

Shakespeare's masterpiece, pico's philosophy: macbeth and oration on the dignity ...

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Shakespeare's shortest tragedy, *Macbeth*, eloquently displays the wildness of human imagination and the consequences of rapid action. The play's plot is written by the ominous whispers of Macbeth's conscience, which lead to avaricious and selfish reasoning. Macbeth's character, as well as other pivotal characters in the book, reveals significant traits and dwellings of the human mind and its capacity. In *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Italian scholar and philosopher Giovanni Pico discusses his view on the skills and level of existence of human beings. His philosophy revolves around the amazing capacity of human achievement as well as human failure. He describes his awe in the establishment of humankind as well as our ability of free will, making us the most wonderful of all creations. To a large extent, Shakespeare's view in *Macbeth* correlates with the view of Pico, as shown largely through the characters' actions and dynamics, mostly notably those of the Macbeths, in the tragedy.

The play begins with the character of Macbeth as an accomplished nobleman of King Duncan. He is known by the authorities of the kingdom as a honest and noble man, who is highly valued for his bravery. After the battle with Macdonwald and Sweno, a wounded sergeant bears Macbeth's bravery as he says " For brave Macbeth — well he deserves that name — Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel, Which smoked with bloody execution, Like valour's minion carved out his passage. Till he faced the slave" (1. 2. 16-20). Evidently, Macbeth is a prominent figure to the people and one could assume he has built an established figure in the kingdom. His kindness is also pointed out by his own wife when she says, " Yet I do fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness, To catch the nearest way" (1. 5. 14-

16). Macbeth's character seems to be the ideal nobleman a king would have dreamt of — honest, kind, and courageous. However, this seems to take a deep turn as Macbeth soon finds the power of the human free will, which Pico elaborates as the pivotal part of the existence of humans, writing, "thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer" (Pico, 1487). This free will is the capacity which deepens the hole for Macbeth, as he begins to ponder upon the witches' remarks. He allows himself to give into the thought of evil as he says, "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?" (1. 3. 137-139). He is now trapped into his own thoughts, which, as explained by Pico's philosophy, have the power to control Macbeth. His need to become king becomes the dominant goal of his actions, and soon it is seen how a seemingly innocent thought can become a gruesome action.

Macbeth kills Duncan with the orders of Lady Macbeth, and soon he undergoes a transformation. There is no hesitance or caution that Macbeth asserts anymore; he is rather blunt and bolder to get the crown. He is easily able to easily murder Banquo, as he says to the murderers, "I will advise you where to plant yourselves; Acquaint you with the perfect spy o' the time, The moment on't; for 't must be done to-night" (3. 1. 147-149). A man who once rode along the side of Banquo in his full trust did not even blink when he said he would want him dead. This change in dynamics can be attributed to the free will that is given to us humans. We are able to think for ourselves, as Pico explains "Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to

be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine" (Pico, 1487). This idea correlates to the actions of Macbeth, who wants to become king. However, Pico also states the converse of his last statement as a pivotal reason as to why humans should be greatly acknowledged — our ability to fail. He writes, "Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish" (1487). This is the central correlation to Macbeth, as his actions prove to destroy him, showing the capacity of free will.

By the end of the play, Macbeth realizes he is in too deep of a turmoil, yet still fails to recognize that he can stop. He says, "I am in blood. Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (3. 4. 169-171). This statement illustrates Pico's converse, as one can see that the brave nobleman that was portrayed in the beginning of the tragedy is now ultimately gone due to his own actions. Macbeth has become molded into someone who is entirely different. Hostile and degraded, Macbeth sees his own prophecy fall. When he is finally cornered, he lastly says, "I have liv'd long enough: my way of life. Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf; And that which should accompany old age, As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not look to have; but, in their stead..." (5. 3. 26-30). Here, Macbeth accepts his fate and learns the true consequences of free will actions as he watched a yellow leaf fall. Pico's philosophy revolves around the greatness of the free will of human beings, whether it is good or bad, which differentiates us from other beings. Macbeth is able to portray this philosophy, as shown, by his ability to rise and fall within his own actions.

Nonetheless, even though a large extent of Shakespeare channels the philosophy of Pico, Macbeth also puts forward another argument on life. Macbeth captivates the audience with his dreaded speech after the suicide of Lady Macbeth. He puts forward the ambiguity of life and how trivial humans are when he says, " Creeps in this petty pace from day to day. To the last syllable of recorded time, And all our yesterdays have lighted fools. The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player" (5. 5. 23-27). This approach urges us to re-evaluate Pico's claim on the worth of humans and the awe of free will. Macbeth's speech illustrates life as a place which is meaningless, whether it ends up being good or bad. Free will is only a danger and does not matter at the end. However, because the tragedy heavily shows the impact of free will on actions, Shakespeare still mostly aligns with Pico's philosophy. The assertion that human beings can exercise their intellectual capabilities and change themselves through their free will, whereas the universe is tied to a bond of order, is the marvelous condition of mankind through the eyes of Pico. This philosophy has ascended through time in wondrous ways, and has made it to a place five hundred years after, to readers of Macbeth in our own time.