3

Aristotle's *Poetics*: A Defense of Tragic Fiction

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Aristotle's *Poetics* is arguably the first and also the most influential work ever to address the subject of tragedy. Written sometime between the 360s and 320s BCE, it looks back somewhere between fifty and a hundred years to the heyday of Greek drama, with the philosophical agenda of distilling from tragic practice a theory that explains the genre from its early development to its full maturity.[1] Probably the remains of lecture notes, this abridged and often puzzling explanation is organized into 26 chapters. Nearly all of them have at some time or other occasioned controversy, even while setting the conditions for centuries of literary theory and practice – not only for tragedians but for fiction-writers more generally. Throughout the *Poetics*, in fact, Aristotle characterizes tragedy in terms of what it does and does not share with other literary genres.

In the last chapter of the *Poetics* (ch. 26), Aristotle finally resolves one of these comparisons – the one between tragedy and epic – by finding in favor of tragedy on the grounds of both form and function. More unified than epic, tragedy is also more vivid (*enargēs*). Consequently, Aristotle argues, it packs more pleasure. If this closing judgment highlights the differences between the two genres, however, much of the argument of the *Poetics* up to this point foregrounds their similarities.[2] Indeed, tragedy and epic together constitute a kind of literary making or fiction – *poiēsis* – that differs not only from other kinds of fiction, such as comedy, but also from nonfictional discourse such as philosophy and history. Although Homer and Empedocles compose in the same meter, as we learn in the opening of the *Poetics*, one is a poet (that is, a maker of fictions); the other a philosopher (ch. 1, 1447b17–20). On the same principle, Herodotus, even if he wrote in verse, would still be an historian (ch. 9, 1451a38–1451b4). In his effort to play advocate for tragic fiction, in other words, Aristotle first settles the claim of fiction before he clinches the case for tragedy.

The aim of this chapter is to outline some of the main arguments that support Aristotle's case for the value of the genre he so vigorously defends. Before doing so, however, I want briefly to remind the reader that many aspects of his treatise,

including the competition between the discourses, figure in the dialogues of his teacher, Plato, who is not, incidentally, the unacknowledged antagonist in the debate about tragedy's value. In the *Republic*, to take only the most obvious example, Socrates, citing the long-standing *agōn* or contest between philosophers and poets (607B), levels very damaging charges against the mimetic arts, including poetry or fiction. Some of these charges he aims at *what* the poets imitate: heroes who behave irrationally and gods who behave like their irrational human counterparts. Others he aims at *how* the poets imitate, namely by copying the distortions of the sensible world. Ignorant of the realities his imitations only inadequately represent, Plato's poet can provide his audience with pleasure but no real knowledge or understanding. Despite his traditional authority, such a poet is no true "teacher of men." For, Socrates insists, the poet cannot teach what he himself does not understand.

Aristotle agrees with his own teacher not only about the relation between teaching and understanding (*Metaphysics* 981b7–10), but also about what it means to understand. In contrast to the casual or accidental knowing of the sophist, philosophical knowledge (which *is* knowledge properly speaking) is a knowledge of causes: *why* something is *what* it is (*Posterior Analytics* 71b10–13; cf. *Metaphysics* 981a24–30). With this assumption about knowledge and causality in mind, Aristotle counters Plato's objection, noted above, that the poets please with their imitations but cannot teach. Quite on the contrary, Aristotle argues, imitation or *mimēsis* causes human beings generally to understand through a learning process that begins in childhood. Understanding, in turn, causes pleasure (ch. 4; cf. *Rhetoric* 1.11.23). As a particular kind of imitation, Aristotle will undertake to demonstrate, tragedy provides a special kind of understanding that leads to its own peculiar pleasure.

