Fate and the Ancient World

"I am all that has been, that is, and that will be. No mortal yet has been able to lift the veil that covers me." – Inscription at Neith's temple, Sais [1]

This essay explores the notion of fate as experienced in the ancient Greek, Roman, Mesopotamian and early biblical times. Using a compare and contrast approach, the complex and often incongruous nature of fate is discussed through examination of the deities attributed with its power and the art and literature of the people whose lives it moved. The extent to which the gods could control fate is measured against the ability of mortals, or other deities, to influence set destiny. The essay concludes with a summation, highlighting Fate's earliest and most universal association with the feminine.

The ancient Greeks called fate *Necessity* or Anake, personified in the great goddess Moira. Represented sometimes singularly, she was also seen as *the Moirae*—the three goddesses who wove, measured and cut the thread of mortal life in accordance with natural law. After this, there is little agreement as to the origins, nature, intention or immutability of Fate.

Hesiod gives two distinct accounts of the Moirae in his theogony. Initially he depicts Fate as primordial goddesses, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropo—daughters of Night (Nyx) by parthenogenesis. In this account, they precede the Olympians (Hes. *Theog*. 218). Later, when discussing Zeus' power, he calls them daughters of Zeus and Themis. (Hes. *Theo.* 690) Apollodorus, writing in the first century BC, also gives the parentage of the Moirae to Zeus and Themis. (Apollod*. Epit. 1.13)*

One consistent aspect of the Moirae is the theme of weaving. Clotho, the spinner, spun the thread of life. Lachesis, measured its length, and Atropo, who cut the thread, was inescapable death against which there could be no appeal. Together they set the limits to what a mortal may or may not achieve in life. (Hom. *Odyss*. vii.195) Homer states that it is Fate that controls destiny, depicting a single Moira spinning the fate for

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[1] *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion.* (2002) Ed. Donald B. Redford. Oxford University Press, Oxford. P 275.

Hektor at his birth (Hom. Ili. xx.127, xxiv. 200) As late as the fourth century AD, the same reference is used, *she spinneth with her thread inevitable.* (Quint. Smyrn. xi. 272) Virgil proclaims, . . . *the Fate-spinners granted that Latium's affairs should go well.* (Verg. *Aen.* xii. 147)

Plato also describes Necessity in reference to spinning. For him the spindle of the universe rests on her knees. In this imagery, he portrays her three daughters, the Fates, sitting in a geometric arrangement around her—an ordered version of the cosmos. (Plato. *Rep.* x. 617) Plato agrees that Fate appoints the time of death. (Pl. *Phdr.* 114) He sees perfection of the soul as alignment with the unalterable laws of Necessity—truth in accord with mind in accord with the cosmos. *(Pl. Epin.* 982) Like Hesiod, he associates Fate with Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropo, the third whom he says *bestows on the dooms ratified by Clotho the quality of irreversibility.* (Pl. *Leg.* Xii. 960)

Aeschylus links the *Erinyes* with fate.(Aesch. *PV.* 515) Also called Furies or Eumenides, they are minions of Necessity and daughters of Nyx, (Aesch. *Eum* . 321) but Hesiod has them born of the drops of blood from the severed gentiles of Ouranos falling on the earth. (Hes. *Theo.* 176). In either case, the Furies' purpose was to punish those who transgressed the laws of Necessity. (Hom. *Il.* ixx. 249) As goddesses of retribution, the Erinyes take vengeance on mortals for their blood crimes by inflicting psychological torment (Aesch. *Eum.* 335) even when the transgression was induced by a god. (Eur. *Or.* 416) Later, it is emphasized by Aeschines in the mid-third centaury BC that these crimes are not instigated by the gods but spring from the wickedness of men. (Aeschin. *Speeches*. 1:190) For Aeschines, each depraved man has a Fury urging him on in crime.

The Roman poet Ovid describes the Furies as *Night-born goddesses of implacable doom* (Ov. *Met.* IV. 451) and Virgil has Aeneas sacrificing a black lamb to Night, *mother of the Furies*, before he ventures into the underworld. (Verg. *Aen.* VI. 236) This theme is elaborated on by Pausanias in the second century AD when he describes similar rites practiced for both the Erinyes and Moirae—the sacrifice of a pregnant ewe, with libations of honey, water and flowers. (Paus. 2.4.7.)

Another image linked to the Erinyes is the Ker—spirit-death-demons, depicted in vase paintings or grave-jars as flying up or diving back down at the command of Hermes

Psychopomp, guide of the souls. [2] Hesiod calls them *black death,* the offspring of Nyx (Hes. *Theo.* 207) and sisters of the Moirae. Jane Ellen Harrsion states, '*The Erinyes are primarily the Ker of a human being unrighteously slain . . . the outraged soul crying for vengeance.*' [3]

Homer describes the Erinyes as formidable, hateful and dark but he gives them no physical characteristics. [4] Aeschylus depicts them as female, shrouded in black with their heads wreathed with snakes. (Aesch. *Cho.* 909) Virgil concurs seeing them with twining coils of serpents and wings. (Verg. *Aen.* XII. 848) Ovid gives a fabulous description of their snaky appearance and the terror they invoke. (Ov. *Met.* IV. 451) When Clytaemnestra rouses the Erinyes from their slumber, she calls them *dragoness*. (Aesch. *Eum.* 126) These images perpetuate the earth-demon as snake and are reminiscent of the three gorgons with serpent locks and venomous stare. [5] Such associations between snakes, fate and the primordial goddess are not isolated.

