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Mythos* and catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics

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Abstract: The paper argues that catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics* is a two-pronged process, which applies both to the construction of the *mythos* by the poet and its reception by the audience. Catharsis may plausibly be taken as the poet's distillation of events that constitute a *mythos* so as to clear away anything that might undermine its coherence or disturb its unity. The sequencing of fearful and pitiable events in the plot according to probability or necessity allows the audience to evaluate or reevaluate properly the relative importance of factors that determine or influence the behavior of the tragic characters and the fulfilment of their fate. In several cases at least, the plot also leads the audience to realize that other features such as the heroes' social and intellectual advantages, which they and/or the characters may have considered important in principle, because of their cultural or social background, and/or in the early stages of the plot, were not involved in the downfall (or salvation) of the heroes. This gradual and plot-induced shift in the audience's appreciation of the relative importance of various factors constitutes the catharsis experienced by the audience. They gain a clear(er) understanding of the reason(s) why the heroes suffer and how they bring about (or escape) disaster. Sophocles' *OT* and Euripides' *IT*, which Aristotle praises highly in the *Poetics*, are discussed as examples that illustrate how their plots lead the audience to experience catharsis.

Keywords: Aristotle, *Poetics*, mythos, catharsis, Sophocles, *OT*, Euripides, *IT*

πάθει μάθος

It is a cliché that Aristotle's *Poetics* is a brief treatise with a huge influence. Virtually every part of it has been vigorously debated since the Renaissance, and consensus has not yet been reached. Some of the major areas of discussion are mimesis, the historical development of drama, the role of the emotions, catharsis, and the work's relationship to Plato's view of poetry. In this paper I contribute some arguments to the debate about the interpretation of catharsis. I focus on the *mythos*, the most important part of tragedy according to Aristotle, and argue that catharsis is a

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two-pronged process, which applies both to the construction of the *mythos* by the poet and its reception by the audience. My arguments corroborate and further the cognitive interpretation of catharsis, which I consider most plausible.¹ Famously, catharsis occurs only once in the treatise, at the end of the definition of tragedy's essence (*Poet.* 6, 1449b22–28):

περὶ δὲ τραγωδίας λέγωμεν ἀναλαμβάνοντες αὐτῆς ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων τὸν γινόμενον ὄρον τῆς οὐσίας. ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῃ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν.

Let us now discuss tragedy, picking out the definition of its essence from what has already been said. Tragedy, then, is the imitation of a serious and complete action of a certain magnitude; its language is attractively embellished in distinct ways in the different sections; its mode is dramatic and not narrative, and it achieves the catharsis of such events through pity and fear.²

This definition is crucial to Aristotle's enterprise in the treatise. In the next section I will discuss the definition briefly in order to make clear my view of tragedy's position in Aristotle's philosophical program.

¹ For an overview of the main interpretations of catharsis, medical, moral and cognitive, see Halliwell 1998, 350–356, Munteanu 2012, 238–250 and Curran 2016, 212–226.

² For the view that catharsis and the entire last phrase is an addition or a gloss see Scott 2003 and Veloso 2007; *contra* e. g. Halliwell 2011, 260–265, to whose arguments Scott 2018, ch. 5 responds (I have not been able to consult the book). The excising of catharsis would certainly facilitate the interpretation of the definition and the treatise as a whole, and some scholars suggest that it is best not to discuss catharsis anymore; see e. g. Halliwell 2002, 206 and Woodruff 2009, 622. Most scholars do not agree that excision is the only viable solution. It is even harder to share the view that a reference to pity and fear, which appear prominently in the work, should be eliminated. As will be argued below, catharsis is not a process that applies to emotions: παθήματα are the pitiable and fearful events dramatized rather than the emotions of pity and fear generated by their dramatization; for πάθημα, a synonym of πάθος, = 'suffering' cf. 1459b11, 1452b11–13, 1453b18, 20, 1454a13, possibly also 1447a28, and Hose 2023, 275. Although emotions are an integral part of the audience's tragic experience and the pleasure they derive from it, they are not cleared away, purified, or otherwise treated through catharsis. The plot, the representation of pitiable and fearful events, causes pity and fear and leads to catharsis through, but not of, these emotions; cf. Nehamas 1992, 307.

Parts, whole and catharsis³

By providing the definition of tragedy, the product of the art of poetry on which he focuses in the *Poetics*, Aristotle also defines the art of poetry. For Aristotle, the definition of an art, e. g. medicine or house building, is the definition of its product, health or house. The definition of a thing may mention its matter (ὕλη), its constituent(s). It may mention its form (εἶδος or μορφή), the shape of its matter, or the way all the different constituents, each possibly with a different shape, are organized or arranged so as to be organic parts of the whole that constitutes the specific thing. If this structure is to perform a certain function (ἔργον), to achieve an end (τέλος), for the sake of which the constituents acquire the specific structure, and which, as final end, explains why the artefact is the way it is and what it is, then this end is the form of the thing. The definition may also mention both the matter and the form of the thing (*Met.* H 2, 1043a14–21).

The first kind of definition is partial because it omits all reference to form: the matter of a bed cannot be, and cannot be called, a bed but only a potential bed. The second kind of definition is not symmetrically partial. It defines what is essential, the essence itself (οὐσία) of the thing in question. The essence determines also the matter as well as the process from which, and through which, the thing is actualized. The form determines the prerequisites of its actualization, and is the real definition of the thing, which enables us to understand it fully. The definition of a thing that mentions both its form and its matter simply expands the definition that mentions only its form.

For Aristotle, the definition of an art is the definition of its product, in the sense that it is the definition of the product's form (*Met.* Z 7, 1032a32-b14). The form is not inherent in specific products but in the mind of the artist, as the content of his/her knowledge, and is called “the form in the soul” (τὸ εἶδος ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ) and “essence without matter” (οὐσία ἄνευ ὕλης). This essence, or the art itself, causes and directs the process of the making of the product. For instance, the enmattered house results from the house without matter, from the art of house building.⁴ As form of its product, the art is the equivalent of the form of a biological organism. This form directs the development of the organism from within, so that, following the completion of its development, the organism may perform all the functions for the sake of which it has been shaped in a specific way. The form of a biological organism is its nature (φύσις) or soul (ψυχή), the sum of the functional capabilities for the sake of which the organ-

³ Husain 2002 also discusses these issues, but the distinction between art and life that she proposes (89) is extreme, and her view that tragic action involves impersonal causal agency (59) cannot be corroborated.

