



Tragedy Offstage: Suffering and Sympathy in Ancient Athens

Rachel Hall Sternberg

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Humane ideals were central to the image Athenians had of themselves and their city during the classical period. Tragic plays, which formed a part of civic education, often promoted pity and compassion. But it is less clear to what extent Athenians embraced such ideals in daily life. How were they expected to respond, emotionally and pragmatically, to the suffering of other people? Under what circumstances? At what risk to themselves?

In this book, Rachel Hall Sternberg draws on evidence from Greek oratory and historiography of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE to study the moral universe of the ancient Athenians: how citizens may have treated one another in times of adversity, when and how they were expected to help. She develops case studies in five spheres of everyday life: home nursing, the ransom of captives, intervention in street crimes, the long-distance transport of sick and wounded soldiers, and slave torture. Her close reading of selected narratives suggests that Athenians embraced high standards for helping behavior—at least toward relatives, friends, and some fellow citizens. Meanwhile, a subtle discourse of moral obligation strengthened the bonds that held Athenian society together, encouraging individuals to bring their personal behavior into line with the ideals of the city-state.

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