

William Julius Mickle (1735-88)

2 *Hengist and Mey: A Ballad*

In ancient days when Arthur reign'd,
Sir Elmer had no Peer;
And no young Knight in all the land,
The ladies lov'd so dear.

His sister Mey, the fairest maid 5
Of all the Virgin train,
Won every heart at Arthur's court;
But all their love was vain.

In vain they lov'd, in vain they vow'd,
Her heart they could not move; 10
Yet at the evening hour of prayer,
Her mind was lost in love.

The Abbess saw — the Abbess knew,
And urged her to explain;
"O name the gentle youth to me, 15
"And his consent I'll gain."

Long urg'd, long tir'd, fair Mey reply'd,
'His name — how can I say?
"An angel from the fields above,
"Has rapt my heart away. 20

"But once, alas! and never more,
"His lovely form I spied;
"One evening by the sounding shore,
"All by the greenwood side.

"His eyes to mine the love confest, 25
"That glow'd with mildest grace;
"His courtly mien and purple vest,
"Bespoke his princely race.

“But when he heard my brother’s horn,
“Fast to his ships he fled; 30
“Yet while I sleep, his graceful form,
“Still hovers round my bed.

“Sometimes all clad in armour bright,
“He shakes a warlike lance;
“And now in courtly garments dight, 35
“He leads the sprightly dance.

“His hair, as black as raven’s wing;
“His skin — as Christmas snow;
“His cheeks outvie the blush of morn,
“His lips like rose-buds glow. 40

“His limbs, his arms, his stature, shap’d
“By Nature’s finest hand;
“His sparkling eyes declare him born
“To love, and to command.”

The live-long year fair Mey bemoan’d 45
Her hopeless pining love:
But when the balmy spring return’d,
And summer cloth’d the grove;

All round by pleasant Humber side,
The Saxon banners flew, 50
And to Sir Elmer’s castle gates,
The spear-men came in view.

Fair blush’d the morn, when Mey look’d o’er,
The castle walls so sheen;
And lo! the warlike Saxon youth, 55
Were sporting on the green.

There Hengist, Offa’s eldest son,
Lean’d on his burnish’d lance,
And all the armed youth around,
Obey’d his manly glance. 60

His locks, as black as raven’s wing,

Adown his shoulders flow'd;
His cheeks outvy'd the blush of morn,
His lips like rose-buds glow'd.

And soon the lovely form of Mey 65
Has caught his piercing eyes;
He gives the sign, the bands retire,
While big with love he sighs.

"Oh! thou, for whom I dar'd the seas;
"And came with peace or war; 70
"Oh, by that cross that veils thy breast,
"Relieve thy lover's care!

For thee I'll quit my f'ather's throne;
"With thee the wilds explore;
"Or with thee share the British crown; 75
"With thee the cross adore."

Beneath the timorous virgin blush,
With Love's soft warmth she glows;
So blushing through the dews of morn,
Appears the opening rose. 80

'Twas now the hour of morning pray'r,
When men their sins bewail,
And Elmer heard King Arthur's horn,
Shrill sounding thro' the dale.

The pearly tears from Mey's bright eyes, 85
Like April dew drops fell,
When with a parting dear embrace
Her brother bade farewell.

The cross with sparkling diamonds bright, 90
That veil'd the snowy breast,
With prayers to heaven her lilly hands,
Have fixt on Elmer's vest.

Now, with five hundred bowmen true,
He's march'd across the plain;
'Till with his gallant yeomandrie, 95

He join'd King Arthur's train.

Full forty thousand Saxon spears,
Came glittering down the hill,
And with their shouts and clang of arms,
The distant valleys fill. 100

Old Offa, drest in Odin's garb,
Assum'd the hoary God;
And Hengist, like the warlike Thor,
Before the horsemen rode.

With dreadful rage the combat burns, 105
The captains shout amain;
And Elmer's tall victorious spear
Far glances o'er the plain.

To stop its course young Hengist flew
Like light'ning o'er the field; 110
And soon his eyes the well-known cross,
On Elmer's vest beheld.

The flighted lover swell'd his breast,
His eyes shot living fire;
And all his martial heat before, 115
To this was mild desire.

On his imagin'd rival's front,
With whirlwind speed he prest,
And glancing to the sun, his sword
Resounds on Elmer's crest. 120

The foe gave way, the princely youth,
With heedless rage pursued,
'Till trembling in his cloven helm,
Sir Elmer's javelin stood.

He bow'd his head — slow dropt his spear; 125
The reins slipt through his hand,
And stain'd with blood — his stately corse
Lay breathless on the strand.

“O bear me off,” Sir Elmer cried;
“Before my painful sight 130
“The combat swims — yet Hengist’s vest
“I claim as victor’s right.”

Brave Hengist’s fall the Saxons saw,
And all in terror fled;
The bowmen to his castle gates, 135
The brave Sir Elmer led.

“O wash my wounds, my sister dear;
“O pull this Saxon dart,
“That whizzing from young Hengist’s arm
“Has almost pierc’d my heart. 140

“Yet in my hall his vest shall hang,
“And Britons yet unborn,
“Shall with the trophies of to-day,
“Their solemn feasts adorn.”

All trembling Mey beheld the vest, 145
“Oh, Merlin!” loud she cried,
“Thy words are true — my slaughter’d love
“Shall have a breathless bride!

“Oh Elmer, Elmer, boast no more
“That low my Hengist lies! 150
“O Hengist, cruel was thine arm!
“My brother bleeds and dies!”

She spake — the roses left her cheeks,
And life’s warm spirit fled:
So nipt by winter’s withering blasts, 155
The snow-drop bows the head.

Yet parting life one struggle gave,
She lifts her languid eyes;
“Return my Hengist, oh return
“My slaughter’d love,” she cries. 160

“Oh — still he lives — he smiles again,

“With all his grace he moves;
“I come — I come where bow nor spear
“Shall more disturb our loves.”

She spake — she died. The Saxon dart 165
Was drawn from Elmer’s side,
And thrice he call’d his sister Mey,
And thrice he groan’d, and died.

Where in the dale, a moss-grown cross,
O’ershades an aged thorn, 170
Sir Elmer’s and young Hengist’s corse,
Were by the spear-men borne.

And there, all clad in robes of white,
With many a sigh and tear,
The village maids to Hengist’s grave 175
Did Mey’s fair body bear.

And there, at dawn and fall of day,
All from the neighbouring groves,
The turtles wail, in widow’d notes,
And sing their hapless loves. 180

1784

(From *Poems and A Tragedy*. London, 1794)