⁴ Cf. Heath 2009, 61.

ism is shaped as it is, and the realization of which makes it what it is. Without form, there is no organism but only a body without soul, which cannot function.

By calling the *mythos* “as it were, the soul of tragedy” (οἷον ψυχὴ ... τῆς τραγωδίας, *Poet.* 6, 1450a38–39)⁵ and its end (τέλος) (*Poet.* 6, 1450a22–23), and so the end of poetry itself, Aristotle elevates it above the other parts of tragedy, character (ἦθος), thought (διάνοια), diction (λέξις), song (μελοποιία) and spectacle (ὄψις), as the form of tragedy: the *mythos* makes tragedy what it is, and the production of the *mythos* rather than the other parts of tragedy is the aim of poetry. Other arts are in charge of the production of the other parts, e. g. music produces songs. The products of these arts serve tragedy’s needs.⁶ According to Aristotle, these arts contribute to the art that they serve the matter for the realization of the form. This is determined by the art they serve, which posits the prerequisites for their products.⁷ The *mythos* and the other parts of tragedy then have a relationship of form to matter. The other parts, even if each and all are exquisite, cannot make a tragedy and achieve its end. By contrast, the *mythos* can do that, even if the “material” parts are not well made (*Poet.* 6, 1450a29–33). Without the *mythos*, there is no tragedy but its soulless body.

It is then no accident that in the definition of tragedy, the definition of the essence of the *definiendum*, all the emphasis falls on the *mythos*, “the imitation of a serious and complete action of a certain magnitude” (μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης). The “material” parts are mentioned because tragedy needs to be differentiated from epic, which, from the point of view of the *mythos*, is identical with tragedy (*Poet.* 23, 1459a; cf. 8, 1451a30–35). The action imitated by the poet is complete (τελεία), in the sense that it is a composite, with all parts in place, as is the case with every good artefact, which has the appropriate magnitude, according to its nature.⁸ The constituents of the *mythos* are events, and it is constructed around “a single, whole, and complete action, with beginning, middle, and end, so that like a single, whole animal may produce the pleasure proper to it” (μίαν πρᾶξιν ὅλην καὶ τελείαν, ἔχουσιν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσα καὶ τέλος, ἥν’ ὥσπερ ζῶον ἐν ὅλῳ ποιῇ τὴν οἰκείαν ἡδονήν, *Poet.* 23, 1459a19–21; πρβλ. *Poet.* 7, 1450b21–1451a6). I will return to the animal simile below. As one and whole (μία and ὅλη), the action (πρᾶξις) has all its parts and, most important, has them as a natural whole, as “a whole by nature ... so that they are one” (ὅλον φύσει ... ὥστε ἐν τι εἶναι ἐκείνα, *Met.* Δ 26, 1023b26–28).⁹

⁵ “as it were” presumably because tragedy is not an organism.

⁶ See *Poet.* 19, 1456b8–15, for diction; 6, 1450b4–7 and 19, 1456a34–36, for thought; 6, 1450b16–20 (cf. 14, 1453b1–8), for spectacle; 6, 1449b36–38, and 19, 1456a33–b2, for character.

⁷ See *Phys.* B 2, 194a36–b7.

⁸ For the definition of complete (τέλειον) see *Met.* Δ 16, 1021b12–23.

⁹ From the definition of whole (ὅλον).

In this light, the constituents of the *mythos* are not simply placed next to each other. Similarly, the parts of a shoe, for instance, may not simply be placed next to one another, in a haphazard manner, but are structured so as to become a shoe, an artefact that has a form, in the sense of a structure.¹⁰ Like the parts of a shoe, the parts of a single and whole action may be structured so that the transposition or removal of one part disturbs the whole: if the presence or absence of a part has no significance, if it does not affect the whole to which it belongs, then this part is not really part of a whole (*Poet.* 8, 1451a30–35). The principle that guarantees the organization of the constituents into an actual *mythos* is the sequence of events according to probability or necessity. For Aristotle, this organizing principle renders poetry more philosophical than history (*Poet.* 9, 1451a36–b11).¹¹

By linking events according to probability or necessity so that they become parts of a single, whole and complete action, and the *mythos* emerges, the art of poetry, which imitates such an action, imposes beginning, middle and end to a multitude of events: it imposes a limit, beyond which there are no parts of the *mythos* as a single, whole and complete action. Within this limit (πέρας), all parts are present, each at its proper place, and superfluous parts, which may disturb the coherence of the whole, are absent.¹² In the definition of tragedy, the participle περαίνουσα, in the phrase δι' ἑλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν, which is cognate with πέρας and qualifies the *definiens*, points to this crucial step in the construction of the *mythos*. If so, the object of the participle, τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν, may only involve an aspect of the organization of the events of a complete action into a limited whole according to probability or necessity. “Such events” should be the events that constitute the complete action, as indicated by the use of the demonstrative pronoun. As already suggested, the imitation of a complete action, into which events are organized, should not include any event that might undermine its coherence.

In this light, catharsis may plausibly be taken as the poet's distillation of events that constitute the *mythos* so as to clear away anything that might undermine its coherence or disturb its unity. Homer fashioned his epic in a similar manner: he constructed essentially tragic *mythoi*, around a single, whole and complete action, which has beginning, middle and end, by selecting (ἀπολαβών) from the multitude of events of the Trojan saga only one part (*Poet.* 23, 1459a30–b2). As imitation of a serious and complete action of a certain magnitude, tragedy completes or achieves (περαίνουσα) the clearing away of any extraneous element from the events that

¹⁰ See *Met.* Δ 6, 1016b6–16; cf. 1024a1–3.

¹¹ For this controversial assertion see the discussion of Hose 2023, 261–264.

