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Epideictic and Ethos in the Amarna Letters:
The Withholding of Argument

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Running Head: Amarna Letters

Epidictic and Ethos in the Amarna Letters:

The Withholding of Argument

A group of letters found in the ruins of Amarna, the royal capital of the Egyptian New Kingdom, exemplify a tendency to employ epidictic forms in deliberative situations. For example, over three thousand years ago a Near Eastern prince facing military disaster called for his scribe to bring a stylus and tablet and dictated the following letter to his lord, the king of Egypt:

To the king, my lord, my Sun, my god: Message of Bayawa, your servant. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, my Sun, my god, 7 times and 7 times, on the stomach and on the back. Should Yanhamu not be here within this [year, a]ll the lands are [lo]st to the 'Apiru. So give life to your lands. (Moran, Amarna Letters 283-84; EA 215)¹

That rhetors sometimes give no arguments is no surprise. But when a person attempts to convince another of something vitally important, on matters of which the sender alone has detailed knowledge, concerning which a decision must be made, and yet

gives no reasons, the absence of argument becomes meaningful. Huspek and Kendall analyze a politically disenfranchised community in the United States that withholds political speech. The Amarna letters show us that this phenomenon is not new, and provide confirmation of a connection between how people use rhetoric and the power relationships in their societies. The Amarna letters demonstrate that intense power relationships can distort the expression of argument.

The Amarna letters were written in Akkadian, the usual diplomatic language of the time (Izre'el 1:9). The different scribes exhibited a variety of backgrounds, dialects and styles (see Zorn, 129; Cochavi-Rainey, 57, 65). These tablets contain the surviving foreign correspondence of the Egyptian empire under emperors Amen-hotep III and his son Amen-hotep IV, or Akh-en-aton. The princely writers, powerful and proud in their own spheres and arrogant in their rule, suppress their own argumentation as an adaptation to the immensely greater power and authority of their audience, the king.

Bayawa's urgent pleading offers only minimal supporting reasoning. About half is a formulaic, obsequious greeting. Considering Bayawa's situation, the reader wonders how many of the Apiru, that is, outcasts or king's enemies (Moran, "Join"; Greenberg) threaten, how soon they will attack, the prospects for defense, how many lands are in danger, and so on. But Bayawa does not say. Bayawa finds enough time to bow down seven and seven times and to call the king "my Sun, my god" twice, but not

enough to argue the basic facts of his case. One wonders what would possess any sensible king to send forces off on an expensive mission on the basis of such cursory pleading. Yet this cryptic letter is no aberration: a great many of the Amarna letters are very similar. Is this because, only a few thousand years ago, so basic a tool as reasoned communication had yet to come into existence? As this seems unlikely, something in the structure of the society suppressed the expression of argument. Indeed, as we shall see, writers in this culture were perfectly capable of making quite cogent deliberative arguments when it suited them; therefore, there is some deeper reason when argument is necessary but absent.

Few of these writers seem to care who is right. Rhetors communicate as if the king cannot be persuaded by facts or reasons but only by loyalty, with loyalty proven in the most extreme cases only by outrageous flattery. These persuasive documents help us understand the suppressing effects that totalitarianism can have on rhetoric, and thus may better enable us to understand the role of argumentation in more open societies.

For the most part these rhetors do not plead along the lines, "I beseech you, most august ruler, to accept my petition because it is wise according to considerations A, B, and C," but rather "I beseech you, most august ruler, to accept my petition. I am loyal to you and those who disagree with me are traitors." Rhetors in the Egyptian empire could and did make arguments under

certain conditions. But, when trying to persuade a very high power receiver, most of these writers adapted to their audience, the king, by suppressing their own arguments. In the Amarna letters, this effect tends to vary with the intensity of the power difference: the message is systematically distorted by the power structure (as in Habermas, "On Systematically," 205-213; Habermas, "Theories," 33; Habermas, Toward 75; Wenzel 83-94). At the same time, the power relationships are affected by the king's tendency to ignore disputes among his vassals as long as they continued to offer the proper tribute and respect to the king (Liverani, Prestige 146-147).

Produced during an era during which Egyptian power ranged from its height to a period of increasing political disorder (Kitchen, esp. 5-11; Baikie; Murnane, "Rhetorical" 183-189; Moran, Introduction xxxiii; Wilson, trans. 234-241), the Amarna letters reflect a dramatic range of differences in power. The Egyptian empire reached its peak under Amen-hotep III and then went into gradual decline in the face of a variety of stresses, especially attacks from the Hittites (Schulman 189; British Museum 61-62; Givon 58; Murnane, "History of Ancient Egypt" 704-706; Murnane, Texts 1-2).

