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I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.

Macbeth's Indecisiveness about Free Will and Fate

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* drives its story with the struggle between fate and free will. Macbeth repeatedly has his fate determined by the three witches within the story, which serves critical roles in his rise to power and his downfall. His omen as the Thane of Cawdor unlocks his ambition, his destiny for the kingship peaks his hubris, and the warnings about Macduff serve to foreshadow the ending of the story. These plot points are almost checkpoints within the story, events the audience knows are going to inevitably happen throughout the play. Free will is presented, however, as the means to the ends that fate decides. Macbeth, in his efforts to follow or upend the prophecies to his own desires, commits actions unmentioned by fate, and thus, can be said to be acting on his own free will. This presents the dynamic between fate and free will within the play: fate represents checkpoints and inevitable events throughout the story, while free will is left to fill in the means to the ends that fate creates. This unknown is seen as the problem that Macbeth is constantly trying to provide the solution for to both fulfill and change his fate, where he finds that free will is ultimately unable to change fate.

Free will is consistently seen as the means to the ends of fate in the play. The idea of fate is clearly portrayed by the witches' lines throughout the play, through the eerie, but vague prophecies they foretell. Although the ends of the prophecies they give range from as blunt as "All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter" (Shakespeare, 1.3.48) to statements as vague as

"Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill Shall come against him" (Shakespeare, 4.1.91-93), the witches, in both instances of offering their prophecies, refuse to elaborate further when Macbeth urges them to, always vanishing both times, as if to let Macbeth figure out how to fulfill or avoid the prophecies. Here, free will takes control, both with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's actions. In their bid to fulfill the prophecy of Macbeth becoming King, they decide that they must kill Duncan—to them, there is no simpler way to the throne. Upon realizing that the King is coming to Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth immediately assumes the murderous plan. "The raven himself is hoarse That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan Under my battlements" (Shakespeare, 1.5.45). It is upon their own free will that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth decide to take action and ascend to the throne early. Did Macbeth not forget that the first aspect of the prophecy, becoming the Thane of Cawdor, happened without his knowledge and action? With fate having such a huge power in the world of this play, why does Macbeth take it upon himself to murder Duncan instead of waiting on Duncan and all his heirs to keel over and for him to assume the throne naturally, an event as unthinkable as the Thane of Cawdor betraying King Duncan?

The answer comes in the form of how the dynamic of free will and fate is problematized. The means to fate's ends—Macbeth's and everyone's right to free will—is seen as an unknown. This strikes fear into Macbeth who, in his remorse and believing the fates to be malevolent, starts attempting to use his free will to change the means to avoid fate. This is made clear in Act 3, where Macbeth says, "Our fears in Banquo Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature Reigns that which would be feared" (Shakespeare, 3.1.50-52). He references the first prophecy, where Banquo's sons are destined to be king. The unknown in this prophecy scares Macbeth, who immediately assumes that the same fate that befell Duncan will befall him. Is it not plausible that

Banquo's lineage could also become king, when Macbeth has long since naturally died? Fleance is as much a member of Banquo's sons as is his future bloodline. Macbeth projects his own ambition onto Banquo, believing that everyone has the same desire as him to betray his own morals to become king.

The unknown is not only problematized by Macbeth, but the same dilemma is also given to the audience, through the second prophecy. The second prophecy, mentioning that Macbeth will not be harmed by anyone "of woman born" (Shakespeare, 4.1.79) and will not be vanquished until "Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane" (Shakespeare, 4.1.92), brings about mystery to the audience. Macbeth, in his folly, is reassured by these words, but the inquisitive audience, knowing that this play is a tragedy, realizes that this is a bad omen for Macbeth. For Macbeth, he believes there is no man not of woman born, and no possibility that Birnam Wood moves to high Dunsinane. The audience, instead, questions how there is going to be a man not of women born and how the forest will move to the hill. Shakespeare turns this unknown to the audience, presenting them with the same problem and allowing them to draw their own conclusions, just like Macbeth does with the first prophecy.

The audience's interpretation of the unknown could also extend to the dilemma between fate and free will as well. This is made especially clear in an analysis of two film adaptations of the play by Wendy Rogers Harper between directors Roman Polanski and Orson Welles. Harper analyzes the choice of each director to emphasize fate or character—the choices in free will—in driving the imagery of the play. She says, "Polanski selects character, Welles fate...Polanski's imagery is realistic, Welles's is surrealistic. The former director focuses on the natural, the latter stresses the supernatural" (Harper, 203). In this sense, the directors are the audience filling in the unknown: their creative licenses take them in two different directions, feeling the necessity to

explain their interpretations of the dynamics between fate and free will, and which one should triumph in their own audiences.

To push their own agendas regarding fate and free will in the play, Harper goes on to identify the stark contrasts as to how both adaptations develop their stories. Polanski's adaptation acts as a psychological exploration into Macbeth's free will and his decision-making, while Welles interprets the play as a battle between Heaven and Hell as fate and higher beings control the world of humans. To make free will the dominant factor in the story, Polanski both demystifies the supernatural and introduces character development, especially of Macbeth, to remove the higher power aspect of fate. Harper states for the former, "the three weird sisters in [Polanski's] film are not the classical goddesses of destiny but the toothless crones and rumpled girls common to poor rural life...their behavior is not otherwise mysterious or inexplicable" (204). Regarding the latter, she states, "by the end of the film [Macbeth] has hardened into a conscienceless killer who indifferently dispatches women and children. Even the death of his once dear wife scarcely moves him" (204). These two main factors detract from fate's role and compound free will's importance in pushing the actions of the story, completely contrary to Welles, who takes away from the characters and mystifies the story. Harper points out two key moments, where "Macbeth is a sensitive, henpecked husband spurred on by the three weird sisters and by his shrewish, vampish wife, who nags even in her sleep" for the former, and for the latter, "Just before Macduff kills Macbeth, the camera shows the voodoo doll being decapitated. Its crown falls to the ground, and a male figure, seen only from the waist down, picks up the crown." (207-208). First, Macbeth is no longer in charge of his own actions, he is simply being driven by external sources, the witches and his wife, who in this film, is regarded as a member of the supernatural. Furthermore, the usage of voodoo imagery as well as vague, almost godly

figures picking up symbols of power just emphasize the lack of control the humans in the story have in their fates. This foil between the two films' use of character building and the mystification of fate to emphasize either fate and free will support the original *Macbeth*'s ability to both cast an unknown over the audience over fate and free will as well as emphasize that both concepts are as closely tied together as the two concepts of means and ends. The ability for both these films to call themselves a rendition of *Macbeth* simply confirms that it is unclear which factor is truly dominant in the play, continuing the struggle that represents the dynamic between fate and free will.

Macbeth, as a play, offers audiences a tantalizing taste of foreshadowing through the witches, that introduces the dynamic between fate and free will as a struggle between means and ends. Its vagueness in determining which one is the driving factor of the play creates the unknown that defines the problem facing both the audience and the characters of the play, prompting them to act to define that unknown to their own liking. However, they are both unsuccessful, with Macbeth succumbing to his fate at the end of the play, and adaptations of both fate-driven and free will-driven versions of *Macbeth* being interpreted by different directors. This is the strength of Shakespeare's writing: being able to present this worldly dilemma through the tragedy of a power struggle in medieval Scotland.

Works Cited

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