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Pity and Two Tragedies

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The standard Greek terms for pity are *eleos* and *oiktos*, along with their derivatives. Clearly, these do not exhaust the range of words that intersect with the modern notion of pity and compassion. For example, there exists a broad set of terms beginning with the prefix *sun-*, such as *sunalgein, sullupeisthai, sumponein*, etc., indicating participation in another's grief or pain, which is one of the basic senses of the words "pity" or "sympathy" in English. Indeed, these terms seem to get us closer to the root notion of compassion, in the sense of sharing the painful experience of another person. In Greek, sympathy in the broadest sense may be indicated by the word *philanthrôpia*, sometimes rendered in Latin as *humanitas* (the use of *sumpatheia* in this sense is late); in certain contexts (e.g., Epicurean anthropology), the simple form *philia* has this meaning (cf. Lucretius' *amicities*, 5, 1019). Of course, any indication of tears or weeping in the presence of another's suffering may, but need not, be a sign of pity (it may also indicate anger or grief, for example). To determine the particular values of such words and scenes, it is necessary to attend closely to the contexts in which they appear.

I propose to examine the role of pity in two dramatic texts that were produced within a year of one another and bear an interesting resemblance in plot. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* was staged in 409, while Euripides' *Orestes* appeared the following year, in 408. When the action of Sophocles' play begins, Philoctetes, crippled by the snake-bite that left him subject to agonizing spasms, has been eking out his life for ten years on the deserted island of Lemnos. In Euripides' tragedy, Orestes too is ill, as a result of the madness induced by the Furies after the murder of his mother. What is more, he is in the process of being tried for matricide in the council of Argos, and if convicted — as indeed proves to be the case — he will be sentenced to death. In both cases, moreover, an outsider intervenes with the promise of succor. For Philoctetes, this takes the form of the arrival of

Neoptolemus, who is in fact in conspiracy with Odysseus to trick the ailing hero into departing for Troy, where his bow is needed for victory; in the end, however, moved by Philoctetes' plight and his own sense of honor, Neoptolemus joins forces with the suffering hero. In Orestes' case, two men arrive on the scene: first, his uncle, Menelaus, and then his cousin and dearest friend, Pylades. Orestes pleads with Menelaus to help him, but Menelaus is hesitant to oppose the Argives, despite the veterans he has brought with him from Troy. With Pylades, Orestes is inclined rather to dissuade him from needlessly risking his life without hope of success (764), but Pylades regards Orestes' fortunes as his own, and helps his friend to take over the palace and hold Menelaus' daughter hostage, until the epilogue in which Apollo appears and resolves the conflict. Sophocles' play too, of course, concludes with a *deus ex machina*.

Despite the similarity in situation, however, the two tragedies differ profoundly in regard to the role of pity. Pity is at the heart of Neoptolemus' response to Philoctetes' condition. The note is sounded by the chorus when they first come upon Philoctetes' wretched lair: "I pity him [*oiktirô nin egôge*]: no human being to care for him, with no companion in sight, miserable, forever alone, he is afflicted by a savage disease and wanders at the mercy of every need that arises" (169-75; cf. *epoiktirein*, 318). When Philoctetes sees the strangers, whom he recognizes as Greeks because of their dress, he cries out: "Pity me [*oiktisantes*], a miserable man, alone, deserted, friendless and abused; speak to me, if you come as friends" (227-29). He recalls how merchants who on rare occasions took refuge on Lemnos were moved to pity (*eleousi*), though they balked at taking him aboard their ships (307-11). Philoctetes falls at the knees of the young man, beseeches him by Zeus, god of suppliants, to rescue him from the island (484-86), and concludes by begging: "pity me [*m' eleêson*]; observe how all things are ominous, and mortals risk not only faring well but also the reverse" (501-03).

