

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND FREEWILL: A LIBERTARIAN AND  
NATURALISTIC ENQUIRY INTO THE ACTIONS OF MACBETH.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The debate about freewill and determinism has been going on for centuries right from the classical period. It has developed into a web of arguments and counter arguments. Perhaps, this may be because, they are closely related to freedom of action and moral responsibility. Philosophers like Rene Descartes, argued that human choices are the product of non-physical spirit-mind, not the function of brain activity. Descartes opined that our physical bodies are indeed constrained by natural laws but our spirits have unbounded freedom and it is our spirits that are ultimately behind the free actions that we perform. This is a libertarian view which believes that metaphysically and morally, man is self-controlled and operates independently of others or other external forces. The naturalists like Emile Zola on the other hand argue that human actions are determined by hereditary and environment. And these factors are indeed beyond human control. If this is true, then the consequences of our actions past or present are not up to us. People have been coming up with excuses for their actions since Adam's, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat"; and Eve's, "The serpent beguiled me, and I did". Even the favourite excuse of great tragedy is almost always fate. The actions of William Shakespeare's Macbeth have been subjects of debates: whether he acted freely or was influenced by external forces. This article aims to take a libertarian and naturalistic enquiry into the actions of one of Shakespeare's greatest tragic characters: Macbeth. An attempt will be made to analyze his actions; to explore whether there were other alternatives available or open to him, in order to determine if he could have done otherwise in a particular situation.*

**KEYWORDS:** William Shakespeare, Freewill, Libertarianism, Naturalism, Macbeth.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of freewill and determinism in the course of our actions have been one of the most debated and discussed issues even from the classical times. It has developed into a web of arguments and counter arguments. Philosophers like Rene Descartes described the will as so free in its nature that it cannot be constrained. Descartes opines that though our physical bodies are constrained by natural laws, our spirits have unbounded freedom and it is our spirits that are ultimately behind the free actions that we perform. This is a libertarian view. In contemporary debates, scholars like Robert Kane; Timothy O'Connor, and Hugh McCann, though differ in their views about the causes of human action, nevertheless believe that humans have freewill. Libertarian freewill is basically the concept that metaphysically and morally, man is an autonomous being, operates independently and not controlled by other or by outside forces. This is contrary to determinism which denies freewill and asserts that our choices are determined.

Determinism is the metaphysical position that claims every event including human actions follows necessarily from previous events. It is the belief that given any condition nothing else could have happened other than the way it has happened. As a theory, Determinism denies that man is really free. Inwagen is of the opinion that, If Determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things including our present acts are not up to us.' (1983, p.56).

Determinism is one of the characteristics of Naturalism. Naturalists maintain that people are fated for whatever station in life their heredity, environment and social conditions prepare for them. Numerous people use external forces or fate as a cover up in order to take less responsibility over their actions or decisions. Even in literature, the favorite excuse of great tragedy is almost always fate. A study of the tragedies of the ancient Greek tragic writers which is modeled upon an essentially religious weltanschauung represents the philosophy of men's insignificance in the face of gigantic divine power that controls human life. In the medieval period, man's fate was seen to depend on the will of the Christian God. It was from the Renaissance era that people started a change of perception concerning the action of man.

Renaissance period fostered an increased surge of individualism allowing people to believe that man can do all things if they will. The general conception was that man was not the subject of fate or God, rather that he controls his own destiny, and thus responsible for his action. William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a Renaissance play and late 20<sup>th</sup> Century commentaries on this play frequently focuses on the hero of the play – Macbeth; his struggles with his conscience and whether his fate is predetermined. This article attempts to make a libertarian and naturalistic exploration into the actions of Macbeth.

## **A LIBERTARIAN AND NATURALISTIC ENQUIRY INTO THE ACTIONS OF MACBETH.**

According to *The Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion*, Libertarian Freewill is defined "...in ethics and metaphysics, (as) the view that human beings sometimes can will more than one possibility". In libertarian freewill paradigm, the power of contrary choice reigns supreme. To have freewill is to have what it takes to act freely. Consequently, when one acts freely; exercises freewill, it is up to that person whether he/she does one thing or another on that occasion. Numerous or at least more than one alternative is open to him/her, and he/she determines which one to follow. Without this ability to choose otherwise, the libertarian freewill proponents will claim that man cannot be held morally responsible for his actions.

Libertarians can be categorized into three: (i) The Event-causal libertarians like Robert Kane who believe that our free actions are in-deterministically caused by prior events. (ii) The Agent-causal libertarians, for example, Timothy O'Connor believe that agents in-deterministically cause free action. And (iii) The Non-causal libertarians like Ginet and McCann who typically believe that free actions are constituted by basic mental actions, such as a decision or a choice. The requirements for human freewill are summarized thus: That our actions are causally determined by our will and therefore up to us; that we have alternative possibilities, and as a result morally

responsible for our actions. Even in the light of this, Dennet still opines that alternative possibilities are not required for moral responsibility or freewill.

