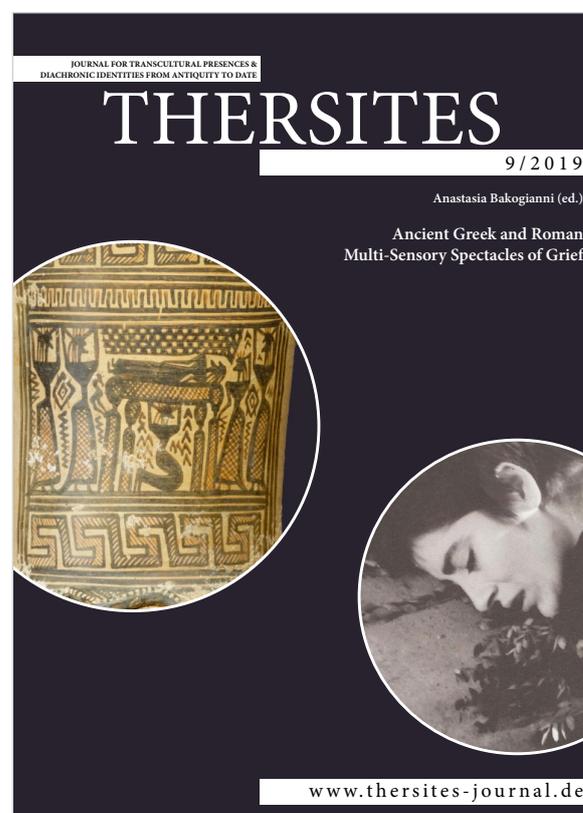


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R E V I E W

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Review of Nils Kircher, *Tragik bei Homer und Vergil. Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zum Tragischen im Epos* (Heidelberg 2018) (= *Studien zu Literatur und Erkenntnis*, Band 9), 242 pp.
ISBN: 978-3-8253-6223-2, 61 € (hb).

LITERATURE is all about emotions. As a prime example the genres of ancient epic and tragedy come to mind, for they often feature dramatic episodes involving conflict, bravery, failure, death and mourning. By ascribing a tragic character to the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the two foremost epics of Greek and Latin literature, the quasi-paradoxical title of the monograph under review plays with such widespread notions as well as with the affinity between the two genres that has been postulated since antiquity. Contrary to much current emotion studies in the field of Classics, Kircher however does not so much investigate the emotions of the fictional characters as depicted in the texts, but rather the affective responses these texts are intended to evoke from their readers.¹ His main focus lies on the history of scholarship and philosophical issues, as the author in a decidedly hermeneutic stance (cf. the subtitle) aims at reconstructing the historical horizon of expectations of ancient audiences based on a close reading of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

1 To be fair, although the present review conveniently appears in a special issue devoted to the emotions, Kircher himself does not primarily contextualize his study within literary emotion studies but has a specific focus on Aristotelian (and Stoic) philosophy, for which he refers to Michael Krewet's studies *Die Theorie der Gefühle bei Aristoteles* (Heidelberg 2011) and *Die stoische Theorie der Gefühle. Ihre Aporien. Ihre Wirkmacht* (Heidelberg 2013) as well as Teun Tieleman, *Chrysippus' On Affections. Reconstruction and Interpretation* (Leiden/Boston 2003).

After a brief introduction (chapter 1: pp. 13–18) and an extended overview of trends in scholarship on the concept of the tragic in Homer (chapter 2: pp. 19–56; on its focus and its limitations see below), the long third chapter (pp. 57–125) reviews crucial passages from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Here a general exposition of the Aristotelian theory of epic and its close connections with tragedy is followed by critical analyses of problematic key concepts such as the character of the ideal tragic hero, which is basically good but flawed because of a *hamartia* (tragic error) leading to his downfall. The audience’s partial self-identification with the characters in turn produces the cognitively based emotions of *eleos* (pity) and *phobos* (fear), resulting in a *katharsis*, an epistemic goal defined as a kind of intellectual empathy or refined emotionality. According to Kircher, these Aristotelian concepts are crucial for the interpretation of Homer’s *Iliad* as well, which he demonstrates in chapter 4 (pp. 127–188) by applying them to the characters and actions of Patroclus and Hector that culminate in their ‘tragic’ deaths – a fate not wholly determined by the gods but also caused by (avoidable, emotionally induced) wrong decisions taken by the characters themselves. In the final, much shorter fifth chapter (pp. 189–214) this Homeric method of composition is then contrasted with Vergil’s radically different conception of the tragic in epic, which – again after a brief review of selected scholarship – is illustrated by a (deplorably superficial) reading of two examples from the *Aeneid*, the episodes of Nisus and Euryalus and Dido respectively (for a detailed criticism of this chapter see below). The book is rounded off with a summary (6: pp. 215–223), a brief English abstract (7: pp. 225–226), and a bibliography (8: pp. 227–242).

