

## The Evolution of Tragic Form: An Analysis of the Theme of Fate and Agency in Early Modern English Drama

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### Abstract

This research explores the dynamic interaction of fate and agency in the development of tragic forms in early modern English drama. Focusing on playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, this study seeks to examine precisely how Renaissance dramatists re-imagined classical tragic traditions through a fusing of classical determinism with the rising humanist individualism of the period. This work contextualizes how early modern dramatists reconfigured the tragic form within the flux of broader cultural and philosophical changes. By adopting a qualitative analytical approach, this research investigates thematic tensions and structural innovations in selected plays as contributions to a deeper understanding of early modern dramaturgy and its cultural resonance.

**Keywords:** Evolution, Fate, Agency, English Drama, Modern Tragedy

تطور الشكل المأساوي: تحليل لموضوع القدر والفاعلية في الدراما الإنجليزية الحديثة المبكرة

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### المخلص

يستكشف هذا البحث التفاعل الديناميكي بين القدر والفاعلية في تطور الأشكال المأساوية في الدراما الإنجليزية الحديثة المبكرة. مع التركيز على كتاب مسرحيين مثل ويليام شكسبير وكريستوفر مارلو، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى فحص كيفية إعادة تصور كتاب المسرح في عصر النهضة للتقاليد المأساوية الكلاسيكية من خلال دمج الحتمية الكلاسيكية مع الفردية الإنسانية الصاعدة في تلك الفترة. يضع هذا العمل سياقاً لكيفية إعادة تشكيل كتاب المسرح في العصر الحديث المبكر للشكل المأساوي في ظل تدفق التغيرات الثقافية والفلسفية الأوسع. من خلال تبني نهج تحليلي نوعي، يبحث هذا البحث في التوترات الموضوعية والابتكارات البنيوية في مسرحيات مختارة كمساهمات في فهم أعمق للدراماتورجيا الحديثة المبكرة وصداءها الثقافي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التطور، القدر، الوكالة، الدراما الإنجليزية، المأساة الحديثة

## SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Tragedy has long been one of the genres at the center of Western literary traditions, focused on human suffering and existential questions. Early modern English drama is one of the most critical periods in the development of tragedy, with playwrights responding to classical traditions with Renaissance conceptions

of individualism and human potential. This paper focuses on the themes of fate and agency that form the bedrock of tragic narratives. While classical tragedies, as laid out by Aristotle, focused more on the immutable forces of fate, early modern dramatists like Marlowe and Shakespeare brought in a more complicated dynamic by exploring human agency and moral responsibility. This reflects wider intellectual currents of the Renaissance, where the tension between free will and determinism became an increasingly salient cultural and philosophical concern (Aristotle, 1996; Kastan, 1999).

## 1.2 Problem of the Study

Despite the wealth of scholarship on early modern drama, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the complex balance of fate and agency within these works. The few studies published to date tend to focus either on thematic analyses or on historical contexts without fully exploring how playwrights integrated these concepts into the tragic form. This study will seek to rectify this by examining the ways early modern dramatists negotiated the tension between Renaissance individualism and classical determinism. In so doing, it would aim to contribute to an increasingly subtle understanding of that period's dramaturgical practices themselves (Dollimore, 2004; Ryan, 2010).

## 1.3 Aims of the Study

The primary aim of this work is to explore the development of tragedy in both theme and structure through the early modern period, especially in relation to fate and agency. In particular:

Examining how early modern dramatists reinterpreted classical notions of fate and integrated Renaissance ideas of humanism.

Analysis of the interaction between thematic concerns and dramatic structure in selected plays.

The cultural and philosophical repercussions of these tragic forms within early modern England are explored by Bevington, 2011; Woodbridge, 2010.

## SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Classically Conceived Tragedy

The basis of classical tragedy heavily lies in the Aristotelian points stated in Poetics. He defines tragedy as the imitation of a serious and complete action, focusing on the protagonist whose downfall results due to the combination of

hamartia-tragic flaw-and fate. This model was of great influence to the development of early dramatic traditions in Europe, with its emphasis on the inevitability of fate and the moral and emotional effect upon the audience (Aristotle, 1996). Renaissance dramatists inherited these classical conceptions, often using them as a framework for their own innovations. While classical tragedies like Oedipus Rex by Sophocles stuck to the unities of time, place, and action, early modern dramatists began experimenting with increasingly labyrinthine narrative structures (Kastan, 1999). These deviations reflect a growth in interest regarding human agency and individualism, paving the way for the growth in tragic form evident in the Renaissance.

