Tragic Pleasures

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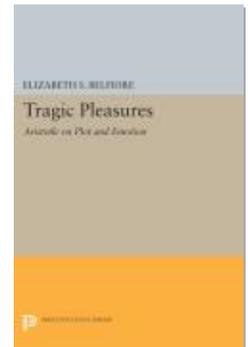
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Plot and Character

ARISTOTLE has a number of reasons for making plot rather than character (*ēthos*, *ēthē*) central to his theory of tragedy [1] These have to do with his concept of the nature of tragedy as imitation of action, with his desire to counter Plato's attacks on poetry, and with his views on the development of tragedy. Accordingly, Aristotle makes a clear theoretical distinction between plot and *ēthos*, and he denies that *ēthos* is essential to tragedy. Although a number of serious theoretical difficulties arise when this distinction is made, it is important for an understanding of Aristotle's views on the tragic plot, and it is useful for an analysis of the plots of the Greek tragedies.

THE PLOT-CHARACTER DISTINCTION

Plot is of primary importance in tragedy because, in the first place, tragedy imitates actions (1449b24, 1449b36), as opposed to other objects, such as characters and emotions (1447a28). Of the six "qualitative parts" of tragedy—plot, character, speech, thought, spectacle, and song (1450a8–10)—it is plot, defined as "the composition of the events" (1450a4–5), that imitates action (1450a3–4). Aristotle is careful to distinguish between the plot, which is an *imitation of* action, and "the actions of which the plots are imitations" (1452a13) His terminology reflects this distinction, for he uses the terms "plot" (*muthos*) and "organization (composition) of the events" (*sustasis*. 1450a15, or *sunthesis tōn pragmatōn*. 1450a15) to refer to the imitation of action, and the term "action" (*praxis*) to refer to the action imitated.[2] Aristotle insists that tragedy is imitation of action,

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[1] One problem in Aristotle's account is that of his often confusing use of the singular (*ēthos*) and plural (*ēthē*) Aristotle calls the qualitative part of tragedy either (*ta*) *ēthē* (e g , 1450a5, 1450a9, 1450a39), or (*to*) *ēthos* (e g , 1450a14) Because this distinction is not of great importance here, I use the English "character' to translate both singular and plural

[2] This distinction between *praxis* and *muthos* (*sustasis pragmatōn*) is noted by J Jones, *Aristotle*, 24 According to Dupont-Roc and Lallot, *Poétique*, 219, Aristotle distinguishes, in *Po* 8, between the many *praxeis* (which, they say, make up "brute reality") of one individual, and the one, unified *praxis*, which is a kind of first-order representation created

as opposed to imitation of *ēthos*: "They [sc., poets and actors] do not act in order to imitate the *ēthē*, but they include the *ēthē* along with the actions; so that the events and the plot are the end of tragedy, and the end is the most important of all" (1450a20–23); "tragedy is imitation not of human beings but of actions and [the events] of a life" (1450a16–17); "it is imitation of action, and because of this [sc., action] above all [it is imitation] of those acting" (1450b3–4). Plot is not only the most important, it is the only essential part of tragedy. Character is strictly secondary: "the organization . . . of the events . . . is the first and most important part of tragedy" (1450b22–23); "the first principle and as it were the soul of tragedy is the plot; second is the *ēthē*" (1450a38–39); "it is right to distinguish tragedies that are the same or different on the basis of nothing other than the plot" (1456a7–8); "without [imitation of] action there could be no tragedy; without *ēthē* there could. The tragedies of most of the new poets

by a poet who selects and orders the many *praxeis* This is a misunderstanding. When the poet chooses to imitate one unified *praxis* from among many *praxeis*, he does not thereby imitate and represent, but instead grasps one intelligible structure in order to imitate it In so doing, he resembles the philosopher who understands the causes of the objects he perceives. (See *PA* 1.5.645a5–17.) Aristotle's use of *pragmata* and of the nominal forms of *praxis* is remarkably consistent (I leave the verbal forms out of consideration because they do not allow for the kind of distinction in question) The plural *pragmata* occurs seventeen times in the *Poetics*, and it always refers to the events that make up the "organization of the events" (the plot), which is an imitation of action On eight occasions (1450a15, 1450a33, 1450a37, 1450b22, 1451a33, 1453b3, 1453b14, and 1454a34) it occurs within the phrase *sustasis (sunthesis) tōn pragmatōn*, or a close variant, and at 1450a4–5 the *muthos* is defined as the *sunthesin tōn pragmatōn* On the other eight occasions (1450a22, 1451b22, 1453b5, 1453b13, 1454b7, 1455a17, 1456a20, and 1456b2) *ta pragmata* are the events that make up the *sustasis tōn pragmatōn*—the plot (Note the phrase *ta pragmata kai ho muthos*. "the events, that is, the plot" at 1450a22.) The singular *pragma* occurs twice, at 1450b35 and at 1451a10 It means simply "thing," and does not refer to the plot or to an event in the plot. *Praxis*, on the other hand, refers to an action of which the plot is an imitation, or to actions in life generally. The noun *praxis* occurs a total of thirty-five times On fourteen occasions, *praxis* occurs in conjunction with *mimēsis* or *mimeisthai* 1447a28, 1448b25, 1449b24, 1449b36, 1450a4, 1450a17, 1450b3, 1450b24, 1451a31, 1451b29, 1452a2, 1452a13, 1452b1, and 1462b11 Three times it occurs in a variant of the phrase *sunistanai* (or *poiein*) *peri praxin* 1451a28, 1459a19, and 1459b1 On fourteen occasions, Aristotle uses *praxis* to refer to an action in life generally. 1450a1, 1450a2, 1450a18 (twice), 1450a20, 1450a22, 1451a18, 1451a19, 1451b33, 1452a14, 1452a37, 1453b16, 1459a22, and 1462b8. In three difficult passages (1452b11, 1453b27, and 1454a18) *praxis* is used of an event in the plot. At 1452b11, for example, the *pathos*, a part of the plot, is defined as "a destructive or painful *praxis*." In these passages, I believe, Aristotle uses *praxis* as the singular of *pragmata* in order to avoid the vague singular of *pragmata* (events of the plot). *pragma*, which means "thing." In another difficult case, 1450a24, I take *praxeōs* to be short for "imitation of *praxeōs*."

are without *ēthos*, and in general there are many such poets" (1450a23–26).

Because tragedy is imitation of action and not of character, it is the plot structure rather than *ēthos* that accomplishes the function of tragedy. "Ethical speeches," writes Aristotle, will not accomplish "that which is the function of tragedy" as well as the plot and "the organization of events" will (1450a29–33). This idea is expressed graphically in Aristotle's comparison of plot to a white outline drawing and of *ēthos* to coloring that fills in the drawing. "It is much like the case of painting. For if someone should smear on the most beautiful colors at random, this would not give pleasure in the same way as an image drawn in white" (1450a39–b3). *Ēthos* is a kind of coloring that fills in the plot, which is a kind of outline.[3]

Aristotle has several reasons for insisting that plot is more important than character For one thing, this gives him two ways of countering Plato's attack on tragedy. If it is plot rather than *ēthos* that is essential, tragedy can be shown to be the product of a craft, and not, as Plato insists in book 10 of the *Republic*, the creation of ignorant imitators of images. Plot, unlike *ēthos*, has a natural order—beginning, middle, and end—that gives tragedy a definite structure of its own, with well-defined laws that can be studied and taught.

Aristotle also wants to insist that plot is more important than *ēthos* because this allows him to counter Plato's contention that tragedy is ethically base. Unlike Plato, Aristotle believes that tragedy has the function of arousing fear and pity rather than praise or blame As a general rule, praise and blame depend on a judgment about *ēthos*, for we praise and blame someone for a choice (*prohairesis*) that leads to action [4] Because *ēthos* in tragedy is an indication of what kind of choice a person makes (1450b8–10), someone in a tragedy with an exceptionally excellent or vicious *ēthos* is also praiseworthy or blameworthy. Praise and blame, however, interfere with the tragic responses of pity and fear, as is clear from 1453a4–10 Pity is felt for someone who is *not* blameworthy, the person "suffering undeserved bad fortune," whose bad fortune is not the result of "baseness and

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[3] On *ēthos* in painting, see Keuls, *Plato*, 95–107

[4] The excellence of an action is not intrinsic to it, but depends on the ethical qualities of the agent, and especially on the excellence of the agent's choice (*EN* 1105a28–33) Aristotle discusses praise and blame in *Rhet* 1 9 See esp 1367b21–23 "Since praise is for actions, and it is proper to the *spoudaios* [to act] according to choice, one should try to show that someone acts according to choice " On choice in connection with *ēthos*, see also *EN* 1111b4–6, *Rhet* 1417a15–21, and *Po* 1461a4–9, discussed below In *EN* 1114a23–29, pity rather than blame is said to be felt for what is not in our power

depravity." Fear is felt for someone "like us," and not so "outstanding in ethical excellence and justice" as to evoke praise rather than fear. Thus, if someone in a tragedy is characterized by the ethical extremes of excellence or vice, this tends to interfere with the tragic responses of pity and fear, and must be excluded from the best tragedy.[5]

