

BOOK REVIEW

Tragik bei Homer und Vergil. By NILS KIRCHER. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018. Pp. 242. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6223-2.

This book, concerning the much-debated topic of the “tragic” in ancient epics, is the revised version of the PhD thesis discussed by the author in 2012 at the Philipps-Universität of Marburg. In Chapter 1, which serves as an introduction (13-18), Kircher sets out the purpose and method of his work, consisting in analyzing the tragic in the *Iliad* by the critical parameters and assessment standards drawn up by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, and in comparing the results with the *Aeneid*. The novelty that is expected to emerge from this analysis is evident, as so far the research carried on about this topic has been based on a vague and general concept of the tragic, rather than a clear and precise definition.

Chapter 2 (19-56) is a depth and detailed *status quaestionis*, or better, a critical discussion of selected bibliography on some key points in the Homeric conception of man, especially the sensitive question about free will, which is an essential precondition for the development of the tragic according to Aristotle (with respect to the dialectical tension between error and moral responsibility, as well as the conflict between man and destiny). Kircher starts out from the old argument by Bruno Snell, who denies any human freedom and, as a consequence, any possibility of tragic development in the Homeric world. Needless to say, he refutes Snell’s theory, which would undermine his analysis on the tragic in the *Iliad*. Actually, that theory has been rejected for some time, so perhaps it was not necessary to invest so many pages and effort in refuting it. Then, Kircher follows the scholarly debate of the 20th century, taking into account the (already well known) arguments by Albin Lesky, Alfred Heubeck, Hermann Gundert, Hartmut Erbse, Joachim Latacz and a few others (almost all German). In the end, Kircher shares the position of Arbogast Schmitt, “with his assertion of a relative autonomy and freedom of Homeric men” (40), a position that turns out to be compatible “with the *Hamartia*-conception of tragedy” (49). This chapter is not pointless, but it is too long and wordy, with many textual quotations often coming from outdated works.

In Chapter 3 (57-125), Kircher focuses on Aristotle's *Poetics* to verify whether the arguments developed by the philosopher on tragedy, beginning with "the postulate of organic unity and wholeness of action" (73-78), up to the "κάθαρσις-interpretation" (117-125), can be applied to epics too. Based on the assumption that "the similarities of the two genres concern their essence and effect, while differences lie more on the formal level" (86), he succeeds in demonstrating the compatibility of the critical categories drawn up by Aristotle on tragedy with Homeric epics. Thus, he provides his analysis of the tragic in the *Iliad* with a sound methodology and a solid theoretical basis. Yet, even here, one gets the impression that there is something unnecessary: I really do not see a need for the long discussion on Lessing's and Schadewaldt's theories about tragedy (90-99 and again 104-115).

Chapter 4 (127-188) is the heart of the book, and the best part. Kircher addresses the issue of the tragic in the *Iliad* through two related case-studies, analyzing the "Patroclus-action" and the "Hektor-action" (in books 16-22) by means of Aristotle's critical instruments. Both Patroclus and Hector, described in positive terms, make mistakes in good conscience with disproportionately bad consequences, culminating in their death, arousing the emotional involvement of the reader, namely the "arousal of the tragedy-specific effects of fear and pity" (183). The analysis deals effectively with the personality of the two characters, the motivations of their behavior and the consistency and limits of their responsibility (with respect to destiny and divine will), configuring the very tragic theme of ἀμαρτία. So, Kircher succeeds in demonstrating that Patroclus and Hector can be considered as tragic characters "in the Aristotelian sense" and that "Homer's finding refers to a tragic concept, as Aristotle later puts it" (219).

Chapter 5 (189-214) turns to the *Aeneid*, examining two episodes, notably that of Nisus and Euryalus and the major one of Dido, to consider whether Aristotle's concept of the tragic can also be applied to Virgil's poem. No more than 15 pages are devoted to such a broad and complex subject, for which a whole book would hardly be exhaustive. Here Kircher discusses a very restricted bibliography (exclusively in German and English), which lacks some important works (even in German and English) on this topic, such as E. Lefèvre, *Dido und Aias: ein Beitrag zur römischen Tragödie*, Wiesbaden, 1978; M. Fernandelli, "Virgilio e l'esperienza tragica. Pensieri fuori moda sul libro IV dell'Eneide," *Incontri triestini di filologia classica*, 2, 2002-2003, 1-54; V. Panoussi, *Greek Tragedy in Vergil's Aeneid: Ritual, Empire, and Intertext*, Cambridge-New York, 2009; and a minor one: G. Scafoglio, *Noctes Vergilianae*, Hildesheim-New York, 2010, 77-114 and *passim*. Here too

there is interesting food for thought, e.g. the definition of “Werttragödie” (tragedy of values) that is, a non-Aristotelian concept of the tragic, based on moral values (204), the “komplexe Hamartia” recognized in the behavior of Euryalus (205) and the comparison between the Dido-episode and the “Leidenschaftstragödien” (tragedies of suffering) by Seneca (213-214). But these stimulating points are not properly developed, and that is why this chapter is the weakest part of the book.

Overall, this book contains a number of very interesting points, but Chapters 2 and 3 should have been better revised and carefully shortened, while Chapter 5 should have been further and more deeply developed. The content of the volume is usefully summarized in a conclusive chapter (215-223), as well as in a short and fine abstract in English (225-226). There is a bibliography (227-242, for a total of 16 pages, with only four titles in French and none in Italian), but it lacks an *index locorum*.

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