Ethos, Praise, and the Epidictic Genre

Epidictic is typically construed as rhetoric concerned with praise and blame that stresses display over content, rhetorical talent rather than deliberation (Burgess 93-94; Consigny 281).

Chase finds that the classical conception of epideictic stressed praise and blame (300). The specialized form of encomium features the extravagant praise of its subject, frequently taking what a historian would consider to be a cavalier attitude to the facts in the interests of achieving its purpose (Burgess 113-116). But scholars today recognize that epideictic, despite its origins, is more than the rhetoric of display (Oravec 162-163; Chase).

More important than display is epideictic's reliance on ethos and corresponding de-emphasis on logos (Sullivan, "Ethos"). A unique feature of epideictic is the way the speaker's ethos can obviate the need for deliberative argumentation as we usually think of it, in that the speaker's persuasiveness becomes a function of the authority of the speaker's character more than of the speaker's proof (Sullivan, "Ethos" 123).

Thus, relying on ethos more than argument, sometimes making extravagant praise rather than proof its major function, epideictic speaking stands apart from the conventions of deliberative speaking. Sullivan concludes that epideictic should be defined not by its form at all but instead by its purposes, which include "preservation, education, celebration, and aesthetic creation" ("Ethos" 116). Noting that Ancient Greek epideictic amplified its themes, "leading to idealization," Sullivan comments that the tendency to idealize its subjects "became an integral part of epideictic and was not considered an escape from reality" ("Closer Look" 72). Epideictic rhetoric

thus shies away from realistic, deliberative argument about the right and wrong of policies. Indeed, Condit argues that whereas in deliberative or forensic rhetoric two sides argue against each other, epideictic instead turns its attention to the shared ideals of a community (289).

An important question for understanding the Amarna letters is, under what circumstances does the epideictic rather than the deliberative genre become appropriate for a rhetor's expression? Murphy offers an interesting commentary on this issue in his comparison of anti-war speeches by Senators Sam Nunn and Robert Kennedy. Finding Kennedy's speech to represent epideictic rhetoric more than deliberative, Murphy concludes that Kennedy was effective because of his ethos. On the other hand, Murphy finds Nunn's speech, relying on deliberative forms, to be less effective. Murphy argues that, as the President of the United States acquires a powerful ethos merely by holding the office during wartime, the President's pro-war rhetoric did not really take a deliberative approach; Nunn's speech failed because Nunn failed to see the futility of offering deliberative discourse in what the public no longer saw as a deliberative situation. The Amarna letters mirror this phenomenon but in reverse, as the rhetors often offer epideictic discourse in fundamentally deliberative situations.

Fox concludes that ancient Egyptian rhetoric refrains from argumentation "because it is not argumentation but rather the ethical stance of the speakers that will maintain harmony in the

social order, and that is the ultimate goal of Egyptian rhetoric" (22). The social and moral order of the ancient Egyptian empire indeed did depend on complex, rigid social relationships; the thesis of this essay is that the absence of policy argumentation, although striking, is not absolute; it is instead intertwined with those relationships.

Although they repeatedly address the question of their own ethos, for the most part the princes lack any intrinsic ethos whatever; certainly the documents available to us reveal no evidence that they ever enjoy each other's trust, let alone that of the king. Indeed, perhaps the king left the native rulers in power only because a replacement would be no more worthy of trust (Liverani, Prestige 148).

Power and Empire

Wolf, the great anthropologist of peasant societies (which the Egyptian empire was), describes four "modes of power:" the potency of the person, the ability to control social actions, power due to the "determinate settings" of organizations, and "power that organizes and orchestrates the settings" (Wolf 586-587). The king of Egypt, wrapped in a godly persona, enthroned in a magnificent city built at his command explicitly for his use, controlled a huge, well-organized bureaucracy, and had the ability--when he chose to exercise it--to bring problems to him. Together with the importance of the godly persona (see Grimal 232), the Amarna letters show, more than anything, the

king's reliance on his organization: the oft-repeated threat of military and economic force. The idea that the king's power could be limited by democratic institutions was unknown to the empire. Also, since many of the princes in this body of correspondence were for various reasons partially insulated from the king's rule, the letters reflect varying degrees of power difference. This permits a study of the effects of varying power relationships due to the circumstance that the vassals do not always acknowledge total submission to the king (cf. Moran, Introduction xxxi).

