

Cain, Abel and Shakespeare's Brothers: A Comparison between Hamlet and As You like It

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Abstract: In Shakespeare's Hamlet there is a rivalry between two brothers. Similarly, in As You Like It there is a set of two brothers in rival: Claudius with King Hamlet in Hamlet; Oliver with Orlando and Duke Fredrick with Duke Senior in the latter. Moreover, in both plays, there is a parody of Cain and Abel story, as narrated in Genesis 4:1-16. In each play, of course, the story is parodied quite differently. Shakespeare's rhetorical signature, one could argue, is marked by his ability to adapt the biblical rivalry of the two sons of Adam very effectively to suit his genre. In Hamlet, the tragedy, the dreadful murder is done whereas in the comic play- As You Like It, the competition is milder, and accordingly, its end is marked by reconciliation of the brothers. It is interesting to note that in both plays there is a garden, which, given its two brothers and snakes, might be analogous to the Garden of Eden. In this paper, the two plays will be discussed with regards to their depiction of the Christian story of Abel and Cain. The differences of the two plays will be considered in light of Shakespeare's signature in how he adapts the story differently in both plays. I will argue that Shakespeare adapts the traditional story in a very interesting manner in each of his plays in such a way that it suits the genre of the plays.

Keywords: Abel and Cain, As You Like It, Hamlet, Shakespeare, Sibling Rivalry.

1. Introduction

The remarkable difference between the two plays with regards to Eden is that in Hamlet the story begins in a garden with a venomous snake, which is later found to be Claudius, poisoning the ears of his brother and king- Old Hamlet. In addition, this fratricide leads to the corruption of the state of Denmark. Furthermore, the poison will eventually lead to the death of many of the main characters in the play. In As You Like It, on the contrary, the journey, what Michael MacDonald calls the 'symbolic journey' (*Shakespearean Persuasion*.2013), starts from a usurped and corrupted court towards Eden, where the brothers reconcile and forgive each other; the old Adam goes back to Eden, and the whole scene becomes one of love, hospitality, conversions and nuptials. I further argue that the motive for the sinning brothers is not only ambition and envy; true that envy and ambition are the initial motives, but there is also a sexual motive involved in the competition. Claudius seems more attached to Gertrude than to the throne itself, and Oliver, hearing that the old Duke is banished, first asks about his daughter-Rosalind, who will later become his younger brother's wife. I will discuss this motive in the light of a different interpretation for Cain and Abel story, in which, John Byron believes, involved a rivalry over the more beautiful daughter of Adam and Eve (*Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 29).

According to Genesis 4, Cain and Abel were the two sons of Adam and Eve; Cain was the older of the two. Cain worked in the field and Abel kept flocks. In the course of time, the two brothers each present a sacrifice to the Lord. Namely, Cain offers some fruit from his field, and Abel sacrifices some sheep from his flock. The Lord prefers Abel's sacrifice over Cain's; consequently Cain becomes angry:

"The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast (New International Version. Genesis 4:4-5)."

The reason why the Lord favours Abel's offering over Cain's is not stated in Genesis. The Lord advises Cain to control his feelings lest it lead him to sin against the Lord. Cain, despite that, kills his younger brother, thus, committing the first murder. Apparently Cain and Abel are in Eden for the story goes that once Cain committed the murder, his fields no longer cropped and therefore he went to live in Nod, east of Eden (Gen 4:16).

2. Hamlet

Hamlet opens with a kind of chaos because the young Fortinbras of Norway is threatening to take back the lands his father had lost to King Hamlet. Further, the appearance of the old King's ghost in arms leads Hamlet to believe that something is wrong: "All is not well. I doubt some foul play" (I.i.255-6), and Marcellus fears, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.v.90). In fact, more than one thing is rotten in the court of Denmark. Hamlet learns that the snake which was so told to have stung King Hamlet is actually Claudius (I.v.39). Claudius has murdered his brother, usurped the throne and the royal bed as well, hence the throne has become a bed of incestuous desires. With the murder of the king, the order of the state is in jeopardy in many aspects. Moreover, the fratricide is also a regicide since Claudius' brother was also the king of Denmark. This murder echoes the first murder committed by Cain, and Claudius is aware if the rank of his sin:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
It has the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder" (III.iii.36-7).

