

Does Fate Really Decide?

The beliefs of a civilization are a part of that civilization's identity. As civilizations change, so do their values. Before 1100 BC, the ancient Greeks had strict piety in the gods and did not question their power. Then, after civilization collapsed, it experienced a 4-century long period without writing, culture, trade and government. After escaping the Dark Ages, the Greeks began to rediscover the values they had lost. Stories were written about the days before the Dark Ages, portraying strong heroes and the glory of Greece, like the epic poem, *Iliad*, written by Greek poet, Homer. As time passed, their beliefs strayed from full piety in the gods, and the significance of free will was stressed, as demonstrated in the play, *The Women of Troy*, written by Greek playwright, Euripides. From this, philosophy emerged to explain the universe without the existence of higher powers. The civilization's values became closer to the ideals that exist today. This change was evident in the way certain values were portrayed in literary pieces during ancient Greece. The portrayal of fate in the *Iliad* and *The Women of Troy* conveys a shift in the beliefs of the Ancient Greeks, while relying on a shared heritage.

Both stories reflect on a shared heritage and convey a similar belief that the gods were indirectly in control of people's fates. It was necessary for these ancient authors and playwrights to use common stories and characters, such as the gods. Both texts focus on the Trojan War, a conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans. The cause of the war was because Helen, wife of Greek king, Menelaus, left Greece to be with Paris, the prince of Troy. Ultimately, the Greeks destroy Troy. This tale was well known by the ancient Greeks. Both Homer, the poet of the *Iliad* and Euripides, playwright of *The Women of Troy* rely on this background knowledge to present their views about the gods and fate, so that common people understand those views. From there, both texts demonstrate that the concept of fate is indirectly controlled by meddling gods. For instance, in the *Iliad*, the gods change the course of the

war several times due to favoritism. Aphrodite conceals Paris during a battle with Menelaus, so the war would continue. Also, Athene, goddess of wisdom, chooses to neglect the prayers of the women of Troy. They beg her to “hold back from sacred Ilion the son of Tydeus/ that wild-spear fighter, the strong one who drives men to thoughts of terror.../ but Pallas Athene turned her head” (Homer 277-278, 311). Later, Athene would favor Achilles in war, not the Trojans. The gods have power to indirectly affect the fate of the war and the people involved. The gods also interfere with fate in *The Women of Troy*. According to the play, the gods had chosen sides during the war and attempted to influence the war’s outcome. For instance, Poseidon had favored Troy because “Troy and its people were [his] city./ That ring of walls and towers [he] and Apollo built-/ Squared every stone in it; and [his] affection has not changed” (Euripides 129). The gods, to the Greeks, act like humans, having tendencies to meddle and quarrel. Even after the war, Athene wishes to punish the Greeks and “let floating corpses jostle/ Thick down the Euboean Gulf; so that the Greeks may learn in the future/ To respect my altars and show humility before the gods” (Euripides 130). Like in the *Iliad*, Athene decides to influence the fates of humans. Both stories portray the gods to be biased and interfering, which can affect the nation’s fate. The *Iliad* and *The Women of Troy* use a shared culture and meddlesome gods to portray fate.

Although the two texts share similar backgrounds, the *Iliad* denies the existence of free will and presents the importance of facing one’s fate with honor. Hektor, prince of Troy, realizes that it is his fate to die in war, and he embraces it. While his wife, Andromache pleads with him not to go to war, Hektor must go because he knows his fate is to die in battle. However, he would rather have her “widowed of such a man who could fight off the day of [her] slavery./ But may [he] be dead and the piled earth hide [him] under before [he]/ hear[s] [her] crying and know by this that they drag [her] captive” (Homer 463-465). Hektor knows that he will die in battle, and Troy will be destroyed. He wishes to prolong that day until he is killed, as fated, so he dies a hero when his wife is enslaved. He is not given an option for survival, so he accepts his fate honorably and decides to fight for Andromache and his people. During