¹² See the definition of limit at *Met.* Δ 17, 1022a4–13, which follows, for obvious reasons, the definition of complete.

constitute the tragic action, in the sense that it organizes them in a coherent whole with beginning, middle and end/limit, according to probability or necessity. I will return to the elements cleared away below. For now, tragedy achieves the clearing away through pity and fear because only pitiable and fearful events may be selected for tragic representation and organized in a coherent whole so as to constitute a complete action, which may be recognized and enjoyed as a tragic *mythos* (*Poet.* 9, 1452a1–4; 13, 1452b30–33; 14, 1453b10–14).¹³

As coherent whole, the *mythos* must have the potential to cause to the spectators the pleasure proper to tragedy (τὴν οἰκείαν ἡδονήν, *Poet.* 13, 1453a35–36; cf. 23, 1459a18–21); only this pleasure should be sought from tragedy, and the poet should create it by building it into the representation of pitiable and fearful events (*Poet.* 14, 1453b10–14). As already suggested, Aristotle likens the proper tragic pleasure caused by the *mythos* as a single, whole and complete action (μία πράξις ὅλη καὶ τελεία) to the pleasure caused by a biological organism as a single whole (ἐν ὅλῳ). In a famous passage from his *Parts of animals* (A 5, 644b22–645b3), he mentions again the pleasure caused by a biological organism and explains that this pleasure is caused by the nature that created the organism. It pleases the person who has acquired scientific knowledge and is in a position to understand its nature (θεωρία), without childish aversion toward the constituents of the organism in which its nature is realized. This pleasure is likened to that caused by pictorial representations of animals because, together with the paintings, we contemplate (συνθεωροῦμεν) the art that created them.

Mutatis mutandis, the proper tragic pleasure is caused by the *mythos* as imitation of a single, whole and complete action. We contemplate the art that created it along with its fearful and pitiable constituents, despite the displeasure they may cause us in themselves. The *mythos*, as organizing sequence of events according to probability or necessity, always operates on specific fearful and pitiable events, shaping them into a single, whole and complete action. The final end of poetry, for the sake of which poetry does what it does in connection with the audience or readers, would be a kind of contemplation (θεωρία), as the philosophical aspect of poetry also indicates. This contemplation causes the pleasure proper to it.

In view of the passage from the *Parts of Animals* discussed above, and the parallel between the proper tragic pleasure caused by the *mythos* and the pleasure caused by a biological organism, it is not surprising that already in chapter 4 of *Poetics* (1448b9–18) Aristotle draws a parallel between poetry and painting. He

¹³ Cf. Nehamas 1992, 308. The reason why only such events should be presented in tragedy is found in Aristotle's historical overview of the development of poetic genres, namely because by nature some poets inclined toward the representation of noble action and people while others toward the representation of the base sort (*Poet.* 4, 1448b24–27).

explains that the pleasure caused by paintings, even when their subject-matter is repulsive, is a kind of pleasure naturally caused by the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, to which everyone inclines, as an embryonic philosopher. Now the object of knowledge and understanding is not the art that created the paintings in general but specifically their subjects. The viewers draw pleasure because they understand what is represented and reach some conclusions about it, seeing in a new framework what they had encountered before. Similarly, the audience of a tragedy, as embryonic philosophers, must draw the pleasure proper to it not only from the understanding of the *mythos* as organizing principle of certain fearful and pitiable events but from the understanding of the events themselves and the characters involved in them. The audience revise their previous knowledge of them and reach some new conclusions.

The process Aristotle implies here is probably similar to the one he sketches in the first chapter of *Physics*. The acquisition of knowledge starts from things already known to us, with which we are already familiar, in an imprecise, general and unstructured manner, although they appear very clear to us. The acquisition of knowledge progresses with the clarification and structural concretization of the subject. By clearing away all events extraneous to those that will be organized in a *mythos*, the imitation of a single, whole and complete action, poetry does not aim only at leading the audience to understand and enjoy it. Its goal is also to lead the audience to understand, and enjoy, better the events in question, mainly their origin, connections, and impact.

Pity, fear and catharsis

In view of the above, the pleasure of tragedy is the result of a cognitive process, which involves the emotions of pity and fear. Tragedy and art in general promote understanding but do not provide purgation, purification, relief or instruction, whether emotional or moral. Catharsis then cannot be associated with such instruction or with purgation, purification and relief, as there is nothing noxious to be removed, rebalanced or purified. I submit that pity and fear are not the emotions produced and “treated” by catharsis, in a sort of homeopathic treatment, which would excite them in order to cure them. “Getting worse before getting better” is inapplicable, because there is no disease or disorder to be cured, and even if there had been, there is no indication that it might have been treated in the manner just mentioned. The emotions of pity and fear are not defects or ailments of the audience, which should be treated, but an integral part of their experience of tragedy and the pleasure they derive from it. They are the appropriate response of the audi-

ence to the plot, which dramatizes pitiable and fearful events. By definition, the kind of action appropriate for tragic representation arouses pity and fear to normal people, and thus to the audience.¹⁴

There may be little doubt that (some members of) the audience may be able or likely to realize the background of the heroes' predicament or precarious position without experiencing pity and fear. However, the emotions are naturally aroused by such a plot and are thus part of the proper pleasure of tragedy.¹⁵ In other words, the tragic plot arouses pity and fear, is the product of a catharsis and effects a catharsis. The Aristotelian audience, who have the normal emotional response to the plot and experience catharsis, derive the proper pleasure from the plot. Aristotle ignores (members of) an audience who may fail to experience pity and fear. It is idle to speculate on the reasons why, but if a suggestion is desirable, it would be plausible to assume that he thinks that there would be no such people, or that their responses to the plot would be aberrant and thus unworthy of attention in a treatise that does not discuss this kind of responses. It is then precarious and unwarranted to reject views of the emotions and catharsis on the basis of their failure to take this kind of responses into account.¹⁶

There is no indication that only the most sophisticated kind of audience rather than all audiences experience pity and fear. Although audiences, presumably Aristotle's contemporary audiences, are said to prefer a sort of happy end, with the better sort of characters saved or rewarded and the worse punished (*Poet.* 13, 1453a30–34), this is relevant to the outcome of the plots rather than their dramatization of pitiable and fearful events and the production of the emotions of pity and fear. The Aristotelian inferior plots do not dramatize happy events that fail to produce pity and fear. The proper pleasure of tragedy then cannot be reduced to pity and fear, which are experienced by the best kind of audience, who may feel pleasure because they experience the emotions appropriate to a pitiable and fearful plot. If one wishes to associate it with the definition, it may only be associated with catharsis. Inferior plots produce pity and fear but provide less scope for

14 For Aristotle's focus on the community of normal people and the accessibility of poetry to them see Nikolopoulou 2014, 288–290.

