
Fulkerson (henceforth F.) starts from the observation that ‘remorse plays a significant role in ancient classical literature’ but ‘that regret and remorse have rather different roles to play in ancient and modern cultures. … the modern Western viewpoint esteems the feelings of regret and particularly remorse as a part of a beneficial rethinking and learning process’, while ancients ‘belief[e] that one should refrain from doing in the first place things that one will later need to regret’ (pp.5-6). This leads to a range of further observations on the differences between ‘modern’ and ‘ancient’ approaches to these emotions. In essence, ancients are more prone to believe a mistake (indicated by remorse) is a result of a character defect, and consequently less likely to change their minds or admit inconsistency. Especially for high status males, there is little of the alternative positive value moderns place on admitting error, repentance and redemption. By contrast, when remorse is performed in ancient literature, it shows less concern than moderns with sincerity.

These divergences are nuanced, the book exploring these nuances through case studies from epic (Agamemnon, Achilles), tragedy (Neoptolemus, Hermione), Greek and Roman New Comedy (various senes and adulcentes), Roman poetry (Augustus), historiography (Alexander, Nero, the Roman army), and biography (Plutarch Lives). Fulkerson defends her case study approach, arguing that ‘emotions are only fully comprehensible within a context’ (p.45), so lists of examples are less effective than explorations of illuminating scenarios. She de-emphasizes philosophers’ reflections on remorse on the grounds that they are ‘a small segment of ancient society’ (p.45), less reflective of it than insights from literature and history. However, philosophers did not think and write in a vacuum, but based their views on or against the world they saw around them, so this omission seems controversial.

In the case studies, F. focuses not on internal feelings, but ‘on the verbal, physical, and situational responses that result from mistakes’ (p.8). Her approach is partly lexical: she describes remorse, conscience, repentance and regret (but no non-English terms), then compares these to related Greek and Latin vocabulary – principally *metameleia* and *metanoia*, *paenitentia* and *conscientia*. Any exploration of complex emotions must pay at least as much attention to situations, scenarios, behaviours and admitted feelings, and these rightly occupy far more of the discussion in F.’s case studies. Although these are presented chronologically, F. says that regret and remorse do not develop through antiquity from a ‘primitive’ (p.50) form in Homer, but are fairly similar in all ancient Greek and Roman periods.

Chapter 1 examines two mistakes in the *Iliad*. Agamemnon makes amends to Achilles by recognizing responsibility and attempting reparation. Though his gifts are rejected, F. believes he ‘establishes a pattern for displays of remorse and reparation that recurs, with variations, throughout classical antiquity’ (p.59). His lack of sincerity shows a key distinction between ancient and modern remorse: the latter involves both sincerity and a ‘morality scenario of reconciliation, one which involves significant and measurable life-change’ (p.59); the former does not. In Agamemnon’s second apology, he still falls short in sincerity; however, this is apparent to Odysseus, showing ancients as alive to this aspect as us. After Achilles’s actions lead to Patroclus’s death, he mourns, refuses food, weeps and appears suicidal; he feels responsible and guilty, and is willing to die in reparation. This F. also labels a ‘remorse scenario’ (p.63), highlighting its similarities to Agamemnon’s: they both wish to undo their mistake, and try to do so. While Achilles sincerely repents, and his sorrow fundamentally changes him permanently – these aspects making it similar to modern remorse – F. highlights that they are so rare in ancient remorse scenarios that we cannot consider them essential.
The only other modern remorse scenario (i.e. with these extra features) seen in ancient literature is Neoptolemus (Soph. Phil.), the subject of chapter 2. Having initially deceived Philoctetes, he begins to suffer (aligo) and feel pity (oiktos); he confesses his deception, and tries to make reparation. In realising the moral implications of his earlier action, regretting and repudiating it, and making reparation – in short, experiencing remorse (in the modern sense) – Neoptolemus ‘grows up’ (p.66): he is forever changed by his experience. F. argues that the rarity of this scenario is explained by Neoptolemus’s youth: learning from a mistake, implied by remorse, is only acceptable in one still improving his moral education. She does not say if these same factors explain Achilles’s remorse.

With Hermione (Eur. Andr.) in chapter 3, we see a contrast. Though sunnoia and metalgei describe her mental state after her plot fails, and she appears dishevelled and talks of suicide, F. argues this is not indicative of remorse, because no sooner does Orestes appear than she agrees to run off with him: her ‘actions suggest that her remorse was either not genuinely felt, or was so shallow as to be easily disposed of’ (p.92). She also readily consents to Neoptolemus’s murder. Thus, F. argues, her previous display of remorse was merely a performance, no longer required. This suggests wide knowledge of ‘the conventions of remorse’ (p.93), yet does not yield a proper remorse scenario. However, F. suggests the play might indicate one for Neoptolemus, in his attempt (per the prologue) to make amends to Apollo for slighting him.

Chapter 4 considers four accounts of Alexander’s killing of Cleitus, and his subsequent remorse. In none does Alexander’s emotion permanently improve his character, unlike modern remorse. In Curtius, Alexander’s grief and suicide attempt are ‘theatrical’ (p.101), but show genuine pudor and paenitentia – this episode exemplifies his tendency to over-react, then feel remorse. In Plutarch, Alexander’s grief is genuine, but he is easily argued out of it. Plutarch often has him commit wrong and feel regret (metanoia) – unusual in ancient literature, even for a young man – but excuses him, attributing his actions to predestination. Arrian makes Alexander’s display of regret more limited and easily ended; nevertheless, he explicitly praises his repentance (metagnônai) as unusual in long-dead kings. The epitomizer Justin labels Alexander’s behaviour paenitentia; however, his Alexander is so often in the grip of strong emotions that, F. says, his ‘remorse is explicitly pointless and self-indulgent’ (p.112).

