

# ARISTOTLE ON COMEDY

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## I

The reader may smile at the prospect of yet another attempt to determine how Aristotle conceives of comedy. But, rest assured, I shall do my best not to cut a ridiculous figure. Indeed, I do not to claim to have discovered what theory of comedy Aristotle proposes or even what definition of comedy he offers. The textual evidence for these endeavors is simply too scanty.

I propose a more modest goal. My hope is to present what might be more likely than not the key element in Aristotle's definition. This element is the concept of comic action and its catharsis. I shall draw a parallel between tragedy and comedy. This parallel will show that the tragic qualities of an action and their catharsis rest on ethical presuppositions that can also serve the comic qualities of an action and their catharsis. My contention, in short, shall be that both a pitiable and fearful action and a ridiculous and shameful action can have a capacity to function in a manner surprisingly and profoundly similar.

## II

We might first recall how Aristotle distinguishes tragedy from comedy. We shall then be able to see how drama, though divided into forms so clearly dissimilar, yet contains in these very forms an obvious, but overlooked, similarity. Tragedy and comedy clearly imitate different objects. Human character is either serious (*σπουδαίους*) or frivolous (*φούλους*), Aristotle argues. The distinction between virtue (*ἀρετῆ*) and vice (*κακία*) divides us all (*Poetics* 2. 1448a1-4). The characters in a drama must thus be "better (*βελτίονας*) or worse (*χείρονας*) than us or such (*τοιούτους*) as us" (1448a4-5). Tragedy represents better characters and comedy worse characters (1448a16-18).

I wish to argue, however, that tragedy and comedy portray characters less different from each other and more like us than this initial distinction might suggest. Consider, first, the tragic character. Aristotle argues explicitly that a tragedy ought not to represent excellent characters (*τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς ἀνδρας*) falling from good fortune into bad fortune. An imitation of this kind is neither pitiable nor fearful (*Poetics* 13. 1452b34-36). Nor would a tragedy be a tragedy if it were to represent an extremely knavish character (*τὸν σφόδρα πονηρὸν*) falling into bad fortune (1452b36-1453a4).

A tragedy ought rather to represent an intermediate character (*ὁ μεταξὺ*), he explains (*Poetics* 13. 1453a7). Its protagonist is neither distinguished in virtue or

justice, nor is he vicious or depraved. But he does make a mistake:

He is of such sort that, not distinguished in virtue or justice, he is falling into bad fortune, not because of a vice or depravity, but because of a mistake (δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά), and he is from a family of great fame and good fortune (*Poetics* 13. 1453a7-10; also 1453a13-17).

That is why, Aristotle remarks, dramatists composed the most beautiful tragedies of his day about a few houses, such as those of Alcmeon, Oedipus, or Orestes, for example (*Poetics* 13. 1453a11-12,17-22).

Our tragic protagonist would thus appear to be someone with a character more similar to ours than we might have anticipated. That is to say, a tragic protagonist is neither extraordinarily good nor extremely bad. But he or she is someone who, though not entirely without virtue, can and does err.<sup>1</sup>

Who, then, is the comic character? Might he or she possibly be more similar to us than we initially thought? When he distinguishes drama of this kind, Aristotle reminds us that comic characters are of the more frivolous sort (φαιλοτέρων) (*Poetics* 5. 1449a32-33). But these characters are not frivolous in accordance with any vice (οὐ . . . κατὰ πᾶσαν κακίαν), he explains (1449a33). They are ridiculous, he implies, and they are ridiculous because of a mistake:

The ridiculous (τὸ . . . γελοῖόν . . .) is a mistake (ἁμαρτημά . . .) and a thing shameful (αἰσχρός) but painless and not destructive (ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν) (*Poetics* 5. 1449a34-35).

We shall soon see, as the last clause suggests, that a comic error differs from a tragic one in that a tragic error is either destructive or painful but a comic error is neither painful nor destructive.<sup>2</sup>

The comic character, like the tragic, would thus appear to be of an intermediate sort, too. He is clearly not a person distinguished because of his virtue. Aristotle does not even bother with this possibility. Nor is he someone who stands out because of his vice. As is a tragic character, so is a comic character, though perhaps with a vice or two, apt to commit an error.<sup>3</sup>

What, then, might a ridiculous error be? My conjecture is that comedy portrays a character rising from bad fortune to good because of a mistake. I would hope that the humor in this conjecture, if it proves true, is obvious enough. Unfortunately, Aristotle only briefly discusses comic action and its change of fortune when he compares dramas with a single action to those with a double action (*Poetics* 13. 1453a30-32). He argues that a composition with a double action yields a pleasure more appropriate for comedy (ἡδονὴ . . . μᾶλλον τῆς κωμωδίας οἰεῖα) (1453a35-36).

His example is the *Odyssey*. This poem, he explains, brings about opposite endings (τελευτῶσα ἐξ ἐναντίας) for better and worse characters (*Poetics* 13. 1453a32-33). Obviously, Odysseus rises from bad fortune to good, and the suitors fall from good

fortune to bad (see *Poetics* 17. 1455b16-23). But how could the *Odyssey* be a comedy? I would suggest not that this poem is a comedy, but that it does have a comic aspect. What is comic about the poem is the fact that the main action ends in good fortune. After his misadventures, Odysseus does manage to find his way home.

