

Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy

Lecture III | The Tragic Plot

Amlan Das Gupta

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 third part of the series, which continues its engagement with Aristotle's Poetics.

Edited by: Sandeep Banerjee, Associate Professor of Literature, McGill University.

Aristotle's claim that tragedy is the imitation (*mimesis*) of an action (*praxis*) situates the *Poetics* within the broader framework of his ethical thought. Action, for Aristotle, is not merely one element among others in tragic representation; it is the fundamental category through which human life, value, and happiness are to be understood. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle explicitly states that happiness and unhappiness belong to action and that the end (*telos*) of life is itself a form of activity rather than a quality or disposition. This formulation mirrors the central claims of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *eudaimonia*—human flourishing—is defined as activity in accordance with virtue.

Tragedy imitates not isolated deeds, but a unified sequence of actions organised into a coherent plot (*muthos*). Although human beings perform innumerable actions simultaneously, tragedy selects and orders these acts into a single, intelligible whole—what Aristotle calls the 'ordering of actions' (*sunthesis tōn pragmatōn*). Plot-making is therefore an active, creative process rather than a passive reflection of historical or

biographical fact. Even when tragic plots are drawn from traditional myth, their significance lies not in their factual accuracy but in their capacity to present general truths about what a certain kind of person would probably or necessarily do in a given situation. This distinction between poetry and history is crucial. Whereas the historian records particular events, the poet constructs actions that possess intelligibility, coherence, and ethical significance. In this sense, poetic activity resembles philosophical inquiry, which likewise seeks universality within the flux of experience. Tragedy renders visible the conditions under which human actions conduce to flourishing or collapse into suffering.

Earlier, we also situated tragedy within Aristotle's unresolved ethical tension between virtuous activity and dependence on fortune (*eutuchia*). While *eudaimonia* is grounded in virtue, Aristotle concedes that external goods and favourable circumstances are often necessary for noble action. Tragedy stages this vulnerability by representing reversals in happiness brought about through action itself. Far from being ethically extraneous, tragedy becomes a privileged site for examining the fragility, limits, and human conditions of the good life.

We look today at the convergence of structural and ethical ideas about tragedy in chapters 13 and 14 of *Poetics*. This has been greatly influential in the later interpretation of the form and has probably generated more critical commentary than any other part of the *Poetics*. But the text itself is problematic and is probably textually imperfect: there is no way of knowing whether (or what) parts of the argument have not been preserved and whether the fundamental variance of the argument is part of a larger framing discourse. We have to make do with what we

have in the manuscript, and it seems undeniable that Aristotle is making radically different suggestions about what the best kind of tragedy is.

But what I find most exciting about this section of the *Poetics* is the sense that we are witnessing a progression of thought: Aristotle is thinking about how tragic poets achieve success and what kinds of plots are the most effective. As he presses harder, he revises earlier statements and arrives at newer realisations, a recognition that what he has said thus far is inadequate or deficient. This is witnessed in chapter 13 itself, and more radically between 13 and 14. Some—or should I say most—commentators privilege one part of the argument over the others, but for us at this point the text is paramount and we have to struggle with its demons.

How then can excellence in tragic representation be achieved? What kind of tragedy is likely to be the most effective? Tragedy operates on a consciousness heightened by intense emotion and specifically by the two emotions of fear and pity. The discussion of these two emotions in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* II. 5 and II. 9 shows them to be closely related. It seems that, essentially, they are roused by the same kind of situations, but fear is self-regarding and pity other-regarding. Aristotle's statement that tragedy arouses fear in the audience therefore implies that he takes for granted a remarkable degree of identification between the audience and the characters presented. Aristotle notes that pity and fear are the emotions that tragedy seeks to excite, the best tragedy is that which is most successful in doing so (see Hubbard, 108). There is also a compressed definition of what pity and fear mean here. Pity is aroused by the fact that the tragic agent does not deserve the fate that befalls him or her, and fear by the identification of the agent with ourselves. Aristotle continues to observe that pity 'is

felt for someone who comes to grief without deserving it, and the other (fear) for someone like us (pity, that is, for the man who does not deserve his fate, and fear for someone like us)' (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a).

Aristotle seems to be indicating here that pity is aroused by the tragic predicament of the agent, and fear by the agent's implication in the condition of humanity. The human referent is important in this discussion because the discussion has a strong ethical bias. There is a marvellous discussion in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen Dedalus is discussing Aquinas with his friend Lynch, and speaks about pity and fear, which he claims Aristotle has not defined: Pity is 'the feeling which arrests the mind in the contemplation of whatsoever is grave and constant in human suffering and unites it with the human sufferer'. Fear, on the other hand, is 'the feeling which arrests the mind in the contemplation of whatsoever is grave and constant in human suffering and unites it with the secret cause' (Joyce, 239).