15 Konstan 2020, 60–63 suggests that tragic emotions, which are real and not essentially different from “real life” emotions, and tragic pleasure are responses to the plot in its artistic construction and entirety, not to single misfortunes that befall the characters. In this sense, they are aesthetic. See also Worman 2022, 154–155.

16 See e.g. Heath 2001, 21 n. 9. Aristotle also fails to deal with such issues as the usefulness of tragedy for different categories or age groups of citizens and their activities. It may be plausible that tragic performances would be suitable for, and congenial to, the intellectual entertainment of sophisticated adult citizens, but such an assumption contributes little to our understanding of the *Poetics* in general and its definition in particular. Cf. Nehamas 1992, 308, and next n.

elucidation or understanding, as the audience are fairly certain about the characters' morality, their behavior and its consequences, and the outcome reinforces or rewards their convictions.

Aristotle prefers representation of events that are pitiable and fearful throughout, in their inception, development and outcome, rather than in part. The treatise includes no reference or allusion to alternative kinds of dramatized events and different kinds of reaction on the part of different audience members, and attempts to approach it in such terms are unwarranted. The events are not chosen in order to cause pity and fear, because these emotions should be aroused for the goal of tragedy to be achieved. Rather, the events are chosen because they are the subject of the genre and arouse the emotions of pity and fear *eo ipso*. In Aristotle's view, the production of pity and fear is not the desideratum or the goal of tragedy but rather a given. The goal is the understanding the audience gain by watching the dramatic representation of a pitiable and fearful action performed according to specific artistic rules, which produces the appropriate tragic pleasure.¹⁷

Catharsis and audience

Catharsis involves the action represented, and the audience's reception or perception of it. As already suggested, it cannot have anything to do with purgation, purification, or healing.¹⁸ The action represented and its agents are not subject to any of these

¹⁷ Veloso 2007, 278 argues that the audience understand what is judged as pitiable and fearful without necessarily experiencing pity and fear. Aristotle, though, nowhere indicates that there is a need for such judgment or a possibility that the audience might not experience pity and fear; cf. previous n. The pleasure of tragedy is unlikely to be the pleasure the virtuous take in the exercise of their virtue, as Heath 2014 thinks; cf. Destrée 2014, 22–23. The pleasure of tragedy is not restricted to them. Heath distinguishes the pleasure that accompanies something that causes distress, e. g. grief over loss, from the pleasure caused by distress. The audience, though, do not derive pleasure from pitiable and fearful *events* but from *the imitation* of such events, which cause pity and fear. The emotions are not the source of the pleasure but they accompany the pleasure, which is produced by the experience of a well-crafted artistic product, put together according to the principles of its art that Aristotle postulates. This pleasure is cognitive, and it is no objection that one also derives pleasure from imitations of pleasant objects, and the latter are certainly not the cause of more pleasure. Cognitive pleasure is common to all imitations, but the specific pleasure of tragedy derives from the proper realization of its subject matter, the representation of a specific kind of events according to specific principles; cf. n. 13 above.

¹⁸ There seems to be little profit in associating Aristotle's discussion of catharsis through music in *Politics* 8.7 and tragic catharsis in the *Poetics*. For such an association see recently Ferrari 2019, and the reply of Veloso 2020. An explanation of tragic catharsis, the main desideratum, cannot be

processes. Even if, in modern parlance, the characters reach some form of closure at the end of some or most tragedies, pity, fear and catharsis are experienced by the audience, as the construction of the plot is directed to them, and thus cannot involve the characters. Some of the tragic characters also experience pity and fear, and may reach catharsis, (a degree of) greater awareness or understanding, but this is not the concern of Aristotle. The characters may be thought to direct or focalize the audience's emotions and understanding of the plot, but the characters' emotional and intellectual processes are not the focus of Aristotle's discussion. The characters' predicament comes into question only as the subject of pitiable and fearful plots and never as disorder that receives cure. If the tragic catharsis experienced by the audience does not involve purgation, purification or healing, it must indicate clearing up, clarification, or elucidation.¹⁹ This can only be the condition that results from the clearing away of elements that obfuscate or sidetrack their understanding and appraisal of the plot. The selection and sequencing of fearful and pitiable events in the plot according to probability or necessity allows the audience to evaluate or reevaluate properly the relative importance of factors that determine or influence the behavior of the tragic characters and the fulfilment of their fate. What kind of elements is cleared away and what better understanding do the audience gain?

To answer this crucial question, it is helpful to review and keep in mind the quite strict criteria that Aristotle sets, both for the construction of the best plot and for the selection of the best kind of action to be dramatized. The latter is the reversal of fortune, from happiness to unhappiness, of a particular kind of individual, socially preeminent and morally neither evil nor blameless, who suffers because of *hamartia*, an error (*Poet.* 13, 1453a7–39).²⁰ The complex plot, the best

obtained thereby, for various reasons. The most important of these is that tragedy and a particular kind of music, which excites and purges emotions, such as the mixolydian harmony (*Pol.* 8.5, 1340b1–2) and Dionysiac music (*Pol.* 8.7, 1342a4–15), cannot have the same effect. The catharsis mediated by music, mainly experienced by excitable people and those who partake of emotional excitability to some degree, is certainly different from the tragic sort, whatever view of the latter one might espouse; cf. Hose 2023, 54. Moreover, *Politics* 8 deals with the education of the young and suggests a tripartite function of music. The *Poetics*, which draws few distinctions, features nothing similar. For the alleged usefulness of tragedy for different groups of citizens or the intellectual entertainment of sophisticated adult citizens see n. 16 above. The tragic catharsis is due to the non-musical part of tragedy, and the most plausible assumption is that the work on poetics mentioned in *Politics* is not our *Poetics* or the extant part of it. Cf. Depew 1991, 368–369; Schütrumpf 2005, 665–666; Schmitt 2008, 502–510 and Woodruff 2009, 619. For a refutation of the educative view of catharsis see also Lear 1992, 318–321 and Capra 2020, 19–20.

