PURGATION OF PITYABLENESS
AND FEARFULNESS

I. Only with some trepidation can one make an entrance on a stage already crowded with characters of all sorts. One surely runs the risk of compounding matters further instead of bringing about their denouement. Yet I find myself obliged to take the role of arguing for a new solution to an old problem in the ‘Poetics’. The problem is indeed the very conundrum of the treatise. What is Aristotle’s conception of catharsis?¹

In modern times most scholars interpret catharsis as a psychological process. These scholars concern themselves with tragedy and its effect on the soul. They sometimes argue that tragedy purifies pity and fear in the soul. That is to say, it so refines these emotions that they cease to be painful and become pleasant². And sometimes they argue that tragedy purges pity and fear from the soul. That is, it removes an excess of these emotions and restores us to a normal condition³.

One modern scholar however interprets catharsis as a mythological process. He focuses his attention on tragedy and its myth. And he argues that tragedy purifies the pityableness and fearfulness imitated in its action. In other words, tragedy represents a pitiable and fearful action which is not morally foul⁴. I would also like to direct our attention to tragedy and its myth. But I wish to argue that tragedy purges the pityableness and fearfulness from its action. We shall see that tragedy of the most beautiful kind begins with a pitiable and fearful action but ends with an action no longer pitiable nor fearful⁵.

¹ Gudeman actually despair of finding a solution to the problem of catharsis. He feels that we do not have sufficient grounds for one. See A. G., Aristoteles: ΠΕΡΙ ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΗΣ (Berlin 1934), pp. 167–171.
⁵ Else argues that a tragic action cannot purge itself because its incidents cannot be purged out of the play (Else, p. 231). But I shall argue not that the incidents purge themselves out of the play, but that the incidents purge themselves of their pityableness and fearfulness.
II. Aristotle would appear to allow his argument in the ‘Poetics’ to unfold almost as a dramatist allows a dramatic action to unfold. Only if we attentively follow his argument and its development, can we see how he allows ambiguities concerning his conception of catharsis to resolve themselves. He in fact lays down a definition of tragedy which is perfectly ambiguous with regard to the question of whether catharsis is a psychological or a mythological process. As usually translated in modern languages, such as English, the definition can easily support a psychological interpretation: »A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions« (Poe. 6. 1449 b 24-28). The final clause clearly implies that the tragic action causes an audience to feel pity and fear, and that the tragic catharsis is a change felt by an audience in its emotions.

But a more recent translation shows that the definition can also support a mythological interpretation: »Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action which is serious, complete, and has bulk, in speech that has been made attractive, using each of its species separately in the parts of the play; with persons performing the action rather than through narrative, carrying to completion, through a course of events involving pity and fear, the purification of those painful or fatal acts which have that quality« (Poe. 6. 1449 b 24-28). The final clause now implies that the tragic action consists of events which are pitiable and fearful, and that the tragic catharsis is a change occurring in these events and their quality.

Aristotle begins to resolve this ambiguity concerning catharsis as soon as he considers what dramatic action is. Before he discusses tragic action specifically, he presents us with a discussion of dramatic action in general and its qualities. He suggests that the ambiguity ought to be resolved not in favor of the audience and its psychology but in favor of the myth and its action. For he asserts that a dramatic action has beauty when it has both a certain magnitude and a certain arrangement of its parts (Poe. 7. 1450 b 34-36). And he explains what arrangement of parts a beautiful action has. Since it is a whole, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end: »A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which is itself not of necessity after something else, but after which something else naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally is either of necessity or for the most part after something else, and after which nothing else is. A middle is that which both is itself after something else and after

6 Bywater's translation.
7 Else's translation.
8 The Greek terms which occasion these diametrically opposed translations are άλογος and χόμης. These terms may equally well mean either the emotions of pity and fear or the objects of pity and fear. Similarity άλογημα in its plural may mean either emotions or incidents.
which something else is» (Poe. 7. 1450 b 26–36). A beautiful action clearly has an arrangement of parts defined by the relationships among its parts.

