

*Martha C. Nussbaum: The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* Cambridge University Press, 1986. 544 p. GBP 12.95.

This is a challenging and stimulating attempt to grasp some of the issues of Greek ethics through their literary manifestations in tragedy and the works of Plato and Aristotle. Martha Nussbaum is well equipped for dealing intelligently with this complex. And she is intensely aware of the eternally human relevance of the classical responses to the dilemmas of individual ethics.

In fact the book is less concerned with drama than with philosophy (though M.N. would not separate the two). An initial analysis of some aspects of Aeschylean drama and of the *Antigone* (Euripides is not in the foreground except for a paradigmatic epilogue on the *Hecuba* at the end of the book) leads over to the first main section, a discussion of 'early and middle' Plato which focuses on the *Protagoras*, the *Republic*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. The idea of a confrontation and conflict, both on a personal and an interpersonal level, receives appropriate emphasis in M.N.'s approach (but it is not altogether clear why she has bracketed out the *Gorgias*). This stress on the dramatic — indeed, literary, and also highly personal — character of the dialogues includes important new insights: her interpretation of (part of) Plato's oeuvre as 'antitragic theater' can actually be regarded as a very valuable contribution to Platonic scholarship. The last section, which analyses Aristotle's ethics in relation to tragedy and Plato, is slightly more conventional than could have been expected. Though M.N. intellectually sides with Aristotle's practical wisdom, maybe Plato's dilemmas, his intellectual experiments and his visions are emotionally more congenial to her ?.

By presenting and discussing Greek philosophy as living literature, M.N. rebuilds long-since forgotten bridges. But there are several risks involved. Though many of her analyses are simply brilliant, and she is sufficiently well-read and learned to avoid the usual traps of subjectivity, she moves on a ground where too many specialists (ranging from philologists and historians over sociologists and estheticians to philosophers) have been cultivating vineyards of their own. All readers cannot be expected to have all the tolerance necessary for accepting this kind of approach. The book is a *mega biblion* in almost every sense; it is bristling with ideas and arguments, it is eloquent to the point of verbosity, and it makes no easy reading for anybody. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, it seems to represent a new, profoundly promising trend in classical scholarship: the sophisticated, boundary-transcending, dauntlessly fresh and suggestive interpretation of the classics for today's and (let us hope) tomorrow's intellectuals.

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