¹⁹ The word is also used in this sense in Plato's *Sophist* 230b–d; cf. *Phaedrus* 243a.

²⁰ This does not imply that less illustrious and prosperous people might not commit errors and suffer, only that the change of fortune is more striking and amazing in the case of the prominent

kind, is unified, develops according to probability and necessity, includes a recognition, and produces the appropriate pleasure by presenting the pitiable and fearful reversal of fortune of the aforementioned type of individual (*Poet.* 13, 1452b30–1453a17; cf. 1452a12–1452b13).²¹ The most appropriate kind of tragic heroes cannot be morally impeccable: the downfall of morally perfect persons does not cause pity and fear but repugnance (*Poet.* 13, 1452b34–36). Although the downfall of excellent persons is undeserving and thus may cause pity, it does not cause fear because they are unlike the audience (cf. *Poet.* 13, 1453a4–6), and the pity of the audience is presumably overwhelmed by their revulsion.²² Excellence is also incompatible with *hamartia*, and a plot that would present a perfect individual committing a *hamartia* would be irrational.

It is clear that *hamartia* is not the cause of the protagonist's lack of moral distinction, but whether it is a moral defect or has a moral dimension is less clear. This is probably the case in chapter 18, in which *hamartia* is not mentioned, but the fall of heroes who excel in cleverness and bravery but are wicked and unjust produces wonder, which is particularized as “tragic and arousing human sympathy” (τραγικὸν ... καὶ φιλόανθρωπον, *Poet.* 18, 1456a21).²³ There is no contradiction between chapters 13 and 18, certainly not an irreconcilable contradiction.²⁴ The difference between the heroes in the two chapters is quantitative rather than qual-

individuals. Besides, by definition, as it were, or because of its historical development, tragedy deals with noble people and their actions (*Poet.* 4, 1448b25–26, 1449a5).

21 *Mutatis mutandis*, these specifications hold for the best kind of epic, first composed by Homer (chapters 23 and 24; cf. 4, 1448b33–35). The main differences are the meter and narrative mode of epic, its magnitude, which includes the time handled, and of course the time of performance, and the inclusion of a multitude of events that occur simultaneously but should ideally be presented as episodes of the main plot of epic rather than plots in themselves, which would render the main plot episodic. Irrational elements may also be presented in epic more easily than in tragedy, especially if handled appropriately by a poetic master such as Homer. Pity and fear or catharsis are not explicitly mentioned as constituents of a successful epic. However, since Aristotle insists on the dramatic plots, unity, and appropriate pleasure of the best kind of epic and states explicitly that all parts except lyric and spectacle are the same in epic and tragedy, it is plausible that the outcome and pleasure of epic and tragic plots would be similar.

22 Cf. Lucas 1968, 141; Stinton 1975, 239 and Curran 2016, 198–200.

23 Minsaas 2001, 148 suggests that “Aristotle seems to regard poetic wonder as a site of experience situated in a mean position between shocking surprise and causal plausibility. Mere surprise without plausibility will be experienced as something weird and incomprehensible and so cognitively frustrating; mere plausibility without surprise will be experienced as predictable and so cognitively unchallenging”.

24 Else 1957, 548 defends Gudeman's deletion of τραγικὸν καὶ φιλόανθρωπον. It is possible that chapter 18 is a collection of unconnected fragments; cf. Lucas 1968, 193. It is not a part of the treatise as worked out as chapter 13, but the fact that Sisyphus, one of the heroes mentioned, appeared mainly in satyr plays is not a serious problem. Aristotle may refer to lost tragedies or even take an

itative: both Sisyphus and Oedipus are intelligent, and both have some flaw, but Sisyphus' flaw is graver and may be thought to place him in the category of the wicked. Because of their moral defects, the fall of heroes such as Sisyphus is morally satisfying to the audience, but also intellectually challenging, and thus wondrous, because of their advantages. There is no indication that wonder might not be due to the plot and would not appear to be contrary to expectation but according to probability or necessity. Wonder is built into the representation of pitiable and fearful events in a unified plot, which presents the events as contrary to expectation but causally related (*Poet.* 9, 1452a1–11). If so, the fall of the heroes in 18 may be thought to be due to some kind of *hamartia* due to a moral flaw such as arrogance or the pursuit of some benefit. This does not lead directly to the fall but occasions its immediate cause, for instance, through the failure of the clever to see what is coming, and the brave to take adequate precautions.

The audience might or would expect a wicked man to fall but they would also certainly expect a noble man such as Oedipus to fall, not to mention that not all wicked men such as Menelaus in *Andromache* or even in *Orestes* do. The fact that these are not the main characters is irrelevant, because there is no prohibition or convention to the effect that the main characters might not be presented in the manner just mentioned. Since Greek tragedies dramatized well known mythological stories, and Aristotle indicates that basic facts in the stories should not be altered (*Poet.* 14, 1453b22–25), it is not the fall or salvation of the heroes that comes into question but the manner it comes about, creating, in narratological terms, suspense over how rather than what.²⁵ Finally, *hamartia* is not ignorance of a person's identity, although such ignorance is a factor in many successful tragedies. Complex plots involve recognition, mainly of friends believed to be enemies or vice versa. However, it does not occur in all such tragedies, and it is unlikely that ignorance of identity would be described as an error and a great error.²⁶

example from satyr plays, as he does from dithyrambs (*Poet.* 15, 1454a30–31; cf. 26, 1461b32 and 2, 1448a14–15).