By stressing plot and excluding from tragedy the ethical extremes that are praised or blamed, Aristotle is able to counter Plato's charge that the poets are "imitators of images of excellence" (*Rep.* 10.600e5)—that is, of what is not truly excellent but only appears excellent to the ignorant.[6] These false images of excellence are imitations of *ēthos*. Plato explicitly states that the poet imitates *ēthos* at 604e1–3. "The complaining [*ēthos*] gives rise to much and varied imitation, but the wise and quiet *ēthos* . . . is not easy to imitate." In other ways also, Plato's account of imitation in the *Republic* consistently stresses *ēthos*. In his characterization of imitation at *Republic* 10.603c4–7, Plato's emphasis is on human beings and ethical responses, not on actions: "We say that the imitative craft imitates human beings doing compulsory or voluntary actions, and as a result of acting thinking that they have fared well or ill, and in all these cases experiencing pain or pleasure." The account of imitation in book 3 of the *Republic* also stresses character. The reference ("we say") in the passage just quoted is to 3.399a5–c4, where Plato allows into his ideal state music that imitates the speech of a courageous man doing the compulsory actions of war (399a6) or of a man doing in a temperate way (399b8) the voluntary actions of peace (399b3–4). In Plato's view, not only is an imitation of a base *ēthos* ethically base in itself, it also appeals to a base part of the soul and produces base effects (10.603b4). In particular, this kind of imitation makes us praise (605e6, 606b3) what we would be ashamed to do.[7]

Aristotle believes that tragedy does not have these pernicious ethical effects in large part because it does not imitate *ēthos*. Aristotle's definition of tragedy in *Poetics* 6 ("tragedy is imitation of action") is a significant rephrasing of Plato's characterization in *Republic* 10.603c ("the imitative craft imitates human beings doing compulsory or voluntary actions"). Ar-

[5] Similar points are made by Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics,* 179, Heath, *Poetics,* 81–82, and Stinton, *"Hamartia,"* 229 For an example in lyric poetry of the incompatibility of pity and praise, see Simonides 531 3 the dead at Thermopylae receive praise instead of pity (ὁ δ' οἶκτος ἔπαινος)

[6] On Plato's views in the *Republic*, see Belfiore, "Accusation "

[7] Plato states that tragedy and epic evoke praise, sympathy, and pity (*Rep* 605d4, 605e6, 606b3) Aristotle, however, separates the arousal of pity by tragedy and epic from the evocation of praise by another poetic genre the encomium

istotle explicitly opposes Plato's view at 1450a16–17. "Tragedy is imitation not of human beings but of actions " Because tragedy does not lead us to praise what is base, it cannot deceive us about excellence While tragedy does, in Aristotle's view, have ethical effects, these effects differ from the ones Plato condemns, and they depend on the audience's reactions to the plot structure.[8] The audience cannot, in Aristotle's view, react to the plot in the right way if it is primarily concerned with praiseworthy or blameworthy character.

Aristotle also wants to distinguish plot from *ēthos* for teleological reasons. In his account of the "evolution" of tragedy and comedy in *Poetics* 4, he distinguishes genres that evoke praise and blame (hymns and encomia) from those that arouse fear and pity (epic and tragedy), or laughter (comedy).[9] Early in the development of poetry, some poets "imitated fine actions and those of such people," creating hymns and encomia, while others imitated the actions of inferior people (*phauloi*), making *psogoi*. invective, or blame poetry (1448b24–27). Gradually, true comedy developed, as "the laughable" replaced invective (1448b37). An important stage was reached when Crates abandoned the iambic form and composed stories and plots universally (1449b7–9)—that is, according to the principle of probability or necessity.[10] In this development of comedy, plot takes the place of the "ethical" invective or iambic element While Aristotle does not tell us explicitly what, in tragedy, corresponds to the development of comedy from "blame" to the "laughable," it is reasonable to suppose that tragedy also developed away from ethical concerns toward imitation of action— from praise poetry to plot-centered poetry Some of Aristotle's remarks in *Poetics* 6 confirm this view The "first poets," he writes, were better at making *ēthos* than at creating plots (1450a35–38) On the other hand, the tragedies of many of the "new poets" are "characterless" (*aēthēis*. 1450a25) There is reason to believe that tragedy of the fourth century B C.E. did in fact became increasingly concerned with intrigue, complicated plots, and adventures, a characteristic shared by some of the late plays of Euripides [11] The kind of tragedy Aristotle praises is between these two extremes im-

[8] On the ethical effects of tragedy, see chaps 6 and 10

[9] The question of whether this evolution is purely teleological or in part temporal need not concern us here A good account of the role of praise and blame in Aristotle s account is that of Nagy, *Best*, 253–64 See also Schutrumpf, *Bedeutung*, 74–80, and Else, *Argument*, 135–49 For a discussion of the development of comedy from blame poetry, see Janko, *Comedy*, 242–50

[10] On Crates' innovation, see the perceptive remarks of Heath, "Comedy," 348–52

[11] See Xanthakis-Karamanos, *Studies*, chap 1, 3–34

itation of action is primary, but *ēthos* is an important secondary part of tragedy that is carefully kept from dominating and interfering with the plot.

For the reasons just discussed, Aristotle's repeated assertions that plot is essential to tragedy while *ēthos* is secondary should be taken literally. The plot structure, like the soul of a living thing, is what is essential to tragedy: that by means of which it accomplishes its function of producing pleasure and katharsis from pity and fear. *Ēthos*, while important, is not essential to tragedy in this way.[12]

The *Poetics* adopts a very different perspective from that of Aristotle's ethical works. In the *Poetics*, good and bad fortune are connected with plot and not with *ēthos*. The plot is a change from good to bad fortune, or vice versa (1451a13–14). *Ēthos*, on the other hand, is defined as "that which indicates choice [*prohairesis*]" (1450b8–9), and is distinct from plot. This means that plot and the good and bad fortune between which it moves do not in themselves have anything to do with choice, which is peculiar to *ēthos*. It is easy to be confused about this, for plot is imitation of action. In the ethical works, of course, people act, in the full sense, only when they choose; "the origin of action is choice" (*EN* 1139a31), and actions themselves are qualified in large part according to the ethical choice the agent makes (*EN* 1105a28–33). The *Poetics*, while admitting that this is true of actions in real-life situations, correctly sees that plot, *imitation of* action, is different. A poet who creates a dramatic *imitation of* action may not give us all the information relevant to ethical judgments about real-life actions.[13]

This distinction between real-life actions and dramatic imitations of action helps clarify Aristotle's meaning in *Poetics* 6:

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[12] I argued for a strict interpretation of Aristotle's statements that *ēthos* is not essential to tragedy in Belfiore, "*Praxis*," a view I still hold, though I now believe this distinction is problematic for reasons discussed below ("Problems") The strict interpretation is also supported by Catherine Lord, "Character"; Janko, *Comedy*, 229–31, who cites *Po* 1450a12: οὐκ ὀλίγοι αὐτῶν, and Heath, *Poetics*, 118–19. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 149–64, has some good remarks on the plot-character distinction, though I disagree with much of what he says about action.

[13] On this difference between the ethical works and the *Poetics*, see Dupont-Roc and Lallot, *Poétique*, 196. The *Poetics*, they say, "reverses the perspective of the *Ethics*. It is no longer the agent but the *action* that is in the foreground here." However, they incorrectly conclude that, in the *Poetics*, agents are ethically qualified because actions are. "and *because* this action must be qualified in ethical terms, the agents must also be so qualified" (emphasis in original).

Since it [sc , tragedy] is imitation of action, and [this action] is acted by certain people acting, who must necessarily be qualified according to *ēthos* and thought (for because of these we say that actions also are qualified— there are by nature two causes of actions thought and *ēthos*—and according to these [sc , actions] all people succeed or fail) The plot, then, is the imitation of action I mean by plot here the composition of the events, and by *ēthē* that according to which we say that those acting are qualified. (1449b36–1450a6)[14]

Here, Aristotle states the general rule that, in real-life situations, action is caused by *ēthos* and thought, which qualify agents [15] He goes on, however, to make it clear that the plot, an imitation of action, is a part of tragedy distinct from *ēthos*, according to which the agents of the *dramatic action* are qualified. When *ēthos* is not added by the poet, there is no way to tell what the causes of the *dramatic* action are. In that case, the events of the plot are, to use Aristotle's own metaphor (1450a39–b3), ethically colorless. An act of killing, for example, is neither a heroic defense of one's country nor vicious treachery, if *ēthos* is not added by the poet. [16]

The passage just quoted also clarifies Aristotle's statements in *Poetics* 2.

