Oedipus the Cliché: Aristotle on Tragic Form and Content

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1. Introduction: *Oedipus* the Best?

One of the most widespread assumptions about a good Greek tragedy is that it must have an unhappy ending. Aristotle himself, in *Poetics* 13, seems to sanction this persistent misunderstanding with his remarks on Sophocles' most famous work, the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. For this reason, commentators have long puzzled over Aristotle's subsequent ranking of *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a kind of second-rate tragedy in *Poetics* 14. The puzzle over the apparent contradiction between *Poetics* 13 and 14 has not been resolved by philologists, but recent scholarship has nonetheless argued persuasively that Aristotle must be read as making a coherent argument across both chapters (see Belfiore 160-176 and Halliwell 202-237).

In this spirit, then, that is, in defense of the coherence of Aristotle's argument about the best esthetic experience that tragedy can offer, I would argue that the *Poetics* needs to be read more carefully (and more anthropologically) in order to recognize that, in *Poetics* 13, Aristotle is discussing the content of tragedy, and, in *Poetics* 14, the form of tragedy. For such a reading, Eric Gans's understanding of esthetic experience as an oscillation between form and content can help to clarify Aristotle's argument, because Gans's theory of esthetic history also helps to clarify, with the benefit of hindsight, the discussion of high culture and popular culture also embedded in the *Poetics*' treatment of tragic form and content.

As Matthew Schneider has observed, "Aristotle anticipates Gans" in many ways, because the key insights of the *Poetics* into the esthetic experience of tragedy in fact address key anthropological questions:

The durability of Aristotle's theory therefore results neither from historic accident nor scholarly conspiracy: discovering that an anthropologically-grounded theory of

the sign could sidestep Plato's fears about art initiating the contagion of conflictive mimesis enables the classical aesthetic eventually to achieve its logical end point: the exploration [of] the scene of representation *qua* scene.Subsequent literary criticism may have abandoned Aristotle's rigorous anthropological questioning, as Schneider notes, in exchange for a much more sloppy "sacred ambivalence" about esthetic experience. But in addition to shrinking from the anthropological desacralization of tragedy, literary criticism has also made Sophocles' Oedipus into a sacred cow, by propagating (on the authority of a hasty reading of Aristotle) the idea that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is Aristotle's favorite tragedy.

While the play's peculiar construction of tragic irony is a unique case (and hence a special case that tests the esthetic rule about the best tragedy),(1) apart from its irony the play is a textbook example of clichéd form and content in tragedy: a hero learns the truth too late, and comes to an unhappy end. It is this clichéd form and content that makes it exemplary for Aristotle's purposes in the *Poetics*. For Aristotle thinks, and says (1453a27-30), that Euripides, not Sophocles, is the gold standard in tragedy. To understand Aristotle on this point, we need to see that he is not contradicting himself between *Poetics* 13 and 14 on the matter of Oedipus. Generative anthropology can help us here to make a closer reading of Aristotle's discussion of form and content, and of high and popular culture, with regard to the esthetic of tragedy. In particular, such a closer anthropological reading solves philology's special difficulties with the received text of *Poetics* 13 and 14. But it also serves a more general and salutary purpose. It argues against the popular prejudice of many readers of Aristotle and Greek tragedy, a prejudice to which even writings on generative anthropology have hitherto not been immune: the notion that Aristotle gives preeminent esthetic rank to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. On the contrary, Aristotle's *Poetics* gives no warrant for us to see this play as the "perfect" tragedy (Schneider) or as the "greatest tragedy" of Sophocles (Gans 1993, 139). It is, rather, in Aristotle's eyes, a compendium of exemplary tragic clichés.(2)

2. Unhappy Form, Unhappy Content: The Problem of Oedipus in *Poetics* 13 and 14

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The plot of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is well summarized as, formally, the unhappy belated discovery of a violent *pathos* (suffering), and, with regard to content, as the unhappy end of a morally serious man, King Oedipus:

The Thebans, in the grip of a terrible plague, are instructed by Delphi to kill or expel the murderer(s) of their former king, Laius. The present king, Oedipus, determined to uncover the truth, eventually discovers that he himself is the murderer and, moreover, that Laius was his father and the widowed queen, Iocaste, whom Oedipus

had married, is his mother. Iocaste commits suicide; Oedipus blinds himself and begs, in vain, to be cast out of Thebes. (Sommerstein 43)The play, which is dated to between 436 and 426 BCE, stands on its own, and not as part of a trilogy with either *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BCE) or *Antigone* (c.442 BCE). Even if forced together as an artificial “trilogy” (as in contemporary anthologies commonly used by the public, usually in schools and universities), the three plays scarcely portray an ultimately optimistic reversal of fortune for Oedipus. While he seems at the end of his life, after years of wandering in misery, to be taken by the gods to themselves and to become a blessing for Athens, this outcome in the *Oedipus at Colonus* would have to give way chronologically to the continuance of the curse of Oedipus in the multiple suicides enacted in the *Antigone*: those of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice. The mythological chronology of the events comprising the artificial “trilogy” would have to be: *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. That is, the “happy ending” of the *Oedipus at Colonus* would be succeeded by the “unhappy ending” of the *Antigone*.

In the historical chronology, of course, the play with the “happy ending” is dated two decades after the other two plays, the *Oedipus at Colonus* being written instead in Sophocles’ old age. But it is interesting to note, in this regard, that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* did *not* win first prize in competition. The posthumous production of the latest work *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, did win first prize. Yet in spite of its lesser acclaim Aristotle nevertheless still has much to say about the *Oedipus Tyrannus* in the *Poetics*.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle refers to the *Oedipus Tyrannus* ten times (Kassel 68; cf. Halliwell 40 n.59): twice with Thyestes, in chapter 13, as possessing the best sort of subject matter for tragedy (1453a11, 20); twice in chapter 11, as an example of *peripeteia* (reversal of the action) and an *anagnorisis* (recognition of persons) coincident with the *peripeteia* (1452a24-33); again in chapter 16 as possessing (along with Euripides’ *Iphigenia among the Taurians*) the best kind of *anagnorisis* that arises from the dramatic action itself (1455a18); twice in chapter 14, as a tragedy whose plot summary alone causes one to shudder (*phrittein* 1453b7), containing an *anagnorisis* of *philia* (*i.e.,* of kinship: 1453b31); in chapter 15, as a plot that leaves the inexplicable (the *alogon*) outside the action of the plot (1454b8); meaning, as he says in chapter 24, that Oedipus’s lack of previous inquiry into how Laius died does not concern the action of the plot (1460a30); and in chapter 26 as being of the right (non-epic) length for effectively portraying the action (1462b2).

