The Soul of Tragedy: Some Basic Principles in Aristotle's *Poetics*

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The soul of tragedy, as Aristotle famously says, is the plot. This would seem to be one of the most important ideas in the *Poetics*, and it seems relatively straightforward and clear. But what sort of thing, exactly, is a plot that it should count as the soul in this way? What sort of metaphor is this (if it is a metaphor), and what is the evidence for it? Aristotle's explicit pronouncement about plot is matched by an equally significant reliance on evidence as he attempts to bring to the surface the basic principles that are implicit in his favourite plays, drawing his examples from the rich heritage of Greek theatre and from the wider context of Greek literature in general, as well as from the vast storehouse of myth and legend. It is important to note that he works from a multitude of examples and not simply from one paradigm. The plot thickens.

Two of his favourite examples will serve to illustrate some of the complexities and tensions. *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, is a play that ends in disaster. The discovery that Oedipus has killed his father, Laios, and married his mother, Jocasta, results in his self-blinding and the death of his wife and mother by her own hand. Oedipus, newly widowed (and orphaned) and blinded, is now exiled. *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, by Euripides, is a play that ends in harmony. Orestes, driven mad by the furies who have pursued him since he murdered his mother,

Clytemnestra, and nearly sacrificed by his sister, Iphigeneia, in the land of the Taurians, is reconciled with that sister and freed from his madness and from imprisonment in Tauris. Iphigeneia and Orestes return, together, to their homeland. How could two such different plays each satisfy the demands of a tragic plot?

For Aristotle, *Oedipus* is a model, in part because of the way the climax of the plot brings about recognition and reversal simultaneously, but he also judges that the conclusion of *Iphigeneia* is the finest kind of conclusion, in part because of the way in which the recognition (of brother and sister) intercepts and prevents the disaster of the one killing the other. The disparity between these two examples suggests that these tragic plots may have such different kinds of souls as to raise some question about how they could both be considered tragic. What they have in common is a brooding sense of fate or destiny and an oppressive legacy of dysfunctional families. Orestes may be saved from his madness and reunited with his sister but only at the cost of publicly acknowledging that he is a matricide, one who killed his mother because she had murdered his father, Agamemnon. For her part, Iphigeneia too is bound by the tragic prehistory of the play, sacrificing strangers (especially Greek strangers) on the shores of Tauris as the price of her escape from the sacrifice her father, Agamemnon, intended to perform (and thought he had performed) so that the Greek fleet could sail to Troy. Since the reconciliation of brother and sister foregrounds their murderous family history, it is less than an entirely happy ending, and it remains fundamentally tragic. Oedipus is similarly dominated by the violation of family ties. Condemned to death, at birth, by his father and mother, who feared the prophecy concerning their own fate at the hands of this child, he is spirited away to Corinth. Believing his foster parents there to be his real parents, Oedipus, fearing the same

prophecy that he would kill the one and marry the other, flees to Thebes—only to fulfill his fate by killing Laios at the crossroads and marrying Jocasta. One basic principle of both plays, then, clearly involves deep transgression against the bonds of the family, or the violation of *philia*. Another is *pathos*, an intensely painful act or suffering. This is, in Aristotle's view, the bedrock of tragedy. Tragedy, in a memorable phrase, "has pain as its mother." The plot sickens.

Yet even so, the soul of tragedy has a paradoxical ability to be uplifting, even exhilarating. For Aristotle, this paradoxical power is intimately tied to what he thinks of as the peculiar pleasure of tragedy. And that pleasure, of course, is tied in turn to what he thinks are the ultimate ends of tragedy, in particular the evocation of the tragic emotions of pity and fear and, finally, the purification or *catharsis* of those emotions. Before discussing such exalted concepts, however, we might note that a good deal of what is ennobling or uplifting about tragedy in Aristotle's view is also connected to those aspects of tragedy—character and thought—that he ranks second and third in importance, after plot, which is primary—the other three of his six aspects being diction, song, and spectacle or opsis. Character and thought are basic principles, in large measure, because of the way they emphasize the human dimension of tragedy. However much the pain and suffering is to be ascribed to the will of the gods, or fate, the central focus for Aristotle remains on what human beings do in the face of their circumstances. Although there is a history of commentary that asserts that part of what is compelling and distinctive about tragedy is the sense one gets that the characters could not do otherwise than they do, this can be taken too far, for Aristotle insists on a central role for the choices that issue from thought, and he emphasizes those figures who are morally serious

(*spoudaios*) and capable of acting and choosing. Characters manifest themselves in the kinds of decisions they make, especially those decisions or mistakes that precipitate tragic suffering, and in the way they cope with the consequences. Character, in this view, is inherently dynamic. It can be fundamentally altered or shaped by crucial choices made at key moments, and this remains true even in the face of the most implacable fate. Oedipus may be caught in the web of his own destiny, but in the course of the plot that Sophocles arranges from the materials of the larger story, he chooses to face the most awful truths about himself. And in this action he manifests an ennobling freedom and a sense of responsibility and dignity, even in the midst of degradation. The plot is the soul, that is, the life, of tragedy in part because it permits such freedom.