My suggestion rests on Aristotle's own explanation. In a comedy, he tells us, the bitterest enemies, such as Orestes and Aegisthus, "become friends in the end and walk off together, and nobody is killed by anybody" (*Poetics* 13. 1453a36-39). This hypothetical play would end in good fortune for both Orestes and Aegisthus, presumably because of their newfound friendship. A comic playwright of any talent could take an action of this kind and make of it a drama that would no doubt be hilarious.<sup>4</sup>

We see, then, that tragic and comic protagonists, though better or worse than us, do nonetheless bear an important similarity to us. A character of either kind makes a mistake. But tragic and comic characters do not make a mistake of the same kind. The one issues in an action taking a character from good fortune to bad, and the other in an action going from bad fortune to good. Or so I propose to argue.

### III

I now shall, in fact, ask what action might be pitiable and fearful, and what action ridiculous and shameful. Let us begin again with tragedy and its mistake. Aristotle implies that a tragic mistake issues in suffering. Suffering (πάθος), he argues, is a part of tragic action (*Poetics* 11. 1452b9-10). It is "an action either destructive or painful (πρᾶξις φθαρτικῆ ἢ ὀδυνηρά)." An action of this kind entails "deaths and severe pains and wounds and anything of such sort" (1452b11-13).

But how could suffering be an action? one might wonder. Aristotle suggests that suffering can be an action rather than a mere passion when he specifies more fully what tragic action is. He asserts that a tragedian ought to seek out actions in which agents inflict death or pain on their family members:

When the sufferings (τὰ πάθη) occur among friends, as when brother kills or intends to kill brother or does some other such thing, or son father or mother son or son mother, these are the actions to be sought (*Poetics* 14. 1453b19-22).

Surely, no one would deny that a protagonist would suffer grievously if he or she were to kill a sibling or a parent or a child.<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle explains explicitly why an action of this kind is pitiable and fearful. We feel pity for someone who suffers undeserved bad fortune, he implies, and fear we feel for someone who is like us:

The one emotion concerns an undeserved (περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον) falling into bad fortune, and the other emotion concerns a likeness (περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον). Pity (ἔλεος) concerns the undeservedness, and fear

(φόβος) the likeness (*Poetics* 13. 1453a4-6).

The obvious implication is that we feel pity for a protagonist who does not deserve to fall into bad fortune, and we feel fear for a protagonist who is like us.

Why, then, does a tragic protagonist suffer undeservedly? He or she makes a serious mistake. The mistake issues in action that entails murdering or inflicting pain on a person near and dear. How is a tragic protagonist like us? Again, he or she makes a serious mistake. We, I presume, have not murdered or maimed a family member. But we could quite possibly inflict death or pain on someone dear to us if we were so unfortunate as to commit an error of this dire sort.

Pity and fear both, I would conclude, are emotions that concern a person engaged in an action either destructive or painful. Pity and fear are very similar, and they differ only with regard to the qualities in a person who suffers something destructive or painful. Pity we feel for the mere fact that someone is suffering undeservedly, and fear we feel for the fact that someone undeservedly suffering resembles us. We might ourselves make a similar mistake and suffer in a similar way.<sup>6</sup>

In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle confirms our conclusion. He asserts with his definition that we feel pity for something destructive or painful that happens to someone undeservedly:

Let pity (ἔλεος) be a pain felt at the appearance of a bad thing (κακῶ), destructive or painful (φθαρτικῶ ἢ λυπηρῶ), happening to someone who does not deserve it (τοῦ ἀναξίτου). . . (*Rhetoric* 2. 8. 1385b13-14).

He does not explain why someone suffers undeservedly. But may we not reasonably assume that someone might so suffer because of a mistake?

Fear he defines as an emotion that arises at the mere thought of something destructive or painful:

Let fear (φόβος) be a pain or distress arising from an image of something bad (κακοῦ), destructive or painful (φθαρτικοῦ ἢ λυπηροῦ), that is going to happen (*Rhetoric* 2. 5. 1382a20-21).

In this passage he does not state that one does not deserve the destructive or painful thing about to happen. But, surely, some fearful things might arise undeservedly because of an error.

We can see, then, that we feel both pity and fear for something destructive or painful, and that this destructive or painful thing could easily result from an error. But pity we feel for suffering that is happening, and fear we feel for suffering that is about to happen.

Unfortunately, Aristotle also suggests in the *Rhetoric* that we feel pity for another and fear not for another but for ourselves. He asserts explicitly, ". . . whatever is feared when it happens to ourselves, when it happens to another, occasions pity" (*Rhetoric* 2.

8. 1386a27-29). He again states, "Simply put, the fearful is anything that is pitiable when it is happening or is going to happen to another " (*Rhetoric* 2. 5. 1382b24-26).

Yet Aristotle does allow that we may feel fear for another. We can, he explains, pity persons known to us if they are not too closely related:

People pity (ἐλεοῦσι) those whom they know if they are not very closely related (μὴ σφόδρα ἐγγύς ὧσιν οἰκειότητι) (*Rhetoric* 2. 8. 1386a18-19).