This frequency of mention (a veritable top ten list of Aristotelian literary criticism) has led readers to assume that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is Aristotle’s gold standard for tragedy. Yet a major puzzle has long confronted interpreters of the *Poetics*: if the

Oedipus Tyrannus is so unproblematically the gold standard, how are we to reconcile the account in chapter 13 (where the Oedipus myth is the stuff of the best tragedies), and the account elsewhere (that it has the best kind of thrill, a coincident *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, as part of a taut plot structure that excludes inexplicable external action from the course of its own internal development), with the account in chapter 14? For chapter 14 argues that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is an example of the *second-best* plot structure. The best formal plot structure is exemplified for Aristotle in the *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, with its coincident *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* preventatively before, and not tragically after, the fact of violent *pathos* (the violent *pathos* here which, while certainly being the play's implicit subject, is never realized as its actual content):

Iphigenia, spirited away by Artemis when about to be sacrificed by her father Agamemnon at Aulis, is now her priestess in the land of the Tauri (the Crimea), obliged to sacrifice every Greek who lands there. Orestes and Pylades arrive in quest of the image Artemis Tauropolos; they are captured, but Iphigenia spares Pylades on condition that he takes a message back to Greece for her. The message reveals her identity to Orestes, and after a joyful reunion they plan and execute a scheme to escape from the wicked King Thoas, taking the image to be with them (to be set up at Halae in Attica). (Sommerstein 52)This is the tragedy with a "happy ending" that Aristotle clearly commends in *Poetics* 14. In *Poetics* 17, Aristotle gives his own summary of the *Iphigenia* play's plot form, that is, of the general [*katholou*] form, the form without the "contents" [*hupothenta*] of the character names [*onomata*] and episodic details concerning these characters [*epeisodia*]:

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As for the story, whether the poet takes its general outline ready made or constructs it for himself, he should first sketch the general outline, and then fill in the episodes and amplify in detail. The general outline [*to katholou*] may be illustrated by the *Iphigeneia*. A young girl is sacrificed; she disappears mysteriously from the eyes of those who sacrificed her; she is transported to another country, where the custom is to sacrifice any strangers to the goddess. To this ministry she is appointed. Some time later her own brother chances to arrive. The fact that the oracle for some reason ordered him to go there, is outside the general plan of the play. The purpose, again, of his coming is outside of the plot's proper action. However, he comes, he is seized, and, when on the point of being sacrificed, reveals who he is. The mode of recognition may be either that of Euripides or of Polyidus, in whose play he exclaims very naturally: "So it was not my sister only, but I too, who was doomed to be sacrificed"; and by that remark he is saved. After this, the names being once given [*hupothenta ta onomata*], it remains to fill in the episodes. The episodes [*ta epeisodia*] must be fitting to the general action. In the case of Orestes,

for example, there is the madness that led to his capture [cf. Eur. *IT* 281-335], and his deliverance by means of the purificatory rite [cf. Eur. *IT* 1029 ff.]. In the drama, the episodes are short, but it is these that give extension to epic poetry. (1455a34-b16)(3)This passage shows not only that Aristotle is conscious of a distinction between plot *form* (which can be sketched in outline without names) and plot *content* (which concerns the people named and portrayed in dramatic episodes). It also shows that he has reflected on the problem of plot form and content with regard to the *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, the very play that he has just commended as best in form, in*Poetics* 14 (1454a4-7). The problem, however, is whether this contradicts Aristotle's apparent recommendation of the *Oedipus* character-arc, the "unhappy ending" *metabasis* (change of fortune), in *Poetics* 13.

Stephen Halliwell has rightly observed that the unhappy ending of the *metabasis* apparently recommended in *Poetics* 13 is "exceptional within the *Poetics*' discussion of tragedy"; for Aristotle, "the possibility of a change in either direction" clearly describes all the *metabasis* options available to tragedy (218). A careful reading of the text shows that Aristotle is noncommittal on any formula for the recommended *metabasis* in tragedy. For Halliwell, then, there is continuity between Aristotle's discussion in *Poetics*13 and 14 (223), and "the anomaly between *Poetics* 13 and 14″ (226) with regard to the variations of plot-form is best interpreted in light of a unifying idea: the consistently serious content of tragedy (227-230, 235-237, esp. 228). While Halliwell thus suggests a reading in the direction of content to achieve a coherent account of *Poetics* 13 and 14, he does not fully work out, however, the esthetic interplay of form and content in tragedy.

Elizabeth Belfiore, in her book *Tragic Pleasures*, attempts to reconcile *Poetics* 13 with *Poetics* 14 by reaffirming the *Oedipus Tyrannus* as Aristotle's gold standard for tragedy. In absolute terms, she suggests, Aristotle prefers a plot with an unhappy ending, where the coincident *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* occurs after a *pathos*. The *Iphigenia* plot, with its happy ending, is ranked superior in *Poetics* 14 only because it "provides an easily followed formula" (Belfiore 176). The Oedipus plot is thus absolutely best "according to craft" (*kata ten tekhnen* 13. 1453a 22-23), whereas the *Iphigenia* plot is only relatively best; that is, relative to what poets have been able to generate in formulaic practice by chance (*ouk apo tekhnes all' apo tukhes* 14. 1454a 9-11). Belfiore admits that her suggested interpretation is inconclusive and "a plausible suggestion only" because it rests on "this slight different in phrasing" regarding chance and craft (Belfiore 174).

Despite Belfiore's efforts, the distinction between the *content* apparently recommended in *Poetics* 13 (an unhappy *metabasis*) and the plot *form* recommended in *Poetics* 14 (a happy *anagnorisis* coincident with a *peripeteia* generating an ending without *pathos*) reflects a tension inherent in tragedy that

cannot simply be explained with reference to chance practice and carefully cultivated craft. The question remains why an “unhappy ending” ought to be associated with the best craft, and the “happy ending” associated with allegedly formulaic plots. In a word, if the crowds are relatively happy with the formulaic happy Hollywood endings, why is the art-house “unhappy ending” absolutely superior? Moreover, why did allegedly formulaic happy endings evolve only later, after the earlier, absolutely superior unhappy endings? The case in point: *Oedipus Tyrannus* is dated to between 436 and 426 BCE and *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is dated to c.414 BCE (Sommerstein 80-81; cf. Knox and Bates).

