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INTRODUCTION

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ONE WAY ANCIENT ATHENIANS RESEMBLED MODERN AMERICANS WAS their moral discomfort with empire. The Athenians had power and used it ruthlessly; they celebrated martial prowess and glory; but in certain contexts, violence worried them. The infliction of suffering, it seems, did not fit well with their civic self-image. Athenians, like us, embraced democracy and freedom – indeed, they invented those concepts. They proudly pitted themselves against tyranny and oppression. As it happens, their very concept of the tyrant entailed, to a considerable extent, his abuse of power, his violence against innocent victims whose sufferings merited pity. Athenians therefore were deeply troubled when they saw themselves behaving in tyrannical and oppressive ways. And they discovered what we Americans are continually rediscovering: that the use of power often entails violence and the infliction of suffering even when one's aim is ostensibly lofty – even when, for example, one seeks to prevent unjust bloodshed, to intervene on behalf of the oppressed.

The aim of this volume is to explore the moral discomfort of Athenians through the theme of pity or compassion. The chapters, taken as a whole, examine the place of pity in the culture of an idealistic city-state faced with the recurrent question, "How do we maintain our hegemony?" Some authors question whether there was a role for pity in political decision making; others study the refraction of pity through tragedy, philosophy, the visual arts, and medicine. As an interdisciplinary collection embracing at a minimum history, art history, and literary criticism, this book raises diverse theoretical and interpretive issues. The authors' common purpose, however, is to describe Athenian pity in the light of historical circumstances – during the city-state's

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brief age of empire in the fifth century BCE and also during the century that followed, when Athens lost its hegemony yet retained and perpetuated its civic self-image and cultural prestige. Such an inquiry is relevant to contemporary society on both sides of the Atlantic because it can help us think about thorny questions of American and European pity, American and European power, and the ever-present issue of what to do in the face of suffering both at home and around the globe.

Nowadays, of course, the preferred term is "compassion" rather than "pity," since the latter can convey scorn, a sense of superiority greatly at odds with an egalitarian ethos. Pity, it is feared, can be a bad thing, while compassion, a word derived from church Latin for "suffering with," is conceived of as a good thing. Modern views of compassion are set firmly within a double framework of Christianity and secular humanism. Within Christianity, compassion is a virtue illustrated by Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). Within secular humanism, philosophers since Hume and Rousseau have suspected that fellow-feeling among human beings, whether it is called pity or compassion or sympathy, forms the basis for a moral society.[1] Yet a hundred years before Nietzsche rejected pity as "the greatest danger," Kant complained that sympathy is a "good-natured passion [that] is nevertheless weak and always blind."[2] He and his followers argued that reason rather than emotion must provide the foundation for morality. The last few years have witnessed attempts to bridge the supposed gap between the two. Psychologists have sought the pathways in the brain involved in generating the physiological symptoms of emotion.[3] In the field of classical philosophy, Richard Sorabji and others have revived the ancient idea, developed most of all by the Stoics, that emotion is cognitive. Martha Nussbaum, in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), argues that affect and cognition work together and that compassion has an evaluative component. It is not a raw instinct, like fear, but something more intellectual: a feeling that rests upon judgment.[4]

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The political implications of pity or compassion have been strongly felt in the United States throughout much of its history, not least in abolitionism, and especially since the nineteenth century when realist literature exposed the hardships and horrors imposed upon the poor by free-wheeling industrialization. Ironically, wealthy capitalists of that era helped shape American philanthropy.[5] Domestic political debate today focuses on public welfare and private charity. The political right and left have long squared off against one another over the efficacy of compassion. The right claims that compassion tends to weaken its recipients and in any case should be practiced by private individuals rather than by governmental agencies; the left has traditionally urged compassion as a corrective to social injustice, although lately it is seeking more hard-headed approaches.[6] In foreign policy, right and left alike are divided over the wisdom of aid and interventions, as potent images of suffering in far-flung parts of the world reach our living rooms on a nightly basis.[7] Such images convey information, but also, more overtly, they stir feelings of pity. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), explores the ambivalent shock value of film footage and still photographs depicting violence. She warns that compassion is inherently unstable, that the globalization of suffering can induce despair and apathy. Yet images of pain, she insists, are an invitation to reflect on who caused the pain, and whether it is morally excusable.

