

Pitying Xerxes in Aeschylus' *Persians*

In Aristotle's definition of pity in the *Rhetoric*, the type of people who can be pitied are those who merit it and with whom one does not possess a close relationship (1385b14-16, 1386a16):

ἔστω δὴ ἔλεος λύπη τις ... τοῦ ἀναξίου τυγχάνειν...
ἐλεοῦσι δὲ τοὺς τε γνωρίμους, ἂν μὴ σφόδρα ἐγγύς ὧσιν οικειότητι.

let pity be a kind of pain ... befalling one who is undeserving of it...
men pity those who are familiar, if they are not very close with respect to closeness/intimacy.

A possible challenge to this definition can be found in the earliest instance of pity explicitly expressed in a fully extant Greek tragedy – Darius' pity for his son, Xerxes, as recounted in the Queen's dream of Aeschylus' *Persians* (197-8).

πίπτει δ' ἐμὸς παῖς. καὶ πατήρ παρίσταται
Δαρεῖος οἰκτίρων σφε

My son falls and his father, Darius, stands
beside, pitying him.

The pity Darius expresses at seeing his son, Xerxes, thrown by the force of the rebellious Greek woman usually receives little notice other than to claim that it does not correlate to Darius' seemingly pitiless visit later in the tragedy (Garvie, 2009, 102; Rosenbloom, 2006, 56). Johnson even finds his pity "unexceptional... Darius' compassion is that of a father who witnesses his son's humiliation and feels compassion or 'compassionate grief' for that son's intense suffering." (Johnson, 2016, 74) But if Aristotle's definition is correct, Darius would have to be estranged from his son in some way and to find Xerxes' circumstances unmerited. In this paper, I will argue that Darius does attempt to alienate himself from Xerxes through several indignant speeches but instead of finding Xerxes unworthy of his punishment, he eventually shows a level

of humanity characteristic of *philanthropia*, a 4th century term for a pitiful feeling for someone who does not merit it (Konstan, 2006, 213-218). Darius' reference to Xerxes as his son throughout the speeches, however, and his occasional moments of worry for Xerxes' well-being, show signs of a father who exhibits a type of pity among family members found in other tragedies, namely, one that privileges the blood relationship as enough to warrant pity, regardless of merit. This exceptional form of familial pity, I propose, is what we should think of when reading Darius' pity in Atossa's dream.

By expressing indignation at his son's poor political and moral decisions throughout several speeches (744, 749-750, 782-786) Darius distances himself from Xerxes emotionally, lacking empathy for what he ultimately sees as deserved punishment - he portends a downfall for Xerxes and the army that will come as punishment for their pride and godless thoughts (808). Instead of abandoning his son outright, however, Darius expresses paternal concern for Xerxes' safety (735, 737) and he counsels his wife and the Chorus to offer Xerxes comfort and guidance in the end (832-838). The requisite of Aristotle's definition of pity that persons not be close then seems laboriously assured but Xerxes does not merit the pity that he seems to receive from his father. On the one hand, these gestures may reflect a philanthropic feeling of humanity for those who suffer despite deserving it. However, I would argue that Darius' final acts of pity reflect a prejudice afforded to family that appeals for pity between family members in tragedy frequently imply, as when Clytemnestra begs for pity from her son, Orestes, because she bore him despite her having killed his father in Sophocles' *Electra* (1409-1410) or when Polyneices pities his brother Eteocles in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* because they are *philoï* though they have been *echthroï* (1444-1446). In these instances and others, the fact that the victims have committed grievous errors precludes their ability to receive pity. Accordingly, the victims and pitiers do not

attempt to reframe the error as just but to appeal to the value of the blood relationship. Darius' reaction in Atossa's dream then could be understood as part of a tragic tradition of pitiful expressions among family members in which an alienation between the two family members has occurred, allowing pity to be felt, while the blood relationship becomes valid grounds upon which to overcome the victim's lack of desert.

Bibliography

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