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Knowing Our Future Changes Our Future

If you were told that you were going to die in three days in a car crash, what would you do? Would you say, ‘okay, if it’s my time to die I guess I’ll die’? Or would you avoid any and all cars for the next three days? Most people would pick the second option. When we know the future, we change it simply by knowing it. This topic has caused many time travel enthusiasts to have endless discussions about the time-space continuum. My personal opinion is that if someone receives knowledge of future events and acts on this knowledge, then he/she completely changes the future that had already been on course. This new future is the result of the actions of that person. His/her actions would have been done to change the future, either to prevent an unhappy outcome or to create the future he/she wants. It could be argued that the fortune teller could ‘prophesize’ the future in a way that creates a future they want. In *Macbeth* and *The Castle of Otranto*, I believe the characters Macbeth and Manfred acted of their own free will in an attempt to change or to create the future that had been prophesized to them.

In William Shakespeare’s play, *Macbeth*, the character Macbeth is told by the Weird Sisters that he would become the Thane of Cawdor and then the King of Scotland. At first Macbeth seems doubtful, but then shortly after hearing this prophecy, a messenger comes to Macbeth telling him that Macbeth has gained the title Thane of Cawdor due to the original Thane being executed for treason. This leads Macbeth to believe that maybe what the Weird Sisters had foretold was true. The play goes on to Macbeth murdering the king and several other characters in an attempt to gain and remain in power. At first Lady Macbeth had to push him to do it but then Macbeth becomes more confident and power hungry. I think that if the Weird Sisters hadn’t have told Macbeth his future, then he wouldn’t have had any reason to kill the king. Macbeth would have remained as he had been and nothing would have changed. However, the Weird Sisters decided to have some fun and play fortune tellers by telling Macbeth the ‘future’. I don’t believe that the Weird Sisters told Macbeth the true future. Instead I think they created that future by telling it to Macbeth. Some scholars, such as A. D. Nuttall, have a different opinion. In Nuttall’s *Oracles And The Start Of Recognition*, he brings up the issue of Macbeth already having a desire to kill the king for the crown and that the prophecy merely gave him the push to do it sooner.

Even with Macbeth having been told his future, he could have chosen to do nothing but he got power hungry. Yes, Macbeth’s wife was pestering and belittling him until he did it, but Macbeth could have simply told her to shut up. He chose to act of his own free will when committing and ordering the series of murders that occur throughout the play. These actions created Macbeth’s future; if he had not acted and ignored the prophecy, he would have peacefully lived out his life as Thane of Glamis and Cawdor. Instead Macbeth created the new future that ended with his untimely death and his wife’s death.

Similarly, in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the character Manfred becomes the victim of a prophecy. The book opens with a brief description of the characters and then the prophecy is stated, “That the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it.” When Manfred’s only son, Conrad, dies a tragic death, Manfred goes mad with his fear that his family will lose ownership of Otranto. Manfred believes that this is the prophecy coming to fruition. In an attempt to cheat fate and change his family’s future, Manfred plots to divorce his now barren wife and marry Isabella to produce an heir. This child would be the legitimate owner of Otranto due to Isabella’s family’s claim to be the lawful heirs. If Manfred hadn’t have caused all of this panic and drama, things may have worked out by marrying his daughter, Matilda, into Isabella’s family. Instead Manfred freaks out and becomes a true Gothic villain through his dastardly plot. He then goes on to estrange himself from Isabella’s family and accidently murders Matilda, thus bringing an end to Manfred’s family line and him truly losing Otranto.

I believe that his actions are what truly caused the prophecy to come true. His son’s death by being crushed by the giant helmet, in my opinion, could be seen as a warning to Manfred that he needed to tell the truth about his family’s misdeeds. If he had heeded the warning and not gone completely bonkers, then his family line would have still lived on through Matilda. The line may not have carried Manfred’s name or stayed long in Otranto, but it would have at least still been continued. However, that would not have been as exciting a story. So Walpole had Manfred do his villainous deeds and bring about the end of his own family in an attempt to put off the prophecy coming true.

This prophecy had been hanging over Manfred for his whole life and it made him paranoid. This most likely influenced his actions as he reacted similarly to a wounded animal trying to protect its territory. Eric Spangenberg and David E. Sprott’s *Self-Monitoring And Susceptibility To The Influence Of Self-Prophecy*, states that “Asking people to make a self-prediction regarding a normative behavior influences the performance of that behavior in the future.” Now, this is mainly about people going to the gym after saying that they will but I believe it can apply to The Castle of Otranto. Manfred had this future hanging over his head for his whole life, therefore he spent his whole life dedicated to having an heir no matter what to continue his name and remain in control of Otranto. Manfred’s self-prophecy was that he would not be the owner that grew “too large to inhabit it”. In his attempt to fulfill his self-prophecy, Manfred in turn brought about the terms of the ancient prophecy. If he had not have attempted to change his future, then his actual future would not have been as tragic as his actions made it.

If Macbeth and Manfred had been free from these prophecies, they would have not experienced as much tragedy as they did. It was their own actions, done by their own free will, which brought about a majority of the horrible things that happen in each story. If Manfred had been able to keep a cool head then he wouldn’t have lost both of his children, one of which he killed accidently. Manfred would also have most likely still had Otranto in his possession for several more years if he hadn’t have gone insane. If Macbeth had not been power hungry then he and his wife would have lived longer lives, as would have the people he killed or ordered the murders of. Each of these two men caused their futures to happen and guaranteed the prophecies to come true. Granted, Manfred and Macbeth might not have acted as they had if they had not been privy to the futures foretold to them, but their actions were their own.

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