Since the imitators imitate people acting, and it is necessary that these be either noble [*spoudaioi*] or inferior [*phauloi*] (for *ēthē* almost always correspond to these [categories] alone, for all *ēthē* differ in baseness [*kakia*] or excellence [*aretē*]), [they imitate people acting who are] either better than we are, or worse than we are, or such as we are   Tragedy is distinguished from comedy by means of this difference, the one tries to imitate people worse, the other better than those of today. (1448a1–5, 1448a16–18)

While this passage might appear to assert that tragedy imitates *people* with certain *ēthē*, the *Poetics* 6 passage just quoted (1449b36–1450a6) shows that this is not really Aristotle's view. In *Poetics* 2, Aristotle is speaking loosely, in a way that he is careful to avoid once he makes the technical distinction between plot and *ēthos* in chapter 6. He then makes it clear that what he really means is that the *action imitated* is done by agents, and that

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[14] At 1450a1–2, I do not follow Kassel in bracketing πεφυκεν   ἠθος

[15] I cannot discuss *dianoia*, "thought," here A good account of *ēthos* and thought is that of Else, *Plato*, chap 8, 116–24, who argues cogently that thought is "nonmoral" while *ēthos* is "moral ' On *ēthos* and *dianoia*, see also Fortenbaugh, "Modo," and Blundell, *Helping*, 16–25

[16] See Belfiore, ' *Praxis*," for arguments against the view that the word *praxis* in the *Poetics* has the technical sense of deliberate action by a rational agent that the term often has in Aristotle's ethical works

these agents are necessarily ethically qualified. This is not true of the actions done by the agents of the *dramatic* action, the events of the plot: these events are not necessarily qualified by *ēthos* as a part of tragedy.

A similar distinction between tragedy and real life is relevant to an understanding of a difficult passage in *Poetics* 6: "Tragedy is imitation not of human beings but of actions and [the events] of a life. Both happiness and unhappiness [*eudaimonia kai kakodaimonia*] lie in action, and the end is some action, not a quality. People are qualified in a certain way according to their *ēthē*, but according to their actions they are happy or the opposite" (1450a16–20). In this passage, Aristotle makes a conceptual distinction between action and happiness on the one hand and *ēthos* and quality on the other. In real life, of course, *ēthos* is a cause of action and of happiness. Tragedy, however, imitates action, and represents a movement between good fortune and bad fortune, without necessarily representing the person moving between good and bad fortune as having certain ethical qualities. In 1450a17–20 ("Both . . . opposite"), bracketed by Kassel,[17] Aristotle makes general statements about life.[18] This is why he uses the strongly ethical term *eudaimonia* (happiness) instead of the more colorless *eutuchia* (good fortune), which is used to refer to one end point of the tragic change at 1451a13–14 and 1455b27–28.[19]

It is also important to read a passage in *Poetics* 25 with the distinction between tragedy and real life in mind:

> In deciding whether something was well or not well said or done by a person, one must not only consider the point by looking at whether the thing itself that was said or done was noble or inferior [*spoudaion ē phaulon*], but one must also look at the agent or speaker, to whom, or when, or with what he acted or spoke, or for the sake of what, for example, to bring about a greater good, or to prevent a greater evil. (1461a4–9)

While this passage makes the general statement that the qualities of actions are not inherent in them, but depend on the qualities of the agents,

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[17] The passage is defended by Janko, *Poetics I*, 86, and Horn, "Begrundung."

[18] Else, *Argument*, 255, notes that almost all interpreters agree on this point.

[19] Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 202–8, has some good remarks on the relationship between *eudaimonia* and *eutuchia* in Aristotle's thought, and I now agree with him (203 n. 2) that my earlier view (Belfiore, "*Praxis*," 115–16), that *eudaimonia* is equivalent to *eutuchia* in 1450a16–20, was incorrect. I do not, however, agree with Halliwell's view (203–4) that Aristotle's use of *eudaimonia* in this passage implies that tragic action has ethical dimensions.

it does not state that we can always determine what these qualities are. In tragedy, it is not always possible, even in theory, to tell what the qualities of the agents of the dramatic action are.

Because Aristotle makes a strict distinction between plot and *ēthos*, and insists that plot is essential to tragedy while *ēthos* is not, his views on the nature of tragedy differ radically from those of many modern readers and scholars, for whom character is the center of interest. Martha Nussbaum, for example, writes, "The great tragic plots explore the gap between our goodness and our good living, between what we are (our character, intentions, aspirations, values) and how humanly well we manage to live."[20] Not only is this character-centered view of tragedy opposed to Aristotle's plot-centered theory, but it can also lead to misunderstandings about the Greek tragedies themselves. For one thing, a bias in favor of character has often led scholars to attempt to find a "psychological realism" in Greek drama that the dramatic conventions of this genre did not allow and that the extant tragedies do not display. The inappropriateness of the view that agents in drama are psychological entities much like their real-life counterparts is now widely recognized, as scholars from Tycho von Wilamowitz to Thomas Rosenmeyer have argued against the idea of "a constant dramatic personality existing independently of the sequence of scenes in which the playwright develops the action."[21] Such questions as what thoughts Aeschylus's Agamemnon has as he walks on the carpet or what sort of father he is are out of place, unless specific passages in the play invite us to ask them.[22] There are, as John Jones remarks, no further realities lying behind the masks.[23]

A second and less well recognized consequence of the modern character-centered view of tragedy is the tendency of many scholars to see Aristotelian character as an integral part of plot or action. Lionel Pearson, for example, states that "it is by representing people's actions that one shows

[20] Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 382. For other expressions of this view, see Belfiore, "Iphigenia."

[21] Rosenmeyer, *Art*, 211, summarizing the view of T. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, which is expressed in *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles*.

[22] Dodds, "Misunderstanding," 21, puts it neatly. "*What is not mentioned in the play does not exist*" (emphasis in original).

[23] J. Jones, *Aristotle*, 45 My account of modern opinions is an oversimplification of varied and complex views. Good summaries of the controversy about character in Greek drama are given by Easterling, "Presentation of Character" and "Character," 83–89; and by Goldhill, *Reading*, 168–72.

what kind of people they are "[24] According to John Jones, Aristotle has a concept of "characterful action" in which "the human self is present in its acts."[25] Stephen Halliwell's statement that "we must be able to identify it [sc., Aristotelian character] as a specific dimension of the action" is quoted with approval by Simon Goldhill.[26] To incorporate *ēthos* into action in this way is to misunderstand a fundamental premise of the *Poetics*. Tragedy is imitation of action, as distinct from *ēthos*, and for this reason it has the function of producing pleasure and katharsis from pity and fear.

While the nature of and motivation for Aristotle's distinction between plot and character are clear enough, there are, nevertheless, some serious philosophical difficulties connected with this distinction Before we can understand how these difficulties arise we must first study in more detail Aristotle's concept of *ēthos* in the *Poetics*

ĒTHOS

Aristotle's views on *ēthos*, and on related matters such as the noble (*spoudaios*) person and the decent (*epieikēs*) person, are extraordinarily difficult to grasp. Not only does he fail to explain his views clearly and in detail, but he is also inconsistent in a number of ways. Unfortunately, the scholarly controversies surrounding these issues have often only added to the confusion. A greater degree of clarity can be obtained, however, if we pay close attention to two important principles The first principle has just been discussed: drama is not ethics, and this difference must be kept constantly in mind as we study "ethical" concepts in the *Poetics*. Second, as we will now see, Aristotle uses *ēthos* in two different senses in the *Poetics*.

The first section of this chapter was concerned with *ēthos* primarily as one of the six qualitative parts of tragedy, second in importance to plot. *Ēthos* and *ēthē* in this sense are technical terms, defined in chapter 6 along with the other six qualitative parts of tragedy "I mean   this by   . the *ēthē*. that according to which we say that those acting are qualified" (1450a5–6) [27] After this definition, *ēthos* is frequently used in the technical

[24] Pearson, "Characterization," 79–80

[25] J Jones, *Aristotle*, 33

[26] Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 152, quoted by Goldhill, ' Character,' 119 For another example, see Dupont-Roc and Lallot, *Poetique*, 196, translated above, n 13

[27] The phrase "I mean   this by (λέγω γὰρ   τοῦτον 1450a5) introduces the definitions of "character" and "thought (1450a5–7), as well as the definition of "plot As Else notes (*Argument*, 244), the statements about character and thought at 1450a5–7

sense to refer to a part of tragedy or epic.[28] However, Aristotle also uses *ēthos* in a nontechnical sense, to refer to character generally. *Ēthos* has this nontechnical sense in the *Poetics* before it is defined as a technical term.[29] The term is also occasionally used in a nontechnical sense after the definition in chapter 6. For example, when Aristotle writes that poets and actors "do not act so as to imitate the *ēthē*" (1450a20–21), he cannot mean that they do not imitate *ēthos* as a part of tragedy; he must instead be using the term in a nontechnical sense. Again, at 1460a10–11, when Aristotle writes of an "*ēthos* that is not without *ēthos*," he is obviously using *ēthos* in two different senses, at least one of which must be different from the technical sense defined in chapter 6.[30] On the other hand, in many passages after the definition of *ēthos* it is very difficult to decide whether Aristotle is using the term in the technical sense. At 1450a21–22, for example, Aristotle writes, "they include the *ēthē* on account of the actions [that they imitate]": τὰ ἤθη συμπεριλανβάνουσιν διὰ τὰς πράξεις. Here, it is impossible to be certain whether the *ēthē* that are included in the tragedy are *ēthē* in the technical sense of one of the parts of the tragedy, or in the nontechnical sense of noble or inferior characters of people whose actions are imitated.[31]

In spite of these difficulties, however, the *Poetics'* concept of *ēthos* in the technical sense is in many respects clear and useful. Moreover, close attention to the question of whether *ēthos* is used in a technical sense in a given passage helps us understand Aristotle's views on plot as well as *ēthos*.

