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# Essays on Aristotle's *Poetics*

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→ "THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ARISTOTELIAN TRAGEDY"  
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CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS PUBLICOS  
CENTRO DE DOCUMENTACION

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

11

USA 48.07 Bka-compua -  
marzo 2010

# The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy

Amélie Oksenberg Rorty

Sophocles puts the moral of our story best, and what he says reveals the essence of Aristotelian tragedy.

Wonders are many and none more wonderful than man . . .  
In the meshes of his woven nets, cunning of mind, ingenious man . . .  
He snares the lighthearted birds and the tribes of savage beasts,  
and the creatures of the deep seas . . .  
He puts the halter round the horse's neck  
And rings the nostrils of the angry bull.  
He has devised himself a shelter  
against the rigors of frost and the pelting rains.  
Speech and science he has taught himself,  
and artfully formed laws for harmonious civic life . . .  
Only against death he fights in vain.  
But clear intelligence – a force beyond measure –  
moves to work both good and ill . . .  
When he obeys the laws and honors justice, the city stands proud . . .  
But man swerves from side to side, and when the laws are broken,  
and set at naught, he is like a person without a city,  
beyond human boundary, a horror, a pollution to be avoided.

What is a tragic drama? Why are we so affected by tragedies, sobered but enlarged, seared but strangely at peace? Why do tragedies – and what we learn from them – bring us such complex, bitter-sweet pleasures?

Aristotle gives us the best explanation we have for our experiences of tragedy. But if we accept his explanation, then we must also accept a good deal of his psychology and ethics. Aristotle's characterization of a tragedy is, perhaps, all too familiar, so familiar that we misread him, replacing his intentions with ours. Tragedy is one of the poetics arts.<sup>1</sup> It is, he says, an imitative representation

(*mimēsis*) of a serious (*spoudaios*) action, dramatically presented in a plot that is self-contained, complete, and unified. The protagonists of tragic drama are admirable, not technically speaking heroes or demigods, but larger and better versions of ourselves.<sup>2</sup> In the finest tragedies, the character of the protagonist makes him susceptible to a deflection – to an erring waywardness – that brings disaster, producing a reversal in the projected arc of his life. The story of his undeserved misfortune arouses our pity and fear, clarifying and purifying those reactions in such a way as to bring us both pleasure and understanding. At its best, tragedy brings recognition of who and what we are. Like other forms of poetry, tragedy is more philosophic and illuminating, and so more truthful than history.

Before examining the elements of Aristotle's definition and locating them within the larger frame of his ethics and psychology, we should say something about the kind of theory he holds. Although Aristotle focuses on the formal elements of tragedy – on the best way to structure plots, his is not an aesthetic theory. The pleasures and the insights of tragedy do not rest solely or primarily in their purely formal properties, in the elegance of structural tension and balance. In the arts and crafts – as in biology and metaphysics – form follows function and purpose. The beauty and merit of any individual work – a shoe, a pot, or a tragedy – is a function of the way that its form expresses and fulfills its aims clearly and elegantly, in an appropriate medium and manner. Because they are representational, all the poetic arts include, among their various aims, that of bringing us to some sort of recognition: they fulfill their distinctive emotional aims by affecting our understanding and they affect our understanding by affecting our emotions.

Aristotle is no more a hermeneuticist than he is an aesthetic formalist. The significance of a tragic drama lies in its *mūthos* and not in the history of its interpretations. Neither self-conscious formalism nor self-conscious hermeneuticism allows for Aristotelian tragedy.<sup>3</sup> For whenever there is the awareness of the play of abstraction or interpretation, we implicitly grant ourselves the power – even if it is only an intellectual power – to elude the ineluctable, escape the inescapability of the tragic plot. To be sure, it is in principle possible to restructure the classical dramas, to rearrange the elements that define Aristotelian tragedy, and to vary them in such a way as to produce new plays and new genres, cousins to Aristotelian tragedy.<sup>4</sup> And indeed later dramatists did redirect the ends of the plays they called “tragedies”: Elizabethan critics like Nevile thought tragedies should show “Gods horrible vengeance for sinne:” Corneille thought they should evoke the grandeur and gravity of the diction of noble action and passion. By contrast, Lessing stressed the evocation of pity and compassion through simple, unaffected language. Schiller takes tragedy to express the tensions between the sublimity of self-legislating freedom and the pathos of human suffering.<sup>5</sup> From Aristotle's point of view, debates about whether these dramas are, strictly speaking, tragedies, are idle and empty. Dramatic genres are differentiated by their ends; but the ends of a work of art –

indeed the end of any *technē* – also specify the formal structures of the work. To change the form is to shift the end; to shift the end is to change the genre.

Incomplete and fragmentary as it is, the *Poetics* conjoins a number of distinct enterprises: it is, to begin with, a philosophical study intended to analyze the structures and functions of the range of poetic genres as if they were biological species. The motto of this mode is: Save the phenomena. Anatomize poetic genres by showing how the formal arrangement of their “parts” succeed in fulfilling a specific aim, that is, by showing how the structures of the works produce a certain type of response. But since the poetic genres are crafts, the *Poetics* is a book of technical advice, as well as a functionally oriented anatomy. Aristotle's advice to the tragedians is advice about how to structure dramas in such a way as to produce a specific kind of psychological and intellectual effect. This advice goes beyond telling dramatists how to conform to a model that was derived by an analysis of classical drama, as if Aristotle were a chemist who had analyzed a compound and derived the formula for producing it. Aristotle's way of saving the phenomena of tragic drama has a strongly normative turn, beyond that which is implicit in any technical advice. Indeed, his normative agenda may have so focused his analysis of classical drama that he ignored some of its important features. The motto of this mode is: save drama against Platonic attacks by showing that good tragic drama – tragic drama properly understood – can promote rather than thwart understanding, attune rather than distort the emotions it arouses. The argument of the *Poetics* is intended to show that the best effects of tragic drama derive from its representational truthfulness rather than from ecstasy; that the turn of the plot depends on human agency rather than on demonic or divine forces, on probable rather than accidental connections among incidents; that the primary emotions evoked by tragic drama are pity and fear about what can plausibly happen rather than horror or awe (*deinon*) about the way that fate (*Moira*) can, in a strange alliance with chance (*Tuchē*), intervene in the natural course of events. It is a person's character (*ēthos*), as determining his actions and choices, rather than any cosmic justice (*dikē*) or vengeance (*nemesis*) that determines his fate. It is for these reasons that Aristotle does not discuss of the role of civic and religious rituals surrounding the traditional performances of the classical tragedies; and it is for these reasons that he thinks tragedies should not represent gory and horrible deeds on stage. His view is that neither tragedy nor its essential psychological effects depend on retaining their archaic sources or forms. Nietzsche was quite right: Aristotle wanted to transform, if not actually to eliminate, any remnants of the Dionysian origins of tragedy.

