

Treatment of Fate in the Plays of William Shakespeare

Dr. Shabeena Parveen

Assistant Professor

Department of English

SMP Government Girls' PG College, Meerut.

Abstract

Fate is one of the most persistent and complex ideas in Shakespearean drama. His plays repeatedly present human beings confronted by forces that appear to lie beyond their control: prophecy, fortune, accident, inherited conflict, political circumstances, supernatural intervention, and the consequences of earlier actions. Yet Shakespeare rarely presents fate as a simple, predetermined power that completely controls human life. Instead, his dramatic treatment of fate is closely connected with human choice. Characters receive prophecies, encounter unexpected circumstances, or inherit conflicts, but their responses to these circumstances frequently determine the course of events. This tension between necessity and free will is particularly evident in Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Shakespeare's history plays. The Renaissance concept of Fortune, traditionally represented by the unstable Wheel of Fortune, also provides an important background for understanding Shakespeare's treatment of destiny and uncertainty. This paper argues that Shakespeare uses fate not merely as an external force governing human beings but as a dramatic framework through which he examines ambition, responsibility, chance, political disorder, love, suffering, and mortality. His characters live in a world where human plans can be disrupted by forces beyond their knowledge, but Shakespeare consistently leaves room for human agency. Consequently, fate in Shakespeare is neither absolute determinism nor complete freedom; it is an unstable interaction between circumstance, choice, chance, and consequence.

Keywords: Fate, fortune, destiny, free will, tragedy, prophecy, Renaissance drama

I. Introduction

William Shakespeare's plays are deeply concerned with the question of how much control human beings possess over their lives. Again and again, his characters make plans for the future, attempt to control political events, pursue love, seek revenge, or struggle against circumstances that appear to have been determined before they act. Sometimes their plans succeed; at other times a seemingly insignificant accident changes everything. Shakespeare's dramatic universe therefore raises an enduring question: Are human beings the masters of their destinies, or are their lives controlled by forces beyond their understanding? The idea of fate was particularly significant in Shakespeare's intellectual and theatrical environment. Medieval and Renaissance culture inherited several traditions concerning destiny and Fortune. One of the most influential was the image of Fortune as a woman turning a wheel, raising some people to prosperity and bringing others down into suffering. The idea ultimately has ancient roots and became especially influential through Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The Wheel of Fortune remained an important literary and visual symbol throughout the Renaissance. Shakespeare repeatedly uses this vocabulary of Fortune, chance, destiny, and mutability. In *Henry V*, for example, Fortune is explicitly imagined as blind and associated with a constantly turning wheel, emphasizing her instability. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, characters likewise refer to Fortune's wheel, while in *King Lear* and other plays the rise and fall of individuals can be understood through the same traditional image. Nevertheless, Shakespeare does not simply reproduce the traditional belief that Fortune determines everything. His treatment is much more dramatic and psychologically complicated. A prophecy may reveal a possible future, but a character's response to the prophecy helps bring that future about. An accident may cause tragedy, but human decisions often make the accident destructive. A political conspiracy may be shaped by historical circumstances, yet individual ambition and judgment remain crucial.

Thus, Shakespeare's treatment of fate is best understood as a conflict between external necessity and internal choice. His characters cannot control everything that happens to them, but neither are they merely helpless victims of destiny.

Fate and Fortune in the Renaissance Imagination

Before examining individual plays, it is necessary to distinguish between several related concepts. Fate suggests a predetermined course of events, whereas Fortune generally signifies chance, instability, accident, or unpredictable changes in circumstances. In Shakespeare, these concepts often overlap. The Wheel of Fortune was particularly useful as a dramatic metaphor because it represented the instability of worldly success. A king could become a prisoner; a wealthy man could become poor; a celebrated political figure could suddenly fall from power.

The image therefore suited Shakespeare's histories and tragedies exceptionally well. Modern scholarship has emphasized that Fortune in early modern drama was not merely an old-fashioned idea of blind luck. It could also signify opportunity, risk, and unpredictable possibility. Jane Hwang Degenhardt, for example, observes that early modern drama developed changing understandings of Fortune in connection with commerce, exploration, risk, and human action. This is important because Shakespeare's characters frequently encounter circumstances that are neither completely predetermined nor completely controllable. Fate, therefore, becomes dramatically productive precisely because characters do not know whether an event represents destiny, coincidence, Providence, or the consequence of their own actions.