If in Chapter 4 of the *Poetics* Aristotle makes the case for imitations in general, in Chapter 6 he narrows the focus to tragic imitation, defining it as follows: *an imitation of human action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; that is enacted dramatically rather than narrated, in language appropriately ornamented; and that arouses pity and fear* (ch. 6, 1449b24–8; emphasis added). In good philosophical fashion, this definition addresses the *what*, *how*, and *why* of tragedy, in that order. Elsewhere in the argument Aristotle answers the first two questions – what and how – in the shorthand of two separate lists. First is the tripartite division into *object* (what), and *mode* and *media* (how) (ch. 1, 1447a16–18), followed by the division into six constituent parts: plot, character, thought (objects/what), style, melody (media/how), and spectacle (mode/how) (ch. 6, 1450a7–12). (Like most shorthands, Aristotle's are nearly incomprehensible to the uninitiated.) By far the most important of these six parts is the plot, which Aristotle calls the starting point, the endpoint and the soul of tragedy (ch. 6, 1450a38–9, 1450a22–3, 1450a38–9). And *what* tragedy imitates with its plots is unambiguously a certain kind of action.[3]

By characterizing this action as serious, *spoudaia*, Aristotle contradicts Plato, who dismisses all imitation as "child's play" or *paidia*, the antithesis of whatever is worthwhile (*Republic* 602B). With this characterization, Aristotle also distinguishes tragedy from another kind of enacted as opposed to narrated fictional imitation,

namely comedy. Whereas these two genres share a single mode – dramatic as opposed to narrative – and some overlap on media in their use of language and meter, their objects differ significantly. Both represent actions, but comedy treats actions performed by agents who are lesser human beings, while the agents of tragic action belong to the better sort (ch. 2, 1448a16–18; ch. 4, 1448b24–7; ch. 5, 1449a32–4) (see chapter 15 in this volume). And if tragedy is more serious or worthwhile – *spoudaia* – than comedy, fiction (*poiēsis*), and especially tragic fiction, is more serious than history. Whereas history deals only with the actions of particular people, fiction shares with philosophy its access to universality. "It is for this reason," Aristotle argues (ch. 9, 1451b5–11),

> that poetry is both more philosophical (*philosophōteron*) and more serious (*spoudaioteron*) than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A "universal" comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain *kind* of character – something which poetry aims at *despite* its addition of particular names. A "particular," by contrast, is (for example) what Alcibiades did or experienced.

Fiction's claim to universality – kinds or types rather than individuals – is crucial to Aristotle's argument because it is in universals that the philosopher or anyone else looking for knowledge most readily discovers cause (*Posterior Analytics* 86a4–10; *Metaphysics* 981a15–981b6). And knowing an object, as we have seen, requires knowing its causes. Aristotle's poet, in sharp contrast to his historian, imitates not just *what* happened but *why*. Whereas the historian represents events that happen one after another, in temporal sequence (*pros allēla*) (ch. 23, 1459a24), the poet or fiction-writer imitates events which occur because of one another (*di'allēla*) (ch. 9, 1452a4).

These causal connections between the events of the fictional plot also account for the unity or wholeness of the tragic action; and unity, alongside seriousness, figures prominently in the definition of tragedy in Chapter 6 noted above. In Chapter 7, Aristotle gives a fuller account of this wholeness by differentiating the beginning, middle, and end of the tragic action in terms of causality: the beginning is not caused by anything that comes before; the middle is caused by the beginning and causes the end; the end is caused by beginning and middle but causes nothing further. To this wholeness and seriousness, as we have seen, Aristotle adds "magnitude," which he goes on to define as "the scope required for a probable or necessary succession of events which produce a transformation either from affliction to prosperity, or the reverse" (ch. 7, 1451a12–15).

The magnitude of a tragic action, in other words, is indefinable in terms of length or, following later dramatic theory and practice, a specified number of acts.[4] Rather, it must be long enough to allow for a probable or necessary change. Here, as throughout the *Poetics*, Aristotle's brevity obscures several important points. One is the emphasis on change or *metabolē*, which, considered indispensable by Aristotle, is flatly condemned by Plato. In the *Republic* (604E), Socrates singles out the changeability of the tragic agent in the face of misfortune as *the* characteristic that disqualifies him as an

object suitable for representation. And representing the gods as changeable is no less objectionable (380D–381D). Just as Aristotle disagrees with Plato on this issue, later dramatic theorists will disagree with Aristotle, not because they will reject change, however, but because they will accept for tragedy a change only from good fortune to bad.[5]

