

THEMATIC AND TEXTUAL COMPARISON OF THE TRAGEDIES

HAMLET BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND *ANTIGONE* BY SOPHOCLES

Krste Iliev¹ Natalija Pop Zarieva²,

¹Lector Krste Iliev, University “Goce Delcev”, krste.iliev@ugd.edu.mk

²Lector Natalija Pop Zarieva, University “Goce Delcev”,
natalija.popzarieva@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract

This paper aims at making a comparison of some of the most renowned tragedies in the history of Western literature, *Hamlet* and *Antigone*. Both plays summarize the values and ethos at the apex of their countries of origin, the Golden Age of Athens and the Golden Age of England. The Renaissance has brought the achievements of Ancient writers to England during the *Golden Age*, hence some similarities between the two tragedies. Both plays, *Hamlet* and *Antigone* pose the eternal question concerning the nature of human existence and indirectly about human`s place in nature. Both plays are dichotomous, simultaneously emphasising the greatness of human nature, and pointing out the insignificance of humans faced with nature. In *Hamlet* and *Antigone*, the protagonists struggle to fulfil what they regard as their duty and dwell on how their actions will affect their afterlife. In addition, both plays deal with the role of Fate and Free Will in the lives of humans and illustrate how this struggle is perceived in 5th century BC Athens/Thebes and 15th/ 16th century England. The paper aims to analyse how Shakespeare and Sophocles approach and elaborate these everlasting themes.

Key words: *human nature, ontology, eschatology, deontology, Fate and Free Will*

Introduction

This paper aims at making a comparison of some of the most renowned tragedies in the history of Western literature: *Hamlet* and *Antigone*. Both plays summarize the values and ethos at the apex of their countries of origin, the Golden Age of Athens and the Golden Age of England. Both plays abound with multilayer strata. Hamlet is a prince, a lover, a poet, a philosopher, a swordsman, a hesitant suicide. Antigone is a princess, a sister, a fiancée, a cousin, a rebel, a suicide. The Renaissance has brought the achievements of Ancient Greece to England during the *Golden Age*, hence some similarities between the two tragedies, but also certain differences.

Certain similarities and differences in the plays

Both in Elsinore and in Thebes something is rotten. As Hamlet would point out “*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark*” (Act 1, Scene 4, line 90). In Thebes, the unburied and rotten (μῦδάω, be damp, deteriorate by dampness) body of Polyneices symbolizes the rotten nature of Creon’s rule and that rottenness of Thebes. For Hamlet Denmark is an imagined, but also a real prison.

Hamlet: *Denmark's a prison.* Rosencrantz: *Then is the world one.* Hamlet: *A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst.* Rosencrantz: *We think not so, my lord.* Hamlet: *Why then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.*

(Act 2, Scene 2, lines 243- 251)

Likewise for Antigone, the cave where she is locked also becomes prison. Antigone: *My city! Rich citizens of my city.../I make my way to a prison sealed like a tomb. /Pity me. Neither among the living nor the dead/do I have a home in common--/neither with the living nor the dead.*”(Lines 900-907). In Hamlet, Claudius is the miasma “decease, pollution” both metaphorically and real. He pollutes King Hamlet’s body by pouring poison in his ear, but also “pollutes” the bed of Gertrude, the wife of his deceased brother. In *Antigone*, Creon proclaims his son Haemon to be a “polluted creature” (line 746) and confines Antigone to a cave instead of executing her “so that the whole city may avoid pollution” (lines 852-843). However, his accusations backfire as he ends up being the cause for the misfortunes, due to the fact his son Haemon, his fiancée Antigone and his wife Eurydice commit suicide. Both Hamlet and Antigone strive to put things right by opposing the respective kings responsible for the iniquities. For the higher goal, both forfeit their lives.

Both plays, *Hamlet* and *Antigone*, pose the eternal question concerning the nature of human existence and indirectly about human’s place in nature. Both plays

are dichotomous, simultaneously emphasising the greatness of human nature and pointing out the insignificance of humans when faced with nature. In *Hamlet*, the reborn idea of the greatness of man is expostulated by the main protagonist. This idea was particularly popular in the Renaissance, due in part to the so-called Renaissance manifest "*Oration on the Dignity of Man*" pronounced in 1486 by the Italian philosopher Pico de la Mirandola. As reported in the manifest, Hermes Tresmegistus said: "*A great miracle, Asclepius, is man!*" In both plays the human is represented using similar terminology, in *Hamlet* as: "*piece of work*" (Act 2, Scene 2, line 303), in *Antigone* as a "*wonder*" (line 335). In *Hamlet*, the human is described as: being "*noble in reason*" (Act 2, Scene 2, line 304), able to "*express*" (Act 2, Scene 2, line 305), and "*understand*" (Act 2, Scene 2, line 306). In *Antigone*, the Chorus describes the humans as: possessing "*thought*" (i.e. able to think, line 355) and capable of "*speech*" (line 355). Both plays portray the human, as the noblest being. In *Hamlet*, as being the most perfect, i.e. "*paragon of animals*" (Act 2, Scene 2, line 307). In *Antigone*, the human is described as being the master and tamer of other animals (lines 343-353).

