
The Aristotelian Concept of the Tragic Hero

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THE ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPT OF THE TRAGIC HERO.

Because of a rather puzzling use of certain terms the concept of the tragic hero in the *Poetics* of Aristotle presents a problem. Three passages in particular cause difficulty. I shall first set forth the nature of the puzzle, next study the general Aristotelian use of the words in question, and then establish the meaning of the words in their context. Finally, after suggesting what I believe to be the correct interpretation of the proper hero for tragedy, I shall attempt to show that this interpretation accords with Aristotle's theory of tragedy as a whole.

It is necessary to review the passages which embody the concept we are seeking. First, brief references to it (1448a 1-5, 16-18, b 24-27) in the early part of the *Poetics* introduce us in a general way to Aristotle's thought on the matter. In these chapters Aristotle is defining tragedy by genus, species, and differentiae. It is, first of all, imitation. Within that genus it is of the species which imitates men in action by language and music in a direct way; in other words, it is drama. Finally, it is differentiated from comedy by the objects of the imitation, since it imitates good men, while the latter is concerned with men of the baser sort. So far there is no cause for misunderstanding, no trace of inconsistency, and no need for a more careful definition of terms.

We turn next to the beginning of chapter 13 (1452b 30-53 a 17), where Aristotle discusses the matter in detail:¹

We assume that, for the finest form of Tragedy, the Plot must be not simple but complex; and further, that it must imitate actions arousing pity and fear, since that is the distinctive function of this kind of imitation. It follows, therefore, that there are three forms of Plot to be avoided. (1) A good man (τοὺς ἐπιεικέας ἄνδρας) must not be seen passing from happiness to misery, or (2) a bad man (τοὺς μοχθηρούς) from misery to happiness. The first situation is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us. The

¹ The translation is that of Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (Oxford, 1909). All the translations quoted herein from other works of Aristotle are from *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, ed. W. D. Ross (11 vols., Oxford, 1910-1931).

second is the most untragic that can be; it has no one of the requisites of Tragedy; it does not appeal either to the human feeling in us, or to our pity, or to our fears. Nor on the other hand should (3) an extremely bad man be seen falling from happiness into misery. Such a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortunes, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that there will be nothing either piteous or fear-inspiring in the situation. There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just (*ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ*), whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e. g. Oedipus, Thyestes, and the men of similar families. The perfect Plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the hero's fortunes must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error on his part; the man himself being either such as we have described, or better, not worse, than that.

Now the crux in this passage is the meaning of "good" in the phrase "a good man." What does Aristotle mean by a "good" man? Are we to understand the adjective in an ethical sense, as being approximately equivalent to "virtuous," or in a purely social or aesthetic sense? Both interpretations have been upheld by reputable scholars. I shall return to this point presently, but first I want to introduce two more passages, both from chapter 15.

In the former, at the opening of the chapter (1454a 16-20), Aristotle writes:

In the Characters there are four points to aim at. First and foremost, that they shall be good (*χρηστά*). There will be an element of character in the play, if (as has been observed) what a personage says or does reveals a certain moral purpose (*προαίρεσίν τινα*); and a good element of character, if the purpose so revealed is good.

The remaining passage is found near the end of the chapter (1454b 8-15):

As Tragedy is an imitation of personages better than the ordinary man, we in our way should follow the example of

good portrait-painters, who reproduce the distinctive features of a man, and at the same time, without losing the likeness, make him handsomer than he is. The poet in like manner, in portraying men quick or slow to anger, or with similar infirmities of character, must know how to represent them as such, and at the same time as good (*ἐπιεικείς*) men, as Agathon and Homer have represented Achilles.

