

Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy

Lecture II | Action and Plot

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The National Law School of India University, Bengaluru hosted an online lecture series on select texts from Greek tragedy by Amlan Das Gupta, retired Professor of English at Jadavpur University and noted scholar of classical studies and English renaissance literature. The series, titled 'Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy', discussed Sophocles' Antigone, Aristotle's Poetics, and Euripides' Medea. The four-part series was transcribed and edited for The NLS Blog. Below is the second lecture in the series, which considers Aristotle's Poetics.

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Aristotle was born in Stagira (now Stavros) in 384 BCE. At the age of seventeen, Aristotle entered the school of Plato in Athens where he remained until Plato's death in 348 or 347 BCE. In 343 or 342 BCE he was appointed house tutor to the son of Philip II of Macedonia, none other than the great Alexander. He remained in this position for a couple of years, leaving it when Alexander became regent. Aristotle's school—the Lyceum—was undoubtedly one of the greatest institutions of the classical world. The building included a covered court (*peripatos*) from which the school and its teachings derived the label 'peripatetic'. Aristotle built a library and museum, instituted a system of common meals and a monthly symposium, and directed a phenomenal programme of research, assisted, amongst others, by his students Theophrastus and Aristoxenus. All the known branches of learning were covered in the Lyceum, and Aristotle is known to have written about most of them. A substantial number of Aristotle's works have survived and have formed the basis of a very large and varied body of learning through the centuries.¹ These are, however, a relatively small fragment of what Aristotle actually wrote. Early in his career he wrote a number of works in dialogic form, probably in the style of his master Plato. None of these have

¹ The earliest surviving manuscript of Aristotle's *Poetics* dates from the tenth or eleventh century. Its influence in the western world appears to have been negligible till the fifteenth century, whatever knowledge of the text existed seems to have been based on a summary made by the great Arabic scholar Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and translated into Latin by Hermanus Alemannus towards the end of the Middle Ages. The survival of Greek philosophical and scientific literature was greatly facilitated by Arab scholars like Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd (Averroes).

survived; neither have any of the collections of material and notes that he amassed for the purpose of research. Some believe that the surviving works are 'acroamatic' or 'esoteric', that is to say the substance of lecture courses for students of the school (as opposed to 'exoteric' or published works). Others point to the full and detailed nature of some of the surviving works, and feel that they may have been written for the use of students.

The *Poetics*, Aristotle's sole surviving work on the craft and content of imaginative literature, forms a relatively minor part of his surviving corpus. The work is short, even fragmentary; its readings are uncertain and contested; it can hardly be considered to be one of the principal parts of Aristotle's philosophical system. Nevertheless, most would consider the *Poetics* to be the most significant study of the literary art in the Western canon. It is our misfortune that Aristotle's other writings on poetry (for instance, *Homeric Questions*, *On the Poets*) have not survived, though some idea of their content can be formed from secondary sources. It is also thought by some that the *Poetics* in its present state is incomplete, and that what we now can read forms the first part (or most of the first part) of the text as it was conceived.

It is important for me to emphasise that I find in the *Poetics* a profound consideration of ethical problems. In fact, it could hardly be otherwise, given that tragedy, which is the principal subject of the *Poetics*, represents the human condition *in extremis*.

Aristotle wrote at a time when the great period of Athenian drama had ended. There is some evidence that the plays of the great masters continued to be acted, but Aristotle evidently read them as literary texts; though again, exact knowledge about the manuscript circulation of plays is difficult to determine. But it is clear that both Aristotle and his audience were part of a larger literate community closely familiar with the great dramatic achievements of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Tragedy, Aristotle claims, is the imitation of an action. The term action is again something that requires the utmost care in elucidation. The end and purpose of life, he writes in the *Poetics*, is a kind of action: doing something, not being a certain kind of person. Happiness in life comes from action: the Greek word for happiness or the good life used here is *eudaimonia*, the central concern in Greek ethical thought. It might be said that, for Aristotle, the judgement of whether human beings are happy or

unhappy, successful or unsuccessful, good or bad depends on how we assess their actions. There is no judgement of character without reference to action. When people act well, we call them good; when they are successful in attaining their ends, we call them happy. It is this world of action to which tragedy, like other forms of literature, lays claim.

