike modern literature, mythology includes first of all religious contents, and as such it is an expression of faith. In other words, mythology forms an ideological framework of a given magico-religious system (Wierciński 1981 : 131). Both myth and literature make use of the symbolic signs in their narration, but it is mainly in mythology that — due to its anonymous character — symbols are nonarbitrary, truly spontaneous, and "natural". Their reception and understanding in turn rely on attaching in the process of conscious or subconscious thinking to the initial symbolic sign imaginative associations of objects, phenomena, and ideas, so that a single sign may generate a complex superstructure of related images and concepts. We shall make use of this kind of associative thinking in the process of deciphering the symbols pertaining to cosmology in the successive versions of the Hamlet story.

Now let us observe that the story of Amleth as rendered by Saxo Grammaticus is divided into two parts: one, contained in Book III, describes the events leading to the revenge, and the other, included in Book IV, covers the later incidents (Amleth's installation on the throne, adventures in Britain etc.). The turning-point in the whole story is the revenge and, interestingly enough, this is exactly where Shakespeare's drama ends. That the Elizabethan Hamlet represents here a departure from the prevailing mythical pattern is corroborated by further versions of the story. For example, a Roman account on Brutus, again an alleged fool and the avenger of his wrongs on king Tarquinius, found in the *History of Rome* by Livy (1968) (cf. also Gollancz 1926 : 32) follows a similar pattern: the events ending with Brutus' election to consulship fill the last chapters of Book I, whereas Book II begins with the

consul's address to the excited crowd — similarly like in Saxo. Nor is the story ended right after the revenge in another "Hamletic" text — an Icelandic saga known from a seventeenth century manuscript entitled *Hamlet the Fool: the Icelandic Saga of Ambales* (in Gollancz 1898 : 2—191). The fact that Shakespeare's play ends where it ends is significant in itself, and the problem will be reverted to later on.

The dividing line in Saxo is not accidental because it runs through the crucial and decisive moment in the story, namely the revenge. We shall try to prove that the "moment" is also a turning-point on the cosmological plain. But let us have a closer look at the way the revenge is accomplished: the relevant episode refers to Amleth's fresh return from Britain with the desire to kill Fengi, his uncle and the slayer of his father Horwendil. Earlier, upon his departure to Britain, Amleth had told his mother Gerutha to hang the walls with knitted tapestry and to perform pretended obsequies for him a year thence. Now, having returned in the time of feasting,

he took from his bosom the sticks prepared long ago and entered the hall in which the courtiers, their bodies splayed everywhere over the floor, were belching away in alcoholic slumber. There, spread over the interior walls, he found the tapestry which his mother had woven, cut it away from its fastenings and tore it down. Then he threw it over the snorers and using the crooked sticks tied it with such Gordian knots that none of those lying beneath, however vigorously they strained, could manage to get to their feet. After this he started a fire, whose flames grew to a wide-spread conflagration and enveloped the entire building. The palace was destroyed and its inhabitants cremated, whether they were enjoying deep sleep or vainly struggling to rise.

(Saxo Grammaticus 1979 : 89—90)

With slight modifications the event just described is repeated in the Ambales saga: having spent years on exile Ambales finally returned to his native Cimbria to claim his legacy back. 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 his sack under it. Afterwards 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 he 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 all aflame. The horrified banqueters attempted vainly to rise, and finally the king together with nearly two thousand people gathered in the hall were burnt.

In the above instances the idea stays constant: the destruction of the hostile palace following the annihilation of the enemy as a realization of

Hamlet's long-awaited vengeance. Now let us observe that among the most universal archaic conceptions is the conviction in the direct correspondence between cosmogony and social practice of the ritual beginning of "something new": the laying of the foundation stone in the erection of a building, the installation of a new ruler, the founding of a new city, state etc. At the roots of these wide-spread practices lies man's deep religious need to reproduce the cosmogony at the outset of a new undertaking, and to place the activities from the human world in a cosmic frame of reference. As a result of this need seemingly secular activities, such as the building of a new house for instance, were in archaic societies preceded by the construction rites which connected the action of building with cosmogony, with the concept of a "new era", an "absolute beginning" (Eliade 1959 : 76). Similar rites referring to 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 paradisiac period. Mircea Eliade finds this archaic and universal conception in Homer, Hesiod, in the *Old Testament*, in China and elsewhere (Eliade 1959 : 128ff).