25 Cf. Ferrari 1999, 195.

26 Cf. Sherman 1992, 178–179 and 184. The examples of the stories of the few mythological families most appropriate for tragic treatment (*Poet.* 13, 1453a18–22; cf. 1453a11) do not all conform to the pattern of ignorance of identity. Of the heroes mentioned, only Oedipus and Thyestes ignored the identity of their relatives. Orestes did not ignore his mother's or Aegisthus' identity, and Meleager was aware that his uncles participated in the battle in which he killed them, even if he did so accidentally. It is also irrelevant that some victims ignore their killer's identity. Aristotle may refer to other errors such as Orestes' certainty about his mother's motive for killing his father and consequent blaming of her on this account. Alternatively, and not mutually exclusively, Aristotle may mention the male heroes as heads or members of the afflicted households and not refer to the heroes' *hamartia*.

If the tragic heroes' error is not factual, then it must be an error of judgment, which highlights the limitations and vulnerability of eminent and highly gifted individuals. The heroes err in failing to properly take into account factors, or all factors, that they might easily have considered, given their social, moral and intellectual advantages, and to behave in an appropriately cautious or temperate manner.²⁷ Heroes such as Oedipus in Sophocles' *OT* and Iphigeneia in Euripides' *IT* act in a manner that their superior intelligence might, and perhaps should, have prohibited. Given that they are not morally perfect, their reasoning is vitiated by their urges and emotions, which had been shaped, to an extent at least, by their history or circumstances. The positive qualities and the limitations of tragic agents are very important for the plot, the appropriately constructed representation of the pitiable and fearful sequence of events dramatized according to probability and necessity, but in most, and arguably all, extant tragedies, the outcome is independent of them. It is fixed in advance by fate, presumably known to audiences familiar with the mythological and poetic tradition, and often announced or adumbrated in oracles, portents and dreams mentioned in the plays.²⁸

As already suggested, the plot guides the audience to evaluate or reevaluate properly the relative importance of factors that determine or influence the heroes' situation. To a large extent, if not entirely, these factors motivate the heroes' choices and actions, which lead to the fulfilment of their fate. In several cases at least, the plot also leads the audience to realize that other features such as the heroes' social and intellectual advantages, which they and/or the characters may have considered important in principle, because of their cultural or social background, and/or in the early stages of the plot, were not involved in the downfall (or salvation) of

27 This is probably also the case with comic ἀμάρτημα: it leads to shameful or ugly actions that are not painful or fatal (*Poet.* 5, 1449a34–37), and thus cannot cause pity or fear, but the pleasure coming from, and appropriate to, the laughable. The comic hero sometimes makes factual mistakes or operates in the context of misunderstandings, but this is not always the case, certainly not in all surviving Aristophanic comedies of the first and middle period. Although Aristotle probably had access to most plays of Old and Middle Comedy, there is no reason to believe that he had only factual mistakes and similar in mind. Most important, the similarity in the references to the kind of action appropriate to tragedy and comedy indicates clearly that ἀμαρτία and ἀμάρτημα are also similar. Apparently, the comic heroes do something that involves failure to take into account all factors that should, and likely could, be taken into account; cf. Cinaglia 2020, 171–177. From this point of view, the difference between tragedy and comedy is not to be sought in the *hamartia* or even *mutatis mutandis* the limitations of the hero, but in the resulting action, which in tragedy is fearful and pitiable but in comedy laughable.

28 A possible and partial exception is Sophocles' *Antigone*, and perhaps Euripides' *Medea*, but certainty is impossible because of the loss of virtually the entire tradition on which the playwrights may have drawn. See Griffith 1999, 7–8 and Mastronarde 2002, 52.

the heroes.²⁹ The initial assumptions of the audience may have also been shaped by their acquaintance with the myths dramatized and previous artistic treatments of them. This gradual and plot-induced shift in the audience's appreciation of the relative importance of various factors constitutes the catharsis experienced by the audience. They gain a clear(er) understanding of the reason(s) why the heroes suffer and how they bring about (or escape) disaster. The heroes' advantages enable them to achieve some of their goals, but their failure to control their impulses or to realize their limits endangers and may destroy them.

Catharsis in Sophocles' *OT* and Euripides' *IT*

To illustrate my argument, I will discuss Sophocles' *OT* and Euripides' *IT*, which Aristotle praises as paradigmatic artistic products in the *Poetics* (11, 1452a24–26, 14, 1453b30–32, 1454a7, 16, 1454b32–33, 1455a16–19, 17, 1455b2–15), but several other plays may serve as examples.³⁰ In Sophocles' *OT* Oedipus was born and raised a prince, in Thebes and Corinth respectively, and was highly intelligent but also quite impulsive. Neither his social and intellectual preeminence nor his emotional makeup had a direct, causal connection with his terrible fate, which had been determined, and predicted by Apollo to his father, before his birth (711–714; cf. 1175–1176). Teiresias also predicts in enigmatic but unmistakable language in the first episode what Oedipus is fated to find out and suffer within the day (412–428, 438). No explanation or background for this fate, or for Apollo's hostility toward Oedipus and his family, is provided. The story about a family curse or intergenerational guilt of the Labdacids, which had been a motif in the literary tradition but is not mentioned or alluded to in the play, might not be considered as relevant to it and its interpretation. Kovacs argues that the oracle to Laius, whom the god

29 I do not share the view of Golden 1992, 5–39 that the understanding and pleasure of tragedy results from following the plot and realizing the difference between particular and universal. Nehamas 1992, 308 suggests that tragedy expands “our sense of the factors which can affect the shape of our life”. Tsitsiridis 2005 associates tragic understanding with Aristotle's theory of recollection.