In chapter six of *Poetics*, Aristotle clarifies that tragedy imitates actions. These actions are performed by human beings, in accordance with their moral or ethical predispositions, and therefore tragedy imitates character. These characters express certain general truths or maxims, and consequently tragedy imitates thought as well. This gives us a triple formula of imitation: tragedy imitates action (*praxis*), character (*ethos*), and thought (*dianoia*). It is the analysis of action that principally engages Aristotle's attention.

Aristotle uses the term action both in a restricted and an extensive way. Human beings are continually engaged in actions, but tragedy represents these actions as a continuous and distinctive sequence: this is the singular, unique action of tragedy. Aristotle describes the 'action' of tragedy as 'the ordering of (particular) actions' (*sunthesis ton pragmaton*). We may take a cue from the eighth chapter to try and explain what Aristotle is saying here. Human beings, we might say, are engaged in a host of different actions at the same time. Somebody might be drinking tea and watching a TV programme and thinking about going to watch a film at the same time. These three activities may be thought to be part of three temporal sequences: one involving boiling the water, brewing the tea, pouring it into a cup, throwing away the tea leaves, and so on. The second might involve turning the TV on, adjusting the remote until the right channel is got, getting tired of it and finding a new channel, feeling satisfied and sitting down to watch in peace. All this time the person in question might be mulling over the possibility of leaving the house and going to watch a film, the possibility that she might not get a ticket, that it seems like it might rain, that the film itself might not be very interesting.

From Aristotle's point of view, each of the three sequences that we have described is an action, each an arrangement of particular 'acts', both physical and mental. Writing about the same person, he says, does not ensure that the action is single and unique.

Tragedy therefore fashions a single action out of the multitude of acts that individuals may perform and represents that as the plot (*muthos*) of the play. For Aristotle, it must be understood, representing or imitating the action is not a passive observation of something that exists as a natural or biographical fact. Plot-making is a kind of activity, something that justifies the term 'poet' or 'maker'. As bedmakers make beds, poets make plots. In a magnificently perceptive passage (chapter nine [5.5]), he says that the fact that the actions represented may have actually taken place, does not make the tragic poet any less a maker. For Aristotle, this makes poetry and history fundamentally different kinds of activities. The historian is always tied to the recording of particular facts, whereas the poet invests the plot with a kind of generality, telling us what an individual would have done in a particular set of circumstances. The fact that proper names such as Oedipus and Thyestes are used, and that the material is often taken from traditional stories does not, in any way, detract from the generality of the plot.

What Aristotle says, with remarkable concision here, requires a few words of explanation on our part. First, we know that tragic poets almost always took their material from the mythic cycles and heroic legends that were a basic part of Greek culture. The Greeks did not differentiate between myth and history: the story of Oedipus was as 'historical' as, say, that of Julius Caesar. Anybody who has read collections of Greek myth will know that, in most cases, many exploits were credited to the heroes. In addition, there also seems to have been many versions of myths. Our own knowledge of them is fragmentary, being limited only to textual records. Even if we account for a thriving culture of oral myth-telling, we need to keep in mind that mythic material was present to the Greek writer as a body of facts and deeds, not as a set of coherent and distinct tales. The tragic poet, as Aristotle sees him, takes material from myth and fashions it into a sequence of actions that are distinguished by internal connections.

Oedipus, the wise king of Thebes, listens to the plea of his countrymen and resolves to find the cause of the plague in the country. The sequence of the two actions—listening to the plea and deciding to do something about it—manifests the essential characteristics of plot-making. They are related in probable and necessary sequence:

some kind of action is necessitated by the plea, and given the kind of person that Oedipus is, it is probable that he will not be unsympathetic or apathetic, but will try to do something about it. The sequence would also make sense even if the name Oedipus was not used, and we were to use an imaginary name or an algebraic symbol instead. The value of tragic imitation, thus, lies in the poet fashioning out of the native anarchy of historical fact, a form that is coherent, consistent, and aesthetically pleasing. In other words, the poet's fashioning of an ideal form. Thus, it makes no real difference whether plots are based on traditional material or invented by the poet (as we find in the plots of classical comedy). The value of the plot lies in its ability to present a sequence that is justified by its unbroken chain of probable and necessary connections. It is because the poet is a maker of plots that his activity is more important than that of the annalist, and more akin to that of the philosopher who, too, searches for general truths in the confused mass of human experience.

