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Revenge and the Answer to the Question "Who's there?"

1. Abstract

Revenge is a subject that characterizes Renaissance tragedy and Elizabethan drama and depicts the fragility of the rule of law during the period of the setting of the play. One of the questions to be addressed in this paper is why the topic on revenge is important to us and how it is related to the nowadays debate. Revenge remains a subject that questions the existence and challenges the rule of law institutions even in the context of the modern world. Therefore, the theme of revenge bangs hard and seeks to be explored. The reign of Queen Elizabeth is pretty much identified in literature with the Shakespeare's plays and traditionally it denotes "a revival of classical antiquity" (Singh, 2009) which originally began in Italy with Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and Michelangelo. The identity of the avenger is crucial in understanding the motive behind each murder that takes place because of revenge. Therefore, finding the answer to the question "Who's there?" is of utmost importance in resolving the mystery behind the series of tragedies that occur within the play of Hamlet.

Key words: revenge, murder, ghost, question, blood feud, throne, mother's love, jealousy

2. Introduction

The reign of Queen Elizabeth is identified with the Shakespeare's plays. The period of Renaissance "traditionally denoted a revival of classical antiquity" (Singh, 2009), which originally began in Italy with Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and Michelangelo.

During this period there is also a growing sense of pride in the national culture and heritage. Professor Abdullah Karjagdiu, referring to Milton, writes that after the reign of Edward and Mary, with the Elizabeth taking power as Queen of England, we suddenly see England "a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks". (Karjagdiu, 1997).

As it is well noted the revenge emerged as one of the central issues in Renaissance drama, and particularly in England, the so-called revenge tragedy became one of the dominant genres of the stage. (Canton, 1989, 2004). Hamlet's revenge has its root in pagan tradition (Blamires, 1974, 1984) and the foundation of his act is based solely in his own suspicion.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy clarifies that the words "revenge" and "justice" in ancient Greece were equivalent. He further maintains that Plato's Socrates taught that "the return of evil for evil" is always unjust. (Honderich, 2005). The Hebrew *Bible* describes a "vengeful God" and prescribes "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24), (Bible, 2011) while the *New Testament* encourages forgiveness, calling never to take revenge and reserves vengeance for a loving God. "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." (Romans 12:19) (Bible, 2011).

One of the questions to be addressed in this paper is related to the identity of the avenger. "Who's there?" - it is not just a question that opens the play, but one that haunts the entire spirit of the drama. "Who's there?" is not merely questioning the physical presence of a mysterious being, but it digs deeper, questioning the very existence of Hamlet as a royal member, eligible to inherit the throne following his father's death. The spirit of this question creates a platform for the reader to understand that Hamlet has many identities and therefore each reader will keep asking who Hamlet is really. Even Hamlet himself is found pondering about his own role and identity and how he ends up in this whole madness and tragedies that occur one after another. Who is Hamlet? Is he a Prince of noble value? Is he eligible to inherit the throne? Who is the student of Wittenberg? Wasn't he smart enough to recognize his rights and take the throne but fall under the trap of the ghost? Who is the ghost that appears in the middle of the night, encouraging Hamlet to take revenge for its own death? Was Hamlet's mind sound? Was he mad trying to play madness? What is the motive behind his urge to seek revenge? Is it really the pain he feels for the loss of a beloved father or is it the jealousy and love he feels for his mother, who soon forgets about her late husband and marries her brother-in-law?

Given that the theme of revenge is important, and it is related to the nowadays debate and the rule of law, a comparative analysis will be made with the Canon of Lekë Dukagjini about revenge and how that is correlated with everyday life of common men. The rule of law even nowadays is fragile and not strong and often people will become the law and take justice onto their hands.