There is of course a long discussion of pity and fear in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: 'For, in general, here also we may conclude that all that men fear in regard to themselves excites their pity when others are the victims' (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1386a). I mentioned that in a significant comment in chapter 13 of *Poetics*, Aristotle says that the tragic poets return to the stories of a few individuals or families in their plots, for it is only in the lives of these individuals that we encounter such terrible (*deina*) happenings. For instance, Oedipus who murders his father and marries his mother, or Orestes who slays his mother. Chapters 13 and 14 are about the kinds of actors that tragedy might represent and the consequences that their actions might have. Yet these characters are possessed of high social standing and respected by many. How are we to assess

such actions? Do they render their actors culpable and blameworthy in the highest degree? Aristotle does not directly answer this, but he does reveal a concern with determining the most effective tragic plots. The best plot Aristotle decisively says is that which excites the proper tragic emotions, pity and fear, in the greatest degree.

I will refer to the Greek text, given that Aristotle uses a variety of moral descriptors that evade single replacements in English. Aristotle says that

one should not show virtuous men (*epieikeis andras*) passing (*metaballontas*) from good to bad fortune (*ex eutuchias eis dustuchian*), since this does not arouse fear or pity (*ou gar phoberon oude eleeinon*) but only a sense of outrage (*miarou*). Nor should one show bad men (*mochtherous*) passing from bad to good fortune (*ex atuchias eis eutuchian*) as this is less tragic (*atragodatatou*) than anything, since it has none of the necessary requirements; it neither satisfies our human feeling (*oute gar philanthropon*) nor arouses pity and fear. Nor should one show a quite [exceedingly] wicked man (*sphodra poneron*) passing from good to bad fortune; it is true that such an arrangement would satisfy our human feeling (*philanthropon*), but it would not arouse pity or fear (*alla oute eleon oute phobon*), since the one is felt for someone who comes to grief (*dustuchounta*) without deserving it (*anaxion*), and the other for someone like us (*ton homoion*) pity (*eleos*), that is, for the man who does not deserve his fate (*anaxion*), and fear (*phobos*) for someone like us (*peri ton homoion*); so this event will not arouse pity or fear (*oute eleeinon oute phoberon estai to sumbainon*, literally, 'neither pity nor fear will come to be'). So we have left the man between these (*ho metaxu ara touton loipos*). He is one who is not pre-eminent

in moral virtue, who passes to bad fortune not through vice or wickedness, but because of some piece of ignorance (*esti de toioutos ho mēte aretēi diapherōn kai dikaiousunēi mēte dia kakian kai mochthērian metaballōn eis tēn dustuchian alla di' hamartian tina*), and who is of high reputation and great good fortune, like Oedipus and Thyestes and the splendid men of such families (*hoion Oidipous kai Thyestēs kai hoi ek tōn toioutōn genōn epiphaneis andres*) (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452b–1453a).

The agents of tragedy are either good or bad, and because tragedy is about change, these agents pass from good fortune (*eutuchia*) to bad fortune (*dustuchia*). It needs to be noted that the changes of fortune from good fortune to bad fortune or from bad to good—owing to chance, necessity, or the enmity of the gods—is at this point distinct from the disposition of the tragic agents themselves. The initial discussion is based on two sets of variables—of moral dispositions and kinds of fortune—and the criteria for assessment are provided by the specific character of the tragic emotions—pity and fear—and the more general test of fellow-feeling or justice, *philanthropia*. The variables might yield four separate possibilities: that of the virtuous man passing from good to bad fortune (it is non-tragic, because it contravenes fellow-feeling, *philanthropia*); the evil man passing from good to bad fortune (which is non-tragic, but is not against fellow-feeling); the virtuous man passing from bad to good fortune (which is not discussed at all) and the evil man passing from bad to good fortune (which is the worst, because not only is it against *philanthropia*, but is also described as the most untragic (*atragodaton*)). We note at this point Aristotle's generous use of moral descriptors (*epieikes*—virtuous, *mochtherous*—wicked, *sphodra poneros*—extremely vicious, *to miaron*—defiled or abominable).

Aristotle abandons this line of argument without completing the series. Even though he seems to derive a conclusion from this analysis suggesting that the focus on tragedy is the 'one in the middle [who] is left (*ho metaxu ara touton loipos*)' he has abandoned it. None of the above seem at this point to ensure effective plot-making and so we are left with: 'he who is neither outstanding in virtue and justice, nor through badness and wickedness is changed to bad fortune, but through some error'. The initial appearance of this 'in-between' person is hardly reassuring. Such tragic agents are neither good nor bad, but pass from good to bad fortune owing to some error (*hamartia*): 'not virtuous or vicious in full sense, their downfall occurs because of some error'.

Aristotle goes on develop this idea further. The initial formulation seems to be markedly devoid of ethical force. There is no sense of active goodness in the description at all, and is in fact described in terms of his lack of virtue and justice. But Aristotle goes on to illustrate the argument by appealing to the traditional myths of people held in high esteem (*en megale doxe*) and in good fortune (*eutuchia*) like Oedipus and Thyestes, and the recapitulation of the argument affords the opportunity for some kind of ethical revision, by more clearly allocating the causes for change.

