In William Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*, the three witches use their reputation to influence Macbeth’s actions and make him believe that what they say is fate. The Weird Sisters, as they are commonly called, tell Macbeth several prophesies throughout the play, but that is all they do. The actions of Macbeth and others are their own. However, Macbeth blindly follows their words because he trusts in magic and prophecies, which results in his death. During the time period when Shakespeare wrote this play, “the witchcraft hysteria in Europe had already waxed and waned a number of times” (Kennedy 720). The author would have had plenty information about the history of witchcraft. During the seventh century, “England ... became one of the most active arenas in Europe for both accusations of and skepticism about witchcraft” (Kennedy 724-5). King James, the person for whom this play was written, also had a great amount of knowledge about witches and believed in magic, which may be the reason why the witches play such an important role in the play (*Riverside Shakespeare* 1357). Shakespeare’s witches, like many of the accused women of that time period, did not perform magic. But Macbeth believed that the witches told fate, not just possibilities.

The witches, or the Weird Sisters, appear at the beginning of the play before the action moves to a military camp where King Duncan of Scotland hears news of generals and their success in battle. The generals, Macbeth and Banquo, encounter the witches when they cross a moor and they are told a prophesy that Macbeth will first become a thane of Cawdor before eventually rising to King of Scotland. Banquo, while never being King himself, will sire a line of kings. The two are skeptical about the witches after they vanish until some soldiers come and tell Macbeth that he has been named thane of Cawdor. Macbeth is intrigued but uncertain about the rest of the prophesy, so he writes to his wife, telling her everything. She, however, is not as cautious about the prophesy. Lady Macbeth begins to plan the murder of Duncan and persuades her husband to kill the king the night he comes home. Their plan succeeds even though Macbeth still has doubts and has visions of a bloody dagger. Macbeth assumes the throne and Duncan’s sons flee the country. The new king of Scotland fears for his throne because of the witches’ other prophesy concerning Banquo’s heirs, so he hires men to
kill Banquo and his son. Banquo is killed but his son, Fleance, escapes. That night, the ghost of Banquo visits Macbeth, who scares his guests when he rambles in fear at a feast. Lady Macbeth tries to control the damage, but the nobles are questioning his legitimacy, so Macbeth visits the witches. They show him demons and spirits who tell him more prophecies: “beware Macduff / Beware the thane of Fife,” “The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth,” and “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him” (1377-8). Despite these unsettling prophecies, Macbeth is relieved and feels secure because he believes that a realization of the prophecies is impossible. After learning that Macduff has joined Malcolm, Duncan’s son, he orders Lady Macduff and her children murdered. News of this reaches Macduff and, vowing revenge, Macduff joins Prince Malcolm’s army as they ride to Scotland. Several Scottish nobles, appalled by the tyrannical behavior of Macbeth, support this invasion. Lady Macbeth kills herself after sleepwalking, believing that blood is covering her hands. Macbeth, in great mourning, still waits for the invasion by fortifying the castle but believes he will be invincible because of the witches’ prophecy. However, fear strikes his heart when the army advances with tree branches from Birnam Wood, making one prophecy true. Macbeth fights back but is eventually overwhelmed and confronted by Macduff, who was born of a C-section, thus “not of woman born.” Macbeth still fights, knowing his doom, and is beheaded by Macduff, making the latter the new King of Scotland.

When looking at the witches in Macbeth, many scholars have varying opinions on what they are. Some see them as the embodiment of evil, similar to furies or demonic spirits. Others see them as mere old women, while yet other consider them actual witches: “There are two branches from Birnam Wood, making one prophecy true. Macbeth fights back but is eventually overwhelmed and confronted by Macduff, who was born of a C-section, thus “not of woman born.” Macbeth still fights, knowing his doom, and is beheaded by Macduff, making the latter the new King of Scotland.

While many scholars disagree on the extent of the witches’ magical power, they also have different views on Macbeth’s role in the witches’ prophecies and about how much of his actions are fate. Anthony DiMatteo writes in his article, “Classical Aspects of the Witches in Macbeth,” that Macbeth has crossed a line in the interpretation of the power of witchcraft that Banquo (and Conti) carefully avoided doing. The goddess of witches, Hecate herself, is only an instrument of a force greater than her own; she is the course and power of fate divinely communicated into mortal bodies. Of course, this perhaps fine though rather
crucial distinction between instrument and cause is muddled by Macbeth's evidently swelling desire to know what will happen. Ironically, Macbeth himself has become an instrument of his desire to know, a trespass of the boundaries of reason. (45)

DiMatteos says that Macbeth's interpretation of the prophecy is what causes his demise, not the witches' prophecies themselves. Macbeth becomes a toy that the witches can manipulate with their words.