The analysis in this essay stresses letters typical of political situations. Letters were selected for analysis by these criteria: those relevant to political decision making, written by identifiable persons, and for which evidence exists to help the critic identify the intensity of the power differences. Sometimes a prince wrote a series of virtually indistinguishable letters on the same subject; in these cases one letter is analyzed in depth. Instead of viewing these often contentious letters as straightforward sources of information about the Egyptian empire, this essay views them more as information about the culture and more importantly the state of mind of the writers (cf. Liverani, "Memorandum"). Many of these letters were to all appearances composed carefully and often with great concern for rhetorical effect (Gevirtz 164; Gianto 220).

Argumentation

Argumentation is the giving of evidence and reasons on behalf of a point of view, typically by cause and effect reasoning, analogy, generalization, example, testimony, deduction, or sometimes narrative; policy argumentation or deliberative argumentation shows the strengths and weaknesses of a course of action.

The Amarna Letters: Argument and Power

Letters from the King to the Princes

Powerful were the kings, and their power implies a particular rhetoric. For example, a letter from the king of Egypt to the prince of Akšapa opens with no courtesies of any kind ("Say to Endaruta, the ruler of Akšapa: Thus the king"). The brief message that follows enjoins Indaruta to obey orders strictly, "Do not be negligent!" and assures that the king's archers "will cut off the head of the enemies of the king" (Moran, Amarna Letters 365; EA 367). The king's letter to Milkilu of Gazru similarly omits polite greeting. The king simply orders Milkilu to send weaving women, precious gems, and "extremely beautiful female cupbearers in whom there is no defect" in return for Egyptian goods, concluding immodestly that the King is healthy and that Aman has placed all of Egypt, "where the sun rises, where the sun sets, under the feet of the king" (Moran, Amarna Letters 366; EA 369). The king, as we would expect, feels no need to prove a point, although he stresses the organizational basis of his power.

Letters from Monarch to Monarch

On the other hand, the letters from one king or queen to another become expansive. The monarchs call one another "brother" to express mutual respect and equality (cf. Liverani, Prestige 197) and in long and excruciatingly polite, but not obsequious, introductions convey wishes that everything be well with the recipient's various wives, sons, horses, chariots, fighting men, and so on.

These letters between equals often make lengthy, detailed arguments. Tušratta, king of Mittani, after wishing well to the recipient, together with his horses, wives, and chariots, complains on tablet after tablet about the inadequate presents that the Egyptian king sent as a bride price for Tušratta's daughter. For proof, Tušratta reviews minutely the faults in every statue and idol. Tušratta allows that his family wept when they saw that the presents were not gold and inquires if his "brother" does not love him. He boasts that he is sending the king abundant golden gifts, which he lists and describes (Moran, Amarna Letters 86-90; EA 27). These letters contain numerous statements that are unequivocally argumentative:

When [Ha]amašši, my brother's messenger, came to me, reported my brother's words, and I heard them, I spoke as follows: "Just as I always showed love to Mimmureya, your father, I will now show 10

times--much--more love to Naphurreya." Thus did I speak to Ḥaamašši, your messenger.

But now my brother has not sent me the statues of solid gold, nor has my brother sent all the additional goods that your father o[rde]red sent. (Moran, Amarna Letters 88; EA 27)

Or, in a lengthy discussion of controversy with Egypt over the statues, some problems with messengers, and a few other assorted matters, Tušratta not only states his positions forcefully, but gives incessant reasons similar to those that we would hear in modern argumentative discourse. He says that "One must not change another's words" (Moran, Amarna Letters 95; EA 29). He appeals to an eyewitness to confirm the details of the marriage-alliance contract, that witness being Teye, the King of Egypt's own mother (Moran, Amarna Letters 96; EA 29). He inquires as to the cause of the King of Egypt's reluctance to offer golden gifts, avowing that in Egypt "[. . . gol]d is as plentiful as [dir]t," and that stinginess over the gold cannot be a legitimate cause of distress (Moran, Amarna Letters 95-96; EA 29).

A reader's initial reaction to the Amarna letters might be that the culture of the ancient Near East did not allow for the modern Western ideal of argumentation. But these kingly letters show otherwise: when power disparities are minimal, equals resort without hesitation to detailed argumentation.

Letters from the Princes to the King

Some princes were totally submissive; others enjoyed a bit of independence: not legal independence, for all avowed allegiance to the king, but rather a feeling of being able to manage their own affairs; indeed, some apparently gave little more than lip service to the king (Gevirtz 163). The degree of the king's power over these various princes can often be inferred from (1) the distance from Egypt--no small matter given the difficulty of travelling, (2) the degree of obsequiousness of the complimentary greeting, which sometimes include optional debasements of the author or hymn-like praise of the king (see Liverani, "Pharaoh's Letters" 6), (3) the political situation, including questions of political stability as well as the size and importance of the prince's domain; (4) the willingness of the writer to pay or deny tribute; also, (5) occasionally the writers themselves suggest how much power they feel the king has over them or their neighbors. The most subordinate princes forsake all attempts at argument; the least subordinate princes present arguments on behalf of their positions, and for the most part the more independent the prince the more inclined to present evidence and reasoning.