Libertarianism is opposite to naturalism. Naturalism was a movement in theatre, film and literature around the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that seeks to replicate a believable everyday reality as opposed to such movements as Romanticism. In naturalistic plays, the notion that characters have freewill is replaced by the focus on nature. It is believed that the fate of the character has already been predetermined by certain factors and he can do nothing to change it. The naturalists' position is that our characters/behaviors are determined by heredity and environment, and these factors are indeed beyond our control. That even though we take steps to change our situations, our decision is a manifestation of characteristics in us which have been cultivated by heredity and environmental factor. The argument for naturalism from materialism posits that: Human choices are exclusively the function of brain activity; brain activity is constrained by rigid natural laws, therefore human choices are constrained by rigid natural laws - biological and environmental factors. Scholars like Emile Zola and B.F. Skinner are of the opinion that the actual causes of human behaviour lay in the environment. In the following discussions, a libertarian and naturalistic exploration into the actions of Macbeth will be made.

Macbeth is a tragic play by William Shakespeare which deals with the rise and fall of King Macbeth of Scotland. The downfall of the hero begins with the encounter between him and three witches who prophesy his rise to the throne. He puts his faith in the words and prophecies of the three witches after their first prophesy: that he will become the Thane of Cawdor, comes true. Lady Macbeth is instrumental to Macbeth's ambition. She manipulates her husband with remarkable effectiveness, overriding all his objections until he murders the King and occupies the throne. Macbeth's ambition and passion for power are so vehement, that no inward misery could persuade him to relinquish the fruits of crime or to advance from remorse to repentance. He continues to murder innocent people that he perceives as threats to his kinship.

Currently, there is sharp division among commentators on the question of whether Macbeth is a sympathetic figure with whom the audiences and readers can identify as they do with Lear, Hamlet or Anthony or whether Macbeth is a self-centered and unadmirable villain. Some critics contend that Macbeth is depicted as an inherently good man who only succumbs to temptation after a harrowing struggle with his conscience. Others like R.A. Foakes see Macbeth as an essentially moral man, who because of his wife's bullying and his own ambition, fatally compromises his gentler instincts and destroys his own humanity, ending up a victim as well as a villain. Blanche Coles agrees with the above, when she asserts that Macbeth's wife had considerable leverage over her husband's mind. O' Rourkes, on the other hand, argues that the dramatic action of Macbeth, is determined neither by divine providence nor by human will, but by an irrational sequence of action and consequence. The debate goes on and on. This paper aims to examine key issues that have evolved from the debates: Is Macbeth fated to be a traitor and a king killer? ; Is he alone responsible for his actions? And did he freely choose his choice?

The weird sisters i.e. (the witches) are frequently linked to the possibility of providential or deterministic interpretation of Macbeth. The three witches approach Macbeth with prophecies that will all come true in the end. The fulfillment of these witches' prediction may be seen as a clear

sign that Macbeth is led by fate, destined to do as the witches foretell. Furthermore, King Duncan's visit to Inverness, Macbeth's home, for a one-night celebration of the victory provides an enabling environment for the Macbeths to carry out their dastardly act. In addition, Lady Macbeth, one of Shakespeare's most famous and frightening female characters also pressurized Macbeth, repeatedly questions his manhood, fuelling his ambitions and urging him on, until he commits murder and occupies the throne. Looking at the play from the above scenario presents a very naturalistic perspective. These events seem to be fuelled by forces beyond Macbeth's control. However, a Libertarian exploration will take an opposite position. Hearing the predictions that he will become king, almost immediately after meeting the witches, Macbeth starts planning to fulfill the tempting predictions. Macbeth notes with astonishment, the reaction that seizes his mind and body:

Macbeth: (...) If good, why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair, and make my seated heart knock at my ribs against the use of nature? (1994, pp. 34 -37).

However, he briefly decides to let chance take its course rather than taking matters into his hands when he observes that "if chance will have me king, why, chance will crown me without my stir" However, as soon as Macbeth learns that Malcolm has been named heir, he is no longer content to wait for chance. He decides to take action. Indeed, this is willful. He had stated; "...stars, hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires". He does not want his desires to be known. He was deliberately planning to murder the king and he knows that his desires are wrong and ambitious. Even Macbeth admits that he is ambitious:

Macbeth: (...) I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition which overleaps itself and falls on the other. (1994, pp.25 -28).

