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## THE COCK AND THE NATIVITY

In this brief essay I am going to suggest that a paragraph from Saxo's *Danish History*, Bk. V, may possibly provide a much needed context for the reading of the "bird of the dawning" passage from *Hamlet* (I, 1, 157—163), clarifying the purport of those lines notoriously in some ways defying analysis. There are, of course, indications in Shakespeare's own text ("Some say", „and then they say") that, for fuller understanding, reference to extraneous contexts might be useful, if we had them. The value of the source I am about to propose will, I believe, come out more interestingly if we set it against the background of such findings as we can first make in the course of an examination rigorously kept within the bounds of the *Hamlet* text data.

Here, then, are the relevant lines; the two speeches, by Horatio and Marcellus, both referring to the properties of the Cock, and apparently forming a sequence (I, 1, 149—163; the text is from the Q. 2 version).

*Horatio*

I haue heard,  
The Cock that is the trumpet to the morne,  
Doth with his lofty and shrill sounding throat  
Awake the God of day, and at this warning  
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or ayre  
Th'extrauagant and erring spirit hies  
To his confine, and of the truth heerein  
This present obiect made probation.

*Marcellus*

It faded on the crowing of the Cock,  
Some say that euer gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Sauours birth is celebrated  
This bird of dawning singeth all night long,  
And then they say no spirit dare sturre abraode  
The nights are wholesome, then no plannets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charme.  
So hallowed, and so gracious is that time.

Marcellus begins in a musing vein, as if in a mood to continue the former speaker's discourse, and then, surprisingly, goes on to produce an idea startlingly novel. The Cock, on a superficial view, seems to assure the continuity, but this will not bear examination. Horatio spoke about

the "Cock that is the trumpet to the morne", that is to say, the bird we know from everyday life; Marcellus has a different Cock who, paradoxically, is provoked to continuous song by the longest night in the year, as if it were, in a sense, a dawn. One can easily perceive the logic of this on the metaphorical level; as well as to note the contrast between the pagan temper of Horatio's speech, natural in the mouth of the man who considers himself "more an anticke Romaine then a Dane"; and the devoutly Christian note his friend strikes.

Each one of these two little speeches, we can now see, has a different theme, so that they are, in fact, quite unrelated. This is also reflected in the very different slant they take towards the actualities. Horatio's is a practical attitude; his words are meant to explain a phenomenon which has just taken place. Marcellus, on the other hand, seems to indulge in unbusinesslike musings: his utterance is aimed at a point in time which is not that of the action; the information he volunteers about the bird of dawning can have no reference to the "here and now", to events happening on that high summer night in Elsinore. Inevitably, we are left wondering in what way, if at all, his words may possibly apply to matters touched on earlier in the dialogue.

Closer inquiry into the thematic structure of his speech will only bring out its seeming irrelevance more strikingly. For it appears to have one single dominant theme: the Nativity. The Cock is not a comparable thematic feature: not being a magical bird. If he were, we should expect the message of the concluding line to amount to something like: "So potent on that night is this bird's song", instead of which sense we have: "So hallowed, and so gracious is that time". So it is the authority of the unique religious event, and not the bird's song, that assures conditions of exceptional immunity on that one night in the year.

This is, I believe, about as far as analysis unaided by comparative study may take us; and the results, while partly positive, still do not throw light on the problem of the dramatic relevance. H. D. F. Kitto, the first of critics to see the significance of this religious "inset", defined its function in the most general terms only, as simply that of "poetry"; nor has appreciable progress since been achieved. This should make keener our interest in sources, if only we can basically agree as to their value.