But analogous to the cosmogonic meaning of the founding of a new building or the installation of a new sovereign is the reverse situation, that is, the correspondence between the destruction of a building or the dethronement of a ruler and the mythical end of the world. And in the eschatological conceptions of the ancient Norsemen the "end-of-the-world" theme is well represented, as we learn from the Icelandic *Poetic Edda*, whose prophetic songs of the "Völuspa" connect the "Twilight of the Gods", the so called "Ragnarök", with the coming of the three giant-maids, the Norns, as personifications of the cosmic destiny, who 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 (cf. MacCulloch 1964 : 337). The cosmic disaster is preceded by the violation of social norms, such as the occurrence of notorious fratricide for instance. Soon afterwards the released Cosmic Wolf Fenrir swallows the Sun, the dog Hel takes the Moon at one bite, while the stars turn from their position in heaven (Branston 1955 : 277). Another fearsome monster, the hell hound Garmar, who was chained by the Bottomless Pit, breaks free at that time, and the World-Serpent Yormungandr 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 (Branston 1955 : 278—81).

The crucial moment of the cosmic catastrophe as rendered in the "Völuspa" is the shaking and destruction of Yggdrasill, the World Tree and supporter of the sky-vault, the kind of Cosmic Pillar known from probably all archaic cosmologies, and attested already for the early shamanic complex (Eliade

1974 : 314). The sustenance of the Cosmos relies on the stability of the Cosmic Axis which supports the roof of heaven and serves as a transmission between three main cosmic planes: the Nether World, the mid-plane of the Earth, and Heaven. Therefore 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 an inseparable constituent of the cosmic catastrophe. In the Scandinavian tradition the memory of the stirring of Yggdrasill denoting the approaching Twilight of the Gods and the end of the existing cosmic structure was still vivid in the popular mind long after the christianization of Scandinavia: this cosmological concept is linked with the so called Vartträd, or "Ward-trees", growing beside Swedish houses, which, if cut down, brought the prosperity of the house to an end (MacCulloch 1964 : 333).

The above considered, one is entitled to refer the presented cosmological framework, expressed in the "apocalyptic" songs of the *Poetic Edda*, to the episode of bringing the hostile palace and its inhabitants to ruin in the Hamletic myth. Hamlet (Amleth, Ambales, Amlodhi etc.) appears on the local, "earthly" level as an avenger on the tyrant ruler, whom he succeeds as the lawful and just sovereign. On the other hand, in the cosmological perspective Hamlet's appearance, particularly his revenge, marks the caesura between two world-ages: that of the "dark period" of Satan's oppression and lawlessness, and the new Golden Age. The burning down of the palace together with the people inside repeats the cosmic destruction of the World-Temple, standing for Cosmos, together with the annihilation of the old gods. Sometimes the regenerator and purifier of Time, the one who is to "set right the time" which happened to be "out of joint", (Shakespeare 1927 : I, v), must also sacrifice himself for the benefit of the "new age" to come; let us recall the role ascribed to Hamlet by Shakespeare, or the story of Samson, whom the Philistines...

stood between the pillars, and 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.

(Bible, Judges 16 : 26—30)

As is seen, the inseparable elements of the "destruction-of-the-palace"

motif are: 1) the hero in the role of a demiurg bringing damage to the World-Temple in order to create the cosmos anew; 2) the structure, that is, the old cosmos brought to the ruin by the shaking of the supporting pole, the Axis Mundi; and 3) the people perishing together with the old world, the victims of the cosmic catastrophe, of which another mythological offshoot is a universal Deluge myth.

