Two Systems of Destiny: A Comparison of Love Stories

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The Roman Poet Virgil (Pubilius Vergilus Maro) and Geoffrey Chaucer both wrote poems in the Trojan War tradition with destiny as a strong central theme. However, destiny is treated differently in each work. For Aeneas, in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, destiny means history. For Troilus, in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, destiny is tragedy. I wish first to examine both poems in detail, concentrating on the love stories in each, in order to describe how these two systems of destiny are presented, and then to look at how these two cosmologies compare with each other. Such analysis yields evidence of Virgil’s influence on Chaucer.

**VIRGIL AND DESTINY AS HISTORY**

Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* during the height of Rome’s Augustan age. The *Aeneid* is a national epic, a glorification and exaltation of Rome and of the destiny of the Roman people. Indeed, the history of Aeneas is the history of Rome: his glory is its glory. Aeneas embodies many of the important Roman virtues, particularly the sense of civic responsibility. This historical element underlies the system of destiny in the *Aeneid*.

Many times in the poem, it is said (or prophesized) that Aeneas will be the founder of Rome. Every part of the poem is directed toward this end. Jupiter is the creator of destiny in the *Aeneid*. It is Jupiter who “from bright Olympus . . . rules the gods/And turns the earth and heaven by his power—” (Virgil 105). Jupiter rules men and women as well as gods. He has decided the destiny of Aeneas and his followers.

In Virgil’s cosmology, although gods and human beings are given their own destinies, within these destinies they are given the power to act freely. For example, although Aeneas has been destined to found Rome, Juno nevertheless tries
to stop him, thereby adding to the course of events Jupiter has already planned. Venus also offers her divine aid to her son to ensure his safety so that he might be able to fulfill his destiny, complicating the matter further. The influence of the gods on the lives of men and women is great. As Juno tells Venus, "Divine power is something to remember/If by collusion of two gods one mortal/Woman is brought low" (Virgil 99). Jupiter allows Juno and Venus to act, as long as they do not interfere with Aeneas' achieving his destiny.

In point of fact, however, Aeneas has such a strong sense of duty that it is apparent from the beginning of the poem that he will not be able to do other than follow his destiny to its end. When he flees from burning Troy, Aeneas carries his father on his back, his son in his arms, and brings with him his hearth-gods. Aeneas knows that through his destiny he is to be the instrument of history, though he does not know how or why.

Aeneas is never able to understand fully the significance of his destiny. When he travels to the underworld with the Sybil and speaks with his father, he is told of the future of Rome and of his sons. However, when he leaves through the ivory gate of false dreams, he forgets. The shield given to him by his mother also depicts the future glories of Rome. But again, Aeneas is not able to understand them. However, despite his uncertainty as to what his personal achievements will be, Aeneas is able to gain hope from his destiny, a hope that carries the Trojans through the worst of their troubles.

Jupiter has chosen a history-making destiny for Aeneas. Though he will reach Lavinian lands as foretold, Virgil underscores the fact that Aeneas's path to those lands was not foreseen:

... For years
They wandered as their destiny drove them on
From one sea to the next: so hard and huge
A task it was to found the Roman people.

(Virgil 4)

It is Juno's anger that drives them from one stormy sea to the next. From the opening verses of the poem we find that Juno's anger will play a central role. Surprisingly, however, there is no mention of either adverse winds or Venus' guiding hand when Aeneas and his ships sail into Carthage. It seems to be chance that brings them to those shores: "Tired out,/Aeneas' people made for the nearest land,/Turning their prows toward Libya" (Virgil 9). Why, we must ask, is Aeneas allowed to land in Carthage? Certainly he needs time to repair his ships and recover his lost men, but beyond this, there seems little pur-
pose in allowing the love story between Dido and Aeneas to develop. However, if we examine how destiny operates in the love story, we may discover Virgil’s purpose.

Once Aeneas has landed near Carthage, his mother, Venus, appears to him, directing him to the town where Jupiter has sent Mercury to make “The new-built town, receptive to the Trojans/Not to allow Queen Dido, all unknowing/As to the fated future, to exclude them” (Virgil 14). To gain further favor with Dido, Venus sends to the queen her divine son, Desire. The queen, finding herself attracted to the nobleness of her guest, is generous in helping the Trojans rebuild their ships.

