
Justina Gregory
Smith College

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James Franklin Johnson,
*Acts of Compassion in Greek Tragic Drama.*


This study examines the workings of compassion—Johnson’s preferred translation of Greek terms such as *eleos* and *oiktos* because it suggests equality, as opposed to condescension, between the participants— in the *Iliad* and tragedy.

Archaic and classical Greece have traditionally been associated with harsh values: vendetta justice, helping friends and harming enemies. De Romilly sketched out fresh terrain with *La Douceur dans la Pensée Grecque* (Paris, 1979), and since then the ancient emotions have been the subject of wide-ranging cross-disciplinary studies such as Braund and Most’s edited *Ancient Anger: Perspectives from Homer to Galen* (Cambridge, 2004), Harris’s *Restraining Rage* (New York, 2004), and Konstan’s *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (Toronto, 2006, synthesizing his previous published work). None of these titles figure in Johnson’s bibliography. He makes good use, to be sure, of Konstan’s *Pity Transformed* (London, 2001), Munteanu’s *Tragic Pathos* (Cambridge, 2012), and a spate of recent articles, and he documents points of scholarly agreement and divergence in the endnotes, but his readings are essentially word-based and grounded in his chosen texts. In this respect his model resembles older works such as Burkert’s dissertation on pity (*Zum altgriechischen Mitleidsbegriff*, Erlangen, 1955) and Adkins’s *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960).

In the introduction Johnson announces his intention of analyzing compassion in Greek tragedy by moving forward from Homer rather than backward from Aristotle—a sensible course, even if there proves no avoiding Aristotle in practice. After reviewing English and Greek terminology, Johnson draws attention to the expectation or claim of reciprocal benefit that distinguishes the ancient Greek model from modern concepts of disinterested compassion. I wonder, however, whether the emphasis on benefit found in scenes of compassion is a rhetorical ploy designed to cast the transaction in a hard-headed, practical light. As Johnson notes, there was always the danger that a purely emotional response might be condemned as weak or effeminate. Thus at the end of the *Iliad* Homer’s Akhilleus cares so little about
the ransom Priam has brought with him that he immediately gives part of it back, setting aside two cloaks and a tunic to dress Hektor’s body, but simultaneously he insists that Patroklos should not be angry with him for returning the corpse, since Priam’s ransom is “not unworthy” (II. 24.594). Johnson uses his introduction to lay additional groundwork by discussing the relationship of compassion to philia, xenia, and aidôs, and by setting forth definitions or assumptions that he labels for future reference as D1 through D6. D2, for example, is a “recognition of common humanity” (21) that impels or restrains compassionate action in epic and tragedy.

Chapter 1 identifies supplication as “perhaps the most conspicuous occurrence of compassion in ancient Greece,” (25), but this claim seems problematic. First, how does one reconcile the self-abasement signified by the conventional suppliant posture with the “fundamental equality between the pitier and the pitied” (12) that Johnson regards as intrinsic to eleos and oiktos? Second, supplication, as Johnson recognizes, is a ritual overseen by Zeus in his capacity of protector of suppliants; eleos and oiktos, in contrast, depend on the secular, almost subversive sense of fellowship forged between vulnerable mortals (as opposed to the gods, who are immune to suffering) that Johnson labels D2. Akhilleus, whom Johnson rightly identifies as setting the pattern for subsequent depictions of eleos and oiktos, makes this point explicitly to Priam (II. 24. 525-26).

Chapter 2 rather perfunctorily surveys compassion in the theater, the lawcourts, and the assembly. Here I missed engagement with de Romilly, mentioned above, as well as with Herman’s Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens (Cambridge, 2006). In Chapter 3 Johnson turns to his principal task, the representation of compassion in each of the dramatists. He devotes a chapter apiece to Aischylos, Euripides, and (late) Sophokles, in that order. Johnson’s method is to narrate the action of each play, pausing to comment on salient terms. A difficulty is that the vocabulary of compassion is ubiquitous in tragedy; characters and events are so frequently described as pitiful that the sentiment dwindles in significance. In any case compassion, as Johnson admits, does not loom large in Aischylos. The theme is most prominent in Prometheus Bound, which he accepts as Aischylean and which departs from the norm by depicting gods who, like mortals, are prone to “suffer and…experience deprivation, pain, and loss” (88).

Eighteen plays of Euripides survive, with compassion a prominent theme in many. Johnson varies his approach accordingly and in Chapter 4 focuses on selected tragedies: the suppliant dramas Children of Herakles and Suppliants; the women-and-war tragedies Hekabe and Trojan Women, where the victorious Greeks comport themselves with pitiless cruelty; Medea and Orestes, which feature deceptive appeals
for compassion; and finally *Herakles*, where Theseus takes the initiative, unasked, to rescue Herakles from his suicidal despair. This is the most successful discussion in the book, attentive to context as well as vocabulary and illuminating on the dramatic interplay between the two heroes.

With Sophokles (Chapter 5) Johnson reaches the climax of his study; the playwright, he notes, “presents the…deepest and fullest treatment of the compassion theme” (n. 45, p. 230). He makes the odd decision to consider only the late plays at length. That entails including *Elektra* (whose date is in fact uncertain), a tragedy whose protagonist is notoriously pitiless, while giving short shrift to *Aias*, whose Odysseus would seem the very model of tragic compassion. Just as oddly, Johnson introduces new labels for recurrent themes in Sophokles, even though these themes often overlap with the system he introduced previously; for example, S.2.1., “compassion based on a sense of one’s common humanity” (147) appears identical to the earlier D2. Unable to identify significant moments of compassion in *Elektra*, Johnson shifts focus to discuss audience reaction to Elektra and Orestes’ implacable murders of their kin. His discussion of *Philoktetes* charts the development of Neoptolemos’ compassion for Philoktetes and suggests that the latter is both justified and sympathetic in his refusal to accompany Neoptolemos to Troy. Finally, Johnson notes that Theseus’ compassion toward the aged, polluted Oidipous in *Oidipous at Kolonos* marks him as a hero who “represented the best of Athenian qualities” (212). Sophokles, he concludes, is the playwright who most powerfully vindicates compassion as a counterweight to “the vulnerable human condition” (214).

Johnson does not ignore the contemporary implications of his topic; he begins by canvassing modern responses to catastrophic events, ranging from individual involvement to monetary donations to compassion fatigue, and ends with a poignant plea for a world that would reject aggression, violence, and retribution. Seldom has compassion seemed more necessary or been found in such short supply.

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