New Comedy’s sons and fathers are the focus of chapter 5. Young men frequently behave badly, then express regret or remorse – more genuinely, F. believes, in Menander and Terence than Plautus. In all cases, misdeeds are excused as youthful folly, and learned from – showing ‘a now familiar ancient view of the educative function of remorse in the young’ (p.117). Randy old men, who only appear in Plautus, do not learn anything. Sometimes humiliation and regret are brief, in other cases more strongly expressed – but, as with Plautus’s young men, regret never seems genuine. In Menander and Terence, old men regret slighting their sons; while more genuine, this is no longer-lived. New Comedy offers many opportunities for remorse/regret scenarios, because its protagonists are lower status than the public figures of earlier chapters, and the scenarios play out in the private family sphere where healing division is more important than maintaining status.

Chapter 6, on Ovid and Augustus in the exile poetry, does not focus on a remorse scenario per se. F.’s notes: ‘[t]he poet portrays himself as innocent but attempting to apologize … and the emperor as … having done many regrettable things but feeling no remorse. What emerges is a drastic fission between remorse and responsibility, with the fault on one side and the forced performances of regret on the other’ (p.133). However, this is really as far as the chapter goes with remorse or regret: much of what follows discusses Ovid’s presentation of Augustus
(particularly his anger), and his own exculpation. F.’s suggestion that it shows the ‘conventions of remorse’ manipulated (p.146) is unconvincing.

Nero’s remorse after killing his mother (chapter 7) is, like Alexander’s, recorded by several historians. In Dio it is short-lived, of no consequence, and does not change his character for the better. In Suetonius, where several emperors are said to feel regret (*paenitentia*) – a challenge to F.’s reluctance to allow regret or remorse to high status adult men – Nero’s ‘tortured regrets … humaniz[e] him’ (p.156). Tacitus (who also attributes regret to Tiberius) gives *paenitentia* an important place in his account of Nero and, F. says, believes his remorse genuine.

Chapter 8 focuses, uniquely, on the collective regret the army shows after four mutinies (in 217, 206, 47 BCE; 14 CE) – each based on several accounts. In the first, the army is a bystander that merely grumbles; the ‘mutiny’ is a policy division amongst generals, and subsides when the ‘rebels’ feel remorse and apologize. In the second, the soldiers adopt a *sauve qui peut* attitude when their general is rumoured dying; they subside when it proves untrue. In neither case is this collective regret. In the latter there is no regret, though Livy has Scipio tell them they should feel *paenitentia*. By 47 BCE there is more focus on the soldiers. After two mutinies, Appian respectively describes the army’s *metanoia*, then has them voice their own; Dio labels them with *metagnônai* and *metanoein*, though does not show them ‘explicitly emotional’ (p.179). After the fourth mutiny, Tacitus has the men explicitly choosing *paenitentia*, but with no moral improvement; Dio avoids emotional language, but does show them changed.

A summary of findings to date begins chapter 9, followed by a brief survey of views (ranging from Theognis to Quintilian) on the value of changing one’s mind. The remainder focuses on Plutarch, who expresses views on the topic – for public figures – in a range of treatises and *Lives*. Mainly, ‘he seems to find change more palatable when it occurs early in a life, that is, when it can be seen as a part of character development’ (p.197), and he consequently takes a dim view of remorse in adults (e.g. Antony, Timoleon), as indicative of character shortcomings. However, with a number of public figures, he shows himself accepting of inconsistency (Themistocles), downplays it (Demosthenes), or uses it to paint a tragic figure buffeted by a fickle people (Alcibiades). The ‘Conclusion’ chapter, following, largely contains a brief discussion of remorse in a Christian context (Theodosius) – indicating a new era had begun.

F. has shown that there are remorse and regret-like scenarios in ancient literature, and most of these individual episodes have been well examined. While a minor quibble, ‘modern’ could have been more clearly defined – Western, Anglophone and 21st-century seem intended (though ‘modern’ normally has a wider chronological span in historical studies). However, many of the book’s claims remain unproven. For instance, that remorse is generally not seen in high status men unless young and still learning virtue is not proven, given that F. has described two scenarios most similar to modern remorse (Achilles and Neoptolemus), and of these Achilles is not ‘young’ in this sense of the word. In New Comedy she presents many men, both young and old, who feel some form of remorse – as do a number of adult monarchs. Again, that women and slaves can more acceptably apologize – and therefore, presumably, feel remorse – is not substantiated, as the book considers only one woman, who does not feel genuine remorse, and no slaves.

While I sympathize with the case study approach, and it has led to some interesting results for those specific case studies, the number looked at is too few and the findings too diverse, in my view, to draw secure conclusions on ‘ancient’ remorse. F. has a good story to tell on remorse and ancient monarchy and, to a lesser extent, remorse and regret in young men in Greek literature. In general, Greek literature is covered more comprehensively than Roman, yet a number of relevant genres – some featuring lower status individuals – are ignored (e.g. oratory, letters, romantic
poetry, the novel), and in those examined some obvious examples are missed (e.g. the Athenians’ emotions after voting to execute all Mytileneans; Thuc. 3.36, 49) – collective remorse being considered in only one case study. Finally, one wonders whether firmer conclusions could have been drawn about non-high status individuals had something written by them been considered (e.g. papyrus letters). The entirety of ancient literature seems both too wide, and too narrow, a field in which to explore a whole family of emotions effectively.

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