In Egyptian hieroglyphics the word 'goddess' is expressed by the image of a cobra, one of her personifications being Neith, who can appear as a golden snake. [6] She is connected to magic and weaving, and known as the *Oldest One*, who *'originates in herself'*. Neith's symbol is the shuttle, and from it she weaves the world. [7] In ancient Mesopotamia, the primordial goddess Tiamut is referred to as a dragon or enormous snake. *(Cuneiform Texts,* part xiii, pl. 33 f., Rm. 282)

 The Romans adopted the image of the Moirae from the Greeks, with Decima, Nona and Morta forming the three Parcae. The Erinyes are called Furies, serpent twined and vicious. (Vir. *Aeani.* Xii. 843) Both the Parcae and the Furies dwelled in the underworld and are later attributed directly with the power of prophesy. (Stat. *Theb. viii. 190, xxv. 364)* The Romans also worshiped Fortuna or Tykhe, the goddess of luck, success, fate and providence. Pindar sees her as the daughter of Zeus (Pind. *Ol* .xii.1)

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[2] Harrison, J. E. (1991) *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion.* Mythos Series. Princeton University Press. New Jersey p.43

[3] Ibid. p. 216

[4] Harry Thurston Peck. *Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*. New York. Harper and Brothers. 1898. [online version] retrieved November 9, 2005 from http://www.perseus.tufts.edu

[5] Harrison, op. cit., p 233

[6] E. A. Wallis Budge, (1905) *The Egyptian Heaven and Hell.* Open Court Publishing Company, Illinios. P. 107

[7] Felix Guirand (ed.)(1968). *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* The Hamlyn Publishing Group Middlesex. p 37

though the earlier Greek Homeric Hymn to Demeter describes her as one of the companions playing in the meadow with Persephone before her abduction by Hades. (*Hymn. Hom. Dem.* 415) Fortuna/Tykhe was worshiped more as fate in this life (as opposed to the fate of death) and seen as having control over the *lands, oceans, wars and wise counsellors.* (Pind. *Ol* . xii. 1)

A series of friezes from about 580BC depict the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and the party includes the entire pantheon of Mt. Olympus. They parade in chariots and behind them walk the three Moira.[8] These images, be they the single Moira, the three Fates or Parcae or the terrible Erinyes/Furies, sustained, moved and watched over the law of Necessity to which even the great god Zeus must bow.[9] Yet the question remains as to whether Zeus, actually bows to them or not.

It is clear that the Titan Prometheus—a pre-Olympian god—has *skill weaker than Necessity* (Aesch. *PV.* Vii. 22) yet he is also under the power of Zeus. When the chorus in *Prometheus Bound* asks who drives Necessity, Prometheus replies that it is the Fates and mindful Furies. The chorus then asks if Zeus might have less power than they, and Prometheus answers. "*Not even he can escape the thing decreed."* (Aesch. *PV.* 515) The chorus seems surprised and asks, "*Why, what is fated for Zeus except to hold eternal sway?"* And Prometheus defers saying, *"This you must not learn yet, do not be over eager."* (Aesch. *PV.* 520) Nothing else is revealed except the original statement that '*the might of Necessity permits no resistance'.* (Aesch. *PV.* 105)

As late as 330 AD, Quintus Smyrnaeus describes cooperation between Zeus and the Fates. *"Yet powerless for her help to override Fate; for not Cronos' Son can stay the hand of Destiny, whose might transcendeth all the Immortals, and Zeus sanctioneth all her deeds."* (Quint. *Smyrn.* Xiv. 96) However, Fate's intention is not always clear to mortals. *"...But human affairs and human purpose above all are obscured by fate, just as the mud of a river hides a pebble;"* (Paus. 4.9.6.)

Homer depicts an ambiguous relationship between the Fates and Zeus. First fate is immutable (Hom. *Il.* Xix. 87; Hom. *Od.* Xxii. 413) then Zeus can choose to alter it. (Hom. *Il.* xvi. 434). At another time, Homer has a mortal surpass the limits of Fate.

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[8] *Wedding of Peleus and Thetis; animal friezes.* Perseus Vase Catalog 10.70. Gregory R. (ed.) The Perseus Project. Retrieved November 7, 2005 from http://www.perseus.tufts.edu
[9] Guirand, op. cit., p 163.