Philoctetes' appeal to human vulnerability is a commonplace. Aristotle defines pity as "pain arising from a perceived evil that is destructive or painful, in a person who does not deserve to meet with it — an evil that one may expect either to suffer oneself, or that one's own may; and this, when the evil appears near" (*Rhet*. 2, 8, 2). Those

who have lost everything are, accordingly, incapable of pity, since they have nothing more to fear, as are those who are confident that they will prosper (2, 8, 3). If Neoptolemus is not immune to the kind of harm that Philoctetes has suffered, he should be susceptible to pity. The chorus take a similar view: "Pity him [*oiktir'*], sire: he has recounted the burden of numerous, unendurable sufferings — may no one of my friends experience the like" (507-09). In torment from his wound, Philoctetes again appeals to Neoptolemus' pity (*oiktire me*, 756); when he recovers consciousness, he remarks with surprise on Neoptolemus' extraordinary capacity for pity (*eleinôs*, 870) in staying by his side. Later, Neoptolemus exclaims: "A terrible pity [*oiktos deinos*] has overcome me for this man, not just now, but long since." "Pity me [*eleêson*], my child, by the gods," says Philoctetes, "and do not make a shameful spectacle of yourself before mankind by robbing me" (965-68). Philoctetes demands pity of the gods (*oiktirete*, 1042) and of the chorus of sailors (*epoiktireite*, 1071), whom Neoptolemus instructs, again out of pity (*oiktos*, 1074), to remain with Philoctetes till he and Odysseus can get the ship ready to sail. Pity stirs Neoptolemus even as he carries out Odysseus' plan of winning Philoctetes' confidence by the fiction of a quarrel with Agamemnon and Menelaus.[1]

In Euripides' tragedy, by contrast, Orestes never utters a single appeal for pity, whether to Menelaus or to Pylades. There is no question but that Orestes and Electra recognize their condition as miserable. Electra's opening words refer to the varieties of *pathos* and *sumphora* to which her family has been subject (2), and she concludes her speech with the gnomic statement that "a house in misfortune is a helpless thing" (70; for *sumphora*, cf. 139, 154, etc.). Orestes is frequently described as "wretched" (*meleos*, 90, 159, etc.; cf. 203-04: "the greater part of my life is spent in groans and laments and night-long tears"). When Menelaus arrives on the scene, Orestes immediately grasps his knees in supplication: "save me; you have come at the critical moment of my troubles" (382-84). Menelaus concludes the stichomythic exchange with the words, "O wretched one [*meleos*], you have come to the limit of misfortune [*sumphora*]" (447).

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[1] See further D. Konstan, "Philoctetes' Pity", Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy 13 (1998), pp. 276-82.

Orestes shoots back: "Give your dear ones [*philois*], who are faring miserably, a share in your own well-being, and do not keep for yourself what is good, but partake in our struggles in turn [ἀντιλάζου καὶ πόνων ἐν τῷ μέρει], and pay back the debt of gratitude to my father [χάριτας πατρῴας], to whom you ought. For they are friends [*philoi*] in name, not deed, who are not friends in misfortune [*sumphorai*]" (450-55; cf. 665-67). Later, Orestes will even beseech Menelaus' help in the name of Helen (671; cf. 673, and the chorus' entreaty in 680). That he recognizes the wretchedness of his position is clear, and he has no hesitation in casting himself as a suppliant before Menelaus. He does not, however, ask for pity.

Menelaus' response to Orestes is revealing: "I respect [καταιδοῦμαι] you and wish to struggle along with you in your plight [ξυμπονῆσαι σοῖς κακοῖσι]" (682-83). He explains that it is right to help bear (ξυνεκκομίζειν) the plight of kin (ὁμαιμόνων, 684), when this is possible, both by dying oneself and slaying opponents (*enantioi*, 685). But he protests that he has not the forces to assist Orestes in this way, and for this reason recommends persuasion and gentle words, to which the people are likely to respond, "for there is pity [οἶκτος] in them, though there is also mighty passion" (702).