### *Mūthos* and *Mimēsis*

“*Mūthos* – a story or plot –,” Aristotle says, “is the fundamental principle and soul of tragedy” (1150b2 ff.). While there is sorrow, grief, loss, and pain in life, there is tragedy only when the actions and events that compose a life are

organized into a story, a structured representation of that life. A drama is not only the *mimēsis* of an action, the enactment of a story that represents actions by actions and in actions: at its best, it also brings us to an understanding of the shape (*eidos*) and boundary (*horos*) of human action. Like all representation, drama selectively condenses and structures what is presents. It reveals the inner logic and causal organization of an apparently disconnected series of events, encompassing them to form a single extended, self-contained and completed activity. A *mūthos* takes what seemed to be a set of randomly distributed points and represents them in an arc, the trajectory of a well-formed parabola, containing all (and only) the elements and causal relations that are necessary to explain what happens. The delimitation and the definition of an action – its boundaries and its essential point – are coordinate: representing the structure of an action conjoins the arc of its temporal completion with the fulfillment (or failure) of its aims or intentions. We don't know when an action has been completed, let alone whether it has been successfully completed, unless we understand its aim or purpose.

Before we can understand Aristotle's account of how drama represents action, we need to understand his theory of representation. *Mimēsis* conjoins two notions. Neither the terms *imitation* nor *representation*, taken independently of one another, fully captures Aristotle's use.<sup>6</sup> Consider: an actor's mask is a representational *mimēsis* of the face of a certain kind of character, that of a king or that of a shepherd, for example, as abstracted from any accidental individuating factors. A good mask enables the spectators straightaway to identify the King, the Shepherd. Similarly a portrait represents the structure (*morphē*) of an individual's features: it is successful when we can recognize that it is a representation of Pericles rather than Sophocles. A good mask represents those features that reveal what is essential to the type: presumably in showing us what differentiates a King from a Shepherd, it also shows what a king really is; in differentiating Youth and Age, tragedy from comedy, it reveals what is centrally characteristic of each.<sup>7</sup>

Like many other animals, we are constitutionally set to mimic the actions of those around us. It is through *mimēsis* as imitation that we first learn, acquiring the habits that form our character, as well as the skills and abilities that constitute our virtues (1103b21 ff.). When imitation works well – when our models truthfully represent the essence of what they are and what they do – we not only learn how to play, to dance, to make pots, to arrange the matters of the day, but also what playing, dancing, pottery really are, what ends guide and determine the structuring of these activities. Ideally the idiosyncracies of the models that we imitate drop out, and what remains is a representation of the essence of the actions and activities that constitute a well-lived life.

A central step in Aristotle's defence of tragic drama against Plato's attack is his claim that tragedy produces its emotional and cathartic effects through *mimēsis*, by representing and imitating actions. Instead of seeing *mimēsis* as essentially falsifying, he sees it as capable of being correct or truthful. Every

representation of an action – whether it is structured as an epic, or in history or oratory – necessarily gives that action some form, a definition and a boundary. But while interpretations are indeed perspectival, there is a truth of the matter, indeed a double truth.<sup>8</sup> To begin with, protagonists can be profoundly mistaken about what they are really doing. Oedipus may have believed that he married the Queen of Thebes, and so he did; but the proper description of that action – the description that should have guided his deliberation – was that in marrying the Queen of Thebes, he would be marrying his mother, Aristotle carries the correctness of actions further: however well individual agents understand their particular actions, these actions can themselves conform or fail to conform to the normative essential definitions that govern the type of action in which they are engaged.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their differences, Aristotle accepts a central part of Plato's account of *mimēsis*. There is no imitation or representation without selection and abstraction.<sup>10</sup> The representation of an object or an event sets forth the formal organization or schema (*eidos*) – the rationale (*logos*) – of the relation among its parts. A dramatic imitative representation of an action reveals the structure of the dynamic causal connections among the events that compose it. Just as a good mask truthfully represents the essential configuration of the face of a King, so the criterion for a sound or good imitation of an action is that the representation be truthful, that it captures what is essential to its typical causal structure, abstracted from the accidental and contingent features of its performance. The kinds of actions that are centrally significant to a human life – serious (*spoudaios*) actions with weighty, far-reaching consequences – have a normative structure. Such actions and activities have an objective end or point: they can succeed or fail to realize that point. Tragedies represent the way that the protagonist's serious actions – those that affect the major directions of his life and that determine his happiness – skew the essential ends of what he does, and how this error, this waywardness brings disaster. The *mimēseis* of tragic drama can be evaluated for their truthfulness: they show how the protagonist's (well-intentioned but mistaken) purposes miss the true or essential ends of his actions and how his *harmartia* brings disaster.

Many tragedies represent a tale with which the audience is likely to be familiar. The original tale is itself a mimetic representation of a legendary set of events. For such dramas – Oedipus is one of them – the audience does a double take, as it were. It recognizes that Sophocles is re-presenting an old tale; and it recognizes that the old tale represents the structure of a certain sort of action. That old story, the story of Oedipus, could also be truthfully represented – imitatively re-presented – in an epic, or in music and dance. Had Oedipus been an historical figure, the story of his actions could also have been represented in a chronicle. The appropriate structuring of a *mimēsis* varies with the aim or the purpose of the representation. While an historical treatise represents certain events and actions, it does not, by Aristotle's lights, attempt to produce a particular emotional or motivational effect on its audience. But a political orator

could introduce the story of Oedipus in the course of an argument to persuade a polity to conduct a thorough investigation of a stranger's ancestry before accepting him as a ruler. He would, without distorting the original story, structure his representation of the action in such a way as to bring about a certain kind of political effect. Although the story of Oedipus is, to be sure, not an ordinary story, it is told as a tragedy – a tragedy with universal significance – when it is structured in such a way as to bring about a specific emotional and intellectual effect, by representing the story of an action that undoes a person of high energetic intelligence.

### Action and the Unity of Action

What then are actions? Human actions are a species of natural motion, those sorts of motion whose sources are internal to the agent. Avalanches toss great boulders, roots of trees press through rock, animals devour one another, each acting from its own nature, to fulfill its nature. Our natural motions are also of this general kind. We differ from avalanches and animals in that some of our natural motions – those we call our actions – are structured by our intentions, our beliefs and desires. We act – we intervene to change or direct the course of events – in order to fulfill our purposes, ultimately for the sake of what we take to be our happiness (1095a14 ff.). When we intentionally and deliberately intervene in the course of events – ringing the nostril of the wild bull, snaring the light-hearted birds – we are not acting against nature. On the contrary, we are expressing our natures. We differ from avalanches and animals in that we are capable of intelligent planning and of acting voluntarily, understanding the meaning and normal consequences of what we do when it is within our power to do otherwise.

Intelligent action arranges the affairs of life in such a way as to conduce to happiness (*eudaimonia*): but a life of action and activity is more than a well-planned enterprise, one that produces happiness as if it were interest on a crafty business investment. Happiness is not an outcome or end-product of action and activity. It is soul actively engaged in its natural activities, doing its best at its best (1098a12 ff.). An action takes the form of an activity when it is self-contained, whole and complete, fully performed, its ends achieved in the very performance.<sup>11</sup> Many actions, particularly those which express basic species-defining traits, are specifications of activities or are embedded within them. Political discussion is, for example, an exercise of the fundamental activity of civic life; similarly the actions involved in botanical or animal dissection are part of the activity of scientific inquiry.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle remarks that humans are in a way thought to be partially divine, or at least to share in divinity in so far as they share in *nous*, that is, in so far as they share in intelligence, in mind (1177b27 ff.). Contemplation is the most pre-eminent and perfectly formed noetic activity;

in it we fulfill what is highest and best in us, purified as it were, of all that is extraneous and contingent. Nevertheless, in so far as we act intentionally and intelligently, forming action by thought or *dianoia*, we act in a god-like way, changing the direction of what would otherwise have happened, through and because of our thought-filled and thought-directed interventions.