Another important point involves the role of probability, which raises from Socrates objections as fierce as those he levels against change. Condemned most roundly in the *Phaedrus* (272D–273D), probability, according to Plato, sidesteps the truth in favor of credibility – what most people believe. Vestiges of this Platonic position are recognizable in the *Poetics*, especially its final chapters, where Aristotle recommends both that the poet avoid at all costs whatever is implausible (ch. 24) and that he counter critics' charges of the impossibility of fiction with its believability (ch. 25). "Poetic requirements," he cautions, "make a plausible impossibility preferable to an implausible possibility" (ch. 25, 1461b11–12). For most of the argument, however, Aristotle propounds a very different notion of probability – one responsive to fiction's intense focus on human action.

In discussions elsewhere of such varied topics as metaphysics and ethics, Aristotle first divides human endeavor into three categories – doing, making, and thinking – and then identifies the ways that doing is like and unlike the other two (*Nicomachean Ethics* 6.3.1–6.6.2; cf. *Metaphysics* 981b25–982a1). Both doing and making are matters of practice; they lead to some activity. Thinking, in contrast, is theoretical. It does not culminate in any action. On the other hand, thinking and doing (well) are alike in that both are ends in themselves, whereas making (*poiēsis*) – even making tragedies – is not. In starkest contrast to a more modern aesthetic that embraces art for its own sake, Aristotelian *poiēsis* is always the means to some further end. For this reason, Aristotle finds it necessary in his definition cited above to address the *why* as well as the *what* and *how* of tragedy.

Despite this crucial distinction between what we do and what we make, however, our actions are like our products but unlike our contemplation in another regard. Belonging to the natural world or physics, the supernatural world or metaphysics, and the formal world of mathematics, the objects of thinking are invariable. They cannot be otherwise. Being so, they operate according to fixed, unchanging laws that can in turn predict their operations with great precision. Once the scientific thinker understands the laws governing the sun, for instance, she can predict with great accuracy its rising and setting tomorrow and the next day.

Though similarly true for the equilateral triangle, this degree of predictability is not true for human action – even for the actions of those who are more than usually consistent or very familiar to us. Like human production, human behavior is variable. It can be otherwise; and so its operations and outcomes are not knowable with anything like the same precision as the sun or the triangle. Indeed, the laws governing what we do, like those governing what we make, are only very infrequently necessary; for the most part they are probable. And so Aristotle warns that (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1.) "the same exactness must not be expected in all departments of philosophy

alike, any more than in all the products of the arts and crafts... It is equally unreasonable to accept merely probable conclusions from a mathematician and to demand strict demonstration [necessary conclusions] from an orator."[6]

Aristotelian probability, in other words, is not, as it was for Plato, a mere strategy ot trick for exploiting popular opinion. On the contrary, it characterizes the kind of knowing commensurate with its object, human action, as the focus of tragedy. When Aristotle repeats throughout the *Poetics* that the elements of the plot, like those of character, must obey either necessity or probability (chs. 7, 8, 9, 10, 15), he is safeguarding tragic imitation from the Platonic charge that all imitations are the products of ignorance. Insofar as the tragic poet constructs his fiction according to the laws governing human action, that fiction will disclose the causal connection between events and so deepen our understanding of those events – *why* they happened as they did.

For the causes of human action, in turn, the fiction-writer must look to the moral and intellectual qualities – character (*ēthos*) and thought (*dianoia*) – of the agents. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially book 6, Aristotle develops this complex causality in some detail. In the *Poetics*, he states it more baldly (ch. 6, 1449b36–1450a3): "tragedy is a representation of an action, and is enacted by agents, who must be characterized in both their character (*to ēthos*) and their thought (*tēn dianoian*) (for it is through these that we can also judge the qualities of their actions, and it is in their actions that all men either succeed or fail)." Aristotle's previously enumerated list of the six constituent parts of tragedy, in other words, fails through its abbreviation to disclose the causal relation among the first three: plot (*mythos*), character (*ēthos*), and thought (*dianoia*). The actions of the plot are what they are in no small part *because* of the ethical and intellectual qualities of their agents. If tragic and comic plots differ, as we have also seen, that is precisely because of such qualitative differences.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, moreover, Aristotle's analysis of action includes a crucial element not on the list of the *Poetics*. "Now the origin of the action," Aristotle explains in the *Ethics* (6.2, 1139a31–35),