this time, those who followed their fates were considered heroes, who would die honorably. His wife and the Trojan women even mourn Hektor's death, before he dies because they know his fate is predetermined. After he leaves for war, "they mourned in his house over Hektor while he was living/ still, for they thought he would never come back from the fighting/ alive, escaping the Achaean hands and their violence" (Homer 500-502). Hektor will be mourned honorably according to this text because he chooses to follow his fate. In contrast, Hektor's brother, Paris avoids his fate. He had stolen Helen away, causing the war. However, he stays hidden in his palace, until Hektor visits him because his city is being destroyed while Paris hides. Hektor scolds Paris because Paris "would fight with another/ whom [he] saw anywhere hanging back from the hateful encounter" (Homer 329-330), for being cowardly and dishonorable to his nation. Paris avoids his fate, to fight in a war caused by himself, and therefore he is viewed as a coward. Fate was a significant value to the Greeks during this time, and they believed no choice or act of free will could change their predetermined fates. Therefore, according to the beliefs demonstrated in this Greek epic, embracing one's fate like Hektor was considered honorable and evading it like Paris was considered cowardly. The significance of fate to the ancient Greeks and absence of free will are portrayed in the *Iliad*.

In contrast to the *Iliad*, Euripides's play, *The Women of Troy*, conveys that those who believe in the power of free will are ultimately stronger than those who rely upon fate. It was commonly known in that Helen caused the war and all the resulting destruction. In this play, Helen uses the belief of fate and relies on Menelaus's knowledge of the gods to persuade him not to kill her. She blames everyone's misfortune on a trivial competition between Hera and Aphrodite. Hera claims that it was fate, not an action of her own free will that "Aphrodite won; and from [her] marriage Hellas gained/ This benefit [the Greeks] today are neither overwhelmed by Asian armies, nor ruled by an Asian king" (Euripides 140). According to Helen's argument, fate is the cause for the Trojan War. However, it is possible that Helen does not even fully believe in it, but rather uses it merely to persuade Menelaus to let her live. Had she

truly believed in fate, she would not have tried to argue her side, for her time of death would have already been decided by fate from birth. Therefore, fate can change, according to this play. This portrayal of fate suggests a shift in the Greeks beliefs. Instead of using fate as an explanation for the war, Hecabe argues that even though the gods had played a minor role, it was caused by Helen and her free will. She claims that Helen said Paris “abducted [her] by force./ What Spartan noble heard [Helen] call for help? What sort/ Of out cry did [she] raise?” (140). Hecabe’s argument is stronger than Helen’s because the war could have been avoided had Helen chosen to flee out of her own free will. Helen was truly at fault because according to this text, the presence of free will can change fate, shown when Hecabe suggests that Helen’s free will could have affected the fate of the people affected by war. Those who use free will to change fate are more powerful than those who blame fate. This belief is different than the one presented 300 years prior, in the *Iliad*. This shift of portrayal of fate from the *Iliad* to *The Women of Troy* is reflective of the shift in the beliefs of fate and divinity in ancient Greek society. During the period in which these literary texts were written, philosophy began to emerge and counter the existing belief system. Prior to this, the people believed that higher powers such as the gods and fate had control of the everything in existence. Philosophers such as the Pre-Socratics, “in contrast with the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, who deified the sun, the rivers, and the other natural elements,... stripped nature of all super-natural associations” (Greek 41). Philosophers sought to find alternative explanations removed of association with higher powers for the existence of nature. For instance, one Pre-Socratic, Anaxagoras, explained that the sun is not Apollo’s chariot as the existing belief said, but rather a large sphere of flaming gas. He used science to explain the sun’s existence. Other philosophies suggested that a single element, such as water, is the basis for everything in existence. These philosophies resulted in a shift away from the beliefs of fate and divinity. The new belief that emerged, that one should use free will rather than depending fate, is present in later ancient Greek texts, such as *The Women of Troy*.

Although written about the same story and culture, the *Iliad* and *The Women of Troy* demonstrate differing views of the concept of fate. The *Iliad*, written circa 762 BC conveyed the societal belief that one had a predetermined fate which had full influence on one's life. Embracing it would earn you honor while one would be considered pusillanimous for avoiding it. However, according to *The Women of Troy*, written circa 415 BC, fate did not have the same overpowering influence. The people realized that they had the free will to choose their destiny, as portrayed by the characters. Philosophers such as the Pre-Socratics were responsible for this shift, presenting ideas to replace the idea that higher beings had control over all. This shift in beliefs, lacking faith in higher powers closely resembles current beliefs today. While the ancient civilizations used gods to explain the unknown, as civilizations become more advanced and modern, they too shift towards using science and reason to explain the unknown. Today, although using science and reason has caused society to stray from full belief in higher powers, it has propelled society forward in significant scientific advancements.