

Fate, Fortune, and Human Actions: The Fall of Troy from Homer to Chaucer

The story of Troy is one of the most persistent and widely retold narratives in literary history, appearing in texts from ancient Greece and Rome through the medieval period and beyond. Because the story of Troy has been told in many variations, the fall of Troy often feels inevitable, as if the city were destined to fall from the very beginning—which is certainly the case in some of its reiterations. However, when looking closely at the major texts that recount the Trojan War—Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*—the fall of Troy is never presented as a simple or straightforward event. Instead, these authors consistently present versions of Troy that raise an important question among readers: was Troy fated to fall, or do the characters have agency in the events that are described? Furthermore, in later medieval texts, the question becomes even more complicated when Fortune is introduced with her ever-turning wheel that raises cities and people up only to bring them down again.

The fall of Troy is not explained by only one cause in these texts, but rather a combination of several different factors. Fate, Fortune, the gods, human mistakes, pride, love, and political decisions all play a role in the downfall of the city. Across these books, Troy is both doomed from the start and destroyed through the actions of its people—Fate and Fortune may have decided that Troy would fall, but it was the actions of the characters that determined when and how it would happen. By examining Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Chaucer together, it becomes clear that while the story of Troy consistently presents a world in which larger forces shape human history, individuals are still responsible for the decisions they make.

Unlike later authors who describe the fall of Troy directly, Homer’s *Odyssey* focuses on what happens after the war is over. Since the poem takes place after Troy has already fallen, the

destruction of the city is presented not as the focal event, but rather as a past event in which the consequences continue to affect the characters throughout the poem. In this way, Homer does not focus on whether Troy was doomed to fall, but instead on what the Greeks did during and after the fall, and how their actions led to their own suffering afterward. By exploring this side of Troy's story, Homer shows readers that the ways in which these characters conduct themselves following the end of the war directly impacts their situation.

One of the most important ideas in *The Odyssey* is that the Greek soldiers suffer on their journey home because of their own actions, not simply because of Fate. Odysseus repeatedly loses his men because they make poor decisions, such as when they eat the cattle of the sun god Helios despite being warned not to. In Book 12, Eurylochus convinces the crew to eat Helios' cattle despite knowing the consequences, and Zeus later punishes them for it (Homer). This moment is important because it shows Zeus stepping in to punish the men for their own actions rather than because of unavoidable fate. This suggests that while the gods have power, they are often responding to human behavior rather than controlling it completely. This passage is also vital because it establishes one of the central ideas of *The Odyssey*: humans often blame the gods or Fate for their suffering, but their own choices are often the real cause. This reinforces the idea that even in a world influenced by divine forces, individuals are still responsible for what happens to them.

This idea can also be applied to the fall of Troy itself. Although the war may have been influenced by the gods, it began because Paris abducted Helen, and it ended with the Greeks destroying the city through deception and violence. *The Odyssey* repeatedly shows that the fall of Troy did not end the suffering of the Greeks, but instead began a new period of hardship caused by their actions during the war. As Diane P. Thompson notes, "Troy stories were a marvelous

source of plots and characters, centering on major issues of European civilizations. Trojan themes included power and war, love and deceit, loss in victory and success in failure, [... and] the tangled connections between human desires and divine will” (12). Homer’s story of the aftermath of Troy fits this pattern exactly, since the poem shows that even after the city falls, the tangled relationship between divine power and human choice continues to determine the fate of its survivors.

In this sense, Homer presents Troy’s fall as something that may have been destined to happen, but he emphasizes that the suffering that follows the war is caused by human decisions. *The Odyssey* suggests that even if large events like wars are influenced by Fate or the gods, individuals are still responsible for their actions and therefore must face the consequences of those actions. By focusing on the aftermath of Troy rather than the battle itself, Homer shifts the focus from fate to responsibility, showing that the destruction of Troy leads to further suffering not because of destiny alone, but because of human behavior.

