

The Politics of Pity in Athenian Civic Ideology and Aristotle's *Poetics*

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Introduction

The Athenians of the classical democratic polis viewed themselves and their city as exceptional - quite literally superior to other Greeks and other Greek *poleis*. The most common justification for this exceptionalism is kinship (in one form or another). The Athenians championed their autochthony and their racial purity. Although a few other Greek cities also had myths of autochthony, for instance the original Thebans were said to have been sprung from the sowing of dragon's teeth, the Athenians claimed to be the children of the earth and the god Hephaestus. The myth of autochthony (and its secular corollary - democratic racialism) not only rendered the Athenians closer to the gods, but it also endowed them with extraordinary political and ethical capacities. The link between autochthony and democratic equality is by now well known. However, the myth is also connected to ideas about justice. The Athenians claimed to be more just than other Greeks because they did not win their land by an initial (unjust) act of military conquest (Lysias 2.17). Similarly, because they had lived in the same place since time immemorial, they also claimed to have provided refuge for various outsiders. In the Archaeology, Thucydides describes these outsiders as dispossessed aristocrats who came to Athens and, in time, were "naturalized" as citizens. In other fifth and fourth century sources, however, the Athenians put it somewhat differently, laying claim to a history of accepting suppliants to help the weak against the strong because of their acute sense of justice and their pity for those suffering undeserved misfortune.

While pity was a characteristic Greek emotion intimately linked to ideas about justice, the Athenians claimed they were more ready to pity those suffering undeservedly than other Greeks. In Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, the Argive Adrastus declares that Athens alone of *poleis* takes pity on those who are suffering (187-90). In Plato's *Menexenus*, Socrates states that if anyone wished to make a just accusation against the Athenians, it would be that the city has always been "too pitiful (*philoiktirmon*) and the servant of the weak"(244e).

Tragedy and oratory celebrate Athenian pity in contexts involving the treatment of suppliants seeking asylum or assistance of some form. Although there was a strong religious pressure to receive and assist suppliants (since they had divine protection) neither cities nor individuals were strictly obligated to grant a suppliant's request. Athens, however, prided itself on helping afflicted suppliants, even if it meant undertaking a just war on their behalf. In the fifth century, the Athenians seem to have used these mythic accounts of assistance to the weak to justify the Athenian empire and imperialism. For the Athenians insisted that they acquired their empire not by conquering unwilling subjects but rather by helping the weak against the strong. The allies invited them to assume command of the war against the Persians specifically because of Spartan misconduct, a transfer of leadership that paved the way for the Athenian empire.

The Athenians trumpeted their ethical superiority, emblemized by their special capacity for pity and its work in motivating just action, to differentiate themselves from other Greeks (and to justify imperialism). However, enacting this superiority meant assisting the *xenos*, treating the outsider like a citizen, and in the most extreme case, offering to make the *xenos* into a *polites*. Paradoxically, the capacity for pity, one of the elements that defines and justifies Athenian exceptionalism, also pushes against the normative exclusivity of Athenian citizenship. The celebration and cultivation of pity in democratic Athens made possible a more capacious conception of citizenship, i.e. one not governed by a norm of racial or blood purity. This potential, however, was never realized; Athenian racialism and exclusivity remained entrenched throughout the fourth century. Naturalization remained the exception rather than the rule that the Athenians were more willing to grant when the beneficiary was not going to act on it.

The Athenian blindness to the implications of their ideology arises in part because they did not believe that everyone was worthy of their pity. For instance, slaves who were beaten or abused by their owners were not generally seen as suffering undeservedly. In the paradigmatic examples of Athenian pity, pity is directed at outsiders suffering undeserved misfortunes - usually free men, women, or children - whose fortunes have suddenly or drastically plummeted. The pertinent question centers on what prevented the Athenians from living up to their own stated ideology in the case of free non-Athenians. What factors blocked Athenian pity, inhibiting its efficacy as a motive for corrective ethical action, and limiting its ability to break down status boundaries? To consider these questions, I first discuss the classical conception of pity. Second, I examine Athenian pity in Thucydides' *History*. Although the ideology of Athenian pity probably crystallized in the context of international relations, in Thucydides' narrative this is precisely the sphere in which pity is ruled out. Third, I examine the double bind of Athenian pity depicted in one Athenian tragedy. The double bind is this - to pity someone or their plight, it seems necessary to have a sense of commonality with the sufferer (at least in the classical conception of pity). But if one sees oneself as radically different from others, as exceptional in the Athenian sense, how was it possible to identify with the outsider? By dramatizing the suffering of outsiders, tragedy encouraged the Athenians to see and perhaps overcome this double bind. In conclusion, I briefly discuss pity in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Appreciating pity's traditional involvement with boundary issues can, I think, elucidate Aristotle's notorious claim that a proper tragedy should produce a katharsis of pity and fear.