To change (*metaballein*) not into good fortune from bad fortune (*eis eutuchian ex dustuchian*) but in the other way (*tounantion*) ... not through wickedness (*di' mochtherian*) but through some great error (*di' hamartian megalen*) of whom we have spoken (*ē hoiou eirētai*), or better rather than worse (*ē beltionos mallon ē cheironos*).

It is this part of the argument that seeks to revive the terms of the earlier discussion: the tragic protagonist now appears to have possession of good fortune and can in fact accommodate some kind of moral excellence. Margaret Hubbard in her exemplary translation of the *Poetics* chose to render *hamartia* as 'some piece of ignorance' (See Hubbard 106-07). Typically, *megale hamartia* is translated as 'some large scale piece of ignorance', which might suggest that Plato's claim that wrong doing can come out of ignorance is influential in this regard. The *hamartia* argument—used only in this part of the *Poetics* (though verbal forms are widely used throughout)—to designate various misconceptions appears to facilitate the accommodation of some notion of moral virtue, or at least moral innocence in respect of the acts committed.

The discussion of *hamartema* in *Ethics* (1135b) and *Rhetoric* (1374b) suggests that *hamartia* and *hamartema* are largely indistinguishable.

Thus there are three kinds of injury in transactions between man and man ... those involving ignorance are mistakes when the person acted on, the act, the instrument, or the end that will be attained is other than the agent supposed; ... when the injury takes place contrary to reasonable expectation, it is a misadventure (*atuchema*). When it is not contrary to reasonable expectation, but does not imply vice, it is a mistake (*hamartema*) ... When he acts with knowledge but not after deliberation, it is an act of injustice (*adikema*) (Aristotle, *Ethics* 1135b).

The *hamartema* class of actions lies between the products of mere accident (*atuchemata*) and unjust acts in the proper sense (*adikemata*). The points of distinction lie in the extent of premeditation behind the act and in the nature of moral intention.

WD Ross—in his translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—renders the word *paralogos* as ‘contrary to reasonable expectation’, which could also be further unpacked. However, the clarity of such distinctions seems out of place in the world of tragedy, for one could go on speculating about the extent of actual responsibility for the deeds performed by the tragic personages.

If the tragic personage is not *eudaimon* in the obvious sense, at least she or he can claim the lesser privilege of being in temporary possession of good luck. How far would the turn of fortune cause us to revalue their ethical standing? It may be that as with other ethical questions (for instance, with respect to actions) the question of moral worth is one that tragedy habitually complicates. If it is right to characterise the tragic structure that emerges in the end in chapter 13 as one of ignorance, it is evidently effective in protecting moral innocence. This seems largely a response to Sophocles and, as many critics have long held, to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The hero is notably unfortunate, but in some obscure way he claims a pre-eminence that necessarily has a moral component. The argument however gets more complicated as it goes on. The best tragedies, Aristotle goes on to say, are based on a small number of eminent families, for it was their lot to suffer or perform fearful (*deina*) acts. It is important to note that in this context Aristotle emphasises the degree of reversal and the unhappy ends of tragedy. Euripides’ skill in constructing plots of this kind is especially commended. Plots that end with reconciliation are not favoured because the pleasure that they afford belongs to comedy rather than tragedy.

Before going on to the next chapter, one might point out that the nature of the tragic act appears to have been much misunderstood. *Hamartia* should not be thought of as

a 'flaw' in character. Indeed, our discussion indicates that Aristotle would not have understood such an idea. If somebody has a deep-seated deficiency in character that makes the person commit violent crimes, the person is clearly morally reprehensible. We noted that in an attempt to attack this traditional misunderstanding of *hamartia*, the translator, Margaret Hubbard, translates the term as 'ignorance'. The fact that the Greek New Testament uses the word '*hamartia*' for 'sin' in the Christian sense may be partly responsible for the misunderstanding.

It should also be noted that Aristotle makes no concessions to the comfortable idea that the suffering of the tragic protagonist is 'out of proportion' to their acts. They passionately disclaim *moral* responsibility for their acts, certainly—but if Oedipus suffers greatly, he himself recognises that he has committed acts that put him outside the pale of human society. The greatness of tragedy lies in its presenting to us the deed being both proximate and remote, owned and disowned. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the old hero repeatedly asserts his moral innocence with respect to the terrible deeds that he has committed. This awareness might also help us to make sense of the rather surprising commendation of Euripides as the 'most tragic' (*tragikotatos*) of playwrights, for in Euripides, the distinction between responsibility and non-responsibility is arguably the finest in Greek tragedy. Medea kills her children in full knowledge of the enormity of her act, but in the end it is her passion, her *thumos*, that makes her act in this way.*

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

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Dr Sandeep Banerjee for his careful copy-editing of my rough drafts.