The pertinent sections of the *Poetics* are now all before us. I should like to turn back now to chapter 13 and examine the difficulties it presents and the interpretations of three of the principal editors of this century, Bywater, Gudeman,² and Rostagni.³ Aristotle makes it quite clear that the plot must not show a bad man under any circumstances, no matter what the course of his fortunes. He also says that a good man must not be represented passing from happiness to misery, since this is odious. What, then, is the tragic hero to be? There remains "the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just." The words here used to define the proper hero, "not pre-eminently virtuous and just," seem to fix the meaning of good in the negative part of the passage, where we are told that "a good man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery." Aristotle must mean that a virtuous man must not be seen under these circumstances, but rather, one "not pre-eminently virtuous and just." So far the positive and negative parts of the exposition fit together and there is no inconsistency. "Good" (*ἐπιεικής*) is to be understood in an ethical sense. But a difficulty seems to arise when we examine the words which close the same passage, "The man himself [i. e. in the perfect Plot] being either such as we have described, or better, not worse, than that." This in itself is not serious, however, for we may suppose that Aristotle simply wanted to relax somewhat the rigor of his earlier statement in order to allow for deviations which he knew actually to exist among the Greek tragedies with which he was familiar. A more serious difficulty, on the other hand, presents itself when we compare the statements in chapter 13, which we have just reviewed, with those in chapter 15, where we are informed that the characters must be good. This appears to be an outright contradiction of chapter 13. Perhaps the word

² *Aristoteles Περὶ Ποιητικῆς* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1934).

³ *Aristotele Poetica* (2nd ed., revised, Turin, 1945).

"good" here (in chapter 15) must be taken in some other than the ethical sense; for example, noble, or prosperous. In this case we might reproach our translator for choosing an ambiguous or misleading English word, especially when we observe that the Greek word translated as "good" in this passage is *χρηστός*, whereas in the other it was *ἐπαικής*. This might resolve the dilemma, if it were not for the fact that in the remaining passage from chapter 15, in which we read that the poet must know how to represent his heroes as good men, as Homer had Achilles, the Greek word which Bywater translates as "good" is *ἐπαικής* again, rather than *χρηστός*.

It is opportune here to inquire what the commentators have to say of these difficulties. Bywater believes that the Greek words *ἐπαικής* and *χρηστός* may be and here are used synonymously.⁴ He thereby defends his translation and leaves us facing the inconsistency between chapters 13 and 15. This he discusses in a note on *ἐπαικής*, where it is first used in chapter 13,⁵ in which he writes:

The sense we are to attach to the term in this passage is shown by the equivalent that replaces it in 13, 1453a 8, *ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη*. . . . It is difficult to reconcile his present view with what he tells us elsewhere of the tragic hero (see on 13, 1453a 16), or his present use of the term *ἐπαικής* with that in 15, 1454b 13. . . . All this may show perhaps that strict consistency of language is not always to be expected even in Aristotle.

Bywater, then, leaves us with the rather frigid comfort that inconsistency there is and we must expect no better.

Gudeman in his note on the same passage⁶ adopts a different interpretation, according to which *ἐπαικής* has no ethical significance, but means eminent, great, or noble. Like Bywater, he draws his interpretation from another phrase later in the same passage, but from one other than Bywater's. To him the significant words are "of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity." He also takes the phrase "through vice and depravity" as parallel and in contrast with "pre-

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 226. Cf. p. 213.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-14.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 237-8.