Despite Orestes' angry reaction to what he perceives as Menelaus' cowardice (cf. 719: "O basest of men, when it comes to avenging your friends"), he too, in his subsequent exchange with Pylades concerning the wisdom of making a personal appearance at the assembly, brings up the possibility of arousing pity in the townsmen of Argos (784: καί τις ἄν γέ μ' οἰκτίσειε), and Pylades agrees that Orestes' noble birth may help him in this regard. Pylades' own response to Orestes' ruin, however, is to go down together with him (*sunkataskaptois an hêmas*), on the grounds that "the things of friends are in common" (735). Correspondingly, he is amazed that Menelaus did not have the heart to partake in (*antilazusthai*, 753) the struggles of his nephew.

The messenger who reports the negative verdict of the assembly, and instructs Electra to prepare for suicide, says that Pylades was weeping as he led Orestes out, and that the friends who are accompanying them are wailing and lamenting (κλαίοντες, οἰκτίροντες, 951). The force of *oiktirô* here is difficult to gauge: in the

absence of a direct object, and paired with *klaiô*, it probably means "grieve" rather than "pity." So too, Electra, when she and Orestes are on the point of slaying themselves, is overcome with sorrow. Orestes, however, rejects her lamentations as womanly (1022), even though their circumstances are pitiable (*oiktra*, 1023). Electra insists on the misfortune of Orestes' premature death (1029-30), and when Orestes reproaches her for undermining his manliness, she responds that "it is impossible not to bemoan one's evils, for one's life [*psukhê*] is a pitiable thing (*oiktron*) to all mortals" (1033-34). The predominant note in Electra's complaints is fear and sorrow, rather than an appeal for pity.[2]

The function of pity, then, is clearly disparate in the two tragedies. Is there a reason why? I suggest there is. Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are strangers; the scene on Lemnos is the first meeting between them. Orestes, on the contrary, is nephew to Menelaus and close friend and relation to Pylades. This difference in the degree of relationship bears fundamentally on the role of pity.

Orestes does not seek pity from his uncle: he asks his due as his nephew. To be sure, Orestes believes that Menelaus is in his debt, because his father, Agamemnon, had ventured everything to bring back Menelaus' wife from Troy and lost his life as a result. Orestes' present predicament is a consequence of the war fought in Menelaus' behalf, and Menelaus should be prepared to take whatever risks are required to rescue Agamemnon's son. The principle to which Orestes appeals, in this regard, is gratitude or reciprocity — both ideas are embraced in the Greek term *kharis*. The moment that Orestes, reviving from one of his episodes of madness, learns that Menelaus is on hand, his mind turns to the debt his uncle is under: "What's that? Has a man

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[2] Other occurrences of pity-terms in the play do not affect the present argument. Thus, Orestes summons the aid of his father's spirit with tears, and Electra with "pitiable cries" (*oiktoisi*, 1239). The chorus sing: "what *eleos*, what murderous contest is this that comes urging you on in your misery [*ton meleon*]?" (333-34), but here, as in a related choral song (831-33: τίς νόσος ἢ τίνα δάκρυα καὶ τίς ἔλεος μείζων κατὰ γᾶν ἢ ματροκτόνον αἷμα χειρὶ θέσθαι;), the sense of *eleos* is "a pitiable thing" (cf. LSJ s.v., def. III). The chorus refer to the pitiable feast of Thyestes (οἰκτρότατα θοινάματα καὶ σφάγια, 814-15). Most relevant is Electra's lyric lament: "pity, this pity [*eleos*] comes for the sake of those who will die, once leaders of Greece" (968-70).

who is our kin, and who is indebted to our father (ἀνὴρ ὁμογενὴς καὶ χάριτας ἔχων πατρός), come as a beacon to our ills?" (243-44; cf. *kharin* in 239). We have already noted the phrase χάριτας πατρῴας in Orestes' first appeal for help to Menelaus in person (453). More explicit is the demand: "give me nothing of your own, Menelaus, but pay back what you received from my father" (642-43).[3] Rather than invoke pity, then, Orestes prefers to insist on Menelaus' obligation. Philoctetes, of course, is in no position to demand recompense for any prior service to Neoptolemus.