Extreme power subordination. Some princes, utterly subject to the king's authority, dared to nothing but cringing obedience. Dramatic examples, devoid of all thought, are letters from Yidya of Ašqaluna. This writer's small province was so close to the king's residence as to rob him of any freedom from scrutiny

(Albright and Mendenhall 490, n. 26). Furthermore, the tone of Yidya's complimentary greetings encourages us to think that Yidya subordinates himself thoroughly to the king's godly persona. One letter reads:

[T]o the king, my lord, my god, my Sun, the Sun from the sky: Message of Yidya, the ruler of Ašqaluna, your servant, the dirt at your feet, the groom of your horses. I indeed prostrate myself, on the stomach and on the back, at the feet of the king, my lord, 7 times and 7 times. I am indeed guard[ing] the place of the king where I am. Whatever the k[ing], my lord, has written me, I have listened to very carefully. Who is the dog that would not obey the orders of the king, his lord, the son of the Sun? (Moran, Amarna Letters 350; EA 320)

Although the bowing both on stomach and back is typical of Palestinian style of the era (Moran, Introduction xxx), the balance of this obsequious letter is difficult to comprehend as anything other than servility (cf. Albright and Mendenhall 490, n. 26). Other letters from Yidya are quite similar (Moran, Amarna Letters 322; EA 321). In all likelihood, a letter of this sort simply acknowledges the author's readiness to provide tribute (Liverani, "Seasonal" 342-343).

Yapahu's writing similarly consists mostly of an unusually servile complimentary greeting:

[T]o the king, my lord, my god, my Sun, the sun from the sky: Message of Yapa[h]u, the ruler of Gazru, your servant, the dirt at your feet, the groom of your horses. (Moran, Amarna Letters 340; EA 298)

After falling the requisite number of times and assuring the king that he is "the dirt at your feet," Yapahu makes a rather unadorned accusation that his younger brother is a traitor:

May the king, my lord, be informed that my younger brother, having become my enemy, entered Muhhazu and pledged himself to the 'Apiru. As [Ti]anna is at war with me, take thought for your land. (Moran, Amarna Letters 340; EA 298)

Being close at hand, Gazru was presumably well under royal command; consistent with the effect of the power relationship, Yapahu gives no reasoned defense why his claim is true nor why he should not fall under suspicion of sharing his brother's treason.

Less extreme power subordination. Some princes were subordinate but somewhat freer to exercise independent authority. Their letters generally open in an obsequious but less florid manner and often contain rudimentary reason giving. But when

these princes do offer arguments or defend their actions, the reasoning is most often directed at the issue of loyalty rather than policy. Although rank was derived from power, the culture expected a certain pattern of behavior from persons of various ranks (Liverani, Prestige, 68-70). This may be compared with Fox' point that in Egyptian rhetoric "Ethos, not argument, is finally what will win you your way:" the real issue is character (Fox 18). Logos comes to serve ethos, while the deliberative requirements of the situation go unserved.

A letter from Abi-Milki, prince of Tyre, to Ahk-en-Aton begins with praise for the king that sets a high standard of obsequious flattery:

To the king, my lord, my god, my Sun: Message of Abi-Milku, your servant. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, 7 times and 7 times. I am the dirt under the sandals of the king, my lord. My lord is the Sun who comes forth over all lands day by day, according to the way (of being) of the Sun, his gracious father, who gives life by his sweet breath and returns with his north wind; who establishes the entire land in peace, by the power of his arm : ha-ap-šī; who gives forth his cry in the sky like Baal, and all the land is frightened at his cry. (Moran, Amarna Letters 233; EA 147)

Another letter (Moran, Amarna Letters, EA 148), is a bit more argumentative, but it also seems to reflect a more desperate political situation in which Abi-Milki's city was besieged, which would imply some weakening of the king's power. Submissive in tone this letter may be, but it does end with a few sentences in which the author discusses his rule over Tyre and accuses Zimredda, King of Sidon, of plotting with the traitor Aziru, under whose rule Ammurru shifted allegiance from Egypt toward Hatti (Izre'el 1:9):

I am indeed guarding Tyre, the principal city, for the king, my lord, until the powerful arm of the king comes forth over me, to give me water to drink and wood to warm myself. Moreover, Zimredda, the king of Sidon, writes daily to the rebel Aziru, the son of ʿAbdi-Ašratu, about every word he has heard from Egypt. I herewith write to my lord, and it is good that he knows. (Moran, Amarna Letters 233-234; EA 147)

Thus, it contains a bit of deliberative reason giving, although nothing very impressive. The ruler of an important territory, this author was presumably less thoroughly subordinated than, say Yidya, and set forth some minimal arguments.