The murder of the brother king sets violence and bloodshed in motion in the play and leads to the demise of almost all the main characters. Besides murder and villainy, rhetoric is another aspect of the rotten state of Denmark. Professor MacDonald argues that "if one thing is rotten in the state of Denmark, it is language" (*Shakespearean Persuasion*. 2013). Denmark becomes a state of venomous rhetoric, as we hear from the ghost: 'the ear of Denmark' is abused into believing that Old Hamlet died of a serpent's sting:

'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown (I.v.35-40).

This reveals Claudius' power of persuasion actually; Claudius is able to convince the Danish people that a serpent killed King Hamlet, and he is also able to woo Queen Gertrude. Also, the ghost tells us that Claudius enjoys a kind of wit, which the ghost calls witchcraft:

Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts-
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!" (I.v.42-44).

Claudius' poisonous rhetoric together with Polonius' empty, bloated and vain 'foolish figures' further explain the corrupted state of language in the court of Denmark. The foul sin of fratricide thus leads to the descent of Denmark from a lovely garden to a corrupted court, similar to Cain's expulsion from Eden after murdering Abel.

To sum up, the 'symbolic journey' starts from an orchard, where Claudius kills his brother King and deceives his wife. The rivalry between the two brothers leads to bloodshed, madness and tragedy in all its aspects. Consequently, the venom which first poisoned King Hamlet's ears eventually poisons many other lives, and more importantly it poisons the Danish court in the ways noted above.

3. As you Like It

As You Like It presents the rivalry quite differently from Hamlet. In this play of Shakespeare, there are two sets of brothers in competition with each other: Duke Fredrick with Duke Senior and Oliver with Orlando. The competition of the two Dukes is apparently over power and the Dukedom; the relationship between the two sons

of Sir Rowland de Boy, however, seems rather subtle. That is, the motive for Oliver's hatred seems to be more than property and inheritance. I suggest that Rosalind, daughter of Duke Senior, is in one way involved in the competition. I will further discuss this point together with Claudius's motive for killing his brother, which reveals a similar sexual rivalry over a woman.

Frances E. Dolan, in his introduction to *As You Like It*, states that given this sinister beginning of the opening act of the play, we expect some tragic events to follow (xxx). The play, opens with Orlando, the youngest son of Sir Rowland de Boy, complaining about the way his older brother, Oliver, treats him:

...he keeps me rustically at home or, to speak more properly, stays me here at home unkept: for call you that keeping for a gentleman of my birth that differs not from stalling of an ox? His horses are bred better (I.i.6-10)."

Moreover, Oliver has not provided an education for Orlando, and he is going to deprive him from his inheritance. The usurping Duke Fredrick, on the other hand, banishes his brother and his niece. The Dukedom, all in all, has become corrupted; it has become a scene of hatred and rivalry. Nevertheless, this beginning does not lead to a tragic ending. What changes the course of the events is the place to which the banished characters go. We soon learn that the Duke Senior "...is in the Forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the Old Robin Hood of England" (I.i.109-111). When Rosalind and Celia set off for the forest, Celia says, "Now go we in content to liberty, and not to banishment" (II.i.134). The forest becomes one of liberty, and the banished duke feels the same about it:

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court? (II.i.1-4).

The forest, unlike the 'painted pomp' of the court, provides true joy, sports and merry of every kind. There is no flattery in the forest, the duke says. Further, whoever comes to the forest, the Amiens song goes, "Here shall he see no enemy" (II.v.5). When Orlando draws his sword and demands food from Duke Senior, the Duke replies him gently: "What would you have? Your gentleness shall force more than your force to move us to gentleness" (II.vii.101-102). The forest, thus, is a place of hospitality and gentleness. Besides, the forest becomes one of love and poetry; the duke "finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks" (II.i.16), and Orlando, as well, finds books in the trees on which he writes his love poems (III.ii.5). The whole scene then is characterized by love, and later marriages. Moreover, the forest also provides a locale of Christian love and conversion, for example, when Oliver comes to the forest to find his brother probably to kill him, there he converts and reconciles with the love of brotherhood: "I do not shame to tell you what I was, since my conversion so sweetly tastes, being the thing I am" (IV.iii.136). This notion of conversions and piety is further demonstrated when Duke Fredrick, initially coming to kill his brother in the forest, meets a religious man and converts:

In his own conduct, purposely to take
His brother and put him to sword;
And to the skirts of wild wood he came,
Where, meeting with an old religious man,
After some question with him, was converted
Both from his enterprise and from the world,
His crown bequeathing to his banished brother,
And all their lands restored to them again
That were with him exiled (V.iv.155-163).