3. Literature Review

For this paper many authors and scholars have been reviewed, who were concentrated on Hamlet and the theme of revenge in Shakespeare's play. Harold Bloom has been the main address to review Hamlet's character and my attempt to answer the question "Who's there?" or "Who is it?" in trying to unfold the identity of the blood avenger in this play. General Editor Burton Raffel, who annotated Shakespeare's Hamlet takes us to the pre-historic story of Hamlet, introducing us to the original "*Amhlaide*" as a record of the principal character's name. Harold Bloom in his collection of studies "Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: Hamlet" points out that for 400 years audiences, readers, critics, actors, and directors have been asking, "Who is it?" when trying to identify the protagonist and title character. He writes "Who is Hamlet, really? Son, prince, student at Wittenberg, avenger, playwright, Renaissance Everyman, soldier? If observers do not agree on the answer to this central question, so they certainly will not agree on Hamlet's motivations for acting (cleverness, revenge, political ambition) or failing to act (fear, melancholy, uncertainty, sensitivity ...)". (Bloom, 2008).

William Hazlitt in his book "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays" described Hamlet as a "great moraliser," the "prince of philosophical speculators," "thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of the human character," and "as little of the hero as a man can well be" (Hazlitt, 1908, 2009).

The individual identity is destroyed through his commitment to take revenge. The moment Hamlet decided to kill, he killed his identity and himself thereto. According to the American philosopher of Aesthetics, Stanley Cavell "*The play's name for the thing that debars Hamlet from existence is revenge.*" He further maintains that revenge is the "*destroyer of individual identity.*" (Cavell, 2003).

For the purpose of identifying the right to succession of the throne, a paper "Elective Monarchy in the Sources of Hamlet" by A.P. Stabler has been reviewed, which emphasizes that "the election was limited to members of the royal house, in other words, the choice lay between Hamlet and his uncle" and that the disappointment that is felt in Hamlet, who at the time of his father's death was still a student in Wittenberg, is due to the fact that "succession seems to follow the principle of primogeniture" (Stabler, 1965).

I have made a short comparative analysis with the Kanun (Canon) of Lekë Duakgjini, collected and written by the Priest Shtjefën Gjeçovi in my attempt to understand who Hamlet is from the perspective of the victim or the person who lost a beloved father. Also, the Criminal Code of Kosovo has been referred in order to understand the definition of the notion on "murder".

Hamlet's revenge and the answer to the question "Who's there?"

"Who's there?" is not a simple question with which Hamlet's drama begins. It is a philosophical enigma with which Shakespeare tries to unfold an intriguing theme of the drama and literature of the reign of Elizabeth (1558 - 1603), whose name has left enduring traces throughout the history of England during which the English dramaturgy flourished and plays written and staged by William Shakespeare predominated.

What stands out in the English theatre and characterizes this golden theatrical period is the theme of revenge in the plays of the Elizabethan Age, which turns into a distinct literary genre and does not constitute merely of a literary theme. In the second half of the sixteenth century, which coincides with the great era of English drama, the works of Roman playwrights began to be largely translated into English. The Roman poet Seneca aroused great interest in English playwrights because as Harold Bloom emphasises "his plays were filled with such horrific events as cannibalism, incest, rape and violent death, things that the audience of this period was really interested in watching." Bloom further indicates that most of Seneca's performances dealt with the heroic figures of classical legends and their narratives were filled with scenes of great revenge. (Bloom, 2008).

Given that the modern world is marked with violence, the first reaction to such violence is always a revengeful reaction. Revenge is rooted in the human soul and the first natural reaction against a wrongdoing. Blood feud has been the outcome of revenge and many souls have perished due to revenge. This topic has been the motive of many great pieces of literature, including Shakespeare's drama, and therefore most people potentially tend to think that revenge is justifiable.

In Hamlet we meet a thoughtful young man, worthy, very intelligent, who under normal circumstances would do no harm to anyone. In a traditional culture, which is guided by unwritten canons and conventional ways, the avenger can be considered a hero, but, since such a character is the avenger, and consequently the murderer with a primitive motive for blood feud, he is a criminal, who commits a serious of criminal offense such as intentional and planned murders.