Pity

In classical Greek, *eleos*, *oiktos* and their various compounds and cognates render the emotion of pity and/or one of the evaluative judgments on which pity was thought to be based. But what exactly is pity? According to Aristotle's analysis, pity (*eleos*) involves three (or perhaps four) judgments:

Let pity be a kind of pain aroused by the appearance of evil, destructive or painful, that happens to a person who does not deserve it, and that one might expect to come upon oneself or one's own, and this, whenever it seems near.

According to this definition, the person who pities makes three main judgments: that the sufferer's injury is grave, undeserved, and crucially, that the injury could happen to him or someone close to him. Although she builds on this Aristotelian account of pity in her recent work (translating *eleos* as compassion), Martha Nussbaum argues that Aristotle's contention that pity requires a perception of similar vulnerabilities is not strictly speaking necessary for the emotion. While seems correct, she does not consider why the Aristotelian definition seeks to restrict the range of people one might pity. It seems clear that here and elsewhere Aristotle thinks that we should pity people who are like us, or slightly better than us, rather than those who are "inferior" to us. That said, his definition leaves space for a fourth judgment relevant to understanding Athenian pity and its expansiveness, namely that the person who pities must also determine who exactly is "one of his own."

Aristotle's analysis of pity finds parallels throughout the Athenian sources. In Isocrates' speech *On the Team of Horses*, Alcibiades the Younger informs the jurors:

it is necessary to pity those who have been unjustly endangered, who are contending for the highest stakes, and are fairing in a manner unworthy of themselves and their ancestors (16.48).

Here we find the ubiquitous notion that the downward mobility of aristocrats is especially pitiful, a sentiment that shores up pity's close association with boundaries in classical thought. The passage also strongly suggests that examples of pity may not always involve a feeling state. As Kenneth Dover puts it, "The stronger pities the weaker i.e. shows pity behaves as if compassionate, when he does what the

weaker has asked him to do-rather as *thaumazein*, 'admire,' or *philein*, 'love,' can be used of outward manifestations without regard to inner feelings."

That Greek words denoting pity can be used without implying a feeling state is one reason for translating *eleos* as pity rather than compassion. Whereas compassion (as understood in modern discussions and definitions) always involves a feeling of concern or sorrow for the suffering of others, pity in classical Greek sources may or may not denote a feeling state. Another important difference between compassion and the classical conception of pity centers on the element of judgment. To have compassion for another's suffering, one need not make a judgment about whether the suffering is deserved or not. In principle, compassion is not judgmental. By contrast, pity in the Greek sources requires a judgment about whether or not the person deserves his suffering. Accordingly, pity in the in the classical conception is, as David Konstan remarks, "not something separate and apart from judgments concerning justice and desert." Conversely, this implies that suffering or misfortune was sometimes judged to be merited and hence not an occasion for pity.

Modern discussions of pity emphasize that the person who pities looks down on the sufferer, underlining the difference in their respective fortune and position. By contrast, compassion is thought not to involve an element of looking down on or condescension. For this reason, some philosophers argue that compassion is "morally superior" to pity. It may true that compassion is a more moral emotion than pity from the point of view of the person who experiences the emotion. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that having compassion rather than pity -as understood by the Athenians - produces the more just outcome. When the Athenians grant pity (in myth and literature), they also act to alleviate the sufferer's plight or danger, whatever that might entail. Compassion does not seem to provide an equally strong motive for action. Accordingly, pity might have prompted the Athenians to do the right thing albeit for non-ideal reasons.

The honor/shame orientation of Athenian culture is an additional factor influencing the force of pity as a motive for action. The dependence of both personal and political status on the evaluation of others encouraged a high degree of self-monitoring that influenced the way emotions were felt and expressed. Since pity was a core component of the Athenian national image, Athenian honor and reputation were at stake in requests for pity. For this reason, pity in the Athenian conception seems to have been more self-regarding than other-regarding. Protecting and promoting the Athenian reputation for pity were equally if not more important considerations in responding to appeals for pity than protecting the weak from injustice.