We noted earlier that *eudaimonia* was the central concern in Greek ethical thought. Both Plato and Aristotle place *eudaimonia*—often translated as happiness or flourishing, though some scholars prefer to leave the word untranslated—at the centre of their ethical thought. For Plato, especially in Book IX of the *Republic*, the philosopher's life is the most *eudaemon*. Aristotle likewise takes *eudaimonia* to be the final goal of ethical inquiry.

Although the Greek ethical schools differ, their systems can be understood in terms of how they position *eudaimonia*. The term is related to *daimon*, and so may suggest something partly external to the agent. Aristotle frequently contrasts *eudaimonia* with *eutuchia* (good luck). Edward Cope describes *eutuchia* as accidental and fleeting, while *eudaimonia* is complete, stable, and grounded in self-sufficiency:

εὐτυχία ... [eutuchia] 'good; fortune; or luck', accidental, transitory, fragmentary, is opposed to εὐδαιμονία [eudaimonia], complete, permanent, substantial happiness, the essence of which resides in its αὐτάρκεια [autarkeia] or independence of all accidental and external conditions (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 94).

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by surveying traditional views about the constitution of happiness. Everyone agrees happiness is life's goal and depends on

possessing or exercising certain goods, but they disagree about which: virtue, philosophical wisdom, practical wisdom, pleasure, or external prosperity. Aristotle treats these views as worthy of consideration, likely to contain partial truths, and emphasises that happiness is an activity, not a mere state of mind.

The inclusion of external goods presents a difficulty. Aristotle acknowledges that noble actions require certain resources—friends, wealth, political power—and that lacking things like good birth, beauty, or supportive relationships can mar happiness. He notes that some people equate happiness with good fortune, while others equate it with virtue, and he does not yet decisively choose between these positions. His example of Priam—who suffered catastrophic reversals late in life—shows that no one calls a person happy who has endured extreme misfortune. As he notes:

Yet evidently ... it needs the external goods as well: for it is not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness, as good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy (*eudaimonikos*), and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death ... happiness seems to need this kind of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune though others identify it with virtue (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a-b).

Aristotle recognises a tension: happiness is defined as virtuous activity, complete and unified, yet human life is vulnerable to chance. This tension remains unresolved even at the end of the *Ethics*. Though he ultimately praises the contemplative life as the most self-sufficient and divine, Aristotle admits that such a life is not fully human. Human beings need others in order to perform just and virtuous actions. Thus, the best human life is not purely contemplative but includes the virtues enacted in community. His discussion of friendship (*philia*) reinforces this: friends are the greatest external good, and it is strange to imagine the happiest person living in isolation. What remains possible within the human realm is a more modest definition of virtue:

But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate. Just and brave acts, and other virtuous acts, we do in relation to each other, observing our respective duties with regard to contracts and services and all manner of actions and with regard to passions; and all of these seem to be typically human. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1178a)

It is not difficult to see how the worlds of myth and literature might be illuminated by these ideas: the example of Priam, or the discussion of the man who wounds and kills his father in ignorance, are important to the development of the argument itself. If we turn to the *Poetics*, we find that there too the changes of human condition appear initially at least as changes in happiness:

for tragedy is the mimesis not of men but of actions and of life, and of happiness and of unhappiness. Happiness and unhappiness are in action—their end is some kind of action, not some quality (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450a, my translation).

It is clear then from this passage that Aristotle is looking at eudaimonia in the tragic context as a point of departure. The following points may be inferred: first, that tragedy shows a change from the good life to the bad life; second, happiness and unhappiness can be expressed in action only and, finally, the end of life is an action, not a quality. Inasmuch as tragedy is concerned with kinds of activity and its results, and human activity in a general way is seen to be conducive or otherwise for the good life, tragedy exists within the domain of ethics. That tragedy habitually renders obscure the clarity of moral actions need not be doubted: but that would not be a reason for separating the two.*

* **Note:** Please check the References document for a full reference list, along with suggestions for further reading.

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