The Problem of Pity in Athens

As competing groups, then, lay claim to unjust suffering, some of it inflicted by the United States or by its allies, modern observers are left wondering how to respond – and whether pity can reliably guide the world's sole remaining superpower. But what of ancient Athens? To start with, pity there was not a virtue. It never ranked among traditional forms of moral achievement such as justness (*dikaiosunê*), self-control (*sôphrosunê*), or general excellence (*aretê*). This fact emerges clearly in

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the moralizing writings of Xenophon and Isocrates, whose occasional catalogues of virtues reveal the centrality of justness and self-control.[8] Piety ranks next in importance, with wisdom not far after. In such contexts, Isocrates sometimes praises mildness and love of humanity but he never mentions *eleos* or *oiktos*, the two classical Greek words for pity. Still, in the courts of law, one way to convince jurors of a man's good character was to praise him for his pity; one way to vilify him was to decry his pitilessness.[9] Isocrates approvingly calls his fellow citizens the most pitying, *eleêmonestatous* (15.20).[10] We are faced, then, with a seeming paradox: pity was not a virtue, yet it somehow merited praise.

That paradox deepens in Book Three of Thucydides, when the Athenians reopen debate on the fate of Mytilene, a city whose rebellion against the hegemony of Athens has just been crushed. Should all male Mytileneans be put to death, or just the ringleaders? Kleon, whom Thucydides portrays as ruthless, urges extreme measures and disparages pity as a weakness that places Athens in danger (Thuc. 3.37.2): "You don't realize how dangerous it is for you whether you go awry because you are persuaded by self-interested arguments, or whether you yield to pity . . . " Later in the speech (Thuc. 3.40.2–3), Kleon warns the Athenians of the three things most prejudicial to rule: "pity, delight in argument, or fairness. For pity is right when given reciprocally to one's peers[11] but not to those who will not pity in return and who are, by necessity, permanent enemies." Yet when Diodotos urges limiting the executions, he not only retains Kleon's focus on expediency but also mimics his warning against pity and fairness (3.48.1). The Mytilenean episode epitomizes the tension within Athenian culture with regard to pity, for Thucydides frames the explicit rejection of pity in the debate itself with a tacit acceptance of pity in the passages immediately preceding and following.[12] First, he implies that humanitarian pangs were what caused the issue to be reopened on a second day, and he uses the adjective *ômon*, or savage, to describe that initial vote of the Athenian

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assembly that condemned the Mytileneans to wholesale destruction (Thuc. 3.36.4).[13] Second, Thucydides implies that similar pangs slowed the progress of the first trireme sent to Mytilene with the terrible order (Thuc. 3.49.4). Both Kleon and Diodotos, then, reject pity as a motive for decision and political action in ancient Athens, yet their admonitions presuppose that the citizen body can be moved by *oiktos*.

Fifth-century Athenian voters, in running an empire, must often have dealt with issues of pity and the infliction of suffering. Yet most scholarly discussions of Greek pity have focused instead on Aristotle's concept of *katharsis*, the "purification" of pity and terror experienced by spectators of tragedy in the ancient theater. His treatment of pity in rhetoric stirred little interest, and until recently, pity outside the courtroom and theater was overlooked even by philosophers who studied ancient ethics. One reason for this is simple: Plato and Aristotle set the ethical agenda, and pity was not on it. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship prior to World War Two, the issue was seldom raised and, when it was, it received curt dismissal.[14] Grace Macurdy, in 1940, looked at mercy in Greek literature from a Christian vantage point. Walter Burkert, in 1955, completed his dissertation on *oiktos* and *eleos* in the Homeric poems, but then turned his attention to other themes.

The moral turbulence of the 1960s sparked a broader interest in Greek popular morality, but again, pity received short shrift. Lionel Pearson, in *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece* (1962), analyzed the place of justice in the moral outlook of the Greeks but never considered pity. Sir Kenneth Dover, writing a dozen years later in *Greek Popular Morality*, devoted just six pages to compassion (1974: 195–201). Arthur R. Hands spent twelve pages on pity for the destitute in his *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (1968). Willem Den Boer, in *Private Morality in Greece and Rome* (1979), examined the treatment of widows and orphans. Jacqueline de Romilly, in her 1979 volume *La douceur dans*

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la pensée grecque, delineated the history of humanity and gentleness in Greek literature, approaching her subject through the Greek words *praos*, *philanthrôpos*, *epieikês*, and *sungnômê* – but never *eleos* or *oiktos*.