One of the paradigmatic instances of Athenian pity - the Athenian protection of the Heraklids - illustrates that reputation could outweigh pity in motivating helping behavior. In Euripides' *Children of Herakles*, Demophon must make a decision about whether to grant asylum to children of Herakles before he actually has a chance to interview them alone. However, the chorus, old Athenian citizens from Marathon, signal their own support for the children by immediately pitying their misfortune, lamenting that the sons of a noble father suffer unworthily (*anaxiôds*) (232-35). In this example, pity operates to preserve boundaries of rank and status since the chorus link their pity for the children to the fact that their present circumstances are discordant with their inborn nobility (*eugeneia*). Immediately after the chorus's comment, Demophon agrees to protect the children, giving three reasons for his decision: Zeus, kinship, and dishonor (236-39). He clearly regards dishonor (*to aiskhron*) as the weightiest consideration, explaining that if he allows the suppliants to be torn from the altar in his land, he and his country will be thought to fear the Argives. Thus, in this play, reputation and honor, and to a lesser extent pity, motivate the Athenians to undertake a just war to save the children.

In this version of the story, pity plays a negligible role in motivating the Athenians to undertake corrective ethical action on behalf of oppressed foreigners, although it is mentioned in the text. Nevertheless, it dramatizes the consequences of the extreme emphasis placed on reputation and honor in

4 Draft

Greek culture - the Athenians had to protect and live up to their reputation - again and again. When the chorus of Athenian citizens in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* initially refuse to accept Oedipus as a suppliant, Oedipus demands to know what benefit he gets from the Athenian reputation for helping foreigners (258-62).

Athenian Pity in Thucydides

Although the self-regarding nature of Athenian pity could in principle lead to corrective ethical action, at least in Athenian tragedy and funeral oratory, in practice the linkage between helping behavior and self-regarding pity seems to have been precarious at best. The Athenian evidence suggests that if pity is based on self-regard, it can too easily give way to self-interest. Thucydides' account of the Mytilenean debate has much to say on this issue, as well as on pity's ability to raise boundary questions, blurring the line between us and them. In 427, the Athenians voted to punish the Mytileneans, an ally that had revolted from the empire, by putting all the adult males to death. On the day after reaching this decision, the Athenians realized that it would be cruel to punish the innocent along with the guilty, i.e. they probably had pity for the innocent, and held another Assembly to reconsider the question of punishment. Thucydides' Mytilenean debate purports to give an account of the second day's deliberations, reporting Cleon's speech in favor of sticking to the former decision, his own motion according to Thucydides, and Diodotus's speech - which carried the day - against the motion on the grounds that the fear of death would not deter allies from revolting in the future.

Cleon argues that the Athenians are making a mistake in treating the Mytileneans the way they, as Athenians, treat each other. Because democratic culture allowed the Athenians to live without fear in their domestic relations, they were erroneously applying the same norm to their dealings with the allies (3.37.2). According to Cleon, by reversing their decision, Athens would be succumbing to their own pity and displaying a weakness that the allies would neither love nor respect. Like Perikles, Cleon reminds the Athenians that their empire is a tyranny, a way of underlining that they had subjects rather than allies and that they controlled them by force rather than consent. In contrast to Perikles, however, Cleon develops the implications of this point. Whereas Perikles praised the gentleness of the Athenian character, Cleon seeks to extirpate gentleness and pity from the realm of foreign policy.

According to Cleon, the Mytileneans were not driven to revolt by mistreatment or oppression because the Athenians honored them and gave them relative independence. Because their action was voluntary and premeditated, he argues that neither pardon nor forgiveness is appropriate. Given the Athenian willingness to pity the Mytileneans, Cleon might have added that pity was inappropriate for the perpetrators of voluntary or premeditated acts. He does not make this point, however, because his argument is that pity is never a fitting response when dealing with the allies. Cleon explicitly seeks to inhibit pity's capacity to blur status boundaries by defining the legitimate objects of Athenian pity and by drawing a strong negative correlation between pity and empire.

As for me, just as I was at first, so I am now, and I shall continue to impress upon you the importance of not altering your previous decision.

Pity (*oiktô*), pleasure in speeches, and the claims of decency (*epieikeia*) are three things that are most inexpedient for an imperial power.