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are "definitions of specific and technical meanings which the two words are to have *as 'parts' of tragedy*—a status which is not necessarily the same as they have in life at large" (emphasis in original).

[28] *Ēthos* has this technical sense, for example, at 1450a9, 1450a14, 1450a36, 1450a39, 1450b8, 1450b10, 1454a16, 1454a17, 1454a33, and 1460b5.

[29] That is, at 1447a28, 1448a2, 1448a3, 1448b24, 1449b38, and 1450a2.

[30] There is no need to delete the first occurrence of *ēthos* here, as many have suggested (e.g., according to Schutrumpf [*Bedeutung*, 94], Castelvetro, Reiz, Susemihl, and Gomperz, Janko, *Poetics I*, on 1460a11, also advocates deletion). On this passage, see further below, "*Ēthos* as Part of Tragedy."

[31] An informative discussion of the meaning of the term συμπεριλανβάνειν is given by Pearson, "Characterization," 81–83. Pearson argues that the verb means "acquires," "picks up," "gathers in," or "involves," and that 1450a21 should be interpreted to mean that "the actions of a dramatic personage imply or involve character-development" (82). This interpretation, however, tends to confuse character with action in a way inconsistent with Aristotle's explicit statements. Aristotle means instead that *ēthē* are included in the tragedy, when they are included, because agents happen to have *ēthē* (1449a36–1450a3). On the idea of imitation of the actions of people with noble or inferior characters, see below, "The *Spoudaioi*."

Ēthos *as Part of Tragedy*

Ēthos (*ēthē*) in the technical sense is the second most important of the six qualitative parts of tragedy. I argue in this subsection that *ēthos* in this sense refers specifically to something within a particular passage in a tragedy (or within all such passages collectively) that indicates what kind of choice is made by an agent of a dramatic action. A passage that "has *ēthos*" may, for example, be one of the "ethical speeches" mentioned at 1450a29. These would include "the lament of Odysseus" and the "speech of Melanippe," which, at 1454a30–31, are said to be examples of *ēthos* [32]

In a number of passages Aristotle tells us that *ēthos* in the technical sense indicates what kind of choice someone makes. In his discussion of the six qualitative parts of tragedy, Aristotle states that the *ēthē* are what qualify the agents of a dramatic action. "I mean this by . . . the *ēthē*: that according to which we say that those acting are qualified [*poious*]" (6.1450a5–6). Aristotle's word *poious* (qualified, of a certain sort) belongs to the vocabulary of ethics, and often means "character."[33] Aristotle is more specific when he rephrases the definition of *ēthos* in the technical sense later in chapter 6: "Ēthos is that which indicates choice [*prohairesis*], of whatever sort, for which reason those speeches do not have *ēthos* in which there is nothing at all that the speaker chooses or avoids" (1450b8–10) [34] Aristotle again states that *ēthos* indicates choice at 15.1454a17–19 "It will have *ēthos* if, as was said, the speech or action makes clear what sort of choice is made." In the ethical works, a *prohairesis* is, in Irwin's words, a "decision, which is a desire to do something here and now, the action that deliberation has shown to be the action required to achieve the end," and correct *prohairesis* "is necessary for virtue of character, and expresses a person's virtue."[35] *Prohairesis* has a similar sense in ordinary Greek. A *prohairesis* is a choice that indicates someone's motives, purposes, principles, or policies.[36]

A number of passages in the *Poetics* make the most sense if *ēthos* is interpreted narrowly as an indication of choice Aristotle classifies the *Odyssey*

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[32] Keuls, *Plato*, 97–98, has some good remarks on *ēthē* (in one sense) as 'passages in the dialogue which reveal individual character" (97) I would qualify this statement slightly, however, for *ēthos* is not a passage, but an indication of choice within a passage

[33] See Irwin, *Ethics*, 390 " 'character often translates *poios*

[34] I omit the phrase bracketed by Kassel ἐν οἷς   φεύγει (1450b9–10)

[35] Irwin, *Ethics*, 392–93

[36] See LSJ, s v προαίρεσις

as "ethical" (1459b15), because this epic deals with Odysseus the *polutropos*
(*Od.* 1.1), the "versatile man," who constantly chooses how to act in dif-
ferent situations. Aristotle's examples in *Poetics* 15 also support the view
that *ēthos* in the technical sense is an indication of what kind of choice
someone makes. Two of these examples are taken from extant tragedies.
First, Menelaos in Euripides' *Orestes* is given as an example of "unnecessary
evil of *ēthos*" (1454a28–29). In Euripides' play, Menelaos, in his speech at
682–715, makes it clear that he chooses not to help Orestes because of
selfish love of gain. This speech, then, "has *ēthos*," in that it contains in-
dications of the kind of choice Menelaos makes Second, Iphigenia in Eu-
ripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* is said to be an example of an inconsistent *ēthos*,
"for the suppliant is not at all like the later [girl]" (1454a32–33).[37] The
speeches that have *ēthos* in this play would, then, be those in which Iphi-
genia seeks to avoid death by supplicating her father (1211–52), and those
in which, inconsistently, she chooses to sacrifice herself (e.g , 1374–
1401) All of these speeches "have *ēthos*" in that they contain indications
of the kind of choice Iphigenia makes

When Aristotle writes that an action as well as a speech can make clear
what sort of choice someone makes (1454a18), he means that attendant
circumstances can give ethical "color" to an action While he does not give
examples of actions that do this, examples are easily found in the tragedies.
In Euripides' *Electra*, Orestes' motives in murdering Clytemnestra and
Aigisthus are shown by the circumstances attending his actions, as well as
by his speeches Orestes kills Aigisthus during a sacrifice, and he kills
Clytemnestra while she is preparing for a sacrifice. Passages in which these
actions take place "have *ēthos*" because they contain indications that Ores-
tes chooses to kill in a way that is offensive to the gods and to human
custom. An interesting parallel to this kind of *ēthos* is provided by an ex-
ample given by Jerome Pollitt of *ēthos* in painting A painting of Poly-
gnotus was said to depict Ajax swearing at an altar while Cassandra sat
holding the image of Athena to which she clung as a suppliant when Ajax
dragged her away.[38] Here also, attendant circumstances clearly show that
Ajax's act is impious

The foregoing analysis helps us interpret two problematic passages in
which *ēthos* might be taken to mean dramatis persona It provides support
for the view that *ēthos* never has this meaning in the *Poetics*, as some have

[37] On the meaning of *ēthos* in these two examples, see further below, this subsection
[38] Pollitt, *Ancient View*, 188

thought.[39] As B. R. Rees points out, the Greek for what we call a dramatic "character" is "mask" (*prosōpon*) and not *ēthos* [40]

In the first of these problematic passages (15.1454a28–32), Aristotle states that Menelaos and Iphigenia are examples of *ēthē* of certain kinds. Because Menelaos and Iphigenia are not people whose actions are imitated but "Menelaos in the *Orestes*" and "Iphigenia in Aulis" [sc., in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*], *ēthos* might be taken to mean dramatis persona here. However, later in the same sentence, specific passages are given as examples of *ēthos*: "the lament of Odysseus" and "the speech of Melanippe." Can *ēthos* mean dramatis persona in the first part of this sentence and "specific passages" in the second half? While the sentence is awkward at best, it is least difficult if we take *ēthos* to refer throughout to indications of choice within specific passages. In this interpretation, "Menelaos" would be short for "the indications of choice within Menelaos's speeches,"[41] and "the lament of Odysseus" would be short for "the indications of choice within the lament of Odysseus " The comparison Aristotle makes between plot and *ēthos* immediately after this puzzling sentence supports the view that *ēthos* refers to indications of choice within specific passages throughout this sentence. Aristotle writes. "One should always seek either necessity or probability in the *ēthē* just as in the organization of the events, so that [one should represent] a person of a certain kind saying or doing things of a certain kind according to either necessity or probability, and this should come after that either by necessity or by probability" (1454a33–36). If the plot as a whole is made up of a number of individual events (things said or done), similarly the *ēthē* as a whole are made up of a number of indications of choice within specific passages. Each of these passages individually "has *ēthos*."