It is generally acknowledged that Hellenists of each successive generation live in a climate of thought that leads them, within the limits of the evidence, to find their own Athens. Today's climate of thought will be more easily summarized tomorrow, but it appears that some scholars, tired of intellectual cynicism and distressed by global events, want either to build anew the moral grounds for altruism and compassion – or understand why they cannot.[15] Julia Annas, in *The Morality of Happiness* (1993), analyzed Aristotelian concepts of friendship, self-love, and justice in a section on "other-concern," and David Konstan several years ago published *Pity Transformed* (2001), the first full-length book on pity in the ancient world. In it, he traces the history of ideas about pity in Greece and Rome over a period of more than a thousand years. He acknowledges the sociological underpinnings of such ideas: "If emotions depend at least in part on beliefs," he writes, "then they have a history analogous to that of the cultures or societies that have generated them" (Konstan 2001: 9). Yet the place of pity in classical Athens accounted for only part of *Pity Transformed*, and a number of complex questions about Athenian society and culture remain to be explored in depth: In what ways did the exercise of power in the Athenian democracy affect ancient views of pity and vice versa? How did citizens develop and express their emotional responses – and ethical attitudes – toward the suffering of others? What is the relationship between pity in Athenian life and Athenian arts and letters? Why is much of Greek tragedy imbued with pity? Why do writers like Thucydides and Plato give the impression of rejecting it?

This set of questions is so daunting and so complex as to require multiple answers from scholars in different subfields of Classics. The present volume is based on a conference on Pity in Ancient Athenian Life &

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Letters held at Rutgers University in March 2002. All the contributors have attempted to understand the moral universe of ancient Athens by thinking across genres and trying to understand Athenian society as a whole. They analyze pity in historiography, oratory, tragedy, vase painting, sculpture, and medical writings – with reference to philosophy and epic along the way. Certain key texts turn up in more than one chapter: the Mytilenean debate, for example, and the suppliant plays. Most modern readers find the latter quite dull, but their dynamic of pity and suppliancy clearly commanded the interest of their original audiences and they furnish valuable evidence for fifth-century Athenian attitudes. Several of our contributors turn to these plays to elucidate ways in which pity was embedded within the discourse of power (Konstan, Tzanetou) or, alternatively, was distanced from it (Johnson and Clapp).[16] The genre of tragedy as a whole receives considerable attention in this volume because of its salience in Athenian culture and because the themes of tragedy can be looked at from many points of view – through the lens of oratory, for example, or vase painting.

Yet the historical context remains paramount. One premise shared by the present authors is that evidence from different literary genres, and from the visual arts as well, can be used to cross-check readings of passages and images in the rest and can, we hope, lead toward more secure interpretations of Athenian pity. The contributors do not agree on every point, but the chapters coalesce around the central theme of pity and power because, it will be argued, the development of pity as a *topos* in literature and art was linked to the emergence of Athens as a hegemonic city-state. Ultimately, we aim to contribute to the social and cultural history of Athens in ways suggested more than half a century ago by the *Annales* school. The interest in private lives, pursued by Paul Veyne, Peter Brown, and numerous other classicists, is also flourishing, and ancient emotions are nowadays under scrutiny: Douglas Cairns has written on shame or *aidôs* in ancient Greece, William V.

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Harris on classical anger. Like Cairns and Harris, we do not aspire to a cross-cultural analysis, although Greek pity could fruitfully be compared to the sympathetic emotions of Brazilian highlanders, studied by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, or those of Micronesian islanders, studied by Catherine Lutz, or especially those of contemporary Americans, studied by Candace Clark. Ancient Rome is deliberately overlooked, except in the final chapter, although some fascinating work on Roman emotion has been done by Carlin Barton and others. Nevertheless, we hope that our narrow focus on a single historical era will bring with it a concomitant depth.

