

BOOK REVIEW

The Pregnant Male as Myth and Metaphor in Classical Greek Literature. By DAVID LEITAO. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 307. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01728-3.

As David Leitao explains in the Introduction to this thoughtful and wide-ranging book, his interest in the imagery of male pregnancy began in work on Plato's *Symposium*. It is with Plato that the book concludes, in hefty chapters on the metaphor of philosophical pregnancy in the *Symposium* (Ch. 6) and the *Theaetetus* (Ch. 7). The book's earlier chapters establish the currency of the image and metaphor in texts from the century prior to Plato, with close analyses of the fragments of Anaxagoras (Ch. 2), Euripides' *Bacchae* (Ch. 3), fragments of the Sophists (Ch. 4), and Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* (Ch. 5). These earlier chapters, then, read to a great extent as prelude to the two crowning chapters on Plato. But in them lie many stimulating, if at times overbold, arguments about the literature and intellectual discourse of the Classical period.

In Chapter 2 ("The New Father of Anaxagoras: the One-seed Theory of Reproduction and its Reception in Athenian Tragedy") Leitao makes the case that the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras' one-seed theory, which held that men alone give birth through ejaculation, is not reflective of any social debates about gender, but rather that it stems from the philosopher's commitment to monism, a system requiring that soul and life were created in a single event, from a single cause. But, as Leitao discusses (41–42), the demiurge of Anaxagoras' monistic universe is the masculine *Nous* (Mind), a fact that *ipso facto* seems to gender the philosopher's system.

Leitao goes on in Chapter 2 to examine references to the one-seed theory in the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides (52–57). In response to Froma Zeitlin's reading of a "dynamics of misogyny" in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*,¹ he suggests that, in the debate over Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra, the litigators Apollo and the Furies are arguing not about gender but about kinship, agnate kinship (from the male

¹ Zeitlin, F. (1996). *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago), 87–119.

line) versus cognate kinship (from the female line). This line seems to be over-fine; it is hard not to see in Aeschylus' play a validation of male authority, whether or not Aeschylus' Apollo is, as Leitao suggests, incorporating Anaxagoras' embryological theory.

Leitao continues to push against the scholarly identification of gender politics in Attic tragedy in Chapter 3 ("The Thigh Birth of Dionysus: Exploring Legitimacy in the Classical City-State"), where he suggests that the varying accounts of Dionysus' birth in Herodotus, Euripides, and other authors are reflective more of Athenian debates about legitimacy and citizenship than they are of debates about gender and power.

In Chapter 4 ("From Myth to Metaphor: Intellectual and Poetic Generation in the Age of the Sophists") Leitao looks at the rise in use of the metaphor of male pregnancy in the later fifth-century. It came to be used during this period by poets when referring to their work, and also by Sophists such as Prodicus, who may well have promised to "impregnate" his students with wisdom and virtue (133–134).

Chapter 5 ("Blepyrus' Turd-Child and the Birth of Athena") continues the survey of the fifth-century Athenian intellectual scene from Chapter 4, with a concentration on the *Assemblywomen*, Aristophanes' play in which Athenian women rise to replace their husbands in power. Here Leitao builds upon the work of Zeitlin,² and he reads Blepyrus' prolonged defecation scene (lines 311–371) as a male effort to rival the female act of giving birth, and so to respond to the abolition of marriage and paternity proposed by his wife Praxagora, the leader of the women's party. Here, as at other points in the book, Leitao makes fruitful comparisons with the *couvade*, the ritual existing in several cultures in which men simulate the act of parturition after their wives have given birth.

We come to Plato in the excellent Chapter 6 ("The Pregnant Philosopher: Masculine and Feminine Procreative Styles in Plato's *Symposium*"), in which Leitao sorts through the many references to male pregnancy—and suppressions of maternal imagery—in the *Symposium*. In opposition to the Sophistic model, whereby the teacher impregnates his pupil with wisdom (Chapter 4), Plato, in the climactic speech by Diotima, figures the mature lover of wisdom as generating knowledge and virtue within himself. Such philosophical pregnancy, a "fullness" that requires no parturition, is the goal of the philosopher.

²Zeitlin, F. (1999). "Aristophanes: The Performance of Utopia in the *Ecclesiazusae*," in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne, eds., *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge), 167–97.

The anti-Sophistic, self-sufficient pregnant philosopher of the *Symposium* is not the model of the later *Theaetetus*, as Leitao explores in the concluding Chapter 7 (“Reading Plato’s Midwife: Socrates and Intellectual Paternity in the *Theaetetus*”). In this dialogue the character Socrates figures himself as an intellectual midwife: he tends to the pregnant student, helps with the delivery of ideas, and then assesses the truth-value of those ideas. In this last capacity, the midwife in fact assumes a paternal role as the one who can judge true and false “children.” Engaging with the age-old debate among Unitarians and Revisionists about the consistency of Platonic thought, Leitao reads this marked change in birthing imagery from the *Symposium* as reflective of Plato’s shift in interest from the source of ideas to their truth-value. Expanding on the work of David Sedley,³ he also interprets this change in the *Theaetetus* as speaking to Plato’s philosophical turn away from his midwife Socrates—whose commitment to *aporia* ultimately rendered him infertile—towards his own distinct, more generative, and more dogmatic system of philosophy.

This book is not for novices (e.g. words such as “phratry” and “elenctic” go undefined, as do the technical uses of “agnate” and “cognate” in Chapter 2), but the summary paragraphs that Leitao includes at the end and often middle of chapters are of great help. His concentration on the literature of the Classical period (470–350 BCE) means that Hesiod, whose *Theogony* narrates the envious “pregnancies” of Cronus and Zeus, is to a great extent sidelined (as Leitao acknowledges on page 2). The result is that Hesiod’s influence on the discourse about male pregnancy in the Classical period may be understated.⁴

In short, while rooted in analysis of the particular image of the pregnant male, this book has much to lend to a wide range of debates about the literature of the Classical period. The arguments overreach at times, but they are consistently thought provoking. Full of ideas in its own right, Leitao’s book also has the potential to be generative of more ideas among scholars interested in exploring such imagery and issues in other periods.

TIMOTHY JOSEPH

College of the Holy Cross, tjoseph@holycross.edu

³ Sedley, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato’s Theaetetus* (Oxford).

⁴ On the reception of Hesiod in antiquity, see H. H. Koning (2010), *Hesiod: the Other Poet. Ancient Reception of a Cultural Icon* (Leiden).