

Hubristic Violence and the Categorization of Shame

In several of his formulations concerning hubris (*Rhet.* 1373b8-1374a15, 1378b14-30; cf. *EN* 1149b20-23), Aristotle distinguishes hubris (in its juridical sense, as an aggravated form of battery) from other acts of violence by the perpetrator's intent to aggrandize himself and/or humiliate his victim, and modern scholarship (e.g., Fisher 1992; D. Cohen 1995) has shown that this Aristotelian element of *mens rea* accords with the depictions of hubristic behavior in Attic oratory and elsewhere. However, it is not hard to find in Greek literature and cultural practice instances where a violent act occurs with the clear intent to humiliate, yet no hubris is deemed to have been committed. This paper argues that, in examining whether a violent act would be seen as constituting hubris, we should take into account the type of shame that the act was meant to provoke. What Aristotle omits from his passages on hubris, but other sources demonstrate, is that under such circumstances Greeks made at least a tacit distinction between constructive shame, which was inherently not hubristic, and destructive shame, which could be hubristic; that is, it was not the mere fact of shaming, but the perceived utility of the shame, that was a determinative factor in establishing whether a violent act qualified as hubris.

Acts of violence that were seen as intentionally causing purely destructive shame were commonly considered hubristic, and under this category fall the great majority of allegations of hubristic behavior by speakers in Attic oratory. No plausibly constructive purpose is served, for example, by the sons of Conon's violent and insulting behavior toward Ariston and his slaves while on garrison duty – much less the subsequent beating and stripping of Ariston that culminated in Conon's imitating a gamecock over his prone body (*Dem.* 54) – or by Teisis' tying Archippus to a column and whipping him (*Lys.* fr. 279 Carey; cf. *Aeschin.* 1.58-64: the fact that similar acts committed against a free man and against a slave both constitute hubris is significant), or by Meidias' punching Demosthenes in the face at the Greater Dionysia of 348 (*Dem.* 21).

Yet shame, while by definition destructive to the sufferer in the short term, can also be constructive to the sufferer (in the longer term) and/or to third parties. A vivid application of this principle appears in the trial scene at *Xen. Anab.* 5.8, where Xenophon, accused of hubris for striking a soldier who refused to carry a grievously-wounded comrade, defends his use of violence for the purpose of enforcing military discipline and is acquitted by acclamation; this episode serves as an informative contrast to Ariston's description of his conflict with Conon's sons in camp at Panactum (*Dem.* 54.3-5). Other, broader examples appear in the right of officials in athletic competition to flog athletes caught in the act of cheating, and in the corporal punishment of students by teachers. In these instances, shame-provoking violence was not considered hubristic, since the resulting shame, whatever its efficacy, served an ultimately constructive purpose both for the shamed person and for others, as an admonition against similar wrong action and an assertion of community standards.

Works cited:

Cohen, D. *Law, Violence, and Community in Classical Athens* (Cambridge 1995)
Fisher, N. R. E. *Hybris* (Warminster 1992)