eminently virtuous and just" and would have us translate "a man not pre-eminent for virtue and justice or through vice and depravity." I think that this is an impossible rendering of the Greek; but, be that as it may, Gudeman is firm in his opposition to those who would understand the "good man" of this passage as one "integer vitae scelerisque purus." In his note on *χρηστός* in chapter 15⁷ he, like Bywater, regards it as synonymous with *ἐπιεικής*, and this leads him, in agreement with his view on chapter 13, to maintain that "good" in chapter 15 cannot be ethical in connotation, but means, here as earlier, eminent, great, or noble. Rostagni produces still a third interpretation,⁸ for he believes that in chapter 13 "good" (*ἐπιεικής*) is wholly moral or ethical in significance, while in chapter 15 "good" (*χρηστός*) has no ethical connotation but refers simply to persons superior to the normal. Now, on the face of it, do these more recent interpretations improve upon Bywater's? Gudeman's, by accepting the identity of the meaning of "good" in the two chapters and rejecting the ethical connotation in both, removes the inconsistency between the chapters, to be sure, but reduces chapter 13 in itself to absurdity. He would make Aristotle say, in effect: "An eminent man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery . . . but the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminent for virtue and justice or for vice and depravity, . . . one of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity." Rostagni, on the other hand, allows chapter 13 to stand on its own merits, with "good" taken in the ethical sense, and, by refusing to understand *χρηστός* in chapter 15 as synonymous with *ἐπιεικής*, eliminates the inconsistency between the two chapters. This is an attractive solution as far as it goes, but it leaves the latter part of chapter 15 out of harmony with the first part.

Obviously, we must look into the problem more carefully. First, can *χρηστός* be used as a synonym for *ἐπιεικής*? We must answer this in the affirmative, for Vahlen in 1866 conclusively demonstrated⁹ that it can. It is altogether legitimate, then, to believe that it is possible to take it as synonymous with *ἐπιεικής*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-1.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 69, 82.

⁹ "Beiträge zu Aristoteles Poetik," II, in *Wien. Sitzungsab.*, LII, pp. 163-4.

in the passage in chapter 15 under consideration. But the words are not universally equivalent, so that it is not necessary to hold that, since *χρηστός* can and often does have the meaning of *ἐπιεικής*, it must have that meaning in this particular instance. At best we can say that it may have it. But before we proceed further in this direction, we must turn to *ἐπιεικής*, in order to try to determine its significance.

Since Bywater and Rostagni understand *ἐπιεικής* in the ethical sense, as meaning "good," i. e., "virtuous" or "just," while Gudeman stoutly denies it this meaning, we must endeavor to learn which sense is more probably correct here. I shall, accordingly, examine the use of the word in the whole body of Aristotle's works, with a view to establishing, if possible, the predominant significance of the term in his writings. In Book V, chapter 10, of the *Nicomachean Ethics* *ἐπιεικής* is treated fully and formally. It is there equivalent to "equitable" and is one of the moral virtues, clearly an ethical usage. Aristotle says in part (1137a 31-1138a 3):

Our next subject is equity and the equitable, and their respective relations to justice and the just. . . . The same thing, then, is just and equitable, and while both are good the equitable is superior. What creates the problem is that the equitable is just, but not the legally just but a correction of legal justice. . . . And this is the nature of the equitable, a correction of law where it is defective owing to its universality. . . . It is evident also from this who the equitable man is: the man who chooses and does such acts, and is no stickler for his rights in a bad sense but tends to take less than his share though he has the law on his side, is equitable and this state of character is equity, which is a sort of justice and not a different state of character.

In this same passage Aristotle remarks in passing (1137b 1) that "we apply the name (*ἐπιεικής*) by way of praise even to instances of the other virtues, instead of 'good' (*ἀντὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ*)." There is a similar discussion of equity in the *Rhetoric*, Book I, chapter 13 (1374a 18-28):

We say that there are two kinds of right and wrong conduct towards others, one provided for by written ordinances, the other by unwritten. . . . The . . . [unwritten] kind has itself two varieties. First, there is conduct that springs from exceptional goodness or badness (*τὰ μὲν καθ' ὑπερβολήν*

ἀρετῆς καὶ κακίας), and is visited with censure and loss of honor, or with praise and increase of honor and decorations: . . . The second kind makes up for the defects of a community's written code of law. This is what we call equity. . . .