According to Burton Raffel, who annotated Shakespeare's Hamlet the pre-history of Hamlet is linked with the story of a blood family feud that occurred somewhere in Scandinavia at some distant and unknown time. "Amhlaide is how Hamlet was named, in the next link in the story, which is also our first written record of the principal character's name, though not yet of the tale proper. We do not have a whole work, but only a fragmentary mention in still another account, Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, dated to ca. 1230." (Ed. Raffel, 2003) (Shakespeare, 2003).

Hamlet fills the stage with blood. All are drowned into it: Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia. The revenge motive in all this drama is obvious: three sons have lost their fathers: Fortinbras's father is killed by old King Hamlet, prince Hamlet's father (King Hamlet) is murdered by Claudius, and Laertes's father Polonius is killed by prince Hamlet.

According to the American philosopher of Aesthetics, Stanley Cavell *"The play's name for the thing that debars Hamlet from existence is revenge."* He further maintains that revenge is the *"destroyer of individual identity."* (Cavell, 2003)

Northrop Frye thinks that *"in Shakespearean tragedy, man is not really man until he has entered what is called a social contact, when he ceases to be a "subject" in the philosophical sense and becomes a subject in the political one, essentially related to his society. The ordered society in Shakespeare is, to use Heidegger's term, ecstatic: its members are outside themselves, at work in the world, and their being is their function."* (Frye, 1967)

In a period when the rule of law was not strong or proving murders by legal means or criminal code was almost impossible, while the prosecution and trial of offenders was not regulated by legal and judicial norms, of course justice would remain in the hands of individuals. But such a case should not be for Hamlet's period. Denmark, as an old monarchy, seems to be well organized. In this period Denmark has its ambassadors all over Europe and it seems that its influence is largely extended throughout Western Europe. Hence,

Voltemand and Cornelius (Danish councilors, ambassadors to Norway) – Act 1, Scene 2 (The Castle)

*Polonius: The ambassadors from Norway, my good lord,
Are joyfully returned.*

Further in Act 5 enter Fortinbras, the English ambassadors, and others.

*Osric: Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland,
To th' ambassadors of England gives
This warlike volley. – Act 5, Scene 2*

Moreover, proving the murder against an uncle who has just received the throne was almost impossible. How can people in power and with legal immunity even nowadays be prosecuted?

Before the play begins, Hamlet's father, the King of Denmark, dies at a young age, and his mother soon marries his uncle. It is precisely Hamlet's mother's marriage to his uncle and the jealousy he feels against his mother, as well as the longing and pain for the late father, that push the young Hamlet to suspect that his uncle has killed his brother in order to seize the throne. Harold Bloom highlights Hamlet's motive for seeking revenge, questioning "whether his motive was really due to the pain he felt for the loss of his father or was it simply related to his jealousy of his mother", however he implies also that at a certain stage during the play, namely at Act V that "Hamlet is a changed man: mature rather than youthful, certainly quieter, if not quietistic, and somehow more attuned to divinity. Perhaps the truth is that he is at last himself, no longer afflicted by mourning and melancholia, by murderous jealousy and incessant rage. Certainly, he is no longer haunted by his father's ghost." (Bloom, 2009).

The play opens with the question "Who's there?", posed by Bernardo (Act 1, Scene 1)

"Who's there?" can be translated also as "Who is it?" and there seems to be a practical reason why Shakespeare decides to open the very first scene of the play with such a question, as Bernardo must change the shift and be replaced by another guard, in this case Francisco. Of course, they were obliged to confirm aloud each other's identity in the middle of the dark night. However, a kind of fear and insecurity is felt when such question is raised by Bernardo and consequently it becomes the beginning of a series of questions about the identity and personality of many characters of this drama and therefore the spirit of the question "Who's there?" will haunt the whole drama. More questions will haunt the reader of Hamlet. Who is the ghost that appears first to Bernardo and then to Hamlet? Who is Hamlet? What is the purpose of his appearance? Is it possible for justice to be sought from the other world? Can Hamlet's unfounded suspicions be substantiated only by the testimony of a ghost? Who is really his father's killer? Why did Hamlet not become king? Who is Claudio? Who are his friends? Who is Horace?" In some translations the question is translated as "Who is it?" Hence for example, "*Kush është atje*"? in Albanian. (Noli, 1926)