Much scholarly research shows the different views regarding the witches, fate, and Macbeth in the hopes that the reader will understand Shakespeare's play better. Although the different sides of this argument must be known, one should focus on certain parts of the play to truly understand the witches and their behavior.

Looking at the different views of scholars, one can see how diverse the opinions are about the witches and that Shakespeare is rather vague in his presentation of them. However, one can also see that the witches, while they may be slightly supernatural, are only good at making people believe that what they say is true. The witches only inform Macbeth of their prophecies but do not say how they will come to be. The actions of others caused the tragedy of Macbeth, not the witches. The characters acted based on the witches' words, while the witches merely planted the seeds; "Witches are only capable of seeing what is likely to happen and have no way of defining the course of events. Macbeth's moral downfall begins when he forgets this boundary and begins seeing the witches as having the power to define life's course" (DiMatteo 45). When the witches told Macbeth that he would be king, he was unsure about how he should act, but his wife was the one who persuaded him to spring to action. Lady Macbeth's actions were not determined by the witches but, owing to the witches' reputation, Lady Macbeth thought their prediction was fate.

Macbeth fails to take into account the prophecies he hears from the demons and spirits later in the play. The witches' ability to summon demons and spirits might suggest that they are part of the supernatural world, but they do not perform any other magic. In Act 1, Scene 3, the witches vanish after delivering their message to Macbeth and Banquo. However, like Wentersdorf has mentioned, the witches are not using magic, but instead using a sleight of hand to disappear from the two generals, and the actors who performed this play during Shakespeare's time also would have used tricks to make the audience believe that they were disappearing. Through talking with Macbeth and their non-magical disappearance, the witches are revealed not as demons but as intelligent women who, with only their words, influence Macbeth and his wife. Since Scotland is a land rich of history of the supernatural, there is historical evidence to Macbeth and his wife believing the witches, who would have taken advantage of this blind acceptance of truth. Stallybrass mentions that witchcraft was not just part of England's folklore: "Although witchcraft accusations reached epidemic proportions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, witchcraft beliefs are endemic in many societies" (189). This influence by reputation and local belief is what helps the witches in their goal of leading Macbeth down a certain path of eventual failure.

Through Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's actions, one can concur that they both believe that the witches' prophecies are fate, not mere suggestions. This eventually leads to their deaths when the throne Macbeth usurped is taken from him. Fate implies that events are set in stone, but the witches only said that Macbeth would become king of Scotland. They did not say how he would become king or how long he would last in that position. Lady Macbeth assumes that Macbeth would have to kill the king in order to win the throne, and Macbeth assumes that the throne cannot be taken from him. But because of their actions, 'fate' happens in a way they did not expect. That is why the witches cannot see the future but are instead planting seeds in Macbeth's mind, pushing him toward the actions they want him to take. They, having told him that he would be king, but that Banquo would sire a line of king, set in motion the events they wanted to happen. The witches did not know how, but trusted Macbeth and his wife would act rashly in order to live out their ambition. But when Macbeth consults them again with concerns about his kingship, they tell him that Macduff will fight against him, that a man not born of woman would kill him, and that his kingship will fall when Birnam Wood advances the castle. Macbeth takes their words at face value and, believing that his kingship is his ultimate fate, thinks he is invincible against the rising invasion. However, the witches cannot decide fate, only plant the seeds for the events in the way they want to. They know that Macbeth is losing his rational thinking and is only
concerned about his throne. Hence they tell him the prophecies in riddles to make them sound impossible, luring Macbeth into a sense of false security. Shakespeare is showing his audience through the witches’ manipulation that fate cannot be relied on and that people make their fate, not magic or supernatural forces. This message would have appealed to King James, who did not like witchcraft and thought of the witches as the evil forces in the play—as many scholars still do.

One of the main foci in *Macbeth* are witches, unlike most other Shakespeare plays, who affect important events in the play with their words. During that time period, there was a large cultural belief in fate and witchcraft, which the Weird Sisters use to their advantage. Whether or not the three women have a certain goal in mind when setting down Macbeth the path of tragedy, Shakespeare does not tell his audience, but a reader can clearly perceive that the witches do not force Macbeth to act. His actions are the fault of his wife and himself, not magic, although the witches were able to manipulate him based on their reputation. The witches are shown as women who use sleight of hand and control of their words to affect the actions of others, thus affecting major events. They speak to plant ideas in people’s minds and set events into motion. In *Macbeth*, the villain of the play are not the witches, but instead the other, non-magical characters. Lady Macbeth is the one who convinces her husband to kill the king, not the witches. If Macbeth had never spoken to the witches, his wife would have never convinced him to kill Duncan. Fate is not the driving force of the play, but the notion of possibility. The witches’ words offer a possible future, and is up to the listener to decide to pursue that future or not. The future is not set in stone and the witches knew that. Clearly, Macbeth did not.

**Works Cited**


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