He similarly explains what magnitude a beautiful action has. To be beautiful, a dramatic action cannot be minuscule, nor can an action of this sort be immense (Poe. 7. 1450 b 37–1451 a 3). But a beautiful action must have a length which can be remembered: «Just as it is necessary that systems or animals have a magnitude, and that this magnitude be easily seen, so too it is necessary that myths have a length, and that this length be easily remembered» (Poe. 7. 1451 a 3–6). He explains further what length can be remembered. The action must include events which result in a change of fortune: «To state abstractly what has been defined, a magnitude great enough for a series of incidents to result in a change from bad to good fortune or from good to bad fortune according to probability or necessity would be an adequate definition of magnitude» (Poe. 7. 1451 a 11–15). Clearly a beautiful action has a magnitude defined by the relationship among its parts (also see 1451 a 9–11).

A dramatic action would thus appear to be beautiful when it has certain relationships among its parts. The parts of such an action must constitute a whole which has a beginning, middle, and end, and they must have a magnitude which results in a change of fortune. When he further specifies the parts of a dramatic action, Aristotle also indicates that a tragic action has its specific beauty in the relationships of its parts. He argues that the parts of a dramatic action are recognition, reversal, and passion. And he obviously has tragic action in mind. For he states that passion is a destructive or painful action, such as death or great pain and harm (Poe. 11. 1452 b 10–13). But action of this sort is specific to tragedy (see again Poe. 6. 1449 b 24–28).

Aristotle argues more explicitly about tragic action when he turns to reversal and recognition. He defines reversal as a change in the action to the opposite: «A reversal is a change to the opposite in the actions being performed» (Poe. 11. 1452 a 22–23). A change in the action to the opposite would appear to be a change in fortune. He also defines recognition as a change. But a change of this kinds is from ignorance to knowledge: «Recognition, as the very name signifies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge and to friendship or enmity in those fated for good or bad fortune» (Poe. 11. 1452 a 29–32). The change from ignorance to knowledge appears to result in a change to friendship or enmity, for recognition is recognition of who someone is (Poe. 11. 1452 b 2–8).

Aristotle argues of course that reversal and recognition divide dramatic action into actions which are simple or complicated. A simple action has a change of fortune without reversal or recognition, but a complicated action has a change of fortune with recognition or reversal or both (Poe. 11. 1452 a 12–18). But more

9 My translations.
importantly for us Aristotle argues not only that reversal and recognition are parts of a dramatic action, but also that these incidents give dramatic action its tragic qualities. Both recognition and reversal are parts of a dramatic action. For these events occur in accordance with probability and necessity: »It is necessary that reversal and recognition come to be out of the very system of the myth so that these events result from the preceding events and come to be from necessity or according to probability« (Poe. 10. 1452 a 18–20). Aristotle is especially fond of the reversal in ‘Oedipus’. A messenger comes to remove Oedipus’s fear about his mother but instead confirms his fear: »And this ought to occur according to probability or necessity, as we said. It ought to occur as it does in ‘Oedipus’. The messenger comes to gladden Oedipus and to allay his fear about his mother but reveals who Oedipus is and brings about the opposite« (Poe. 11. 1452 a 23–26). He also cites the example of ‘Lyceus’. Apparently Lyceus is lead away to be executed, and Danaus follows to execute him. But as a result of previous events Danaus is executed and Lyceus saved (cf. Poe. 11. 1452 a 27–29). He appears to think that a recognition also ought to occur in accordance with probability and necessity. For he praises the recognition in ‘Oedipus’ because it occurs with the reversal: »Recognition is most beautiful when it comes to be with reversal, such as the one which the reversal in ‘Oedipus’ has« (Poe. 11. 1452 a 32–33). He makes this point explicitly when he discusses recognition and its kinds (see Poe. 16. 1455 a 16–19).

But Aristotle argues that when they occur in accordance with probability or necessity, recognition and reversal are incidents which make a dramatic action pitiable and fearful: »The best myth and the best action is the one mentioned. For a recognition and reversal of this sort will have either pitiableness or fearfulness, and tragedy was laid down to be an imitation of such actions« (Poe. 11. 1452 a 36–1452 b 1). The reference would have to be either to ‘Oedipus’ or to ‘Lyceus’, for these dramas were the ones mentioned. He also asserts that pitiable and fearful incidents result unexpectedly and yet for the sake of one another: »Since the imitation is not only of a complete action but also of pitiable and fearful incidents, these incidents come to be best when they come to be contrary to expectation and for the sake of one another« (Poe. 9. 1452 a 1–4). The recognition and reversal in Oedipus would be an incident of this sort. For it is contrary to expectation, and the previous incidents appear to occur for its sake.

