

# The gift of free will

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Dutch humanist and scholar Erasmus defines free will as “ a power of the human will by which man may be able to direct himself towards or turn away from what leads to eternal salvation” (Erasmus 6). Many literary works of the Renaissance debate the roles of fate and free will in everyday life because determinism cannot be scientifically proven. Human beings cannot choose the family, culture, or economic situation that they are born into. But each action or decision that occurs from this point on is determined by free will, which is given freely by God. Free will differentiates mankind, or rational beings from animals. Humans have the capability to think, reason, and then make a conscious decision about how to act in response, therefore assuming responsibility for one’s actions and the subsequent consequences. Erasmus’ *A Discussion or Discourse concerning Free Will* is one of the many works of this time period which supports this theory, and uses examples in scripture to do so. William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, on the contrary, argues that the entire course of events that unfolds during the play is a result of determinism. However, even though *Romeo and Juliet* does argue that fate is omnipotent, it can also be interpreted that Shakespeare only includes the supreme power of fate in order to manipulate the play’s plot, suspense, and moral message since fate does not exist. Humans have the will to act freely, and both Erasmus’ and Shakespeare’s works can be seen as supporting the same side of the controversy between fate and free will, regardless of the author’s original intention.

Free will is an aptitude given to humans by God. Erasmus adds that this gift also includes several kinds of grace. For example, grace that is naturally present within the human soul is possessed by all humans. Erasmus states

that grace “ remains even in those who persevere in sin; for they are free to speak or be silent; to sit or stand up; to help the needs, read the scriptures, or listen to a sermon” (Erasmus 9). Each individual has the ability to make a thoughtful and informed decision about each and every action. The second form of grace, or particular grace allows God to urge the sinner to repent but does not infuse the highest grace which “ destroys sin and makes man acceptable to god” (Erasmus 10). Those who wish to achieve eternal salvation have the power to do so if they choose to act in a way that is morally and spiritually superior, allowing mankind to have control over their destiny.

Erasmus also provides several examples from scripture to support the forms of grace and the presence of free will. God gives Adam and Eve the capability to choose whether or not to obey His commandments, which will result in either life or death (Gen. 2: 17). Similarly, God tells Cain “ If you do good, will you not receive? And if you do evil, your sin will immediately be at your door. But the desire for it will be within your control, and you will master it” (Gen. 4: 6-7). In these instances, God teaches his followers about free will because it is a capability that each one possesses, which in turn determines their eternal salvation. Erasmus describes that “ Scripture speaks of nothing but conversion, endeavor, and striving to improve” (14). Free will allows humans the capability to do so. The ability to improve in moral endeavors prevents complacency. If each aspect of human life was due to determinism, there would be no need for self-motivation or learning the morality of what is right and wrong. The presence of free will prevents God from being unjust

and cruel, meaning each individual is responsible for each one of his or her actions which determines one's posthumous destiny.

On the contrary, William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* strives to eliminate the theme of free will and instead presents the role of fate in a straightforward yet unique way. Before the first act begins, the chorus delivers a prologue in the form of a sonnet that describes the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues in Verona. The chorus blatantly states "A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life," revealing the ending of the tragedy before the play even begins (Shakespeare prologue. 6).

Shakespeare is unequivocally telling the audience that fate will bring two lovers together who will ultimately take their own lives. This frame narrative allows the audience to gain an omnipotent, god-like point of view in order to watch the tragedy unfold into what has been predetermined. Shakespeare's stylistic choice to utilize an omniscient prologue allows the audience to recognize the many allusions to fate that are evident throughout the entirety of the play, reminding the audience that Romeo and Juliet's tragic ending is still impending.