Here again, ἐπιεικὴς is clearly a term with pronounced ethical connotation; observe also that it is used in contrast with "exceptional goodness." The passage concludes with the following account (1374b 10-22):

Equity bids us be merciful to the weakness of human nature; to think less about the laws than about the man who framed them, and less about what he said than about what he meant; not to consider the actions of the accused so much as his intentions, nor this or that detail so much as the whole story; to ask not what a man is now but what he has always or usually been. It bids us remember benefits rather than injuries, and benefits received rather than benefits conferred; to be patient when we are wronged; to settle a dispute by negotiation and not by force; to prefer arbitration to litigation—for an arbitrator goes by the equity of a case, a judge by the strict law, and arbitration was invented with the express purpose of securing full power for equity.

Another passage in Book II of the *Rhetoric* (chapter 1) throws further light on Aristotle's use of ἐπιεικὴς (1378a 7-18):

There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator's own character—the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense, good moral character (ἀρετή), and goodwill. False statements and bad advice are due to one or more of the following three causes. Men either form a false opinion through want of good sense; or they form a true opinion, but because of their moral badness do not say what they really think; or finally, they are both sensible and upright (ἐπιεικεῖς), but not well disposed to their hearers, and may fail, in consequence, to recommend what they know to be the best course. These are the only possible cases. It follows that anyone who is thought to have all three of these good qualities will inspire trust in his audience. The way to make ourselves thought to be sensible and morally good (σπουδαῖοι) must be gathered from the analysis of goodness already given. . . .

Here we have left the strict definition of ἐπιεικὴς as equitable and find it clearly used in the sense of morally excellent, for it is the

adjective used to describe the man who possesses ἀρετή and serves as a synonym for σπουδαῖος, an indubitably ethical term. There are some passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* which show a similar sense of our word. In Book III, chapter 5 (1113b 11-14), we read "Now if it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise in our power not to do them, and this was what being good or bad meant, then it is in our power to be virtuous (ἐπιεικέσι) or vicious (φάυλοις)." In chapter 6 (1115a 12-14) appears the following: ". . . to fear some things is even right and noble, and it is base (αἰσχρόν) not to fear them—e. g. disgrace; he who fears this is good (ἐπιεικής) and modest (αἰδήμων), and he who does not is shameless (ἀναίσχυντος)." Book 4, chapter 7, yields the following instance (1127a 33-b3): "We are not speaking of the man who keeps faith in his agreements, i. e. in the things that pertain to justice and injustice (for this would belong to another virtue), but the man who in matters in which nothing of this sort is at stake is true both in word and in life because his character is such. But such a man would seem to be as a matter of fact equitable (ἐπιεικής)." Finally, in Book VII, chapter 10, we read of the incontinent man who is yet not wicked, for, says Aristotle (1152a 17), "his purpose is good." Two passages in the *Politics* are worthy of our attention. The first is from Book II, chapter 11 (1273b 3-5): ". . . it is absurd to suppose that a poor and honest (ἐπιεικής) man will be wanting to make gains, and that a lower stamp of man (φauλότερος) who has incurred a great expense will not." Here we have our term used not only in an obviously moral sense but also of a man who can in no respect be called eminent or noble. The second is from Book IV, chapter 8 (1322a 20-24): "It is well to separate off the jailorship also, and try by some device to render the office less unpopular. For it is quite as necessary as that of the executioners; but good men (ἐπιεικεῖς) do all they can to avoid it, and worthless (μοχθηροῦς) persons cannot be safely trusted with it."

We have now seen a sufficient number of examples to enable us to form a sound opinion about Aristotle's use of the adjective ἐπιεικής. It varies within a rather narrow range from the technical and highly specialized sense of equitable to the more general sense of honest or good, and in all these instances it has had a clear ethical significance. Not once, on the other hand, does it

mean eminent, great, or noble. Out of about seventy-five occurrences of the word listed in Bonitz's *Index Aristotelicus* (Berlin, 1870, p. 271b), I have found upon examination that in sixty-eight cases the word is used with an ethical connotation, while in four instances the ethical interpretation is doubtful or improbable, and in only three is it manifestly impossible. This establishes, I submit, a very strong presumption in favor of the ethical significance of *ἐπαικὴς* in any given instance; so strong, indeed, that where the context not only does not render the ethical interpretation impossible but even suggests and supports it, we must accept it. Such is the context which we have in chapter 13 of the *Poetics*. We must conclude, therefore, that in the phrase "good man" in that chapter, "good" is to be taken in the ethical or moral sense to mean virtuous, honest, or upright. We thus reject Gudeman's view in this chapter and adhere to that of Bywater and Rostagni.