If they are too closely related, we feel for them as we feel for ourselves:

We feel for those very closely related as if for ourselves (ὥσπερ περὶ αὐτοῦς . . .) when something is going to happen to them (*Rhetoric* 2. 8. 1386a19-20).

What we feel for ourselves is, of course, fear.

He takes his example from Herodotus. Amasis did not weep when he saw his own son led to death, but when he saw a friend of his begging, he did weep. He felt not pity but fear for his son, and he felt not fear but pity for his friend (*Rhetoric* 2. 8. 1386a20-22). Obviously, he is more closely related to his son than he is to his friend. The fact that he felt fear for his son prevented him from pitying him (1386a22-24).<sup>7</sup>

Why, then, do we feel both pity and fear for a tragic protagonist? Pity, recall, we feel for someone who suffers undeservedly what we might suffer, and fear we feel for someone who resembles us. We feel pity and fear both, I submit, when someone who suffers undeservedly resembles us but not too closely. We feel both emotions for someone who resembles us in a capacity to err.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV

I now wish to argue that a ridiculous and shameful action is amenable to an analysis similar in its fundamentals to our analysis of a pitiable and fearful action. My contention shall be that we feel ridicule for undeserved ill repute and shame for a likeness to us. I shall assume that a disreputable action, even if mistaken, can bring someone good fortune.

We must, then, ask, What is ridiculous and what is shameful? Unfortunately, we now find ourselves facing a tattered text silent on these very points. Aristotle does not define these qualities in the extant *Poetics*. But he does make mention of them. He states that comedy imitates the ridiculous when he reminds us that it represents people who are more frivolous (*Poetics* 5. 1449a32-33). In the same breath he also asserts quite explicitly that the ridiculous is a species of the shameful:

Of the shameful (τοῦ αἰσχροῦ) the ridiculous (τὸ γελοῖον) is a part (μῦριον) (*Poetics* 5. 1449a33-34; also see 1449a34-35).

He then states, we have seen, that the ridiculous is "a mistake and a thing shameful but painless and not destructive" (*Poetics* 5. 1449a34-35).

We might ask, then, how the ridiculous could be shameful. Aristotle presents what appears to be only a preliminary explanation. He offers the comic mask as an example of something both ridiculous and shameful:

For example, a ridiculous mask (τὸ γελοῖον πρόσωπον) is at once shameful (αἰσχρόν) and contorted without being painful (*Poetics* 5. 1449a36-37).

This example would imply that a ridiculous countenance, which a comic mask would represent with its exaggerations, could somehow be shameful.

Why might the ridiculous be shameful, then? Perhaps we ought now to ask what the shameful is. Though he does not do so in the *Poetics*, Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* does define shame for us:

Let shame (αἰσχύνη) be a pain or distress about the appearance of ill repute (εἰς ἀδοξίαν) borne by bad things, either happening, having happened, or going to happen (*Rhetoric* 2. 6. 1383b 12-14).

May we not assume that one might bring ill repute upon oneself because of a shameful mistake?

But what does this definition of shame tell us about ridicule? The definition itself does not tell us anything. But Aristotle makes a remark in his discussion of shame that hints at what ridicule might be. He suggests that what we could also feel shame for, is what others would ridicule us for. His remark concerns the people before whom we feel shame, and among these people he includes satirists and comic playwrights:

We also feel shame before those who spend their time preoccupied with the mistakes (ταῖς . . . ἁμαρτίαις) of their fellows, such as satirists (χλευασταῖς) and comic poets (κωμωδοποιῶτες). For these sorts speak ill and tell tales (*Rhetoric* 2. 6. 1384b9-10).

Aristotle clearly implies that comic playwrights take the shameful, at least in part, to be ridiculous (*Poetics* 5. 1449a32-34). Satirists surely concern themselves with ridicule, too.

With this observation Aristotle suggests that a dramatic action with comic qualities bears significant similarities to an action with tragic qualities. These similarities permit us to draw an analogy between the tragic and the comic emotions. Our analogy turns on the qualities of the protagonists. A comic and a tragic protagonist both suffer undeservedly because of their error, and both tragic and comic protagonists resemble us because of their error.

We may, therefore, infer, I would think, that as we feel pity for someone who suffers undeservedly from an action involving pain or death, so we feel ridicule for someone who suffers undeservedly from an action entailing ill repute. And as we feel fear for someone who bears a likeness to us, so we also feel shame for someone who is like us.<sup>9</sup>

Aristotle offers other observations about shame that confirm our analogy between the tragic and comic emotions. In the *Ethics* he actually asserts, using a synonym, that shame is a species of fear. He does so when he argues that shame is not a virtue but a passion:

About shame (αἰδοῦς) one ought not to speak of it as a virtue. A passion it would seem to be rather than a habit. It is therefore defined as a fear (φόβος) of ill repute (ἄδοξία) (*Ethics* 4. 9. 1128b10-12).

He explains further that shame and fear both appear to be bodily, which pertains to a passion rather than to a habit, because they both give rise to changes in color (*Ethics* 4. 9. 1128b10-15).<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle does not argue that ridicule is a species of pity, unfortunately. But he does imply that the ridiculous might resemble the pitiable in an important respect. As the pitiable, when it happens to someone who resembles us closely, can be fearful, so the ridiculous, when it happens to someone close to us, can be shameful.