The problem still remains why Aristotle in *Poetics* 14 would rank later, allegedly formulaic developments in plot composition higher than the earlier, high culture “unhappy ending” type of tragedy. Surely an appeal to chance or formula would define not the superiority, but rather the inferiority, of “happy ending” tragedies, just as people imply today when they sneer at the haphazard and formulaic composition of Hollywood endings. The problem has traditionally been seen as concerning why Aristotle gives highest rank to the Hollywood ending in *Poetics* 14 but seems to imply everywhere else that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is, despite its second-best type of ending, the Oscar-caliber gold standard in all other respects. Positing that the craft of tragedy degenerated artistically as it advanced technically introduces unwarranted (Nietzschean) assumptions nowhere justified in Aristotle’s text. A more minimal hypothesis is required to explain the harmony between Aristotle’s remarks on the *Oedipus* and those on the *Iphigenia*.

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As I have already suggested, the distinction that explains this apparent contradiction in the *Poetics* is not, *pace* Belfiore, the distinction between chance and craft, but rather the distinction between *content* and *form*. The evolution of tragedy’s subject matter no doubt followed what, by “chance” in a given year, best resonated with audiences. But the cultivation of such tragic *content* (a *metabasis* that proved successful with audiences) surely was a practice that was subsequently refined by the development of craft no less than the cultivation of the tragic plot *forms* (that used more complicated configurations of *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and *pathos*). *The tension between form and content is not reducible, then, to the opposition between chance and craft.* The interplay between form and content, rather, opens up more possibilities for the artwork, possibilities greater in number than a simple binary opposition between happy and unhappy endings.

3. Sophocles, Euripides, and Homer: Aristotle on High Culture’s Form and Content

The fact that there is an apparent contradiction in the *Poetics* between the

recommendation of happy and unhappy endings points only to the inadequacy of this binary standard for literary criticism, and not to the inadequacy of the *Poetics*. It is insufficient merely to define the difference between high culture and popular culture as the difference between unhappy endings and happy endings. Someone who classifies every movie with a happy Hollywood ending as crowd-pleasing (*philanthropon*) popular culture, and every movie with an unhappy art-house ending as serious (*spoudaios*) high culture, is being superficial. Clearly there can be products of high culture with happy endings and products of popular culture with unhappy endings. A more subtle classification, based on a more careful consideration of both the artwork's form and content, is required. To Aristotle's credit, the *Poetics* does contain such a careful classification and consideration. The tension reflected in the apparent contradiction between chapters 13 and 14 testifies to the depth of Aristotle's analysis, a nascent critical theory that distinguishes between popular effect and more refined artistry, and that does so, moreover, with reference to form and content.

Evidence for reading *Poetics* 13 and 14 this way is indicated elsewhere in the work. The plot summary of the *Iphigenia* in *Poetics* 17, which distinguishes between form and content, has already been mentioned. But the distinction is prepared from the beginning, in *Poetics* 2, where Aristotle outlines the ultimate subjects, that is, the defining content, of tragedy's *mimesis*: namely, the type of people it represents. Tragedy represents people as better than they are in real life, whereas the content of comedy is people represented as worse than they are:

We must represent people either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. . . . The same distinction marks off tragedy from comedy; for comedy aims at representing people as worse, tragedy as better than in actual life. (1448a2-5, 16-18)In *Poetics* 25, Aristotle remarks that Euripides in his drama, unlike the drama of Sophocles, represents people not as they ought to be but as they are (1460b33-36). This remark should not lead us to conclude that Aristotle thinks that Euripides composes in a third genre of drama, one that, by virtue of its realistic content, is neither tragedy nor comedy. For Aristotle says in *Poetics* 13 that Euripides is "the most tragic of the poets" (1453a27-30). What we have here, rather, is an only apparent contradiction between *Poetics* 2 and 25 in Aristotle's comparison of Sophocles and Euripides. Like the tension between *Poetics* 13 and 14, we also have here a tension that reflects the tension between content and form. We ought not to say that Sophocles is high culture and Euripides is popular culture, any more than we ought to say that unhappy endings are high culture and Hollywood endings are popular culture. We will return, therefore, to this comparison of Euripides and Sophocles at the end of this paper, after having studied how Aristotle balances a consideration of content in *Poetics*13 with a consideration of form in *Poetics* 14. Any apparent contradiction between the two considerations

merely reflects the inherent tension between form and content. The proof of this interpretation, unlike Belfiore's weak distinction between chance and craft, is a strong textual basis for reading an underlying unity in the discussions of high and popular cultural effects in the *Poetics*.

The treatise's unity is visible when it becomes clear how the distinction between form and content neatly solves longstanding difficulties with interpreting some notorious passages. In *Poetics* 18, four "kinds" [*eide*] of tragedy are identified in a passage that has long baffled interpreters with regard to how it is connected to the discussion in the rest of the *Poetics* (cf. Lucas 184-186):

There are four kinds [*eide*] of tragedy: the complex [*peplegmene*], depending entirely on reversal and recognition; the pathetic [*pathetike*]–such as the tragedies on Ajax and Ixion; the ethical [*ethike*]–such as the*Phthiotides* and the *Peleus*. The fourth kind is the simple . . . (1455b32-56a2)Here the "simple" and "complex" kinds can only refer to the plot *forms* discussed back in *Poetics* 14. But the introduction of "pathetic" and "ethical" as kinds of tragedy is novel. I would suggest, however, that these two terms refer to the two possible outcomes for a character's character-arc (*metabasis*, or change of fortune): an "unhappy" or a "happy" ending as the tragedy's *content*. For example, Ajax and Ixion are two characters who, considered as tragic subject matter, invariably come to an unhappy end. Ajax commits suicide after losing the battle over Achilles' armor to Odysseus and then descending into dishonorable madness. For trying to rape Hera, Ixion suffers eternal punishment in Tartarus on a flaming wheel. The *pathetike* outcome of both their stories offers tragedy the straightforwardly poignant and sacrificial content of intense human suffering.

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The *Phthiotides* ("Women of Phthia") and *Peleus* (the father of Achilles), on the other hand, are perhaps less clear for us as examples, for the plays do not survive. Based on what evidence we do have, however, it is sound to conjecture that they had "happy endings." For example, the famous myth of Peleus, Achilles' father, tells of how he wrestles the goddess Thetis who, in spite of her best efforts to change shape and escape, nevertheless is compelled to be his bride. A wedding is the classic example of a happy ending, and the wedding of Peleus and Thetis could have been the happy finale of a *Peleus* (cf. Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1036-1079). (The judgment of Paris at the ensuing wedding reception, however, and the Trojan War which followed upon it, would not be episodes proper to the unitary dramatic action of the wedding, if the wedding were taken as the content for a *Peleus*; *cf.* Aristotle at 1462b2-5 and 1459b1-7.) But if Aristotle is referring in *Poetics* 18 rather to the non-extant *Peleus* of Euripides, that play would treat the rescue of Peleus

from persecutors by Philoctetes on his return from Troy (Post 15; cf. Euripides, *Trojan Women* 1126-8).

