

## Tears of Compassion in Classical Athens

This paper argues that Plato's criticism of tragedy reflected a significant change he observed during his lifetime (c. 429-347 BC): that men were crying more freely than they had in his childhood and youth, a change he blamed (plausibly) on the emotionally stirring effects of poetry. Work by cultural anthropologist William A. Reddy can help us interpret this possibility via analogy with a shift that occurred in 18th-century France as people learning empathy from an energetic new literary genre began to cry much more than previously.

A tearful response would have provoked the disapproval of some observers because it departed from the strict emotional control imposed on males by the warrior ethos of the Archaic and Early Classical periods (van Wees 1998). Early in the 5th century, when men cried over the *Sack of Miletus*, the Athenians angrily fined Phrynichus, the poet; but crying over tragic poetry was apparently commonplace by the 4th century (Plato, *Laws* 800, Isoc. 4.158). As Athenians learned from tragic drama how to empathize and sympathize (Nussbaum 2001; Johnson & Clapp 2005), tears become a regular feature of discourse.

The quasi-magical power of words is a familiar theme in Greek thought (de Romilly), and the *Defense of Helen* by Gorgias describes the impact of a story well told (9): "Fearful shuddering and tearful compassion [*eleos poludakrus*] and sad yearning enter into the hearers; and the soul, affected by the words, experiences as its own the emotion aroused by the good and ill fortunes of other people's doings and lives."

Recent scholarship on crying and tears in ancient Greek literature (Fögen 2009) deals separately with Homer, tragedy, and Hellenic historiography, while new work on oratory is lacking. I flag a development that emerges markedly in 4th-century oratory: a growing tendency of literary tears to metonymically represent compassion, so that we can eventually infer

compassion in passages where *oiktos* and *eleos* words are lacking but a character is said to witness pathetic things and weep (Sternberg 2005). Demosthenes equates the feeling of compassion with a tearful response when he says that Aeschines lacked feeling for the Olynthian war captives (Dem. 19.309): “Yet Aeschines did not pity [the women] nor did he weep for Greece.” Fourth-century orators reflect a growing acceptance of tears and recognition of “the soft part of [men’s] souls.” (Lyc. 1.33) Further, that soft part eventually wins a positive valuation, so that at length it is judged a good thing to have the capacity for compassion.

Reddy assesses abundant evidence from late eighteenth-century France showing that along with the rise of the novel people became more empathetic, sympathetic, and tearful. He theorizes that the moment created a new emotional regime that changed the culture, and I suggest that in the fifth and fourth centuries, an energetic new genre -- tragic drama -- taught empathy, drew tears, and changed the culture of Athens.

### Bibliography

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