Another passage that might seem to favor the view that *ēthos* can mean dramatis persona is 1460a10–11 Aristotle states that Homer "at once brings on a man or a woman or some other *ēthos*, and none without *ēthos* but having *ēthos*" (εὐθὺς εἰσάγει ἄνδρα ἢ γυναῖκα ἢ ἄλλο τι ἦθος, καὶ οὐδέν' ἀήθη ἀλλ' ἔχοντα ἦθος) This difficult passage is phrased in a deliberately paradoxical way. Clearly, if there can be *ēthos* without *ēthos*, the term must be used in two different senses Here, the distinction between a technical and a nontechnical sense of *ēthos* can be helpful. In the

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[39] The view that *ēthos* means dramatis persona is defended by, among others, Else, *Argument*, 456–57

[40] Rees, "Plot,' 192 Schutrumpf, *Bedeutung*, 93–99, gives some good arguments against the view that *ēthos* means dramatis persona in the *Poetics*

[41] Cf Else, *Argument*, 466

second and third occurrences of *ēthos* ("none without *ēthos* but having *ēthos*") the term is used in the technical sense, to refer to one of the qualitative parts of epic. The first occurrence of *ēthos*, on the other hand, does not have this technical sense, nor does it mean dramatis persona. Instead, it refers to the character (in a broad sense that can include such qualities as gender) of the person whose actions are imitated.

Some parallel passages support this interpretation of 1460a10–11. At 1454a26–28 Aristotle writes "For if the one furnishing the imitation [ὁ τὴν μίμησιν παρέχων] is someone inconsistent and this sort of *ēthos* has been added [τοιοῦτον ἦθος ὑποτεθῇ], nevertheless, it should be consistently inconsistent" Aristotle uses similar language at 1455b12–13, where he writes that after setting out the plot, the poet should "add [ὑπο-θέντα] the names and episodize."[42] To "add" *ēthos* or "names" in this way is not to supply dramatis personae, but to set it down as a premise that the person whose actions are imitated, the one who "furnishes the imitation," has certain individual qualities; it is, for example, to set down that the actions imitated are those of Iphigenia, who is inconsistent. The poet then creates *ēthos* in the technical sense, in the form of consistent indications, within specific passages, that she chooses inconsistently. Similarly, at 1460a10–11, the *ēthos* that Homer "brings on" is that of the person— for example, Agamemnon or Helen—who "furnishes the imitation" because his or her actions are imitated by the plot Homer then adds *ēthos* in the technical sense to his imitation of the actions of this person. "none without *ēthos* but having *ēthos*." Another parallel to 1460a10–11 is *Rhetoric* 1417b7.[43] Aristotle writes that the rhetorician "at once brings himself on also, qualified in a certain way" (εὐθὺς εἰσάγει καὶ σεαυτὸν ποιόν τινα). Here, the rhetorician ("himself") corresponds to the person whose actions are imitated by the poet The rhetorician gives himself certain ethical qualities (he makes himself *poios*), just as the poet adds *ēthos* in the technical sense to his imitation of the actions of the person who "furnishes the imitation."

In the *Poetics*, *ēthos* as a part of tragedy is always an indication of choice, and never includes a broader set of "characteristic peculiarities," as *ēthos* sometimes does in the *Rhetoric*. In *Rhetoric* 3.16, *ēthos* has two important senses: (1) ἓν μέν, "that which indicates choice" (1417a17), and (2) ἄλλα

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[42] House, *Poetics*, 54, suggests the translation "episodise" Aristotle also writes that names should be 'added" at 1451b10 (ἐπιτιθεμένη) and at 1451b13 (ὑποτιθέασιν) On the meaning of these terms, see Else, *Argument*, 307–8 and n 25 On 1455b12–13, see chap 4 ("Plausibility, Plot, and Episode ')

[43] This parallel passage was called to my attention by Schutrumpf, *Bedeutung*, 95

ἠθικά, traits that "accompany each character." For example, talking while walking is a trait that belongs to a boorish character (1417a21–23). *Ēthos* in this second, broader sense includes characterizations of age, sex, and nationality, as well as disposition (*Rhet.* 3.7.1408a25–29).[44] The analysis of *Poetics* 1460a10–11 just given, however, does not support the view that merely to represent someone as a man or a woman is to add *ēthos* as a part of tragedy. Nor does 1454a17–25 support this view. Here, *ēthos* is an indication of choice that qualifies someone as a *good* woman, man, or slave; it is not merely the representation of someone as a man, woman, or slave.

A passage in *Poetics* 15 presents greater difficulties. Samuel Bassett argues that the "wrathful" and "easygoing" *ēthē* mentioned in this chapter are "characteristic peculiarities."[45] According to Aristotle,

> since tragedy is imitation of those better than we are, [the poet] should imitate good portrait-painters. For they also make their subjects like by giving them their individual shape, but paint them more beautiful. In the same way the poet [should] also, in imitating people who are wrathful or easygoing or have other such qualities with respect to their *ēthē*, make them such [τοιούτους] as that, but decent. For example, Homer [made] Achilles stubborn and good. (1454b8–15)[46]

If the poet in this passage makes someone in his play "such as" the character of the person whose actions are imitated, he clearly does so by adding *ēthos* as a part of his tragedy. There is, however, no reason why this *ēthos* cannot indicate choice, as *ēthos* is said to do at the beginning of chapter 15 (1454a17–19). Homer's Achilles is shown to be wrathful in those speeches in the *Iliad* in which he chooses to revile Agamemnon and to keep from the fighting rather than accepting the loss of Briseis without complaint. He is shown to be stubborn by his decision to play the lyre instead of fighting, by those speeches in which he rejects the gifts offered by Agamemnon, and by those in which he repeatedly asserts his decision to cease fighting.[47]

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[44] The phrase "characteristic peculiarities" is that of Cope, *Rhetoric* 3:193. This discussion, together with his *Introduction*, 113, connects *ēthos* in the second sense in 3.16 with *ēthos* in 3.7. In *Introduction* (112–13), Cope indicates that *ēthos* as a part of tragedy can have this broader sense in the *Poetics*. A similar view is held by Bassett, "*Hē de Odusseian*," 6–7.

[45] Bassett, "*Hē de Odusseian*."

[46] The text of this last sentence is hopelessly corrupt, but its general sense is clear.

[47] Achilles is shown making a decision at *Il.* 1.188–89 ("his heart . . . was divided between two opinions") about whether to attack Agamemnon. After Athena's intervention, he decides to avoid attacking Agamemnon, but to keep out of the fighting (1.239–

Aristotle's restriction of *ēthos* in the technical sense to indications of choice implies that *ēthos* must qualify someone as base or excellent in a sense that is at least in part "moral."[48] Aristotle's use of terms with some "moral" connotations in connection with *ēthos* as a part of tragedy supports this view. In chapter 15, Aristotle uses the terms "good" (*chrēston*: 1454a19), "evil" (*ponerias*. 1454a28), and "courageous" (1454a22) in giving examples of *ēthos* as a part of tragedy In chapter 13, two of the terms that characterize the dramatic agent who moves between good and bad fortune have primarily "moral" connotations. "justice" and "depravity" (*mochtherian*. 1453a8–9) These qualities would be indicated by *ēthos* in the technical sense.

Aristotle's strict separation of plot and *ēthos* has two further consequences It implies that whatever belongs to the plot does not in itself have the "moral" qualities that are given by *ēthos* alone. In particular, because good fortune and bad fortune (*eutuchia* and *dustuchia*), the end points between which the tragic plot moves (1451a13–14, 1453a13–14), belong to plot and not to *ēthos*, good and bad fortune do not have the "moral" qualities that *ēthos* alone confers. The separation of plot and *ēthos* also implies, conversely, that *ēthos* in the technical sense does not in itself indicate good or bad fortune. In the *Poetics*, then, *ēthos* in the technical sense differs from *ēthos* in *Rhetoric* 2 12, where *ēthē* are said to differ in "fortunes" (*tuchas*. 1388b32)—that is, in "noble birth, and wealth, and power, and the opposites of these, and, in general, in good and bad fortune [*eutuchian kai dustuchian*]" (1389a1–2).