Virgil’s *The Aeneid* retells the fall of Troy from a very different perspective. Unlike Homer, who focuses on the consequences of Troy’s fall, Virgil focuses on what Troy’s destruction makes possible. In *The Aeneid*, Troy must fall so that Rome can rise, making its destruction part of a larger historical and political destiny. As stated in Book I:

Troy’s kingdom there shall rise again. Be patient:

Save yourselves for more auspicious days,

... [a time when] young Romulus

Will take the leadership, ...

And call by his own name his people Romans.

For these I set no limits, world or time,

But make the gift of empire without end. (Virgil 1.282-3, 1.371-5)

This passage emphasizes that Troy's fall is not simply a tragic loss, but part of a larger plan that stretches far beyond the city itself. Virgil reframes destruction as necessary for renewal, suggesting that the end of one civilization allows for the rise of another. This idea complicates the question of fate and free will, because while Troy must fall, individuals must still act in ways that fulfill that destiny. This is important because it shows that even when fate determines the outcome, individuals still control how that outcome happens.

In Virgil's version of the story, the Trojans are defeated not only because of Greek strategy, but because the gods have decided that Troy's time has ended. Jupiter's prophecy makes it clear that the Trojans will not simply disappear, as is made clear when he tells Cytherëa that her "children's destiny has not been changed," and that they will instead help create a new empire in Italy (Virgil 1.348). This shows that Troy's destruction is not simply an ending but also a beginning for something new and greater as designed by the gods and Fate. However, even though the gods and Fate have determined that Troy must fall, Virgil still emphasizes the role of decisions, especially those made by Aeneas. The story continually comes down to his decisions: Aeneas must choose to leave Troy, to carry his father out of the burning city, and continue his journey even when he would rather remain in Carthage with Dido. His sense of duty—with a little guidance from divine command—is what allows Troy's people to survive and eventually found Rome. While divine prophecy establishes that Troy must fall, Virgil still emphasizes the importance of human decision-making in shaping what happens next.

As Marilynn Desmond notes, *The Aeneid* reflects Roman cultural values through Aeneas's role as a duty-driven hero (164). In other words, Virgil's poem encodes Roman imperial ideology, but it does so through the figure of a hero whose moral choices matter. Virgil

therefore presents Troy's fall as both inevitable and necessary, but he also shows readers that individuals must also use their free will to choose to follow the destiny that Fate laid out before them. Without Aeneas's decisions, Troy's story would end with its destruction instead of continuing it into the founding of Rome.

Ovid's portrayal of Troy in the *Metamorphoses* is very different from both Homer and Virgil because Ovid does not focus on a single hero's fate or follow the same linear narrative that his predecessors used. Instead, Ovid focuses more on human drama than warfare in the way Homer and Virgil do. By the time Ovid began writing, the story of Troy was already a well known and foundational part of Roman history, which allowed for him to focus not on the war itself, but on the tragic fate of those who lost when Troy fell. Ovid also puts a unique spin on the well-known tale of Troy by focusing his stories on literal physical transformation, which adds another layer to an already interesting story. By doing this, Ovid manages to shift the focus away from Fate and destiny and instead emphasizes the human cost of war.

Many of the stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that deal with Troy focus on the Trojan women and children who suffer after the city is destroyed. Hecuba, for example, loses her children and her city and is eventually transformed into a dog as a result of her grief and anger. The story of Polyxena, who is sacrificed after the war, and Astýanax, who is thrown from the walls of Troy, further highlight that the fall of Troy leads not only to glory for some, but to suffering and loss for many others as well. Each of these stories show that even after the city has fallen, the violence continues, and it is humans—not Fate—who continue that violence. By focusing on these stories, Ovid shows that the fall of Troy is shaped not only by Fate or the gods' will, but by human violence, as the Greeks choose to kill Astýanax, sacrifice Polyxena, and enslave the Trojan women. These actions are not presented as necessary acts of fate, but as

human decisions that cause further suffering after the war is over. This is important because it highlights that these actions are not unavoidable, but are instead deliberate decisions that increase the tragedy of the fall of Troy.