Fate in Romeo and Juliet

Perhaps no Shakespearean play appears more directly concerned with predetermined destiny than *Romeo and Juliet*. From the beginning, the lovers are described as "star-crossed," immediately associating their relationship with an unfavorable cosmic destiny. Their deaths are announced before the action properly begins. The importance of fate in the play lies partly in the audience's knowledge of the ending. Shakespeare creates dramatic irony by telling the audience that the lovers are destined to die while allowing Romeo and Juliet themselves to hope for happiness. Their love develops within an environment already shaped by family hatred, social conflict, and violence. However, Shakespeare does not make the tragedy exclusively supernatural. The feud between the Montagues and Capulets creates the social circumstances within which the lovers' relationship becomes dangerous. Tybalt's aggression, Romeo's banishment, the secret marriage, Juliet's apparent death, and the failure of the message to Romeo all contribute to the catastrophe.

The tragedy is consequently produced by an interaction between fate and human action. Romeo and Juliet are not simply killed by stars. They make choices. Friar Laurence makes plans. Tybalt chooses violence. Romeo chooses to return to Verona. The messenger fails to reach Romeo. A series of individual decisions and accidents converges upon the predetermined ending.

Fate and Prophecy in Macbeth

If *Romeo and Juliet* presents fate through love and accident, *Macbeth* explores it through prophecy. The Weird Sisters announce that Macbeth will become king. Their prediction establishes one of Shakespeare's most fascinating questions: Does prophecy cause Macbeth's actions, or does it merely reveal a possibility that his own ambition will realize? At first, Macbeth appears uncertain about what he should do. The prophecy does not explicitly instruct him to murder Duncan. It merely predicts his future kingship. Macbeth himself supplies the murderous interpretation. This distinction is essential. If Macbeth were simply compelled by fate, his responsibility for Duncan's murder would be greatly reduced. Instead, Shakespeare emphasizes his decision-making. Macbeth debates the murder, recognizes its moral and political consequences, and eventually chooses to proceed. Lady Macbeth encourages him, but the decision remains his. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth becomes increasingly dependent on prophecy. The second set of supernatural predictions gives him a dangerous sense of security. He begins to interpret ambiguous statements as guarantees of safety. His confidence eventually becomes one of the causes of his destruction. The tragedy therefore demonstrates the danger of attempting to control fate. Macbeth wants to know the future because he believes knowledge will give him power over it. Paradoxically, the attempt to make the prophecy come true produces the very violence that destroys him.

The play's structure also resembles the traditional rise and fall associated with Fortune. A scholar discussing Shakespearean tragedy notes the upward movement of Macbeth's fortunes toward the crown and the subsequent reversal toward catastrophe. In *Macbeth*, therefore, fate is inseparable from ambition. The supernatural creates uncertainty, but human desire transforms uncertainty into action.

Fate and Political History in Julius Caesar

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare places fate within the context of Roman politics. Omens, dreams, supernatural signs, and prophetic warnings surround Caesar's assassination. Yet the political crisis is also produced by human disagreement about republican government, tyranny, ambition, and political responsibility. Caesar receives several warnings before his death. The most famous is the soothsayer's warning about the Ides of March. Calpurnia also dreams of danger. Nevertheless, Caesar chooses to ignore the warnings. Brutus presents himself as an agent acting for Rome rather than for personal interest. He believes that Caesar's death is necessary to protect the Republic. Yet his decision contributes to political chaos and eventually to his own death. The play therefore complicates the idea of fate by presenting multiple interpretations of events. Are Caesar's omens supernatural warnings? Are they coincidences? Are they signs of political disorder? Shakespeare never completely resolves the question. After Caesar's assassination, events move beyond the conspirators' control. Their plan is based on the assumption that killing Caesar will restore political stability. Instead, it produces civil war. The conspirators become victims of consequences they did not foresee.

This pattern suggests that fate in Shakespeare often operates through unintended consequences. Human beings may initiate events, but they cannot determine all their consequences.

Fate and Free Will in Hamlet

Hamlet presents a more philosophical treatment of destiny. The Ghost tells Hamlet that his father was murdered and demands revenge. The command places Hamlet within a situation he did not create. Hamlet's problem is therefore not simply whether fate exists but whether he should accept the role apparently assigned to him. The Ghost's appearance may be supernatural truth, deception, or something more ambiguous. Hamlet must interpret it before acting. This uncertainty distinguishes Hamlet from Macbeth. Macbeth receives predictions about his future; Hamlet receives an account of the past. Yet both characters must decide how to respond to supernatural knowledge.

By the final act, Hamlet develops a different attitude toward destiny. Before the fencing match, he expresses an acceptance that there are circumstances human beings cannot control. His famous reflection that there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow suggests an increasing willingness to accept uncertainty. This does not mean that Hamlet abandons free will. He still acts decisively when necessary. Rather, he recognizes the limits of human control.

