



Acts of Compassion in Greek Tragic Drama (Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture Series)

James Franklin Johnson

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The ability of human beings to feel compassion or empathy for one another—and express that emotion by offering comfort or assistance—is an important antidote to violence and aggression. In ancient Greece, the epics of Homer and the tragic dramas performed each spring in the Theater of Dionysus offered citizens valuable lessons concerning the necessity and proper application of compassionate action. This book is the first full-length examination of compassion (*eleos* or *oiktos* in Greek) as a dramatic theme in ancient Greek literature.

Through careful textual analysis, James F. Johnson surveys the treatment of compassion in the epics of Homer, especially the *Iliad*, and in the works of the three great Athenian tragedians: Aischylos, Euripides, and Sophokles. He emphasizes reciprocity, reverence, and retribution as defining features of Greek compassion during the Homeric and Archaic periods. In framing his analysis, Johnson distinguishes compassion from pity. Whereas in English the word “pity” suggests an attitude of superiority toward the sufferer, the word “compassion” has a more positive connotation and implies equality in status between subject and object. Although scholars have conventionally translated *eleos* and *oiktos* as “pity,” Johnson argues that our modern-day notion of compassion comes closest to encompassing the meaning of those two Greek words. Beginning with Homer, *eleos* normally denotes an emotion that entails action of some sort, whereas *oiktos* usually refers to the emotion itself. Johnson also draws associations between compassion and the concepts of fear and pity, which Aristotle famously attributed to tragedy.

Because the Athenian plays are tragedies, they mainly show the disastrous consequences of a world where compassion falls short. At the same time, they offer glimpses into a world where compassion can generate a more beneficial—and therefore more hopeful—outcome. Their message resonates with today’s readers as much as it did for fifth-century Athenians.

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