## 2.2 Renaissance and Human Agency

The Renaissance was a cultural and intellectual movement that placed human potential and agency at the fore and significantly modified the deterministic cast of the medieval worldview. In Renaissance humanism, a firm belief in individual dignity and freedom of intellect was paramount; and this had a huge bearing on the literature of the age. Theorists such as Pico della Mirandola celebrated the ability of humankind to fashion its destiny, a view finding resonance with early modern drama (Dollimore, 2004). This is a shift in emphasis that is best exemplified by playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, particularly in works such as Doctor Faustus, where the protagonist's struggle for knowledge and power reflects the Renaissance tension between ambition and moral boundaries. According to Bevington (2011), this emphasis on agency introduced new dimensions to the tragic form, complicating the traditional relationship between fate and free will.

## 2.3 Early Modern English Drama

Early modern English drama reached excellence, experimental in style and indebted to the twin influences of classicism and contemporaneous cultural processes. The playwrights like William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe recreated the definition of tragedy through fusions between classical themes and humanistic attitudes that surfaced during the Renaissance period. Take for example, in Shakespeare's Macbeth, he expounds upon the mental and psychological angles of ambition and guilt by showing a play of fates with character agency, says Ryan (2010). Similarly, Tamburlaine in Marlowe is also a protagonist whose superhuman ambition confronts traditional moral and social hierarchies. The two plays reflect the complex relationship between determinism and individualism, showing early modern dramatists how classical forms could be reshaped for contemporary concerns (Kastan, 1999).

## 2.4 Themes of Fate and Agency

The themes of fate and agency in early modern tragedy provide the focus for much dramatic tension and philosophical investigation (Wilson, 1995). The classical tragedy often fell to the dominance of fate, whereas early modern dramatists introduced a different view as to the proportionate measures of individual control of one's destiny. For instance, the internal struggle of a character in Hamlet shows the tension between fate and agency since he is battling with questions of revenge, morality, and self-determination (Woodbridge, 2010). Equally, Doctor Faustus by Marlowe questions the limits of human ambition, which eventually implies the agency of human beings is under constraint by the divine and moral laws. In light of these thematic explorations, early modern drama reflects engagements with the cultural and intellectual currents of its time that are rich and multifarious in their portrayal of human experiences (Dollimore, 2004).

## 2.5 Dramatic Techniques and Structure

The development of various dramatic techniques and structures within early modern tragedy underlines the genre's adaptability and innovation: playwrights experimenting with new forms of narration, construction of character, and word expression to give further profundity to the thematic weight of their plays. For example, the usage of soliloquies in Shakespeare's work-hamlet's well-acknowledged speech on whether to be or not to be-provides spectators with insight into characters' internal struggles and deliberation and, as a matter of fact, magnifies the agency and humanity of those on stage (Ryan, 2010). Moreover, Marlowe makes use of the resource called blank verse in presenting dramatic and poetic lines that showcase the grandiose and failed ambitions of a character in Doctor Faustus (Bevington, 2011). These innovations not only enriched the tragic form but also provided new ways of engaging audiences, underlining the crucial place that early modern drama holds within literary history (White, 2016).

## SECTION III: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This paper is based on a qualitative, analytical framework with which to explore the thematic and structural evolution of tragedy in early modern English drama. The interplays of fate and agency within selected texts are discussed here with a view to examining how playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe reimagined classical tragic forms within the context of Renaissance humanism. A comparative approach is carried out to analyze the

primary texts in their respective cultural and philosophical backgrounds. This design shall allow the holistic examination of both content and form in the plays, underlining their thematic intricacies and innovations in dramatic structure, according to Creswell (2014). The qualitative nature of the research is particularly suited to literary analysis, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of textual nuances and contextual influences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### 3.2 Data Collection

Material in this study consists of primary texts by Shakespeare, namely Hamlet and Macbeth, and by Marlowe, namely Doctor Faustus and Tamburlaine. These plays have been selected because of their thematic richness and representation of the tension between fate and agency. Secondary materials used in this study include scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays, which avail the researcher with the historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts of early modern drama. Materials were collected from library archives and online academic databases such as JSTOR and Project MUSE to make the materials as inclusive as possible. The selection criteria privileged works that directly engage with the research themes and represent the broader spectrum of early modern tragedy (Kothari, 2004).

### 3.3 Analytical Approach

In the analytical approach, textual analysis is combined with contextual exploration to shed light on the representation of fate and agency in early modern tragedy. Textual analysis here entails close reading of the primary texts in order to identify thematic patterns, character dynamics, and structural innovations. Further, in contextual analysis, these findings are located within the broader intellectual currents of the Renaissance-humanism, individualism, and classical influences. It looks at both aspects in relation to how early modern dramatists negotiated between the dual forces of determinism versus free will. This study has engaged critical theories of interpretation that include Aristotelian tragedy and Renaissance humanism, in relation to plays thematic and structural elements (Culler, 2011).

