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AP Literature

03 December 2014

*The Tragedy of Macbeth:*

Fate in His Own Bloody Hands

Shakespeare’s Renaissance play, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1606), is infused with the abstract concept of fate. The tragedy commences with its outcome predetermined and almost immediately revealed to Macbeth by the three Weird Sisters. Instead of spoiling the play’s ending, however, this exposure of prophecy becomes the driving force behind Macbeth’s actions. Fate is his motivator and the source of his confidence. It is his misguided sense of immunity and the reason for his downfall. As Macbeth develops an obsession with fulfilling his prophecy, it becomes evident that because he is responsible for his actions, he is responsible for their consequences. His behavior costs him his health, his sanity, and eventually, his life. While the witches’ supernatural predictions reveal to Macbeth his destiny, it is their implications of future power which cause Macbeth to dictate his own fate and ultimately, his own undoing.

Destiny was perceived as a mysterious yet powerful phenomena during and prior to the reign of King James I, so it is not ludicrous for those in *Macbeth* to respond so actively to supernatural predictions instead of dismissing their authenticity. Unlike a more modern perspective, the only way to rationalize the unknown was through a greater power or unseen force. Prophecy was real. Prophecy *would* be fulfilled. Since it was also typical for Scottish Kings to be dethroned within a decade, Macbeth and his wife are convinced that the prophecy is their calling to slay King Duncan, as well as their golden ticket to the throne. Although Macbeth initially doubts that he should kill Duncan, he reluctantly acknowledges murder as the only logical way to remain on track with the witches’ predictions:

I am settled and bend up

Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

Away, and mock the time with fairest show.

False face must hide what the false heart doth know. (1.7.92-96)

For who is he to contradict what the universe has decided? In presenting Macbeth’s fate as fact, however, the Weird Sisters have thrust his thought process into a paradox. Despite all recognition of greater power, his destiny initially seems impossible. Yet at the same time, he realizes that it somehow would come to be true. Out of a piqued interest and total befuddlement, Macbeth demands to know more from the witches:

Stay, you imperfect speakers. Tell me more.

By Sinel’s death I know I am Thane of Glamis.

But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives

A prosperous gentleman, and to be king

Stands not within the prospect of belief,

No more than to be Cawdor. (1.3.73-78)

The witches have caused Macbeth to interpret the irrational as something earthly and valid, and as a man prophesied to hold great power, he *must* naturally do something to fulfill their suggestion. After he is appointed Cawdor’s new Thane, Macbeth finds it necessary to attack his fate by literally attacking the man in his next foretold position. Taking down Duncan by force is the only means of becoming king himself which Macbeth finds plausible.

The witches, however, reveal nothing about *how* Macbeth would gain his titles. They say nothing about killing the king in his sleep, or about Macbeth taking action on his prophecies at all. They only expose his end position - not the process by which he will attain it. In fact, Macbeth’s interaction with the witches is so brief that the majority of their dialogue is spent praising his future: “All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (1.3.53). The witches provide no action plan. They produce no deadline for destiny. Macbeth’s interpretation and decisions to act upon the fate are totally his own.

With only the outcome of *Macbeth* driven by a morsel of destiny, the characteristics of Macbeth himself imply psychological free will. Although Macbeth is working towards becoming the King of Scotland, the nature of prophecy has shown that Macbeth is not supernaturally bound in the process of attaining that position. Macbeth instead initiates his own bloody course of action in reaching the throne. Peter Voss, a published researcher in philosophy and cognitive psychology, discusses the nature of free will from a scientific standpoint: “Our volitional ability represents the highest form of control of any mechanism or organism. The brain contains countless chaotic dynamical systems, it is subject to occasional quantum events, and it is subject to numerous external random events” (Voss). Voss proposes that free will is not an illusion, and furthermore, it does not arise from randomness or ignorance. Voss also speculates that because of the complexity of human cognition, it is impossible for anything except oneself to control their own cranial functions. He validates that free will emerges from a mechanistic brain, but never discuss how the confines of perception and circumstance limit our variety of choice. While Macbeth’s brain is capable of great thought processes and even greater degrees of leadership, it cannot have the capacity to escape a logical reality. Essentially, Macbeth is totally in control of his actions, but because of his human gravitation toward what he can comprehend, is limited to what he finds plausible. Even with supernatural interaction as part of the equation, Macbeth’s thought processes are tied to what he finds realistic in his time period. To Macbeth, prophecy and murder to fulfill it are equally logical. In this way, Macbeth exhibits free will in satisfying his destiny, but is only free in ways he sees to be realistic.