With this proviso, then, let us now enter on our proper inquiry. Shakespeare here, as so often elsewhere, appears to be highly original both in invention and in the way he has used his source material. The basis for his portrayal of the Cock as Christ's herald can be found in the line "Coc cante el suo onur les hures nuit e jur" ("The Cock chants in his honour the (canonical) hours night and day"), from Philippe de

Thaun's *Bestiary*, which, however, could be accessible to Shakespeare only in manuscript form, if at all.<sup>1</sup> But the closer association between the Cock and the Nativity, and more particularly the Bird of Dawning conceit, seem Shakespeare's own imaginative flights, possibly encouraged by this source.

The idea I want to discuss here for the first time concerns the Nativity. The books III and IV of Saxo's brilliant work contain, as all students of Shakespeare know, the story of Hamlet, the 33rd king of Denmark. Book V, in turn, tells the story of Frode, one of the warrior kings, towards the end of whose reign, in a distant land, Christ was born. This is how the Danish historian tells of the event:

Per idem tempus publicae salutis auctor mundum petendo seruandorum mortalium gratia mortalitatis habitum amplecti sustinuit, cum iam terrae sopitis bellorum incendiis, serenissimo tranquillitatis ocio fruerentur. Creditum est tam profusae pacis amplitudinem, ubique aequalem nec ullis orbis partibus interruptam, non adeo terreno principatui quam diuino ortui famulatam fuisse, caelitusque gestum, ut inusitatum temporis beneficium praesentem temporum testaretur auctorem.<sup>2</sup>

In Oliver Elton's rendering:

About the same time, the Author of our general Salvation, coming to earth in order to save mortals, bore to put on the garb of mortality; at which time the fires of war were quenched, and all lands were enjoying the calmest and the most tranquil peace. It has been thought that the peace then shed abroad so widely, so even and uninterrupted over the whole world, attended not so much an earthly rule as that of divine birth; and that it was a heavenly provision that this extraordinary gift of time should be a witness to the presence of Him who created all times.<sup>3</sup>

Shakespeare seems to have assimilated both the mood and the idea, and turned them to unexpected dramatic use. An original feature of his treatment is the new association of the Nativity theme with the Cock (as Christ's servant), but this novelty, we have seen, is not of major consequence. The more important development seems to be this, that he imaginatively entered into Saxo's poetic mood and responded with original poetry of his own. Both the historian's and the poet's great subject is time, hallowed and gracious through the coincidence of the

<sup>1</sup> I have discussed the question at some length in *Hamlet* (Ossolineum, Wrocław 1963), pp. 135—37.

<sup>2</sup> (*Danica Historia libri XVI... Auctore Saxone Grammatico... Francoforti ad Moenum...* M. D. LXXVI. Lib. 5, fol. 86. „Christi Natiuitas” (marg. note).

<sup>3</sup> (*The nine books of Saxo Grammaticus*, London 1894, p. 209).

divine birth; but only with the historian the peace which then emanates upon the earth is, explicitly, political peace, the peace which reigns when the fires of war are quenched. This, however, seems to be the very overtone of meaning needed for the understanding of the dramatic implications of the Marcellus speech. The young soldier, a scholar and a gentleman besides, has been deeply shamed by his ineffectual attempt to kill, or scare away, the majestic apparition, and now experiences a revulsion from violence. Inspired by the idea of the Cock as herald of Christ's peace on earth, he makes a speech whose dramatic relevance can be clearly perceived against the background of the previous talk of politics and war. That is where he contacts the realities of the situation; but we could not divine the political, and melancholy, turn his thought has taken from the nostalgic tone of his Christian musings alone.

I suppose it is possible to see the aptness of the proposed context from Saxo for the enlargement of our understanding of the issues involved in the Shakespearian structure of the dialogue. And it is not the only time that Marcellus has been charged by his creator with a serious poetic mission. Some of the weightiest and best remembered pronouncements in *Hamlet* come from him. "We doe it wrong, being so Maiesticall, To offer it the showe of violence" is one example. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmarke" is another. Like his greater contemporary, the Prince, he has a sensitive and diagnostic soul, one capable of moral courage: a more detailed analysis of his actions and sayings in Act I would prove this amply.