And the sense of responsibility and dignity that is apparent even in those tragedies Aristotle thinks of as "simple"—in which *pathos* or suffering occurs on its own, with no recognition and reversal—is more evident in the "complex" tragedies that do have recognition and reversal. Recognition is a particularly important activity for Aristotle, not merely a mental event but a crisis in the action or plot, an alteration in the momentum or significance of the whole. It works in this way because it includes not only recognition of persons but also recognition of consequences or implications. Orestes sees that the person in front of him is Iphigeneia, which entails too the recognition of their relation as siblings, but the action forces him to publicly acknowledge himself as the brother who killed their mother. Aristotle pointedly does not use the term "hero" (though this word has often been foisted on the *Poetics* by later commentators) because he is more interested in emphasizing the tragic relations between those involved in blood relationships than in the isolated individual. The tragic recognition is

simultaneously the recognition of self and other and of their relation. It frequently also involves a realization of a significant mistake or hamartia, and in this sense recognition is a correlate of hamartia, the latter (like the former) an action performed by the protagonist. The etymology of hamartia means "missing the mark," a meaning that emphasizes a mistake rather than a flaw (and again, the critical tradition has often misrepresented the issue by speaking, in this case, of a "tragic flaw" in the "hero"). Oedipus may have a disposition to be angry and impulsive, and in that sense his character certainly influences his fate. But Sophocles also shows him to be smart enough to solve the riddle of the sphinx and caring enough both to be concerned about his plague-ridden city and to track down the criminal; so he could have known, perhaps should have known, to beware of quarrelling with a man old enough to be his father and of marrying a woman old enough to be his mother. The freedom that Aristotle thinks is germane to tragedy includes the freedom to make big mistakes. Such freedom is premised on a view of the dignity of a human nature that is not mechanically determined, either by the will of the gods or by an inherited and unalterably fixed disposition, and the soul of tragedy is the tracking of that freedom.

The basic principles of the *Poetics* that we have surveyed so far, then, may be summarized by recounting the crucial terms: recognition, reversal and *hamartia*, character, thought and choice (*proairesis*), blood ties (*philia*), suffering or painful action (*pathos*) and plot. It is useful in compiling such a list to include some of the transliterated words alongside their standard English translations, not so much to indicate a set of specialized or technical terms, as to keep open the possibility that many of these concepts are still subject to a variety of interpretations and emphases. The transliterated words, then, are something like blockers

preventing a blind side tackle on the semantic field. Aristotle's principles may appear sharp and well-defined, even schematic, but that impression would hide something of their profoundly exploratory quality, covering a wide range of disparate evidence—as we have seen in even some very brief glimpses of his two favourite tragedies.

The exploratory, even elusive, quality of Aristotle's central principles has been repeatedly highlighted by the fomentation in *Poetics* study over the past fifty years, as represented in the selected list of translations appended to this article, and it is nowhere more in evidence than in Aristotle's central definition of tragedy. I quote from the translation by George Whalley:

A tragedy, then, is a *mimesis* of an action—that is, it is [morally] serious and purposeful, having magnitude; uttered in heightened language and [using] each of its resources [i.e., dialogue and song] separately in the various sections [of the play], [the action presented] by people acting rather than by narration; bringing about through [a process of] pity and fear [in the events enacted] the purification of those destructive or painful acts. (Whalley's square brackets.)