> the source of the movement, not the action's goal – is decision (*prohairēsis*), and the origin of decision is desire together with reason that aims at some goal. Hence decision requires understanding and thought (*dianoia*), and also a state of character (*ēthike*), since doing well or badly in action requires both thought (*dianoia*) and character (*ēthos*).

Our decisions, as we learn from this explanation, are what they are *because* of our characters and thoughts; and our actions are what they are *because* of our decisions.

Despite its shorthand for treating the causes of action, the *Poetics* nevertheless acknowledges this same indispensable intermediate step in the psychological process that culminates in action. Both chapter 6 and chapter 15 underscore the causal relation between the character of the agent and his decisions or choices, insisting that "the character will be good when the choice (*prohairēsis*) is good" (ch. 15, 1454a18–19). But choice plays an even more prominent role in Aristotle's literary theory than the brief treatment of *prohairēsis* in the *Poetics* suggests.

Like the *Nicomachean Ethics,* the *Poetics* assumes that actions in general are somewhere between the extremes of wholly voluntary (*hekōn*) – the immediate consequence of our decisions or choices – and wholly involuntary (*akōn*), the consequence of causes completely out of our control. When in chapter 13 (1453a10) Aristotle characterizes the tragic act as a *hamartia*, he is specifying the extent to which the agent can be said to have caused the act through his choices. On this point, the difficult shorthand of the *Poetics* gains clarity from the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle divides acts into three kinds: mistakes (*atuchēmata*), personal failings (*hamartēmata*), and unjust acts (*adikēmata*) (*Rhetoric* 1.13.15–16; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.8.6–11): "Mistakes are unexpected actions and do not result from wickedness; personal failings are not unexpected and do not result from wickedness; [and] unjust actions are not unexpected and do result from wickedness." As we learn in chapter 13 of the *Poetics*, unjust actions are inappropriate for tragedy. For the agent of an unjust act, whether he experiences a change from prosperity to affliction or the reverse, will not provoke the spectators' fear and pity. Those who are the victims of chance misfortunes – mistakes – are also disqualified since it is "neither fearful nor pitiful but repulsive" when preeminently good men "[pass] from prosperity to affliction" (ch. 13, 1452b34-36). Furthermore, because a mishap is by definition without cause – a product of chance – this kind of action cannot be qualified by the intellectual and ethical qualities of the agent.

The *hamartia* or *hamartēma*, on the other hand, is precisely suited to tragic fiction: while it is not, strictly speaking, voluntary, in that the agent does not freely choose the act with full knowledge of its particulars, neither is it, strictly speaking, involuntary, in that it is not wholly unforeseen. Aristotle's tragic *hamartia*, then, falls somewhere between an act that is fully intended and one that is completely unexpected. Or as Aristotle puts it in chapter 9 (1452a4), tragic events happen "contrary to expectation yet still on account of one another."

That Aristotelian tragic action occupies this middle condition between the fully intended and completely unexpected is confirmed by the discussion that follows. Chapter 14 of the *Poetics* lays out the possibilities for tragic action as (1) intended and committed, (2) intended but not committed, (3) not intended but committed, and (4) neither intended nor committed. Medea illustrates the first, Haemon in *Antigone* the second, Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* the third, and Iphigenia in *Iphigenia in Tauris* the last. The third and fourth combinations make for the best tragedies, according to Aristotle, because their tragic agents do not fully intend the acts they commit or almost commit. If the common factor in the two approved tragedies, *Oedipus the King* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, is the lack of intention, moreover, the difference between them turns on whether the unintended act is discovered before or after it is committed. And this conjunction of intentionality with the timing of discovery also accounts for a structural feature of the best tragedies: what Aristotle calls the *anagnōrisis* or recognition, one of the two features of the complex plot.