And so we see that a dramatic action itself has tragic beauty. For a dramatic action which is complicated includes parts which are pitiable and fearful. An action of this sort exhibits recognition and reversal in accordance with probability and necessity. In a word, dramatic action has a beautiful form.

III. When he discusses tragic action specifically, Aristotle confirms our conclusion that beauty is a quality of a myth. But Aristotle also allows us to answer the question of whether catharsis is a purification or a purgation of myth. He
implies that catharsis is a purgation. For he argues that a tragedy is most beautiful when it purges itself of its pitiableness and fearfulness.

Aristotle states that he intends to resolve two questions concerned specifically with tragic action. He asks what must be sought in a myth and what must be the source of its function: «What it is necessary to aim at and what it is necessary to beware of in systematizing myths, and from what the function of tragedy comes, ought to be discussed after what has now been said» (Poe. 13. 1452 b 28–30). We shall see that what one ought to seek in a myth is pitiableness and fearfulness, and that what ought to be the source of its function is the purgation of these qualities.

Aristotle answers the question about what to seek and to avoid in a myth when he shows what makes an action tragic. He argues by elimination that an action of this kind represents someone falling from good to bad fortune because of an error. He implies that a protagonist ought not to rise from bad to good fortune. For a bad character ought not to go from bad fortune to good. An action of this type is the most untragic of all (Poe. 13. 1452 b 36–1453 a 1). And apparently a good character ought not to rise from bad to good fortune. An action of this sort would be more appropriate for comedy, which has a myth with a double ending. He cites the example of the ‘Odyssey’ (sic! Poe. 13. 1453 a 30–39; see also Poe. 17. 1455 b 15–23).

He also argues that a protagonist with extreme virtue or vice ought not to fall from good fortune to bad. An extremely good character ought not to pass from good to bad fortune. An action of this kind would be neither pitiable nor fearful but foul (Poe. 13. 1452 b 34–36). And an extremely bad character also ought not to pass from good to bad fortune. An action of this sort is neither pitiable nor fearful, though it does raise philanthropic emotion (1453 a 1–4).

Aristotle then concludes that a tragic action represents someone of an intermediate sort falling from good fortune to bad because of an error: «There remains a man, not distinguished in virtue or justice, who falls into bad fortune, not because of vice or depravity, but because of some error, and who is from a family of great fame and fortune» (Poe. 13. 1453 a 7–10). He cites the example of Oedipus again and that of Thyestes (1453 a 11–12).

When he eliminates the extremely bad protagonist, Aristotle explains why we feel pity and fear for someone who falls into bad fortune because of an error. Literally, he states that pity is for undeservedly falling into bad fortune, and that fear is for likeness: «The one emotion concerns the undeserved falling into bad fortune, and the other emotion concerns the likeness. Pity concerns the undeservedness, and fear concerns the likeness» (Poe. 13. 1453 a 4–6). He appears to mean that pity is for someone who undeservedly falls into bad fortune, and fear is for someone who bears a likeness, presumably, to ourselves. And the likeness would appear to be a capacity to err, for error is what distinguishes the tragic protagonist from the other characters.

We thus see that Aristotle specifies what change of fortune a tragedy ought to
imitate and what kind of character ought to undergo the change. And we also see
that a tragic action and character have qualities which make them pitiable and
fearful. But Aristotle has yet to answer the question about what the source of the
tragic function is. We do not yet know what catharsis is. Is catharsis purification or
purgation? To show what tragic action is most beautiful, Aristotle has to specify
further what action is pitiable and fearful. For he has to indicate what error causes a
tragic protagonist to fall from good fortune to bad. He argues again by elimination
that a tragic action represents someone killing or intending to kill a family member.
For a passionate action must occur among individuals who are either friends or
enemies to one another or indifferent to one another (Poe. 14. 1453 b 15–17). But
an action of this sort is not pitiable if it occurs between those who are enemies
(1453 b 17–18). Nor is it pitiable if it occurs between those who are indifferent
(1453 b 18–19). Aristotle concludes that a tragic action is pitiable and fearful if it
occurs among family members: «But when a passionate action occurs among
friends, when brother kills or intends to kill brother or does some other such deed,
or son father, or mother son, or son mother, these are the actions to be sought»
(Poe. 14. 1453 b 19–22). Obviously these protagonists themselves fall from good to
bad fortune when they kill a close family member.