Do not be guilty of them. As for pity (*eleos*), it is just toward people who are like us (*homoious*) and not toward those who feel no pity in return and whose position is always by necessity hostile (3.40.2-3).

Cleon's contention that pity is appropriate only in reciprocal relations is strikingly at odds with what Thucydides' Perikles claimed in the funeral oration. Perikles argued that the Athenians were different from other peoples in willingly forgoing balanced reciprocity to do favors without the expectation of a

return (2.40.2). Nevertheless, that Cleon must browbeat the Athenians into banishing pity is a strong indication that the Athenians could extend pity and hence considerations of justice to their allies. In the debate at Sparta in Book 1, the Athenians justify their behavior by claiming to rule their empire with more justice than necessary. It may be of some significance that Mytileneans, as a non-tribute bearing ally with an independent navy, were closer in status and standing to them than their other allies. Their relative position of strength may have made their punishment seem all the more pitiful given the Athenian tendency to have pity for others in proportion to the extent of their fall. Although in the end the Athenians were persuaded not to put all the adult males to death, not because of their pity but because they were convinced by Diodotus's argument that meting out such harsh punishment would not actually serve their own interests, Cleon's worry about Athenian pity is important because it shows that there were other possibilities for Athenian rule. The apparent willingness of the Athenians to pity the Mytileneans suggests that at least some of the allies could have coerced the Athenians into being true to their self-image.

The Double Bind of Athenian Pity in Euripides' Suppliant Women

Although Cleon's speech suggests that the cultivation of pity in Athenian culture had the potential to push against the boundary between Athenian citizens and everyone else, Athens' quest for power and empire seems to have led to an entrenchment of existing boundaries, rendering it difficult for the Athenians to see others as mattering to their own goals and interests and to see what they may have had in common with their subordinated allies. Euripides' *Suppliant Women* - a play that narrates one of the paradigm cases of Athenian pity found in funeral oratory, Isocratean panegyric, and late sources - is acutely aware of these problems. Its opening with two appeals for pity, one that succeeds and one that shockingly fails, suggests that to pity another, one must first see that person as mattering or as sharing some basic commonality.

The *Suppliant Women* tells the story of what happens after "The Seven against Thebes." According to the traditional account, Oedipus's sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, contended for power in Thebes after Oedipus was discovered to be the murderer of his father. Polyneices left Thebes after Oedipus cursed the brothers and went to Argos, marrying the daughter of the Argive king Adrastus. When Eteocles denied him his rightful inheritance, Polyneices convinced Adrastus and the Argives to mount an expedition against Thebes. After a decisive victory, the Thebans refused to allow the Argives to recover their dead. This was both egregious and impious since denying a corpse burial is something akin to a "human rights" violation in fifth century literature. Already in the Homeric poems there is a strong moral and religious pressure on conquering warriors to allow their enemies to bury their dead. The *Iliad* centers on the transformation of Achilles' anger into pity - not for the men whom he kills in battle - but for their corpses and perhaps for their devastated family members. To refuse a corpse burial in the Homeric poems was horrible because it was thought that the unburied dead were denied entrance to underworld. By contrast, Athenian texts dating from the fifth and fourth centuries BC portray the denial of burial as "an offense against humanity and the gods," as the most heinous war crime imaginable. In the traditional version of events, after being supplicated by Adrastus, the Athenians recover the Argive dead for burial, upholding the divine, Hellenic, and moral law. When Euripides dramatized this patriotic tale, probably in 424, everyone knew how the story would end - with the Athenians assisting the defeated Argives and emerging as the champions of justice and piety over and against the brutal and impious Thebans. But this is not a foregone conclusion as Euripides tells the story. In other known versions, the Athenians immediately agree to assist the downtrodden Argives, as might be expected since this is one of the paradigmatic acts defining Athens as the polis of pity and champion of the weak against the strong. In Euripides' play, however, Theseus (Athens' 'democratic' king) does not automatically extend either pity or assistance to mothers of the Argive dead or to the defeated king.

The play opens in Eleusis with a supplication scene between Aithra - mother of Theseus - and the mothers of Argive dead. Adrastus, the defeated Argive king, and the children of the slain warriors are

6 Draft

also present. Aithra claims to remain at the hearth of Demeter and Kore feeling the constraint of their suppliant branches, pitying (*oiktirousa*) the childless mothers, and honoring their sacred wreaths (32-36). To reinforce Aithra's pity, or to dramatize why she feels it, the mothers make a direct act appeal for Aithra's pity.