Like all tragic plots, even the simplest ones, scenes of recognition require change – in this case, a change from ignorance to knowledge (ch. 11, 1452a30–1). Like only the very best tragic actions, however, the best recognitions occur contrary to the

intentions of the agents. Accordingly, Homer shows himself a more skillful poet in crafting Eurycleia's discovery of her master Odysseus in book 19 than he does in Eumaios' in book 14. In the one, Odysseus intends to keep his identity a secret from his nurse, who recognizes him against his will, whereas in the other he intentionally identifies himself to the swineherd. And the same criterion serves to distinguish the two recognitions in *Iphigenia in Tauris*. While Iphigenia identifies herself unintentionally through a letter, thereby earning for Euripides Aristotle's approval, her brother Orestes in the same play fully intends to make his identity known, thereby effecting a recognition less deserving of praise.

The other feature of the complex plot is *peripeteia*, or reversal, which shares certain characteristics with recognition. Both involve change. And both occur in the best cases not only according to probability or necessity (chs. 10, 11), but also contrary to the intentions and expectations of the agents. So Aristotle illustrates *peripeteia* with an episode from *Oedipus the King* (ch. 11, 1452a25–6), "where the person comes to bring Oedipus happiness and intends to free him from his fear about his mother; but he produces the opposite effect, by revealing Oedipus' identity." In addition to these similarities, recognition and reversal also share their singular impact on the emotions (ch. 6, 1450a33–5).

Like his teacher, Aristotle takes into account the power of fiction through these and other features to provoke strong emotion in the audience. Plato would just as soon eradicate fiction's so-called *psychagogic* power – that is, its power, literally, to lead the minds of those in the audience.[7] Aristotle, in contrast, prefers to harness this power for some socially useful end. Like any other made thing, we recall, a tragic poem is never an end in itself but a means to some further end. As we have already seen, Aristotle acknowledges this end in chapter 6, where, defining the kind of fiction or *poiēsis* under consideration, he introduces not only the *what* and *how* of tragedy, but also the *why*. And the *why* he identifies unambiguously with the provocation of strong emotion – an identification he later confirms (ch. 25, 1460b24–6) when advising other defenders of fiction to justify apparent errors in poetry on the very grounds that these errors serve to heighten poetry's emotional impact.

But why the emotions, and why fear and pity in particular? Aristotle answers the first question, directed somewhat predictably at Plato's objections to fiction's *psychagogic* power, in the *Rhetoric* (2.1.8): "The emotions are those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgments and which are accompanied by pain and pleasure, for example, anger, pity, fear, and other such things and their opposites." Over and against Plato's call for eradication, Aristotle affirms the role of human emotion (as well as change) in the activity of judging human action, whether we encounter these actions in the law courts, the assembly, or the theater.[8] An action arousing our fear, he argues by way of example (*Rhetoric* 1.14.5), deserves a harsher judgment than one arousing our pity.

In his handbook for the fiction-writer as well as the orator, Aristotle describes the two emotions of fear and pity as both especially instrumental in judging action and inextricably related to one another. In the *Poetics* (ch. 13) we pity those agents who

suffer unfairly, while we fear for those who are like us (*homoios*). This latter quality of likeness is, moreover, essential to the best tragic characters (ch. 15, 1454a24). In the *Rhetoric*, we similarly pity those who have not deserved their suffering (2.8.1), but we also pity those who are like us (2.8.13) – provided they are not so like us as to be us or those closest to us. In such cases, Aristotle reasons, we feel fear rather than pity. Accordingly, Amasis, King of Egypt, was seen to weep at the sight of a friend reduced to poverty but not to have wept at his son's execution, the sight of which terrified him (2.8.12). In general, however, "people pity things happening to others in so far as they fear for themselves" (2.8.13; cf. 2.5.12).