As stated in the preface, the book is the slightly revised version of the author’s doctoral dissertation, submitted in 2012 at the Philipps University of Marburg. A few (predominantly German) studies published since have obviously been worked in.² Despite such minor revisions the book’s origins are still visible, which in the eyes of the present reviewer constitutes its strength as well as its weakness (the latter far outweighing the former). On the one hand, the close readings of crucial passages from ancient criticism (especially Aristotle) and meticulous analyses of previous scholarship allow the reader to follow the argument step by step. On the other hand, excessively long quotations and long-winded paraphrases of scholarly literature

2 The most recent title is another Marburg dissertation: Sven Meier, *Die Ilias und ihr Anfang. Zur Handlungskomposition als Kunstform bei Homer* (Heidelberg 2018).

(in the text as well as in the footnotes) render the reading experience a bit tiresome, the more so as chapter 2 centers around the old controversy about the possibility of ascribing to Homeric characters free actions of self-conscious subjects, sparked by Bruno Snell's *Discovery of the Mind* (*Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, 4th edition, 1975 [originally 1946]). Kircher self-professedly focuses on German scholarship predominantly from the mid-twentieth century as the fundamental approach in research in this area (p. 17).³ Although he states that Anglophone scholarship tends to be less dominated by Romantic and idealistic conceptions and can therefore be used as a corrective (pp. 50 and 215), with respect to the tragic in Homer only older studies such as James Redfield's (1978, ²1994) and Richard Rutherford's (1982) are given extended consideration (pp. 50–52, 163, 183–188). In contrast, Yoav Rinon's 2008 monograph (*Homer and the Dual Model of the Tragic* [Ann Arbor]) is reviewed only briefly as an 'intriguing' ("*spannend*"), yet 'partly convincing and partly forced' ("*teilweise überzeugend, teilweise gezwungen*") contribution (p. 55 n. 162).⁴

In general Kircher relies heavily on the approach of his *Doktorvater* Arbogast Schmitt and that of his 'school'.⁵ So it does not come as a surprise that in his discussion of the psychological make-up of Homeric characters and interpretation of controversial passages from Aristotle's *Poetics* he regularly arrives at the same conclusions as Schmitt.⁶ In my view, it would have been better to shorten the preliminary analysis (especially his overview of

3 Still, it reads oddly to discover on pp. 16f. as an example of the 'latest research' ("*neueste Forschung*") a reference to a 1995 study by Joachim Latacz, followed by an Albin Lesky quote from 1962. Sometimes Kircher's overview of scholarship lacks historical perspective: Hermann Gundert's essay (Charakter und Schicksal homerischer Helden, *Neue Jahrbücher für Antike und deutsche Bildung* 3 [1940] 225–237) is discussed at length (pp. 34f. and 45–48; cf. p. 152 n. 439 and p. 163 n. 449) without mentioning the journal's national socialist background.

4 Cf. now also Rana Saadi Liebert, *Tragic Pleasure from Homer to Plato* (Cambridge 2017).

5 Publications by Schmitt himself and his former students, among them Gyburg Radke-Uhlmann and Michael Krewet, make up a considerable part of the (anyway not very extensive) bibliography. Schmitt is also one of the editors of the series in which Kircher's book has appeared.

6 Cf. especially Arbogast Schmitt, *Selbständigkeit und Abhängigkeit menschlichen Handelns bei Homer. Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Psychologie Homers* (Stuttgart 1990) and his substantial commentary of Aristotle's *Poetics* (Berlin 2008, ²2011).

the history of scholarship) and to summarize the results, as is conveniently done in the concluding sections of each (sub)chapter. In this way he would have been able to devote more space to the application of theoretical perspectives to the interpretation of the actual epics. As it stands, in its analysis of Patroclus and Hector in the *Iliad*, Nisus and Euryalus, and Dido in the *Aeneid* as 'tragic' characters Kircher's book covers the same ground as many previous studies. The present reviewer would have liked to read the author's thoughts on tragic features in other, less often treated passages in order to broaden the textual sampling of the epics.

Apart from these reservations, the main problem is the striking imbalance between the amount of space devoted to Homer and Vergil respectively. The chapter on Homer (or rather the *Iliad*) amounts to 60 pages (and Homer features prominently as well in Kircher's overview of scholarship in chapter 2 and in chapter 3 on Aristotle's *Poetics*), while the Vergil chapter is a mere 25 pages long. The original title of the dissertation '*Tragisches Handeln bei Homer. Mit einem kontrastierenden Ausblick auf die Tragikonzeption Vergils*' (cf. the preface) correctly labels the section on the *Aeneid* as an appendix, whereas the book's title '*Tragik bei Homer und Vergil*' suggests an equal treatment of both epics. Readers expecting a thorough discussion of the *Aeneid* as a 'tragic epic' will thus be disappointed, and not just for reasons of coverage.