Similarly, the ending of the *Phthiotides* would also have been happy, since the play would concern the rescue of Hermione and Orestes from their persecutors and then their marriage. Aristotle could be referring to the non-extant *Phthiotides* of Sophocles, in which this is likely what happened. Or else when he says, “Phthiotides and Peleus” (*hai Phthiotides kai ho Peleus*), he is referring to them, not as names of plays, but simply as characters, as he has just done with Ajax and Ixion. That is, he is perhaps referring to both the character Peleus and the chorus of the Women of Phthia in an extant play of Euripides, namely, the *Andromache* (as Post 13-15 suggests), in which precisely this persecution and marriage of Hermione and Orestes does happen:

Hermione, daughter of Menelaus and wife of Neoptolemus, plots in her husband’s absence against his concubine Andromache (widow of Hector), whom she accuses of making her barren by witchcraft. She calls in her father, and Andromache and her son are about to be put to death but are saved by Neoptolemus’ aged grandfather Peleus. Hermione contemplates suicide, but her ex-fiancé Orestes, who hates Neoptolemus for having robbed him of Hermione, opportunely arrives; she runs off with him, and he successfully plots to have Neoptolemus murdered at Delphi. (Sommerstein 51)It would not be unusual for the play to be known by a second name; that is, by the name of its chorus, the Phthiotides, as well as by the name *Andromache* (Post 14). In any case, by adducing the Phthiotides and Peleus as examples, it seems clear that by *ethike* Aristotle means a tragedy that has a plot whose content is “persecution and deliverance” (Post 15); in other words, he means a *metabasis* with a happy ending.

This reading of Aristotle’s classification of tragedy (in terms of form and content) is strengthened by the parallel passage in *Poetics* 24, where Homer’s epic poems are also described both in terms of general form (being either simple or complex) and their content (being either “pathetic” or “ethical”). The passage confirms, with reference to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, my thesis about the “pathetic” and “ethical” in *Poetics* 18 as being descriptions of the *metabasis* content (“unhappy” or “happy”):

Again, epic poetry must have the same kinds [*eide*] as tragedy: it must be simple [*haplen*], or complex [*peplegmenen*], or ethical [*ethiken*], or pathetic [*pathetiken*]. The parts also, with the exception of song and spectacle, are the same; for it requires reversals, recognitions, and sufferings. Moreover, the thoughts and the diction ought to be done well. In all these respects, Homer serves as our earliest and sufficient model. Indeed each of his poems has a twofold composition. The *Iliad*

is at once simple [*haploun*] and pathetic [*pathetikon*], and the *Odyssey* complex [*peplegmenon*] (for recognition scenes run through it), and at the same time ethical [*ethike*]. Moreover, in diction and thought they are supreme. (1459b7-16)Aristotle's remarks here make sense when we consider the facts. On the one hand, the *Iliad* has an unhappy ending, as Achilles accepts his impending death and the women of Troy mourn for the slain Hector; but not only is the *Iliad* thus *pathetike* in content, it is simple (*haple*) in form, for Achilles' anger has simply destined him for eternal glory (*kleos*) all along.(4) (Of course, he had not foreseen how his anger, and how he does or does not control it, would be the motive force for his winning glory in the successive conflicts, first with Agamemnon, then with Hector, and finally with Priam. But the simple plot form of the *Iliad* works out the consequences of Achilles' wrath in all its glorious manifestations.) On the other hand, the *Odyssey* has a happy ending, as Odysseus returns home, slays the interloping suitors, and is reunited with his wife Penelope; but not only is the *Odyssey* thus *ethike* in content, it is complex (*peplegmene*) in form, as the suitors undergo a reversal (they intend to insult a beggar for sport, but in doing so they precipitate their destruction) and a recognition (for they incur the wrath of Odysseus, who it is in disguise as the beggar).

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Better translations for "pathetic" and "ethical" in chapters 18 and 24, therefore, would be "poignant" (*pathetike*) for the unhappy *metabasis*, and "morally uplifting" or "inspirational" (*ethike*) for the happy *metabasis*. Generative anthropology, moreover, would probably be most comfortable with translations that point to generative contexts for the content of these two types of *metabasis*: "sacrificial" (for *pathetike*) and "sentimental" (for *ethike*). If we admit with Schneider that "Aristotle anticipates Gans," then it is not hard to see that, in terms of ultimate content, tragedies can be either "chronicles of love" (*ethike*) or "chronicles of resentment" (*pathetikon*).(5)

Both Sophocles and Euripides achieve the high culture effect of Greek tragedy, but in Aristotle's literary criticism their mimetic achievement can be distinguished with regard to how they employ form and content. Further, Aristotle's remarks on Homer help us discern his views on the kinds of tragedy composed by Sophocles and Euripides. But before clarifying Aristotle's stance on these more general questions, it is time now to confront the particular problem still before us: the fact that, in *Poetics* 14, Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is ranked by Aristotle above Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In the latter play, I maintain that Aristotle sees how Sophocles reworks clichéd tragic form and content to good effect, whereas in the former Euripides play we see innovation that is not simply effective tragedy but, in Aristotle's view, the development of the composite of form and content that is most

proper to the high culture of tragedy. To see this, we need to recognize the harmony in Aristotle's presentation, as already evidenced in the discussions above (from *Poetics* 17, 2, 25, 18, and 24), where he has shown his sensitivity with regard to distinguishing form and content. We turn now to read this harmony in *Poetics* 13 as commending a certain exemplary content for tragedy, and in *Poetics* 14 as commending a certain exemplary formal structure. In the end, this will help us to see, not just how each poet is a master of the "complex" (*peplegmene*) plot form, but which poet is more "sacrificial" (*pathetike*) or "sentimental" (*ethike*) with regard to content.