On the other hand, the fact that the damage of the palace in the Hamlet saga is additionally linked with the element of the sacrificial combustion of the enemy may be reminiscent of the local, more exactly Celtic, tradition. Namely, Hamlet's burning down of the palace filled with men may have been influenced by the memory of the ancient custom of the British Druids, who used to make human sacrifices in the form of the great wicker-images filled with men and animals, and then set them on fire (Caesar 1915: VI, 16). Although at the time of the Viking expansion and penetration of Britain and Ireland in the 7th - 10th A. D. the Druids and their ceremonies had for long been a matter of the past, the descriptions of those archaic practices were still present both in the popular memory and in the mythological cycles written down by the Irish monks. Especially appealing to the pugnacious heathen Vikings must have been vivid descriptions of the trapping of heroes in the so called "bruidne", the hostelries, and the subsequent burning of these. These descriptions, found for instance in the Irish tales *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 honoured and human sacrifices carried out according to the tribal rites (Ross 1967: 56, 59). To the cycle of such tales belongs also the Irish story of Labraid Loingsech, the divine ancestor of the tribe of Loing, i.e. the people of Leinster, preserved in a ninth century manuscript. The story describes the exploits of a disinherited, fatherless hero sent on exile (another "Hamletic" figure), who eventually returns and traps his foes in an iron house which he then sets on fire (cf. Dillon 1975: 244).

But the demolition of the old cosmic structure together with the "sinners" is only a part of Hamlet's "mission". The usual situation is that the annihilation of the former cosmos is followed by the setting up of a new one, which is in perfect agreement with the universal mythical 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 off 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" ("Gylfaginning" LIII, in Branston 1955: 287-8). The final stanzas of the "Völuspá" 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.

(Cf. MacCulloch 1964: 345)

There is thus a new earth without ills, where fruits unsown ripen — a typical Elysium or Golden Age world. Apart from Balder the Norse myth speaks of other deities responsible for peace and prosperity, among whom the sea-god Njord occupies a remarkable position. Originally a Vanir, i.e. connected with vegetation cults, Njord is known as the ruler of the wind who stills the sea, storm, and fire. Men call on him in sea-faring 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 (MacCulloch 1964: 101).

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 him peace and fruitfulness abounded. He took the realm after Njord and was referred to as "Lord of the Swedes" (MacCulloch 1964: 108, 110, 113-4). 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 "Frodi-Peace" is mentioned by Snorri in "Skaldskaparmál" (XLII), i.e. "The Language of the Bards" 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 call it the Frodi-peace." (cf. Branston 1955: 134, Guerber 1914: 128, Santillana 1977: 87, MacCulloch 1964: 114). 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 could hang up an armring of gold in three parts of his kingdom which no one for many years dared touch (Saxo Grammaticus 1979:152; Edda 1925:102). Historical chronology, however, does not connect mythical Frodi with the age of Caesar Augustus but with the fifth century A. D. when a historically attested Danish king Frode III is said to have ruled over the whole Scandinavia, then still at a stage of relative linguistic and cultural uniformity (Adamus 1970:204). 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 which began after Frode's death eventually led to the emer-

gence of four separate Scandinavian kingdoms: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries — the states which indulged in constant reciprocal hostility and war in the regions of the Baltic and North Seas (Adamus 1970:206, 208, 225).

The reign of historical Frode III, as well as the mythical "Frodi-Beate", belong essentially to the Golden Age on both 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 referred to the initial "illud tempus", to the beginning of Time, when the disintegrating forces of Chaos come 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 the *Beowulf* it is said that a ship laden with treasure came to Denmark and brought a child who afterwards became king of the land. When the end of a long and prosperous reign finally arrived 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 it way (*Beowulf* 1979: 51 — 2).