Aristotle can now explain what source the tragic function has. For he can now
explain how tragedy has beauty, and how tragedy has a catharsis. He first divides
tragic actions into their species, and then he ranks them according to their beauty.
Actions which are tragic divide into four kinds. This division depends on whether
the protagonist acts or not and on whether the protagonist knows the antagonist or
not (see Poe. 14. 1453 b 36–37). A protagonist may act with full knowledge of who
an antagonist is. Medea is an example of a character who acts in this manner: «The
action may come to be in the way in which ancient poets made it happen. It may
come to be with knowledge and forethought, just as Euripides made Medea kill her
children» (Poe. 14. 1453 b 27–29). Or a protagonist may act without any knowledge
of who an antagonist is. Oedipus is an example of a character who acts in this way:
«Or the protagonist may perform the action, not knowing that he is doing some-
thing terrible, and only afterwards recognize the friendship, as Sophocles had
Oedipus act» (Poe. 14. 1453 b 29–31). And he cites the example of Telegonus too
(1453 b 31–34).

A protagonist may also intend to act without knowledge of who an antagonist
is. But he may fail to carry out his action because he recognizes who he is about to
harm: «And thirdly besides these actions a protagonist intending to harm someone
because of his ignorance may make a recognition before he acts» (Poe. 14. 1453 b
34–36). And finally a protagonist may also intend to act with full knowledge of who
an antagonist is and yet fail to do so (see Poe. 14. 1453 b 37–8). He gets cold feet, in
other words. Aristotle cites Haemon and Creon as examples of those who fail to act
in this way (see 1453 b 39–1454 a 2).

When he ranks these actions, Aristotle argues that an action of the worst kind
occurs when a protagonist intends to act with knowledge of an antagonist and yet does not act. An action of this kind is untragic and even foul: »Of these actions the worst is with cognizance to intend to act and not to act. It is foul, and it is not tragic. For it has no passion« (Poe. 14. 1453 b 37–39). An action of this sort appears to be untragic because the protagonist does not fall from good to bad fortune. He suffers only in intention, and his resolve is weak. This action is apparently foul because the protagonist intends to harm a family member with full knowledge of whom he would harm (see Poe. 14. 1454 a 2–4).

To perform a tragic action with full knowledge is next to the worst. Aristotle is rather brief about this possibility: »To act is second« (Poe. 14. 1454 a 2). An example of someone acting in this way would of course be Medea. An action of this sort would at least appear to be tragic. For Medea surely suffers when she murders her own children (see Poe. 13. 1453 a 23–30). But the action may still have an element of foulness about it. For Medea harms members of her family, knowing fully well whom she harms (see again Poe. 14. 1454 a 2–4).

A better action is to have the protagonist perform the tragic deed in ignorance and after having done it discover who the antagonist is: »What is better is that a character who is in ignorance acts and having acted, makes a recognition. For no foulness is present, and the recognition astounding« (Poe. 14. 1454 a 2–4). This action is both pitiable and fearful. It is pitiable because the protagonist suffers when he harms a member of his family. And it is fearful because the protagonist is mistaken about the person whom he harms (see again Poe. 13. 1453 a 4–6). And an action of this sort appears to have no foulness about it because the protagonist does not know whom he harms\(^{10}\).

But an action of the best kind occurs when the protagonist intends to perform a tragic deed without knowledge of the antagonist, but then does not perform the deed because he recognizes the person about to be harmed: »But the best is the last. I mean an action such as that in 'Cresphontes'. Merope intends to kill her son and does not kill him but recognizes him. And like that in 'Iphigneia'. The sister intends to kill her brother but does not do so. And like that in 'Helle'. The son intends to surrender his mother but recognizes her« (Poe. 14. 1454 a 4–1454 a 9). An action of this sort has an intention which is pitiable and fearful. For Merope apparently suffers because she intends to harm a family member in error. And she does not appear to be irresolute about her intention. But an action of this sort also ends without being pitiable and fearful. It ends without pity because Merope ceases to suffer. And it is without fear because she corrects her error\(^{11}\).

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\(^{10}\) Else would appear to be right to argue that tragic action ought not to be morally foul, and that the error of the protagonist purifies the action of this quality (Else, pp. 423–425).

