

*Guilt by Descent: Moral Inheritance and Decision Making in Greek Tragedy.* By N.J. SEWELL-RUTTER. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xiii + 202. Cloth, \$90.00. ISBN 978-0-19-922733-4.

Greek tragedy rightly claims an authority on the question of fate and free will. Who better to express, for example, the limitations of human freedom than Oedipus? In tragedy the relationship between humans and gods so familiar to Homer is confronted and re-imagined. There is no longer an Apollo or Athena to flick away spears like flies or to pull our hair as we prepare to chop off our leaders' heads. How then are we to confront the impasse of choice and action without a god to guide us? Do the forces of fate and determinism still obtain? N.J. Sewell-Rutter (hereafter S.-R.) sets out to address the issues of "causation, of familial interaction and decision-making, of mortal agency and over-determined action" in tragedy (p. xiii)—an admirable task since it has been quite some time since Lesky, Dodds, Lloyd-Jones, et. al. set the standard. As S.-R. justifiably claims, "the raising of questions in these fields, let alone the settling of them, is by no means at an end." True indeed.

A very brief introduction (3 pages) lays out S.-R.'s methodological aims: to "trace the connections within and the workings of a certain constellation of causal determinants that operate in the corrupted and inward-looking *oikoi* of tragedy, paying particular attention to the Atreids and the Labdacids" (p. xii). S.-R. has chosen three motifs with which to examine the tragedies at hand: inherited guilt, curses and Erinyes.

Chapter 1, "Preliminary Studies: The Supernatural and Causation in Herodotus" (pp. 1-14), offers Herodotus as a prompt to the study of causation in tragedy to show that "the genre does not exist in a vacuum, and that tragic theology is not entirely isolated and self-sustaining" (p. 1). The Big Three tragedians "did not create the complex phenomenon of supernatural causation *ex nihilo* and certainly do not enjoy a monopoly over it" (p. 2). The story of Croesus figures prominently in the discourse of causation, because on him seem to converge all those dreadful forces: "fate, the sins of the fathers, and the uncertainty and mutability of human life" (p. 5). Accordingly, in the death of his son by the hands of Adrastus, Croesus comes to recognize the hand of god. So too with his expeditions against the Persian empire. For S.-R., the "twin concepts of what is fated and what must happen run right through [Herodotus'] work, and are frequently invoked to account for some misfortune or downfall" (p. 7). In support of this claim S.-R. adduces the examples of Mycerinus, Apries and Xerxes' troubling episode with Artabanus' dream. Yet S.-R. is right to argue that these hapless humans are not simply helpless pawns, but rather that the courses of their lives are "multiply

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determined”: “it is motivated on both human and divine levels, and the divine component of its motivation is not single but multiple” (p. 11).

Chapter 2, “Inherited Guilt” (pp. 15–48), traces intrafamilial, generational guilt—the sins of the father visited upon his children, as it were. S.-R. is particularly interested in the Labdacids, who more than any other blighted family seem to occupy the tragedians. “Do [Oedipus’] sons inherit from their forebears more than the fact of their internecine death? Do they inherit characteristics or propensities to this kind of disastrous behaviour?” (p. 16). S.-R. provides a literary background to these questions, showing (by reference to Homer, Hesiod and Solon) that “the notion of an offender bringing his family down with him when he falls is as early as the earliest Greek literature” (p. 19). Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* has been, up to the last 20 years or so, an essential text to explore questions of inherited guilt and causation, and S.-R. shows that the “familial principle is repeatedly appealed to by both Eteocles and the chorus to explain the catastrophe” (p. 27). The central decision-scene of the play, where Eteocles sets himself at the seventh gate of Thebes against his brother, “brings [Eteocles] into conformity with his supernaturally determined doom” (p. 28). Rather like Croesus’ multiple motivations, “the fated quality of [Eteocles’] fall is reconciled with the need for a personal impetus rooted in his own deviant motivation” (p. 31). Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*, which S.-R. takes to be a “finely and subtly nuanced response” to *Seven*, gets similar treatment: Euripides “traces ... ramifications through multiple interacting characters as they work out in concert the doom that they all share” (p. 40). All told, “in both authors, the doomed family’s recurrent misfortunes through the generations are mediated not simply through some mysterious supernatural means, but at least in part through the recurrence of traits and modes of behaviour, which help to create the recurrent patterns of doom through intelligible continuities of human character and action” (p. 48).