An Ideal Ruler figure thus places himself at the turning-point of the culture's mythico-history, and as his appearance commences "the age of peace and plenty", so his departure brings the Golden Age to an end. This "critical" or "decisive" aspect of the appearance of the Hamletic figures is well marked in the texts referred to, which either unequivocally or covertly associate the hero with the caesura between two world-ages: if, for instance, in Shakespeare Hamlet's mission is to "set right the time" because it happened to be "out of joint", then in Saxo Amleth speaks of himself as of the one who has "wiped off [his] country's shame" (Saxo Grammaticus 1979:95). There are also in the *Gesta Danorum* further clues for connecting the figure of Amleth with the concepts of Time and the Golden Age, though they seem to be less conspicuous. For instance, in Book III we read:

Once Amleth and his companions [Fengi's men] ... were going along the shore when the attendants discovered the rudder of a wrecked ship and said to Amleth that they had found an amazingly large knife. "All the better to cut an outsize ham with", he answered, obviously referring to the sea, since its vastness suited the dimensions of the rudder. As they passed the sand-dunes they told him to look at this flour, to which he remarked that it had been ground by the foaming billows when it was stormy. The company congratulated him on this response, which he again agreed was a wise pronouncement.

(Saxo Grammaticus 1979: 85)

It is interesting to observe that in the above scene Saxo himself does not want to comment on Amleth's cryptic statements, though he always points out in the text that the hero's "nonsensical" answers carry hidden meaning. And

one would probably pass over this episode and discard it as least irrelevant to the main plot of the Amleth story, if it were not for the fact that the poem "Skaldskaparmal" by Snorri Sturluson (1178 — 1241) seems to provide the key to Amleth's otherwise inexplicable answers. In the poem, as one of the answers to a question: "What are the names for the sea?", the following verse is given:

'Tis said, sang Snaebjörn, that far out, off yonder ness, the Nine Maids of the Island Mill stir amain the host-cruel skerry-quern — they who in ages past ground Hamlet's meal. The good chieftain furrows the hull's lair with his ship's beaked prow. Here the sea is called Amlodhi's mill.

(In Gollancz 1898 : xi)

The one Snaebjörn mentioned at the beginning is said to have been an Icelandic bard living about 200 years earlier than Snorri and Saxo, and his verse, repeated in the "Skaldskaparmal", is the earliest documented reference to the mythical hero named Hamlet-Amleth-Amlodhi. Nor is there any direct trace of the Hamlet story in the sagas or poems belonging to the two centuries intervening between Snaebjörn's verse and Saxo's chronicle (Gollancz 1926:2, 25). Nevertheless the Eddaic passage suggests that there must have been a story, popular in Iceland at the time but now lost, about the hero named Amlodhi, in which the mill, whatever it may mean, played a vital part. The last clear reference to this lost tale is contained in Saxo's account in which the passage on sand-dunes meaning flour "ground by the foaming billows" undoubtedly refers to the tenth century Snaebjörn's mention of "Hamlet's meal" and the rest<sup>1</sup>.

Now what the mysterious notion of "Amlodhi's mill" stands for? A note by I. Gollancz, not less impressive than Snaebjörn's verse itself, says that:

The underlying reference is certainly to the great World-Mill deep down in the sea, the great cosmic force, which the ancient Northerners and other races conceived as the cause of storms and showers, and of all the disintegrating changes wrought on mountains, rocks, and shores. The fierce whirlpools and currents of the Arctic Ocean may easily explain this great idea of a gigantic World-Machine, its terrific funnel ever ready to gorge, its cruel mill-stones, huge as islands, ever ready to grind whatsoever the mighty swirl has seized.

(Gollancz 1898 : xii)

One has to, however, leave poetry to the bards and approach the problem more methodically.

Let us first observe that the "Island-Mill" of Snaebjörn's verse is in the vernacular Icelandic "ey-ludr", in which the root "ludr" stands strictly for

<sup>1</sup> The genetic relationship between the two episodes has been unanimously accepted by the students of Hamlet's sources: Gollancz (1898, 1926), Zenker (1905), Elton (1894:402), Santillana (1977:23).