(Hom. *Il.* xx. 336) Athena instructs Telemachus that the gods can not protect even a man they love from his fate, (Hom. *Ody.* 3.229) and the goddess Thetis warns her son Achillis that the *sure hand of Fate,* is not far off. (Hom. *Il.* xxiv.120) Later, Thetis begs Zeus to compensate Achilles, (Hom. *Il.* i.507); but Zeus does not, neither does he save his own son, Sarpedon, though he considers it. In the end, the Fates *forbid* Thetis to take revenge on the Trojan fleet.[10]

The gods do intervene at times on a mortal's behalf. Athene saves Orestes by releasing him from the torment of the Erinyes whose power is portrayed originally as unalterable (Aesch. *Eum.* 335) In the Aeneid, Jupiter is the mouthpiece of Fate and knows their intentions.(Vir. *Aeani.* i. 262; ix. 108) Although there are things only the Fates decree, (Vir. *Aeani.* v. 711; vi. 68) Jupiter manipulates the final battle by sending a Fury to haunt Turnus. (Vir. *Aean.* xii. 855)

To the Ancient Greeks and Romans, the gods could coerce and persuade one another, and mankind could even prevail upon their will, but all were equal in that they functioned within the bounds of Necessity, the limits of natural law.   In this sense fate was not a punishment or a reward, but a boundary. Punishment came if the boundary was crossed, as elaborated by Cicero. *". . . how the furies nevertheless haunt them . . . because they could not be pious without wickedness."* (Cic. *Ve*r. xxiv.66)

In Mesopotamia, the goddess Mammetum (Mamitu, Mammitu, Arurur) is the maker or mother of fate. Like the Greek Moira, and the Roman Parcae, she sets a mortals' fate at the time of birth.[11] But before her, the earliest image of the goddess of Fate from this region is Tiamat, the *sea* or *Dragon/snake. (Cuneiform Texts*, part xiii, pl. 33 f., Rm. 282). She is a primordial goddess, a feminine creator deity in the form of chaos that gives birth to the world. [12] She has control of the *tablets of Destiny* (*Enuma Elish*, Tab 1. 137) but prior to the great battle that destroys her, she gives them over to her son/lover Kingu. (*Enuma Elish*, Tab 1. 137) Marduk, son of Ea, meanwhile agrees to slay Tiamat but asks that he be given the power of *fate* in return. (*Enuma Elish*, Tab 2. 136) Marduk destroys Kingu, wresting the *tablets of destiny* from him and cleaves Tiamat in

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[10] C. Parada, *The Greek Mythology Link,* (1997-2005) Retrieved October 7, 2005 from http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/
[11] Guirand, op. cit., p 63.
[12] Campbell, op. cit., pp 75-85.

two, using half her body to create the mansions of the heavens, stars and signs. (*Enuma Elish*, Tab 5. 1-7) This ordering of the zodiac from Tiamat's body is an interesting twist considering the association with astrology and fate![13] The relinquishment and redistribution of fate from the feminine creator deity to the masculine foreshadows the later biblical mythology where destiny is in the hands of a single, ineffable, patriarchal god.

In Genesis, patriarchy is so firmly established that the primordial goddess no longer needs to be overthrown nor does the power of fate need to be taken from her. [14] She is reduced to an elemental state where the wind of Elohim blows over the face of the waters (*Gen*. 1.2) compared with the annihilation of Tiamat as Marduk blows the evil wind into her mouth (*Enuma Elish*, Tab 4. 96-97)

In biblical mythology, fate is in the hands of God. Paradoxically, the freewill of humankind is also set in play. *"…theologians and philosophers, in there effort to abide by the ground rules of biblically based mythologizing, give credit simultaneously to God's foreknowledge and to man's free will as the ultimate cause of fate, and have thus tied themselves into knots as picturesque as any in a mariner's handbook…"* [15] Campbell stresses: *Your augury, is in the hands of God* (*Koran* 27:48), yet didn't God say to Cain that he *may* choose good over evil?(Gen. 4. 7) [16]

This essay has touched on the nature of Fate as experiences by the ancient peoples of Greece, Rome and the Near East. The contradictory elements, including origins, power and mutability were explored, as well as the consistent themes of personification and attributes. Aside from the patriarchal divinity of biblical mythology, humankinds' oldest and most universal image of fate is female. Upon deeper exploration, a peoples' relationship to fate seems to portray something intrinsic about their relationship to the masculine and feminine and to life and death—an investigation still relevant in current times.

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[13] Liz Greene, (1984) *The Astrology of Fate,* "Fate and the Feminine." Samuel Weiser Inc. York Beach, Maine.
[14] Campbell, op. cit., pp 85-94.
[15] Campbell, J. (1967). *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God,* Penguin Books Ltd. Middlesex, p. 139
[16] Here we have the translation dilemma as poetically portrayed in Steinbeck's *East of Eden.* Did god mean *thou shalt, thou must or thou mayest?* The Orthodox Jewish translation suggests *timshel* is '*thou mayest*'— implying freewill.

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