If this is so, the good fortune that marks one of the end points of the tragic change must be primarily social and material good fortune. prosperity, high status, good reputation. This view of tragic good fortune makes sense for a number of reasons. Aristotle tells us that tragedy should imitate the actions of the *spoudaioi* (1448a27)—the socially superior "nobles," "those with great good reputation and good fortune," and "illustrious men" (1453a10–12). Aristotle's theory is in accord with the facts, for tragedy and epic do in fact imitate the actions of those who are "fortunate" in a social sense. kings and heroes.[49] Oedipus himself (before his discovery,

44, 297–99) It is again clear what kind of choice Achilles makes throughout *Il* 9 He plays the lyre at 186–89, at 356 he says he does not wish to fight Hector, and at 345 he says "He will not persuade me,' after giving his reasons for this choice

[48] Pace Keuls, *Plato*, 97 n 28 Because no Greek term corresponds to the English "moral,' I place this word in quotation marks On the "moral" and "nonmoral" distinction, see below, "Problems "

[49] See Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 166–67 and 202–8, on the social and material con-

but after the parricide and incest) is called *eudaimōn* (that is, *eutuchēs*, "fortunate") by Euripides [50] Moreover, *eudaimonia*, "happiness," in the ordinary Greek sense, depends, like *eutuchia*, in large part on objective prosperity and social status [51] Even in Aristotle's ethical works, *eudaimonia*, a word with much stronger "moral" connotations than *eutuchia*, includes external goods such as wealth and social status that are necessary for the full exercise of excellence [52] We may conclude, then, that the people whose actions are imitated by tragedy are "fortunate" in a primarily material and social sense that does not include the "moral" qualities that are given by *ēthos* as a part of tragedy However, the people whose actions are imitated by tragedy do have *ēthos* in a nontechnical sense, for they are the *spoudaioi*

The Spoudaioi

In *Poetics* 2, Aristotle uses the term *ēthē* in discussing the objects imitated by tragedy and comedy "The imitators imitate people acting, and it is necessary that these be either noble [*spoudaioi*] or inferior [*phauloi*] (for *ēthē* almost always correspond to these [categories] alone, for all *ēthē* differ in baseness [*kakia*] or excellence [*aretē*])" (1448a1–4) Here, *ēthē* does not have the technical sense of one of the parts of tragedy, for this sense is not defined until *Poetics* 6 Instead, the term refers to the characters of the people whose actions are imitated These characters are "base" or "excellent" in a sense that is in large part social, for they "correspond to" the *spoudaioi* and the *phauloi*, those who are socially fortunate (the *agathoi*) or unfortunate [53] Tragedy and epic deal with the "nobles" (*spoudaioi* 1448a2,

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notations of good fortune in the *Poetics* For a good discussion of the fact that Greek tragedy deals with great families, see Lattimore, Legend That misfortunes of great families arouse more emotion is a commonplace in tragedy Lattimore cites Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1465–66 and *Helen* 1678–79 (190 n 8)

[50] Euripides, *Antigone* frag , quoted in Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1182, 1187 (Nauck, *Fragmenta*, frag 157, 158) This use of *eudaimōn* as a synonym for *eutuchēs* is noted by Sheppard, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, xxix and n 2 Aristotle himself notes that the two words are often taken to be synonymous (*EE* 1214a25)

[51] See Adkins, *Merit*, 254 and n 12, and 257–58 The data collected by Heer, *Makar*, also supports this view

[52] See, for example, *EN* 1099a31-b8, 1100b22–1101a22, 1178b33–1179a9, *Rhet* 1360b14–30, and *Pol* 1323b40–1324a2 On *eudaimonia* and external goods, see J M Cooper, Fortune

[53] Else, *Argument*, 71–79, shows the importance of social qualities in Aristotle s concepts of *spoudaios* and *phaulos* He points out (76–77) that the term *spoudaios*, like *aretē*, charac-

1448a27, 1449b9–10), who are the agents of the "noble-and-serious"[54] (*spoudaioi*) actions imitated by these two closely related genres (1448b34, 1449b24). These are the people with "great good reputation and good fortune" whom Aristotle mentions in *Poetics* 13 (1453a10). Comedy, on the other hand, imitates the actions of socially "inferior" people (1448a16–18). These two classes differ in *ēthos* in large part because they differ in good and bad fortune, one way in which *ēthē* are said to differ in *Rhetoric* 1388b32–1389a2. *Ēthē* in the nontechnical sense used in *Poetics* 2, then, includes broader and more social qualities of people in general, while *ēthos* in the technical sense refers narrowly to indications of choice within a tragedy.

A conceptual distinction between the ethical qualities that characterize the *spoudaioi* and those indicated by *ēthos* as part of tragedy is apparent in Aristotle's characterization of the best agent of the dramatic action in *Poetics* 13: "The person between these is therefore left. This sort of person is one who is not outstanding in excellence and justice, and who does not change to bad fortune because of baseness and depravity, but because of some error; [he is one] of those with great good reputation and good fortune, such as Oedipus and Thyestes and illustrious men from such families" (1453a7–12). Here, the person with "great good reputation and good fortune" is one of the kings and heroes whose actions are among the "traditional stories" imitated by tragedy (1453b22–23). This person is *spoudaios* in a primarily social sense, and has an excellent *ēthos* corresponding to his or her social class. On the other hand, outstanding "justice" and "depravity" in this passage are characteristics closely connected with choice, with "morality." The conjunction of "excellence" with "justice," and of "baseness" with "depravity," suggests that all four terms have a "moral" sense here. All indicate characteristics that would be added to a tragedy by *ēthos* in the technical sense.

The *spoudaia ēthē* of the people whose actions are imitated are important to tragedy as a genre. When Aristotle defines tragedy as "imitation of a

terizes the heroic, aristocratic class. Else also notes that *spoudaios* includes "moral" qualities, on which see further below, "Problems." Gellrich, *Tragedy*, 126–62, also notes that *spoudaios* in the *Poetics* combines traditional social qualities with "moral" qualities. It is thus a mistake to give *spoudaios* too narrowly "moral" an interpretation, as do Schutrumpf, *Bedeutung*, 57–63 (criticized by Rees in his review of *Bedeutung*, 51, and praised by Golden, in his review, 286), Golden, "Serious," and Held, "*Spoudaios*," esp. 171.

[54] This translation, while awkward, takes into account that the Greek term *spoudaios*, like the English "noble," has both social and "moral" connotations, and that it also means "serious" as opposed to "laughable" or "trivial."

spoudaia action" (1449b24), he means one done by a *spoudaios* person
Tragedy differs in this respect from comedy, which deals with "the laugh-
able" (1449a34), and is an imitation of the actions of the socially "inferior"
(*phauloi*. 1448a2, *cheirous* 1448a16–18, 1448b24–27, 1449a32) [55] More
specifically, a *spoudaios* person is someone capable of the good fortune that
is one of the end points of the tragic plot. This view is supported by *Ni-
comachean Ethics* 1177a1–11, where Aristotle writes that *spoudaia* rather
than laughable things contribute to the *eudaimonia* of which a slave is not
capable. [56] Since tragedy represents a change between good and bad for-
tune, it imitates actions that are *spoudaiai* in the sense of "serious," and it
does so because it imitates the actions of the *spoudaioi*, the "nobles," people
with the excellent *ēthē* that characterize those who are fortunate in a social
sense. kings and heroes. The actions imitated by comedy, in contrast, are
those of the *phauloi*, who have base *ēthē* that characterize people who are
capable of neither great good nor great bad fortune

This way of distinguishing tragedy from comedy might appear incon-
sistent with the view that *ēthos* is not essential to tragedy Aristotle states
in *Poetics* 2 that drama imitates the actions of people who are *spoudaioi* or
inferior, and he indicates that these people differ in having excellent or
base *ēthē* (1448a1–4) Yet in chapter 6 he states that there can be tragedies
without *ēthos* (1450a23–26), and in chapter 13 he characterizes the ideal
dramatic agent as someone who is not outstanding in excellence or justice,
and who does not fall because of baseness and depravity (1453a7–12). We
might then ask how a tragedy can imitate the actions of a *spoudaios*, some-
one who has an excellent *ēthos*, without including *ēthos* in some way More-
over, it might be objected, if the *spoudaia* qualities of actions depend on
the ethical qualities of the agents, Aristotle's distinction between plot and
ēthos must be less strict than I have indicated

While the difficulties just noted are real and serious, they cannot be
solved by conflating plot and *ēthos*. As I have argued, both Aristotle's ex-
plicit statements and his theory of drama require a strict separation of these
two parts of tragedy. Moreover, Aristotle's narrow definition of *ēthos* in the
technical sense provides a partial solution, although it cannot completely
prevent inconsistency. A tragedy can, in his view, imitate the actions of
the *spoudaioi* simply by representing the social and material good fortune

[55] See Golden, "Serious," 284–85, on the dependence of genre distinctions on character
[56] Else calls attention to this passage in *Argument*, 241 n 73, where he notes that the
phaulos class "never arrives at either real happiness or its opposite ' See also *EN* 1100b27,
where Aristotle writes that the use of the good things given by fortune is ' fine and *spou-
daia* "

that is one end point of the tragic plot. Such a tragedy would not necessarily have *ēthos* in the technical sense, for it would not necessarily include indications of ("moral") choice.

<h2 style="text-align:center">PROBLEMS</h2>

The difficulties just noted arise because certain features of Aristotle's ethical theory are not entirely consistent with his dramatic theory. His distinction between plot and *ēthos* in the *Poetics* depends in part on a conceptual distinction between social excellence and "moral" excellence involving choice. Because the ethical theory on which the *Poetics* is based does not fully recognize this distinction, however, Aristotle cannot consistently restrict *ēthos* in the technical sense to indications of "moral" qualities, nor can he completely restrict the qualities of the *spoudaioi* to social qualities.

