

BOOK REVIEW

Ancestral Fault in Ancient Greece. By RENAUD GAGNÉ. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 556. Hardcover, \$130.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03980-3.

Gagne begins by affirming the importance of ancestral fault against recent critics who have claimed that ancestral fault was, on the whole, too erratically or too broadly described to work usefully as a category. Energized by this challenge, Gagne proceeds on an exhaustive discussion of the traditional sources of the idea, focusing on three primary texts: Proclus' *De Decem Dubitationibus de Providentia*, known to us by a translation by William of Moerbeke and a heavily Christianized abridgement of Isaak Sebestakrator; Plutarch's *De Sera Numinis Vindicta*, and key passages in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, with auxiliary evidence from other sources. Gagne attempts to establish beyond any doubt that ancestral fault was, at least within the context of philosophical and theological discourse, an important category. There follows a review of scholarship from the early modern period up to his three 20th century exemplars, Glotz, Dodds and Lloyd-Jones. Unfortunately, Gagne's relentless review of scholarship, while enlightening and imposing, may discourage all but the most enthusiastic of readers.

Gagne's arguments will not always command agreement. He insists on the importance of Hesiod's apparent reference to inherited guilt at *Works and Days* 274–285. Hesiod specifies that the family of a man who keeps his oath will prosper, the family of a perjurer will become obscure. This does not, however, guarantee divine punishment; Hesiod may only be implying what everyone knows, that a reputation is easier to acquire than to lose, and a reputation follows any family's name. Moreover, an earlier passage adduced by Gagne on Zeus' punishment to oath breakers (260–261) clearly designates the *demos* as the victims of the perjurious behavior of the kings, not the kings' own children, and his effort to associate intergenerational punishment in the form of bastardry with ancestral fault founders. An Iliadic reference, by contrast, provides better evidence. After Pandarus breaks the truce agreed upon by the Greeks and Trojans prior to the single combat between Paris and Menelaus, Agamemnon claims that Zeus will punish either the transgressors or their children (*Il.* 4.158–162), foreshadowing

the eventual fate of the vanquished Trojans. From the epic evidence, Gagne concludes that ancestral fault functions as grounds to punish perjury.

Gagne then moves to archaic poetry, basing his argument for the continuation and expansion of the concept of ancestral fault on the poetry of Alcaeus, Solon, and the Theognidean corpus. Yet most of his examples from Alcaeus' attacks on Pittakos say more about Pittakos' ancestors than any putative progeny and do not, as Gagne himself admits, necessarily imply a ritual pollution (217). The abuse of Alcaeus, in fact, smacks more of trash talk from the street (replete with insults to Pittakos' mother) than any clear statement of religious belief. By contrast, Solon and Theognis, both of whom clearly discuss ancestral fault and the possible punishment of a man's descendants, offer better evidence. The expansion of the concept of ancestral fault beyond perjury correlates to a changing political and economic landscape in the nascent *poleis*; in the shifting political alliances of the era, transgressors may well escape punishment within their own lifetimes, but the punishment of future generations awaits.

In this chapter and others, Gagne discusses the curses brought on against the Alcmaeonids for the murder of the Cylonian conspirators, but he misses the point—while at different times the curse was invoked against the family, in the long run it had little impact on the most famous Alcmaeonids. Cleisthenes may have been slowed down by the curse, but it clearly never stopped him; and Pericles easily overcame any suggested taint, while Alcibiades' career was derailed by wounds that were self-inflicted, not inherited.

By contrast, Gagne offers an excellent discussion of deferred punishment described by Herodotus in the case of the heralds sent to Xerxes to atone for the murder of Persian heralds at the start of the Persian wars, an act of appeasement to the spirit of Talthybios. Xerxes spared the ambassadors, but a generation later their sons fell victim to the wrath of the Athenians (*Herod.*7.133ff).

Gagne concludes with a lengthy discussion of Greek tragedy. He acknowledges that little secure evidence exists from epic and archaic poetry to connect the fates of the Labdacids and the Atreidae to the sins of their ancestors, but insists that the plays themselves offer more than sufficient evidence for the importance of ancestral fault in 5th century thinking. Yet not a word about ancestral fault appears in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and Oedipus barely raises the issue of divine wrath at his family when he clears himself of guilt for his actions in the *Oedipus at Colonus* (O.C. 965). Gagne adduces better evidence from the *Seven Against Thebes*, *Antigone*, and *Phoenissae*. Gagne then discusses the evidence from the *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Orestes*, where the criminality of the ancestors clearly

drives every aspect of the Atreid myth. In the end, though, Gagne is compelled to admit rather weakly that “there is no doctrine of ancestral fault in Greek tragedy,” (438).

Gagne offers a final coda of additional evidence drawn from Plato, Orphism, Herodotus, and the orators to reinforce his main point, that ancestral fault existed as an important concept in Greek thought; most will agree that the concept did exist, but the importance will remain a matter of dispute. Indisputable, however, is the quality of Gagne’s work. The scholarship is impeccable, the arguments formidable, and erudition visible on every page, whether Gagne completely persuades his readers or not.

JOSEPH P. WILSON

University of Scranton, joseph.wilson@scranton.edu