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Marina Berzins McCoy. *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy.* Oxford University Press 2013.

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Marina Berzins McCoy. *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy.* Oxford University Press 2013. 256 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199672783).

In the preface to this book McCoy asserts that ‘Greek epic, tragedy, and philosophy have important insights to offer about the nature of human vulnerability and how human beings might better come to terms with their own vulnerability’ (viii). *Wounded Heroes* amply justifies this claim, offering a selection of case-studies that demonstrate the scope and sophistication of Greek thinking about human vulnerability. The book’s central argument is that the Greeks rightly maintained the view that by embracing human vulnerability, both individually and together as political communities, we open up the space for the full realization of our humanity, for the virtuous life. Vulnerability is essential to the human condition, and to seek (or to think of oneself as having) an invulnerable godlike super-human state is a sort of bad faith or delusion that in fact de-humanizes us and leads to various problems for both the individual and the community. The case is made by a series of close readings of selected works of Homer, Sophocles, Plato, and Aristotle.

In the first chapter, ‘Woundedness, Narrative, and Community in the *Iliad*’, McCoy argues that in the *Iliad* we can see vulnerability as a distinctly human concern, tied up with our mortality and our propensity to be wounded. Further, through the example of Achilles and Priam in particular, vulnerability is depicted as essential to the formation of social and political bonds. McCoy suggests that a failure to acknowledge vulnerability accounts for Achilles’ detachment from his comrades and ultimately the death of Patroclus. Once Achilles does accept vulnerability he can be integrated again into the community. Here McCoy focuses in particular on the meeting with Priam in the final book, which demonstrates how an acceptance of our shared vulnerability underpins fundamental human communal activities such as eating together and mourning and acknowledging others’ loss. Moreover, the mutual acceptance of vulnerability, which manifests itself in such practices, opens up the space to reflect sensitively on our shared human condition and also allows for a meaningful human life in a community. The argument offers an engaging account of the essential humanity at the heart of the *Iliad*.

The second and third chapters explore tragedy. ‘Oedipus and Theseus at the Crossroads’ focuses on Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. The central concern is how to handle the effects of vulnerability on both the individual and community. In *Oedipus the King* Oedipus lacks knowledge and is a staunch denier of his own vulnerability, which leads to various terrible things for him personally; moreover, his actions and attitudes have detrimental effects on the community as a whole. McCoy suggests that Sophocles provides a positive account of how to deal with the fallout: certain rites, customs, and activities allow people collectively to move forward, that is, to accept vulnerability, deal with its effects, and keep living as a community. On the one hand, we have the blinding, exile, and wandering on the part of Oedipus himself, but more strikingly, in *Oedipus at Colonus* we see Theseus accepting Oedipus, the wounded man, in the same manner that he would a guest or a stranger. Theseus accepts vulnerability in a way that Oedipus himself did not, and by doing so he finds a way to integrate Oedipus back into the human community, providing him (and others) some sort of meaningful closure. ‘Pity as a Civic Virtue in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*’ offers another example of the connection between the acceptance of vulnerability and the formation of the social bonds and practices that allow for community. McCoy argues that the pity shown by Neoptolemus to Philoctetes for the harms he has suffered alleviates problems that might arise from failure to acknowledge his vulnerability. This aids Philoctetes’ own acceptance of what has befallen

him (rather than wallowing in self-pity), and allows him to move on with his life. Both chapters offer attractive accounts of the nature of tragedy, emphasizing the resolution of tensions between individual and community that arise from vulnerability (which the community gathered together as the audience can experience together) and the reassertion of the community's strength as allowing a space for meaningful and virtuous human lives even in the most challenging circumstances.

Chapters Four and Five address Plato. In 'Wounding and Wisdom in Plato's *Gorgias*' McCoy argues against the view that Plato is insensitive to vulnerability and human imperfection. She focuses on the concluding myth, in which we stand naked before the judges in the afterlife, and suggests that Socrates acknowledges fundamental human vulnerability and weakness. Rather than ordinary bonds of community, however, Socrates stresses that it is shared philosophical practice that offers the best therapy for our psychological wounds and vulnerability, even if we do not in fact succeed in gaining virtue, self-sufficiency, or knowledge before death. The Socratic practice of philosophy, involving interactive dialectical conversation, is seen as arising owing to an awareness of our vulnerability (epitomized most by Socrates and his disavowal of knowledge), and it offers a narrative or means by which to live a good life. 'Eros, Woundedness, and Creativity in Plato's *Symposium*' focuses on our vulnerability as incomplete creatures dependent in some way on external things for our flourishing. McCoy suggests that Platonic *eros* arises from this vulnerability, but the proper end of *eros* is not the dissolution of our vulnerability by grasping the changeless Form of the Beautiful or the Good, which might also involve a sort of isolation from standard human erotic relationships. Again vulnerability is not seen as a problem so much as an opportunity: once we have embraced our vulnerability we can harness fully the power of *eros*, and thus vulnerability opens up the space for human creativity and the sort of productive activities that make life meaningful—such as erotic relationships, intellectual endeavour, the making of beautiful things, the procreation of future generations, and the like. The cogency of these readings is up for debate, but they resonate most strongly when viewed against those scholars who argue that Plato essentially advocates overcoming our vulnerability through self-sufficiency, self-control, and the marginalization of contingent factors.