What he asserts explicitly is that we feel shame before people for whom we would feel shame:

On the whole people feel shame before those for whom they themselves would be ashamed (ὕπερ ὧν αἰσχύνονται αὐτοί) (*Rhetoric* 2. 6. 1385a4).

The people before whom and for whom we feel shame are those who look up to us, those whom we have taught or advised, and those "others like us" (ἕτεροι ὅμοιοι) with whom we compete (*Rhetoric* 2. 6. 1385a5-7).

With this assertion he implies not only that we can feel shame before others, but also that we can feel shame for others. But those for whom and before whom we feel shame bear a likeness to us. If they look up to us, they would wish to make themselves resemble us to some extent. We would wish to make them resemble us in some regard if we teach or advise them. And if we compete with them, they are explicitly like us.

We thus find a similarity of significance between shame and fear. We may apparently feel not ridicule but shame for another who bears a close resemblance to us, as we may feel not pity but fear for another who closely resembles us. Aristotle explicitly notes that we feel shame for those whom we care about:

. . . it is necessary to be ashamed (αἰσχύνεσθαι) about bad things of any sort such that they seem to be shameful (αἰσχρὰ) for ourselves or for those for whom we exercise practical wisdom (ὧν φροντίζει) (*Rhetoric* 2. 6. 1383b16-18).

Those for whom we take thought would surely include our own relatives.

If I were to hazard a definition, I would declare that ridicule is a pain or distress felt at the appearance of a bad thing bringing about ill repute for another. We thus feel

ridicule for another and shame for ourselves and those close to us, as we feel pity for another and fear for ourselves and those close to us. But we feel ridicule or shame because of a mistake causing ill repute, and pity or fear we feel because of a mistake causing death or severe pain.

But comedy, if my hypothesis is correct, has the capacity to occasion both ridicule and shame, as tragedy can occasion both pity and fear. We can now see why. A comedy has this capacity if the person for whom we feel its emotions bears a likeness to us but not too close a likeness. In fact, a comic protagonist resembles us only because he or she is liable to err. We may ridicule comic characters, then, because they are not intimates of ours, but we may also feel shame for them because their error is all too human.

## V

One might wonder, given these fundamental similarities, whether comedy can, as can tragedy, have a catharsis of its action. If my analysis is correct, comedy would appear to represent a frivolous character rising undeservedly from bad fortune to good because of a mistake that is at once ridiculous and shameful. Would Aristotle not likely argue that a playwright would make a comedy most beautiful if its action were to bring about a catharsis of its shameful and ridiculousness? After all, he does imply that a tragedy is most beautiful if its action includes a catharsis of its pitiable and fearful qualities.

I shall begin once again with tragedy, and ask how a tragedian can compose an action that brings about a catharsis of its pitiable and fearful qualities. We have already seen that a tragic action contains three parts, and that one part is suffering. This part consists in a protagonist murdering or maiming someone close to him or her. That an unfortunate event of this destructive or painful sort is the source of our pity and fear, we have also seen.

But a tragic action has two other parts. These parts are recognition and reversal, and they are, Aristotle rather clearly implies, the source of the tragic catharsis. What, then, are recognition and reversal? How can these events have the capacity to bring about a catharsis of pity and fear?

With his definition Aristotle suggests that a recognition is a change in knowledge and feeling about a character:

Recognition (ἀναγνώρισις), as the name signifies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge (ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν), and either to friendship or to enmity, in those destined for good fortune or bad fortune (*Poetics* 11. 1452a29-32).

We find an obvious example in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Oedipus discovers the unfortunate fact that Laius is his father, and that Jocasta is his mother (see *Poetics* 11. 1452a32-33). As a consequence he feels affection for the man whom he has slain and revulsion for the woman whom he has married.<sup>11</sup>



A reversal, Aristotle implies, is a change of fortune in the action:  
 Reversal (περιπέτεια) is a change to the opposite (εἰς τὸ ἐναντίον)  
 in the things being done . . . (*Poetics* 11. 1452a22-23).

We find again in *Oedipus* an example. Oedipus not only discovers who his parents are, but he obviously finds, though after the fact, that his fortune has changed from good to bad (*Poetics* 11. 1452a24-26).

How, then, do recognition and reversal have the capacity to bring about a catharsis of the pitiableness and fearfulness in an action? A recognition can purge a tragic action of its suffering when it brings about a reversal. A protagonist who unknowingly intends to murder or to harm a parent or sibling would surely cease to do so if he or she discovers that the intended victim is a father or mother or a brother or sister. Hence, an action initially one of suffering ceases to be pitiable and fearful. It purges itself of its tragic qualities.

Unfortunately, the example of Oedipus cannot serve to illustrate tragic catharsis. Oedipus discovers only too late who his parents are, and he cannot undo his murder and marriage. In the play he is not merely intending to perform but has already performed an act of suffering. Hence, his discovery can no longer purge his action of its tragic qualities. He cannot stop himself from doing what he has already done. But his recognition, through its new knowledge, clearly brings to light a reversal in his fortune. He learns that he has fallen irretrievably into bad fortune.