Having lost this opportunity to thwart the Trojans, Juno finds a more accommodating option in encouraging a marriage between Dido and Aeneas. Her plan is to make Aeneas stay, and thereby be unable to fulfill his destiny. Her plan almost succeeds.

In an effort to achieve their opposing goals, Juno and Venus do not try to manipulate Aeneas, but rather Dido. In this way Dido becomes more a victim of Aeneas’ destiny than Aeneas. On three occasions three different gods try to sway Dido’s emotions toward Aeneas. Desire is sent by Venus with these commands:

... to ensnare the queen
By guile beforehand, pin her down in passion,
So she cannot be changed by any power
But will be kept on my side by profound
Love of Aeneas . . .
When she embraces you and kisses you,
You’ll breathe invisible fire into her
and dupe her with your sorcery.

(Virgil 28)

Desire does all this and is able to “waken with new love, a living love,/ [Dido’s] long settled mind and dormant heart” (Virgil 29).

Dido possesses the same free choice Aeneas does, but she, like Aeneas, finds the gods’ influence powerful: “This man alone has wrought upon me so/And moved my soul to yield. I recognize /The signs of the old flame, of old desire” (Virgil 96). Nevertheless, she finds the idea of a new love unacceptable after having loved and lost her husband. Dido swears an oath that she be cast into the depths of hell before she breaks the laws of “chaste life” (Virgil 96). She says: “That man who took me to himself in youth/Has taken all my love; may that
man keep it, / Hold it forever with him in the tomb" (Virgil 96).

The tragedy of Dido is not that she falls in love with Aeneas, or that he must leave, but that she finds the idea of her love for Aeneas to be wrong. Dido takes her own life in an attempt to avenge herself on Aeneas, whom she blames for her thwarted love. When Aeneas approaches her with news that he sails "for Italy not of [his] own free will," she replies:

Now the prophet Apollo, now his oracles,  
Now the gods' interpreter, if you please,  
Sent down by Jove himself, brings through the air  
His formidable commands! What fit employment  
For heaven's high powers! What anxieties  
To plague serene immortals!  

(Virgil 109)

What role, then, do Carthage and Dido play in Aeneas' destiny? The love complication is, perhaps, part of a greater plan to test the strength of Aeneas' commitment to his destiny. Before they arrive in Carthage, the Trojans survive many disasters and ill-fortunes, but always the thought that they will be part of a great destiny gives them hope to continue. When Aeneas leaves Dido, it is because he has come to understand the importance of his destiny. The Roman quality of civic duty which Aeneas embodies can be given no better trial. At this point is stressed the importance of the Roman virtue of "state before man"—or, we might say, woman.

Thus destiny in the Aeneid is history. The poem is about history, and it is for the sake of history that Aeneas must leave Dido. Those qualities Aeneas embodies are the qualities respected in Virgil's time, and thus the glory of Aeneas is the same glory Virgil extolls.

CHAUCER'S DESTINY OF PROVIDENCE

In Chaucer we find that destiny has a different meaning. Chaucer is not writing an epic; he has no history-making characters. Instead, Chaucer has Troilus, a love-struck knight who blames destiny for his tragedy. Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde is a more personal story than Virgil's, and Troilus' destiny has a less far-reaching effect.

Chaucer was greatly influenced by Boethius.1 Chaucer borrows the Boethian universe in his re-creation of the Trojan War. Consistent with the medieval concept of the Olympian gods, the gods do not walk through the verses of Chaucer's poem as they do in Virgil's. The polytheistic view of Virgil has been...
replaced by a monotheistic view. The gods have become planets, yet as planets they still have influence over the lives of men and women. Fortune, little mentioned in the *Aeneid*, becomes the main agent of destiny in Chaucer’s poem. As Alice Kaminsky explains:

Boethius believed that an eternal God dispenses his rule through Providence; . . . The chief minister of Providence is Destiny, and Destiny controls Fortune and Chance. Providence operates through the “bond of love” which links all of the universe together in harmony. Fortune is allegorized as a goddess who is responsible for the mutability of existence since she gives men power, riches, fame, and sensual pleasures, and then takes them away, dropping men on the famous allegorical wheel from prosperity to adversity . . . Destiny is responsible for carrying out the wishes of Providence. Thus Providence is the means by which God involves himself in human affairs.