4. Serious (Not Unhappy) Content: The Exemplary *Metabasis* of *Poetics* 13

First we turn to *Poetics* 13 to discern its recommended *metabasis*. We have a clear distinction between types of content in *Poetics* 13 with Aristotle's distinction there between what he calls the "single" plot and the "double" plot. Aristotle describes the content of the "double" plot as what is popular with the audiences (*philanthropon*):(6)the good are rewarded, and the bad are punished. In contrast, Aristotle affirms the superiority of a "single" plot because it exemplifies what he considers to be the right kind of *metabasis*:

A well-constructed plot [*muthon*] should, therefore, be single [*haploun*] in its issue, rather than double [*diploun*] as some maintain. It is required to change the fortune [*metaballein*] not from bad to good [*eis eutukhian ek dustukhias*], but, reversely, from good to bad [*ex eutukhias eis dustukhian*]. It should come about as the result not of depravity [*dia mokhtherian*], but of some great error [*di' hamartian megalen*], in a character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse [*beltionos mallon e kheironos*]. The practice of the stage bears out our view. At first the poets recounted any plots that came in their way. Now, the best tragedies are founded on the story of a few houses–on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered terrible things. A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction. Hence they are in error who censure Euripides just because he follows this principle in his plays, many of which end unhappily [*eis dustukhian*]. It is, as we have said, the right procedure. The best proof is that on the stage and in dramatic competition, such plays, if well worked out, are the most tragic in effect; and Euripides, even if in other aspects he may be considered not to manage his content well, is still conspicuous as the most tragic [*tragikotatos*] of the poets. Thus in the second rank comes the kind of tragedy which some place first. Like the *Odyssey*, it has a double [*diplen*] thread of plot, and opposite endings for the good and for the bad. It is usually ranked in first place because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poets are guided in what they write by the wishes of the audience. This popular pleasure, however, is not the pleasure proper to tragedy. It

is proper rather to comedy, where those who, in the plot, are the deadliest enemies–like Orestes and Aegisthus–depart the stage as friends at the close, and nobody is slain by anybody. (1453a12-39)The sentences in this passage, usually taken as commending an unhappy ending over a happy ending, must be read in the context that clearly frames the entire discussion: Aristotle's express preference for the "single" *metabasis* over the popular "double"*metabasis*. Euripides follows the right procedure because he uses a single *metabasis*. It is following this principle of using a single *metabasis* that ensures that a poet's effect is "the most tragic." Aristotle remarks that many of Euripides' plays end unhappily (1453a26-27), but with that remark, read in context, he is still implying nonetheless that Euripides' plays are all single in *metabasis*. Further, when Aristotle says that the single *metabasis* should be from good to bad (1453a9), he is speaking relatively, not absolutely, and intends only to contrast the usual *metabasis* of good people portrayed in a double plot (viz., from bad to good fortune) with the usual *metabasis* of good people portrayed in a single plot (viz., from good to bad fortune). The remark is not a general prescription that all tragedies must have unhappy endings in order for them to be "most tragic." It can only be misread as such if taken out of context.

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In *Poetics* 13, the type of content that is being commended is the singular focus of plot on one person's fortune, and not so much the type of end that that person meets. The only prescription for the ending is that it should be a single (*haplous*) plot *metabasis*. Tragedy's high culture is best achieved through a single *metabasis*, and not through the popular *metabasis* of a double (*diplous*) plot ending. On the one hand, as Aristotle remarks, the double ending in comedy would have the bad man (Aegisthus) coming to a good end (avoiding the death penalty at Orestes' hands), and the good man (Orestes) coming to a bad end (failing to exact the necessary vengeance against his enemy, instead making Aegisthus his friend). On the other hand, the double ending in tragedy would be what we actually have in Aeschylus: Orestes kills Aegisthus in vengeance; hence the bad man comes to a bad end (*The Libation Bearers* 838-877), and the good man comes to a good end (*Eumenides* 752-777). Aristotle is silent on whether Aeschylus's treatment of this plot outline is more *haple* than *diple* in its execution in the *Oresteia*, and thus he is silent on the rank of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* as an achievement in tragedy. But in outline, nevertheless, the revenge tragedy, with its content of double *metabasis*, is a "formulaic sub-genre" (Gans 2000, 62) that risks descending into the crude satisfactions expected by popular culture, however much we must still affirm that the *Oresteia* and the *Odyssey* do not descend into such *diple* cliché (cf. Gans 1985, 227-268). In any case, it seems clear enough that in this passage Euripides is the "most tragic" poet, the one who has mastered the use of the content of single

metabasis.(7)

The classification of the possible kinds of single *metabasis* that precedes this very passage in *Poetics* 13 also supports the thesis that, for Aristotle, a single plot *metabasis* with an unhappy ending is not the preferred content. For in that preceding section he says that an unhappy ending can be *miaron*, vulgar (1452b36). Instead, the single plot *metabasis* that is to be preferred is selected, not on the basis of the ending being happy or unhappy, but on the basis of the *metabasis* being generated by a *hamartia* (mistake):

First, it is clear that the changing of fortune [*metaballontas*] presented must not be the spectacle of noble men [*epieikeis andras*] brought from prosperity to adversity [*ex eutukhias eis dustukhian*]: for it moves neither pity nor fear; it is merely vulgar [*miaron*]. Nor, again, that of depraved men [*mokhtherous*] passing from adversity to prosperity [*ex atukhias eis eutukhian*]: for this is the most un-tragic [*atragoidotaton*] of all things; it possesses nothing of these things: it can neither be popularly satisfactory [*philanthropon*] nor does it call forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall [*ex eutukhias eis dustukhian*] of the utter villain [*sphodra poneron*] be exhibited. A plot composed in such a manner would, doubtless, be popularly satisfying [*philanthropon*], but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between [*metaxu*] these two extremes–that of a man who is not preeminent in excellence or righteousness, yet whose changing into misfortune [*metaballon eis ten dustukhian*] is brought about not by badness or depravity, but by some error [*di' hamartian tina*]. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous–a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families. (1452b34-53a12)The important thing to note here is not that Aristotle talks about Oedipus as an example of this kind of single-plot *metabasis* content. To do so would risk being misled into thinking that an unhappy *metabasis* is the criterion of high culture. The important thing to note, rather, is that the desirable single-plot *metabasis* is one whose content concerns *hamartia*. Whether or not this content, with its *hamartia* criterion, is sufficient for high culture is not reducible to an "unhappy ending" formula. Aristotle states only the guideline for the *mimesis* of the *metaxu* person ("the character between these two extremes": *i.e.,* the above-average person), and of the *hamartia*, that is to be the content of the tragic representation. That is, he says that the representation ought to be of a person *beltionos mallon e kheironos* (1453a16-17): more of a person as people ought to be, rather than of a person as people are. *The content guideline concerns the person, and not the ending.* In other words, the high culture criterion with regard to content is that a *spoudaios* (morally serious) person, and the presence of a *hamartia*, constitute the content of the representation. By chance, plays with unhappy

endings brought this fact about content to light. But we should not mistake an unhappy *metabasis* for Aristotle's recommended content.

