

Interpret the Relationship between Prophecy and Macbeth's Tragedy in Macbeth from the Perspective of Karma and Predestination

Shujin Wang

College of Foreign Language, Ocean University of China, Qingdao, China

sylvia18cs@163.com

Abstract

Witches' prophecy is an important driving force for the plot of Macbeth. This paper, taking the connection between witch's prophecy and Macbeth's tragedy as the starting point, tries to explain their causal relationship from two religious views: Karma and predestination. The two views give different interpretations of the relationship between man and fate, which affect the understanding of Macbeth's ending and meaning.

Keywords

Witch Prophecy; Macbeth; Karma; Predestination; Fate.

1. Introduction

This paper tries to interpret Macbeth in two religious views: karma and predestination. The purpose is not to conclude which one is the best explanation, but to understand Macbeth's tragedy and the relationship between individual and fate from different perspective.

2. The Tangled Relationship between Prophecy and Tragedy

In *Macbeth*, there is a tangled relationship between witches' prophecy and Macbeth's tragedy. The content of prophecy is the result, while the prophecy itself seems to be the cause of everything. This is a kind of Ouroboros structure, popularly used in some films such as *Tenet*, which causes produce effects in the future, and effects produce causes in the past--Macbeth's burning desire can be seen as both cause and effect of witches' prophecy.

What is interesting is the question that which one is the true cause. Personally speaking, there is no single answer, and the meaning of this question lies in the fact that in different views it is capable of different interpretations.

3. From the Perspective of Karma

3.1. What is karma?

It is a term of Buddhism, Hinduism and some eastern religion, also called "ye" in Chinese, referring to the belief that actions in this life affect future lives. The basic theme of karma is that what goes around comes around, and the moral value it advocates is "Sentient beings follow their karma. The good and evil of human nature can be chosen. Sentient beings should be diligent in doing good deeds and be wary of committing evil" (Hongxing Yangdzom 175-183)[1].

From this perspective, the interpretation should be placed on Macbeth's choices and actions rather than witches' prophecy.

3.2. Domino Effect of Macbeth's Choice

The story of Macbeth could be divided into six parts: the first one is the encounter between tempers and the tempered; the second one is his hesitation before final decision; the third is the murder of Duncan; the fourth is the assassination of Banquo; the fifth is the murder of Macduff's wife and son; the last one is Macbeth's annihilation. Each part is a choice made by Macbeth, closely related to the next, becoming a trigger for the further falling into abyss.

"Macbeth goes through a process that the dissolution of his subject consciousness changes from a short period of passive one to an active one." (Ren He-he 71-77) (in Chinese)[2] With desire aroused by witches' first prophecy, Macbeth is going to sink into sin gradually. The temptation gives rise to the passive dissolution. While Macbeth choose to abandon his past subject consciousness soon—he begins to take action. It seems that Mrs. Macbeth incites him to murder Duncan, but in fact, hesitation is itself a kind of choice. Macbeth just need a psychological conform from others to soothe himself.

It is the choice to rob the throne that dooms Macbeth to be stained by Banquo's blood, for he cannot tolerate his crown being donated to Banquo's offspring. The murder of Banquo accelerates Macbeth's becoming a devilish creature--after that he tries to end MacDuff's life to ensure his crown, which virtually leads to the war and Macbeth's death.

If Macbeth suppresses his desire at the very beginning, choosing to be a hospitable host rather than a dark slayer, or stops at any time midway, there may be another version of ending.

What adds to a sense of tragedy is that Macbeth rushes headlong into his doom with clear realization that "as honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not to have; but, in their stead, curses, not loud but deep" (Mac.5.3.16-18).[3]

In this light, it is his own karma rather than something outside such as withes' prophecy that leads to his effects.

3.3. Banquo's Karma

Banquo is an opposite mirror image of Macbeth in his choices and fate. In the same encounter with witches, Banquo shows completely different reaction compared with Macbeth. Confronted with temptation, he, never drawn in desires, keeps his rationality, conscience, loyalty and humanity. Eventually, these virtues lead him to the end that he could sleep in peace with his grave full of flower, and that line of his offspring will take the crown.

Banquo' karma is a good one. In contrast with Banquo's karma, Macbeth's bloody actions and his futility become more ridiculously tragical, and the effect of karma--you reap what you sowed--becomes clearer.

In a word, Macbeth makes his own fate. From his choice, a storm is coming; desire burns. A war is calling; the tides are turned.

4. From the Perspective of Predestination

4.1. Predestination

In a narrow sense, predestination is believed by Calvinists that human beings have original sin and are totally depraved from the very beginning of his fate. It also refers to the theory or the belief at large that everything has been predetermined by God or fate and cannot be changed.

A typical illustration of predestination is *Oedipus the King*, in which Oedipus is manipulated by cool and cruel fate, pushed into his doomed end that he must slay his father and marry his mother, no matter what he has done to fight against the overwhelming and invisible power. The power, or the fate must lead its chosen person to the predestinated place.

4.2. Prophecy Decides Macbeth's Action

If we take it from this view, the emphasis should be put on the effect of prophecy.

The first prophecy is given in the first act in that Macbeth would be the king. It is since then that Macbeth is haunted by his desire and even defeated by it. In this case, the final effect—Macbeth becomes the king—decides the cause that he takes action to rob the crown.

The second prophecy is in Act IV. The witches give some ambiguous hint that “none of woman born shall harm Macbeth”, “Macbeth shall never vanish'd be until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him” (Mac.4.1. 87-88.101-103).[4] These prophecies have already shown the effect in a tricky way that “Macbeth shall be harmed by a man not born normally by his mother” and “Macbeth shall be conquered if the wood moves to Dunsinane.” However, Macbeth falls into the trap of those ambiguous sentences and goes blindly, just as guided by a script that fate had already written, into the war against Macduff, which in turn becomes the cause.

4.3. The Power of Destiny

The power of destiny in *Macbeth* is mainly elucidated by two points. The first one is futile resistance. Although Macbeth made every effort to invalidate the prophecy that Banquo's offspring would be crowned, he still could not escape the arrangement. The second point is that Macbeth is invariably lured by the supernatural, as if the devil of fate sent some followers, the witches, to make sure that Macbeth would take the road it has paved for him at every crossing.

In the end, the destiny won everyone. In this light, it is the effect that makes the cause.

5. Conclusion

The two religious views reveal different attitude toward the relationship between human being and fate.

From the perspective of karma, mortals make his or her own fate by making choices. Macbeth's failure to control his desire and ambition gives rise to final nothing, only leaving sound and fury. The story seems to have more moralizing meaning if interpreted in this way.

From the perspective of predestination, fate controls everyone, which envelops the tragedy a more despairing feeling. And the famous conclusion made by Macbeth facing death that life “is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Mac.5.5.28-30) approximates a kind of modern philosophy that “nothing can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. All human effort is thus futile and leads only to despair.” (Chang Yaoxin 157).

References

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