The tragedy consequently moves from the desire to know and control events toward an acceptance of human limitation. Fate becomes less an external force than a name for the boundaries of human knowledge.

Fate, Suffering, and Justice in King Lear

King Lear offers one of Shakespeare's bleakest treatments of destiny. The play contains a world in which suffering often appears disproportionate to moral responsibility. Lear, Cordelia, Gloucester, and others experience catastrophic suffering despite their attempts to understand or improve their situations. The play repeatedly invokes the language of the gods, stars, Fortune, and cosmic order. Gloucester famously interprets political and personal disorder through celestial influences. Edmund, however, rejects the idea that the stars determine human character. His rejection of astrological determinism forms an important contrast between different attitudes toward fate. This conflict is central to the play. Gloucester initially believes that celestial forces explain human suffering, whereas Edmund insists upon his own agency. Yet Edmund's attempt to control his destiny through manipulation and ambition eventually produces his downfall. The play thus refuses a simple answer. The universe may appear ordered, but human suffering frequently seems arbitrary. At the same time, characters make choices that intensify their circumstances.

The traditional Wheel of Fortune is particularly relevant to King Lear. Fortune's wheel symbolizes sudden changes in social position, power, and security, and Renaissance political drama frequently used this imagery. □ Shakespeare adapts the tradition to create a world in which kings can become powerless, legitimate children can be rejected, and political authority can collapse.

Fate and Psychological Manipulation in Othello

In Othello, Shakespeare reduces the supernatural dimension of fate and instead shows how human beings can be manipulated into believing that circumstances are predetermined. Iago creates an appearance of inevitability around Othello's jealousy. He carefully arranges evidence, suggestions, and coincidences so that Othello begins to believe that Desdemona's betrayal is certain. The tragedy therefore demonstrates how a false interpretation of circumstances can function like fate. Once Othello accepts the belief that Desdemona is unfaithful, he behaves as though the conclusion were already established. This is an important variation on Shakespeare's treatment of destiny. Fate does not necessarily have to be supernatural. A belief in inevitability can itself become a destructive force. Othello's tragedy emerges from a combination of Iago's manipulation, Othello's insecurities, social circumstances, and a series of misunderstandings. The result is not the simple fulfillment of a prophecy but the creation of a false reality through human action.

Fate and Fortune in Shakespeare's History Plays

Shakespeare's history plays extend the idea of fate from individual lives to entire nations. Kings rise and fall, political factions compete, and historical events produce consequences that individuals cannot fully control. In Henry VIII, for example, the idea of Fortune's wheel becomes particularly important. Characters such as Buckingham, Katherine, and Wolsey experience dramatic changes in political status. The Folger Shakespeare Library notes that critics have identified both a providential pattern and a Fortune-wheel pattern in the play, illustrating the complexity of Shakespeare's treatment of historical causation. This duality is characteristic of Shakespeare. History can be interpreted retrospectively as a meaningful sequence in which events appear to lead toward a particular political future. At the same time, individuals experience history as unpredictable and painful. Consequently, fate in the history plays is closely connected with political contingency. A king's success may depend upon war, accident, political alliances, or individual decisions. The apparent inevitability of history is often visible only after events have occurred.

Fortune, Chance, and Human Agency

One of the most important features of Shakespeare's treatment of fate is his interest in chance. Storms, accidents, mistaken identities, delayed messages, unexpected encounters, and political reversals frequently determine the direction of a plot.

This is particularly evident in the late romances. In *Pericles*, for instance, shipwreck and sea travel repeatedly place characters at the mercy of unpredictable circumstances. Scholarship on the play connects its representation of the sea with changing early modern ideas about Fortune, risk, opportunity, and human initiative. Chance, therefore, is morally neutral. What matters is how characters respond to it.

Fate and Moral Responsibility

A major question arising from Shakespeare's treatment of fate is whether characters can be held responsible for actions that seem destined. Shakespeare generally refuses to eliminate responsibility. Macbeth cannot excuse his murders simply because the witches predicted his kingship. Othello cannot transfer all responsibility to Iago. Brutus cannot escape the consequences of his political choices simply because he believes circumstances demand action. At the same time, Shakespeare does not suggest that individuals possess unlimited freedom. His characters inherit social identities, family conflicts, political institutions, historical circumstances, and cultural expectations. These forces shape the possibilities available to them. The result is a middle position between absolute freedom and absolute determinism.

A useful way of describing Shakespeare's dramatic method is therefore:

Circumstance creates possibility; human choice converts possibility into action; consequence produces a new circumstance. This circular process makes Shakespearean fate particularly powerful. The future seems predetermined only when viewed retrospectively.