As we differ from animals in our capacities for thought, we differ from divinities in our susceptibilities to waywardness. We are not only capable of acting intelligently and wisely, but also of acting in error and ignorance. Unlike other animals, we can act askew, lawlessly, and although our intentions are always directed to what we believe to be good, we often do not know what is good, even for ourselves. The ends that direct our actions can be opaque to us, even when we are acting from our clearest and best understanding. Indeed, it is sometimes precisely our way of being at our clearest and best that undoes us.

Sometimes, it is the very energy and vigor of our purposiveness – the fact that we act in a focused arc of attention – that blinds or at least blurs what appears at the periphery of our intentions. There is no action without focused purpose and the energy to fulfill it; there is no focused, energetic purpose without the lively possibility of disorder, of going wrong. Even intelligent, truth-bound beliefs and well-formed desires for what is genuinely good are not sufficient to carry purposes to their realization. The successful enactment of the strongest, most intelligent desires also requires a certain kind of energy which is, at its best, confident, often indignant and sometimes courageous; at its worst, it is presumptuous and disordering.

Except for self-contained activities that are completed in the very act of performing them, we rarely grasp the structured unity of what we do. That is one of the reasons we cannot judge a person's life happy until he is dead, and perhaps some time after he is dead, when the full shape of his actions are finally revealed, their trajectories completed. The real completion of a person's life – the realization of the projects that were essential to it – does not usually coincide with the natural end of his activity in death. We do not know whether a person has been a wise parent until his children are grown; nor whether he has been a wise statesman until his policies have been in effect for some time (1100a18 ff.).

Drama reveals the form and point of the protagonist's actions, their sometimes hidden directions and purposes. In a way, we cannot see what an action really is, until we see it contextualized, embedded in the story of which it is an essential part. Until we see the completed whole in which an action functions, we cannot determine whether it has been well or ill performed, whether it succeeds or fails. An action is only partially identified and directed by the agent's intentions, by the chain of practical reasons that connect it to his general ends. These are, as it were, the logical structure of the beginning and end of his action, conceived in isolation. But even the logical structure of the agent's intentions do not give the full explanation of what he does. Those intentions must also be located in the story that reveals the causal structure of the unfolding of his interactions with other characters.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, in ordinary life,

we identify and evaluate actions readily and quickly, without an extended investigation of the practical reasoning that formed the agents' intentions or the stories that frame their actions. But that is because we assimilate particular actions to a standard form, supplying the standard stories and intentions that are implicit in our categorized perceptions. It is against the background of such assumptions about the typical etiology and directions of action-types that we judge particular intentions and actions to be well or ill formed, justified or askew.<sup>13</sup>

The stories or plots of tragedies reveal the significant structures that unite serious actions – actions that make a difference to how a person lives, well or ill, happily or unhappily – into a self-contained whole, an activity. But life is, according to Aristotle, activity: it is expressed in action and activity (1095a19–20, 1098a20 ff., 1450a15 ff.).<sup>14</sup> By connecting the protagonist's serious actions into a story, drama reveals the unified structure of a life. Represented in a unified whole, a life can be seen as a unified whole, with an intelligible shape (1100b32). That is why tragedies are of enormous and terrifying significance to us, because they are representations of what can go wrong even in the best and most intelligent action, go wrong not merely because chance and accident attend all contingent events, but because of some error or misdirection in the action itself, a deflection that brings a reversal of the very intentions that propelled it.

A plot or story presents discrete events and actions as forming a completed and self-contained whole which can be grasped all at once, as a single activity, lacking nothing, with its component incidents so arranged that if one of them is removed, the whole is disturbed or destroyed (1451a7 and 15 ff.).<sup>15</sup> A plot connects the incidents that compose it in three ways: (1) causally; (2) thematically; and (3) by exhibiting the connections between the protagonist's character, his thought and his actions.

- (1) Aristotle puts the causal connection straightforwardly, simply and strongly: the events are linked, shown as happening because of one another (1452a2–4). To link the events in a well-ordered whole and to elicit pity and fear, the causal connections must be necessary or nearly so, as necessary as human actions can be.
- (2) Repetition is the simplest type of thematic connection; ironic reversal is another (1452a ff.). Aristotle's example of a thematic connection is that of the statue of Mityls falling on his murderer (1452a10). Having saved Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus must again save the city by solving the mystery of the source of its pollution. Blind about his real identity, he blinded himself when he discovered who he was; the heir apparent of Corinth who fled his city, he ended his days a cityless wanderer, a pariah, a scared suppliant. He is the solution to the mystery of the city's pollution; and he has become the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, the man who crawled on all fours in his lamed and fettered infancy, who stood upright in his prime and who stumbles on a staff in the end. Antigone lived

to bury her dead; her punishment was to be buried alive. But since she deliberately did what she knew to be punishable by death, she took her own life in the tomb where Creon had condemned her. It is such patterned closures as these that give thematic unity to drama.

- (3) Finally the unity of the plot is manifest in the way that each protagonist's fundamental character traits are expressed in all that he thinks, says, does (1454a2 ff.). Oedipus revealed himself kingly in all he did, in all his actions: in the images of his bold speech, in the large scope of his thoughts, in his assurance and high, quick energy; in the directions of his actions, moving always to protect his city.

### Character (*Ēthos*)

Although tragedy is, according to Aristotle, about action rather than about character (1450a15 ff.), the two are coordinate (*Rhetoric* I.12. 1372 ff.). The stress of *ēthos anthrōpo(i) daimōn* now falls firmly on one side of the equation: it is a person's character rather than his *daimōn* that determines his fate. But character is expressed in choice (*prohairesis*) and choice determines action: "*eudaimonia* takes the form of action" (1450a16). While in principle a person might have some character traits that are rarely, if ever exercised, character is essentially individuated and fundamentally articulated in choice and in thoughtful action (1139a22–3; 1144b30–2).<sup>16</sup> Since "life is action and activity" (1450a16 ff.), tragedy that represents serious action is also a dramatic representation of the way that the protagonist's character is expressed in his fundamental choices and actions, those that affect the way that his life unfolds.

Tragedy represents protagonists who are recognizably enlarged and simplified versions of what is best in us, presented without the multiple extraneous purposes that confuse our actions. They are what we would be if we could undergo an alchemy, a purification of the elements that compose us. They have, in an exemplary form, the character traits and dispositions that are the raw materials of virtue, the intelligence that goes into *phronēsis*, the energy that goes into *andreia*, the natural affections that go into *philia*, the assurance that goes into great-heartedness. Character structures of this kind are normally stable: they are expressed in habits of perception and emotion that typically move smoothly to well-formed deliberation and action. Yet in the course of the drama, they make a terrible choice – one that is in character and voluntary, but that nevertheless involves a significant waywardness – whose consequences reverse the good fortune that would normally attend the actions of a person of their character.