You too once bore a son, my lady,
making your bed pleasing to your husband.
So grant me a portion of your kind regard (*dianoias*), grant it,
for so great are my pain and grief now that my sons are dead.

We have a just plea (*endika*) and you have some power to
to relieve our misfortune by the noble son you bore.
Because I suffer pitiable things (*oiktra*), I beg your
son to put in my wretched hand my child, a corpse,
so that I may embrace his heart grieving limbs.

The mothers assume that Aithra can identify with and pity their plight pity because she too is a mother. Here, as in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the habit of defining women on the basis of their reproductive/sexual body provides a way of transcending the national boundary between the Argives and Athenians.

Theseus arrives immediately after the chorus's supplication. Having heard their lament, he expresses concern and fear - not for the mothers who appear patently foreign (*xenas gunaikas*) to him, but rather for his own mother. Thereupon Adrastos makes his appeal to Theseus for assistance in recovering the Argive dead. First, however, Theseus interrogates him, demanding to know the entire history of the war. It turns out that Adrastos's involvement in the foreign war has its roots in the foreign (*ouk engene*) marriages he arranged for his daughters. When Theseus asks why he gave Argive maidens to foreigners, he explains that he was deceived by Apollo's oracles instructing him to give his daughters to a boar and a lion (135, 138, 140). While the foreign marriage involved Adrastos in affairs not properly of Argive concern, Adrastos himself made additional mistakes in conducting the war by failing to consult seers and burnt offerings, and by ignoring the counsel of the one seer who of his own accord spoke against the expedition.

After this initial interview, Adrastos appeals to Theseus to have pity (*oiktiras*) on his misfortunes and the mothers whose sons have died (168-9). He adds that it is wise for the fortunate to look on (*dedorkenai*) what is pitiable (*ta oiktra*), acknowledging Athens' superior status but also subtly bringing up the notion of the instability of human fortune; the prosperous ought to help the unfortunate to ward off the fear that his or her own situation could take a similar turn for the worse. He concludes with standard praise of Athens and Theseus, extolling the city for looking upon or having seen (*dedorke*) pitiable things:

Perhaps you might object, "Why do you pass over
the Pelopian land and lay this labor on Athens?
I am in justice bound to explain this.
Sparta is savage and of devious ways,
and the other states are small and weak.
It is your city alone
that could undertake this labor (*ponos*).
It looks on (or has seen) (*dedorka*) what is pitiable and it has in you
a youthful and noble leader.

According to Adrastos, wise men and wise cities like Athens do not flinch from looking on at the pitiable. The repeated use of the verb *derkomai* emphasizes the familiar connection between pity and vision and suggests that seeing the pitiable is sufficient to rouse the emotion and motivate action.

Adrastos, however, is completely wrong. Theseus is virtually unmoved by the spectacle before him and sees no reason why either he or Athens should help the Argives. He seeks to preserve the boundary between the Athenians and the Argives because the Argives, or at least their leader, belongs to the ranks of foolish mortals as exemplified especially by his careless blurring of the boundaries in the most important sphere:

You clearly belong to the number of the foolish, as one
 who yoked by Phoebus's oracles gave your daughters
 to foreigners as if the gods gave them away:
 but by mixing your bright house with mud
 you wounded it. The wise man should not mingle unjust bodies
 with just: he ought to acquire prosperous friends for his house.
 Considering their lots to be cast together the gods destroy
 the healthy and the innocent with the troubles of the diseased.

Theseus emphasizes the necessity of maintaining good national/familial and moral boundaries (which happen to overlap in this case) because the gods destroy the just together with the unjust. As one critic puts it, Theseus rejects “*symmachia* 246 because it involves *symmixis* 222.” Theseus puts Adrastos in the ranks of the foolish and arrogant, foolish because he over-extended his circle of concern by marrying his daughters to aliens, and arrogant because he neglected the gods. Thus, his rejection of Adrastos's appeals are consistent with Aristotle's requirement that pity only be granted to the morally innocent and his normative claim that one ought only to pity those whose possibilities resemble one's own.

Farewell, go away; if you have not deliberated well,
 why should your fortune press upon us?