But the favor owed to Agamemnon and his offspring is not Orestes' only, nor even his primary, claim on Menelaus. His first thought, when he hears that Menelaus is in Argos, is of kinship (ὁμογενής), and he insists throughout the play on Menelaus' responsibility to his near and dear ones, that is, his *philoi*. We have already cited the passage (454-55) in which Orestes, speaking gnomically, affirms that unqualified support is owed to friends (and, a fortiori, to relatives). In regard to the vengeance he took for his own father's death, Orestes explains to Menelaus that he was not wise, perhaps, but he was "a true friend to his friends" (424), and Menelaus is reproached for disloyalty to those closest to him several times in the course of the play (cf. 628, 652, 665-68, 718-20, 740, 748, 794, etc.).

Pylades, by contrast, is the perfect friend, and willing to participate in all Orestes' sufferings. His view is, as we have seen, that friends share everything (735): this means that they spontaneously take your side and assume your troubles as their own. Hence Orestes' famous exclamation (804-06): "This proves the proverb: 'Have comrades [*hetairoi*], not just kin [*to sungenes*]!' For a man, though an outsider [*thuraios*], who is conjoined by character is a better *philos* for a man to have than ten thousand of his own blood." Family ties, however close, may fail to inspire the loyalty or identification that they ought.

The community of interests that obtains, ideally or in principle, among friends and near kin obviates the role of pity in such relationships. If the hardships of one's friend are one's own, one

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[3] The chorus refers to Orestes' slaying of his mother as an obligatory service due to his father (828-29).

simply joins the friend in suffering them or in struggling to overcome them. The language of *Orestes* reflects this quality of mutual participation and cooperation in the use of verbs with the prefix *sun-*, such as ξυμπονῆσαι (683) and ξυνεκκομίζειν (685). Thus, Orestes informs Menelaus that Pylades collaborated (συνδρῶν, 406) with him in murdering Clytemnestra (cf. 1535: σύγγονόν τ' ἐμὴν Πυλάδην τε τὸν τάδε ξυνδρῶντά μοι), and Pylades explains that his father, Strophius, has banished him because he undertook the slaying together with Orestes (συνηράμην, 767). When Orestes tries to discourage Pylades from perishing along with him, on the grounds that he did not slay his own mother (οὐκ ἔκτανες σὴν μητέρ', 1073),[4] Pylades retorts, somewhat illogically: "I did it with you, and I must suffer the same things" (1074: σὺν σοί γε κοινῇ· ταὐτὰ καὶ πάσχειν με δεῖ).[5]

Pity, in Greek, is a more remote emotion, in the sense that the pitier necessarily stands at a distance from the pain of the pitied.[6] Some modern discussions of what is called pity obscure this element of alienation. Adam Smith, for example, says of the relation between the pitier and the pitied: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations."[7] Schopenhauer, who regards pity or compassion (*Mitleid*) as the

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[4] Modern editors (e.g., Biehl, Benedetto) mostly follow Hermann and the codd. recc. in emending *sên* to *su*; C.W. Willink (ed.), Euripides Orestes, Oxford 1986, prints *sên* in his text, but observes in the commentary ad 1073: "recent editors rightly prefer *su* to *sên*." The effect of the emendation is to render Orestes' reference ambiguous; thus, Martin West, Euripides Orestes, Warminster 1987, p. 133, adopting *su*, translates: "you didn't kill a mother, as I did."

[5] Cf. the suspected line 1224: Πυλάδη· σὺ γὰρ δὴ συμπονεῖς ἐμοὶ πόνους.

[6] Contrast C. Fred Alford, "Greek Tragedy and Civilization: The Cultivation of Pity", Political Research Quarterly 46 (1993), p. 265, who sees *eleos* as referring to "the felt connection to the suffering of others like oneself" (cit. D. Walton, Appeal to Pity, Albany 1997, p. 50); Alford cites with approval W.B. Stanford, Greek Tragedy and the Emotions, London 1983, p. 24, for the claim that, with *eleos* and *oiktos*, "there is no question [...] of the pitier being separate from another's agony. You respond to it in the depths of your being, as a harp-string responds by sympathetic resonance to a note from another source." Walton adds (p. 51): "The Greek concept seems more like what we would call *empathy* or *sympathy* that *pity*."