After the appraisals, follow the lines that emphasise the insignificance of humans when faced with the nature. Hamlet rhetorically asks: *Yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust!*¹ (Act 2, Scene 2, line 308) if he is not happy. In *Antigone*, the insignificance is presented through the incapability of humans to find way for eternal life and overcome death. The Chorus points out to Creon "*For what is destined/for us, men mortal, there is no escape.*" (Lines 1411-1412)

Antigone`s unhappiness stems from the fact that she cannot bury Polyneices due to Creon`s decree. For her, the burial with dust and pouring of libations is ontologically related to her soul and being. She points out: "*If I had suffered him who was born of my mother to lie in death an unburied corpse, in that case I would have sorrowed...it is nothing shameful to revere those...from the same womb*".(lines 465 – 511).

Hamlet is ontologically related to his father and by extension to his father`s ghost. After he encounters the ghost, who demands revenge, Hamlet acquiesces and pledges:

*"Yea, from the table of my memory, I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past, That youth and observation
copied there, And thy commandment all alone shall live, Within the book
and volume of my brain, Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!"*

(Act 1, Scene 5, lines 98-104)

¹i.e. soul and all capabilities. The early alchemists believed in fifth most noble element, besides the four basic ones: earth, water, fire, air.

In both plays one misfortune brings another one or as Claudius in *Hamlet* would point out: “*When sorrows come, they come not single spies. But in battalions*” (Act 4, Scene 5, lines 78-79). In *Antigone* the same message is uttered by the Chorus: “*disaster is linked with disaster*” (Line 595)

Both Hamlet and Antigone struggle to fulfil, what they regard as their deontological tasks. Hamlet regards his duty to revenge the murder of his father, whereas Antigone regards as her duty to bury her brother Polyneices. Both duties are related to close relatives, father and brother. In both cases, the culprits for the iniquities are once again close relatives, i.e. uncles. The reason for the injustice stems from different nature. In the case of Antigone, Creon is merely taking precaution for future possible revolts including by women. His decision however runs contrary to the unwritten and eternal laws. In the case of *Hamlet*, Claudius` ambition for power leads to the murder of his brother and Hamlet`s father.

The moving force in *Hamlet* is the ghost. In Sophocles` *Antigone*, the moving force is her decision to bury Polyneices. In both cases, our theorizing for the causes for the human condition are burdened by these facts. Moreover so, if they are ambiguous and undeniable, as the ghost (are there ghosts?) and burial, does Antigone has the right to bury Polyneices, despite Creon`s decree (Which law has preponderance, natural- unwritten or human- proclaimed, written?).

Additionally, Antigone and Hamlet are active on eschatological level. Antigone is worried about the afterlife destiny of Polyneices, hence her sacrifice. Without proper burial and due to his fratricide Polyneices would be left exposed and hunted by the *Erinyes*. Hamlet is worried about the afterlife destiny of his father Hamlet, his uncle Claudius, but also about his own. The ghost of his father addresses Hamlet in the following lines:

Ghost: “*I am thy father's spirit, Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night, And for the day confined to fast in fires, Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature Are burnt and purged away.*”

(Act 1, Scene5, lines 9-13)

Hamlet also reflects on what will happen to Claudius, if he kills him while praying:

Hamlet: *Now might I do it pat, now 'a is a-praying, And now I'll do't--and so 'a goes to heaven, And so am I revenged. That would be scanned [looked at or thought about again]. A villain kills my father, and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send To heaven. Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.*

(Act 3.4.73-79)

If he kills him at that moment, Claudius will go the heaven and Hamlet as a regicide will go to hell. Hamlet doesn`t want to achieve that, so he postpones his

revenge for a later time. Hamlet is uncertain about what will happen after he dies, i.e. what kind of dreams he would dream. Hamlet: *To die, to sleep, To sleep, perchance to Dream; Aye, there's the rub, For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come. (Act 3, Scene lines 65-67)*

Both tragedies deal with the question of Fate and Free Will. In *Antigone*, Fate is described as having preponderance over Free Will.