More lucid is ʿAbdi-Aširta's communication to Amen-hotep III (Moran, Amarna Letters 131-133; EA 60). ʿAbdi-Aširta enjoyed modest independence; not only was his territory farther from

Egypt but it was a border state between the Egyptian empire and Hatti (Izre'el 9-10; cf Liverani, "Politics"); also Rib-Addi of Gubla questions 'Abdi-Aširta's loyalty (Moran, Amarna Letters 221-223; EA 138; see also 154-156; EA 84). Furthermore, there is evidence that 'Abdi-Aširta lost his life after making inadequate tribute payments to Egypt, which suggests that he at least dared to perceive himself to be somewhat independent of Egypt (Moran, "Amarna Glosses;" Moran, Amarna Letters 174-175; EA 101).

After falling at the king's feet seven and seven times and assuring the king that he is "a servant of the king and a dog of his house," 'Abdi-Aširta assures the king of his loyalty. He states that "Indeed, all the [k]ing[s] under the king of the Hurri forces seek to wrest the lands from my [...] and ... [..] of the king, [my] lord, [but I g]uard th[em]" and assures the king that when his royal commissioner Paḥanate is away, he, 'Abdi-Aširta, continues to guard "the harvest of the grain of Šumur and all the lands for the king, my Sun, my lord. May the king, [m]y lord, know me and entrust [m]e to the charge of Paḥanate, my commissioner" (Moran, Amarna Letters 131-132; EA 60). He assures the king of his loyalty and cites Paḥanate as able to verify the truth of his assertions.

This letter thus contains something of deliberative argumentation: the possibility of hearing testimony from Paḥanate is mentioned; the writer does convey bits and pieces of information to the reader; yet, easily as much of the letter is devoted to servility and extravagant praise as to information or

argumentation of any kind. Despite 'Abdi-Aširta's presumed reputation for unreliability, the presence in his territory of the royal commissioner, presumably on an armed tribute-collecting expedition, kept the damper closed a bit on 'Abdi-Aširta's feeling of independence at the time of this letter (cf. Liverani, "Seasonal" 345-346).

Equally intriguing is a letter from 'Abdi-Aširta to Paḥanate in which 'Abdi-Aširta, possibly defending himself from charges of disloyalty, cites the example of his heroic deed in rushing to Šumur to rescue loyal persons from the palace there. He reviews details of the events, stressing how he had saved four men loyal to the empire, states their names, recounts their plea to save them from the troops of Šeḥlal, and reports that the enemy had killed 25 loyal persons. He then assures Paḥanate that those who speak against him are lying (Moran, Amarna Letters, 133-134; EA 62).

This letter, significantly more argumentative than many of the Amarna letters, contains a specific recounting of events and offers explanation as to why those events occurred. The events that this letter describes would be unlikely to transpire in an area subject to tight supervision, so that we may be seeing a relationship between reduced power disparity on the one hand and greater willingness to offer arguments on the other. Further, the royal commissioner, recipient of this letter, would not carry the king's godly persona. But it is important to note that, once again, the proposition being proved is as much that "I,

‘Abdi-Aširta, am loyal", as it is "I, ‘Abdi-Aširta, defend a good policy."

Ba^lu-UR.SAG's letter to the king complains about the sons of the rebellious prince Lab'ayu. More interested in proving his loyalty than proving his point, he accuses the sons of Lab'ayu of continuing their late father's notorious activities: he rehearses a lurid but seemingly fictionalized conversation with them:

And the two sons of Lab'ayu keep talking to me like this, (saying), "Wage war against the people of [G]ina for having killed our father. And if you do not wage war, then we will be your enemies." I have answered the two of them, "May the god of the king, my lord, preserve me from waging war against the pe[op]le of [G]ina, servants of the king, my lord." (Moran, Amarna Letters 303; EA 250)

This is reason-giving of a sort but again it is directed to the question of loyalty, not policy. Ba^lu-UR.SAG briefly mentions that Milkilu's courier has not abandoned Lab'ayu's sons, which is evidence casting suspicion on Milkilu. Overall, however, the main idea is still not that the king should side with the prince who presents the wisest course of action but rather with the most loyal, as is stressed by this letter's concluding statement:

"Now, Milkilu is indeed trying to cause the loss of the land of

the king, my lord, but I have no other purpose: the king, my lord, I serve, and the orders that the king speaks I obey" (Moran, Amarna Letters 303-304; EA 250). The writer persuades by tying himself to the empire's hierarchical social structure.