[7] *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. E.G. West, Indianapolis 1976, p. 9 = I.1.i.2.

foundation of morality, stipulates that to act solely for the well-being of another "presupposes that, in the case of his *woe* as such, I suffer directly with him, I feel *his* woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own. [...] But this requires that I am in some way *identified with him*, in other words, that this entire *difference* between me and everyone else, which is the very basis of my egoism, is eliminated, to a certain extent at least."[8] No classical Greek philosopher takes this view with regard to *eleos*. Aristotle, for example, holds that "people pity just those things, when they happen to others, that they fear when they happen to themselves" (*Rhet.* 2, 8, 13). It is true that some similarity between the pitier and the pitied is a condition for pity, according to Aristotle. But to feel the same thing as the other would be to experience the other's fear as fear, or his pain as pain; pity presupposes a difference in response rather than the identity that Smith and Schopenhauer presume.

It is for just this reason that Aristotle excludes from the domain of pity those who are too close to us. As he puts it in the *Rhetoric*, "people pity their acquaintances [γνωρίμους], provided that they are not exceedingly close in kinship [ἂν μὴ σφόδρα ἐγγὺς ὦσιν οἰκειότητι]; for concerning these they are disposed as they are concerning themselves.[...] For what is terrible [δεινὸν] is different from what is pitiable, and is expulsive of pity" (1386^{a}18-23). Aristotle cites the remark of one Amasis, who did not weep when his son was led out to die, but did so in the case of a friend: "the latter was pitiable, the former terrible."[9] The point is that the afflictions of those nearest to us are like our own rather than another's; it is precisely the misfortune of someone else, distinct from ourselves, that excites our pity, as opposed to the immediate horror experienced by the other.

Menelaus, of course, does not react to Orestes' plight in the way that Amasis did to that of his son. It is for just this lack of identification — the Greek term would be *philia* — that Orestes blames him, rather than for any failure of pity or *eleos*. Pylades, though more a friend than a close relation (he is a second cousin), nevertheless takes Orestes' danger as equivalent to his own, and is

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[8] *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. D.E. Cartwright, Providence 1995, pp. 143-44 = sec. 16.

[9] The story is related in a slightly different form in Herodotus 3, 14.

prepared "to suffer the same things." Here again, there is no room for an appeal to pity.

I should like to consider briefly two additional reasons why Euripides' Orestes might not have appealed to Menelaus' pity, as Philoctetes did to that of Neoptolemus. There is one element in Aristotle's definition of pity in the *Rhetoric* that I have so far ignored. Aristotle says that pity is "pain arising from a perceived evil that is destructive or painful, in a person who does not deserve to meet with it." The factor of unmerited or unjust suffering reappears in Stoic accounts of pity, and is a commonplace in the appeals for pity that are a staple in the perorations of courtroom speeches. Might Orestes have hesitated to appeal for pity because he was not entirely certain of his own innocence? There is some indication to this effect. In his plea to Menelaus, Orestes concedes: "[Suppose] I am in the wrong [ἀδικῶ]; then I should receive for my plight some unjust act on your part — for in fact my father, Agamemnon, marshalled Greece unjustly when he went against Ilium: he was not at fault [ἐξαμαρτών] himself, but was rather remedying the fault and wrong-doing of your wife" (646-50). This is a debater's point, rather than a sign that Orestes really believes that his case is undeserving of commiseration. But I suggest that Orestes would not have mentioned his possible guilt if his aim had been to excite pity, as opposed to claiming the unconditional support of a close kinsman. We may note that, at the end of *Philoctetes*, when the suffering hero refuses the possibility of being healed if it means helping the Greeks defeat Troy, Neoptolemus reproaches him: "It is not just to indulge [*sungnômên ekhein*] or to pity [*epoiktirein*] those who are involved in self-willed harm, like you" (1318-20).