It might seem as if the description of the tragic protagonist is incoherent, and the account of the tragic plot paradoxical. The pity and fear aroused by tragedy centers around the undeserved suffering of a relatively virtuous protagonist. Virtue is, by definition, self-regulating and self-correcting; and it typically brings

happiness (*eudaimonia*), even in harsh circumstances (1100b22–1101a8). Yet the plot unfolds from the protagonist's *hamartia*, a waywardness whose consequences reverses the *eudaimonia* that normally attends virtue.<sup>17</sup> How can virtue be subject to *hamartia*, how can it involve wayward misunderstanding? And if, as Aristotle believes, a person is at least in part responsible for his character (or at any rate, the kind of person who can be the protagonist of a tragedy is so responsible (1114b1 ff.), then how can the protagonist's suffering be undeserved?

If there is an adequate answer to these questions, it lies in Aristotle's understanding of *hamartia*. The reigning translations of that term do not help us. "Flaw" misleadingly suggests that *hamartia* is built into the protagonist's character. But if the protagonist's erring waywardness were part of his character, he would not be an exemplary figure, his suffering would not be undeserved, and we would not pity him. If, on the other hand, his *hamartia* were involuntary, purely extraneous – like an accidental illness – we would not, seeing his character in action, fear for him. In neither case would the drama be well structured or unified; in neither case, could we learn anything from tragedy; nor would it please us. Yet translating *hamartia* as "error" or "mistake" misleadingly fails to capture the dispositional character of the protagonist's *hamartia*; and in emphasizing its purely intellectual aspect, those notions also fail to capture the way that the protagonist's *hamartia* affects his *thumos* and *pathē* as well as his thoughts. Though a protagonist's *hamartia* might sometimes just involve his making a factual error, it is the sort of error that a person of his character would be typically prone to make. In combination with his character, it misleads his action. (For instance, a character given to grand postures might systematically mistake the size and importance of his family estate, and so characteristically but voluntarily treat his neighbors with untoward arrogance.) Character virtues and their susceptibilities are simultaneously cognitive and conative: they affect a person's passions and desires, as well as his perceptions and inferences.

In the best tragedies, the reversals of fortune that the protagonists suffer come from something central in them, not from any particular thing that they did, but from a waywardness that could not, even with more foresight or energy, have been prevented. The *hamartiai* that bring misfortune are contingent byproducts of admirable character traits, traits that are the natural basis of the virtues and that normally promote thriving. An example might help illuminate Aristotle's point: the character and skill of a courageous soldier explains his taking the sorts of risks that would normally be unwise, his charging the enemy in a way that exposes him to the danger of being wounded in battle. Still, he is not responsible for being wounded, and so we pity his suffering. But because we also admire him, we pity him in a special way, more than we might anyone who was wounded in battle. It was possible, perhaps even probable, that a courageous person like himself would, despite his skills, be more likely to be wounded than an ordinary soldier; and so although we might fear for anyone going into battle, we also especially fear for him. By contrast, we might pity someone who was accidentally

wounded by a tile that fell on his head as he walked to the Agora on a windy day; but we do not fear for everyone who walks to the Agora on windy days.

It is as if *hamartiai* were like a kind of cancer: contingent growths that arise from the very activities that promote healthy physical development. Noble intentions can, often by the logic and development of their own momentum, lead to actions whose full trajectory reverses their origins. Such reversals are especially likely to occur in the interaction among several characters, each acting from the arc of his own intentions. Tragedy reveals that there is, as it were, a canker in the very heart of action. All action is formed by intelligence, to be sure; but by an intelligence directed to a relatively limited purpose. The gap of opacity, and with it the possibility of ignorance and deflection, always stands between even the best general purposes and the particular actions that actualize and fulfill them. Though it falls within the domain of the voluntary, the tragic hero's *hamartia* is an accident of his excellence: his purposes and energy make him susceptible to a kind of waywardness that arises from his character. Although the occasions that unfold the consequences of the agent's *hamartia* are contingent, they are the sorts of things which might well happen. Once they have occurred, the dramatic action that brings about the reversal of the protagonist's fortune has – in the best of tragedies – a terrible and irreversible inevitability. The focused clarity, the assurance, the vitality and energy of exemplary, excellent action – its very godlikeness – are shadowed by the misdirections that threaten their excellence. Concentration blurs what is at the periphery of attention; courage sets natural caution aside; great-heartedness carries the possibility of arrogance; a person of grandeur, with an unusual scope of action, can readily lose his sense of proper proportion, forget his finitude. Everything that is best in the protagonists make them vulnerable to their reversals: like all living creatures, they naturally strive to realize what is best in them; and it is precisely this that, as their actions unfold, undoes them.

The cancer that is at the heart of the tragic protagonist's *hamartia* often involves his not knowing who he is, his ignorance of his real identity.<sup>18</sup> To know who one is to know how to act: it involves understanding of one's obligations and what is important in one's interactions. The kind of ignorance that literally involves not knowing one's family is particularly dangerous because it affects all of a person's sacred, political and ethical conduct. But a protagonist can be superficially, verbally aware of who he is, and yet fail to carry that knowledge through to his conduct, acting as if he were ignorant of what he claims to know. Phaedra's passion for Hippolytus expresses a dramatic *hamartia*: her desire involves her forgetting who she is, the wife of Theseus and stepmother to Hippolytus. In a queen, such a *hamartia* endangers the whole kingdom. Of course Phaedra is not suffering from amnesia or literal ignorance. Nevertheless, her passion for Hippolytus involves her in ethical, character-based wrong-doing.

In a way, there are, in the dramatic world that is composed entirely of serious actions that affect the tenor of a life, no merely intellectual errors. When a drama is composed entirely of serious actions, even factual errors are weighty: a person



who is ignorant of his lineage is likely to act improperly. Unaware of his relations and obligations to those around him, Oedipus does not, in the deepest sense, know how to behave. But Oedipus also suffers another kind of ignorance. His cleverness in answering the riddle of the Sphinx shows that he has a verbal grasp of the boundaries (*horos*) and the vulnerability of human life. Yet his contempt towards Tiresias shows that his acute awareness of his exceptional gifts has blinded him to the full significance of his answer.

In the best plots, the *peripeteia* of action – the moment that reverses the protagonist's fortunes – coincides with insightful recognition (*anagnōrīsis*). Significantly, this recognition typically fulfills the ancient command to know oneself (*gnōthi seauton*) (1452a32 ff.). In recognizing that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, Oedipus comes to himself, realizes who he is, as well as what he has done. The reversal of his fortune is his recognizing that he has violated the fundamental structures that should have directed his actions. As his ignorance was not merely an intellectual error, but a waywardness that pervaded his actions, so too his acknowledgment of his waywardness is not merely a cognitive recognition. It consists in his living out his life, a blind man wandering, "a horror, a pollution to be avoided."

### Catharsis

No wonder that the reversal of intentions, the change of fortunes of those who are better than ourselves evokes pity and fear. If they are ourselves writ large, then what can happen to them, can happen to us as well. Perhaps we are as blind to what we are doing as Oedipus; perhaps we too mistake impetuous rashness for courage, presumption for righteous indignation. Perhaps we too are ignorant or forgetful of who and what we are.