Like Virgil’s Aeneas, Chaucer’s Troilus may not be able to understand his destiny, but he is able to understand how Fortune works, and it is thus that the poem revolves around images of her wheel:

\[
\text{The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,} \\
\text{That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,} \\
\text{In lovynge, how his aventures fellen} \\
\text{Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie} \\
\]  

*(Benson 1.1-4)*

The entire poem may be seen in relation to Fortune’s wheel. The emotions associated with the wheel—hope, joy, fear, and woe—are used frequently and may be seen to characterize Troilus. The poem reflects the turnings of the wheel: books one and two reflect the hope Troilus feels in his desire for Criseyde; book three, his joy at having Criseyde and in their mutual love; book four, the fear of losing Criseyde; and finally, book five, the woe of knowing that Criseyde has betrayed him.

Walter Clyde Curry says that “the chief qualities of Fortune are mutability, change, instability, and irrationality” (243). There are times in Chaucer’s poem when Troilus finds himself unable to act, times brought about unexpectedly, and Troilus blames Fortune for his inaction. Troilus does not think to applaud Fortune when she brings him Criseyde, but he is quick to implicate her when she takes Criseyde away: “Forthi I thus diffyne:/Ne trust no wight to fynded in Fortune/Ay propertee; hire yiftes been comune” (Benson IV.3902). Troilus is able to explain his role in the tragedy as the work of Fortune, and thus destiny.
He has been destined to suffer Criseyde's betrayal; therefore, it is is not his fault: "But trewely, Criseyde, swete may,/Whom I have ay with al my myght yserved,/That ye thus doon, I have it nat deserved" (Benson V.1720-22).

Throughout the poem Troilus tries to maintain that it is destiny that is responsible for all that befalls him. It is natural for Troilus to believe that Fortune controls the good and ill in his life. He knows that she has all of humankind on her wheel:

Ful hard were it to helpen in this cas,  
For wel fynde I that Fortune is my fo;  
Ne al the men that riden konne or go  
May of hire cruel whiel the harm withstonde;  
For as hire list she pleyeth with free and bonde.  

(Benson I.836-40)

However, Pandar us cautions Troilus against blaming Fortune for the very reason that she affects all men and women:

Quod Pandarus, "Than blamestow Fortune  
For thow art wroth; ye, now at erst I see.  
Woost thow nat wel that Fortune is comune  
To everi manere wight in some degree?  
And yet thow hast this comfort, lo, parde,  
That, as hire joies moten overgon,  
So mote hire sorwes passen everechon.  

For if hire whiel stynte any thyng to torne,  
Than cessed she Fortune anon to be.  

(Benson I.841-49)

Pandarus believes that Troilus should take more control in his approach to Criseyde, but Troilus finds it convenient to blame Fortune, for he knows not how to act (Patch ). On the battlefield, Troilus is an experienced knight and does not blame or applaud Fortune for his success. However, when it comes to courtoisie, Troilus is inexperienced, and he must rely on Pandarus for aid.

With the help of Pandarus, Troilus does meet with Criseyde and they consummate their love. But all too quickly Fortune takes away his joy. Criseyde is to be exchanged for Antenor. She is to go with the Greeks to be with her father. Although she promises to return to Troilus in ten days' time, he fears he will lose her. The god of love has brought him Criseyde; now he threatens to take her away. Troilus entreats:
Overrey lord, O Love! O god, alas!
that knowest best myn herte and al my thought,
What shal my sorwful lif don in this cas,
If I forgo that I so deere have bought?
Syn ye Criseyde and me han fully brought
Into youre grace, and bothe oure hertes seled,
How may ye suffre, alas, it be repeled?