Messenger: *"I cannot say / Of any condition of human life "This is fixed. / This is clearly good or bad." Fate raises up, / And fate casts down the happy and unhappy alike: / No man can foretell his fate."*

(Exodus, lines 3-7)

A similar narrative and message is present in *Hamlet*. Player king: *" Our wills and fates do so contrary run That our devices still are overthrown; Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own"* (Act 3, Scene 2, lines 211-213)

Besides the role of Fate, Free Will plays part in the lives of the protagonists. In both *Hamlet* and *Antigone*, the main characters use the force of the free will to overcome the vicissitudes of life and Fate. It is entirely Hamlet's choice, whether he would become a tool of vengeance. The murder of Polonius, Laertes, and Claudius is result of his own decision. Conversing with Ismene, *Antigone* also makes her own choice to die for her brother:

*Antigone: No, save thyself; I grudge not thy escape.
Ismene: Is e'en this boon denied, to share thy lot?
Antigone: Yea, for thou chosed'st life, and I to die.*

(lines 544-556)

Both Sophocles and Shakespeare would agree that the force of Fate and Free Will compete for dominance over the human life. Still, they differ in their perspective regarding this struggle, due to the different time and place they live in. For Sophocles, Fate is much stronger than Free Will; the greater the will of humans to change their fate, the greater the chance to steer in the wrong course. Sophocles' characters at the end give up after they have resisted, understood and come to terms with their fate. Sophocles tragedies warn about the pride, which lures us into believing that we can change our Fate through human intervention. Creon's words portray vividly this worldview:

Creon: „Away with me, a worthless wretch who slew; Unwitting thee, my son, thy mother too. Whither to turn I know now; every way; Leads but astray, And on my head I feel the heavy weight; Of crushing Fate. “

(1339 – 1345)

Creon`s pride leads to disastrous consequences. He is reduced to less than nothing: *Creon: I am the guilty cause. I did the deed, Thy murderer. Yea, I guilty plead. My henchmen, lead me hence, away, away,; A cipher, less than nothing; no delay! (lines 1319- 1322)*

For Shakespeare, as a Christian, the choice between good and evil represents the overarching human dilemma. In his view, the power of human free will competes on a daily basis with Fate. Fate may conquer in the end, but humans should fight to the death to reverse the course of Fate and Nature. The murders of Laertes, Claudius and above all, Hamlet`s inner struggle attest to this notion. Humans strive to become master of their choices, choices that decide if and how Fate may have the last say. Hamlet praises human will, as before staging the mousetrap which is a projection of his will, he utters that: *“And blessed are those; Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled, That they are not a pipe for Fortune`s finger; To sound what stop she please.” (Act 3, Scene 3, lines 68- 71)*

However, Hamlet does not deny the role of Destiny, as the following lines attests:

Hamlet: Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes, let be.

(Act 5, Scene 2, lines 219-224)

In these lines, Hamlet turns himself over to Fate at the same time stating that to be prepared (with the help of Free Will) is everything.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, one can deduce that the watermarks of humanity in both Ancient Athens/Thebes and some two millennia later in Renaissance England were quite similar. Some of the common ideas include: the idea of rotteness and pollution of states and rulers, and subsequent actions to counter their misdeeds; the idea of imprisonment, both metaphorical and real; the concerns for the afterlife; the idea of the special place for humans in nature, but also that of their vulnerability and impossibility to find answers to major issues, such as love, happiness and immortality; the conflict between Fate and Free Will. Whereas in Sophocles, Fate is the supreme master, Shakespeare puts forward a much more complex view. He acknowledges Fate, but also points out that with the help of our Free Will we can steer the course as we like and hopefully end our lives contented.

References:

1. Butler, Judith. *Antigone's claim: kinship between life and death*, Judith, New York: Columbia University Press, ©2000.
2. Fletcher, Angus. *Evolving Hamlet: seventeenth-century English tragedy and the ethics of natural selection*, Angus, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
3. Kinney. F. Arthur. *Hamlet, Critical Essays*, New York: Routledge, 2002
4. Price. G. Joseph. *Hamlet, Critical Essays*, New York: Garland, 1986
5. Segal, Charles. *Tragedy and Civilization: an interpretation of Sophocles*, Cambridge, Mass.: Published for Oberlin College by Harvard University Press, 1981.
6. Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*: Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1985.
7. Sophocles, *Antigone*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.