Ovid also includes the debate between Ajax and Ulysses over who deserves Achilles' armor, and in their speeches both men retell the story of the Trojan War in ways that make themselves look like the hero. However, despite his valiant effort to sway the chieftains, Ajax lost when the "chieftains were swayed by Ulysses, and oratory's power was proved / when the valiant warrior's arms were won by the skillful speaker" (Ovid 13.382-3). Each man presents a different version of events and it is the better spoken one that wins, when considering this in the larger history of Troy, as a story passed down for centuries, it suggests that the story of Troy itself is shaped by storytelling just as much as it is shaped by Fate. As Bernard Jones states in the very first line of his book, *The Discovery of Troy and its Lost History*, "The Trojan War is one of the most fascinating events in human history yet no-one knows if it is really true. Was it the greatest catastrophe of the ancient world? If not, then it is certainly the greatest story ever told" (1). This moment highlights how the power in storytelling can shape historical memory. The version of events that survives is not necessarily truthful, but it is the most persuasive. Ovid suggests that the story of Troy is not fixed, but constantly reshaped by those who tell it, further complicating the idea of a single, fated outcome.

Ovid therefore presents the fall of Troy not as a single, clear event caused by Fate, but as a series of human actions and the stories that later attempt to explain those actions. In the *Metamorphoses*, Troy becomes a symbol of suffering and transformation rather than a symbol of heroic destiny. By focusing on the victims of the war and the different ways in which the stories

are told, Ovid shows that the fall of Troy was shaped by the human choices made then and by the stories that were told afterward to explain what happened.

By the time Chaucer writes *Troilus and Criseyde*, the story of Troy has changed once again. In his version, Chaucer is not as interested in the military fall of Troy as he is in the personal tragedies that happen within the city while the war is going on. Despite the focus on personal stories, Chaucer never lets the reader forget that Troy is a doomed city, which leaves a dark cloud hanging over the entire length of the poem. This creates a sense that the characters are living in a city whose fate has already been decided, even though they continue to make personal choices that shape their own lives. Readers and the narrator both know that Troy will fall, and yet the characters behave as if their personal decisions still matter, which creates a tension between fate and free will that Chaucer explores throughout the poem. As Sylvia Federico states:

The textual strategies of *Troilus and Criseyde* address these questions [of how to read the past without reference to its already enacted future] in ways that mimic the practice of a historian belatedly seeking the cause and consequence of the past from the knowing vantage point of the future. It is a literally forward-looking version of history that seeks to justify the events of the past in light of what comes later—the kind of history that, although already knowing the future, pretends not to in order to make it so. (71)

In other words, Chaucer is telling a story where both the narrator and audience already know what will happen and why it happened. This shifts the focus away from simply telling the story of the war and instead toward understanding how Fate, Fortune, and human decisions contributed to the city's destruction.

What makes Chaucer's version of the story different from earlier versions is his use of Fortune. Instead of focusing on Fate or the gods, Chaucer focuses on Fortune's wheel, which

constantly turns, raising people and cities up before bringing them down again. In medieval literature, Fortune was often used to explain why powerful people and great cities suddenly lost their power—what rises must fall and what falls must once again rise. Troy becomes one of the most famous examples of this idea, despite being a great and powerful city at one time, it still eventually fell. Fortune simply helps explain how something so powerful could still fall.

Though Chaucer does not focus as much on the fall of the city itself, this rise and fall of Fortune's wheel can still be seen among the characters. In the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, there is both the fall of Troy to consider and the rise and fall of Troilus himself. After spending much of the story pining after Criseyde, Troilus rises to peak happiness when he is finally able to be with Criseyde, but that does not last long as Fortune quickly reverses his situation when Criseyde is sent to the Greek camp and chooses to never return. At the realization that Criseyde is not coming back, he cries out “O Fortune, executrice of wierdes, / O influences of thise hevenes hye” (Chaucer 3.617-8). Here he calls Fortune the “executrice of wierdes”—she who carries out the plan of the Fates—so that individual lives in Troy are caught between Fortune's turning wheel and a larger pattern of destiny. These lines show that while Fortune may appear to be randomly spinning her will, there is the larger picture that Fate brings forward as well. This returns to the question of if the city—and in this case Troilus—were doomed from the very beginning or if the actions of people are what truly caused everything to fall apart.

