

Efstratios SARISCHOULIS, *Schicksal, Götter und Handlungsfreiheit in den Epen Homers*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008 (Palingenesia, Bd. 92), pp. 312, ISBN 978-3-515-09168-8, € 64.00.

Fate, destiny and freedom of human action in the Homeric epics have been discussed so thoroughly that, on hearing of a new book on the subject, the potential reader usually expects nothing more than recapitulation of previously presented opinions. In the case of SARISCHOULIS'S [= S.] *Schicksal, Götter und Handlungsfreiheit in den Epen Homers*, however, this assumption proves to be unjustified, as the study, though including a comparison of the most important views on the matter, is not a mere compilation¹. The author succeeds in expressing his own point of view; and despite numerous points on which he agrees with his predecessors, his consistent reasoning and conclusions sound surprisingly fresh.

S.'s book consists of three main chapters. The first explains the author's position and methodology. The second, and the longest, provides an analysis of Greek terms related to fate and destiny, as well as a synthetic conclusion. The last chapter discusses motives of human and divine actions, and self-consciousness of active agents.

Several of S.'s introductory remarks are certainly worth mentioning. In the author's view, Homer does not believe in destiny, but he feels obliged to conform to the epic tradition which established main points of the story long before his time. His heroes, however, are not conscious of that limitation. Gods do not hinder their free will. Homeric craftsmanship creates a world where both people and deities make their own decisions. None of the heroes resembles a puppet.

S. states that before attempting any discussion of fate in the Homeric epics, one should ask whether the notion of fate known from classical literature exists in Homer's world at all. The author himself inclines to the view that we are too often influenced either by our own understanding of destiny or by the definition of that term accepted in the Greek culture of the classical period².

Homeric figures, human and divine, are self-aware individuals acting of their own free will. Of course, divine will may be treated as one of crucial factors in the world, and an equivalent for the poet's knowledge, but, as S. maintains, it does not restrict human freedom.

The analysis of Greek notions begins with a short introduction concerning the concept of destiny in Greek culture. Characteristically, it is the poet, the narrator, who gives the name of the deity responsible for an event, while human heroes talk merely about an indefinite *theos*. The very notion of fate in the Greek culture remains controversial. D.C. DIETRICH, quoted by the author, was the first researcher to sum up discussion on that matter from the 19th and 20th centuries³. Some scholars (NÄGELSACH, LEHR, WELCKER, JEBB) emphasize the power of destiny, which results in the image of gods and destiny acting in full harmony, while others (GRUPPE) tend to interpret *moira* as "world's order" generally accepted by deities. In the late 19th century, the notion *Moirai*/*Moirai* was assigned to the sphere of folk religion (BOHSE). S. takes up DIETRICH'S task and continues

¹ It should be mentioned, however, that S.'s review of research on the subject since the late 19th century makes interesting reading as well.

² S. returns to this problem later (p. 274), admitting that the Greek terms usually translated as "destiny" or "fate" have been discussed for some time and that their anachronistic interpretation raises many doubts; cf. S. SCHEIN, *The Mortal Hero. An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*, Berkeley—Los Angeles 1984.

³ B.C. DIETRICH, *Death, Fate, and the Gods: The Development of a Religious Idea in Greek Popular Belief and in Homer*, London 1965, pp. 179 ff.

with theses put forward by SCHADEWALDT (*moira* as a supreme power), ERBSE (*Lebensanteil des Einzelnen*), NILSSON (the sum of events in life attributed to an individual), GREENE (no contradiction between Zeus' will and the power of destiny), ADKINS (ethical approach encompassing the problem of human responsibility), as well as SCHMITT's methodological remarks. The author seems to be influenced mainly by the last five researchers, who stress the independence and free will of human and divine action⁴, but he sounds more consistent (which is understandable, as he concentrates on one particular topic, while they tend to analyze it among many other issues) and goes further in his conclusions. In the eight subsequent sections of the second chapter S. discusses derivatives of the stem **smer-*, the terms: *peprōtai*, *peprōmenos*, and the notions of *moira*, *moros*, *aisa*, *kēr* (*kēres*), *potmos*, and *oitos*.