Now that we have established the significance of *ἐπαικὴς* in chapter 13, we are ready to turn again to *χρηστός* in 15. We have seen that it is possible for us, with Bywater and Gudeman, to regard the two words as equivalent, but the possibility is not a necessity and does not therefore of itself eliminate the chance that Rostagni may be right in denying the coincidence here of the meanings of the two words. We must, accordingly, examine the context in chapter 15 for evidence on which to base an interpretation of that chapter.

The adjective *χρηστός* is here applied to character, which is a technical term in the *Poetics*. "Character," writes Aristotle, "is what makes us ascribe certain moral qualities to agents" (1450a 5-6). And again, "Character in a play is that which reveals the moral purpose (*προαίρεσις*) of the agents, i. e. the sort of thing they seek or avoid, where that is not obvious—hence there is no room for character in a speech in a purely indifferent subject" (1450b 8-10). Moreover, we are told that "there will be an element of character in the play, if . . . what a personage says or does reveals a certain moral purpose; and a good element of character, if the purpose so revealed is good."

If any doubt remain concerning the ethical quality pervading this whole passage, an examination of the meaning of *προαίρεσις*, which Bywater translates moral purpose, should resolve it. It

receives its most elaborate treatment in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, beginning with the second chapter.

Both the voluntary and the involuntary having been delimited, we must next discuss choice; for it is thought to be most closely bound up with virtue and to discriminate characters better than actions do. Choice, then, seems to be voluntary, but not the same thing as the voluntary; the latter extends more widely (1111b 4-8). . . . Choice involves a rational principle and thought. Even the name seems to suggest that it is what is chosen before other things (1112a 15-17). . . . We deliberate about things that are in our power and can be done (1112a 30-31). . . . We deliberate not about ends but about means (1112b 12). . . . The object of choice being one of the things in our own power which is desired after deliberation, choice will be deliberate desire of things in our own power; for when we have decided as a result of deliberation, we desire in accordance with our deliberation (1113a 9-12).

Having thus established the definition of *προαίρεσις*, i. e. choice or moral purpose, Aristotle goes on that virtue and vice are within our power (1113b 2-14), and he winds up the whole discussion with this summary (1114b 26-1115a 3):

With regard to the virtues in *general* we have stated their genus in outline, viz. that they are means and that they are states of character, and that they tend, and by their own nature, to the doing of the acts by which they are produced, and that they are in our power and voluntary, and act as the right rule prescribes. But actions and states of character are not voluntary in the same way; for we are masters of our actions from the beginning right to the end, if we know the particular facts, but though we control the beginning of our states of character the gradual progress is not obvious, any more than it is in illness; because it was in our power, however, to act in this way or not in this way, therefore the states are voluntary.

This essential concept of *προαίρεσις* or choice as deliberate desire of things in our own power is found throughout Aristotle's use of the term. Consider, for example, what he says in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, chapter 2 (1139a 31-35): "The origin of action—its efficient, not its final cause—is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or