Theseus makes explicit the question always at issue in appeals for pity, namely, why should one care about the misfortunes of others? Because he so confidently places Adrastos in a different class of human beings, he has no fear that he might encounter a similar fate.

When Theseus sees Aithra crying after his decision, he assumes the lamentation of the mothers is affecting her, as it is even him. Aithra, however, asks for permission to offer advice. In what is arguably the moral and political center of the play, Aithra delivers her great speech, convincing Theseus to use military force to recover the bodies of the Argive dead (297-331). She is the first person to articulate the broad political and religious issues at stake in the question of burying the dead. She urges Theseus to consider the gods, that he is being asked to be daring on behalf of the victims of injustice, his honor, and to remember that the Thebans are violating laws (*nomima*) adhered to by all of Greece. In so doing, she focuses on the Thebans and Theseus, making the questions of Adrastos's guilt or innocence virtually irrelevant. Warning Theseus that some people will see unmanly cowardice in his refusal to help the Argives, she concludes:

Your country [*patris*], when mocked for its lack of counsel,
 turns its gorgon glance against its mockers.
 It flourishes in labors (*ponoi*)
 Cities that are slow to act and deal in secret keep secret
 too the ways their eyes are looking, so cautious are they.

Since viewing the Argive sufferings failed to elicit Theseus's pity, Aithra redirects his gaze. She reframes the issue of helping the Argives in terms that matter to Theseus and Athenian pride. Emphasizing that the Thebans are mocking the Athenians, she makes it a question of face or honor: will the Athenians fearlessly look at the Theban insult, or will they look down in caution and dishonor? She also draws on the ideology of Athenian imperialism, reconfiguring the Athenian love of labor to recommend a just war for limited “humanitarian” ends.

Although Aithra encourages Theseus to act for entirely self-regarding reasons, we (the audience) know that her desire to help the mothers has a more complex motivation. In the prologue, Aithra immediately pities the foreign women, despite the fact that they are outside her immediate circle of concern. By specifically invoking their shared maternal identity, the chorus called attention to their commonality with Aithra, paving the way for pity's operation across national boundaries. This is not to say that Aithra's ability to identify with and pity the sufferings of the Argive women overwhelms her reason; it is not a question of emotion versus reason because the classical conception of pity crucially depends upon rational judgement. Aithra's capacity to pity the Argive women is inextricably linked with the judgment that their predicament is undeserved. In other words, the emotion of pity alerts her to the considerations of justice at stake in their appeal, motivating her to make a case for Athenian intervention on behalf of the Argive mothers and Adrastus (cf. 328). Yet, while Aithra's intervention with her son seems to be motivated at least in part by her pity for the mothers, she does not encourage Theseus to act for reasons of pity. Just as she manipulates the conventions of female speech in order to speak out in spite of them, so too she manipulates male values and imperial ideology to secure her own other-regarding ends. What is remarkable about all this is not only that Theseus must be convinced by a woman to uphold the claims of justice but also that he must be convinced at all. One might think that Euripides is simply playing to the cultural stereotype that women were more susceptible to pity than men. If he is, the play is implicitly suggesting that women have some place in politics precisely because they can recognize injustices to which men may be blind.

The situation, however, is more complicated because Aithra is a two-fold outsider in the realm of Athenian political discourse: she is a woman and a foreigner. In the prologue, Aithra claims that she was raised in Pittheus's land (Troezen) and her father Pittheus gave her as wife to Theseus in accordance with Apollo's oracles (5-7). This is the only version of the myth in which Aithra is presented as Aegeus's wife. According to the usual story, Aegeus had consulted the Delphic oracle to learn how he might remedy his childlessness. After receiving an enigmatic answer, he visited Pittheus, king of Troezen, in the hope that Pittheus could discern the oracle's meaning. The king did so, but instead of explaining the meaning to Aegeus, he got Aegeus drunk and tricked him into sleeping with and impregnating his daughter Aithra. Aegeus then returned to Athens, allowing Aithra to rear his son in Troezen. This situation certainly lends Theseus's criticism of Adrastus for giving his daughters to foreigners because of Apollo's oracles an ironic edge, underscoring that Theseus does not know who he is, or at any rate, he does not know his own story.