Modest power subordination. The princes of central and northern Palestine and Syria tended to be less subservient and more inclined to exercise independent authority; their letters also tend to contain more evidence and reason giving. Indeed, that many of the letters from northern regions--which had to be transported over a greater distance--are as long or even longer than those from southern Palestine suggests that transportation difficulties do not entirely account for the relative volubility of different letters. (The tablets are quite small in any case.)

Rib-Addi of Byblos, which is not only well up the coastline, but one of the richer cities of the Near Eastern trade, requests archers while criticizing Ahk-en-Aton for not sending troops. After pledging to die for the king he gives reasons why his enemies should be kept at bay: he lists the city's wealth and names the various allies and enemies contending for control of the region; he stresses the citizenry's loyalty and accuses his enemies of driving him from the city (Moran, Amarna Letters 218-221; EA 137). A similar analysis could be given of Rib-Addi's other letters; one example contains some argumentative material scattered among flowery expressions of loyalty and outlandishly-toned accusations against his enemies (Moran, Amarna Letters, EA 138). Rib-Addi apparently enjoyed the favor of the

king despite his tedious style, further strengthening the conclusion that he was essentially loyal (Cf. Zorn 129; Moran, "Rib-Hadda"); yet, many of his letters may be, in a way, arguing about local conditions and, perhaps, they imply bargaining about his economic relations with Egypt (Liverani, "Seasonal" 344; Liverani, "Pharaoh's Letters"), which a more subordinate prince would never consider. Rib-Addi seems to have been a loyal vassal, but the king's power over him seems to have been limited enough to unleash his reason-giving: a reason-giving that stressed the writer's ethos on the one hand (Moran, "Rib-Hadda", 181) and the merits of his case on the other. There is, in any case, no evidence that the king satisfied any of Rib-Addi's requests.

Similarly, ^cAbdi-Heba (prince of Jerusalem), warns the king of rebellion and hostility. He opens by falling at the king's feet seven and seven times, although he neglects to offer to groom the king's horse or to call himself a dog. Explaining that archers are needed to save the king's land, he assures the king of his loyalty. He accuses Milkilu and the sons of Lab'ayu, "who have given the land of the king <to> the ^cApiru" (Moran, Amarna Letters 328; EA 287), of disloyalty, complaining of several specific acts of violence against him. ^cAbdi-Heba's letter petitions the king for action, and at some length, although he stresses his loyalty and the disloyalty of his enemies about as much as he does the details about why there was a need for action. He gives examples:

Consider the lands of Gazru, Ašqaluna, and L[akisi]. They have given them food, oil, and any other requirement. So may the king provide for archers and send the archers against men that commit crimes against the king, my lord. (Moran, Amarna Letters 328; EA 287)

He twice reviews the misdeeds of the Nubians, including an account of their assault against his own house; he narrates an attack on his tribute caravan (Moran, Amarna Letters, 327-329; EA 287).² Suwardata's accusation of 'Abdi-Ḥeba's disloyalty suggests that 'Abdi-Ḥeba was not completely under the king's thumb; indeed, simply that such an accusation could be thought credible suggests that 'Abdi-Ḥeba was not completely under royal control (Moran, Amarna Letters 321-322; EA 280).

Another of 'Abdi-Ḥeba's requests for royal archers (Moran, Amarna Letters 330-332; EA 288) further reflects civil disorder, Ahk-en-Aton seemingly having abandoned all attempts to control the territory (see David 185). This letter depicts the disintegration of the empire, which has reached the point that violations of Egyptian sovereignty have penetrated to the frontier of Egypt's traditional territory (Albright and Mendenhall 488, n. 19):

To prove his loyalty 'Abdi-Ḥeba refrains from fawning about the king's sweet breath or offering to groom the king's horse; instead he gives as evidence actual deeds he has performed on the king's behalf. He terms himself "tribute-bearer of the king" and

reminds the king that he had delivered "21 girls, [8]0 prisoners, as a gift for the king my lord" to the king's general. He stresses the urgency of the situation by naming those of the king's governors and officers killed in rebellions; for example, "Behold, servants who were joined to the ḥApiru smote Zimredda of Lakisu, and Yaptih-Hadda was slain in the city gate of Silu. The king did nothing" (Moran, Amarna Letters 331; EA 288). The letter ends with a petition that "If there are no archers this year, may the king send a commissioner to fetch me, me along with my brothers, and then we will die near the king, our lord" (Moran, Amarna Letters 331; EA 288).

