



Review of Efstratios Sarischoulis, *Schicksal, Götter und Handlungsfreiheit in den Epen Homers (Fate, Gods and the Freedom of Action in the Epic Poems of Homer)*. Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 2008. ISBN: 3515091688. 312pp.

Reviewed by Lucas Fassnacht
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen, Germany
lucas.fassnacht@phil.stud.uni-erlangen.de

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are widely known as the first examples of western literature and they are even said to be the model on which the concept of the western individual and free will is based. Normally the interpretation goes that the Homeric human being is determined by fate on the one hand, and by the gods on the other. As is classically told, such opposed forces leave no space for individual decision-making, with death being the only logical consequence.

Efstratios Sarischoulis analyzes the role of the gods, fate, and free will in his book-length essay *Fate, Gods and Freedom of Action in the Epic Poems of Homer*. In Sarischoulis' reading decision-making as it appears in the two epic poems describes any freedom of action there might be, despite the deterministic forces represented by the gods. He argues that fate and the gods have much less impact on the decisions of men than many philologists have previously argued. He does this in the context of his profound understanding of the broader literature about Homeric epics.

In the introduction to *Fate, Gods and the Freedom of Action in the Epic Poems of Homer* Sarischoulis describes his intention to focus on the conceptions of fate and human self-perception. Furthermore he makes the point that the Homeric characters also depend on their author Homer,

who in turn is bound by the epic tradition. Sarischoulis does this by first focusing on the different terms Homer used to describe fateful situations. He concludes plausibly that those different terms should not be translated as “fate”; rather they are structural guidelines that consequently influence and follow human actions, but do not determine them. Sarischoulis then compares the gods with the mortals and notes their similarity in being bound by certain rules. As he notes though, this does not necessarily work, since ultimately the gods exist on a different cosmic level.

This leads Sarischoulis to describe many examples to demonstrate the process of how decisions develop in the epic poems. Even though there is no precise term for “decision” in the Homeric language, Sarischoulis is convinced that the characters are conscious of the reasons for their actions. By analyzing different heroic monologues, he shows the differentiated decision-making process they pass through. Ultimately he concludes that the gods, who may influence this process, are not decisive. Instead the gods only offer motives; even as the gods urge the characters to do one thing or the other, they do not eliminate the capacity to choose. As a result, Sarischoulis demonstrates that causality does only limit available options; the choice belongs to the individual all the same.

Further examples follow that demonstrate the capacity of the characters to be responsible for their deeds. For example Achilles is urged by the Greek legation Presbeia to fight against Troy. Meticulously Sarischoulis shows how the hero Achilles evaluates the different arguments, and then makes up his own mind, completely aware that he alone is to decide, and therefore no god nor fate is responsible for his decision. He is very alone.

This is in order that Sarischoulis can make his main point which is that while order emerges out of the fate, fate is a cosmic rule one can comply with, or not. His argument is that in contrast to causality it does not limit the options per se. However, to disobey causes consequences one must bear. So gods, causality and fate are not determinative factors for the decision-making process of the characters, but only contributing ones.

The only exception to this rule of decision-making, Sarischoulis finds, is the fate of death. Ultimately, it is not even determined when one dies, but only that he does. The mortal's actions are crucial for his time of death, and the gods have the power to prolong his lifetime, but nevertheless he must die in the end.

Gods, Fate and the Freedom of Action in the Epic Poems of Homer is written in an accessible manner in large part because asides are tucked into footnotes, where the more specialized reader might delve deeper. In general the chapter arrangement is well chosen, yet sometimes the inter-relationships are not always clear; e.g. the different terms for “fate” that appear in the epic poems are analyzed very early in the essay, but the results of the analysis are used mainly at the very end. Indeed it is somewhat remarkable that Sarischoulis' study of those terms takes more than one third of the book; for some reason, he is determined to mention every single spot in Homer's work where the terms show up. This certainly gives a most ample view on the topic, but it is not completely necessary to the overall point he makes.

Sarischoulis concentrates mostly on interpreting the Homeric texts. Therefore there is a strong reference to them that guides the reader easily throughout the book, as the author always keeps the title of his work *Fate, Gods, and the Freedom of Action* in mind. My only criticism is that by being so thorough, he risks repetitiveness, and leaves out some abstraction. This approach makes the book easy to read indeed, but it restrains the author from further interpretations.

All the more Sarischoulis has to be appreciated for making his point clear about the decision-making process of the Homeric heroes. His usage of secondary literature is profound and wide-ranging. More importantly, he successfully applies the broader literature, but without omitting his own views.

The main strength of the book then is that Sarischoulis does not only focus on the relatively neglected aspect of free will and responsibility of the Homeric human being, but thoroughly and convincingly points out that fate, and the gods have much less impact on the decisions of the epic heroes than many philologists have previously argued.