Chapters Six and Seven focus on Aristotle. 'Friendship and Moral Failure in Aristotle's *Ethics*' explores the vulnerability inherent in the virtue of friendship. Aristotle stresses the centrality of friendship in the good human life, but a friend might turn bad and deprive us of such a good. This illustrates Aristotle's acknowledgement of our vulnerability and its crucial role in the good life, for it has an essential role in friendship. The case is well made and fits well with Aristotle's acknowledgement of the role of external goods more generally. 'Tragedy, Katharsis, and Community in Aristotle's *Poetics*' considers explicitly the political function of tragedy. Here McCoy focuses on the narrative and performative elements as a communal means to deal with and respond to vulnerability and its effects. Drawing heavily on Aristotle's *Poetics*, she suggests that tragedy is at heart a political and communal practice, and as such we must understand *katharsis* more in political or communal rather than individualistic terms. *Katharsis* allows a rebalancing of the community as it reflects as a whole on the suffering and vulnerability of the various individuals that comprise it—such a reflective and therapeutic space, which encourages sympathy towards others, is provided by the public performance of tragedy.

Each of the chapters is well-written and stimulating. However, the major concern with this study is that there is no specific Greek term identified with the English 'vulnerability', and the topic that we are dealing with is extremely multi-faceted, to the point that a lot of more or less related material is covered without a really clear and powerful unifying factor beyond the real or potential suffering of harm, being in a position of weakness or exposure, or being in a less than ideal position

vis-à-vis something or other—all construed in a variety of ways. Indeed, throughout the book vulnerability can and does take a huge variety of guises: for instance, at times we have the focus on the physical body with the motifs of wounding and nakedness and the ever present fact of our mortality; at other times the focus is on psychological harm and suffering as a result of vice, ignorance, or the actions of others; then we have the case of external goods that are subject to contingency such as friendship, ourselves being subject to the vicissitudes of fate, and the notion that external forces impose on us and demand some response—for instance, the world itself (‘what is’) demands an epistemic response when we might be ignorant of the truth and even powerless to gain it (‘epistemic vulnerability’ according to McCoy); and so forth. Throughout the book McCoy liberally uses the term ‘vulnerability’ to capture all such threads, but at times it is hard to discern how far this choice of vocabulary accurately captures the interests of the Greek texts, and indeed to what extent a specific notion of vulnerability was identified and addressed by the Greeks themselves.

The nature of vulnerability perhaps comes out best when contrasted with invulnerability. For McCoy’s real beef seems to be with Martha Nussbaum and others who have stressed the place of self-sufficiency and strength of character—the virtuous man’s invulnerability to vice and the vicissitudes of fortune—in the philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle, and indeed in ancient Greek ethical thought more generally. This book is a move in the other direction, and in particular it helpfully emphasises the role of political community (rather than inner moral strength) as a means to deal with some of the implications of our vulnerability. But more could have been said about the later Hellenistic schools where the idea of invulnerability seems to take on an even bigger role. I would also have liked some discussion of the Presocratic philosophers and the notion of ‘becoming like god’, which does seem to suggest a strong interest in surpassing rather than embracing the vulnerabilities that befall human beings. Indeed, the philosophical texts and authors considered explicitly are quite limited, and a widening of scope would help bolster the argument against Nussbaum and like-minded scholars.

Two further minor observations: the transcribed Greek often contains annoying errors that should have been remedied and the choice of translations is rather odd and haphazard. For instance, in Chapter Seven we are given Bucher’s 1895 translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Jowett’s translation of Plato’s *Timaeus* in Chapter Six is another example). Such old translations have the virtue of now being accessible for free online, but with more recent translations available some comment might have been made about the rationale behind the choice.

Having aired such worries, it must be stressed that this is an engaging and thought-provoking book that highlights some fascinating issues. The bold conclusion that ‘the embrace of vulnerability becomes crucial to virtuous living’, particularly in political community, will stimulate the attention of all interested in ancient Greek ethical and political thought.

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