There is one further reason why Orestes might have been reluctant to appeal to Menelaus' pity. Although he is ill and under the threat of a death penalty, Orestes is young, and a Greek male in the prime of life, even when so weak as to lean on a comrade in order to walk, might be loathe to cast himself as pitiful. Philoctetes, in addition to his lameness, is a generation older than Neoptolemus, to whom he refers throughout the play as "child" (*teknon* or *pais*), and this circumstance perhaps renders his pathetic entreaties more acceptable. It is clear from literary and forensic texts that the very old, along with women, children, and the poor, were the special objects of pity (cf.

Lysias 20, 35-36; Demosthenes 21, 186). Yet Orestes does hope for pity from the Argives in the assembly on the basis of his high birth (a dramatic change of fortune is a standard topos in the rhetoric of pity).

A concept so rich and nuanced as pity need not have had a uniform meaning in Greek culture, any more than in ours. Nevertheless, *eleos* normally involved a distance, rather than a merging, between the pitier and the pitied. As opposed to the sharing of trouble or grief that occurs among intimate family members and friends, and which may be expressed by terms such as *sullupeisthai* and *sumponein*, Greek pity presupposes that the subject and object of the emotion have distinct perspectives: the pitier is always to some extent in the situation of an observer rather than a participant in the experience of the other, and views the suffering of the pitied from the outside, as it were. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, when Hecuba seeks to justify the brutal vengeance she has exacted from Polymestor, she says to Agamemnon: "Consider all these acts of his as shameful, and have respect for me, pity us — step back like a painter and look at me and observe the evils I endure; I was once a monarch [*turannos*] but am now your slave" (806-09). So too, in Sophocles' *Ajax* (118-32), Odysseus feels pity for the raving Ajax (*epoiktirô de nin dustênon*) as he observes him from a distance, while he himself remains unseen. Odysseus acknowledges their common vulnerability: "I have regard," he says, "for my condition no less than his: for I see that we who live are nothing but figments, or a frail shadow." But his pity is also a sign of his detachment from the misfortune of his enemy.

The security enjoyed by the pitier is sometimes interpreted as condescension. In *Prometheus Bound*, the chorus of Oceanids express their dismay upon seeing Prometheus' anguish: "He is iron-hearted and made of stone who does not grieve with you [*sunaskhalâi*] at your sufferings, Prometheus. I would have wished not to look upon this, and as I look upon it I feel pain in my bosom." To this expression of sympathy (rather than of pity), Prometheus responds indignantly: "So then, I am pitiable for my friends to look upon" (242-46; cf. 140). Shortly afterwards, Prometheus blurts out: "It is easy for one who keeps his feet clear of woe to encourage and advise those who are in trouble" (263-65). So too, when Oceanus appears on the scene, Prometheus at once inquires: "Have you too come as witness [*epoptês*]

to my toils?" (298-99), and later notes that Oceanus himself stands free of blame (330).[10] Prometheus is too proud to accept pity, which he associates with the privileged position of the by-stander.

Inasmuch as *eleos* involves a certain separation or detachment from the sufferer, it occupies a different sphere from the most intense kinds of affection: for the Greeks, pity begins where love leaves off. It is for this reason, I think, that Aristotle, in his discussion of relations based on *philia* in the eighth and ninth books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere, finds no occasion to deal with pity. The bonds between close friends and kin do not admit of the distance that pity requires. In such relationships, each feels the pain of the other as his or her own and acts spontaneously to alleviate it, rather than look on from without. In his discussion of the emotions characteristically produced by tragedy, however, Aristotle employs *eleos* rather than a term such as *sunalgein* to describe the audience's response — a sign that it is wrong to interpret Aristotle's theory of drama's effect as one of identification. The spectator's position is like Neoptolemus' initial relation to Philoctetes (or Odysseus' to Ajax) rather than the community of feeling that obtains between Pylades and Orestes. The connection between pity and the gaze makes it singularly appropriate as an emotion excited by witnessing the afflictions of mythic heroes on the stage.

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[10] The following line, which seems to say that Oceanus had a hand in the actions for which Prometheus is being punished, is corrupt.