without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character." In the *Physics*, Book II, chapter 5 (197a 5-7), we find essentially the same notion: "It is clear that chance is an incidental cause in the sphere of those actions for the sake of something which involve purpose (*προαίρεσις*). Intelligent reflection, then, and chance are in the same sphere, for purpose implies intelligent reflection." Compare *Rhetoric*, Book I, chapter 13 (1374a 11-13): "It is deliberate purpose that constitutes wickedness and criminal guilt, and such names as 'outrage' or 'theft' imply deliberate purpose (*προαίρεσις*) as well as the mere action." Again in the *Metaphysics*, Book Δ, chapter 1 (1013a 20-22), we find *προαίρεσις* or "will" as a first cause or beginning: "Hence the nature of a thing is a beginning, and so is the element of a thing, and thought and will, and essence, and the final cause. . . ." In chapter 5 of the same book the meaning is implied by what impedes it (1015a 27): "We call necessary . . . the compulsory and compulsion, i. e. that which impedes and tends to hinder, contrary to the impulse and purpose." The term *προαίρεσις* occurs frequently elsewhere in the works of Aristotle, but I think that a sufficient number of examples has now been presented to demonstrate the way in which he uses it and the fact that it invariably occurs with an ethical significance.

We can now turn back to *χρηστός* in chapter 15 of the *Poetics* and determine which interpretation is the correct one for that passage. In view of the fact that it is there used in immediate conjunction with character and moral purpose, both words of an essentially ethical orientation, the conclusion would seem to be inescapable that in such a context *χρηστός* or "good" must be used in the sense of "upright" or "virtuous."

At this point let us summarize what we have found out about the interpretations of chapters 13 and 15. In the phrase "a good man passing from happiness to misery" we know that we must understand a "virtuous" man, that is, a morally blameless man. In this we agree with Bywater and Rostagni, but disagree with Gudeman. As for the expression "the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just," granting due force to the word pre-eminent, we must understand this as a moral specification. "The intermediate kind of personage" is virtuous; not pre-eminently so, to be sure, but never-

theless to some degree good. With the bad man barred, men of two grades of virtue are left, the acceptable hero, whom, to avoid confusion, Aristotle does not here call *ἐπιεικής*, and the good man of the earlier expression, who must be understood by contrast as *ἀρετῇ διαφέρων*. This interpretation is supported also by the closing summary of this section, in which Aristotle seems to wish to correct any misunderstanding of the quality of the intermediate kind of personage by inserting the words *or better*: "The man himself being either such as we have described *or better*, not worse, than that." Finally, I should like to invite attention to another phrase which may also be regarded as describing the tragic hero. Fear, we are told, is occasioned by the misfortune of one like ourselves. Therefore, if the drama is to invoke fear in us, it must place before us the misfortunes of a man like ourselves. But remember that the *ourselves* here includes Aristotle himself, his colleagues and pupils, and the main body of the literate public of Athens. Is it likely that Aristotle would deny all virtue of such a group?

Chapter 15 need give us no further difficulty. We are to take "good" in both the passages as meaning "morally good" and the two are seen to be consistent with each other and with our suggested explanation of chapter 13. We may conclude our study of this section by noting that our interpretation here agrees with Bywater's and is opposed to Gudeman's and Rostagni's.

It is pertinent next to inquire what can have led Gudeman astray in both instances. I think that we can answer this by noting the direction of the error and the basic view of the *Poetics* held by that scholar. In both chapters Gudeman adopts what he calls a purely aesthetic attitude and opposes the ethical point of view which our interpretation would seem to impute to the author. For the cardinal principle of Gudeman's criticism of the *Poetics* is that the work is the expression not of an ethical or moral but of an aesthetic and hedonistic theory of tragedy, in contradistinction to the ethical character of Plato's dramatic criticism. His initial conception of the nature of Aristotelian literary criticism has led him to reject the appearance of an ethical element on every possible occasion and in every possible detail. His general view he expounds in his introduction (pp. 27-8), and his attitude in detail he makes clear, among other

places, in his commentary where he attacks Vahlen for attributing to *χρηστός* in chapter 15 the ethical significance of *σπουδαῖος* (p. 271). Now I think Gudeman is right in the broader sense, in maintaining that the *Poetics* represents a basically aesthetic criticism of tragedy, but I cannot agree with him in imposing this opinion in detail upon the entire treatise, for here, in the matter of the proper tragic hero, for instance, and in the discussion of the best kind of plot, I believe that Aristotle makes an essentially moral analysis.