What difference is there, if any, between the pity and fear that we feel in the normal course of action, and those we experience in and through tragic drama? And how can drama educate us, so that we experience pity and fear appropriately? Normally fear (*phobos*) is particular and functional; it signals danger. (*Rhetoric* II.5). The ethical and political question that the phenomena of fear raises is: what is, and what is not, worth fearing? Similarly, pity – *eleos* – is normally particular and functional: it signals that a friend or someone like ourselves has suffered an undeserved misfortune. Pity involves both distance and proximity. If the sufferer is too close to ourselves, his impending misfortune evokes horror and terror. If he is too distant, his fate does not affect us (*Rhetoric* II.8). The ethical and political questions are: whom should we pity? What should we regard as undeserved misfortune? The virtues – certainly courage and perhaps also the kind of civic friendship that is at the core of pity – involve the capacity to have the right emotional reactions at the right time, in the right way, directed to the right objects. In fact the virtues are just that – they are *hexeis* – active appropriate habits of acting and reacting. Courage, for instance, involves knowing what is

worth fearing, and being able to set aside natural self-protective fears in order to act wisely on behalf of what we most prize. Similarly, appropriate pity involves knowing when misfortune is undeserved, recognizing human finitude and the limits of control and responsibility. It also involves an affective understanding of the proper domain of *philia*, our solidarity with those with whom we are bound. The psychological effects of tragedy depend on there being a strong connection between the fearful and the pitiable incidents: the audience pities the protagonist for the very reversals that they feared would attend his actions (*Rhetoric* II.8. 1386a27).

But just whom do we pity and what do we fear? The tragic hero? Ourselves? Humanity? All three, and all three in one. Like drama generally, tragedy represents intentions and actions from the agents' point of view, in their language. When they speak in the first person, the protagonists of tragic drama invite our reflective identification: after all, they are like ourselves. Because "it is easier to look at someone else than at ourselves" (*NE* 1169b33–4), the lives of the tragic protagonists will show us something about ourselves. Of course the resemblance between the protagonists and ourselves is a general one: we need not be rulers of Thebes, or even Thebans, to identify with Oedipus; nor need we be sisters or even women, to identify with Antigone. We also see the protagonists externally, taking the perspectives of the other characters and of the chorus; and we share in all their reactions.<sup>19</sup> So, to begin with, we feel pity and fear for the tragic protagonist, but we do not learn appropriate pity and fear by imitating exactly his emotions. For one thing, he does not pity himself: he is grieved or horrified by the unfolding of his actions. But in pitying him and fearing for him, we take the reflective spectator's point of view. He fears what may happen: we fear for him. Still when we feel for him, we see ourselves in him. In pitying the tragic protagonists, we pity ourselves; in fearing for him, we fear to suffer the kinds of reversals that he met and suffered. Since we are also essentially social and political beings, connected to others by civic *philia*, we treat the welfare of our friends and family as essential to our own welfare. Our *philoī* form a series of expanding circles, starting from the closest family and friends, to partners in a common civic project (*koinonia*), and to those who – like members of the human species – share a common form of life.<sup>20</sup> For the original audience, Oedipus may have articulated and expressed the fear that their rulers might be unwittingly dangerous; it may also have articulated and expressed pity for those exiles, who, through no fault of their own – yet because of what they were – suffered a life without their *philoī*, "without a city, beyond human boundaries, . . . a horror to be avoided" (1386ba12 ff.). The pity and the fears of that original audience are, in a way, also ours, fearing – as always we do – the actions of our rulers, and pitying the many forms that exile takes. Tragedy not only diminishes but also enlarges the scope of our pity and fear to its proper objects: to the plight and danger of those who act to change the course of events to conform to their purposes.

The issue of whether the audience's emotions are, in the end, fundamentally



merely self-regarding, can be set aside. In fearing for themselves, the audience does not merely fear for themselves as idiosyncratic individuals. Their fears are simultaneously specific and general: caught up in the action of plot, they fear what seems likely to happen to the tragic hero; but since that fear also has a more general description, as a fear for the undeserved misfortunes that can attend intentional action, they also fear for their *philoï* and for themselves.

But pity and fear are aroused in order to effect a catharsis. The classical notion of catharsis combines several ideas: it is a medical term, referring to a therapeutic cleansing or purgation; it is a religious term, referring to a purification achieved by the formal and ritualized, bounded expression of powerful and often dangerous emotions; it is a cognitive term, referring to an intellectual resolution or clarification that involves directing emotions to their appropriate intentional objects.<sup>21</sup> All three forms of catharsis are meant, at their best, to conduce to the proper functioning of a well-balanced soul. The issue of whether tragic catharsis is expressed as a resolution of the incidents of the plot or whether it is expressed in the psychology of the audience can be set aside.<sup>22</sup> The psychological catharsis of the audience takes place through, and because of the catharsis of the dramatic action. A plot that has been resolved is one whose unity is revealed: the various incidents that compose it are recognized by the protagonist and by the audience to be strongly interconnected in a harmonic whole.

A harmonious soul is by no means apathetic, drained of emotion. Aristotle does not have a hydraulic or drainage-ditch model of catharsis. A room that has been cleaned has not been emptied, but brought to its proper order; a body that has been purged is not an empty sack, but one brought to its healthful functioning order, one that absorbs what is nourishing and eliminates what is not. What matters about pity and fear is that they be appropriate, directed to the right objects in the right way in the right amount at the right time (1109a20 ff.). (Consider: When a thought is well articulated and expressed, it has the proper place and weight, playing an appropriate role in a person's whole system of beliefs. In both cases, the thought and the emotion are fulfilled, brought to their appropriate psychological and intellectual functioning, by being properly focused, defined and articulated.) When pity and fear are appropriately felt, directed to the right things in the right way, according to the *logos* and the measure that is appropriate to them, they can play their natural psychological and civic functions (*Rhetoric* II.9 1386b13).

But attending even the best of tragic dramas is not, of course, sufficient to bring us to virtue. A person who has undergone a physical catharsis is only as healthy as his body can be made by purging: a purge does not cure high blood pressure or poor eyesight. So attending tragic dramas can rectify a person's pity and fear only as far as his character allows. Attending tragic dramas – experiencing a catharsis of pity and fear – cannot make an irascible person temperate. The virtues are acquired largely through active habituation and imitation. Even when tragic catharsis is combined with the insight of *anagnōrisis*, it cannot by itself make us virtuous.

The controversy about whether catharsis primarily involves an intellectual clarification or an emotional rectification shadows the controversy about whether *hamartia* is an intellectual error or a characterological flaw, and whether *anagnōrisis* is purely cognitive.<sup>23</sup> For Aristotle the distinction between intellectual clarification and emotional rectification is, in this sort of context, spurious and tendentious. In the domain of practical life, cognition, character and action are coordinate. Despite his repudiation of Plato, Aristotle's insistence on the separation between theory and practice does not entail a radical separation between practical reason and character. The distinction between theory and practice is a distinction between types of activities – both of them cognitive – as characterized by their methods and aims. Because the aims and methods of *epistemē* and those of *praxis* are distinct, it is possible for a good scientist to lack practical wisdom and for the *phronimos* to be a poor scientist. But the distinction between theory and practice does not imply that a person could be virtuous without practical intelligence.

The psychotherapeutic expression *working through* is a perspicuous translation of many aspects of the classical notion of catharsis.<sup>24</sup> In *working through* his emotions, a person realizes the proper objects of otherwise diffuse and sometimes misdirected passions. Like a therapeutic *working through*, catharsis occurs at the experienced sense of closure. In recognizing and re-cognizing the real directions of their attitudes, the members of an audience are able to feel them appropriately; and by experiencing them in their clarified and purified forms, in a ritually defined and bounded setting, they are able to experience, however briefly, the kind of psychological functioning, the balance and harmony that self-knowledge can bring to action.