The classification of the possible kinds of single *metabasis* in this preceding section can be summed up as:

c(1) the very good [*epieikeis*] meet an unhappy end: *miaron*c(2) the below-average [*mokhtherous*] meet a happy end: *atragoidotaton*

c(3) the very bad [*sphodra poneros*] meets an unhappy end: *philanthropon*

c(4) the above-average [*metaxu*] meets an unhappy end: pitiable & fearful(8)

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What is needed to read this list in context is to realize that the third item, c(3), listed here on its own as a kind of single *metabasis*, can also be taken as one half of a double *metabasis*; the other half would be: "good person meets a happy end." From this point on, after the classification of possible types of single *metabasis*, Aristotle proceeds, as we have already seen, to discuss just this sort of popularly satisfying double *metabasis*. We may note that Aristotle does exclude the logical possibility of "good person meets a happy end" from this list of four here (cf. Else 367). The reason is that he does go on to identify this thread of plot as usually characteristic of one half of the popular double *metabasis*. As he does so, he limits himself in *Poetics* 13 to rejecting its incarnation as half of the thread in the popular double *metabasis*. He remains silent on whether "good person meets a happy end" is acceptable as single *metabasis* content in *Poetics* 13. Only in *Poetics* 14 does he go on to consider this single *metabasis* content, not spoken of in *Poetics* 13, and to articulate the sort of form that can shape it into the best sort of composite of tragic form and content.

In sum, it is only the type of person who is here in *Poetics* 13 being commended as content, and not so much a happy or unhappy ending. A double *metabasis* is identified as being (like certain types of single *metabasis*) often characteristic of inferior, vulgar (*miaron*), and popularly satisfying (*philanthropon*) culture, and hence more proper to comedy than to tragedy. Further, an unhappy ending is not sufficient for tragic high culture content; a morally serious person implicated in mistaken action certainly is. Thus the high culture criterion is content consisting of serious (and preferably mistaken) action, which is ultimately related to how the person is portrayed relative to how people are or ought to be. By chance, craft discovered workable serious content in the unhappy *metabasis*. But Aristotle's point about Oedipus as exemplary content is not that his *metabasis* is unhappy, but that it is only unhappy because its serious *hamartia* content is opposed to the popular

effect of the double-plot *metabasis* (1453a12-17). Moreover, concerning how the practice of the stage has demonstrated that Oedipus is exemplary content, Aristotle merely observes that, when in search of an effective *metabasis*, poets have discovered that by experience the unhappy single *metabasis* is an easy way to achieve this, because *pathos* is already embedded in the unhappy content. The happy single *metabasis*, however, is formally more challenging, and hence a later development, as Aristotle goes on to explain in *Poetics* 14, since it has to formally generate pity and fear in the absence of any realized *pathos* content.

5. Timely (Not Belated) Deferral in Form: The Exemplary *Anagnorisis* of *Poetics* 14

So much for content in *Poetics* 13. Regarding form, we have a clear distinction in *Poetics* 14 between four possible plot forms and their configurations of *pathos*, *anagnorisis*, and *peripeteia*:

Let us explain more clearly what is meant by skillful handling. The action may be done consciously and with knowledge of the persons, in the manner of the older poets. It is thus too that Euripides makes Medea slay her children. Or, again, the deed of horror may be done, but done in ignorance, and the tie of kinship or friendship be recognized afterwards. The *Oedipus* of Sophocles is an example. Here, admittedly, the incident is outside the drama proper; but cases occur where it falls within the action of the play: one may cite the *Alcmaeon* of Astydamas, or Telegonus in the *Wounded Odysseus*. Again, there is a third possibility: when someone is about to do an irreparable deed through ignorance, but comes to recognize it before it is done. These are the only possible ways: the deed must either be done or not done–and that wittingly or unwittingly; of all these possibilities, [the remaining and as yet unmentioned fourth possibility (which we ought to number, rather, on account of its extreme rarity and unsuitability for tragedy, as “possibility zero”), namely,] to be about to act knowing the persons, and then not to act, is the worst. It is vulgar [*miaron*] and is not tragic, for it involves no suffering [*apathes*]. It is, therefore, never, or very rarely, portrayed in tragedy. One instance, however, is in the *Antigone*, where Haemon tries to kill Creon [but fails, and then kills himself instead: see Sophocles, *Antigone* 1226-1243]. The next and better way [namely, “possibility one” as mentioned above] is that the violent deed should be perpetrated. Still better, [“possibility two” as mentioned above:] that it should be perpetrated in ignorance, and the recognition made afterwards. There is then nothing vulgar [*miaron*] involved, and the recognition is thrilling [*ekplektikon*]. The last case [namely, “possibility three” as mentioned above] is the best, as when in the *Cresphontes* Merope is about to slay her son, but, recognizing who he is, spares his life. So in the *Iphigeneia*, the sister recognizes the brother just in time. Again in the *Helle*, the son recognizes the mother when on the point of handing her over. (1453b26-54a9)Commentators, as usual, have made the passage more

complicated by postulating a lacuna (cf. Belfiore 171); my comments inserted in editorial brackets above, however, demonstrate that the passage can be read naturally in a logical progression. Following my numbering, then, the entire passage can be summarized as follows, with the four possibilities corresponding to Aristotle's classification of plot form, from worst to best:

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f(0) Un-tragic plot, without *pathos*: about to occur with full knowledge, but averted. Example: Haemon's attack on Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*.f(1) Simple plot, with *pathos*: occurs, and happens with full knowledge. Example: Euripides' *Medea*.

f(2) Complex plot, with *pathos*: *pathos* occurs in ignorance, and *anagnorisis* happens afterwards [usually without a coincident *peripeteia*]. Example: Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* [in which, unusually but most effectively, a *peripeteia* is coincident with the *anagnorisis*].

f(3) Complex plot, without *pathos*: a coincident *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* averts *pathos*. Example: Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.(9)

The fact that a plot structure that takes the complex form having no *pathos* is ranked highest by Aristotle should not mislead us into thinking that an *Iphigenia*-style "happy ending" is the gold standard for high culture, in contradiction with the apparent indications elsewhere that *Oedipus*, unhappy *metabasis* and all, ought to be. The recommended plot in *Poetics* 14 is not simply a popularly satisfying "happy ending" but, more rigorously, a unitary plot that avoids an unhappy *pathos* by means of a coincident*anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* having a thrilling effect.

In other words, a happy *metabasis* content is not as important as the formal discovery of *hamartia*. Formally, preventative discovery of *hamartia* is superior to tragically belated *anagnorisis*. Formally, *Oedipus Tyrannus* is only second-best. But this means only that high culture can treat *pathos*, *peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis* in various configurations as either present or absent in the plot structure. It does not require them to be configured so as to generate formulaically an unhappy *metabasis* (following a crude "high culture" formula: *i.e.,* "avoid Hollywood endings"). Nor does it require them, *pace* Belfiore, to be configured so as to generate by chance (learning by chance what pleases the crowd) a formulaically happy *metabasis* (following an easy "popular culture" formula: *i.e.,* "strive for big box office"). Formally, what is essentially prescribed by Aristotle in *Poetics* 14 is the superiority of a timely deferral of *pathos* to a belated recognition of the *hamartia* that generated a *pathos*.