30 Schmitt 2008, 489–491, for instance, discusses the case of Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. He suggests that catharsis is the audience's realization of the real dangers facing the characters and the emotions it engenders (500–501). This may be so in some cases, but in most of them, it would reduce tragedy to tragic irony, as the dangers are known to the audience from the tradition and/or become obvious at the beginning or quite early on in the play. It is true, though, that the reasons why the characters fail to realize them may not always be (come) similarly obvious and may be different in each play.

hated for a past offense or for unspecified reasons, was conditional; Apollo behaves justly, and Oedipus suffers because his father made the wrong choice.³¹ Even if one accepts that Oedipus suffers as son of an offender, this moves the unspecified divine hostility a generation back. If Sophocles had wished to suggest that Laius had committed an offense such as the rape of Chrysippus, and his family suffered as a consequence, it is virtually out of the question that he would have relied on the supposed familiarity of the audience with myth. The family suffers because fate and/or the gods condemned it, for unspecified reasons.³²

Oedipus' futile attempt to avoid the realization of his fate, to which I will return, parallels his parents' exposure of their baby son and may thus be attributed to a hereditary proclivity to errors of judgment. It is more likely an example of the limitations of humans, even those enjoying social and intellectual advantages, who cannot realize and resign themselves to the inevitability of their fate. The Corinthian royal couple also erred gravely, and futilely, in hiding from Oedipus the truth about his origins (783–784). Jocasta's disparagement of the Delphic priests (707–725), which parallels Oedipus' attack on Teiresias' competence (370–371, 387–403; cf. 568), and of the oracle Oedipus received (946–947, 952–953; cf. 857–858, 964–975) is similarly indicative of short-sightedness. In this light, it is hard to believe, against all available evidence about Greek and especially tragic religion, that Oedipus might have avoided the realization of his fate. If Oedipus had not traveled to Delphi because he was restless and impulsive and then not solved the riddle of the Sphinx because he was highly intelligent, he would not have spent an uneventful life in Corinth, wondering (or not) about his parentage, but otherwise untroubled by the horrors and untainted by the pollution of parricide and incest.

Unlike his fate, the perpetration of the hero's crimes is intimately connected to his personality, mainly with his impulsiveness and intelligence.³³ The former led to his decision to abandon Corinth (794–797) and to his killing of the party he met at the crossroads (810–813), although not unprovoked (804–809). His unwarranted conviction that Teiresias and Creon conspire against him and his attack on them as well as his disparagement of Jocasta's pleas (1070, 1076–1085) indicate more clearly his inability to show restraint. It has been suggested that Oedipus' reaction to Teiresias' revelations is the only possible one under the circumstances, given

31 Kovacs 2009, 367. For the lack of emphasis on the conditionality of the oracle see Finglass 2018, 391–392.

32 Cf. Cairns 2013, 168 n. 91 and Allan 2013, 174–175.

33 The parricide and incestuous marriage took place long before the action of the play, which dramatizes Oedipus' (and Jocasta's) discovery of his identity and the reversal of his fortune. The perpetration of the crimes is outside the drama but not outside the plot, and thus not of lesser significance than what is presented onstage. Cf. n. 40 below.

Teiresias' apparent incompetence in dealing with past crises.³⁴ However, the intensity of Oedipus' reaction and his failure to take Teiresias' predictions into account are new developments, which cannot be traced back to Oedipus' view of the seer's mantic competence before the quarrel.

When the obscurity of Apollo's oracle leads Creon and the chorus to suggest that Teiresias should be consulted (284–289; cf. 555–556), and when the seer appears, Oedipus does not indicate that he harbors, or had ever harbored, any doubts about the competence of the seer. The accusations of mantic incompetence spring from the encounter with Teiresias. Oedipus is blinded by his passion, and he also seems to be prone to conspiracy theories. Even if he can only make sense of Teiresias' charges as products of a conspiracy, his first thought when he heard that robbers had killed Laius is indicative of this proclivity to conspiracy theories: he assumes that the robbers had been paid by Theban opponents of the king (124–125; cf. 960, his first question about the cause of Polybus' death). Oedipus is suspicious of seditious dissent as a king might be, but more likely as a foreign newcomer to the city, who rose to the highest office because of his intelligence. Although he is honored and treated with respect and affection by family and subjects, he seems to harbor some insecurity about his position and to repeatedly suspect the worst.³⁵

It is not unlikely for a man who had everything, lost it, and then regained it by means of his intelligence to feel that he is in danger of losing everything again, and that his only means of protection is his intelligence, which allows him to detect conspiracies and act quickly to neutralize them. As he claims (618–621), “when a conspirator stealthily moves with speed, I too must think quickly; but if I quietly wait for him, his designs will be accomplished, and mine will fail”. However, this quickness leads to slips and failure of judgement, as the chorus caution (616–617). Oedipus' intelligence famously enabled him to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, to marry the widowed Theban queen and not least to seek the oracle about the plague, which triggered his downfall. As already suggested, his return to Corinth from Delphi would not have prevented the realization of his fate, but his pointless decision to flee Corinth triggered it. The attempt to prevent the fulfillment of his fate was bound to fail, as oracles are bound to come true. This should be obvious to all people, and most of all to highly intelligent men such as Oedipus.³⁶

Similarly, in Euripides' *IT* the fate of Iphigeneia and her family is fixed, and nothing any member of the family might do or have done would have altered it. The plot shows clearly that the recognition and salvation of the long-suffering siblings,

³⁴ Liapis 2012, 87–88. For an overview of Oedipus' main moral and emotional characteristics in *OT* and *OC* see Woodruff 2018, 144–149.

³⁵ Cf. Reeve 2018, 60–61.

³⁶ For Oedipus' limitations cf. Lawrence 2013, 135 and Finglass 2018, 55.

