

Jumping the life to come

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A central theme of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the title character's willingness to accept his fate. Macbeth's attitude toward the prophecies of the witches varies depending on how much he likes the prediction. At first, he follows along with the prophecies that say he will become king, murdering his way to the position, but when they foretell his death and lack of heirs, he tries to stop the course of fate. His methods are bloody ones, and throughout the play he must face-or ignore-the morality of his actions. When Macbeth moves from working for fate to working against it, his feeling of guilt moves from great to small as he grows callous and willfully heads toward his damnation. Whether Macbeth has had any thoughts of killing Duncan before he hears the prophecy that he himself shall be king is unclear, but he certainly thinks this very soon after hearing the witches. Though he thinks about the murder often, he refuses to let himself acknowledge it. Speaking to Banquo, he shakes it off as "things forgotten," and he wants the eye to "wink at the hand." Macbeth both wants to fulfill and to avoid fate. The prophecies are enough to make him think about the deed, but not enough to make him do it. Even the very thought of killing Duncan "doth unfix [his] hair." He is inherently opposed to the killing because it disrupts the natural order of things, as he is Duncan's host and thegn, but that is not the only reason. Many of Macbeth's fears of acting to achieve his fate stem from not moral compunctions but worries of what else his fate may bring. He is afraid of his own damnation for killing such a good king as Duncan, and Cawdor also serves as an example for his possible fate on earth. He knows that he cannot escape divine justice, and decides to keep from his fate as it was stated by the witches. He is stuck in a dilemma: he can try to buck his fate of

becoming king or that of going to heaven. It is the action and not the consequence that he eventually favors, for Lady Macbeth convinces him. Lady Macbeth herself becomes an instrument of fate without much urging. As soon as she hears what the witches told her husband, she invokes “spirits that tend on mortal thoughts,” putting herself firmly in the area of the fate-serving witches. She dwells on their prophecy as “the all-hail hereafter,” considering what Macbeth thought could be neither good nor ill to be unequivocally good. She is not swayed by Macbeth’s multiple protestations, and answers all his doubts. She, by following fate, gets him to act. When he finally does decide to kill Duncan, Macbeth is instantly beset by guilt. He imagines that a bloody dagger is floating in the air before him directing him to Duncan’s room. He fears that the paving stones themselves will speak of his intentions, hears noises, and fears that he is lost to God. After the murder, he “had most need of blessing, and ‘Amen’ stuck in [his] throat.” He has done the deed, and at this point has lost his hope of salvation. Just after the murder, his state is mocked by the porter, who is drunk and fancies himself the keeper of hell’s gate. He constantly babbles about hell, and rather anachronistically mentions an equivocator, “who committed treason...yet could not equivocate to heaven.” This bit of comic relief is Macbeth’s situation in a nutshell. He has chosen his fate, carried by the evil witches. He is lost, and his guilt is really the fear of the consequences. The first consequence is his lack of sleep. Sleep is “innocent” and has a variety of healthful applications, such as a “balm of hurt minds,” which Macbeth could stand to have, but his separation from grace keeps him from peace of mind. Because he has “murdered sleep,” he must live in

dread of the result. Sleep is also “ death’s counterfeit” reminding Macbeth that he can not hope to have a calm death or afterlife. Lady Macbeth’s reaction to this is to scoff at his fear of the afterlife, considering the devil “ painted” and the dead “ but as pictures.” Her method of dealing with guilt is refusing to see it. But as for Macbeth, is not surprising that he begins an attempt to change the course of his life. His damnation is hanging over him, and he realizes that it is for nothing. He reminds himself that the witches said Banquo’s children would become kings, not his own. He therefore decides to fight against this earthly fate, but not his eventual one. What he calls a result of this decision will nicely double as a reason for it: he is “ stepped in blood” too far to repent of his actions. To take another quote out of context, “ blood will have blood.” Macbeth is caught in killings. His guilt is “ the initiate fear that wants hard use” and will soon vanish once he has killed enough. He murders and tries to change his fate because to do so would blind him to his guilt. At this moment he freely chooses to try the impossible. Before, he had done all he could to make his fate come about; now, he thwarts it. Lady Macbeth’s reaction to her husband’s own switching of ideas toward fate is a reversal of her previous attitudes toward killing. Now that Macbeth is fighting fate, she fights him. Before, she suggested the murder and he gave excuses against it, but now he speaks of killing, brushes aside her objections, and even notices that she starts at the thought. As a crime against fate, the murder cannot sit well with one who, like Lady Macbeth, is devoted to vindicating fate. She has accepted fate and does not try to fight it, and so feels real fear and worry- not of hell, but of something greater, an attempt not only to destroy the natural order, or God’s law, as