Chapter 3, “Curses” (pp. 49–77), commences with a long discussion parsing *defixiones* and curses (49–59), the principal difference being that the former is a “much more private” invocation of the gods to harm someone, whereas the latter require public pronouncement (and for this reason lend themselves well to tragedy’s “moments of high drama”). I am not sure I credit S.-R.’s claim that curses “sort better with the exalted dignity of tragedy than does the more humble, quotidian, and secretive *defixio*” (p. 59), especially when the evidence he adduces to demonstrate “the genre’s sense of its own dignity” is Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* are used to illustrate the prevalence and power of curses in tragedy, but the discussion elides a great deal of difference

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and complexity among the individual plays. For example, are the (frankly, vague) similarities drawn between the curses of The-seus and Oedipus (p. 69) enough to assert that the same or a similar type of supernatural causation obtains between the two? Surely the terrifying description of Poseidon's bull arising from the sea and the arrival of the goddess Artemis go farther to suggest supernatural causation than the fuzzy warning Oedipus receives to "cast out the pollution in the city". [[1]] S.-R. asks a telling question: "If we find it tempting to read inherited curses into tragedies, we would do well to ask ourselves why we feel we need them. Are they supposed to provide a more satisfying sense of unity? Or a better explanation for the suffering portrayed? Or a more comforting picture of justice? *Perhaps [our] attempt ... reveals as much about what we desire to find in the action of a tragedy*" (p. 67, my emphasis). Ironically, S.-R. does not explore the consequences of this insight for his own project.

Chapter 4, "Erinyes" (pp. 78–109), opens much like the previous one with a discussion of the origin, functions and powers of the Erinyes. While S.-R. concludes from divergent sources that "to describe and delimit them is not easy," he concedes that "in their various aspects they preserve and enforce *Dikē* in its broad sense of 'the order of things'" (p. 90). Along with inherited guilt and curses, the Erinyes are a component of the matrix of causal determinants that "work" against protagonists like Eteocles. S.-R. might fruitfully have distinguished between the Erinyes as they literally appear in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and their figurative appearance in *Seven* and *Phoenician Women*. He claims, for example, that in *Seven* "the prominence of Erinyes in the climactic 'decision'-scene is undeniable" (p. 83). They certainly play a prominent role in Eteocles' dramatic *cri de coeur* following the revelation that Polynices is stationed behind the seventh gate, but they are not there physically. (The same is true in *Phoenician Women*.)

Chapter 5, "Irruption and Insight? The Intangible Burden of the Supernatural in Sophocles' Labdacid Plays and *Electra*" (pp. 110–35), is a strange beast, opening with an unnecessary discussion of Sophocles' status among the "pietists" and "hero-worshippers" and his evolutionary position between an archaic Aeschylus and a cynical Euripides. The principal problem with S.-R.'s methodology in this chapter is that it is negative: he proves not that inherited guilt, curses and Erinyes figure prominently in these plays, but that they do not. For example: *Antigone* "does not in any significant sense rely on any curse in the family or even on any taint of ancestral guilt" (p. 115); "We are not, I contend, left with the sense that inherited guilt or some curse is the crucial fact—or even a crucial fact—that is needed to explain or account for the events of [*Antigone*] and the decisions taken" (p. 120); "If there is an irruption of any kind in the *OT*, the truth that obtrudes itself is not that a supernatural cause has ever been at

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work behind and within the action.... The irruption of the *OT* is a great insight, the illumination of a terrible fact, not the revealing of an Erinyes that has walked hitherto unseen in the mist" (p. 129); and so on. S.-R. concludes the chapter as follows: "[C]urses, Erinyes, and taints of inherited guilt simply do not operate in the same way in [Sophocles]" (p. 134). He might have saved himself (and his readers) a great deal of time if he had included this point in his introduction.