Although the play attempts to normalize Aithra's status by making her a wife rather than an unwed mother, there is an important sense in which she remains strikingly anomalous in contemporary Athenian terms. As the daughter of a foreign king, Aithra does not meet the nativity requirement for marriage and citizenship established by the Periclean law of 451/0. From 451/0 onward, Athenian women could not "legally" be given in marriage to foreign husbands, and conversely, Athenian men could not legitimately marry foreign women (whatever their aristocratic pedigree). Before this time, some Athenian citizens are known to have married the daughters of foreign kings and aristocrats, though this practice was perhaps more common in the sixth than in the fifth century. In all other cases, Euripidean tragedy projects the contemporary bias against mixed (interpolis) marriages onto the myths it represents. And in this play we have already seen that Theseus strongly condemns interpolis marriage. At the same time, however, it emphasizes that Theseus is the product of just such a union. Adrastus even makes an appeal to Theseus's non-Athenian ancestry as part of a final effort to win Athenian aid. But the significant point is not that Theseus has "mixed blood" but rather that his foreign mother turns out to be the figure who best exhibits Athenian ethical mores. That Athens' ethical intervention in the international arena is motivated by a twofold outsider, a woman and an alien, suggests that this play is launching a subtle critique of Athenian racial and nationalist ideology, and the marriage endogamy that secured it. For Aithra is the only character whose moral emotions are sensitive to the considerations of justice that the Athenians professed to champion. To put it another way, the play depicts the Athenians - or Theseus at any rate - as

deficient in the very emotion that was supposed to differentiate them from others and to justify their exclusionary civic norms. In this play, the rousing of Athenian pity for an oppressed outsider requires that an outsider already be within - a possibility made difficult in practice by the nativity requirements for marriage and citizenship.

Conclusion: Pity and Purity

So far, I have discussed Athenian pity as a response to suffering and as a motive for helping behavior as depicted in panegyric, Thucydides' *History*, and Euripides' *Suppliant Women*. I have also noted the tension in these works between pity as a moral emotion that supposedly separates Athenians from other Greeks but whose operation threatens to diminish that crucial separation. Finally, I concluded that although the Athenians seem to have embraced a conception of pity capable of lessening the significance of their status boundaries, this does not seem to have induced the Athenians to make any substantive changes in those boundaries. The ideology of Athenian pity had little practical effect in part because Athenian pity was primarily self- rather than other- regarding. Nevertheless, pity was always understood to be involved in questions of boundaries and justice, in judging whether another person mattered or ought to matter and whether their condition was deserved or undeserved. Accordingly, the real challenge of pity for the Athenians and for others was always limiting its operation. This issue seems to inform the place pity (and its near relative fear) in Aristotle's theory of tragedy.

Aristotle does not analyze the operation of pity between characters in tragedy but rather builds the representation of the pitiable and fearful into his definition of tragedy. He identifies the particular effect of tragic suffering on the emotions of the audience members as a katharsis of pity and fear (1449b26-28). Although the meaning of katharsis in the *Poetics* remains notoriously controversial, recent commentators agree that considering the term's semantic background is key to understanding Aristotle's adaptation of it. One basic sense of katharsis is that it makes something *katharos* "pure" in a religious or ritual sense, or simply "clean," as in free from dirt. While commentators have considered how these common meanings of *katharos* might underlie Aristotle's psychological use of the term, no one, to my knowledge, has considered whether the admittedly less common political sense of *katharos* might also be pertinent.

Texts dating from the fifth and fourth centuries attest that the democratic polis appropriated the notion of religious purity to render the racial or blood purity of democratic citizens. In Thucydides, the Spartan general Brasidas defers a direct engagement with a contingent of Athenian forces because it was comprised of the pure (*katharon*) part of the Athenians (5.8.2). In appealing his expulsion from the citizen body, Euxitheus asks whether he has been detected doing anything that those who are not pure citizens (*katharôs politai*) do (57. 55, cf. 67). In the *Ion*, Ion explains to his supposed father that he will not go to Athens because the tongue of a *xenos* who goes to a pure polis (*katharan polin*) remains enslaved (even if he is an *astos* in word)(673-75). In the *Ion*, notions of civic purity appear doubly determined by Athenian heritage from Kreousa, whose autochthonous father gives her blood purity, and from Apollo whose "pure seed" suggests a different kind of purity, or perhaps makes the purity of the gods the ultimate source of Athenian blood purity.