The word "purification" here translates Aristotle's *catharsis*. Not all commentators would agree with Whalley (or Gerald Else before him) in locating catharsis in the action, rather than in the audience, or in seeing it as purification, rather than purgation or clarification. But if what the audience responds to is in fact in the play, the idea of catharsis might prove equally relevant to either side of the equation. The interpretive dilemma is exacerbated by the brevity of the reference, this one remark being the sole account in the *Poetics* of purification as the final goal of tragedy. The difficulty is further compounded by questions about the nature of the emotions to which the purification applies. Pity and fear are clearly not the only emotions relevant to tragedy (think of the role of anger or wonder), but Aristotle regards them as central, with his eye perhaps on the need for a kind of equilibrium between them. Do they count as one

principle or two? And are they concerned primarily with the response of the audience or, as

Whalley intimates, with the process of the action? Fear, for instance, may be elicited by tragic events, but it seems equally important in driving them, especially fear of the unknown or the irrational: in *Oedipus* the fear of the prophecy, or in *Iphigeneia* of the furies who afflict Orestes, or in *Hamlet*, to cite a more modern instance, of the ghost. And similarly, one thinks of the pity felt for the people of Thebes, for the affliction of Orestes, for the plight of the ghost. Whatever the interplay is between pity and fear, it seems likely that the goal is less to eliminate such emotions than to bring them into some sort of proper balance or "due proportion"—which

may be as good a guess about *catharsis* as we can make.

Equally important to the shape of the action, in Aristotle's view, are the principles of probability and necessity, for he regards these as giving the action its unity and purpose. This is the glue that holds things together. A plot, he thinks, acquires its unity not by being about one person but by being one action or *praxis*. But again, the idea of unified action turns out to be deceptive in its apparent simplicity, and as with pity-and-fear, one may wonder whether probability and necessity are two principles or one. Since the focus of the *Poetics* is not on the necessities of fate, but on the sort of necessity that flows from choice and action, its role in relation to probability can seem puzzling. It may be that as probabilities accumulate they approach a condition of necessity. That Polonius habitually practices espionage makes it probable that he will spy on Hamlet in Gertrude's chamber; when he commits himself to discover the secret of Hamlet's madness, the probability tightens towards a necessity. Far from being the mechanical chain of cause and effect it is sometimes alleged to be, the principle of

probability-and-necessity may be more like a graduated scale, with (at least theoretically) an infinite range of adjustments possible along the way.

Finally, the opening principle of the *Poetics*, the *mimesis* of the action. Whalley's decision here to go with transliteration is based on a deep distrust of "imitation." The problem lies in the static and reductive account of the process that this standard and well-established translation implies, lending itself too readily to Plato's objections about poetry as deceptive and second-hand or removed from reality—and not indicating enough about Aristotle's resistance to Plato on this score. "Impersonation," a near-synonym, captures the sense of the members of the theatre troupe adopting the roles or impersonating the actors of the drama, but it underplays the role of the plot. "Representation" invokes a relevant sense of abstract or symbolic meaning (as a dot may be said to represent a city on a map without in any way imitating the city), and in that way allows scope for general ideas or universals to emerge in the process. And this is an important point on which Aristotle refutes Plato, poetry being in his view capable of showing what can happen, what is generally true, and therefore being also more serious or philosophical than history. But representation, like imitation, can imply a fixed or second-hand quality that fails to account for the dynamic immediacy and minute particularity of the plot.

A well-known example from *Hamlet* will serve to suggest the range of meanings appropriate to an adequate notion of dramatic *mimesis* and also to indicate the wider and ongoing application of Aristotle's principles. When Hamlet devises "The Mousetrap," the playwithin-the-play, he wants to stage "something *like* the murder" of his father, which does involve imitating or copying the action of Claudius in killing his brother. The actor chosen to impersonate the murderer, Claudius, is presented in the inset play as "one Lucianus." When, at

the climax of the action, Hamlet describes him as "nephew to the king" (my emphasis), his role expands to include the relation of Hamlet to Claudius, nephew to uncle, without ceasing to be an image of the relation between brother and brother. The middle of Hamlet, in other words, superimposes on an image of its beginning (the original crime) an image of its end (the punishment of that crime) in a way that satisfies the Aristotelian principle of the unity of beginning-middle-and-end. Moreover, the fusion of crime and punishment also invokes the idea of revenge or justice—the relevant universals—even as it interweaves those abstractions inextricably and dynamically with the particular characters and the action.

The *mimesis* of an action is itself an action—but an action that incorporates a philosophical dimension. The playwright structures the action so that it is not simply an imitation of a past action (a kind of history) or a representation of a symbolic meaning (a kind of philosophical emblem) but an acting out, in the present, of an important part of human experience, in all its concrete immediacy and in the suggestive reach of its significance, or potential significance. That process, for Aristotle, constitutes the art of poetry. And since the plot involves just this sort of enactment of human experience, that is, of life, it is—quite literally—the soul of tragedy.

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