\(^{11}\) Else fails to see that only tragedy of the last kind has a catharsis. He believes that Aristotle prefers tragedy of this sort because a tragic deed only intended has more purity than one carried out (Else, pp. 450–452).
Perhaps a matrix suggested by Aristotle’s distinctions might be helpful:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Intended</th>
<th>Intended</th>
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<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>not Executed</td>
<td>and Executed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absent during Intention or Execution</td>
<td>Haemon and Creon</td>
<td>Medea</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Merope</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
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The column on the left represents a destructive or painful action which is intended but not carried out. The column on the right represents a destructive or painful action which is intended and carried out. The top row represents an action undertaken with knowledge of the antagonist. And the bottom row represents an action undertaken without knowledge of the antagonist.

An action represented by the upper left quadrant is the least beautiful. This action is untragic and foul. The action is foul because the protagonist intends to kill someone known to be a family member. And it is untragic because this character does not carry out the intended action. An action represented by the upper right quadrant has some beauty. Though it remains foul, this action has pitiableness. For a protagonist who knowingly kills a family member surely suffers. The action does not appear to be fearful, however. For the protagonist who acts in this way makes no error about who the antagonist is. And fearfulness appears to lie in the capacity of the protagonist for error (see again Poe. 13. 1453 a 4–6).

An action which the lower right quadrant represents has more beauty. For this action is both pitiable and fearful. It portrays a protagonist falling from good to bad fortune. And this fall occurs because of an error. For the protagonist does not know who he harms. But the most beautiful action is that represented by the lower left quadrant. This action is not only tragic, but it is also cathartic. The action has pitiableness and fearfulness because the protagonist is falling into misfortune through his error. And the action purges itself of its pitiableness and fearfulness because the protagonist corrects the error through his action and consequently does not fall into bad fortune.
We thus see how Aristotle resolves the ambiguities present in his argument. His argument shows how a beautiful myth brings about a catharsis of its tragic qualities. A tragic action which is complicated brings about a purgation of its pitiableness and fearfulness through its recognition and reversal.

IV. Now someone who favors the psychological interpretation of catharsis might wish to raise an objection. In the ‘Politics’ Aristotle clearly argues that a catharsis is a psychological process. And though he does not discuss drama, he does refer us to the ‘Poetics’ for a full discussion of catharsis.

What Aristotle argues is that music can serve to effect a catharsis in its audience. Musical melodies divide into ethical, practical, and enthusiastic modes (Pol. 8. 7. 1341 b 32–36). These modes have different functions, and one function is catharsis: »We say that it is necessary to make use of music not for the sake of one benefit but for many. For we may use it for the sake of education and of catharsis. We now speak abstractly about what catharsis is, but later in the ‘Poetics’ we shall ask for more clarity. Thirdly music can serve for a pastime« (Pol. 8. 7. 1341 b 36–40). And he explicitly states that music can cause a catharsis of pity and fear: »For recitals of performances by others the pragmatic and enthusiastic modes are useful. For that which occurs strongly in some souls, this also exists in all. The difference is one of more and less. All people have passions such as pity and fear and also enthusiasm. And some people are capable of being possessed by these very motions. But whenever they use melodies to enflam the soul, we also see these people settled down by sacred melodies as if they had hit upon a cure and a catharsis. It is necessary that those capable of feeling pity and fear and those capable of feeling the passions generally undergo this very same thing. And so do others as far as it falls to each one to be of this sort. In all people there comes to be some catharsis, and they are uplifted with pleasure. Similarly the practical melodies grant an innocent delight to human beings« (Pol. 8. 7. 1342 a 3–16). He would thus appear to suggest that tragedy effects a catharsis in its audience as does music.

Now I would not wish to deny that tragedy has an effect on its audience. Nor would I deny that tragedy has a cathartic effect on its audience. What I do deny is that any psychological effect of tragedy presents a problem for poetics. The poetic problem is what the source of a psychological effect is (see again Poe. 13. 1452 b 28–30).