### 3.4 Limitations of the Study

With the completeness of this study, there are certain limitations acknowledged. First, the number of selected plays may not be representative in all ways of the diversity of early modern tragedy. Second, reliance on secondary scholarship is limited by resource availability, especially for less well-known works. Third, the interpretation of texts is always subjective and depends on the



point of view of the researcher and the theoretical frameworks used. These limitations highlight the need for further research that expands the scope of analysis to include a wider range of plays and alternative critical approaches (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

## SECTION IV: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Fate in Early Modern Tragedy

#### 4.1.1 Classical Roots and Continuity

The concept of fate in early modern tragedy is deeply steeped in classical traditions, mostly as outlined by Aristotle in *Poetics*. Indeed, Aristotle said, "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (Aristotle, 1996, p. 23), with an emphasis on the inevitability of fate as a driving force in the narrative. In this classical outlook, fate is an inexorable power guiding the lives of the tragic protagonists, creating a sense of inevitability and moral consequence. This structure passed to the early modern dramatists, but they reworked it into their cultural and philosophical setting.

For instance, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* retains the classical notion of an overarching fate, as Faustus is ultimately doomed by his pact with Lucifer. However, Marlowe complicates this determinism by imbuing Faustus with agency and ambition, reflecting Renaissance humanism's focus on individual potential. While Faustus claims, "A sound magician is a mighty god" (Marlowe, 2011, 1.1.63), he affirms his agency, even as the story enforces the inevitability of his fall. It is this dialectic of fate and agency which underlines the continuity and departure from classical traditions, therefore signaling the dynamic evolution of tragic form in early modern drama.

#### 4.1.2 Divergences in Early Modern Contexts

While the power of fate was developed mainly in classical tragedy, early modern dramatists used significant divergences that reflected the intellectual currents of the Renaissance: the humanist philosophy in celebrating individual agency and intellectual freedom created a tension between the deterministic worldview of classical tragedy and the emerging belief in human potential. This is most peculiarly or specially the case in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where both fate and agency are implicated together in the tragic fall of its protagonist.

It is the prophecy of the witches: "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! / All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor! / All hail, Macbeth,

that shalt be king hereafter! " (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.3.50-53), establishing a framework of fate. It is, however, his actions, dictated by ambition and moral weakness, which fulfill this prophecy. This duality underlines early modern reinterpretations of fate by which characters are not merely passive victims, but protagonists in their life story. He thus gives reason to critique the classical deterministic model that through Shakespeare's interaction of fate with agency comes up with the shape of human experience.

#### *4.1.3 Textual Examples from Selected Plays*

Textual analysis of selected plays reveals the nuanced representation of fate in early modern tragedy. The tragic arc of the title character in Doctor Faustus is the best expression of tension between ambition and predestination. Faustus's repeated refusal of divine grace-"My heart is hardened; I cannot repent" (Marlowe, 2011, 2.3.18)-underlines his complicity in his fate, even while the theological framework of the play suggests that his damnation was inevitable. This duality reflects the cultural and religious anxieties of the Renaissance, where the Reformation's emphasis on predestination clashed with humanist ideals of individual agency (Dollimore, 2004).

Similarly, Shakespeare's Hamlet questions the idea of fate through the protagonist's dilemma of action versus inaction. Hamlet's rumination-"There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (Shakespeare, 1997, 5.2.10-11)-implies a resignation to fate, but his unending introspection and indecision reflect the convolutions of agency. The tragic resolution of the play, in which Hamlet dies and political order is restored, underscores the interplay between personal agency and inexorable fate that gives early modern tragedy much of its thematic depth.

## **4.2 Agency and Humanism**

### *4.2.1 Renaissance Individualism in Tragedy*

The individualism of the Renaissance period expressed the intellectual character of humanism. This philosophical movement celebrated the capacities of human reason and agency against the rigid determinism of medieval thought. The creation of early modern tragedies-most notably Shakespeare and Marlowe-continues this cultural transformation in the depiction of protagonists as causal agents of their fates. As Harold Bloom points out, "Shakespeare's characters are not mere results of circumstance but are motivated by their inner struggles, which

represent the ideal of self-determination that is the hallmark of the Renaissance" (Bloom, 1998, p. 12).