None of important Homeric passages escapes S.'s scrupulous analysis and even if some of his statements provoke further discussion, no-one can accuse him of lack of philological precision. Doubts are inevitable, since it is impossible to exclude subjective elements from interpretation of a particular sentence or its context. Paradoxically, the only drawback of this part of the book is due to S.'s thoroughness: the reader's first impression may be that the author repeats the same argument over and over. Under closer scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that S.'s aim is to cover every angle of discussion. The chapter also includes an interesting section on the notion of the Homeric man (pp. 141–160), introduced by SNELL and later analyzed by LESKY, who proposed the concept of "double motivation" of human behaviour ("double" meaning both human and divine)⁵. S. disapproves of the term "Homeric man" used as *terminus technicus*; in his view, such an approach, quite popular in the 20th century, closes many paths of interpretation. Neither is he satisfied with LESKY's "double motivation", as the thesis fails to provide reliable tools to interpret the Homeric world.

In the third chapter, S. emphasizes once more that every event or misfortune in the Homeric epics may be explained rationally. The chain of events is set in motion by human or divine emotions and behaviour, and responsibility for consequences rests with human will. Homeric heroes are aware of the importance of their decisions and they do not avoid responsibility (e.g. Agamemnon deciding to keep Chryseis). The story develops according to the action–reaction scheme. Even the famous line: *Dios eteleieto boulē*, at the beginning of the *Iliad*, cannot be treated as an argument for the existence of some divine plan. S. shares KULLMAN's opinion that Zeus' will mentioned in the first lines of the *Iliad* refers to the consequences of Achilles' wrath and of Thetis' wish⁶.

Achilles' fate seems the most controversial, and that part of S.'s study may be regarded as the most questionable (or the least convincing; pp. 234 ff.)⁷. In the author's view, Achilles' choice of death and fame does not imply real knowledge of his future, but it simply results from logical thinking: those who take part in a brutal war are likely to die young (and to gain glory), while those who stay at home have more chances to live long. Achilles accepts his own mortality and chooses freely the course of life which he finds the most attractive.

S. perceives human will as the real factor behind all events in the Homeric epics. Such an interpretation makes Odysseus' cruel revenge more understandable. The rage Odysseus shows in the

⁴ Although S. does not specifically mention the ethical issue, it comes to mind as a proper point of reference; cf. A. W. H. ADKINS, *Merit and Responsibility*, Oxford 1960, H. LLOYD-JONES, *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1971.

⁵ Cf. B. SNELL, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes. Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, Hamburg 1946; A. LESKY, *Göttliche und menschliche Motivation in homerischen Epos*, Heidelberg 1961.

⁶ Cf. W. KULLMANN, *Das Wirken der Götter in der Ilias. Untersuchungen zur Frage der Entstehung des homerischen "Götterapparats"*, Berlin 1956.

⁷ S., unlike GRIFFIN, believes that Achilles has no distinct knowledge of his forthcoming death; rather, he seems fully aware of the danger implicit in the life of a warrior; cf. J. GRIFFIN, *Homer on Life and Death*, Oxford 1980, p. 163.

final confrontation with the suitors is not indiscriminate: he decides to spare the poet, who did not keep the suitors company of his own free will. Odysseus aims his vengeance carefully, killing only the men whose wrongdoing was deliberate. The famous passage of the *Odyssey* (I 33–43) where Zeus explains the role of gods in human actions, quoting the case of Aegisthus, is yet another proof of the freedom of human decisions: gods can only warn mortals against consequences of their behaviour, and if human life were fully predestined, why would they bother to warn anyone at all (pp. 256–263)⁸?

In S.'s interpretation, human free will and free choice constitute a principle of the Homeric epics. The fatalism so often attributed to the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* amounts in fact to the acceptance of the necessity of death, the only event in human life that cannot be avoided.

Thoroughness and precision of his argument as well as true commitment noticeable behind the scholarly reasoning make S.'s book an interesting reading even for those who do not agree with his theses. For those reasons, *Schicksal, Götter und Handlungsfreiheit in den Epen Homers* may undoubtedly be regarded as a valuable contribution to the vast field of Homeric studies.

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⁸ For a commentary on Zeus' speech, cf. ADKINS, *o.c.* (n. 4); LLOYD-JONES, *o.c.* (n. 4); DIETRICH, *o.c.* (n. 3); LESKY, *o.c.* (n. 5); W.C. GREENE, *Moirai, Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought*, New York 1944.