(Benson IV.288-94)

In an effort to try to understand his destiny, Troilus remembers the arguments of "clerkes" on necessity and predestination. Much of this argument is Boethian and comes from the *Consolation of Philosophy* (Patch 366-81). However, for Troilus to remain consistent in his excessive emphasis on destiny, Chaucer allows Troilus to quote incompletely from Boethius (Patch 369-71). Troilus examines the idea of necessity and its relation to free will as opposed to the notion of predestination. Troilus comes to the false conclusion that "of the thynges that to comen be . . . That by necessite they comen alle" (Benson IV.1047-50).

It is this belief that all that happens is foreseen by God and therefore must come to pass, that Troilus feels to be responsible for Criseyde’s betrayal:

“For certeynly, this wot I wel,” he seyde,
“That forsight of divine purveyaunce
Hath seyn alwey me to forgon Criseyde,
Syn God seeth every thyng out of doutaunce,
And hem disponyth, thorugh his ordinaunce,
In hire merites sothly for to be,
As they shal comen by predestyne.”

(Benson IV.960-66)

Since God has predetermined all things, it is easy for Troilus to believe that all of the events that led to Criseyde’s betrayal have been predestined as well, making him innocent of all that befalls him. Criseyde, however, does not go this far. When she learns that she must leave, she says only that she is a “woful wrecche and infortuned wight,/And born in corsed constellacioun” (Benson IV.744-45). Criseyde does not curse Fortune (Destiny and Providence) the way Troilus does, but rather considers herself unfortunate. She cries, “O Calkas, fader, thyn be al this synne!” (Benson IV.761). Rightfully she blames her father, for Chaucer has foreshadowed her betrayal in her father’s. Crisdeyde’s view is
that she was lucky to find Troilus and unfortunate to lose him. We do not find in Criseyde the strong desire Troilus has to explain his misfortune as divine Providence. She has a more resigned attitude to her fate.

Believing himself “lorn,” Troilus actively seeks his death while trying to avenge himself on Diomedes. Chaucer manipulates the Boethian arguments in order for Troilus to see himself as a victim. The use of Fortune as a motif is the vehicle by which Troilus is able to prove his innocence, and thus victimization.

In comparing Virgil’s and Chaucer’s love stories we find the actions of one hero directed by a sense of history, and the inactions of another directed by a sense of tragedy in a too-ready abandonment to divine Providence. It is these two systems that underlie the events that make up Virgil’s and Chaucer’s love stories. The gods bring Aeneas and Dido together, just as Pandarus brings Troilus and Criseyde together. The betrayal in each poem is the result of “destiny,” and in each poem the “betrayed” seeks death in an attempt at revenge.

In the Aeneid it is the destiny Jupiter has chosen for Aeneas and Aeneas’ ability to choose to follow that destiny that ensures the greater good of the state over his personal desires. It is the nature of Fortune and Destiny as the workings of Providence that allows Troilus to be able to call himself a victim. These two cosmologies are essential to the poems’ achievements of their desired ends: history and tragedy.

Virgil gives Aeneas a strong sense of duty. This civic virtue carries him through many of the hardships he bears. Chaucer does not embue Troilus with this same sense of duty. It is necessary for Troilus to be inexperienced, and perhaps even clumsy in his approaches to Criseyde, for only thereby can he maintain his stance of innocence. Chaucer’s purpose in writing Troilus and Criseyde was to create a character who represented Troy and yet could be examined on a personal level, for throughout the poem lurks the inevitable fall of Troy. Troilus’ tragedy is in some way precursory to that fall. In writing his poem Chaucer may have held Virgil’s masterpiece as a model. In both The House of Fame and The Legend of Good Women, Chaucer writes of the love of Dido and Aeneas. In Troilus and Criseyde, similarities can be found in the characters of Aeneas and Troilus, but also in Dido and Troilus. In seeking to write of a man as the victim of his destiny, Chaucer might have looked closely at the Aeneid, and, in particular, at the character of a woman, Dido.
NOTES


2 For Chaucer's cosmology, see Florence M. Grimm, Astronomical Lore in Chaucer (New York: AMS Press, 1919); and Walter Clyde Curry, Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960).

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