Hamlet himself represents Renaissance individualism through his ceaseless introspection and philosophical musings. Hamlet's soliloquy, "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! With it, he celebrates the human prospect but underlines the crisis about his existence: "(Shakespeare, 1997, 2.2.303-304). Such a position shows the tensiveness in the relationship between Renaissance trust in agency and the determinism of fortune together with social expectations (Bradley, 2007). Individualism and tragedy are put forth by such intricacies of Early Modern drama-amalgamating classical influences on ideas of humanism.

#### *4.2.2 Character Analysis: Agency in Protagonists*

The protagonists in early modern tragedies often embody the interaction of agency and circumstantial forces, depicting the moral and philosophical struggle of their era. In Doctor Faustus, Faustus's famous utterance, "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships...? " (Marlowe, 2011, 5.1.91), presents him in the quest for glory and intellectual ambition. This assertion of agency is, however, tempered by his damnation in the end reflecting the limitations of human will to divine authority.

Marlowe's depiction of Faustus critiques the hubris associated with Renaissance individualism, suggesting that unchecked agency can lead to self-destruction (Dollimore, 2004). Similarly, Macbeth's descent into tyranny demonstrates the tragic consequences of excessive ambition. It was said, "I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (Shakespeare, 1997, 3.4.136-138). His words indicate that Macbeth realizes his corruption but refuses to back away because this would be as long a journey as continuing to achieve the power he seeks. Agency here shows the complexity of moral ambiguities in human choice; here, one can see how ambition simultaneously destroys and empowers. He thus questions the Renaissance ideal of self-determination by emphasizing its ethic implications.

#### *4.2.3 Structural Innovations Reflecting Agency*



The structural innovations of early modern tragedies reflect the thematic emphasis on agency. On one hand, in comparison to classical tragedies, which are so often dependent upon a linear development prescribed by fate, early modern plays introduce complex narrative structures that afford far greater character autonomy. Hamlet by Shakespeare features prominent soliloquies with the purpose of letting the audience become aware of the internal conflict of the protagonist and thereby create psychological depth. For example, it is Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (Shakespeare, 1997, 3.1.56), which serves as a meditation on the existential consequences of agency. The play's fragmented structure reflects in form and content in such a way as to create a mutually reinforcing display of the troubledness of human choice.

In Doctor Faustus, Marlowe has used the episodic structure to portray the decline of Faustus's morality, enabling the audience to witness his moments of agency and their repercussions. The play's seesaw movement between comic and tragic scenes underlines the duplicity of human experience, part of the Renaissance interest in the contrast between agency and fate. These structural innovations point out the particular contributions that early modern dramatists made to the development of the tragic form, a mix of classical conventions with Renaissance individualism.

### 4.3 Interplay of Fate and Agency

#### 4.3.1 Thematic Integration in Early Modern Drama

The interplay of fate and agency is a hallmark of early modern drama, encapsulating the philosophical and cultural tensions of the Renaissance. This is often portrayed as a dialectical tension between external forces and human will. In Macbeth, Shakespeare weaves in such themes through the prophecy from the witches, which Macbeth interprets as inevitability: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir" (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.3.143-144). There, fate would come out as a line set in advance, though everything that Macbeth did following this suggests his use of free will, thus muddling the line between destiny and choice.

Thematic integration is equally complication in Doctor Faustus. Despite knowing the inevitable destiny of eternal condemnation, Faustus sought knowledge and power with avidity: "Had I as many souls as there be stars, / I'd give them all for Mephistopheles" (Marlowe, 2011, 1.3.101-102). Here, one could argue this statement indicates Faustus made a free-willed decision; however, the play's theological underpinning places his downfall into the structure of God's will. Such

thematic tension reflects the Renaissance struggle to reconcile humanism's emphasis on free will with the residual influence of medieval determinism (Dollimore, 2004).

#### *4.3.2 Audience Perception and Dramatic Impact*

The play of fate and agency informs not only the narratives of early modern tragedies but also shapes audience perception. By using soliloquies in Hamlet, Shakespeare permits the audience to engage with the inner deliberations of the protagonist; thus, a strong feeling of empathy and moral ambiguity arises. Hamlet's musings, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (Shakespeare, 1997, 5.2.10-11), thus beg the audience to consider a world of both divine intervention and human action. It enhances the dramatic effect on the audience through the evoking of fates and individual autonomy.

By contrast, Doctor Faustus employs strategic dramatic irony to enhance Faustus's doomed fate in the audience's psyche. Given many chances of salvation, Faustus will not yield, and his tragic end serves as an accent on the futility of his agency. The last words of the Chorus- "Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall, / Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise" (Marlowe, 2011, Epilogue)-are a reminder, a caution of what may be expected if divine authority is defied. This engagement with the audience reinforces the moral and existential themes of the play by means of the dramatic efficacy of fate and agency being intertwined forces (Honigmann, 2002).