Kircher's central methodological premise is to use Aristotle as the main point of reference for his analysis of ancient epic. He convincingly argues that although it might seem anachronistic to use a fourth-century treatise as a key to the interpretation of the Homeric epics, it is still preferable to stay within an ancient Greek frame of reference rather than to apply modern concepts of the tragic such as Schiller's or Lessing's. However, although he correctly states that for Vergil Hellenistic philosophy and literary criticism were probably more important than Aristotle (esp. p. 192), he does not consequently build on this line of argument.⁷ As a result, the author adopts the very perspective that he rejected in his culture-immanent readings of Homer and Aristotle, when he makes aesthetic judgments about the *Aeneid*

7 Beyond Stoicism (cf. the qualifying remarks in n. 537 on pp. 210f.), it would have been interesting to discuss recent trends in Vergil criticism in connection with the Epicurean theory of emotions; cf., e.g., David Armstrong, Jeffrey Fish, Patricia A. Johnston, Marilyn B. Skinner (eds.), *Vergil, Philodemus, and the Augustans* (Austin 2004).

based on Aristotelian categories.⁸ Of course Vergil's *Aeneid* need not be 'tragic' in the same way as the Homeric epics. According to Kircher, in Homer Aristotle's concept of the tragic in the sense of a 'Charaktertragödie' ('tragedy of character') is already inherent. In the case of the *Aeneid*, his labels 'Werttragödie' ('tragedy of values', in the case of Nisus and Euryalus) and 'Leidenschaftstragödie' ('tragedy of passions', in Dido's case, in some respects anticipating Senecan tragedy) may indeed capture some of the Roman epic's essence, but it is not necessary to denounce Vergil's characters as less sophisticated than Homer's (pp. 220f.). The most striking example of this tendency is demonstrated in the following quotation from the conclusion (p. 221), which contrasts the truly Aristotelian 'Furcht und Mitleid' as realized in Homer's characters with Vergil's allegedly sentimentalized 'Jammer und Schauer' (based on the interpretation of the Aristotelian terms *eleos* and *phobos* in chapter 3.2.2):⁹

"Die Folge dieser Darstellungsweise [sc. Vergils] sind emotionale, pathetische, allgemein sentimentale Stimmungsbilder, die auf jammer- und schauerdervolle Erschütterung des Rezipienten abzielen, die er mit den innerepischen Rezipienten teilt. Ganz anders gestaltet sich das konkrete und differenzierte Mitleid bei Homer [...]. Dieses Mitleid ist kein undifferenzierter, sentimentalischer Jammer, der die Gründe des Scheiterns nicht hinterfragt."

Such evaluative comparisons of Homer and Vergil are themselves the product of the history of scholarship (including that of German idealism), which Kircher sets out to review critically in the rest of his book.

Moreover, in the chapter on Vergil the problems regarding the selection of scholarship, already raised, are much more worrying. Kircher relies on a small and not very up-to-date selection of Vergilian scholarship, mainly from the twentieth century.¹⁰ Niklas Holzberg's complaint about the exponential growth of scholarship raised in his internet bibliography on the *Aeneid* (most recently updated in 2014) cannot be used as an excuse not to engage with more recent studies (cf. p. 194 with n. 506). To give but one

8 Cf. the revealing clause on p. 222: "[...] wenn man sie [sc. die Aeneis] an den Kategorien der Aristotelischen Poetik mißt [...]."

9 Cf. the similar statements on p. 206. The short English abstract (pp. 225f.) uses more neutral terms.

10 Tellingly, the bibliography on Nisus and Euryalus in nn. 526 and 530 on pp. 200–203 does not go beyond Steven Farron's 'new' ("neue") review of scholarship from 1993 (cf. also p. 196 n. 518).

example, I highly recommend Vassiliki Panoussi's 2009 monograph (*Greek Tragedy in Vergil's Aeneid. Ritual, Empire, and Intertext* [Cambridge]), which adopts a different, less formalist approach in the context of the civil wars and the Augustan restoration. In contrast, in Kircher's monograph, intertextuality (with the Homeric epics, with Attic tragedy, with Hellenistic literature) plays no role at all (nor does narratology, despite some passing references to phenomena such as authorial comments or apostrophe in Homer and Vergil).

To conclude, the book under review has a clear methodological focus and raises some good points in its detailed analysis of texts, but it failed to convince the present reviewer in terms of its overall outlook. In particular, the brief and rather biased chapter on Vergil does not do justice to the complexity of the *Aeneid's* 'tragic' vision. The high expectations raised by the title and the blurb, promising a 'detailed contrasting interpretation' of the concept of the tragic in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* ("in ausführlicher, kontrastierender Interpretation des Tragischen in der Ilias Homers und in der Aeneis Vergils") and their modern reception, are not fulfilled.¹¹

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11 In formal respects the book has been carefully produced; all Greek and Latin quotations are accompanied by German translations (not the author's own, but taken from Schadewaldt's for Homer [cf. p. 129 n. 408], Schmitt's for Aristotle [cf. p. 62 n. 176], and Binder's for Vergil [cf. p. 199 n. 523]). There are no indices, which is partly compensated by a detailed table of contents. I noticed only a few errors (p. 194 n. 506: Vorbemerkung; p. 199: mit Ihrem Plan), mainly in the bibliography: p. 230 (cf. p. 54 n. 156): missing year for Danek (2014); p. 231: wrong alphabetical order; two missing titles: Latacz 1995 (full reference in n. 9 on p. 16; cf. the critical review on pp. 53f.) and Schmidt 2001 (full reference in n. 509 on p. 194).