Aristotle himself implies that the tragic effect has its source in tragic action. For he argues that this effect ought to come from the action of a drama rather than the spectacle: »Pitiableness and fearfulness may come to be from the spectacle. But they may also come to be from the system of actions itself. This very thing indicates superiority and a better poet. For it is necessary that the myth be systematized so that without seeing it someone hearing the actions come to be would feel both pity and fear from what happens. This very thing someone hearing the myth of Oedipus
would feel«. (Poe. 14. 1453 b 1–7). He also states that the tragic pleasure ought to
be built into a tragic action: «Since it is necessary that the poet provides the tragic
pleasure by means of imitation through pitiable and fearful events, it is obvious
that this must be made into the actions» (Poe. 14. 1453 b 11–14). I would add that
to provide pleasure by means of an action imitated is to make an action pleasur-
able. And that to effect a catharsis of pity and fear, a tragic action must bring
about a catharsis of its pitiableness and fearfulness\textsuperscript{12}.

The problem for poetics then is how a tragic action can bring about a
mythological catharsis of its pitiableness and fearfulness. And a tragic action
brings about a catharsis of this sort through recognition and reversal, as we have
seen. But of course a mythological catharsis in a tragedy has a capacity to effect a
psychological catharsis in an audience. A purgation of pitiableness and fearfulness
in a tragic action can effect a purgation of pity and fear in a tragic audience.
And this psychological purgation of tragic emotion is what Aristotle calls tragic
pleasure\textsuperscript{13}.

Someone might also wish to object that on our interpretation tragedy repres-
ents a protagonist raising from bad to good fortune, and that it has a happy
ending. But Aristotle explicitly argues that tragedy represents a character falling
from good to bad fortune, and that comedy has a happy ending.

We would reply that on our account tragedy does represent a character falling
from good fortune to bad. For tragedy of the best kind portrays a protagonist
about to kill a family member. It simply does not end in bad fortune. But comedy
appears to represent a character raising from bad fortune to good. At least Aris-
totle gives us an example of a comic action of this sort. Odysseus struggles to
overcome bad fortune and to attain good fortune (see again Poe. 17. 1455 b
15–23). We would also point out that a tragedy which has an unhappy ending
need not be the best tragedy, though it is the most tragic. Aristotle makes this
distinction in a remark about Euripides. He admits that Euripides is the tragedian
who is most tragic because his dramas have unhappy endings. But he also severe-
ly criticizes Euripides for «not treating other matters well» (Poe. 13. 1453 a
23–30). And he ranked Medea next to the worst tragedy, as we have seen (see
again Poe. 14. 1454 a 2).

Finally, someone might object that the drama most favored by contemporary

\textsuperscript{12} Else also argues that the tragic catharsis differs from the tragic function. Aristotle, he
asserts, nowhere states or implies that tragic catharsis is the end of tragedy (Else, pp. 439–440).

\textsuperscript{13} Though we do not agree that the tragic catharsis is the tragic effect, we thus do agree with
Bywater that the tragic effect is a psychological purgation of pity and fear. And we can accept his
analysis of a purgation of this sort (Bywater, pp. 152–159). Else frankly admits that he cannot
explain Aristotle’s psychological analysis of catharsis (Else, pp. 441–443). And he provides
instead an analysis of a psychological process of purification (pp. 447–450).

On aesthetic psychology one might also consider M. Packer, The Conditions of Aesthetic
audiences is only second best on our account. I refer to ‘Oedipus’. In fact Aristotle himself praises ‘Oedipus’ quite highly. He does not appear to miss a chance to cite the play favorably.

We would answer that Sophocles chose material which had poetic limitations. For he chose a traditional myth in which a son kills his father. And Aristotle asserts that a traditional myth ought to retain its traditional ending: «In any event the traditional myths ought not to be resolved. For example, I mean that Clytaemnestra ought to be killed by Orestes and Eriphyle by Alcmeon» (Poe. 14. 1453 b 22–25). All that a poet can do is to treat a traditional myth beautifully: «But it is necessary that the poet himself discover how to use the traditional myths beautifully» (Poe. 14. 1453 b 25–26). To use these myths beautifully is to incorporate a recognition and reversal into their action (see again Poe. 14. 1454 a 2–4). Sophocles accordingly did the best he could with the myth that he had. He used a recognition and reversal, when he represented Oedipus falling from good fortune to bad because of his error about who Laius was. To create a tragedy of the most beautiful kind, he might have chosen a traditional myth that had a resolution. Or he might have invented an entirely new myth for his play (see Poe. 9. 1451 b 15–26).

V. We may conclude then that a tragedy of the most beautiful sort has an action which effects a purgation of its pitiableness and fearfulness through recognition and reversal. And with the hope that this argument might bring about a resolution for the conundrum of catharsis, I take my exit.

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