#### *4.3.3 Case Studies of Key Works*

Case studies of Macbeth and Doctor Faustus shall provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between fate and agency. In Macbeth, the prophecies by the witches establish a framework of fate, while the choices made by Macbeth push the story forward. His soliloquy, "I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.7.79-80), reveals his active participation in fulfilling the prophecy. This crossing of fate and agency underlines the moral ambivalences of ambition, putting Macbeth in the position at once of victim and architect of his own destruction.

In Doctor Faustus, Marlowe adopted an episodic structure to reveal the gradual disintegration of Faustus's agency. His constant renunciation of repentance is highlighted in the line, "My heart's so hardened, I cannot repent" (Marlowe,

2011, 2.3.18), which also identifies his tragic flaw. However, the play also challenges the deterministic theology of its time, since the condemnation of Faustus seems to be preordained despite his flashes of agency. This duality therefore reflects the Renaissance fascination with human potential and its limitation, so that Doctor Faustus is essentially a play of the dynamic of fate-agency.

## SECTION V: CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

This paper has considered the thematic and structural evolution of tragedy in early modern English drama, focusing on how fate and agency interrelate. By examining the major works of both Shakespeare and Marlowe, one finds that early modern tragedies reflect the dynamic tension between the Renaissance ideals of humanism with its championing of individual agency and the residual classical determinism with its emphasis on the inescapability of fate. Plays like *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* are just a couple of examples where protagonists were pitted against internal desires and external forces, culminating in tragic consequences that highlighted the moral and existential dilemmas of the time. Shakespeare's use of soliloquies, for example, shows how a protagonist can reveal his inner turmoil, which, on one hand, reveals his agency, but on the other hand, the limitations of fate (Shakespeare, 1997). Similarly, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* critiques Renaissance humanism by illustrating how Faustus's agency, driven by intellectual ambition, ultimately leads to his downfall (Marlowe, 2011). The study has shown that early modern dramatists innovated within the tragic form by integrating these two themes, creating complex narratives that reflect the philosophical concerns of the period.

### 5.2 Significance of the Study

This work should be important in that it contributes to an understanding of the way tragic form evolved in early modern English drama. The interrelationship between fate and agency within this context serves to provide further depth to our appreciation of how playwrights like Shakespeare and Marlowe faced up to the cultural changes of the Renaissance. This paper underlines the role of tragedy as a medium of reflecting tensions between the individualism of the Renaissance and classic notions of determinism in a way that provides so much insight into the intellectual landscape of the time. Early modern tragedy, according to Dollimore (2004), is a vehicle to explore deeper philosophical and cultural questions rather than a limited literary form. By focusing on the ways in which these themes were

integrated into the structural and thematic elements of early modern plays, this research broadens our understanding of the period's dramatic practices. The findings also stress the relevance of these themes for contemporary literary analysis, where discussions of fate, agency, and individualism remain central to the study of literature.

### 5.3 Implications for Contemporary Relevance

Ideas of fate and agency that permeated the early modern tragedy live on through today's literary and cultural discourse. The conflicted tautness between fate and agency serves high interest for today's audience in a world where questions around the limits of personal freedom, moral responsibility, and the determining effects of impersonal forces keep strong. This interest in the individual's autonomy, confronted by systemic or unstoppable forces, finds a correspondence in modern discussion of free will, determinism, and how far behavior can be influenced by social, political, and economic configurations. Interest continues unabated in the many plays like *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* which survive the action of these forces through reading and performance. For instance, the moral and psychological complexities of Hamlet's existential questioning still echo in today's discussions of identity and personal agency (Shakespeare, 1997). Furthermore, the tragic flaws of characters like *Faustus* serve as a reminder of the consequences of unchecked ambition and the tension between human aspirations and moral boundaries. The interaction between fate and agency in early modern tragedy offers insights, then, not only into the past but also into the complexities of contemporary human experience.

### 5.4 Conclusion

This paper has worked on the idea of how both fate and agency in early modern English tragedy, with texts by Shakespeare and Marlowe as the core area of interest, are imbued with one another. Graded by the acute analysis of these plays, one comes to realize that early modern tragedians integrated those philosophical tensions of the Renaissance and came out with characters bound by flux between self-determination and inevitable destiny. These works, though grounded in their respective historical and cultural contexts, yet serve as a deeply insightful reflection of human nature and the moral dilemmas that define the human condition. The research not only develops a better understanding of early modern drama but also indicates the resonance of its themes within modern discourses. The study underlines the richness of early modern tragedy as a genre

and invites further exploration regarding how these themes have evolved and continue to shape literary and philosophical thought.

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