To this extensive reasoning by example, this letter adds ḥAbdi-Ḥeba's pointed (but not gushing) assurances of personal loyalty to the king: "I am your servant [and] your son" (Moran, Amarna Letters 331; EA 288). Nonetheless, obviously feeling isolated from the king's waning power, ḥAbdi-Ḥeba comments that "I am treated like an ḥApiru, and I do not visit the king, my lord, since I am at war. I am situated like a ship in the midst of the sea" (Moran, Amarna Letters 331; EA 288).

This letter is instructive. Its tone is thoroughly loyal; nonetheless this prince who is less under the king's power is more willing to make arguments. The author does not seem to associate his willingness to present the king with information and reasoning with any feeling of disloyalty, but his insulation from the king's power also released his rhetoric from

self-imposed bondage (also see Moran, Amarna Letters 326-327; EA 286).

Insubordinate power relationship. A fascinating series of letters express the opinions of Lab'ayu, ruler of Šakmuu, located well to the north of Jerusalem, near Samaria. Lab'ayu, who apparently spent his idle hours raiding trade expeditions and seizing other princes' towns, wrote to the king with open contempt--and often with arguments. Not only do Lab'ayu's letters express a tone of independence, but also, with a bitterness shown to no other enemies, his name in the Amarna letters becomes a synonym for "traitor" (e.g. Moran, Amarna Letters 298; EA 244; 299; EA 245; 321; EA 280; 332-333; EA 289).

In a letter to Amen-hotep III, Lab'ayu defends himself against charges made by rival princes. The rebel prince announces his independence from the king's authority with a complimentary introduction that is dramatically less servile: "Say to the king, my lord: Message of Lab'ayu, your servant. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord" (Moran, Amarna Letters 305; EA 252). He doesn't even prostrate himself twice? Lab'ayu complains that his city was taken despite an oath taken with his enemies: "He has slandered me : ši-ir-ti (I am slandered) before the king, my lord" (Moran, Amarna Letters 305; EA 252). Let other princes defend themselves by spouting expressions of loyalty or offering to let the king walk on them; Lab'ayu offers an analogy:

Moreover, when an ant is struck, does it not fight back and bite the hand of the man that struck it? How at this time can I show deference and then another city of mine will be seized? (Moran, Amarna Letters 305; EA 252)

Lab'ayu concludes by reluctantly agreeing to the king's order to guard his prisoners.

In other letters, Lab'ayu at least remembers to fall at the king's feet seven and seven times. In one, he protests his innocence and complains again that he has been unjustly criticized. He alleges that he attacked Gazru because its ruler Milkilu was his enemy. He cites as evidence of his innocence that he has paid his tribute and obeyed the royal commissioner. To further prove his loyalty, he reminds the king of a dramatic act, that he is giving his rebellious son to the king's forces (Moran, Amarna Letters 307; EA 254; cf. Moran, "Amarna Glosses"). But after all this specific reason-giving, even Lab'ayu conforms to his status in the empire and reverts at the end to extravagant, non-argumentative assurance of loyalty:

Moreover, how, if the king wrote for my wife, how could I hold her back? How, if the king wrote to me, "Put a bronze dagger into your heart and die," how could I not execute the order of the king? (Moran, Amarna Letters, 307; EA 254)

Lab'ayu's reaction leads us to see, perhaps, how high a value was placed on loyalty, even to the extent of contemplating suicide upon the king's order, and so how much even a rebel feared the king. Nonetheless, Lab'ayu's letters are unique in the Amarna corpus; brief, arrogant, and mostly argumentative. In the end, by the way, Lab'ayu was not as independent as he may have thought, for more loyal princes eventually killed him, leaving Lab'ayu's sons to continue his work after him.

Conclusion

Grodzins writes of the development of the totalitarian state from the benevolent to the absolute that as the government develops more power and consolidates its authority, "The more total the totalitarianism, the more obedient the people; and in the view of the leaders, obedience can be equated with loyalty" (Grodzins 102). But as rhetorical acts, the Amarna letters show something that is in its own way more chilling than quaking obedience.

