
Charles L. Griswold and David Konstan have collected twelve essays in this volume addressing various portrayals of forgiveness in ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts. Most of the authors of these essays attended a conference in June, 2007, on ancient forgiveness that was organized by Griswold and Konstan. “Ancient Forgiveness is an outgrowth of the conversations that unfolded at that wonderful conference” (p. xiii).

In Griswold’s brief preface to the volume he raises the puzzle of how to define forgiveness and points to the opening essay of the volume in which Adam Morton explicitly addresses the question “What counts as forgiveness?” (3). Morton resists offering a definition of forgiveness and instead suggests a “territory of forgiveness” where various emotions and actions are intertwined. He denies that there is or should be a single paradigm scenario of forgiveness. Instead there is a mix of emotions and linkages which unfold in a variety of ways. Typically there are at least two people involved, one of whom has harmed the other. From this initial fault emerge blame, repentance, reconciliation, and many other events and emotions.

The rest of the essays in the volume supposedly work within the loose framework provided by Morton. This means that different authors employ somewhat different understandings of what constitutes forgiveness. Furthermore, the articles are largely text-based. They do not offer comprehensive theories of forgiveness in the ancient world; instead they examine the forgiveness dynamics in particular texts. Admittedly, the texts are chosen for their connections to the “territory of forgiveness,” but this does not imply any claim about comprehensiveness. Finally, it should be noted that for all the diversity of categories and texts in this volume, there is ongoing conversation with Charles Griswold’s earlier book Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) wherein Griswold maps the considerable differences between modern conceptions of forgiveness and accounts of forgiveness in ancient philosophical texts. Most of the essays in this volume respond explicitly or implicitly to Griswold’s contention that the perfectionist virtue ethic in this philosophical literature precludes the emotional narratives that frequent modern scenarios of forgiveness.

In the section “Forgiveness Among the Greeks” David Konstan’s essay “Assuaging Rage” begins with the question “Did the ancient Greeks and Romans forgive?” Konstan replies to this question by declaring: “In this chapter, I argue that they did not—at least not in the sense the term commonly bears today …” (p. 17). Konstan begins with Aristotle’s analyses of anger and its appeasement. He examines the role of sungnōmē noting both its distinction from the modern term forgiveness and the peculiar way it is employed in these discussions. Konstan examines Stoic understanding of sungnōmē, offers a brief reading of the Iliad and the Odyssey, and concludes with a close reading of the interactions of Demeas, Moschion, and Chrysis in Meanander’s Samia. In all this, Konstan points to notions and instances of reconciliation, but argues reconciliation occurs in the context of status and authority and not in sequences of remorse, repentance, and forgiveness. Page duBois’ essay “Achilles, Psammenitus, and Antigone” reinforces Konstan’s claim that modern notions of forgiveness are absent in this literature. She expands the linguistic range of this analysis by examining the force of pathē, sympatheia, empatheia, and philos. While duBois reads a variety of texts, including Herodotus and Antigone, she focuses on the dynamics of Priam and Achilles in the Iliad. While there may be pity, subjection, and reconciliation in this story, duBois argues...
that there is no forgiveness. She concludes by suggesting that it is a mistake to assume forgiveness is a universal human trait, and instead contends that modern notions of forgiveness are “a product of centuries of cultural labor” (p. 47).

Kathryn Gutzwiller takes a somewhat different tack in her essay “All in the Family.” After a brief survey of incapacities and limitations of sungnōmē in tragedy, she turns to New Comedy and the plays of Menander to argue that a reversal of the tragic form occurs. While in tragedy sungnōmē plays largely a civic role, in Menander forgiveness works mostly in the context of family. While it is typically the male authority figure who has the power to offer forgiveness to a repentant family member, in a series of readings of Menander’s plays Gutzwiller focuses on the central role played by women. Women in these plays overcome social stereotypes and act as free moral agents, mediating forgiveness within the family. Furthermore, in occasions of rape, they become the central actors because only they can offer forgiveness. She concludes that while “individuals surely did sometimes practice forgiveness in earlier Greek culture” it was not until the “Socratic questioning of traditional morality” that forgiveness became a positive value (p. 74). Furthermore, in the plays of Menander forgiveness is portrayed consistently as a positive good, and it is often the women who as free moral agents create the forgiveness in these stories.

Susanna Morton Braund opens the section “Forgiveness Among the Romans” with an account of “The Anger of Tyrants and the Forgiveness of Kings.” As she notes, she is not examining forgiveness by individuals in the context of private lives but the forgiveness of kings. The question in Roman literature is that of the rage of the ruler and the moderation of that rage, the interplay of ira and clementia. She argues that clementia is a uniquely Roman concept for which there is no Greek equivalent. There emerges in Roman literature a standard script for clementia wherein the absolute ruler forgoes his power to punish and thereby places the forgiven person under “permanent obligation” (p. 91). Thus, clementia can only be truly offered by someone above the law who acts out of his own virtues and not according to accepted norms. Thus, forgiveness belongs only to paterfamilias.

Kristina Milnor in her essay “Gender and Forgiveness in the Roman Empire” focuses upon the space within imperial clementia for the participation of women. Milnor, in agreement with Braund, notes that clementia, due to its public character, belongs to maleness. However, Milnor narrates in her essay the accounts of numerous Roman women who effect clementia in both public and private settings. She points in particular to Livia, the wife of Augustus, who not only participates in the clementia of Augustus but often becomes its originator and main advocate. Milnor concludes that “because women were by their gender excluded from the games of one-upmanship that characterized Roman hierarchy” their acts of clementia were seen as emerging not from political authority but from the vulnerabilities of the domestic or private sphere (p. 114). In this way, these women begin to transform the concept of forgiveness into its modern sense of belonging primarily to interpersonal and private dynamics.

The divine dimensions of clementia are explored by Zsuzsanna Várhelyi in her article “To Forgive is Divine.” She begins by acknowledging Anna Clark’s contention that the various Roman abstract divinities (Clementia, Concordia, Libertas, and others) are “divine qualities” that can only be understood by their relationship to real persons and groups (p. 116). She focuses on the association of Caesar with clementia, including the temple dedication to Clementia Caesaris and the problem of Caesar’s unfortunate clemency towards Brutus. This leads to a detailed reading of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ account of the story of Coriolanus.