The root of this fear and insecurity is understood immediately after Elsinore, the castle of Denmark is haunted by the ghost which resembles the dead king of Denmark.

*Marcellus: Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us; - Act 1, Scene 1*

This "dreaded sight" has already been seen twice by Bernardo and his wife, Marcellus, accompanied by his sceptical friend Horace. The next manifestation of the ghost occurs exactly after the meeting of the trio and their conversation about the same ghost, which once again appears. Horace speaks to him insistently, asking him to stay there, to speak ...

*Barnardo: It is offended. See, it stalks away!
Horatio: Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak! - Act 1, Scene 1*

Harold Bloom points out that for 400 years audiences, readers, critics, actors, and directors have been asking the question, "Who's there?" when trying to identify the protagonist and title character. Who is Hamlet, really? Son, prince, student at Wittenberg, avenger, playwright, Renaissance Everyman, soldier? If observers do not agree on the answer to this central question, so they certainly will not agree on Hamlet's motivations for acting (cleverness, revenge, political ambition) or failing to act (fear, melancholy, uncertainty, sensitivity, or—a new option in the early twentieth century....). (Bloom, 2008)

Although William Hazlitt in his book "Characters of Shakespeare's Plays" described Hamlet as a "great moraliser," the "prince of philosophical speculators," "thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of the human character," and "as little of the hero as a man can well be" (Hazlitt, 1908, 2009), it still can be emphasised that that Hamlet's motive for seeking revenge has more to do with the jealousy he feels towards his mother and her quick marriage to her brother-in-law, in this case his uncle, rather than with the manifestation of the ghost. The ghost may have come as a result of the jealousy and imagination possessed by Hamlet's jealousy. We have no indication that Hamlet intends

to claim the royal throne, we see more his intention to claim the throne of his Mother's heart rather than the Royal throne. Hence the question "Who is (Hamlet)?" we can respond indicating that he is a boy who seeks the attention and heart of his mother, a boy who is jealous of her, feeling that she has already betrayed his dead father by marrying another man... The suspicion of his mother's love and sincerity towards his late father become the motive to seek the truth of his father's sudden death and hence revenge on him.

Before Hamlet is encountered with his father's ghost, we have a display of deep disappointment at his mother's attitude towards the death of his father and her husband, the Old Hamlet. Gertrude decides to marry her brother-in-law very quickly, forgetting her late husband and not considering at all the impact such an action could have had on her young and fragile son. Hamlet must have been eligible and qualified for the royal throne. But, according to dramaturgist Lydia Grabau this may not have been the case because not all monarchies inherit kingship through the system called "primogeniture", where the king's firstborn son and his descendants take the throne. (Grabau, 2013) However, this was not a common system of inheritance of the royal throne in the Scandinavian countries, which rather preferred the system of elective monarchy, as elaborated in the research paper "Elective Monarchy in the Sources of Hamlet" by A. P. Stabler. (Stabler, 1965). Studies refer to this system as "tanistry" which is the choice of the monarchy, choosing the "oldest and smartest" of the surviving family of the previous monarch. Of course, if this is how the monarchical system works, then Claudius would be the most natural solution, especially if he had married Gertrude, because this connection would ensure continuity between the monarchs and make the transition easier. However, according to Stabler "Shakespeare intends to represent Claudius as having usurped the throne to which Hamlet was the rightful heir". However, a few readers may be aware of the Danish constitutional practices in terms of election of the heir of the throne. According to Stabler "the election was limited to members of the royal house, in other words, the choice lay between Hamlet and his uncle" and that the disappointment that is felt in Hamlet, who at the time of his father's death was still a student in Wittenberg, is due to the fact that succession seems to have followed "the principle of primogeniture" (Stabler, 1965).

