
Fate, Men, And Chess

Free Will means the freedom to make choices unfettered by divine influence. Free will is inherently human, and Homer knows it. In the Iliad, the warriors make choices clearly determined by their own consciences. Diomedes chooses to attack Aphrodite, Menelaus chooses to defend the dead body of Patroclus, and Achilles chooses to remain idle in his ship. The question of fate is not one of free will, but rather one of a planned future. Homer illustrates this concept like a game of chess. On one hand, fate allows for autonomous, conscious, and intelligent decision-making. Achilles is able to choose to remain with the Achaean army or to return to his homeland. On the other hand, there is a necessary constraint. Chess players may only move their pieces in certain directions, but they may choose whichever direction they wish. In this way, Achilles is doomed to make one of two choices. The tragic warrior is doomed even further when he decides to fight, in one moment signing and sealing an early death.

Religion is another human necessity, and one acknowledged by Homer. Both the Achaeans and Trojans worship Zeus and the personable gods of Olympus. This ancient religion affirms the belief that the gods and fate are one. Divine intervention, therefore, means a change in the course of fate. In one instance, Paris faces a wrathful Menelaus, but Aphrodite whisks him away to his bedroom. In a more dramatic instance, Athena materializes a spear in Achilles' empty hand as he charges a bewildered Hector. The men of the Iliad accept these moments as necessary changes of fate procured by Zeus. Homer mocks this primitive belief in his portrayal of the gods. The allegory of the chessboard is taken further with men as pawns and gods as more powerful pieces. Just as pieces like the knight or ship allow for more dynamic moves, so do the gods intervene and propel the action of the battle. However, just as every piece is restricted to the same chessboard, fate likewise wills the actions of men and gods. The gods are simply powerful, yet limited entities in the eyes of Homer. He accepts that men of the Iliad worship the will of the gods, but never once consigns himself to this belief.

Evidently, fate wills the efforts of individuals, both gods and men. Honest and insightful, Homer makes quiet remarks about the nature of fate and man's acceptance of it. This leaves the question of whether fate's course is cruel or fair. Despite man's best efforts, fate marches forward with an inevitable conclusion.