The point here is not that these writers lacked either intelligence or rhetorical skill, but rather that their rhetorical skill is expressed in a particular manner. Indeed, it is at least conceivable that their instincts served them well, in that the kings of Egypt may truly have been more interested in their subordinates' loyalty than in rightness, and accordingly more inclined to be convinced by praise than by reasoning. On the other hand, the Amarna letters (which admittedly constitute

an incomplete record) reveal not one shred of evidence that the king trusted a single one of these princes to any degree, and little evidence that he responded favorably to their petitions.

Conceiving their ruler to be a god, the Egyptians saw the gap between ruler and ruled to be immense. The king of Egypt generally took no friends; no one was worthy of him (Frankfort, Wilson, and Jacobsen, 87-88). The great kings, those who answered to no higher authority, placed themselves on a higher plane than ordinary persons (Liverani, Prestige 68, 187). Many of the most ruthless leaders of the twentieth century are secretive about their atrocities, lying to conceal their viciousness; the kings of Egypt were proud of theirs. Prisoners bound hand and foot were brought into the throne room so the king could club them in front of the court--and the kings were so pleased with themselves that they caused pictures of these mighty acts to be inscribed on their tombs. A painting on the tomb of Thut-mose III, whose conquests created the Palestinian empire (see "Letter from Tell el-Hesi"), shows the king gleefully riding his chariot over wounded enemies (see Pritchard, Pictures 92, plate #296, text on 282); 101, plate #101; 102, plate #312; 103, plate #315). Ahk-en-aton, seeing himself to be a god, substituted on his tomb pictures of himself for the usual paintings of the gods of the dead (David 183, 185).

And yet these arrogant kings administered a vast, complex domain. The immense power over others that they enjoyed, sometimes mostly in theory but often in brutal fact, resulted in

communication that was so servile that the administrative requirements, which clearly included a need for information and on-the-spot analysis, were buried under the overriding symbols of power and obedience that were so fundamental to the social order. Although what the kings probably needed was argumentative, deliberative rhetoric packed with information, what they actually got was servile praise and implausible assurances of personal loyalty. As Fox astutely points out, "Self-control was especially important to the strictly ordered hierarchical society of Egypt, where the social order was considered divinely ordained and ideally static" and a person's first and foremost responsibility was to take the proper place in the social order (Fox 18).

So the point is not that the underlings were servile but that they so often substituted servile communication for reasoned communication. Although epideictic reaches its highest state when it expresses or persuades about the shared ideals of the community (Condit 289), the quasi-epideictic rhetoric of the Amarna letters is founded on bitterness, division, distrust, and open conflict. Employing the characteristic features of epideictic rhetoric to deliberative ends, the discourse of the Amarna letters was twisted, albeit twisted by the rhetors' own choice, by a complex social and power structure. Instead of deliberating over the issues that confronted them, the rhetors devoted their brief messages to praising their king, or sometimes to praising (or debasing) themselves. That the Amarna letters

contain so little evidence that such rhetoric was successful comes as no surprise.

Such rhetoric is not unheard of today. Prayer offered to a deity is a typical example of ultimate power difference. Modern prayer might praise the deity, confess ones sinfulness, and plead for mercy, but it rarely offers reasons ("Let us beseech thee that thou wast wrong to allow someone else to have my job. Let me give three reasons why thou should return my job to me. I will cite learned authorities to prove that thou are wrong.") One might offer such a plea to an employer, but never to a deity. Persons who perceive themselves to be hopelessly without social power may be less likely to plead their case with the authorities than persons who perceive themselves as closer to equality (Huspek and Kendall). Phillipson's interesting study of Teamsterville, a south side Chicago working class neighborhood, found that the inhabitants usually sought intermediaries to confront authorities rather than to confront the authorities themselves. All of these might be examples of phenomena similar to that studied in this essay.

Argumentation is primarily suitable for communication among equals. Persons in high power are more likely to give commands than to give reasons; persons of very low power, more likely to plead on the basis of their character than to offer reasons and evidence. Something in the nature of the very fact of arguing recognizes an equality between persons, a recognition of the

intellectual worth of both parties, that may have trouble finding expression when that sense of equality is suppressed by power.

Notes

¹ The letter numbers are those of J. A. Knudtson, Die El-Amarna-Tafeln (EA). Moran's translation is cited throughout. The translator marks speculative restorations of missing material or unknown words by placing them in brackets []. Material added by the translator for clarity is in parentheses (). Unrestored lacunae are marked by ellipses (. . .); the author of this essay made no internal alterations, deletions, or additions except to omit line numbers.

² The translator gives as a tentative reading in this letter, "Consider, O king, my lord! I am in the right!" Cf. the translation of Albright and Mendenhall, "Behold, O king, my lord, I am right!" (Albright and Mendenhall 488; EA 287).

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