Iphigeneia and Orestes, hinge on their assets, but their problems and limitations repeatedly endanger it, until the very end. Iphigeneia's intelligence and emotional maturity in *IT* are superb, as becomes obvious, among other things, from her wish to send the famous letter and her ability to procure it (582–596).³⁷ According to Aristotle, her wish to send the letter and the recognition that resulted from it are probable, i. e. they belong to a plot of the best kind (*Poet.* 16, 1455a16–19).³⁸ This wish and especially its realization are probable because Euripides presented Iphigeneia as a highly gifted person, resilient and resourceful. First, she persuaded the would-be scribe of the letter to prepare it and then the captive she would save to carry it to her brother in Argos. Nevertheless, she could obviously have sacrificed her brother if her fate had dictated that she would. As the fated recognition and salvation came about by means of her assets, the crime and disaster might have come about because of, or been mediated through, a blunder of hers: for instance, apart from her failure to realize the meaning or predictive nature of the dream she narrates in the prologue (44–66), her failure to reveal her identity to the strangers early on (541) and her concerns about Pylades' trustworthiness (728–737) delay the recognition, and the sacrifice of Orestes might have taken place before the announcement of the recipient of the letter. Her request for a Taurian escort of the purification party (1208), presumably unplanned, is unnecessary and causes complications, although ultimately not a disaster.³⁹ Such slips create suspense and generate the pity and fear of the audience.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle never mentions fate, and the gods virtually never (cf. *Poet.* 15, 1454b5–6, *Poet.* 25, 1460b35). This is not as surprising as might seem at first sight. The *Poetics* is not an exposition of the theology of tragedy or its transcendental underpinnings but focuses on the composition of the best kind of play according to specific criteria, mainly the construction of the complex plot according to probability and necessity. Since plays dramatize very specific, temporally restricted, events, all the rest often falls outside the plot. What is determined by fate, divine will and agency in myth and in the plots of extant tragedies, which dramatize

37 Since Iphigeneia had needed to persuade a male Greek captive, whom she would sacrifice, to write the letter for her, she was illiterate, and so were presumably the women of the chorus.

38 After outlining the plot of an Iphigeneia tragedy as an example of the proper first step in the construction of a tragic plot (*Poet.* 17, 1455b2–12), Aristotle also notes that the episodes such as Orestes' fit of madness and the salvation through the purification should be "appropriate" (1455b13–15; cf. 24, 1459b27–28), presumably to the construction of the plot and/or the presentation of the characters.

39 The major delay in the recognition is due to Orestes' prolonged and steadfast refusal to provide any information about himself (482–506). For the assets and limitations of the siblings see Kyriakou 2006, 10–11 and 31–33, and 383 (for Iphigeneia's request of the Taurian escorts); cf. Fendt 2007, 101 and Kearns 2023, 260.

stories drawn from myth, belongs to this category. Aristotle does not deny that the outcome of the stories dramatized in tragedy is fixed and he suggests that it should not be altered (*Poet.* 14, 1453b22–25). On the other hand, he is not concerned with the origin of this fixity but focuses on the construction of the best plots that dramatize the realization of the fixed outcome. To take the example of Sophocles' *OT* again, the outcome of the story of Oedipus' rise and fall cannot have been different, but Aristotle discusses the particular plot Sophocles constructed, which dramatizes the events of the all-important day on which the truth about his origin is revealed. Standard elements of the Labdacid myth such as Apollo's oracle to Laius and the fate announced in it are outside the drama, but they are not suppressed or denied.⁴⁰ Aristotle, though, focuses on the way they are fulfilled, mainly on Oedipus' actions and reactions. Any man with a fate similar to Oedipus' would suffer similar misfortunes, but the fulfillment of the fate of the Sophoclean Oedipus was mediated by his emotional and intellectual makeup. In this light, there is no possibility that the unfolding of his story would be different because Oedipus, being the man that Sophocles presented him to be, was bound to behave exactly as he does in the play, or in a very similar manner.

In the case of Euripides' *IT*, the last oracle of Apollo to Orestes, which dictated his trip to the land of the Taurians and the transport of the statue of the Taurian Artemis to Athens (85–92), did not declare unambiguously that Orestes would succeed, or reveal that his sister was alive and he would meet and take her back to Greece with him. At the end, though, Athena leaves little doubt that everything had been fated (1438–41b). The recognition of the siblings occurs, and the disaster of Orestes' sacrifice does not happen, but it is not shown to be averted “without the assistance of beneficent gods”.⁴¹ No tragic misfortunes can be averted without divine intervention or consent, certainly not disasters such as the storm that prevented the departure of the siblings from the land of the Taurians (1391–1419). Iphigeneia recognizes her brother and does not sacrifice him but not because she does or fails to do anything. Instead, the sacrifice does not happen and salvation ensues because fate and the gods had determined that the siblings would meet and recognize each other, that is, there was no possibility that Iphigeneia would sacrifice Orestes, or Pylades for that matter. The recognition and the departure of the Greeks from the land of the Taurians were bound to happen, but their realization is mediated through the determination, courage and brilliance of Iphigeneia, and to a smaller extent the virtues of other characters such as Orestes, Pylades and not least the chorus (1075–1077).

⁴⁰ Cf. n. 33 above. For elements outside the drama and Aristotle's failure to focus on the divine or supernatural element see Halliwell 1998, 230–233 and Roberts 1992.

⁴¹ Halliwell 1998, 236.

It is conceivable that the audience, or some members of it, would view the characters' slips and mistakes, actual or potential, as examples to avoid in their own decisions and actions. If so, tragic catharsis would have an educational dimension and benefit them morally.⁴² However, this is never stated or implied in Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is also quite unlikely that members of the audience who connected the dots of causality properly would reach the conclusion that the heroes could have avoided their downfall if they had been more careful, or that they themselves might be safer if they avoided the heroes' blunders. Even if one believes that nothing in life is fixed, and people are in full control of their fortunes, it is not an assumption that might easily be corroborated from watching tragic plays, especially as far as the tragic heroes are concerned.⁴³ In a similar vein, the importance of pity and fear in effecting catharsis by guiding the audience to transcend their gender or ethnic prejudices or to empathize with socially inferior characters⁴⁴ is not broached or alluded to in the *Poetics*, as the Aristotelian best plots do not even involve such characters. There is no doubt that the audience would empathize with undeserved misfortunes or come to reconsider some of their views, but Aristotle does not deal with such matters. Tragedies are works of art that cause pleasure as well-crafted representations of events, engaging the audience's ability to reason and gain better understanding of the choices of tragic agents and the pitiable and fearful events they are involved in.⁴⁵

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⁴² For this view see e. g. Nussbaum 1986, 388–390 and Janko 1992.

⁴³ Cf. Ford 2016, 39.

⁴⁴ See Nussbaum 1992, 282–283.

⁴⁵ I thank the editors of the journal and an anonymous reader for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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