And so, naturally enough, we turn to pleasure.

### Pleasure

What is pleasurable about tragic drama? Unlike those Platonists who were suspicious of pleasures, Aristotle does not think that pleasure is a process or the outcome of a process: it is the unimpeded, uninterrupted exercise of a natural activity (NE 1153a10 ff.). The prime cases that reveal the character of pleasure are those natural species-defining characteristics which, like the pleasures of sight, are complete in their very exercise. We do not need any motivation to perform such activities, and they are, when properly performed, on their proper objects, without impediment, intrinsically pleasurable, independently of whatever else they may achieve. Even those pleasures that are relativized to pain or depletion – pleasures like those of recuperation of satisfying hunger – arise from the natural activities of the organism in healing itself or in absorbing nourishment. Properly understood, such pleasures are focused on the activity, rather than on the state produced by it.

The pleasure of an action lies in its being fulfilled, completed as the sort of

activity that it is, with its proper values achieved. Aristotle has a doubly normative conception of pleasure.<sup>25</sup> To begin with, pleasures are individuated and identified by the actions and activities that they attend, and in which they are immanent (1175b36 ff.). But actions are themselves intentionally individuated and identified. Two persons attending the same dramatic performance may be performing different actions in going to theater; though they may both derive pleasure from the drama, their pleasures will differ as their intentions differ. One may be pleased by the event, the crowds, the excitement; the other may be absorbed in the unfolding of the drama.

But here, as elsewhere, there are norms (1176a9 ff.). The pleasures of attending dramatic performances have proper forms and proper objects (1462b12 ff.). Tragic drama involves and conjoins so many different kinds of pleasure that it is difficult to determine which is primary and which accidental (1451b7 ff.; 1448b5 ff.).<sup>26</sup> We take pleasure in the activities of the senses on their natural objects: music, dance, spectacle and the declamation of rhythmical verse are, just in themselves, pleasing to the senses. We also take a variety of pleasures in *mimēsis* as such: in seeing and recognizing representations, and in the tragedian's craft in forming and structuring the representation, even when what is represented is unfamiliar, ugly or painful. But the pleasures of dramatic *mimēsis* go beyond those that are generally exercised in the activities that involve recognition. Because it represents a story that is complete in itself, uninterrupted by the irrelevant flotsam and jetsam accidents of every-day life, drama brings the further pleasures of the sense of closure, the recognition of something that has been structured into a well-formed whole. The pleasures that are specific to tragic drama are those that connect the most profound of our pleasures – the pleasures of learning – with the therapeutic pleasures of catharsis, “the pleasure arising from pity and fear through mimesis” (1453b10–14). Through the unity of drama, we discover that a disjointed and even a disastrous sequence of events can be represented as ordered, with a *logos* that connects the temporal completion of an action with its logical closure. But the representations of the structured actions of tragic protagonists also represent us: in recognizing ourselves to be part of the activity of an ordered world, we take delight in self-knowledge, in the discovery that our lives form an ordered activity (*Magna Moralia* 1213a10–26). When it is well structured and well performed, tragedy conjoins sensory, therapeutic and intellectual pleasures. Pleasure upon pleasure, pleasure within pleasure, producing pleasure.

### Lessons and Politics

Having shown how tragedy pleases, we must now turn to what it teaches.<sup>27</sup> Drama is twinned with ethics. Philosophical ethics presents an account of the character structure of admirable agents, whose actions are well formed, reliably successful. By analyzing the role of *phronēsis* in realizing the general ends that

constitute thriving, it reveals the logical structure of virtuous action. Drama does not, of course, supplement constructive philosophic ethics by posting a set of moralizing warnings, examples of what to avoid. Nor does it simply portray admirable nobility in the face of undeserved misfortune, so that we might be inspired to imitate it. Nevertheless its lessons are moral, and its moral lessons have political significance.<sup>28</sup>

It is crucial to civic life that individuals, acting for themselves, and acting as citizens on behalf of the *polis*, understand the deep and often hidden structures of the actions that are important to their thriving. To choose and act wisely, we need to know the typical dynamic patterns of actions and interactions. Later moralists – Hume for example – believed that history, rather than drama, reveals the patterns of action. But Aristotle thought we could not learn moral or political truths from history because it is, by his lights, a chronicle focused on the particularity of events, rather than on what can be generalized from them (1451b4 ff.).

Tragedies have another ethical and political dimension. Like well-formed rhetoric, they promote a sense of shared civic life, and like rhetoric, they do so both emotionally and cognitively. To begin with, the audience is united, temporarily at least, in sharing the emotions of a powerful ritual performance.<sup>29</sup> But tragedy also conjoins us intellectually, bringing us to be of one mind in a common world. In practical life, the trajectories of individual lives intersect, deflect or enhance one another. Although every individual's welfare is bound with that of his *philoī*, different families and communities have their own directions, with distinctive patterns of action and reaction. By presenting us with common models and a shared understanding of the shapes of actions, tragedy – like philosophy and other modes of poetry – moves us beyond the merely individual or domestic, towards a larger, common civic *philia*.

Some say that tragedy teaches us the power of chance, of the force of contingency in determining whether the virtuous thrive. While tragedy does indeed focus on what can go wrong in the actions of the best of men, its ethical lessons are not primarily about the place of accident and fortune in the unfolding of a human life. To begin with, Aristotle says that tragedy is about what can probably or inevitably happen (1451a37 ff.). If the stressed lesson of tragedy were the disconnection between intention and action, between action and outcome, it would produce somber modesty and edifying resignation, traits that are hardly central to the Aristotelian scheme of virtues. To be sure, like all the virtues, *megalopsychia* has its shadow *hamartia*: a flaunting arrogance that forgets the straightened limits of human action. Tragic drama shows that what is central to excellence in action – what is intrinsic to the very nature of action – carries the possibility of a certain kind of arrogance and presumption. In acting purposively, we perforce discount the tangential effects of chance and accident: in the very nature of the case, intelligent action sets aside what it cannot measure. Still even if, in a general way, we somberly recognize the contingency of our lives, we cannot avoid tragedy by becoming modest or resigned: it is in

our nature to strive for what is best in us. The lesson of tragedy is not that we should know more, think more carefully; or that we should be more modest and less impetuously stubborn than the protagonists of tragic dramas. Because it is no accident that excellence sometimes undoes itself, one of the dark lessons of tragedy is that there are no lessons to be learnt, in order to avoid tragedy.

Yet for all of that, the end note of tragedy – its lesson – is not that of darkest despair. The major tragic figures emerge as enlarged by what they have endured, and by the *anagnōrīsis* that is a double turning of their lives, by what they have learnt from their endurance. Their fortunes are reversed in recognizing who they are and what they have done. But the mind becomes identical with what it thinks: knowledge perfects the person (*De Anima* 430a15; 431a1–8). In the nobility with which they express their recognition – a nobility which fuses character with knowledge – tragic protagonists have become their best selves. Tragedy presents a dramatic enactment of the view that is philosophically argued in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: the virtuous can retain their nobility (*kalos*) in the worse reversals of fortune, the loss of the goods – health, the thriving of their children and their city, wealth, the admiration of their fellows – that are normally central to *eudaimonia* (1100b30–3).<sup>30</sup> Tragedies portray the ethical doctrine that there is a sense – by no means the ordinary sense – in which the constancy of virtue, the expression of nobility in the midst of great suffering can carry its own form of *eudaimonia*, despite the loss of goods that normally constitute happiness. After all, *eudaimonia* consists in the actions of a well-lived life, as perfected as it can be. While the undeserved suffering of the virtuous elicit our pity and fear, the nobility with which they meet their reversals – a nobility manifest in their actions and speech – illuminates us. It reveals yet another dimension of the “wonders of humankind.”