Aristotle gives us only three examples of dramas that would appear to have a catharsis. These examples show that a recognition with a reversal can purge a tragic action of its pitiableness and fearfulness. Only one example, *Iphigenia in Taurus*, is an extant tragedy. In this play Iphigenia intends to sacrifice her brother, but she does not do so after she discovers who he is. The two examples no longer extant are *Cresphontes* and *Helle*. In the one Merope is going to put her son to death but does not do so when she discovers who he is, and a son in the other is about to hand over his mother but discovers who she is before he does so (*Poetics* 14. 1454a5-9).<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle does not explicitly conclude, I must concede, that a tragedy with a recognition and a reversal has a purgation of its pitiableness and fearfulness. But he does clearly imply that a tragedy is at its best (κράτιστον) when its recognition brings about a reversal (*Poetics* 14. 1454a4-9). And so I would ask, would not the best tragedy have a purgation of the tragic qualities in its action? Only a tragedy with a purgation of this kind, I would urge, would have a capacity to purge pity and fear in its audience (see *Poetics* 1. 1447a8-13; *Poetics* 13. 1452b29-30).<sup>13</sup>

Why, then, could not a comedy also have a recognition and a reversal? Could a comic protagonist not discover who another character is, and could this discovery not bring about a change of fortune? I would think so. After all, a comic protagonist is performing a shameful and ridiculous action because of a mistake, and a recognition allows a protagonist to correct the mistake.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, I am not aware of any examples of recognition or reversal in the

extant comedies of the classical period. Perhaps Aristotle would criticize Aristophanes for his plays in a manner not unlike that in which he criticizes Euripides. Euripides appears to be, he tells us, "the most tragic of poets." Though they are not well managed, "many plays of his end in bad fortune," he explains (*Poetics* 13. 1453a23-30). A tragic play that ends in bad fortune would most likely lack recognition and reversal.

And so Aristophanes would appear to be the most comic of dramatists. His plays lack recognition and reversal, and they almost always end in good fortune of some madcap variety. Consider, for example, the *Lysistrata*. The women of this play refuse to have conjugal relations with their husbands and bring about a desperate truce between Athens and Sparta and an end to the Peloponnesian War.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, we do find examples of comic catharsis in modern comedy. Someone who philosophizes in English can find ready examples in William Shakespeare. Shakespearean comedy, however, differs from the Aristophanic variety in that it is an imitation not merely of one action but of many actions (see *Poetics* 8.). We consequently find that recognition and reversal may be parts of some actions only, and that they may be parts either of main actions or of minor actions.<sup>16</sup>

*Comedy of Errors* comes to mind at once. This play imitates actions that revolve around two sets of identical twins who are masters and servants, the one set to the other, but who have each lost their twin. The twins of both sets turn up in the same city, and they themselves and other characters repeatedly mistake the one twin of a set for the other. Their mistakes result in actions that actually are or are apparently instances of injustice, infidelity, or insanity. Only when the twins all end up together in the same place, do the twins and others recognize each twin for whom he is, and their actions lose their apparent or actual shamefulness.

I would conclude, then, that a dramatic action can purge itself of its poetic qualities, whether they are comic or a tragic. Through a recognition and reversal a tragic action can purge its pitiableness and fearfulness, and similarly a comic action can also purge its ridiculousness and shamefulness through a recognition and reversal.

## VI

My reader may harbor an objection. How can comedy be pleasurable if it is an imitation of an action that is shameful? After all, shame is a painful or distressful emotion. If I am right, ridicule, too, is painful or stressful. It is, according to Aristotle, a species of shame. Ridicule can in fact be rather harsh and lead to mockery and scorn. I submit that we most frequently ridicule those whose conduct makes us feel uncomfortable or ill at ease.

We might as well ask the perennial question, How can tragedy be pleasurable if it imitates a pitiable and fearful action. Fear is obviously a painful emotion, and so, too, is pity. We feel fear for something destructive or painful that is going to happen to us or ours, and pity we feel for something destructive or painful happening to others. In fact, pity and fear for most people are probably more painful than ridicule and shame.

My response lies in the fact that drama, tragic or comic, is, after all is said and

done, an imitation only. The actors on stage perform an action only as if they were doing the object imitated (*Poetics* 3. 1448a23-24). Simply put, they do not actually do something harmful to someone near to them, nor do they actually do something shameful. Aristotle explains that we take pleasure in these dramatic imitations. We enjoy making imitations, and that we enjoy observing them (*Poe.* 4. 1448b4-7 and 8-12). We learn from doing and seeing imitations, and by nature we each and every one find learning pleasant (1448b7-8 and 12-19).

A reader might offer yet another objection. We would appear to have subverted the distinction between tragedy and comedy and to have converted tragedy into comedy and comedy into tragedy. Tragedy ought to imitate a protagonist falling from good fortune into bad, but our concept of catharsis suggests that it imitates an action ending in good fortune. And comedy imitates, or so I have claimed, a protagonist rising from bad fortune to good, but its catharsis, on our hypothesis, would have it end in bad fortune.

