

Macbeth and Fate

In the second scene of the play, a Sergeant tells the story of Macbeth's victory over the rebel Macdonwald. At one point it looked like Macdonwald was getting the upper hand, and the Sergeant comments, "fortune, on his [Macdonwald's] damned quarrel smiling, / Show'd like a rebel's whore" (1.2.14-15). It was a cliché of Shakespeare's time that fortune, or good luck, was a whore, loved by all men, faithful to none. However, on this occasion, not even fortune could give Macdonwald the victory, because Macbeth held her in contempt and won the battle anyway.

One of the witches is going to take out her spite on a sailor, and she and her sister witches will control the winds so that the sailor won't be able to come into port. She boasts that, "Weary se'nnights nine times nine / Shall he dwindle, peak and pine: / Though his bark cannot be lost, / Yet it shall be tempest-toss'd" (1.3.25). Although these witches can control winds, there is something stronger than them that keeps the sailor's ship ("bark") from sinking.

Later in the same scene, Macbeth, after hearing the witches' prophecy, says to himself: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.144). This seems to indicate that he doesn't regard the witches as the voice of fate, but of "chance." Also, Macbeth is right. Like King Duncan, Macbeth is the grandson of a king, so he has a legitimate claim to the throne, and war or disease could easily kill off other claimants. However, Macbeth eventually decides that "chance" needs some help, and so he murders Duncan.

The first use of the word "fate" in the play occurs when Lady Macbeth receives Macbeth's letter telling of the witches' prophecies. She is afraid that he will not take advantage of his opportunity to take the crown, "Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem / To have thee crown'd withal" (1.5.29-30). It's interesting to note that she assumes that fate doesn't **make** things happen. In order to be king, Macbeth is going to have to murder Duncan, and his wife is afraid that he won't do it.

Just after King Duncan's bloody corpse is discovered, Macbeth exclaims that he killed the King's grooms out of passionate grief, and Lady Macbeth faints. Malcolm and

Donalbain, the King's sons, notice that everyone seems to be expressing more grief than they are, and they suspect that something is fishy. Donalbain asks his brother, "What should be spoken here, where our fate, / Hid in an auger-hole, may rush, and seize us?" (2.3.122). He means that this is no time to talk, because they could be murdered next. The two of them flee, and escape the "fate" that Donalbain speaks of.

Just before he sends the two murderers out to kill Banquo, Macbeth has a soliloquy in which he complains about the witches' prophecy. He's afraid that he has damned his soul to hell so that Banquo's descendants will be kings of Scotland. At the end of the soliloquy he says, "Rather than so, come fate into the list, / And champion me to the utterance! (3.1.70-71). This is Macbeth's challenge to fate. "Come fate" means "let fate come." A "list" is an arena in which knights joust against one another. "Champion me" means to fight as a champion against him. And "the utterance" has the now-obsolete meaning of "the very end." In short, Macbeth is challenging fate to a fight to the bitter end. He appears to know that he is up against long odds, and he imagines himself as a knight, going bravely into battle against fate itself.

At the end of the same scene, Macbeth explains to the murderers that not only must Banquo die, but also his son Fleance "must embrace the fate / Of that dark hour" (3.1.136-137). Here "fate" means a terrible thing that is going to happen because Macbeth is going to make it happen. As it turns out, Fleance escapes this particular "fate" and lives.

After the Ghost of Banquo has appeared at Macbeth's banquet, Macbeth reflects that "they say, blood will have blood" (3.4.121). The saying means that the blood of a murder victim will seek out the blood of his killer, and so a murder will always be discovered. Macbeth knows that stones have moved, trees have spoken, birds have told secrets. All of these things have "brought forth / The secret'st man of blood" (3.4.124-125). Macbeth himself is a secret man of blood, and the bloody Ghost confronted him. His guilt was almost "brought forth" in front of his guests, and there doesn't seem to be any way that he can escape his fate. However, none of this makes him feel remorse, or anything but a determination to see things through to the bitter end, because he is "in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (3.4.135-137).

In the scene before Macbeth visits the witches to learn his fate, Hecate tells the witches that she will prepare illusions that will make Macbeth "spurn fate, scorn death, and bear / His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear" (3.5.30-31), because, as they know, "security / Is mortals' chiefest enemy" (3.5.32-33). "Security" is a sense of safety. In short, the idea that we are bulletproof will kill us.

When Macbeth goes to the witches to learn his fate, they summon up apparitions to deliver their messages. The first apparition warns Macbeth to beware Macduff, but the second one tells Macbeth to "Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.81). At this, Macbeth reflects that he won't have to kill Macduff, after all, but in an instant he reverses himself again, saying he will "make assurance double sure, / And take a bond of fate" (4.1.83-84). He will kill Macduff so that he can "tell pale-hearted fear it lies" (4.1.85). To "take a bond" of someone is to receive a solemn promise that the person will pay us a debt. (The contracts we sign when we borrow money would be called "bonds" in Shakespeare's time.) Thus, Macbeth is going to kill Macduff in order to make sure that fate keeps its promise. Fate has just promised that no man of woman born can harm Macbeth, but fate has also told him to beware Macduff, and he's afraid that fate is fooling with him.

As the English army approaches, Macbeth tries to convince himself that he will be safe, because "The spirits that know / All mortal consequences [human destinies] have pronounced me thus: / 'Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman / Shall e'er have power upon thee'" (5.3.4-7). Thus Macbeth puts his faith in the powers of fate.