Since Macbeth has supernatural insight to his future, he believes that fate is on his side and is his safety blanket. The crown is destined to be his, so throughout the course of the tragedy, he progressively acquires unwise bouts of confidence and an unhealthy bloodlust. Macbeth performs countless murders as in order to gain and maintain his throne. After the death of King Duncan, Macbeth feels immune to any potential repercussions of murdering Scotland’s ruler, solely based on his interpretation of the witches’ prophecy. Once he becomes king and gains the knowledge that his crown is on the line, again a message of the witches, Macbeth’s newfound ego shifts to a rapid killing spree in order to maintain his title. “I’ll call upon you straight. Abide within. / It is concluded. Banquo, thy soul’s flight, / If it find heaven, must it find out tonight” (3.2.160-163). He loses sight of his friendships, such as that with Banquo, and his sanity; exterminating potential subjects who could soon dethrone him and fall in line with what destiny has stated all too quickly. Just as murder was Macbeth’s only means becoming King of Scotland, it became his only tactic to secure a prolonged reign.

At the end of *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters’ final round of prophecy informs Macbeth that he can only be taken down by someone not born of a woman, which serves as helium to Macbeth’s growing ego. It is the uplifting false confidence he needs to valiantly and murderously defend his throne. He is King Macbeth, the battlefield wonder, who now more than ever is the master wielder of the sword. He surely has nothing to fear:

They have tied me to a stake. I cannot fly.

But, bear-like, I must fight the course. What’s he

That was not born of woman? Such a one

I am to fear, or none. (5.7.1-4)

Or so he thinks. In his final battle - his last hurrah - Macbeth ironically sees himself as more than immune to overthrow, but as totally invincible. Again grasping for the logic among the supernatural, Macbeth attempts to continue his reign in the same bloody fashion that it started. Macbeth clings to death in order to maintain pride in his own life. And yet, after an entire play of rival bloodshed and the quest for power and prophecy, Macbeth finally meets his own end. He is slain by Lord Macduff - the witches’ foretold ‘man not born of woman’ - but more importantly, an enemy of Macbeth’s stemmed from the murder of Duncan. Macbeth’s long list of kills and long list of enemies have met up with him on the battlefield. In essence, Macbeth has brought about his own doom. Macbeth’s actions along his quest to obtain power and align himself with fate have ultimately brought about his own undoing. His pride has been the cause of his downfall.

Even though fate determines the outcome of *Macbeth*, and Macbeth himself uses destiny as the source of his confidence, it is evident that he is in control of his own actions and therefore, brings their consequences upon himself. Tracing the play backwards, it was Macbeth’s slaying of Duncan that led to Macduff killing Macbeth - a murder Macbeth only executed in order to logically align himself with the witches’ prophecy. It is interesting to consider, however, that if Macbeth had not taken immediate action on his fate, the outcome of *Macbeth* would be extremely different. By definition, it may not have even been a tragedy - with significantly less bloodshed on its pages. Murder would not have been necessary had Macbeth carried on with life and waited for fate to run its own course. Perhaps he would still have his best friend, his lady, and his life. Instead, Macbeth chose his own adventure and ended *Macbeth* a dead man with a killing record. Macbeth's destiny was his choice. His fate was in his own bloody hands.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine.

New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. Print.

Voss, Peter. “The Nature of Freewill.” *optimal.* Jul. 1997. Web. 06 Dec. 2014.

Prospectus

Thesis:

* While the witches’ supernatural predictions reveal to Macbeth his destiny, it is their implications of future power which cause Macbeth to dictate his own fate and ultimately, his own undoing.

Ideas from Text:

* Macbeth questions legitimacy of Weird Sister’s predictions
  + Decision that the only way to fulfill them is to manipulate his circumstances
  + Nature of their predictions
* Shakespeare’s strategic placement of Witch scenes
  + Opening act
  + Appear after Macbeth feels he controls his destiny
* Nature of prophecy: give the answer without telling how to achieve it
* Fate gives Macbeth forms of unwise confidence
  + Need to kill instead of ride fate

Possible Quotes:

* “I am settled and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” (1.7.92-94).
* “Stay, you imperfect speakers. Tell me more. / By Sinel’s death I know I am Thane of Glamis. / But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives / A prosperous gentleman, and to be king / Stands not within the prospect of belief, / No more than to be Cawdor” (1.3.73-78).
* “I’ll call upon you straight. Abide within. / It is concluded. Banquo, thy soul’s flight, / If it find heaven, must it find out tonight” (3.2.160-163)

Research Ideas:

* Into the Vortex
* Psychology of Free Will
* Shakespeare-navigator.com