On the other hand, it is assumed that Gertrude may have had the right to inherit the throne, hence, the quick marriage between her and her brother-in-law! Act I, Scene 2, reads "Frailty, thy name is woman." (Shakespeare, 2003). These are the words uttered by Hamlet against his mother's decision to marry his uncle, now the new King of Denmark.

Hamlet's suspicion is strengthened when his close friend Horace tells him about the appearance of the ghost of the dead king. Further in his personal confrontation with the ghost Hamlet "realizes" that his father was killed by his uncle by putting poison in his ear while he was sleeping in the yard and for this, he asks him to take revenge. The testimony of the ghost confirms the suspicion of Hamlet, who at that moment explodes saying "Oh my prophetic soul". (Act 1, Scene 5)

A drama full of deaths and numerous murders, where two murders are recorded even before the play starts, that of Fortinbras and King Hamlet. The series of murders follows with the murder of Polonius, who is gathered by Hamlet on suspicion that Claudio is hiding behind the curtains in his mother's room. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed by the King of England when Hamlet realizes that they have taken him to England with an order written by the King of Denmark to murder Hamlet. Hamlet discovers such an order and changes his name to the names of his fellow travellers. Then follows the tragic death of Hamlet's girlfriend Ophelia, who in her loneliness after Hamlet's rejection and the murder of her father by her boyfriend, she goes into a serious mental state and ends up committing suicide. Hamlet confronts Laertes, Ophelia's brother, near her grave, and Laertes finds Hamlet guilty of his sister's death and demands a duel. The duel turns out to have also been planned in advance. King Claudius planned with Laertes to kill Hamlet either with a poisoned sword or with the wine cup in which they will put the killer poison. Unfortunately, the cup of poisoned wine is drunk by Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, who dies toasting her son in a duel. Hamlet manages to stab the King and force him to drink from the poisoned cup. In the end both Laertes and Hamlet end up dead.

The only surviving character remains Horace, who is left to tell this bloody event and story to Norway's new prince, Fortinbras, who returns to conquer the kingdom of Denmark as a result of his attempt to seek revenge for the murder of his father, the old king of Norway, Fortinbras, who was killed by Hamlet's father, the Old King Hamlet of Denmark. Fortinbras returns and enjoys an easy victory because the kingdom of Denmark is in its worst possible condition, covered in blood and a ruined kingdom.

Hamlet took the revenge he sought, but the consequences of his revenge were unpredictable and as a result of it many innocent people died, his love for Ophelia died, the murder of his mother took place and many other unforeseen murders happened too. The only winner in this drama turns out to be Fortinbras, as a secondary character of this play, but important for the political context of the two monarchies, both the Norwegian and the Danish ones.

If we try to answer the Question "Who is Hamlet?" in conjunction with the Albanian traditional Canon of Lekë Dukagjini, which specifically handles the subject of revenge, we will understand that Hamlet is actually a "*gjaks*". Ismail Kadare emphasises that in the mountains of Northern Albania revenge was so incarnated with the life of the highlanders, therefore it was a norm to kill, it was a norm to "take an eye for an eye". These people were called "*gjaks*" (English: blood-avengers) (Kadare, 2006) and they are so referred even today.

In the end of Hamlet, as in all Shakespeare's tragedies, there is no liberation. In the tragic world of Shakespeare no one can be impressed by the time the play ends, thus, Shakespeare's world is a world where, as Blake puts it in a verse of his poem Jerusalem: "The soul drinks murder & revenge, & applauds its own holiness." (Morton D. Paley, 1991).