Duncan's murder was, but the overruling laws of fate. Despite Macbeth's efforts, what comes of the murder is not a blow to fate, but rather a vindication of it. Fleance, who will become king of Scotland, is not killed. Banquo, whom the witches said would never gain the throne, is. Macbeth's vision of Banquo's ghost reminds him of this. Upon seeing it, he is chiefly afraid that the other guests will see it too and know that he committed the crime. He is still afraid of retribution, but also about his success at changing his fate, and so decides to seek out the witches to tell him more about it. He is prepared "to know/By the worst means the worst." He will consort with evil, taking him further along its path, merely to learn that it is futile to change his destiny. Indeed, he will at this point do anything to learn his fate. He commands the witches to tell it to him, even if they have to "let [the winds] fight against the churches," the source of salvation, before they even refuse him. He wants to know the truth directly from the spirits, not the weyward sisters. He speaks directly to them, something not even the witches do. As he speaks, he tries to demand information of the spirits, which the witches warn him he cannot. He tries to learn more of his fate than is possible. When he demands information that is not in his favor, such as whether Banquo's line will ever reign in Scotland, he immediately wishes he had never known it. The witches had told him the answer before, but this time he is faced with an image of Banquo's descendants. The sight is so horrible to Macbeth that it "does sear [his] eyeballs." He deals with the truth by pretending he never saw it. As Macbeth is now blind to his fate, so too is he blind to his guilt. He orders the murder of Macduff and his family, but can only kill his wife and son. Even the murder of Banquo, which occurred under

similar circumstances, did its job to bring about fate, but this action is a futile attempt to change Macbeth's destiny, and merely kills a child and woman of no threat to him. And unlike in the murders of Banquo and Duncan, Macbeth does not soliloquize about his guilt and fear. He has already committed himself to the path of changing his fate, and now is slowly realizing that this is impossible. At the beginning of Act V, Macbeth believes in his invulnerability as predicted in the prophecies so firmly and wildly that it borders on the intentionally self-deceiving. Yet as soon as Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, the impossible condition that would give the lie to Macbeth's immorality, he begins to despair. Fate mocks him by having the most unlikely things happen before his future would change. As it dawns on Macbeth that there is nothing he can do to change his fate, he refuses to fight any longer. Lady Macbeth's death is what shocks (or rather, fails to shock) Macbeth into seeing the bleakness of his fate. Lady Macbeth, instrument of fate, firm believer in the prophecies, has recognized what is happening to her husband and killed herself. As Macbeth blinds himself to guilt, she opens her eyes to it. Yet the flavor of her guilt is not of fear—for if it was, she hardly would have damned herself further by committing suicide—but of simply being unable to live with blood on her hands. She cannot deal with the actions that she and Macbeth (really Macbeth—she faults herself for the murder of Duncan, which she urged but did not commit, and of Lady Macduff, which she opposed) have committed. Fate is no longer supporting Macbeth's rise; it has abandoned him because of his failure to come to terms with his guilt. Lady Macbeth acknowledged her deeds and killed herself out of a guilty conscience, but Macbeth, at the very end, refuses to yield to

Macduff. He may accept the futility of fighting his destiny, but he does it anyway. Macbeth's decision to fight Macduff, by fighting against what he has resigned himself to, shows an acceptance of his own guilt. He is fighting against the completely unquestionable end that fate has predicted for him. A forest has moved and a man not born of woman has appeared—these are not events that Macbeth can consider coincidence. He must face his fate. When he shouts, “and damned be him who first cries, ‘Hold, enough!’” Macbeth is already damned, there is nothing left for him to do but fight this fate, and in the fighting, damn himself again. He does not cry anything, but at the end of the fight he has both played out his destiny and gone to hell. Macbeth has turned his struggle against fate and fight against guilt into the same fight, and lost it. The struggle of Macbeth to gain his fate is one that he could not have lost. The one to fight it is one that he could not have won. His actions, while inconsequential on the level of the grand scheme of things, are tremendously important on the personal level of the fate of his own soul. That fate is not predetermined, and is the only thing that Macbeth really has control over. While chance may crown him, it is Macbeth who decides his own ultimate end.