I happily respond that tragedy remains tragic and comedy comic. Tragedy does imitate an action that is destructive or painful. Its protagonist, because of a serious mistake, is falling from good fortune to bad. A tragic catharsis only brings about a *dénouement* in the action. Its protagonist corrects the mistake and does not fall into bad fortune by harming an intimate. But neither does he or she rise to good fortune, unless not falling into bad fortune is good fortune.

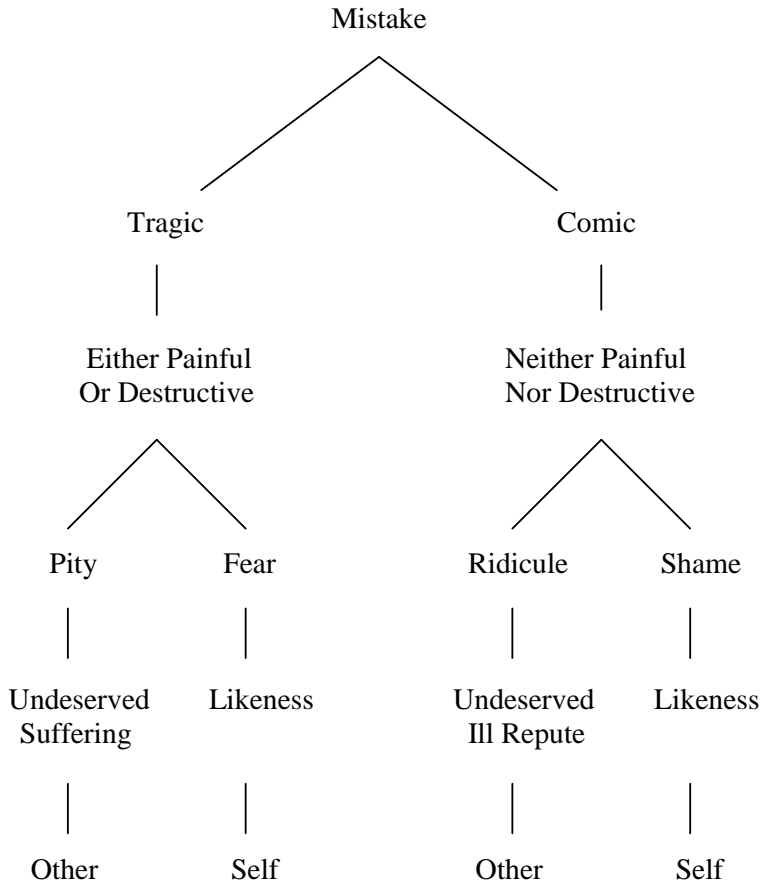
Similarly, comedy does imitate an action that is painless and not destructive. Its protagonist, because of a frivolous mistake, is rising from bad fortune to good. A comic catharsis permits its protagonist to realize the mistake and prevents him or her from rising to good fortune by engaging in a shameful activity. Hence, its *dénouement*. But a comic protagonist does not fall into bad fortune, either. He or she merely fails to attain good fortune.<sup>17</sup>

## VII

Our humanity, I would conclude, may don a tragic or a comic mask. Drama, whether tragic or comic, imitates a protagonist undergoing a change of fortune undeservedly because of a mistake. The mistake may be either destructive or painful and issue in an action that is pitiable and fearful, or the mistake may be neither painful nor destructive and issue in an action that is ridiculous and shameful. But a mistake of either kind may also entail a recognition and a reversal. The dramatic action can thus purge itself of its pitiableness and fearfulness if tragic or if comic of its ridiculousness and shamefulness.

### SCHEMA

#### Aristotelian Drama



## NOTES

1. Bywater leaves without comment the assertion that tragedy portrays an intermediate character. But he does agree that an error and not a vice is the source of tragic action (Bywater 1980, 215). He also agrees that Aristotle offers a concept of the tragic protagonist as "a personage of a very human type, one like we are ourselves." Yet he does not appear to see that the error makes the protagonist like ourselves. He claims rather that this concept of tragic character conflicts with the initial concept of the protagonist as "not like the average man, but better than that" (216). He fails to see that Aristotle qualifies his initial, more general, discussion with his present, more specific, discussion.

Else claims that the protagonist has a character intermediate between someone distinguished in virtue and someone who is like us. We would feel revulsion if the tragic hero is distinctly better than us, he argues, and we would have no feelings one way or another if he is merely like us. The hero must be "somewhere within the range, not between good and bad, but between good and average" (Else 1967, 377-378).

2. Bywater suggests that the ridiculous can arise either from a "mistake or blunder" or from a "moral or physical deformity." He would appear to take ἀμάρτημα and αἰσχρος to be two distinct sources of comic action (Bywater 1980, 140-141). If so, he would take αἰσχρος to refer to a vice only. But he forgets that a comic character is not frivolous in accordance with a vice.

3. Else puts the matter nicely. He says that the comic error is a "counterpart" of the tragic error. But he would define the comic error as a mistake that "threatens but does not cause pain or damage" (Else 1967, 189). I would argue that a comic error cannot even threaten pain or damage or death. Why not? Because the tragic error can be painful or destructive in intent only as well as in deed (see *Poetics* 14. 1453b36-37).