We, too, are transformed by what we have seen and learnt by witnessing the dramatic stories of the tragic protagonists, participating in their final recognition. Realizing what we are, recognizing our kinship with those who overreach themselves in action, we can come closer to fulfilling our natures – and our virtues – as knowers and as citizens. And since pleasure is the unimpeded exercise of a natural potentiality, our double self-realization brings a double pleasure, all the more vivid because we are united, individually and communally, in realizing that however apparently fragmented, ill-shaped and even terrible our lives may seem to us in the living, they form a single activity, a patterned, structured whole.<sup>31</sup>

#### Notes

1. *Poiēsis* is a species of craft (*technē*). Besides tragic and comic dramas, the mimetic arts include epics, dithyrambic poetry and some sorts of music. Their primary contrasts are rhetoric, history and philosophy. The mimetic poetic arts are distinguished from one another by their ends, by the objects they represent and by the means and manner of their representations (1447a14 ff.). Dramatic genres are primarily distin-

- guished from one another by the types of response they attempt to evoke in their audiences, and secondarily by the differences in the structure of their representations.
2. For the sake of simplicity, I shall speak of the *protagonist* of tragic action even though Aristotle speaks primarily of agents or actors (*prattontes*) and of characters (*ēthē*) rather than of *protagonists*. *Prattontes* ambiguously refers to (1) fictional characters who, like Odysseus, might appear in the Homeric epics and also in *Philoctetus*, or (2) the *dramatis personae* of a specific play. *Ēthē* refers to the (1) *dramatis personae* of the drama, typified at the King, the Messenger, and (2) the specific character structures that affect their choices and actions as good, manly, consistent (1450b8 ff.; 1454a22 ff.).
3. We can distinguish the naive from the sentimental versions of formalism and hermeneuticism. Naive hermeneuticists can present what they take to be the interpretation of a work, without developing a general theory that explains and defends perspectival or historical changes in interpretations. But when critics self-consciously affirm the perspectival character of approaches – when they openly reconstruct their texts – they transform the modality of a strictly Aristotelian tragedy. The modality of the plot of an Aristotelian tragedy – the necessity or probability of its events – is central to its psychological effect. A reader who believes he is in principle entitled to reconstrue and reconstruct the tragic plot stands at a remove from the necessities of the drama. In granting himself a freedom from the necessities of the plot as it would have been experienced by the audience of classical tragic dramas, he has changed the psychology of his response.
4. For an excellent summary of the history of the influence and shifts in the discussion of tragedy, see Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chapel Hill, 1986). Ch. X, pp. 286 ff.
5. Alexander Nevyle, “Introduction” to *Ten Tragedies of Seneca* (Manchester, 1887), p. 162; Corneille, “Discourse,” in *Pierre Corneille: Writings on the Theater*, ed. H. T. Bernwell (Oxford, 1965); Lessing, *Dramaturgie*, Essay 77, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin, 1968) 6: 631; Schiller, “On Tragic Drama” and “On the Pathetic” Cited by Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theater* (Ithaca, 1984).
6. Cf. Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chapel Hill, 1986), Ch. 4.
7. Cf. John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 41 ff.
8. To be sure, everyone – the protagonists, the various members of the chorus – has his own interpretation of the action. But although he recognizes that every representation involves interpretation, Aristotle is no egalitarian about interpretations. Like the chorus, the audience can understand the rationale of the perspectives of the various protagonists, while also recognizing that they can distort the truth.
9. Aristotle would, for instance, think that whatever the Egyptians may have believed about the matter, royal agnatic alliances do not properly qualify as marriages and that incest is a violation of the social order, even in Egypt. Confucius' view of ‘the rectification of names’ may illuminate Aristotle's intention. There are correct normative descriptions of marriage, of filial roles and their duties. Disorder and danger attend the violation of these structures. Because it vividly and dramatically presents the consequences of such violations, Aristotelian tragedy can be seen as an instrument in the ‘rectification of names.’
10. To be sure, Plato distrusts imitations, particularly those that appeal primarily to the senses, on the grounds that they tend to distort what they represent. But not every *mimēsis* is sensory: mathematical formulae represent relations among the most general and abstract forms; and the world of becoming is an imitation of the eternal world of forms, presumably because it represents or instantiates the structure of that world.
11. The prime example of a self-contained activity is contemplation. But perception and

thought are also star examples of *energeiai*. Not every activity is completed instantaneously; and many *energeiai* are also embedded within other activities. The animal activity of self-nourishment, for instance, standardly also involves perception. Some *energeiai* – particularly those that, like nourishment and reproduction, are the expression of natural, species-defining potentialities – involve temporally sequential stages that can only be identified by reference to the self-contained, completed activity in which they appear. A action qualifies as an activity only when its end is achieved in the performance: so for instance, the activity of reproduction has not occurred unless an offspring has been produced; nor has an animal engaged in the activity of nourishment unless it has absorbed the food it ate. Sometimes an activity encompasses actions and process-movements (*kinēseis*) as its stages or segments: as for instance, the action of eating and the process of digestion are part of the activity of self-nourishment; the action of impregnation and the processes of gestation are part of the activity of reproduction. But not every action is encompassed within, and identified by an activity; nor is the aim of every type of action intrinsic to it, fulfilled in the very performance. The aims of some actions (those involved in building a house, for example) are external, detachable from the processes that produce them. Standardly *technai* involve movement-processes; and although processes usually take time to complete, some (hammering in a nail, for example) take place virtually instantaneously, without a significant lapse of time. The primary contrast between processes and activities lies in whether their ends are extrinsic or intrinsic, and only secondarily in their temporality.

12. Although Aristotle says that Sophocles brought tragedy to its perfection by representing the interaction of several actors, he unfortunately does not discuss the interactions among the several *prattontes* of tragic drama. Can several *prattontes* perform one action? On the one hand, the close connection between *prohairesis* and responsible action suggests that however complexly developed an action might be – complex enough to encompass a whole life – actions are fundamentally only attributable to individual agents. On the other hand, Aristotle sometimes also suggests that a jury or a Council can deliberate, choose and act.
13. A homely example may illustrate the point: We do not understand why a carpenter hammered a nail just as he did, at this angle, at this place, unless we see that action embedded in the series of actions that constitutes building a certain kind of a roof. We do not know why he built that kind of roof unless we know the intentions of the architect and his client. We do not know whether he built it well, unless we know that those intentions are well formed, that they not only reflect the real needs of the client, but also correctly take into account the effects of gravity, the stress on the materials, etc.
14. The *Poetics* passage – “Tragedy is a representation not of human beings but of action and a course of life. *Eudaimonia* and its opposite consist in action, and the end [of life] is a certain sort of action, rather than a character trait . . . It is according to their actions that they live well or the reverse” – is considered corrupt by G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Harvard, 1957) and R. Kassel (ed.), *Aristotelis de Arte Poetica Liber* (Oxford, 1965). But corrupt or not, the direction of the passage echoes NE 1095a19–20, 1098a20 ff. See Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 202–207; Nussbaum, *the Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 500–501; and Bittner, “One Action” (this volume) for convincing arguments for its legitimacy.
15. Cf. David Gallop, “Animals in the *Poetics*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (1990), 145–171.
16. Action and character are conceptually interdependent and mutually expressive. The intentionality of action assures the embedding of a character-based *prohairesis* within the identification and description of an action. For specific explanatory purposes, an