4. Conclusion

With Hamlet, Shakespeare sought to write the most universal work and show the soul of humankind. The revenge motive in all this slaughter-drama is obvious: three sons have lost their fathers and they all want to seek revenge.

We see that the Hamlet of the first Act of the play is different from the Hamlet of the third Act, and entirely different from the Hamlet of the fifth Act. He has become utterly altered. He has become estranged. He gradually consumes himself in grudge, and his mouth speaks bloody words, and his “sea of troubles” becomes a sea of revenge. Hence the idea of him questioning his own identity.

According to Ismail Kadare’s interpretation of the Canon, “to avenge the blood means to take someone’s life. The blood avenger is not a killer. He is simply someone who should fulfil a duty, a sort of provision.” (Kadare, 2006). This philosophy has continued for ages in our own culture, challenging the rule of law in the most modern periods of time. Thus, I considered important to understand who Hamlet is from the perspective of the victim. In a comparative analysis with the Albanian traditional Canon of Lekë Dukagjini, which specifically handles the subject of revenge, we will understand that Hamlet is a “gjaks”. Ismail Kadare emphasises that in the mountains of Northern Albania revenge was so incarnated with the life of the highlanders, therefore it was a norm to kill, it was a norm to “take an eye for an eye”. These people are so referred even today. Kadare continues to describe them as “Silent, they followed their own way; by different ages, and with serious looks, like members of a sect, symbolizing death... If one of them happened to be at a theatre where Hamlet was showed, to him the Danish prince would be nothing more than a “gjaks” ...” (Kadare, 2006). And not only for him, but for most of the Albanians, Hamlet was nothing but a gjaks:

§ 886. *Në kanû të Malevet të Shqypnis gjithë djelm të lejn, njehen të mirë e nuk veçohen njani prej tjetrit.*

§ 887. *Çmimi i jetës së njerit është një, si për të mirin si edhe për të keqin.*

§ 891. *Prandej “Gjaqet i la Leka si nja-nja: del i miri prej të keqit e i keqi prej të mirit”. – “Shpirt për shpirt, se duken e falë Zoti”.*

§ 916. *“Gjaku gjak, gioba giobë, thotë kanûja”.*

§ 917. *Gjaku s’hupë kurr.*¹ (Gjeçovi, 1933)

All the laws depicted in the Kanun are clear, and cold, like a frozen winter day and as Harold Bloom in his *The Western Canon*, states that Canon is the true art of memory, the authentic foundation for cultural thinking (Bloom, 1994), therefore, exploring the Albanian traditional Kanun (Canon) enables us understand the theme revenge and blood

¹ [§ 886. According to the Code of the Albanian Mountains all the boys who come into life are considered good, and cannot be distinguished from one another.

§ 887. The price of human lives is alike for the good one as for the bad one.

§ 891. Therefore “Leka considered all blood equal: a good man may be begotten from a bad one, and the bad from the good.” - “A soul for a soul, for the appearance is given by God”.

§ 898. “Blood is blood, penalty is penalty, says the code”.

§ 917. “Blood is never lost”.] - from *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit, At Shtjefen Gjeçovi, pp. 85, 86, 87, 88*

feud in literature and also the motive behind each avenger, regardless of how unjustifiable any murder can or should be.

Revenge remains a subject that questions the existence and challenges the rule of law institutions even in the context of the modern world. The Criminal Code for example in Kosovo same as in the most developed countries prohibits murder by all means. Article 174 of the Criminal Code clearly emphasises that “whoever deprives another person of his or her life ... shall be punished” (06/L-074, 2018). Although I do not intend to imply that Shakespeare was familiar with the content of the Albanian Canon, doing this comparative analysis, I may conclude that the Albanian Canon helps us answer the question “Who is Hamlet?”. Hamlet was nothing but a “gjaks” who sought revenge, “a soul for a soul” because he was convinced in his sub-consciousness that blood was never lost.

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