As Adkins notes, Aristotelian excellence includes both the "competitive" excellences of tradition, for which success and prosperity are all-important, and the "cooperative" excellences, such as justice and *sōphrosunē*.[57] According to the *Rhetoric*, "*Aretē* is thought to be the power of getting and keeping good things and the power of conferring many and great benefits" (1366a36–38). Its "parts" include what the *Nicomachean Ethics* calls "ethical excellences"—justice, courage, and *sōphrosunē*—and the intellectual excellences of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) and wisdom (1366b1–3).[58] However, according to the *Rhetoric*, these are excellences not so much because they are good in themselves or good for their possessors, as because they are useful to others: "Of necessity, the greatest excellences are those which are most useful to others, if excellence is the power of conferring benefits" (1366b3–5). This concept of excellence is very close to the Homeric "competitive" concept, according to which *aretē* is the power of benefiting *philoi* and harming enemies.[59] However, it also includes the "co-

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[57] See Adkins, "Aristotle," whose analysis of the combination of "competitive" and "cooperative" excellences in Aristotle's thought is very useful for an understanding of some of the difficulties in the *Poetics*. See also Nussbaum, *Fragility*, 378–94, who discusses a tension between moral excellence and good fortune in connection with the *Poetics* and tragedy. I disagree with many of their conclusions, however

[58] The distinction between "ethical" and "intellectual" excellence is made, for example, at *EN* 1103a14–18

[59] This popular view is reflected in Meno's definition of male excellence in Plato, *Meno* 71e For other examples, see Blundell, *Helping*

operative," "moral" excellences of justice and *sōphrosunē*. Moreover, as I argued above ("*Ēthos* as Part of Tragedy"), *eudaimonia* (happiness) includes external goods as well as "moral goods," even in Aristotle's ethical works The two value systems are inextricably mixed in Aristotle's concept of excellence, especially in works that, like the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*, tend to adopt more popular ethical perspectives than do his ethical treatises

This mixed ethical theory is not entirely compatible with a theory of tragedy that depends in part on a strict distinction of the kind Aristotle makes between plot and *ēthos* If the plot moves between good and bad fortune, and if excellence in a mixed social and "moral" sense is necessary to good fortune, plot must also in some way involve "moral" excellence of the kind that, according to Aristotle's theory of tragedy, is given by *ēthos* alone.

A problem of this kind is apparent in a number of passages in the *Poetics*. For example, in 1453a7–9, as I argued above ("The *Spoudaioi*"), Aristotle writes that the best agent of the dramatic action should not be outstanding in the "moral" qualities of excellence (*aretē*) and justice, or baseness and depravity. These are qualities associated with choice, with *ēthos* in the technical sense. Aristotle also writes that tragedy should represent this person, who is not outstanding in excellence, changing from good to bad fortune (1453a9). This disjunction between excellence and good fortune, however, is problematic in view of 1448a1–4, where the *spoudaioi*, the fortunate people whose actions are imitated by tragedy, are those who have an *ēthos* characterized by *aretē*. If excellence is a quality that characterizes both the socially fortunate and the "morally" superior, it is hard to see how someone can be very fortunate without having outstanding *aretē*

Aristotle could avoid inconsistency if *aretē* meant "moral" excellence at 1453a8, where it is a quality indicated by *ēthos* in the technical sense, and "social" excellence at 1448a3, where it is a quality connected with *ēthos* in a nontechnical sense. Aristotle does seem to be trying to define *aretē* in strictly "moral" terms at 1453a7–9, for he links it with the more narrowly "moral" terms "justice" and "depravity" (*mochthēria*) in this passage, and he adds the further qualification "outstanding."[60] These qualifications do not entirely resolve the difficulty, however, for in Greek thought, the *spoudaioi* are those who are "outstanding in *aretē*," in a mixed social and "moral" sense that Aristotle himself in large part accepts.[61] The difficulty

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[60] Cf the conjunction "excellence and justice' in *Pol* 1309a36, used to indicate a different kind of excellence from that more closely connected with helping friends at 1310b9–12 See Newman, *Politics*, on 1310b11

[61] Vahlen, *Beitrage*, 267–68, has some excellent remarks on the interconnections among

would remain even if we followed Alfred Gudeman in bracketing the phrase about *aretē* at 1448a3–4.[62]

Aristotle's use of the term *spoudaios* at 1461a4–9 (quoted above) is also an indication of a conceptual inconsistency. He writes that in considering whether something said or done was *spoudaion*, one should consider the agent's "purpose" (οὗ ἕνεκεν), a concept very close to that of "choice" (*prohairesis*).[63] However, if having good "purpose" or "choice" is one important characteristic of a *spoudaia* action, and if tragedy as a genre is defined as "imitation of a *spoudaia* action," then *ēthos* in the technical sense, an indication of choice, would seem, contrary to Aristotle's explicit denial, to be essential to tragedy as a genre.

A conflict similar to that between the requirements that the dramatic agent be *spoudaios* and not outstanding in excellence is also evident in Aristotle's account of the "decent person" (*epieikēs*) in *Poetics* 13 and 15. Chapter 13 states that two kinds of people should not be agents of a dramatic action. "decent men" (*epieikeis*. 1452b34) who change from good to bad fortune, and "depraved" (1452b36) or "very bad" (*sphodra ponēros*: 1453a1) people. The context shows that *epieikēs* must mean "outstanding in excellence" here. The best agent of the dramatic action, Aristotle writes, is "the in-between man". "The man between these is therefore left" (1453a7). This man does not excel in *aretē* or justice, and does not change to bad fortune because of baseness or depravity (1453a8–9). He is, therefore, between the "depraved" or "very bad" person mentioned at 1452b36 and 1453a1, and another man who is "outstanding in excellence." Because the phrase "between *these*" (τούτων. 1453a7) indicates that the man who has outstanding excellence has been mentioned previously, he can only be one of the *epieikeis* of 1452b34. In chapter 13, then, *epieikēs* means "outstanding in excellence," and Aristotle holds that this kind of person should not be the agent of a dramatic action.[64]

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the terms *spoudaios, epieikēs,* and *chrēstos* in the *Poetics,* and in Aristotle's thought generally He notes that Aristotle states (sc , in *Cat* 10b5–9) that the *spoudaios* is so called because he has *aretē,* and that *spoudaios* carries with it the whole range of meanings of *aretē* (268) See also D W Lucas, *Poetics,* 63, who calls attention to *Pol* 1324a12–13, where *spoudaios* is used as an adjective of *aretē,* and to *EN* 1145b8–10 On this latter passage see Nagy, *Best,* 254, who notes that Aristotle uses *spoudaios* and *phaulos* as synonyms for "praiseworthy" and "blameworthy" (*EN* 1145b9) Again, in the *Rhetoric, epieikeis* (1378a13) and *spoudaioi* (1378a16) are used as adjectives of *aretē* (1378a9)

[62] See Gudeman, *Aristoteles,* ad loc , and critical note

[63] Cf *Rhet* 1367b21–23, where *prohairesis* is connected with the *spoudaios*

[64] The view that *epieikēs* means "outstanding in excellence" in *Po* 13 is held, among others, by Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics,* 219 and n 24, and Stinton, "*Hamartia,*" 237

Chapter 15, on the other hand, *recommends* making the agents of the dramatic action *epieikeis*. At 1454b8–15, Aristotle writes that, since tragedy is an imitation of people "better than we are," the poet should make people "such as" those he imitates, but *epieikeis*, like a good portrait-painter who makes people "like" but "more beautiful." This passage appears to contradict chapter 13, which denies that the *epieikeis* (those who are outstanding in excellence and justice) are good agents of a dramatic action The inconsistency can be accounted for if Aristotle has a mixed social and "moral" concept of *epieikēs*, a concept that leads him to use the term in two different senses. In this view, *epieikēs* does not mean "outstanding in excellence" in *Poetics* 15, but is a close synonym of *spoudaios*. In the corrupt next line (1454b14), in fact, *agathos* (good), a term with strong social connotations, is substituted for *epieikēs*.

A puzzling mixture of "moral" and "social" qualities also characterizes Aristotle's concept of the person "like" us In *Poetics* 13 1453a5, "like" seems to mean "like" the human average in respect to "moral" qualities, for Aristotle goes on to say that the best agent of the dramatic action has qualities between those of excellence and justice on the one hand and baseness and depravity on the other. "Like" appears to have the same sense in *Poetics* 15.1454a24, where it is a quality indicated by *ēthos* in the technical sense. However, "like" has a social sense in *Poetics* 2 1448a6, where people who are "like" (that is, like us. 1448a4) are opposed both to those who are "better" than we are in a social sense (the *spoudaioi* whose actions tragedy imitates) and to those "worse" than we are, the socially inferior *phauloi* whose actions comedy imitates (1448a1–6, 1448a16–18). Aristotle may be attempting to resolve this difficulty at 13 1453a16–17, where he writes that tragedy should imitate the actions of "either a person such as has been mentioned [sc., the in-between person], or of someone better rather than worse."