Fortune helps explain how events can feel both inevitable and unfair at the same time. Troy is a powerful and wealthy city, and Troilus is a noble and honorable knight, yet both are destroyed. Fortune provides a way of explaining this kind of destruction, because it suggests that all earthly success is temporary. However, Chaucer does not completely remove human responsibility from the story. Troilus chooses to pursue Criseyde, Pandarus, Criseyde's uncle,

chooses to guilt Criseyde into being with Troilus, and Criseyde chooses to remain in the Greek camp. These decisions shape the personal tragedy of the story even though the larger destruction of Troy cannot be stopped. Chaucer therefore presents a world in which Fortunes controls the larger movements of history, but individuals are still responsible for their personal actions within that world.

Chaucer's use of Fortune may seem like a small differentiating detail from the other stories of Troy, but it is a rather impactful change to the narrative. Every other story has the ideas of Fate and the gods dooming Troy from the very beginning for one reason or another, but in the end, it was always the actions of the people that settled the fate of Troy. Chaucer's version of the fall is the only one that calls human decisions into question. By using Fortune, Chaucer nearly removes the question of free will altogether. With the other stories, Troy was at the whim of its people. With Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the question of whether or not people's decisions influenced the fall of the city becomes a difficult one, because the city is supposedly at the mercy of Fortune. A similar argument could be made for the gods, but in *The Odyssey*, gods only interfere when humans act against them and in *The Aeneid*, they only encourage Aeneas to continue on his path, it is only in *Metamorphoses* that the gods interfere by granting favors and backing certain sides of the war. However, Chaucer presents a world where control is even more uncertain, making it harder to determine how much responsibility individuals truly have.

When looking at these texts together, it becomes clear that there is not just one explanation for the fall of Troy. Instead, each author focuses on different cause—Fate, the gods, human decision, or Fortune—to explain the same event. This shows that the story of Troy continues to be told not because it gives a clear answer, but because it raises an important question about responsibility, power, and how much control people really have over their lives.

The differences between these texts also suggest that history is not fixed, but is shaped by perspective, interpretation, and the culture that is telling the story.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Troy has already fallen, and the focus is placed on the suffering that follows the war. Homer shows that the Greeks suffer not simply because Troy fell, but because of their own actions during and after the war. This suggests that even if Troy was destined to fall, the suffering that followed was caused by human decisions. In Virgil's *The Aeneid*, Troy must fall so that Rome can rise, which makes the fall of Troy part of a larger historical destiny. However, even in this version, the future of Troy's people depends on Aeneas's decisions. Fate may determine that Troy will fall, but Aeneas's choices determine what happens after the fall and whether Troy's people will survive. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the focus shifts again, this time to the suffering of the Trojan women and children and the stories that are told after the war. Ovid shows that even after Troy falls, human violence continues, and he emphasizes that history is shaped not only by events but also by the way those events are told and remembered. In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the fall of Troy is explained through the idea of Fortune, whose turning wheel brings down even the greatest cities. However, Chaucer still shows that personal tragedies within Troy are shaped by human decisions, suggesting that Fortune may determine that Troy will fall, but human choices determine how that fall is experienced by the people who live there.

The story of Troy endures because it asks a question that never fully goes away: if destruction is inevitable, does that mean human actions do not matter? The authors discussed here consistently suggest that the answer is no. Even if Troy was destined to fall, the actions of the people in each story still mattered because their decisions shaped the course of events. The destruction of Troy may have been inevitable, but the way in which it was destroyed—and the

suffering that followed—was the result of human actions. For this reason, the story of Troy continues to be retold, because it allows each generation to ask the same question again and again: if Fate or Fortune controls the future, what responsibility do people still have for their actions? The story of Troy does not give a single answer, but it does make one thing clear—even in a world shaped by Fate and Fortune, choices still matter.

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