Chapter 6, "Fate, Freedom, Decision Making: Eteocles and Others" (pp. 136–71), finally addresses the implications of S.-R.'s book up to this point: to what extent does the "constellation of inter-related causal determinants" (p. xii, above) impinge upon the decisions and, importantly, decision-making ability of tragic characters? S.-R.'s ambition is "to compel us to examine the role of fate in tragedy and to ask whether we can justifiably think in terms of a problem of freedom" (p. 137). The very next sentence, employing the same negative mode as the previous chapter, gives up the goods immediately: "For our purposes ... fate is remarkably, even arrestingly, peripheral." The same question arises here as in the previous chapter: What is the point then? S.-R.'s unhelpful distinction between determinism and fate (pp. 137–9) would carry more weight if he had not been conflating inherited guilt, curses and Erinyes all under the banner of "causal determinants" throughout the book. Once again Eteocles plays paradigm: "No one, man or god, is telling Eteocles to meet his brother—far from it.... The only person who urges him to go forth to the fight is Eteocles himself.... Eteocles is both self-motivated and untouched by doubt. He is so locked in to his Labdacid heritage that he needs no divine monitions or human cajoling. It is thus, by means of this remarkable and arresting causal nexus, that his father's curse proceeds.... Eteocles labours under what might be called a curiously voluntary compulsion" (p. 161). I include this lengthy quotation to illustrate just how confused and confusing S.-R.'s formulation about Eteocles' agency is. Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Phoenician Women* make an appearance, but we are ultimately told: "We have seen in this chapter that fate is for our purposes much less important than we might expect" (p. 171). This, I believe, is S.-R.'s most ambitious point, but he does not recognize it as a generic principle of tragedy (more below). Instead, he simply crosses it off the list of causal determinants.

The Conclusion (pp. 172–6) reiterates methodology and findings.

As should be clear by now, I have reservations about S.-R.'s book. Let me elaborate:

(1) This was clearly, and to a large extent still is, a dissertation. That fact is reflected in terms of both structure—the negligible

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introduction and conclusion, which offer only the barest indication of the book's purpose and goals; the repeated use of signposting phrasing; the expansion and discussion of material irrelevant to the argument at hand; the rereading of several plays over and over—and argument. S.-R. rarely engages other scholars, and his bibliography seems thin given the topic at hand, making it difficult to discern his position vis à vis the scholarly community. The theoretical/philosophical underpinning of his thesis is somewhat old-fashioned, especially when major theoretical reassessments of tragedy (e.g. Eagleton, Felski, de Beistegui and Sparks [[2]]) and familial obligations (Föllinger [[3]]) have appeared recently.

(2) When discussing the applicability of questions about fate and freedom in Greek tragedy, S.-R. is over-cautious in his fear of anachronism. He claims (with Vernant [[4]]), for example, that the Greeks had no word for free will (p. 151), and thus that our modern fascination with parsing its presence in ancient texts risks irresponsibility. This is rather like saying that because the Greeks lacked umbrellas, they were not aware that they were getting wet when it rained. I agree for the most part with Vernant, though I suspect our philological rigor gets the best of us sometimes, especially when we insist that without a word for something it could not exist (here is where positivism and post-modernism curiously come together).

Furthermore, if we are to insist (as S.-R. does) that the question of fate and freedom is infected by a modern preoccupation with agency that does not jibe with the ancient lack of words for will, what about words for freedom? They are prevalent in tragedy, but S.-R. does not chase them down. In a way, then, by not holding himself to his own methodological principle, S.-R. imposes our own ideas about freedom upon the ancients.

(3) My biggest concern has to do with where we are going with the issue of determinism in tragedy. It is not clear to me how S.-R. differs from or improves upon those older studies he mentions early on. Is a "constellation of causal determinants" all that different from (or better than) "double motivation"? I do not think so. This may simply be a point of disagreement, but S.-R. never fully justifies his position. As noted at the beginning, I am pleased that S.-R. has revived the questions; the *opinio communis* has got stale. It is time for a systematic reappraisal of determinism, fate, free will, agency, etc. in Greek tragedy. Unfortunately, *Guilt* does not offer it, but merely reaffirms the reigning wisdom.

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[[1]] Cf. Bruce Heiden, "Eavesdropping on Apollo: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*," *Literary Imagination* 7 (2005): 233–57.

[[2]] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Blackwell, 2003); Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy* (Johns Hopkins, 2008); de Beistegui and Sparks, eds., *Philosophy and Tragedy* (Routledge, 2000).

[[3]] Sabina Föllinger, *Genosdependenzen: Studien zur Arbeit am Mythos bei Aischylos* (Goettingen, 2003).

[[4]] "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy," in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, eds., *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (Zone Books, [1972] 1990), pp. 29–48.