Fate as a Dramatic Device

Fate also has an important structural function in Shakespeare's plays. It creates suspense by making audiences aware of possibilities that characters cannot see. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience knows that the lovers will die. In *Macbeth*, the audience hears the witches' predictions and watches Macbeth attempt to fulfill or understand them. In *Julius Caesar*, ominous signs surround the assassination. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost introduces a hidden history that must eventually be confronted. Fate thus creates dramatic irony. The audience often knows more than the characters, and this difference in knowledge intensifies suspense. Furthermore, fate allows Shakespeare to explore the gap between expectation and reality. Characters believe that they understand what is going to happen, but their interpretations are frequently mistaken. Macbeth interprets the witches' predictions as promises of safety. Brutus believes Caesar's assassination will preserve republican liberty. Othello believes manipulated evidence establishes Desdemona's guilt. Lear initially believes that political authority can be divided without consequence. In each case, the character attempts to impose certainty upon an uncertain world.

Fate and the Human Desire for Certainty

Ultimately, Shakespeare's treatment of fate reveals a profound human desire to make the future understandable. People fear uncertainty, and prophecy appears attractive because it promises knowledge. Yet Shakespeare repeatedly shows the dangers of believing that the future can be completely known. Macbeth seeks certainty and becomes tyrannical. Gloucester attempts to understand suffering through astrology. Caesar ignores warnings because he believes himself secure. Othello transforms suspicion into certainty. Lear assumes that he can control both political succession and familial affection. Shakespeare's characters suffer partly because they misunderstand the limits of human knowledge. This is why fate in Shakespeare is rarely a simple philosophical doctrine. It is a dramatic question. The plays ask audiences to consider what people do when confronted by circumstances they cannot control.

II. Conclusion

The treatment of fate in Shakespeare's plays is complex because Shakespeare refuses to choose completely between destiny and free will. His characters inhabit worlds shaped by prophecy, Fortune, accident, social structures, political circumstances, inherited conflicts, and supernatural possibilities. Nevertheless, they continue to make choices, and those choices frequently determine the form that their destinies take. In *Romeo and Juliet*, fate appears through the lovers' predetermined tragic situation, but family hatred and human decisions make that fate concrete. In *Macbeth*, prophecy creates possibilities that Macbeth's ambition transforms into murderous action. In *Julius Caesar*, supernatural warnings coexist with political decisions and unintended consequences. *Hamlet* explores the limits of knowledge and the possibility of accepting uncertainty. King Lear questions whether suffering can always be explained through a just cosmic order. Othello demonstrates how manufactured beliefs can become seemingly inevitable realities. Shakespeare's history plays further extend these concerns into the rise

and fall of political power. The traditional image of Fortune's wheel provides an important framework for understanding these works. Fortune represents mutability, uncertainty, and the instability of worldly success. Renaissance drama inherited this tradition, but Shakespeare gives it remarkable psychological depth. His characters do not merely rise and fall because Fortune turns the wheel; they struggle to understand and control the forces affecting them. The most significant aspect of Shakespeare's treatment of fate is therefore its ambiguity. Fate may appear as prophecy, accident, Fortune, historical necessity, divine providence, or simply the unforeseen consequences of human actions. Shakespeare rarely provides an uncomplicated answer about which explanation is correct. Instead, he places his characters in situations where the distinction between fate and choice becomes difficult to maintain. His tragedies demonstrate that people cannot control every circumstance of existence. Yet they also demonstrate that individuals remain responsible for how they respond to those circumstances. Shakespeare's vision is consequently neither one of absolute determinism nor one of unlimited human freedom. It is a vision of human beings acting within conditions they did not choose, attempting to shape futures they cannot completely know. That tension gives Shakespeare's treatment of fate its lasting power. His characters ask questions that remain relevant because human beings still confront chance, uncertainty, limitation, and consequence. Shakespeare's great insight is that destiny is not necessarily something imposed upon us from outside; sometimes it emerges from the complicated meeting of circumstance and choice. Fate, in his plays, is therefore not simply the force that determines what happens. It is also the mystery created when human beings try to understand why what happens has happened.

References / Works Cited

- [1]. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2000.
- [2]. Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth*, First Folio, 1623.
- [3]. Shakespeare, William, *Romeo and Juliet*. Edited in modern scholarly editions; the play draws upon Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562).
- [4]. Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*. Macmillan, 1904.
- [5]. Salinger, Leo, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy*. Cambridge University Press, 1974
- [6]. Fraser, Russell, "Shakespeare on Fortune's Hill: A Review Essay." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1984.
- [7]. Folger Shakespeare Library, "Seeing What Shakespeare Means: Fortune." April 3 - August 21, 1999.