**Fate**

From the beginning, we know that the story of Romeo and Juliet will end in tragedy. We also know that their tragic ends will not result from their own personal defects but from fate, which has marked them for sorrow. Emphasizing fate's control over their destinies, the Prologue tells us these "star-cross'd lovers'" relationship is deathmark'd."

Though much of *Romeo and Juliet* is driven by the choices its main characters make and the actions they take, there is a dark undercurrent running throughout the play: the suggestion that fate, not free will, is behind the entirety of the human experience. Repeated references to fate and fortune throughout the play underscore Shakespeare’s suggestion that humans are merely pawns in a larger cosmic scheme—invisible but inescapable fates, Shakespeare argues throughout the play, steer the course of human lives, and any and all actions that attempt to subvert those fates are futile and doomed to fail.

In the world of *Romeo and Juliet*, fate and predetermined destinies are an accepted part of life and society. From the [**chorus**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/romeo-and-juliet/characters/the-chorus) that introduces the first two acts of the play, commenting upon the events that are about to take place, to the characters’ own preoccupation with the unseen forces that control them, Shakespeare imbues the world of the play with the heavy atmosphere of a “black fate” sitting like a storm cloud just above the entirety of the action. Throughout the play, characters acknowledge—and make “misadventured” attempts to thwart—the invisible forces guiding their lives. Yet every attempt to outsmart, outwit, or dodge fate ends terribly. By having [**Romeo**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/romeo-and-juliet/characters/romeo) and [**Juliet**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/romeo-and-juliet/characters/juliet) verbally acknowledge—privately and to one another—their fears about their doomed fates, Shakespeare showcases how badly his characters want to believe that their desires and actions stand a chance in the face of fate’s wily hand. “Alack, alack, that heaven should practice stratagems / Upon so soft a subject as myself,” Juliet laments after learning that her parents have arranged for her to marry [**Paris**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/romeo-and-juliet/characters), not knowing that she is already married to Romeo. Juliet has, at this late point in the play, had to deal with the death of her cousin, the cruelty of her family, and the destruction of her previously held ideals about the nature of good and evil, friend and enemy. She has, she feels, been through enough—and is beginning to believe that fate is “practic[ing]” on her, striking her with terrible news and insurmountable problems for sport. Juliet acknowledges the role fate plays in her life—she knows she is a pawn of the “heaven[s]”—and yet her actions over the course of the rest of the play show that she longs to fly in the face of heaven’s decrees.

“O, I am fortune’s fool!” Romeo screams shortly after he kills [**Tybalt**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/romeo-and-juliet/characters/tybalt) in a duel; “I deny you, [**stars**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/romeo-and-juliet/symbols/light-dark-and-day-night)!” he shouts when he learns of Juliet’s “death” in the play’s final act. In these two expressions of frustration with fate and fortune, Shakespeare uses Romeo’s anger at fate’s dominion to show that while he hates realizing he is on a predetermined path, he is nonetheless cognizant of his lack of autonomy in the face of fortune’s plans for him. When Romeo calls himself “fortune’s fool” after slaying Tybalt, he laments, perhaps, having committed the act he knew he’d have to commit all along: killing the man who killed his best friend. Now that he has committed murder, however, Romeo feels he has been a “fool” to play into fortune’s hand, and to fail resisting harder the pull of fate’s demands. When Romeo learns of Juliet’s death, he cries out that he will “deny” the stars—in other words, he doesn’t want to believe Juliet is dead, or possibly believes, deep down, that there is something he can do to reverse what the stars have ordained even if she is. As he prepares to ride from Mantua to Verona to investigate the truth of his servant [**Balthasar**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/romeo-and-juliet/characters)’s news, he is admitting, full-out, that he plans to try to reverse his and Juliet’s fortunes—even as, in the same breath, he tacitly admits that he knows their fates are already written in the stars.

Shakespeare’s argument about fate is a bleak one. The insinuation that forces humans can neither comprehend nor control guide their words and actions is perhaps even more sinister in a contemporary context than it would have been in Shakespeare’s own time. Though debates concerning free will versus determinism stretch back to antiquity, faith in humans’ ability to steer their own destinies did not begin to emerge more widely throughout Western culture until well after Shakespeare’s time. Whether or not Shakespeare himself believed in the total dominion of fate and fortune, he certainly used his plays as an arena to work out his frustrations with the mechanisms of individual destiny—and to suggest that to deny or defy one’s fate is a fatal, calamitous choice.