Aristotle's concept of someone who suffers undeserved bad fortune (*ton anaxion dustuchounta*. 1453a4) also involves a problematic fusion of "moral" and social qualities. *Poetics* 13 tells us that someone who "does not deserve to suffer bad fortune" is, in the first place, someone who does not change to bad fortune because of baseness or depravity But surely Aristotle also has in mind the person whose bad fortune is not to be expected (*axioō*) because of his or her high social rank (*axiōma*).[65] *Rhetoric* 2 5

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[65] *Axioō* means "expect" as well as "deserve," according to LSJ Aristotle writes that we pity those who are "like" us in *axiōmata*, "social positions,' at *Rhet* 2 8 1386a25 On the mixed social and "moral" qualities included in the concept of *axia* (worth) in Aristotle's thought, see Newman, *Politics*, on 1278a20 and 1310b33 Many scholars agree that the

makes it clear that external good fortune was thought by Aristotle and his fellow Greeks to make bad fortune unlikely. "Those who are and are thought to be in great good fortune do not think they could suffer anything" (1382b35–1383a1). The same idea is expressed in 2.8: "If they think they have all good things, it is clear that they also think they cannot suffer anything evil" (1385b22–23).

The difficulties just discussed cannot be resolved completely, for they stem from a tension between Aristotle's ethical and dramatic theories. Aristotle's dramatic theory requires a strict separation of the social qualities associated with plot and the "moral" qualities associated with *ēthos*. In his view, the function of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear rather than praise and blame. He therefore defines tragedy as "imitation of action," as a movement between good and bad fortune in a sense that is primarily social and material rather than "moral." Aristotle excludes "moral" elements from tragedy because "moral" judgments lead us to praise or blame and thus interfere with the tragic emotions. In Aristotle's ethical theory, however, good fortune and the excellence necessary to it include both social and "moral" goods. This ethical theory to some extent prevents Aristotle from separating "moral" and social qualities as his dramatic theory requires.

Nevertheless, the inconsistencies to which this conflict gives rise are not fatal to the practical application to most tragedies of the criteria by means of which Aristotle distinguishes plot and *ēthos*. On the contrary, his distinction between plot, a movement between good and bad fortune, and *ēthos*, an indication of choice within a specific passage, reflects a distinction inherent in many of the plays themselves.

PLOT AND *ĒTHOS* IN THE GREEK TRAGEDIES

Two plot outlines in the *Poetics* support the interpretation of the plot-character distinction argued for above.[66] In distinguishing plot from episode, Aristotle gives an outline of the plot of the *Odyssey* and of Euripides'

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phrase *ton anaxion dustuchounta* has social connotations See, for example, Heath, *Poetics*, 82–83, with notes Adkins, "Aristotle," 91–101, provides an excellent discussion of the social and "moral" connotations of this expression, though I do not agree with him about the discrepancy between Aristotle's views and those of the fifth century B C E

[66] An earlier version of the material in this section was included in Belfiore, "*Praxis*"

Iphigenia in Tauris [67] The "universal" (1455b2–3) of "the Iphigenia," the plot common to Euripides' and Polyidos's versions of the story, is as follows

> A certain girl after being sacrificed and disappearing from the view of those sacrificing her was settled in another land where the custom was to sacrifice strangers to the goddess, and she came to hold that priesthood A while later, it happened that the brother of the priestess arrived The fact that the oracle commanded him to go there, for some reason that is outside the universal, and his purpose [in going], are outside the plot [68] He arrived, was seized, and when about to be sacrificed, he made himself known, either as Euripides or Polyidos wrote it, saying, as was plausible, that not only his sister but he also had to be sacrificed Thence is salvation (17 1455b3–12)

This plot outline explicitly excludes any indication of choice "That the oracle commanded him to go there, for some reason that is outside the universal, and his purpose [in going], are outside the plot "

Aristotle's outline of the "story" (*logos*) of the *Odyssey*—its plot—also excludes *ēthos*

> The story of the *Odyssey* is not long A certain man is away from home for many years, carefully watched by Poseidon and alone Moreover, things at home are in such a state that his possessions are wasted by the suitors and his son is plotted against He himself arrives, storm-tossed, and making himself recognized by some, attacks and is himself saved while he destroys his enemies This is what is proper [to the story] the rest is episode (17 1455b16–23)

In this example also, *ēthos* is conspicuous by its absence Odysseus the versatile is simply "a man," while his villainous enemies are just "the suitors "

An excellent way of further illustrating and testing the interpretation of Aristotle's distinction between plot and *ēthos* argued for above is to apply it to three plays with the same basic plot Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra* If we base an outline of the plot common to all three plays on Aristotle's examples of the *Odyssey* and the

[67] On the plot-episode distinction, see chap 4 (Plausibility, Plot, and Episode) The importance of these two plot outlines for an understanding of Aristotle s view that there can be tragedy without *ethos* is noted by Catherine Lord, Character, 59 I discuss Aristotle s views on the *Iphigenia* plot in Belfiore, Iphigenia

[68] I adapt Janko s translation (*Poetics I*) of 1455b7–8 (τὸ δ’ ὅτι   μυθου), which makes excellent sense of the text, without the need for bracketing διὰ   καθολου, with Kassel

Iphigenia in Tauris plots, we will get something like this. "A woman has killed her husband, and now rules in his stead, along with her lover, who helped in the killing. She has, by her dead husband, a daughter, and a son, living in exile. The son returns from exile, makes himself known to his sister, and kills his mother and her lover."

This plot, common to each of the plays, tells us absolutely nothing about the "moral" quality of the act of Orestes in killing his mother. In fact, the plot is such that we cannot in principle determine this quality from his act alone. As a general rule, it is right to avenge one's father, and as a general rule, it is wrong to kill one's mother. However, the act of avenging one's father by killing one's mother presents ethical difficulties. Each play solves this dilemma in a different way, by attributing different motives and qualities to the agent, that is, by the use of *ēthos*.

In a passage early in the *Libation Bearers*, Orestes gives his reasons for choosing to commit matricide. They are the oracle, grief for his father, and the loss of his patrimony, which, he says, entails the servitude of the very men who sacked Troy (297–305). Of these, all praiseworthy motives, the oracle is by far the most important. When about to act, Orestes hesitates and asks Pylades, "What shall I do?" Pylades answers, "What of the oracle? Count all human beings as enemies except the god." Orestes answers, "You are right," and does the deed (899–904) These passages have *ēthos* in Aristotle's technical sense, for they indicate why something was chosen. Orestes' act is shown by the poet's use of *ēthos* to be justified, and it is vindicated by the gods in the *Eumenides*.

The motives of Orestes in Sophocles' *Electra* are very different. He also gives them in a speech early in the play. the desire to win fame, the desire to destroy his enemies, and the desire to regain his patrimony (59–72). He does *not* give as reasons an oracle, love of his father, or the desire to free his land from tyranny. We conclude (and other "ethical" speeches in the play bear this out) that Orestes' motives in this play do not justify matricide.

In Euripides' *Electra*, Orestes' motives in committing the murders are shown not by speech so much as by the circumstances attending his actions. Orestes kills Aigisthus during a sacrifice, and he kills Clytemnestra while she is preparing for a sacrifice. He brings Aigisthus's corpse to Electra and asks her to maltreat it as she wishes (895–99). He doubts the oracle (971) but does the deed anyway. All this shows a lack of concern for the gods and for human standards of decency. Such a man can have no motive for matricide that can justify the act. This is in fact what the Dioscuri tell Orestes: "She has received justice, but you did not act justly" (1244).

These examples show that Aristotle's distinction between plot and *ēthos* is, in spite of the theoretical difficulties noted above, useful for an analysis of the Greek tragedies themselves. The three plays analyzed here do seem to have plots that imitate an action without intrinsic "moral" qualities. The act is, in each case, given a different ethical "color" by *ēthos*, an indication of what kind of choice someone makes. This distinction will be useful for the studies, with which the next chapter is concerned, of the way in which the tragic plot moves between the end points of good and bad fortune, and of how plot differs from episode.

This chapter has discussed Aristotle's reasons for insisting that plot is more important than character (*ēthos*), and for making a strict distinction between these two qualitative parts of tragedy. Tragedy, he believes, arouses pity and fear in response to the movement of the plot between good and bad fortune in a primarily social and material sense. This emotional response is incompatible with praise or blame, which are responses to character.

Aristotle's views on *ēthos* are problematic for several reasons, however. First, he sometimes uses the term *ēthos*, "character," in the *Poetics* broadly and nontechnically to refer to character in a primarily social sense. The *spoudaioi* whose actions are imitated by tragedy have *ēthē* that are excellent in a social sense. However, Aristotle also uses *ēthos* in a technical sense to refer to one of the six qualitative parts of tragedy. *Ēthos* used thus is an indication of what kind of choice a dramatic agent makes. Other difficulties are created by Aristotle's failure to make an entirely clear and consistent distinction between the "moral" qualities indicated by *ēthos* in the technical sense and the social qualities connected with plot and good fortune. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not prevent Aristotle's distinction between plot and *ēthos* from being of great practical use as a tool for analyzing the plots of the actual Greek tragedies.