“the square case within which the lower and the upper quernstones rest”, hence the “mill” or “quern” (Gollancz 1926:4). The word “ludr” occurs elsewhere in the Icelandic literature in the story of a primordial deluge, in which the events preceding the creation of the world are discussed. According to Snorri’s poem “Gylfaginning” the gods: Odin, Vili, and Ve, the sons of the first man Bor, knocked the old giant Ymir on the head, and “when he kneeled over, so much blood poured from his wounds that every man-jack of the Frost Giant got drowned except one. He just managed to escape with his family. The giants call him Bergelmir. He scrambled on to a mill [“ludr”] together with his wife and they were both saved” (in Branston 1955:59). A reference to Bergelmir, the Scandinavian Noah, recurs elsewhere in the *Poetic Edda* in the poem called “Vaftrudnismal”, where Odin asks the wise giant Vaftrudnir of the oldest event he can think of, and gets this answer: “My earliest memory is of the giant Bergerlmir who was laid on the mill” (“a var ludr um lagidr”) (Branston 1955:61, Santillana 1977:92). The word “ludr”, as has been said, means the mill or quern, but the bizarreness of being saved in the flood “on the mill” made the commentators translate the word also as “boat”, “ship-board”, “ship”, “coffin”, “bier”, “bag”, or “pallet”, which is a sufficient sign of confusion caused by the idea of escaping the flood in such a strange way (cf. Branston 1955:62, Guerber 1914:4, Littleton 1970:188, Lelewel 1828:23, MacGulloch 1964:276, Załuska-Strömberg 1986:60). Some order can be brought into the problem if it is recalled that “ludr” may not be the quern itself but a wooden case within which the two mill-stones are laid; hence the “boat” and the like as a means of resort from the deluge. At the same time another interpretation cannot be excluded, for in the *Poetic Edda* the “ludr” is not only Bergelmir’s means of transport but is also connected with the cosmogonic act following the annihilation of the primeval giant — the act in which out of the giant’s scattered body the gods created the world. Namely in the “Vaftrudnismal” there is no connection between Bergelmir and the flood, and the idea of the giant being “laid on the mill” may therefore refer to the “grinding” of Bergelmir’s body by the Cosmic Mill and thus creating the earth and the whole world (comp. Gollancz 1898:xii).

It should further be noted that the traditional mill known in the North (as elsewhere) was the quern or hand-mill consisting of two circular stones one above the other. The lower mill-stone was stationary, while the upper was turned round by means of a handle set upright in the sone near its periphery. This handle had the name “möndull”, a word which appears cognate with Mundil, as in the name Mundilfari, in which the ending “fari” comes from the Norse verb “fara”, to travel or move (Branston 1955:203). We find this Mundilfari as a mythical personage in Snorri’s poem “Havamal”, which says the following: “There was once a man called Mindilfari who had two children so bright and handsome that he called the boy Mani [Moon] and the girl Sol [Sun]”.

In the “Vaftrudnismal” we also read:

Mundilfari he’s called  
the father of Moon,  
he’s also the sire of Sun;  
a turn across heaven  
they must take each day  
and tell the time for men.

(Branston 1955 : 203)

As the father of the Sun and Moon Mundilfari can be identified with the universal figure of the Sky Father, the Supreme Deity, which makes Night and Day drive round the heavens, and who appears accordingly as the Great Turner of the Heavens represented by the upper mill-stone, which Mundilfari — as his etymology tells us — is supposed to turn round. As compared to the cited passage ascribed to Snaebjörn Mundilfari the Turner of the Cosmic Mill is functionally equivalent to Amlodhi, on whose behalf “the Nine Maids of the Island Mill stir amain the host-cruel skerry quern”, unless, and one cannot exclude this possibility, Amlodhi as the Primeval Giant was himself ground by the Nine Maids, just like was Bergelmir. Anyway, Amlodhi as the turner of the Cosmic Mill is a representative of a larger mythical conception of the Supreme Deity residing near the Centre of the Universe, itself immobile and constant, around which revolves the entire world, just like the vault of heaven keeps turning round the central Pole Star. In this respect “Amlodhi’s Mill” is equivalent to King Arthur’s Avalon, known in Celtic Britain as “caer sidi”, i.e. the “revolving castle”, whose summit touches the Pole Star: Arthur is here likewise the Lord of the Universe, “Seigneur Universal”, like the Indian “Cakravarti”, literally “he who turns the wheel”, himself remaining at the immovable centre of the sky (Evola 1972:49).