Throughout the play, characters such as Romeo and Friar Lawrence think about the presence of determinism in his life quite frequently. Before Romeo attends the ball hosted by the Capulets, Romeo states that his "mind misgives / Some consequences yet hanging in the stars" (Shakespeare 1. 4. 113-14). Romeo has an inkling that something significant is predetermined to happen that night, continuing the theme that is established in the prologue. In the third act of the play, Romeo kills Tybalt in a duel and

exclaims “ O, I am Fortune’s fool!” (Shakespeare 3. 1. 142). This statement seems to suggest that fate is responsible for Tybalt’s death rather than Romeo’s own volition. In fact, Romeo is stating that he should not be held accountable for his violent actions since they are controlled by fate. This is a recurring theme throughout the play as Friar Lawrence also blames “ Unhappy fortune!” when plans go awry, such as when the letter is not delivered to Romeo to inform him that Juliet is faking her own death in order for the two of them to meet again (Shakespeare 5. 2. 17). In the next scene when Juliet awakes from the deep slumber, Friar Lawrence breaks the news of Romeo’s death by saying “ A greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intents” (Shakespeare 5. 3. 158-59). Even though Friar Lawrence marries the lovers in secret, gives Juliet a potion to help her fake her own death, and devises the plan for Romeo to sneak back into Verona after he has been exiled, he blames a higher power for letting the course of events happen as they do. Just like Romeo, Friar Lawrence does not assume any responsibility for the events that he is directly involved with or responsible for, exhibiting the notion that humans do not have control over their actions which are predetermined.

The way that the characters in Romeo and Juliet view the role of fate as a supreme power differs greatly from Erasmus’ understanding of free will. Characters in Shakespeare’s play do not feel the need to take responsibility for their actions, especially when things go wrong. Depending on one’s interpretation, the dominance of fate in Romeo and Juliet can be seen as a stylistic feature employed by Shakespeare in order to succeed in communicating the moral of the story to the audience rather than the true

force that is determining the characters' actions. In each example of Romeo or Friar Lawrence blaming fate instead of their own actions, the plot can be continued without the characters needing to place blame for the tragic events that unfold. When addressing the families, the prince states that "heaven finds means to kill your joys with love ... All are punished" (Shakespeare 5. 3. 303-305). As a result of the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, both families lose a young kinsman, displaying that only destruction can arise from hate. Shakespeare uses the heavy presence of fate as a method to express the more significant message which governs the course of events throughout the play.

Shakespeare also uses the authority of fate in *Romeo and Juliet* to utilize dramatic irony which creates suspense for the audience. Curiosity is naturally provoked when it is stated that the two young lovers will take their own lives. The utilization of a chorus creates a frame narrative that allows Shakespeare to use fate in a seemingly logical way to ensure that the ending will happen as it is promised in the beginning, without the characters' awareness. For example, Juliet foreshadows her own death and Romeo's as well. Juliet asks her nurse to find out who Romeo is and states "If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding bed," which ultimately does happen (Shakespeare 1. 5. 148-49). Subsequently, Juliet foreshadows Romeo's death when she states: O God, I have an ill-divining soul! Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low, As one dead in the bottom of a tomb. Either my eyesight fails or thou lookest pale. (Shakespeare 3. 5. 54-57) Juliet is foreshadowing how she will see Romeo in the Capulets' tomb after he takes his own life. Both of these examples perpetuate dramatic irony as the

audience knows that these statements have additional meanings about Romeo and Juliet's deaths, which increases suspense. In addition to conveying the plot and message of the work, Shakespeare also uses the role of fate as a superficial force to keep the audience entertained, and not as an existent higher power that eliminates the characters' capabilities to act on their own free will.

Humans have the developed capability to make a choice about each and every action, and to understand the consequences of those actions, even though Romeo and Friar Lawrence would disagree in order to escape self-loathing. Fate does not exist when man can think and make a choice. God is just and Erasmus' *A Discussion or Discourse concerning Free Will* proves the existence of free will through countless examples that are in Scripture. William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on the contrary, holds the fate accountable for the characters' actions and the deaths of Romeo and Juliet since this is what the chorus in the prologue states. In actuality, this can be seen as a mere literary technique employed by Shakespeare in order to continue the storyline without characters blaming one another, invoke dramatic and tragic irony to keep the audience in a state of suspense, and convey the moral of the story which expresses the destruction that is brought about by hatred. Both works by Erasmus and Shakespeare demonstrate that all individuals have free will and control over their actions because God gave mankind the ability to do so.