Although Aristotle was aware of the ideology of Athenian racial purity, in the *Politics* he characterizes the birth norms that were supposed to secure it as politically irrelevant and incoherent. First, he exposes Athenian race ideology as a fiction by reporting that Kleisthenes enrolled foreigners and slaves into the new tribes (1275b37). He also points to the paradox of basing citizenship on jealously guarded nativity norms, observing that the founders of a state cannot have been the children of citizen parents (*Pol.* 1275b33-34, 37). Second, he denies that birth or descent has political salience, claiming that democratic birth norms are based solely on exigencies of population size (*Pol.* 1278a28-35). In general, Aristotle seems skeptical of basing citizenship on descent or birth norms because he does not think that politically salient characteristics are heritable. This critique extends to the aristocratic conception of heredity as

well. According to Aristotle, Greek aristocrats assume that just as a man springs from a man, and a beast from a beast, so too a good son springs from good parents. He remarks, however, that while nature might intend to accomplish this, it only infrequently succeeds in bringing it about (*Pol.* 1255b1-4). In the *Rhetoric*, he points to empirical evidence for his anti-hereditarian claims: “families of good disposition degenerate into maniacs, as in the case of descendants of Alcibiades and the Older Dionysius, while families that are stable degenerate into stupidity and dullness, like the descendants of Kimon, Perikles and Sokrates” (*Rhet.* 1390b30ff.).

Given Aristotle’s views regarding the heritability of politically (and morally) salient traits, the Athenian notion of having a *katharos* citizen body that maintains its blood purity through a system of endogamous marriage is simply incoherent. Although Aristotle disagrees with how the Athenians make and maintain status distinctions within their polis, he in no way disputes that status distinctions must be maintained. What differentiates citizens and non-citizens in Aristotle’s thought is the capacity for deliberation and moral virtue rather than bloodlines. Accordingly, if a katharsis of pity and fear contributes to maintaining Aristotle’s conception of the relevant distinctions between members of the polis, his notion of katharsis might plausibly be seen to draw on the Athenian tradition of civic purity, transferring the notion of *katharos* to the relevant domain of moral and social boundaries. Although we do not actually know the sense in which Aristotle employed the notion of katharsis, we do know that the emotion of pity is very much involved with boundary questions, in differentiating those who are like us from those who are not.

In depicting what is pitiable and eliciting pity in the viewer, tragedy encourages its audience to identify their commonality with others. The problem, however, is that tragedy can solicit the “wrong” kind of identifications by depicting outsiders and various groups of vulnerable and subordinate humans as deserving pity. Euripidean tragedy in particular encouraged citizens to recognize a common humanity with classes of people not always regarded as fully human or worthy of justice in Greek polis culture. This suggests that tragedy in general, not only patriotic dramas celebrating Athenian pity, had the potential to erode both inter- and intra-polis status boundaries. To put it in Aristotelian terms, tragedy has the potential to lead the viewer’s emotions astray by eliciting pity and fear for the wrong people and/or for the wrong reasons. Thus, one way to interpret a tragic katharsis is to see it as “purifying” or educating pity and fear to prevent them from going wrong. This interpretation clarifies Aristotle’s stipulation that the appropriate tragic sufferer be of elevated social standing: “one of those who are of good reputation and fortune, like Oedipus and Thyestes and the famous men of such families as those” (1453a10-11). By requiring that the object of tragic pity be an aristocrat, Aristotle effectively curbs pity’s power to blur social boundaries, ensuring that it operate to reinforce rather than to erode status distinctions. It guarantees that the audience not pity those of lower social status - like beggars, hypersexual women, and slaves - characters that Euripides did in fact depict as objects of tragic suffering. In this way, it prevents the audience members from acknowledging what they share with people positioned lower in the social hierarchy. Accordingly, by achieving a katharsis of pity and fear, the properly constructed tragedy supports the emotional disposition needed to ensure that citizens recognize the common humanity of only a small subset of the vulnerable humans with whom they lived. If these or similar considerations lie behind Aristotle’s prescription for a proper tragedy, we might think that he needlessly restricted the legitimate range of tragic sufferers since we know that depictions of Athenian pity for outsiders and the abject had little, if any, practical effect. While I have offered some reasons why the cultivation of pity in Athenian cultural productions did not have positive effects (increasing social justice or eroding social boundaries), I have also suggested that this was not a necessary outcome: things could have gone differently, as Aristotle’s theory of tragedy seems to acknowledge.