But the passage from the “Skaldskaparmal” contains also a clear reference to the sea, which is here synonymous with “Amlodhi’s Mill”. Now the Vikings used to refer to the sea as the “jaws of Aegir” which devoured lost ships (Davidson 1981:128). In the poetry of the seagoing folk the ocean was figured as a greedy destroyer, the mill itself, whose two jaws, the upper and the lower mill-stones, crushed and devoured the ships. Aegir, the Norse god of the sea, was mated with his sister, the goddess Ran, whose name means “robber”, and who was as cruel, greedy, and instiable as her husband. She was considered the goddess of death for all who perished at sea, and in order to win Ran’s good graces the Northerners were careful to carry some gold about them when they set out sailing: whenever any danger threatened them on the sea they used to throw some gold overboard to bribe Ran, who afterwards used it to illuminate her submarine halls (Davidson 1981:128, Guerber 1914:186ff). It is also interesting to note that Aegir and Ran had nine beautiful daughters, describes as waves, or billow-maidens, who played around the ships of the Vikings whom they

favoured, helping them to reach speedily their goals (Guerber 1914:187). These nine damsels, all sisters, in common gave birth to a god named Heidmall, of whom Snorri says in the "Gylfaginning":

There's one named Heimdall: people call him the White God and he is mighty and holy. ... He lives at Heaven's Edge close by Bifröst Bridge where he stands sentinel at the end of heaven watching out for the assaults of the Hill Giants on the bridge.

The god himself sings in the "Heimdalargaldr":

I am son of nine maidens,  
the child of the sister nine.

(In Branston 1955: 137)

This Heidmall's nickname is Vindler, a word which is related to Old Norse "vinda", to wind, twist, or turn. B. Branston suggests that Heimdall's name Vindler, the Turner or Borer, shows him as the producer of domestic fire by friction, a sort of Norse Agni (Branston 1955:140). At the same time Heidmall the Turner and his nine mothers, the daughters of Aegir the sea-god, are another analogue of the "Nine Maids" of Snaebjörn's verse, where Heimdall, "born at the world's edge", i.e., at the meeting point of heaven and earth, and "standing sentinel at the end of heaven" is again equivalent to Hamlet the Sky Father who turns the Mill of Heaven. By the way, Branston's reference to Agni the fire-god can well be reconciled with the proposed interpretation if it is remembered that in India Agni as the embodiment of the Cosmic Fire is associated with the Pole Star and is known as the child of a divine parental pair of heaven and earth, represented by two fire-sticks, of which the upper, hard and rotary, refers to the male revolving heaven, while the lower, soft and receiving, is equivalent to the female immobile earth (Rig Veda 1981:10.5; Tokariew 1980:35).

As is seen from the above evidence the network of symbolic associations initiated by a seemingly "innocent" passage from Saxo Grammaticus further strengthens the association of the Hamlet figure with cosmological concepts, particularly with the complex of the Golden Age. In connection with "Amlodhi's Mill" it is also necessary to mention another Scandinavian legend which, apart from exploring the idea of the mill, includes the already familiar semi-historical figure of king Frodi, as is remembered, the patron of the Norse age of "peace and plenty". The story in question is included in the *Poetic Edda*, and bears the title the "Grottasongr". It is a North-European version of a popular wandering myth, preserved also in Finland, Estonia, Greece, and even China, about a magic mill that cannot be stopped and, when finally thrown into the sea, keeps turning round and producing salt. The story seems crucial to the understanding of the concept of "Amlodhi's Mill", and here it goes:

One king Frodi happened to be the owner of a huge mill, or quern, so huge that no human strength could move it. Its name was Grotte, the crusher. Frodi travelled around looking for someone who could work it, and in Sweden he bought two giant maidens, Fenja and Menja, who were able to work the Grotte. It was a magic mill, and whatsoever one asked for would be ground by this mill. Frodi bade the two giantesses grind out gold, peace, and happiness. So they did. But Frodi in his greed drove them night and day, and allowed them rest only for so long as it took to recite a certain verse. One night, when everybody else was asleep, the giantesses sang the magic Grottasong and ground out a host against Frodi, and that very day Mysingr, the Sea-King, landed and slew Frodi, ending the celebrated "Peace of Frodi". Mysingr loaded the Grotte on his ship, and with him he took also the giantesses. He ordered them to grind again, but this time they ground out only salt. They ground so much that the ship on which they sailed sank, and from that day there has been a whirlpool in that place in the sea where the water falls through the hole in the mill-stone. It was then that the sea became salt.