In addition, the final scene becomes a marriage ceremony; four couples are getting marries, then, Hymen, the god of marriage, descends to bless the couples and she states, "Then there is mirth in heaven when earthly things made even" (V.iv.106-107). *As You Like It*, in sum, starts in a corrupted state, with brothers in rival with

each other and with plans of murdering the brothers, but ends in reconciliation of the brothers. The sibling rivalry, echoing the old Cain versus Abel competition, ends in the conversion of the erring brothers; thus, the tragedy does not take place. This love and conversion suit the setting of the play, earlier in the play Duke Senior says "Here feel we not the penalty of Adam" (II.i.5). Interestingly, Adam settles in Eden again, and the snake which was about to sting Oliver was prevented hence there is an Eden without the venomous serpent. What is obviously noted is that Shakespeare's compositional rhetoric makes use of the story of Cain and Abel and he adapts it to befit his genre. Let us now see how the first sibling rivalry is associated with sexual motives.

The ambiguity surrounding Cain's murder of Abel was briefly mentioned earlier; that is, according to Genesis 4, there is no clear motive for Cain's murder of his brother besides rejection of his sacrifice and his anger, nor is it clear why the Lord preferred Abel's sacrifice to Cain's; besides, there is no indication of the source of Cain's wife:

"Cain made love to his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch (Gen 4:17)."

Thus, according to the story, we do not know who Cain's wife was, and where Cain found her. Was she Adam and Eve's daughter? John Byron (2011) in his book-Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition addresses this issue by referring to some different interpretations for the story. Having referred to Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer that Cain and Abel had twin sisters, Byron says:

"A variety of names are given to the sisters, but there is a common tradition that a love rivalry existed between the two brothers and, in some cases, this is what eventually led Cain to murder Abel. The earliest source for this tradition is *The Testament of Adam* (28)."

And Byron quotes an excerpt from *The Testament of Adam*:

"You have heard, my son Seth, that a flood is coming and will wash the whole earth because of the daughters of Cain, your brother, who killed your brother Abel out of passion for your sister Lebuda (T. Adam 3:5 [Robinson]; cited from Byron, 28)."

Other interpretations Byron considers say that Abel's twin sister was more beautiful than Cain's, and Cain desired her. This led Cain to kill his brother to get the beautiful woman (29). Byron sees the rivalry as something coming naturally between the two brothers given the rarity of women in the world. Nevertheless, Byron argues:

"The Responsibility for the dispute rests with Cain. Cain wants the proposed bride of Abel for his own wife and, according to some exegetes, killed Abel to acquire her (29)."

What I infer from Byron's argument is that there is a possibility that the rivalry was over a woman. This possibility, I argue, is reflected in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *As You Like It* as well.

In a comparison between Caludius and Macbeth, Kumaresan P. argues that Claudius, like Macbeth, has some heroic qualities:

"...in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, Claudius is presented as lofty and elevated in his office of kingship. He is outstanding in handling the young Fortinbras with diplomacy and avoids the possibility of a war (163)."

I argue that Claudius is not actually diplomatically successful in handling his country affairs. When the play opens there is an apparent danger on Denmark, young Fortinbras is on the siege of the country. Speaking of that danger, Claudius says that he has written letters to send to the old king of Norway, young Fortinbras' uncle. Although this seems to be a careful response to the danger, Claudius is more thoughtful to the wedding and revelries:

...Madam, come.

This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet
Sits smiling to my heart, in grace whereof
No jocund health that Denmark drinks today

But great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And king's rouse the heaven shall bruit again
Respeaking earthly thunder. Come away (I.ii.121-128).