Summary of Papers

The starting point for this investigation is the editor's chapter on the fundamental meaning and nature of Greek pity. Conceptions of *oiktos* and *eleos* are examined through their occurrence in two prose genres – oratory and historiography – that are arguably closer to ordinary experience than epic or tragedy or philosophy. Since the private controversies, public speeches, and storytelling found in the Attic orators and the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon responded, in their own age, to actual events as well as to the practical needs and interests of a wide audience, they yield abundant evidence for everyday pity and allow its definition. The exploration of pity as an emotion, complete with its physiological dimensions, permits conjecture about why pity, in ancient Athens, was not a virtue. The privileging of oratorical and historiographical texts, meanwhile, confers an interpretive advantage: it allows us to look at Greek pity without the aid of Aristotle. The explanations he offers are not the only ones possible, and it will be argued that Aristotle, perceptive as he is, should not necessarily be considered the last word on the subject.

In his chapter, David Konstan poses a key question: "What place does pity have in the cold and calculating arena of political debate?"

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His answer starts with historical scenes of supplication represented in Thucydides and Isocrates and then turns to scenes of supplication in tragedy – Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and *Heraclidae*, and Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* – that allow him to study private motives as well as public considerations. He counts on Aristotle to elucidate concepts of deserved and undeserved pity that would have shaped the outcome of actual instances of supplication. Konstan ultimately concludes that, in public debate, pity could raise political questions but not dictate political answers because the self-interest or advantage of the city mattered more.

Donald Lateiner's findings, by and large, corroborate those of Konstan. His starting point is pity in the *Iliad* – most conspicuously, the pity of Achilles – because Homeric epic enjoyed unrivaled prestige and influence within Greek culture. He then argues, from the texts of two fifth-century historians who observed the Athenian empire at work, that pity played a scant role in contemporary politics. The pity of quasi-legendary despots in Herodotus' *History* merely displayed the unlimited power at their disposal. The political expediency that Thucydides emphasized, on the other hand, was real and compelling. And pity was a luxury the weak could not afford. Rather, the strong had the power to act and "an appeal for pity [was] a sign of weakness in the world of *Machtpolitik*."

Angeliki Tzanetou supplies a pivotal explanation for the emergence of pity as a *topos* in classical Athens. Analyzing oratory and the suppliant plays, she argues that pity became a feature of civic ideology at the moment when Athens, having fended off Persia, assumed the leadership of the Delian League and acquired an empire. For concrete historical reasons, Athens claimed to be not only powerful but also compassionate, able to rise above mere self-interest. Yet "power emerges as the other face of pity," Tzanetou writes, and in reality "Athens helped those who recognized its political and military superiority and punished those

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who did not." The principle of expediency, which Thucydides revealed so incisively, could be hidden by the public self-image of Athens as a generous city.

Was pity, then, a mirage in ancient Athens, a shimmering illusion on the sands of bad faith? The most cynical observers might agree. But in that case, why did Athenians place so much emphasis on the artistic spectacle of suffering, the anguish of Hecuba or Oedipus? Pathetic images, whether brought to life on stage, or on the surface of a vase, or in stone, dramatized human plights that called for an emotional and evaluative response. They captured the inherent inequality between the pitier and the pitied. They also reminded viewers of their own precarious good fortune and kept them from becoming smug. If pity was not a mirage in ancient Athens, it was because Athenians, in keeping with their Homeric and Archaic Greek heritage, seem often to have reminded themselves that no one, no matter how powerful, was invulnerable to the blows of fate. They seem, moreover, to have believed that the spectacle of suffering in art and tragedy might play a role in the cultivation of pity. This is especially the case for tragedy, the only genre of art or literature that is thoroughly imbued with pity.

James Johnson and Douglas Clapp study the idealization of pity in Greek tragedy – its positive value and the "horror and pain of life and relationships which lack compassion and understanding." They identify, for example, a stark contrast between the human pity that permeates the action of Sophocles' *Ajax* and the lack thereof in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Most importantly, they differ from Konstan and Tzanetou in urging that the compassion shown on the tragic stage was a genuine and uncynical element in the civic education of Athenian citizens, that it was depicted as a powerful response to human suffering based on a deep awareness of human insecurity and of the corresponding need for human interdependence. Plato's attack on tragedy, they further argue, was based on a distrust of emotion and was unwarranted.

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