A review of the structure of the *Poetics* as a whole will reveal how Aristotle's treatment of the elements of plot and character is related to his fundamental concept of tragedy and how the evidently moral basis of this treatment fits into the essentially aesthetic plan of the larger structure.

Tragedy is, to begin with, a form of *μίμησις*. This may at first seem neither strange nor of much moment, since Greek authors had referred to drama and other works of art as imitation rather frequently and in Plato's criticism of poetry the term imitation looms large. But Aristotle means by *μίμησις* something wholly different from what any of his predecessors had meant by it and his view of tragedy as *μίμησις* is of primary significance for his entire criticism. In the first chapter of the *Poetics* several examples of *μίμησις* are given: epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and the playing of the flute and lyre (1447a 13-28); another form of imitation having no name of its own is the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus; all the Socratic dialogues, which are *μιμήσεις* and so poetry because of their content, although they are not written in meter; while the works of Empedocles, on the other hand, though composed in meter, are not imitations and therefore may not properly be called poetry (1447a 28-b 32). Rather, these are physical treatises. From this we may infer that the essence of poetry is not its metrical form but the fact of its being an imitation, and that the end or purpose of imitation is not to teach but to produce an activity that will find its fulfillment in pleasure. Furthermore, the proper object of imitation is men in action (1448a 1-9) and, finally, it is the duty of the poet to represent not what actually happened on any particular occasion, but what could happen in accordance with probability or necessity (1451a 36-b 11). In short, Aristotle's concept of *μίμησις* is dynamic and *μίμησις* is concerned with

universals. From this the difference between the meanings of imitation in Plato and Aristotle should be evident: for in the former it is the rigid and literal imitation or reproduction of particulars, not of reality but of appearances (*Republic* X, 598b); it is mere play and not to be taken seriously (*ibid.* 602b); it makes men worse rather than better (*ibid.* 604e, 606c, d); and it is not to be judged by the criterion of pleasure (*Laws* 667e).

What kind of imitation, then, is tragedy? Aristotle defines it in the sixth chapter of the *Poetics* (1449b 24-28) as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." The end or purpose of tragedy, accordingly, is the catharsis of pity and fear and similar emotions. Now catharsis is accompanied by pleasure and the catharsis of pity and fear by the tragic pleasure. "Not every kind of pleasure," says Aristotle, "should be required of a tragedy, but its own proper pleasure" (1443b 11). Elsewhere, too (*Politics*, Book VIII, chapter 7), in speaking of melodies which appeal to the emotions, he says that those who are susceptible to emotion are, under the influence of such melodies, as if possessed, but afterward they are restored, having experienced catharsis. "Those who are influenced by pity and fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted" (1341b 32-1342a 16). The end of tragedy, then, being a catharsis which is accompanied by pleasure, it is obvious that Aristotle's essential principle of criticism is aesthetic.

This requirement that tragedy produce its catharsis of pity and fear governs the entire analysis of tragedy. The fact that tragedy is a *μίμησις* of a certain kind determines the object of the imitation, men in action. But the sort of men who are to be imitated and the kind of action in which they must be shown depend on the central and dominant fact that the imitation must bring about its catharsis of pity and fear and thus afford the spectators the concomitant pleasure. That tragedy must

direct its attention to pity and fear is owing to the fact that it is with these that the tragic catharsis is concerned.

Now since the catharsis of pity and fear is effected by arousing those emotions in the spectators, the whole practical effort of the tragic poet must be directed toward creating situations which will arouse them. Pity and fear thus come to be the end of tragedy in the practical sphere and the evocation of these emotions guides the considerations of those whose task it is to write tragedy. In order to show how this may be done, Aristotle has analyzed tragedy into its six elements of plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle—one of the most characteristically Aristotelian achievements of the treatise—and the discussion of each in order is aimed at improving the poet's ability to shape his material to the desired end. Effects other than pity and fear are extraneous to tragedy and may even prove detrimental to it.