The passage above shows that Claudius is very relaxed; there is yet no problem settled but Claudius is having drinking parties and revelries. I suggest that this is too much for a king whose country is under threat. Besides, in many instances in the play Claudius is described an incestuous man no way comparable to Old Hamlet. He is, Hamlet believes, “no more like my father than I to Hercules” (I.ii.153). Once Voltemand and Cornelius, the ambassadors to Norway return, they inform Claudius that young Fortinbras has agreed to withdraw his soldiers, and that he has entreated passage through Denmark to Polack. Claudius replies to the ambassadors: “It likes us well; and at our more considered time we'll read, answer, and think upon this business” (II.ii.81-82). Michael MacDonald observes from the linguistic arrangement of Claudius' political process-He is going to read, reply and then think upon the business; MacDonald believes that this is not a very mature way to conduct political action (*Shakespearean Persuasion*. 2013). Polonius, which we know for his bloated rhetoric, is perhaps among the few who admire the way the business is done: “This business is well ended” (II.ii.85). MacDonald argues that the business is not actually well attended since in the end young Fortinbras becomes the rightful king of Denmark due to Claudius' mishandling of the state affairs (*Shakespearean Persuasion*. 2013).

Claudius's failure to kill Hamlet at the beginning explains two things; firstly, Claudius' immaturity in political life: he fails to recognize Hamlet as his enemy; in fact, only when he is shown the ‘Murder of Gonzago’, a play in which a nephew murders his uncle, Claudius feels the danger of Hamlet's presence. Secondly, it reveals Claudius' strong attachment to Gertrude; he tells Leartes that one of the reasons why has not killed Hamlet is:

...The queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks, and for myself-
My virtue or my plague, be it either which-
She is so conjunctive to my life and soul
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her (IV.vii.11-16).

Further, in his soliloquy, he admits his love for Gertrude:

... I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen (III.iii.53-55).

So, Claudius obviously loves Gertrude; therefore, it is possible that he, like Cain, had a sexual motive for murdering his brother. That is, besides the crown, it seems that Gertrude is another of Claudius' motives for murdering King Hamlet.

In *As You Like It*, the sibling rivalry is less clearly presented to be a sexual one than is in *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, when Oliver hears that the Old Duke is banished, he asks whether the Duke's daughter, Rosalind, is banished with him as well (I.i.100). Also, Oliver clearly expresses his hatred for Orlando; the reason is that people better love Orlando than him; consequently, he is “misprised” (I.i.158-159). Oliver, like Cain, suffers from being less favoured than his younger brother. Thus, part of the rivalry might involve a sexual desire for Rosalind, who loves Orlando; however, the story of the old sibling rivalry is spared the tragic effects in Shakespeare' *As You Like It*, and interestingly, at the end of the play Oliver accepts to marry the right sister-Celia.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the story of Cain and Abel is parodied in both *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*. In each, the story is presented in the way that suits the genre of the play. Having referred to Michael MacDonald's idea of the 'symbolic journey,' I argued that in *Hamlet*, the journey begins in an orchard, a possible Eden, and ended in a tragic scene of many deaths; on the other hand, the journey in *As You Like It* moves the opposite direction and ends up in Eden. I also discussed that the old sibling rivalry is initially caused by envy, yet there are other interpretations that point to an existed competition for the more beautiful woman. I pointed out that in the two plays Shakespeare's composition masterfully captures that possibility of an existing sexual rivalry, again with effective changes in each genre; furthermore, I argued that the effective adaptation of Cain and Abel to each of the plays is what defines Shakespeare's rhetorical signature.

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Author's Biography.



Mohammed Rasul Murad Akoi. Born in Iraq in 1989. Finished his BA in English Language and Literature from University of Sulaimani in Kurdistan Region in Iraq in 2010. Worked as a High School teacher for a year. Received a scholarship to pursue graduate school in Canada. Finished Master's in English Literary Studies from University of Waterloo in Canada in 2014. Currently works as an assistant instructor of English Literature at Raparin University in Kurdistan. He previously worked as a Teaching Assistant at University of Waterloo in 2013. Prior to that, he worked as an English language teacher in Hangaw High School from 2010 to 2012.
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