

Fateful, but Not Fated: Macbeth's Murderous Free Will

There is hardly a more tangled labyrinth than that of free choice.

-- Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam

Since the dawn of time, as outlined in the biblical book of Genesis, man has pondered over, debated about, and grappled with the ethereal dividing line that lies between fate and free will. When, if ever, is one in full command of his experience? Does there exist an authoritative presence ever-hovering in the background of life, governing the acts of men as if directing the action of a stage play? And if there does exist such an entity, is it possible that its power may be accessed by certain individuals and from such position be used by them to govern the direction of another's course? These are questions that have plagued generations; these are questions that continue to vex readers of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

To attribute *fate* as the cause of life events is to say that the path to an end is "unalterably predetermined" ("Fate," def. 1a). It would be to say that Macbeth was "destined" ("Fate," def. 4a) to become a serial murderer by forces outside of himself and beyond his own control. It would be to say that Macbeth's tragic course and downfall were unavoidable. On the other hand, an argument for *free will* would claim that Macbeth's treacherous path was the result of "unforced choice" ("Free Will") on his part. It would be to say that there was an internal causation of his action. This paper will conclude that free will, not fate, is what lead to Macbeth's destruction . . .

There is yet another textual indication that the play's central theme is free will and not fate. In act one, prior to any murders being committed, Macbeth says as an aside, "If chance will have me King, why, / chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.143). In other words, there is nothing he will have to do if it is his destiny to become king. He will not so much as have to

stir if it is his fate to be crowned. That he is crowned after much stirring on his part negates the possibility of chance being at play.

Scripture, too, supports the argument that Macbeth acted of his own accord in his career of murder. When Cain was contemplating to murder his brother Abel, the Lord said to Cain, “[S]in is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen. 4:7). David admonishes in a psalm, “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14). As Erasmus purports of these passages, “[T]he movement of the will toward evil can be overcome” (Erasmus 54). Man can *master* sin and *do*, *seek*, and *pursue* what is right. The connotation in these biblical excerpts is that man has the ability to choose his actions.

“[N]oble Macbeth” (1.2.67) in the beginning of the play turned “hell-bound” (5.8.3) in the end by way of his own actions. Macbeth self-destructed. “Macbeth is a hero who becomes a villain” (Arkins n. pag.). Macbeth’s murder spree was a fateful event as it disrupted the operations of an entire country. “I think our country sinks beneath the yoke; / It weeps, it bleeds” (4.3.39-40), Malcolm laments. It was not, however, fated by divine forces beyond Macbeth’s own will, nor caused by individuals or groups outside him. Macbeth does come to a fateful end; he is decapitated in a field by Macduff. However, Macbeth was not fated to end that way. His loss of all that he desired and his subsequent gruesome death were the result of his extreme ambition and excessive pride—in short, actions chosen of his own murderous free will.

Epilogue

Due to the controversial and Talmudic nature of the subject matter herein discussed, one might find it necessary to explore a third consideration on the topic. What if neither stance is an incorrect assertion? Perhaps one’s free will operates within the bounds of fate. “For mine own good / All causes shall give way” (3.4.136-37), says Macbeth. This line implies that fate

(“causes”) bows (“gives way”) to his will. This would somewhat alleviate the tension between those who point to Macbeth’s guilt by free will and those who point toward fate’s fickle finger.

Proponents of an argument for fate having led Macbeth to destruction would highlight the biblical example of the hardening of the Egyptian Pharaoh’s heart as displayed in the books of Exodus and Romans. “[T]he Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Exod. 9:12). “So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God...he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses” (Rom. 9:16-18). These scriptural excerpts declare that God had total control over the ruler’s refusal to free the Israelites. Luther, too, would be quoted in the argument for fate as he offers a reminder of Vergil’s *Aeneid* in which statements for fate are prevalent; “By changeless law stand all things fixed” and “thou canst break the harsh bonds of Fate” are examples (Luther 121).

Perhaps Macbeth was pre-destined to become king as the witches foretold, just as the chosen Jews were bound to be freed at some point, but because Macbeth willingly chose to force his crown, rather than exhibiting patience and trust that it would come to pass in divine time, it was therefore tragically taken away from him. Perhaps Macbeth had a predisposition toward self-destruction that played into his preordained kingship. “The nature of theatre does not require an either/or answer to this question” (Garber 698) of was it Macbeth’s fate or was it his free will. “For there are some secret places...into which God has not wished us to penetrate” (Erasmus 38). And that is what enjoying literature is all about – becoming comfortable with ambiguity.

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