

# “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her?”

Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2

by *Fiona McMurran*

I’m feeling a bit numb these days. I think you know what I mean. Good folks I care about are hurting. Not to mention all the millions I’ve never met. There is so much pain and suffering out there. Thanks to the miracle of modern media, we hear instantly about each new disaster, each terrible violation of human rights. The compassion we feel is accompanied by a terrible sense of impotence, often to the point of despair. All responses seem so dreadfully inadequate. How do we cope with it all?

We do what we can. We give a comforting cup of tea and a shoulder to the grieving friend. We work to eliminate poverty. We donate to charity. We visit our lonely elderly relatives. We spend hours on the phone with our desperately ill cousin. We feel; we give. And, from time to time we become exhausted by it all. Numbed.

David Byrne’s song “No Compassion” is an ironic lament on this state of compassion exhaustion. It’s easy to empathize with the impulse to turn away altogether: “compassion is a virtue... but I don’t have the time”.

That’s why tragedy—of the theatrical kind—is such a useful art form. Aristotle tells us that good tragedy arouses in us both pity and terror, effecting a catharsis, an emptying-out. I have just realized what the *point* of catharsis is. It’s not that we need to be reminded to care what happens to other people. It’s that we care too much.

The ancient Greeks inhabited a different conceptual world. The Greek gods are not big on compassion, you see. Nor are they expected to be. I think of the end of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, when

the young hero, his body broken and bleeding after his chariot has crashed on the rocks, is brought to his father’s palace to die. His death is needless; he has been a pawn in a quarrel between two goddesses. Hippolytus is a devotee of the chaste Artemis, neglecting and disparaging Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and sexuality. The agent of his death: Theseus, his own father, who has been deceived by Aphrodite into thinking Hippolytus has betrayed him.

On the human level, the accident is a product of a dreadful conflict between father and son. But the fateful course of events has been engineered by Aphrodite, who destroys a family out of wounded pride. At the end of the play, Artemis tells Theseus the truth: his son, whose death he has just caused, is guiltless of any wrong-doing. The goddess is grieved by the sad fate of her acolyte, but she cannot shed a tear. As Hippolytus is dying, Artemis takes her leave. The gods are not permitted to be in the presence of death.

The distraught father begs Hippolytus for forgiveness; Hippolytus grants it. The contrast between the cool remoteness of the deity and the emotions of the flawed and limited humans is powerful. The gods are immortal—and they are ignorant of true compassion. Because they are immortal.

When we are moved by the dreadful fate of a fictional character, it is a kind of release. Not because they are fictional, but because we are reminded that sometimes, sometimes, the awful truth is that *we can do nothing*. We can only be witnesses, mourn, and accept. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*.

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