(In MacCulloch 1964: 283-4; Zaluska-Strömberg 1986: 180-6)

The "Grottasongr" is dated to the tenth century, and references to the story can be found scattered in the tradition of Sealdic poetry. The whirlpool mentioned in the poem, caused by the water rushing in through the hole in the mill-stone, is located near the western of Scandinavia and is called the Mpske. Also, between Scotland and the Orkney Islands flows a current called "Svelki" (O. N. "svelgr", a "whirlpool"), and the tradition of the giant maids Fenja and Menni still lingers on in the islands (MacCulloch 1964:284).

Now in the absence of the rest of the lost story about Amlodhi's Mill it is not entirely unjustified to substitute the mentioned Frodi by Amlodhi, Hamlet's prototype. There is even to be observed a structural similarity between the two mythical figures: king Frodi, the owner of the Grotte driven by the giantesses who ground out "peace and plenty" in the Golden Age on the one hand, and Amlodhi with his mill producing "meal" in "ages past", that is, in the Golden Age, on the other hand. It is also interesting to add that Fenja and Menja explain in their "chant" that they had been growing under the earth for not more or less but nine winters, gathering strength to budge the Cosmic Mill. The "Nine Maids of the Island mill" reappear in the eighth century Irish legend of king Ruadh who begot his son with "nine lovely women living under the waves" (Jackson 1980:150ff), inevitably the nine daughters of some Celtic sea-god, the counterpart of Aegir. Let us also mention the nine virgins of the Isle of Sein in Western Brittany described by Pomponius Mela: they were possessed of magical powers and might be approached by those who sailed to consult them (cf. Gravers 1958:107), just like were Fenja and Menja, the mighty giantesses who knew the feature.

One is not surprised to find the curse of the miller women conjuring up a "host" against those who set them to grinding also in the world of Homer, two thousand years earlier than the Eddaic account. Upon landing in Ithaca

Odysseus prays to Zeus to send him an encouraging sign, and:

Straightaway he thundered from shining Olympus, from on high from the palace of the clouds, and goodly Odysseus was glad. Moreover, a woman, a grinder at the mill, uttered a voice of omen from within the house hard by, where stood the mills of the shepherd of the people. At these handmills twelve women in all plied their task, making meal of barley and of wheat, the marrow of men. Now all the others were asleep, for they had ground out their task of grain, but one alone rested not yet, being the weakest of all. She now stayed her quern and spoke a word, a sign to her Lord. "Father Zeus, who rulest over gods and men, loudly thou hast thundered from the starry sky, yet nowhere is there a cloud to be seen: this is surely a potent thou art showing to some mortal. Fulfill now, I pray thee, even to miserable me, the word that I shall speak. May the woers, on this day, for the last and the latest time make their sweet feasting in the halls of Odysseus! That they have loosened my knees with cruel toil to grind their barley meal, may they now sup their last!" (*Odyssey* XX : 102–119, an English translation by Rouse in: Syntillana 1977 : 90)

"The weakest of all" and yet a true giant figure utters her curse from behind the quern announcing the approaching doom of the woers who have made her a thrall to grind at the mill — just like did Fenja and Manja out an enemy against merciless Frodi. Besides, among the Greeks, too, the rotary quern stood for the revolving vault of heaven, what is explicitly stated by Varro in *De re rustica* (Varro 1936:321). The giant-maid made to turn the mill appears also in the myth of princess Metope locked in a dungeon by her father, king Echetos. The girl had her eyes put out and the sight would not be restored to her until she had ground the bronze grains on a heavy quern (Graves 1974:549). The blind giant set to turn the mill recurs in the "Book of Judges" in the already familiar person of Samson, whom "the Philistines seized ..., gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza. There they bound him with fetter of bronze, and he was set to grinding corn in the prison" (*Bible* 1977:Judges, 16:21). Of all the Giant Heroes of the Mill Samson is perhaps the earliest, as far as the chronology of the sources is concerned. And as is remembered, in the end Samson resumed his strength and brought the temple crushing down on the heads of the Philistines. Like Fenja and Manja, and — let us add — like Amleth, he had taken his revenge.