As characterized in the *Rhetoric*, then, pity is the more sympathetic counterpart to fear, although both are engaged by another's suffering. Fear is intensified, moreover, by those events that occur contrary to our expectation. If you want to terrify your audience, Aristotle informs the student of rhetoric (2.5.13), "make them realize that . . . there are others like them suffering [now] (or who have suffered) and at the hands of those from whom they did not expect it and suffering things [they did not expect] and at a time when they were not thinking of [the possibility]." With this advice in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle inadvertently fills out the truncated argument of the *Poetics*.

In some of the best tragic fiction, as we have seen, a basically good character suffers because he takes responsibility for an action with unforeseen consequences. He commits (and regrets) a *hamartia* (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.13). Many of these same tragedies turn on tragic recognitions and reversals that terrify us precisely *because* their changes are sudden and contrary to expectation. Such rapid, unexpected change also causes wonder (ch. 9, 1452a4–7; cf. *Rhetoric* 1.11.24 and *Poetics* 24, 1460a17). Wonder, in turn, provokes the desire to understand (*Metaphysics* 1.1, 980a21–7; *Rhetoric* 1.11.24), and both wondering and understanding cause pleasure (*Rhetoric* 1.11.23, *Poetics* 4, 1448b4–19).

Aristotle's defense of tragic fiction, then, addresses both of Plato's charges against it: that it is the product of ignorance and that it inflames the emotions. In response to the first charge, Aristotle requires from the tragic plot a carefully constructed sequence of events causally rather than just temporally related. In order to fulfill this requirement, the tragic poet himself must understand the causes of human action in the ethical and intellectual qualities of the agents. Furthermore, he must know how to build these qualities of character and mind into the structure of events. Thus carefully crafted, Aristotelian tragedy challenges and even sharpens its audience's ability to judge human action. In doing so, it performs no small psychological and social function.

But making judgments engages our emotional as well as our rational powers; and so this same tragedy, if its aim is really to deepen our understanding of human action, must also provoke our fears about and our compassion for the human suffering that those who act very often bring on themselves and those closest to them. Rather than answering Plato's second charge, in other words, Aristotle refutes its most basic assumption. The intense pleasure that comes from our emotional engagement with

the tragic action and its agents is inseparable, he argues, from the pleasure associated with our instinct to admire them and our efforts to understand them.

But the emotions do more than account for the effectiveness of tragic fiction. As mentioned in my introduction, they also help to explain tragedy's superiority to epic. Sharing many features of this older and longer form of fiction, tragedy surpasses epic in Aristotle's estimation for two related reasons: one is its greater unity; the other, the greater compression and therefore, we can assume, emotional impact that such structural tightness affords (ch. 26, 1462a12–13). These generic advantages, Aristotle insists, belong as much to reading tragedy as to seeing it performed (ch. 26, 1462a17–18). If reading fiction serves better than reading history because fictional structure in general foregrounds the causal relations between the qualities of human agency and human action, then reading tragic fiction is best of all. Its peculiar structure intensifies our emotional engagement, thereby deepening our understanding and increasing our pleasure.

Notes

1 On the dating of the *Poetics* see Halliwell (1986: 324–30).

2 For a couple of exceptions, anticipating the final chapter, see ch. 4, 1449a5–6 and ch. 5, 1449b18–20.

3 With the exception of a few remarks on spectacle (ch. 6, 1450b16–20; ch. 14, 1453b1–10; ch. 26, 1462a16), indicating its secondary role in tragic fiction, the *Poetics* more or less confines its discussion of *how* tragedy imitates to its treatment of style in chs. 19–22. See Halliwell (1986: 337–49).

4 See Halliwell (1986: 286–323; Herrick (1950: 32–3); Weinberg (1961: 402).

5 See Halliwell (1986: 228) and Weinberg (1961: 416).

6 Although Aristotle routinely couples probability and necessity together in the shorthand of the *Poetics*, he does sometimes refer to probability alone (ch. 16, 1455a16–19; ch. 18, 1456a23–5). See Eden (1986: 69–70) and Halliwell (1986: 99–102).

7 For Aristotle's use of this term in the *Poetics* see ch. 6, 1450a33; 1450b16–17 and Halliwell (1986: 64).

8 For Plato and Aristotle on the commonalities between legal and dramatic theory see Eden (1986: 3–61).

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