In summary, then, *Poetics* 14 distinguishes between the various simple and

complex plot forms, while *Poetics* 13 distinguishes between the single and the double *metabasis*of plot content. And *Poetics* 13 rejects, not the happy ending *metabasis*, but only the popular culture incarnation of it in the double *metabasis*. The failure to read Aristotle's remarks about the unhappy ending *metabasis* in their context leads to the mistaken conclusion that Aristotle commends only the unhappy *metabasis*. On the contrary, Aristotle simply commends the single *metabasis*. Although longstanding theatrical practice has associated the single *metabasis* with the unhappy ending, this is only because a single *metabasis* that has a happy ending is harder to achieve than the single *metabasis* with an unhappy ending. Hence Aristotle proceeds in *Poetics* 14 to analyze in detail the evolution of form that has led to highest achievement of tragedy's high culture. At the summit, he ranks the single *metabasis* content with a complex plot form that discovers and prevents violent *pathos*.

6. Drowning Resentful Form-of-the-Content: Complex Form and Single Content

Yet the question remains why Aristotle ranks the happy absence of *pathos* higher in terms of formal plot structure, when he has so emphatically treated the high seriousness of *Oedipus Tyrannus* as exemplary in terms of content. The answer to this question lies in the esthetic theory of Gans, who has developed his analysis of esthetic history in response to René Girard's theory of mimetic desire (cf. Gans 1977), to explain more fully the relation of texts to material culture. Gans credits Girard alone among critics as seeing the "priority of cultural form over content" (Gans 2000, 55). By this Gans means that prior to both form and content in the artwork is the cultural *form-of-the-content* (*forme du contenu*): "literary works, like all cultural forms, can be traced back to *events* which form their original content" (Gans 1981, 807). There is an anthropological form-of-the-content that is prior to, and originarily generative of, both the artwork's literary form and content. The anthropological form-of-the-content visible in literary works is found in individual triangles of desire or, more generally, in the resentment of the periphery toward the center. This is the human reality behind the artwork, the cultural reality that generated it. Resentment is our emotional state with regard to those ways in which we are powerless to change our station in life. In a particular situation, for example, we may be frustrated in a triangle of desire and resent the rival who models our desire for the object; the clichéd example here is the romantic triangle. In general, we inhabit the social periphery, and hold resentment towards those who inhabit the social limelight; some clichéd examples here would be resentment towards politicians or celebrities.

In this regard, improving upon Girard's literary analysis of triangular mimetic desire, Gans's generative anthropology has observed how "resentment is the basis of all esthetic form." By using resentment, Gans is best able to distinguish between popular culture and high culture in esthetic phenomena. Popular art "satisfies the resentment that generates formal closure." For Aristotle, such popular formal closure can happen both in the happy endings of the double plot or in the unhappy endings of the single plot. But "high art turns us against [resentment]": this is the more austere experience generated by successful esthetic complications in high culture (Gans 2000, 62 n.9), as Aristotle intimates with his preference for the deferral of violent *pathos*.

Gans explains esthetic experience as an oscillation between the contemplation of form and content. It is this oscillation that "drowns" resentment, whether in the *askesis* of high culture that lingers on the form of the artwork, or in the appetitive satisfaction of popular culture that lingers much more over the consumption of its content (Gans 1993, 117-131). Resentment is deferred in high culture through sublimation, but deferred in popular culture by being discharged (Gans 1997, 132). In this way, "mimesis is a purgative cure for resentment, a catharsis" (Gans 1993, 135). High culture encourages us to dwell more on form, whereas popular culture encourages us to dwell more on content. Yet we can never have an artwork made up of either exclusively form or exclusively content. And thus, on the one hand, high culture can satisfy the full range of our esthetic appetite, by allowing us to oscillate to the "vice" of popular culture (a resentful enjoyment of pure content) and, on the other hand, popular culture can satisfy our esthetic appetite by allowing us to oscillate to the "virtue" of high culture (a sublime contemplation of form). But esthetic experience, of course, is concerned primarily with neither virtue nor vice; its amoral oscillation is what makes it, not moral, but esthetic. Esthetic experience is a purgative cure for resentment because it is not concerned with either moral discipline or indiscipline in the real world, but rather with an emotional catharsis generated of, by, and for the imaginary world of the artwork.

The content of an unhappy *metabasis* is consumptively enjoyed as we resentfully delight in the fearful downfall of a great man who had previously occupied the center inaccessible to us, dwellers on the periphery. But the literary revenge enacted to satisfy our resentment also oscillates from the content to the form. The unhappy discovery of unwitting *hamartia* arouses our pity as we esthetically contemplate the narrative form of the suffering: the formal structure highlights the belatedness that makes our literary revenge possible. Paradoxically, in the case of *Oedipus*, the *pathos* has already occurred, before the discovery, and so we can oscillate back to resentful enjoyment of the content. Esthetically, we have our pitiable tragic form and eat its fearful content too. We pity the sacrificial form our resentment takes while, at the same time, we witness the dramatic enactment of

that resentment's fearful power (cf. Gans 1993, 136-142).

In Sophocles, the esthetic experience is one of high culture as we can linger on the ironic form that depicts how people ought to be, that is, how they ought to bear themselves in undeserved suffering and thus merit our pity. Noble people (people "as they ought to be") meeting an unhappy end would merely merit the pop-culture *Schadenfreude* provoked by the merely *miaron* (vulgar) *metabasis*: for example, as in the movies, when the wealthy businessman gets a punch in the face from the downtrodden employee; and if the businessman, moreover, is caricatured as totally evil, the violent *pathos* that occurs is *philanthropon* (popularly satisfying). Sophocles, however, innovates in developing tragedy's form, refining the practice of complex form in the service of high culture. His audience's resentment towards the "better people" (the very resentment that shapes the form-of-the-content of Sophocles' people) is sublimated by their contemplation of his artistic refinements of complex form.

