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ORIGINAL ARTICLES



A Hamlet from Småland, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In the judgement book of 1604 from the province of Småland in the south of Sweden, there is an interesting case, where a thief named Jon is called an *amblet*. The only possible explanation for the word is that it is an appellative use of the name Hamlet in the form it has in the Saxo tradition: *Amlethus* etc. Since it is presented as an extenuating circumstance that Jon ‘was an *amblet*’ when he stole, the meaning ‘lunatic, madman’ suggests itself.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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In the judgment book of 1604 from the hundred of Sunnerbo (Swedish *Sunnerbo härad*) in the province of Småland in the south of Sweden, there is an interesting case dated 14 May. A man named Jon from the village of Pontansbygd has stolen a pair of boots, a pair of trousers and two cheeses. The victim of this petty theft, Tore from the village of Bohult, does not have the patience to wait for a trial in court, and decides instead – together with his neighbour Knut and another man called Jöns – to pursue a revenge attack on Jon in his home. They catch and bind him and seize from him a silver belt, a silver chain, a buckle, two guns, a gun barrel, a gun lock and some coins. However, justice eventually catches up with both parties and they are all convicted and fined for their criminal acts. In the court record describing the case (for a larger context, with the original Swedish text and an image of part of the page, see Fridell 2019–2020), it is said about Jon:

Men Jon i Pontersbygdh som war en amblet, när han snappade ifrån Thore i Boalt wart för menige mans förbön så förskonat, att han ther före skulle böta, Chronone Härratzhöfdingen och Härradet penningar 24 daler. (Göta hovrätts arkiv, Advokatfiskalen, Kronobergs län. Renoverade domböcker. Sunnerbo härad 1603–18, EVIIAAD:5, f. 28v)

But Jon from Pontansbygd, who was an *amblet* when he pilfered from Thore of Bohult, was so spared on account of the intercession of the assembled people that he was ordered to pay a fine of 24 *daler* for this, to the Crown, the Judge of the hundred and the Hundred. (Author’s translation)

The only possible explanation for the word *amblet* is that it is an appellative use of the name *Hamlet* in the form it has in the Saxo tradition: *Amlethus* etc. There is another tradition of the story in Scandinavia, where the principal character is called *Amlóði* in Old Norse and later Icelandic texts (Heggstad, Hødnebo & Simensen 2008: 38) and *Amløthæ* in the Danish chronicle of Lejre in Latin from the 12th century. That tradition is also represented by the appellative use of the name as *amblodhe* in the Old Swedish chronicle of King Erik. In the

standard dictionary of Old Swedish (Söderwall 1884–1918, 1: 33), the meaning of the word is rendered as ‘fool’ (Swedish ‘fåne, narr’), but the context is as follows:

tha slo konungin synom handom samman
 ok loo fastelika ok giorde sik gaman
 rät som han ware en amblodhe
 then sik enkte got forstodhe (Söderwall 1884–1918, 1: 33)
 then the King slapped his hands together
 and laughed loudly and made merry
 just as if he were an *amblodhe*
 who understood nothing well (Author’s translation)

The context implies that ‘lunatic, madman’ would be a better translation, especially considering the underlying allusion to the feigned madness of Hamlet/Amlode. Modern Icelandic *amlóði* and New Norwegian *amlod* have certain other meanings which must be secondary and lack any connection to the tale of Hamlet (Blöndal Magnússon 1989: 15; Norsk ordbok 1: 70).

What, then does *amblet* mean in the quoted 1604 judgment book from Sweden? Since it is presented as an extenuating circumstance that Jon ‘was an amblet’ when he stole from Tore, the meaning ‘lunatic, madman’ suggests itself in this context, too. One can imagine that it was regarded as insane that Jon – for such a meagre profit as boots, trousers and cheeses – should run the risk of both revenge from the victim of the theft and conviction by the court. Perhaps Tore and Knut were notorious violent troublemakers whom it was considered insane to provoke?

The play *Hamlet* by Shakespeare was published in 1603. It is exciting and interesting that the character of Hamlet – albeit only as a symbol of madness – was known at almost the same time to a Swedish legal scribe. Obviously, he could not have had any knowledge of Shakespeare’s play. Rather, both the English drama and the appellative usage in Swedish of the word *amblet* in the sense of ‘lunatic, madman’ are to be regarded as two offshoots of the same tradition emanating from the story of Amlethus in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus.

The spelling *Hamlet* with an initial *H* seems to be an English innovation, introduced perhaps by Shakespeare himself, or by Thomas Kyd (if he was the author of the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* of 1589; see Bevington 2011: 15ff.). Either way, the immediate source for the English playwrights was *Histoires tragiques* by François de Belleforest, published in 1570, in which the name is still written *Amleth* (Gollancz 1926: 174ff.). It seems likely that the spelling *Hamlet* is a hypercorrection, a reaction to *h*-dropping, which was a widespread phenomenon in 16th- and 17th-century English (see Milroy 1983: 48 f.).

It is noteworthy that the text of the Swedish judgment book discussed here is found in a renovated (i.e. copied) judgment book, where the scribe writes *amblet* very distinctly, letter by letter, indicating that it was not a familiar, every-day word to him. Thus the word *amblet* was probably not very widespread and well known in Sweden at the beginning of the 17th century.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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