4. The *Odyssey* would be a comedy of this zany sort should Odysseus become friends with the suitors and, say, join with them in their revelries.

Else views this example of Orestes and Aegisthus as an interpolation. He rests his view on the grounds that the usage of "μῦθος" in the passage is "un-Aristotelian" (Else 1967, 405-406). He does recognize that Aristotle uses "μῦθος" to refer to the material that a poet works with and to the composition that a poet makes (405 n. 147). But he claims that "μῦθος" for Aristotle cannot mean "the original story *as distinguished from the poet's version*" (405-406, his italics). That is, "μῦθος" cannot be "a fixed, independent entity, which can be set *over against* the poem" (406 n. 147, italics his).

Halliwell argues that Aristotle in this discussion focuses "on the morally comfortable, on the type of play, whether tragedy or comedy, which conforms to our best moral expectations." For tragedy "the morally reassuring dénouement" is "less than ideal," but for comedy a dénouement of this kind is "legitimate and proper" (Halliwell 1986, 271-272 and 275-276). I would ask what would be morally reassuring about a comedy in which Orestes makes friends with Aegisthus? Would a dénouement of this sort confirm to our moral expectations?

5. Friendship for Aristotle and for the ancient Greeks generally includes, as this passage implies, kinships, especially those of the immediate family (see, e.g., *Ethics* 8. 12.).

6. Bywater agrees that we feel both emotions for a tragic protagonist. Pity we feel for the hero who experiences "the evil or suffering," and fear we feel out of a "sympathetic interest" that depends on the hero "being more or less like ourselves" (Bywater 1980, 210-213).

Else argues that the likeness of the protagonist to us is fundamental. His likeness provides grounds for our judgment that "he does not deserve his suffering." But the protagonist is like us, he explains, not because he makes a mistake, but simply because he is "neither saint . . . nor villain" (Else 1967, 373). Presumably, the protagonist would also be undeserving, not because he makes a mistake, but because he is neither saint nor villain.

Yet Else does agree that a mistake is not the same as viciousness, and that a mistake about "the identity of a 'dear' person, that is, a blood relative" is "inherently fitted" to arouse pity and fear for the protagonist (Else 1967, 379 and 383). That he would fail to connect the tragic mistake explicitly with the likeness and undeservedness of the protagonist is an unfortunate oversight.

7. Actually, Aristotle mistook the name. Herodotus tells this story not about Amasis but about Psammenitus (see Cope 1877, 2: 103).

8. Else agrees that we feel fear for the tragic hero. He argues that we do so because of "the broader feeling of community with the hero which also underlay τὸ φιλόανθρωπον." We have this feeling of community because we judge the hero to be "a normal and representative human being" (Else 1967, 371-373). But a human being of this representative sort, as we have already noted, he explicitly characterizes not as fallible but as "neither saint . . . nor villain" (373). I would argue that any broad feeling of community rests on our undeniable and unfortunate fallibility.

Bywater also agrees that we feel fear for the tragic hero, and that our fear is felt for a likeness to ourselves. But he argues, as does Else, that the likeness rests on qualities of character. The hero is "neither exceptionally good nor exceptionally wicked," he explains. He claims, too, that a tragic poet arouses a disinterested fear, and that a rhetorician arouses a fear only interested. He thus overlooks *Rhetoric* 2. 8. 1386a18-22 (Bywater 1980, 210-213).

9. Golden contends that the emotion proper to comedy is indignation (νεμεσῶν). His argument is that comedy and tragedy represent characters and actions "in polar opposition," and that indignation and pity are emotions that are opposites (Golden 1992, 381 and 383-384). He also suggests that indignation has "the same reverse side as pity." Indignation becomes fear when we feel threatened by its object, as pity becomes fear when its object threatens us (382 and 383). He cites the *Rhetoric* and its discussion of these emotions.

But Aristotle explicitly states that the comic action is ridiculous, and that the

ridiculous is shameful. Would not the comic emotions, then, be ridicule and shame? My assumption is that both ridicule and shame are emotional responses to a frivolous mistake. Golden himself observes that in tragedy a pitiable and fearful action occasions pity and fear (Golden 1992, 379-380). He does recognize that the comic action is ridiculous, and yet he wishes to show that the ridiculous causes not shame but indignation (379 and 380-381). Perhaps he does so because he, too, translates "αἰσχρός" as "ugly" (383). I would also observe that indignation has an object that can cause us to fear for ourselves, but tragedy imitates an object that causes us to fear for it. That is, we feel fear not for ourselves but for the protagonist in the drama.

Cooper conjectures that the comic emotions might be anger and envy. But he relies on rather cursory evidence taken from the *Ethics* and the *Rhetoric* (Cooper 1922, 65-67). Cooper also speculates that the comic emotions might be pleasure and laughter. But he offers only the *Tractatus Coislinianus* as evidence (69-70).

Janko defends against various assailants the view that the comic emotions are pleasure and laughter. He, too, follows the *Tractatus Coislinianus* (Janko 2002, 156-160; Janko 1992, 350-351).