But in Euripides, who lingers more on people "as they are," our emotional engagement with the human content deepens. Moreover, when *hamartia* is discovered and *pathos* is avoided, as in the *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the formal structure is a higher order of culture than the *Oedipus* plot form, because there is no *pathos* and hence less impetus from the narrative form (which is merely the artifice that relates the story of the violent *pathos*) for us to oscillate back to resentful enjoyment of the content. The height of Sophocles' formal achievement was the coincident *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which was purchased, however, by placing the *pathos* outside of the drama (1453b31-34); but in Euripides, the *pathos* is deferred, *and not just by the poet, but by the play's action*: a signal advance in esthetics, for which Aristotle gives him due credit. The violent *pathos* in tragedy, as a formal closure with regard to human content that mimics the form-of-the-content of a longed-for, resentful real-world *pathos*, attains its highest possibility of deferral in Euripides. In a word, our resentment is sublimated more than indulged.(10)

Oedipus Tyrannus then is not so much the gold standard and exemplary paradigm of tragedy's high culture as it is a handy compendium of its resentful clichés and stereotypes generative of both pity and fear: *unhappy metabasis as content, and unhappy belated discovery as form*. While useful for illustrative purposes, the *Oedipus* play's composite of form and content is not as tragic as Euripides' plots. For Aristotle's distinction between form and content, implicit in the *Poetics*' analysis of the esthetic of tragedy, allows us to see how Euripides' works of high culture are unlike Sophocles' works of high culture. While, on the one hand, Euripides more effectively appeals to the sentimentality prized by popular culture, on the other hand, he deepens our emotional engagement with his plays' human content (by

having us identify with characters as being “like us” more than having us resent them as being “better than us”). Thus Euripides, not Sophocles, best sublimates the vengeful power of resentment visible in tragedy’s clichéd sacrificial form: “somebody has to die.”

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Aristotle’s apparent endorsement of this clichéd single-plot “unhappy” tragic ending at *Poetics* 13 (1453a12-17) ought to be read more carefully for what the text in fact says there: that this kind of single-plot “unhappy ending” is preferable *only* to the inferior double-plot “happy ending” preferred by popular culture. This in no way means that the single-plot “unhappy ending” is the best possible high culture ending. Aristotle’s preference in *Poetics* 14 for the single-plot “happy ending” that defers violence confirms his attunement to the anthropological function of high culture. *A timely recognition that formally defers violence is better than belated discovery of mistaken violence*. For in this way, our catharsis formally sublimates our resentful identification with the drama’s content, a content that, anthropologically, is a mimesis of our resentful relationship with the form-of-the-content. That is, the people of the drama (as “better than” or “just as” people are) are shaped as content by a form-of-the-content: by the social resentments that originarily generated the drama’s subject matter and that continue to generate our fascination with its literary content. Formal deferral best sublimates our resentful relationship with the content: that is, with both imaginary content and the real form-of-the-content.

How ironic that literary criticism has been so scandalized by Aristotle’s apprehension in *Poetics* 14 of this anthropological truth. For it is no small irony that, in spite of Aristotle’s rigorous desacralization of the play’s form and content, Oedipus has become, not anthropology’s recognition of tragedy’s cultural form-of-the-content, but rather *literature’s foremost tragic cliché*. Indeed, the hardest reading to do is a close reading of what you are closest to: neither content nor form, but the form-of-the-content.

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Notes

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1. I would argue that Aristotle in *Poetics* 14 (at 1453b31-34) is aware of the special case that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* presents, because of his distinction between Oedipus, on the one hand, and Alcmaeon and Telegonus, on the other hand. Hence I surmise that Aristotle would have shared my opinion about the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, namely, that it is such an interesting topic for conversation about tragedy because it is both so *sui generis* and so clichéd. (back)

2. The *Oedipus Tyrannus*, however, is admittedly a *tour de force* that turns stones to bread. Sophocles’ esthetic miracle is one of clichéd form and content reworked,

to turn out unparalleled, and literarily exemplary, tragic irony. But our concern here is not this unique esthetic achievement of Sophocles (on this, see instead Gans 1985, 289-295; *cf.*Gans 1997, 72 and Gans 2000, 58-59). It is, rather, the persistent misunderstanding of Aristotle's discussion of the play's clichéd form and content in *Poetics* 13 and 14, which both professional scholars and Greekless Hollywood amateurs have preferred to read as an endorsement of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and of its unhappy ending, as the Oscar-caliber "master plot" of Greek tragedy (*cf.* Hiltunen 5-20). Murnaghan, for example, defends this misunderstanding by tracing Aristotle's "contradictions" back to those of tragedy itself: "The contradictions of the *Poetics* are conditioned by the nature of tragedy itself, which has the paradoxical mission of giving acceptable form to unacceptable actions, of presenting the unpresentable" (767). (back)

3. All translations from the *Poetics* are my own modified versions of Malcolm Heath's modified version of S.H. Butcher's translation. Heath's adaptation is available on-line at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/poetics/poettran.htm>. See Lucas, Kassel, or Else for recent editions of the Greek text. All my references to Aristotle, Homer, and the tragedians are keyed to the line numbers of the Greek text (and hence not reliant on any particular bibliography entry for page numbers). On the history of the happy plot of Iphigenia the Taurian priestess, see Burnett 73-75. For an excellent recent edition of the play, see Cropp. (back)

4. For a different view of the *Iliad*, arguing that it is complex due to a *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* in response to the death of Patroclus, see Rutherford. I am not persuaded, however, since Achilles forswears neither anger nor glory at *Iliad* 18.98-126. (back)

5. Cf. the thematic discussion of love and resentment in the first few Internet Chronicles of Eric Gans at <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw9596.htm>.(back)

6. This is my fresh interpretation of *philanthropon* in Aristotle, for which I credit the generative anthropology of Gans as my inspiration. At any rate, it is a word that has exercised many an interpreter. See Carey for recent discussion. (back)

7. Aeschylus, in contrast, may be seen to have mastered, not the *content* of single (*haple*) *metabasis*, but the *form* of simple (*haplous*) plot. See Garvie for details. (back)

8. Halliwell 217-220 complicates things rather too much, but relatively useful

schemata of the discussion are found in Belfiore 161-162, Else 367, and Golden and Hardison 185. Examples from Belfiore corresponding to my schema are: c(1) Prometheus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (pity and fear is generated, however, by Io's analogous suffering); c(2) Medea in Euripides' *Medea* (pity and fear is generated, however, by the suffering of Jason's loved ones); c(3) the suitors in Homer's *Odyssey* (pity and fear is generated, however, by longsuffering Penelope and by Odysseus in disguise as a beggar); and c(4) Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (whose story, even in plot outline, generates pity and fear; cf. *Poetics* 14. 1453b7). (back)

9. See the useful schemata at Belfiore 173, Else 418-419, Golden and Hardison 197, and Halliwell 224-225. (back)

10. An example of how sublimated resentment might be effected in a relatively crude dramatic scenario: The student of the story does not throw a pie in the face of the teacher; the student comes to a knowledge of the teacher's burden in life and bakes a pie for the school bake sale instead. For a more nuanced discussion of the configuration of high and popular culture in the postmodern era, in which they no longer simply contrast, but rather commingle, see Gans 1998. (back)