The above sample of mythological evidence concerning the mill and the action of grinding suggests the symbolic connection between the spinning mill and the revolving heavens, and consequently, with the notions of Time and Inevitable Fate. To the same symbolic complex belong also numerous mythical conceptions of world-ages, with the initial Golden Age and its Ruler, and the subsequent eras of which — and this is important — every next is worse than the preceding one. Let us recall here Hesiod's classical division of the world's history into golden, silver, bronze, and iron ages (Hesiod 1902:166ff). The idea of the gradual deterioration and devaluation of the initial Golden Age is well reflected in the quoted story of the Grotte which — as is remembered — first

ground out gold, "peace and happiness", and later, due to the "original sin", here Frodi's greed, the mill changed its outputs into salt, a precious but inferior product, and finally probably sand, if we recall Amleth's equation sand=fluor, "ground by the foaming billows" of the sea. Ultimately the stolen Grotte is broken into pieces and falls into the sea — the Golden Age has been brought to a catastrophic end. In a quite similar way, as we read in the *Bible* the fall of Babylon was accompanied by the hurling of a great mill-stone into the sea by a mighty angel: when the city of Babylon was finally swept from the face of the earth "no more shall the sound of the mill be heard" there, that is, the Time, the Age of Babylon's glory will be brought to a close (*Bible* 1977:Rev. of John, 18:21 — 2). According to G. de Santillana the myth of the Grotte and its numerous parallels express symbolically an astronomical phenomenon known as the "precession of the equinoxes", which relies on the gradual and slow shifting of the solstitial and equinoctial points along the ecliptic, and results in the impression of the passing of astronomical eras as the point of the vernal equinox, the "marker" of the current era, moves from one zodiacal sign to another (Santillana 1977:56ff, 102ff). So if it is true that in ancient world-views the mill or quern is a symbolic representation of the Cosmos — with the lower immovable mill-stone as the plane of the earth, the upper rotary stone as the revolving heaven, and the axle standing for the Axis Mundi reaching up to the Pole Star — then the changing products of grinding are a reflection of the passing of world-ages, always from better to worse. The period of Frodi's ownership of the Grotte is undoubtedly a golden one, as is most probably Amleth's. And due to the "mill" episode in Saxo's account we are entitled to include Amleth and, ultimately, Hamlet, into the category of Ideal Rulers reigning in the Golden Age of humanity. Nor is the motif absent in Shakespeare who gets Fortinbras, a would-be incarnation of the just killed prince, refer to Hamlet in the following words:

Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage;  
For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have proved most royally.

Potentially an Ideal Ruler figure, Shakespeare's hero nevertheless quits the scene together with the "old gods" representing the passing 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. Unlike in its sources, the caesura motif in Shakespeare's play indicates quite pessimistically that the old world has been brought to a close, and there is little or no hope to get things better. In fact, the tragic ending suggests that it is the "Golden Age" of the Elizabethan Renaissance which is declining. The "decisiveness" of "Hamlet" the play relies on its standing at the threshold separating two epochs: the Renaissance and the baroque, or, more broadly, the medieval



and modern times. In England, the feeling of general deterioration, nostalgia, and melancholy for the passing world was additionally embittered 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 must have been well understood by Shakespeare's audience, for whom mythical thinking, operating with analogies and symbolic associations, was still a commonplace. People from the turn of the sixteenth century must have still very sensitive to motifs and elements of mythical nature, stirring in their minds perennial strings of symbolic associations, not yed tamed by the Age of Reason with its emphasis on intellect and pragmatic attitude towards the world. This sensitiveness, fed on popular fairy tales, stories and legends from pre-Christian Britain and Scandinavia, the classical world and the Biblical tradition, enabled the recipients of Shakespeare's plays to react much more spontaneously and intensely to seeing Hamlet die on the stage — no doubt much more than today.

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