10. Cope agrees on the synonymy of "αἰδώς" and "αἰσχροός" (Cope 1877, 2: 71-72).

11. Else agrees that a recognition is "a discovery of the identity of a 'dear' person, a blood relative." He adds that a tragic mistake would accordingly concern "the identity of that person" (Else 1967, 379). In other words, a discovery "is the counterpart and reverse of the mistake" (383).

12. Bywater agrees that the best tragedies are those "in which the deed of horror, though contemplated, is not carried out." He claims that Aristotle prefers tragedy of this kind because he has come to view an action that entails suffering no longer as pitiable and fearful but as odious (Bywater 1980, 224-225). But Aristotle clearly argues earlier that a destructive or painful action if performed by mistake is not odious but pitiable and fearful (*Poetics* 13. 1452b31-1453a17). I would suggest that Aristotle is again qualifying his earlier discussion. The dramatist, he now tells us explicitly, must discover how to employ the traditional tragic myths beautifully (*καλῶς*) (*Poetics* 14. 1453b25-26). That is, a dramatist ought to make use of these myths with recognition and reversal.

Else agrees that the tragic action itself can bring about a catharsis with a recognition and a reversal. The catharsis is "a process carried forward in the emotional material of the play by its structural elements, above all by the recognition" (Else 1967, 439). But he argues that the catharsis is not a purgation of pitiableness and fearfulness but a purification of these qualities. A catharsis, he explains, is "the purification of the tragic act by the demonstration that its motive that was not *μιαρόν*" (439). His assumption is that we can feel pity and fear for a protagonist only if we can "judge that *he did not intend the parricide, matricide, or whatever, as such*" (436-437, his italics).

Else also agrees that the dramatist must treat the traditional myths beautifully, and that he or she treats them beautifully by working into the action itself a recognition and a reversal. He even presents two diagrams to explicate Aristotle's analysis of tragic

action into four modes, of which two employ these parts (Else 1967, 416-421).

13. I reluctantly pass over without further comment a vast literature on precisely what tragic catharsis might be for Aristotle. For present purposes I am obliged to present without exhaustive argument the interpretation that I find preferable.

14. Else argues that he must exclude "the possibility of a *comic* catharsis." Why? Because comedy "has no tragic *pathê*, no *μιαρόν*, to be cleansed" (Else 1967, 447, italics his). He thus appears to think that a protagonist can make only a serious mistake and not a frivolous one. He would also imply that only an action that is pitiable and fearful can purge itself of its emotional qualities, and that an action with other emotional qualities cannot purge itself.

Cooper does allow for comic catharsis. But he argues without textual evidence that envy and anger arise from a sense of disproportion, and that comedy frees us from the burden of these emotions by relieving our sense of disproportion. How? "Through the generalized representation the spectator loses what was before merely individual in his own experience . . ." (Cooper 1922, 65-68). He thus accounts for comic catharsis not as a quality of a dramatic action but as an experience of an audience. Nor does he admit a place for recognition and reversal, though he discusses suspense (68-69).

Cooper also speculates that comedy might have a catharsis of pleasure and laughter. It might cure us, he argues, of a desire "to laugh at the wrong time, or at the wrong things, through being made to laugh at the proper time by the proper means" (Cooper 1922, 69-70). But his evidence for this interpretation he finds not in the *Poetics* but in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*.

Janko argues that comic catharsis purifies our emotions, makes them bearable, and reduces them to moderation. He distinguishes simulated and real emotions. The causes of real emotions "remain with us in our lives," but the causes of simulated emotions "lose their reality when the imitations ends." Hence, emotional arousal through imitation is moderated, presumably, and justified (Janko 2002, 143-144; Janko 1992, 350-351 and 352). But he, too, thus interprets comic catharsis not as a quality of dramatic action but as an effect upon an audience.

Halliwell asserts that the question of whether comedy can have a complex plot and a catharsis is "peculiarly obscure." He argues that the comic error can only "represent a broad contrast with tragedy," and that the tragic error is "a specific component of the 'complex' plot, to which we have no sufficient reason for positing a comic analogue" (Halliwell 1986, 274-275). I can agree that the comic error contrasts broadly with the tragic. But I am also arguing that we do have reason to propose a comic analogue to the tragic plot. The comic error can be a component of a complex plot specifically comic.

15. Halliwell agrees that we must remain uncertain about how Aristotle's theory would apply to ancient comedy. He observes that we do not have a sure way of testing his theory against "prime examples of the genre," and he agrees that Aristophanes offers comedies with plots at best problematic. He also speculates, rightly I think, that Aristotle may not have regarded any comedy as embodying his ideal. Aristotle



may have thought that the genre had not yet evolved sufficiently to attain "its final maturity" (Halliwell 1986, 273-274).

16. I would not deny many other differences, salient and subtle, between Shakespearean and Aristophanic comedy in particular and in general between ancient and modern drama.

17. Halliwell is right to argue that the cliché that tragedy ends unhappily and comedy happily is not set out in the *Poetics*. But he worries about whether tragedy ought in its final movement to tend towards misfortune or not (Halliwell 1986, 275-276). If I am right, tragedy should tend toward bad fortune, but its bad fortune ought to be averted in the end. Comedy should tend toward good fortune but its good fortune ought in the end to fall short. At least, the most beautiful tragedy and comedy should have action of this kind.

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