analysis can stress the one or the other. Tragic drama expresses the priority of action, while moral education traces a sequence: a child practises certain kinds of actions for the sake of developing the sort of character that typically and habitually chooses and acts in a certain way. See Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 138–67, my “The Place of Psychology in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*” in J. Cleary, *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* (New York, 1991–2), and the essays by J.-P. Vernant (“Myth and Tragedy,” this volume) and Mary Whitlock Blundell (“*Ethos* and *Dianoia* Reconsidered,” this volume) for detailed accounts of the relations between thought, character and action.

17. Waywardness is a good, though perhaps somewhat archaic and suspiciously moralistic rendering. For a summary of discussions of *hamartia* see Gerald Else, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), pp. 378–85. See J.-P. Vernant (“Myth and Tragedy,” this volume) for a discussion of the connection between the characterological and intellectual aspects of *hamartia*. See Eckart Schutrumpf, “Traditional Elements in the Concept of *Hamartia* in Aristotle's *Poetics*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* (1989), 137–56 for an excellent account of the relevance of the discussions of voluntary actions and *hamartia* in NE 5.10. Schutrumpf convincingly argues that Aristotle's account of *hamartia* reflects his understanding of juridical concepts of criminal action, particularly those involving violent death.
18. Cf. J. Peter Euben, “Identity and *Oedipus Tyrannos*,” in *Tragedy and Political Theory* (Princeton, 1990).
19. See Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, 1988), for an extended discussion of the way that we, as external observers of painting, identify with an internal observer who is represented within the painting. Wollheim's discussion can be fruitfully transposed from painting to the literary arts. The contrast between agent and observer is fundamental, and not reducible to the contrast between emotion and thought (for there is emotion and thought on both sides); nor does it reduce to the contrast between the subjective and the objective points of view: for the chorus is not always objective, and the protagonist is not always merely subjective.
20. *Politics* I.1; NE 1155a12–22.
21. Cf. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, Ch. 6; Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986), esp. 378–391; S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London, 1907); G. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Cambridge, MA, 1967).
22. Cf. Leon Golden, “The Clarification Theory of Catharsis,” *Hermes* 104 (1967) 443–446; Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 184 ff.
23. Cf. Jacob Bernays' influential “Aristotle on the Effects of Tragedy,” trans. J. and J. Barnes in *Articles on Aristotle*, Vol. 4, ed. J. Barnes, M. Schofield, and R. Sorabji (London, 1979); S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 184–201 and Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” (this volume).
24. See Bennett Simon, *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, 1978).
25. Cf. my “*Akrasia* and Pleasure: *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 7,” in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, CA, 1980).
26. For discussions of the variety of pleasures that attend tragic drama, see Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 62–81 and Elizabeth Belfiore, “Pleasure, Tragedy and Aristotelian Psychology,” *Classical Quarterly* 35 (1985) 349–361.
27. There is an ancient, vigorous and apparently endless debate about whether the fundamental social function of drama is that it pleases or that it teaches. As far as tragedy goes, this is a false dichotomy: it pleases by teaching; it teaches by the ways it pleases. Aristotle adds that it mostly pleases ordinary folk, implying that it pleases the wise, largely by teaching (1448b4 ff.). Presumably that is because each type gets what it looks for. Cf. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 62–81; Else, *Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 127–134; Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, Ch. 4.

28. *Politics* VIII 5, 1340a15 ff. "Since . . . virtue is concerned with delighting, loving and hating correctly, there is obviously nothing more important than to learn and to become habituated to judge correctly and to delight in decent character and fine actions." When drama gives us pleasures and pains in the appropriate representations of character and actions, it will enable us to take appropriate pleasures in the real things. "Habituation to feeling pain and delight in things that are like [the thing itself] is similar to being in that same state in relation to the truth. For instance, if someone delights in looking at the image of something . . . it [will] be pleasant for him to look at the thing itself . . ."
29. Aristotle does not limit the emotional effect of tragedies to the audiences of dramatic performances: they also affect those who hear or read the story. Still, the members of an audience of a dramatic performance have the further experience (*pathos*) of a certain kind of emotional bonding.
30. I am indebted to Stephen A. White's "Aristotle's Favorite Tragedies" (this volume) for emphasizing this aspect of what we learn from the best tragedies.
31. This paper arose from a conversation with Ruth Nevo; it developed in discussions with Stephen Engstrom, Stephen Halliwell, Henry Richardson and Stephen L. White. MindaRae Amiran, Mary Whitlock Blundell, Françoise Balibar, Elizabeth Belfiore, Rüdiger Bittner, Jennifer Church, David Gallop and Jens Kulenkampff gave me helpful comments, advice I did not always follow. I am also grateful to participants in colloquia at the University of New Hampshire, the University of Oregon, the University of California at Santa Barbara and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. An earlier version was published in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 15, eds. P. French, T. Vehling and H. Wettstein (Notre Dame, IN, 1992).

## Aristotle on History and Poetry (*Poetics*, 9, 1451a36–b11)<sup>1</sup>

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In a famous passage in Chapter 9 in the *Poetics* (1451a36–b11), Aristotle disparages history (*historia*) in comparison with poetry (*poiēsis*). He begins by stating that "the function of a poet is to describe not what has happened (*ta genomena*) but the kind of thing that might happen,<sup>2</sup> and what is possible according to probability or necessity" (*ὅσα ἀνὰ γενοίτο, καὶ τὰ δυνάτα κατὰ τὸ εἶκος ἢ τὰ ἀνάγκη*). He goes on to say that the distinction between historian and poet (*historikos* and *poiētēs*) resides not in the one writing prose and other verse (for the work of Herodotus, he says, if put into verse, would still be history) but "in the fact that the one [history] describes what has happened, the other [poetry] what might happen." The conclusion he proceeds to draw is that "poetry is something more philosophic and more worthwhile (*spoudaioteron*) than history, because poetry deals rather with universals, history with particulars" (*ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποιησις μάλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δ' ἡ historia τὰ καθ' ἑκάστον λέγει*). And Aristotle goes on to explain what he means by "universals" and "particulars": "universal statements are about what a particular kind of man will say or do "according to probability or necessity;" particular statements are about "what Alcibiades did or had done to him."

This passage is perfectly explicit and unqualified, and it is wrong to seek to explain it away, for example by dragging in *Poetics* 23, 1459a21–24, where Aristotle refers to "our usual histories (*historias tas sunētheis*),<sup>3</sup> which have to set forth not one action but one period, and all that happened during that period concerning one or more persons, however disconnected the several events may have been." This passage leaves open the possibility that there may be histories of a different, less usual, kind. Some may also think here of another passage in *Poetics* 9 (1451b29–33), where Aristotle mentions that a poet who takes his