It is ironic that Macbeth should turn to a traitor because at the beginning, he is shown as a hero in the Scottish army who has just returned from defeating a traitor. So he is capable of distinguishing between right and wrong. But he purposely disregards his own moral judgment to rise to power. He is blinded by his ambition and yearnings to take a shortcut to the future. So contrary to the theory of fate or naturalism, he is responsible for his own actions. The Witches' contributions are credited with far too great an influence upon Macbeth's actions. Some critics even refer to them as goddesses, or even as fates, whom Macbeth is powerless to resist. Bradley has a contrary opinion. According to him,

The Witches are not goddesses, or fate, or in any way whatever supernatural beings. They are old women; poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite, occupied in killing their neighbour's swine or revenging themselves on sailors' wives who have refused them chestnuts. (...) The Witches owe all their power to the spirits; they are instruments of darkness, the spirits are their masters". ( 1991, p.188).

The three witches were only influencing factors. Their words are fatal to Macbeth only because there is something in him which leaps into light at the sound of them. A.C. Bradley asserts that, while the influence of the witches' prophecies on Macbeth is very great, it is quite clearly shown

to be an influence and nothing more. The witches merely announced events: they hailed him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter and did not say that Duncan should be murdered for the events to come true. The natural death of the old king might have fulfilled the prophecy any day. The idea of fulfilling it by murder was entirely his own.

Lady Macbeth who is considered stronger than her husband by some critics has also been blamed for Macbeth's actions. It is true that when we first see her, she is already plotting Duncan's murder and seems more ruthless and more ambitious than her husband. She incites her husband yet she could not carry out the act herself because according to her, she cannot strike the king who resembles her father. After wards, she begins to slide slowly into madness as she is plagued by guilt; she is deeply afflicted by the memory of one stain of blood upon her hand. At the end, she chooses death because she can no longer bear the torments of her guilt. All the above, contradicts the opinion that Lady Macbeth is all strength and has a hold over her husband's mind. She was only an accomplice to the king's murder and probably shocked by the guards' murder. It is apparent that she was not prepared for more death. Furthermore, even though King Duncan's coming to sleep in Macbeth's house is a naturalistic factor that contributed to the king's murder, but even before the king's visit Macbeth had started conceiving the idea when he hears that Malcolm has been named heir apparent to the throne.

It is once again apparent that Macbeth does control his own destiny when he visits the three witches again. When the witches make their second appearance to him, they show him three apparitions that tell him:

1. To beware the Thane of Fife;
2. That none born of woman shall harm him and;
3. That Macbeth shall never be vanquished until Great Birnam wood move to high Dunsinane hill.

At this point in the play, Macbeth starts planning to kill Banquo and his son, Macduff, etc. Yet, the witches didn't say anything about murder. But once he had a taste of power, he's willing to kill anyone including women and children. All his actions are done according to his own free choice. The witches merely provide the spur Macbeth needs to act on his overbearing ambition, but it is ultimately the choice of Macbeth and Macbeth alone to pursue his thirst for power.

## CONCLUSION

Macbeth may be fated to be king, but he decides all on his own to murder Duncan, in order to obtain the crown. His actions suggest that fate may be predetermined but freewill determines how a people reach their destinies. We are free, and despite the pressures from our surroundings or environment, it is clear that the choice, responsibility and consequences are ultimately ours. Two out of three of the witches' prophecies came true without his effort, couldn't he have waited for the third to naturally come true. If he has believed in the prophecy, he should have let nature take its course he could have become king. He believes in the prophecy but not in the strength of fate to make it happen.



A social environment can neither force a man to think nor prevent him from thinking. But, a social environment can offer incentives or impediments; it can make the exercise of one's rational faculty easier or harder. But like Luke Pollard observes, we are influenced by our surroundings, our upbringing, and the facts presented to us when we must make a decision. We are swayed by the circumstances. But ultimately, it is us who choose in which direction we sway. We are free and responsible. All the conditions that necessitated Macbeth's actions are not sufficient: the witches, Duncan sleeping in his house, his wife's incitements, because he still had other options available to him, from which he could have chosen. The witches' interactions with Macbeth and his self-realizing ambition show that it is freewill and not fate that determined the course of Macbeth's actions. He always had a choice throughout the play to make his own fate and his insatiable lust for power and ambition drives him to commit evil.

In addition, Macbeth himself nowhere directly or indirectly implied that his action is caused by external powers. Though, he curses the witches for deceiving him, he did not in any way try to shift the burden of his guilt to them. Shakespeare, too, did not place in any other character's mouth any fatalistic expressions in the play. Finally, there is no sign in the play that Shakespeare meant the actions of Macbeth to be forced on him by external power- witches, or their masters or Hecate. The prophecies of the witches are simply dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal with. In Bradley's view,

They are dramatically on the same level as the story of the ghost in *Hamlet*, or the falsehood told by Iago to Othello. Macbeth is, in the ordinary sense, perfectly free in regard to them and if we speak of degrees of freedom, he is even more free than Hamlet, who was crippled by melancholy when the Ghost appeared to him'. ( 1991, p.189).

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