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Who's To Blame?

“The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings” (*Julius Caesar*, I.ii.41-42). The question of who is to blame is in many of Shakespeare’s works. The idea that fate is behind the scenes, pulling this string and that, was a popular idea in Shakespeare’s day. However, Shakespeare has his characters question whether it really is not fate or stars that control them, but their own decisions and the type of people they are that dictate their fate. Our charge as the jury has been to determine whether it is fate or the actions of certain individuals that turn a love story into a story of woe in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. We the jury find that fate, the quarreling families, and Romeo and Juliet themselves are all to blame for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet.

Fate does appear to have a hand in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. Even the Chorus at the beginning of the play calls them “A pair of star-cross’d lovers” and describes their love as “death-mark’d” (Act 1 Prologue). The Chorus is a form of omniscient narrator so if the Chorus says that Romeo and Juliet are doomed to die then it is fairly good evidence that fate has to bare some blame. Even the Friar acknowledges that “a greater power than we can contradict hath thwarted our intents” (V.iii.153-154), which indicates that even he sees an outside power involved in the events. Even more condemning are the circumstantial evidence. Friar John just happens to get himself quarantined when he has an important letter to deliver to Romeo. Romeo just happens to drink the poison just minutes before Juliet awakens. Friar Laurence just happens to arrive at the Capulet’s tomb minutes too late to save Romeo. One of these circumstances alone would not prove anything; however, all of them together build a fairly

strong case against fate. Fate, however, never can act alone; therefore, it is the actions of the families that allowed these terrible things to occur.

The Capulet and Montague families share in the blame for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. The feud between these two families has gotten so bad that the Prince has to intervene and tell them that the next brawl that breaks out will result in capital punishment. It is no wonder that Romeo and Juliet feel they must keep their relationship a secret. The only reason Friar Laurence marries them is because he hopes the marriage will “turn your households' rancour to pure love” (II.ii.92). But before the marriage could be announced, Tybalt fights with Mercutio, killing him and escalating the violence. If Tybalt had not killed Mercutio, Romeo most likely would have been able to smooth things over and eventually reveal his marriage to the families. Lastly, Lord Capulet himself is to blame for his own daughter’s death. He says to her,

Hang thee, young baggage! disobedient wretch!
I tell thee what,--get thee to church o' Thursday,
Or never after look me in the face;
...An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend;
An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets
For, by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee
(III.v.160-162, 192-194)

Capulet’s flying into a rage and forcing Juliet to marry Paris in such haste makes her desperate to try anything. He may not have plunged the knife into her heart, but he certainly placed it in her hand.

Although the situation goes from bad to worse, nothing and no one forces Romeo and Juliet to commit suicide. They must take responsibility for their own actions. The turning event of the play occurs when Romeo kills Tybalt out of vengeance. After Tybalt kills Mercutio, Romeo says, ““And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now! ... Mercutio's soul is but a little way above our heads, staying for thine to keep him company: Either thou, or I, or both, must go with him”

(III.i.127, 129-132). If Romeo had not killed Tybalt, he would not have been banished. If he had not been banished, there might have been a way for Romeo and Juliet to reveal their marriage and heal the wounds between their two families. The killing of Tybalt does not end Romeo's rash decisions. When Romeo hears that Juliet is dead, he immediately plans to kill himself. He asks the Apothecary for a "dram of poison; such soon-speeding gear as will disperse itself through all the veins, that the life-weary taker may fall dead..." (V.i.60-62). He could have waited to hear from the Friar, but his reckless actions end up costing his and Juliet's life. When Romeo gets to the Capulet's tomb, he wastes no time and quickly drinks the poison:

Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide!

Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on

The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark!

Here's to my love! [Drinks] O true apothecary!

Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.

(V.iii.116-120)

Romeo could have chosen a different route, but instead he chooses death. If he hadn't chosen death, Juliet would not have killed herself. Juliet, too, is pronounced with the same judgment. When she sees that Romeo is dead, she says, "Yea, noise? then I'll be brief. O happy dagger!" [Snatching Romeo's dagger] "This is thy sheath;" [Stabs herself] "there rust, and let me die" (V.iii.169-170). Although circumstances were horrible, no one forces Juliet to kill herself. She makes that decision herself. The evidence is overwhelming that the deaths of Romeo and Juliet were directly caused by their own decisions and actions.

All are to blame, to some extent, for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. However, the evidence is clear that there are varying degrees of guilt. Fate has a significant role in the outcome; the actions of the families are even more to blame; however, Romeo and Juliet are guilty most of all.