Pity and fear are affections of the soul. Fear is occasioned by the misfortunes of one like ourselves and pity by undeserved misfortune.¹⁰ Hence it must be clear that they are both essentially moral in nature; for a man like ourselves or a little better is, as we have discovered, moderately virtuous, and the judgment whether suffering is deserved or not is a moral judgment. It may be objected, in the case of fear, that since this is also defined in Aristotle as the expectation of evil,¹¹ one might experience it on behalf of an exceptionally saintly man or even on behalf of a scoundrel, provided the circumstances of his outward fortune resembled ours. This, however, would seem to be ruled out, first, by what Aristotle specifically says in chapter 13 of the *Poetics*, since we have concluded that we must accept a moral or ethical interpretation for that whole passage, and second, by the consideration that any effect other than the proper tragic pity and fear may prove detrimental to these (*Poetics* 1453b 1-12). For the spectacle of an extremely good man suffering or about to suffer harm or the contemplation of a wicked man under any circumstances will probably prove so violently revolting to the ordinary decent spectator as to destroy utterly any tragic effect.

This notion of the revolting or odious (*τὸ μαιόν*) removes all

¹⁰ *Poetics*, 1453a 5-6.

¹¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a 9, *Rhetoric*, 1382a 21, b 28-1383a 12.

possible doubt about the ethical quality of pity and fear (*ibid.* 1452b 36, 1453b 39, 1454a 3). The odious must be avoided by all means, for it is deadly to the proper tragic effect. And the odious is whatever is repugnant to our moral feelings; it is what prevents our experiencing pity for the sufferings of a wicked person; it is the result of any act which cannot be morally excused. The possibility of introducing the odious causes Aristotle to reject various possible types of plot as unsuitable. Indeed, at one point in the *Poetics* (1453b 15 ff.) he rejects a type of plot of which he had earlier (1453a 12 ff.) approved. I. M. Glanville, in an admirable discussion of this problem¹² has shown that this apparent inconsistency is owing to a change in Aristotle's moral and psychological theory, chiefly a narrowing of the definition of involuntary and compulsory action, which left a greater number of situations open to the charge of being odious, i. e., morally reprehensible. Aristotle never loses sight of the fact that man is a morally responsible being, in whose power is the choice between good and evil, a being who has the ability to distinguish virtue from vice and to achieve the one or surrender to the other.

Since man is by nature moral and since pity and fear depend upon certain moral conditions to evoke them, it is now clear why the type of the tragic hero must be defined in moral terms. It could hardly be otherwise. The hero, the course of the plot, the character, the convolutions of discovery and reversal, and all the machinery of the practical creation of the tragic effect must be adjusted to the moral nature of man and the moral origin of the tragic emotions.

But on the higher plane, the final cause of the whole moral effect, the cause without which it would be meaningless and would, indeed, not even exist, is the catharsis of pity and fear, an activity of the soul which finds its completion in pleasure. In this way the moral basis of the plot and characters is firmly fixed in the whole aesthetic structure of Aristotelian criticism of tragedy. And the bond of their unity is Aristotle's definition of pleasure as the completion of an activity. "For, while there is pleasure in respect of any sense," he says (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1174b 20-1175a 1), "and in respect of thought and contemplation no less, the most complete is pleasantest, Pleasure com-

¹² "Tragic Error," *C. Q.*, XLIII (1939), pp. 47-56.

pletes the activity not as the corresponding permanent state does, by its immanence, but as an end which supervenes as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age." Catharsis is the activity of that part of the soul of which pity and fear are the affections and the tragic pleasure is the completion of that activity. Once impel the soul into activity by the contemplation of scenes arousing pity and fear, and the tragic pleasure will supervene as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age.

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