1. The Structure of the Fabula (I): Aristotle's *Poetics*

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1.7. Character
1.1. Definition

The mythos, "plot" or "structure of the incidents" is for Aristotle the main part of the tragedy:

But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character; character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. . . . Besides which, the most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy—*peripeteia* or reversal of the situation, and recognition scenes—are parts of the plot.[1]

We may misunderstand Aristotle here if we forget his teleological and essentialist view of literature. He is not disparaging the portrayal of character; he is simply saying that the essence of tragedy does not consist in the portrayal of character. Epigram, for instance, can portray character, and it is a "lower" genre than tragedy, it does not present character in motion. The essence of tragedy and its greatness lies in that it allows the portrayal of an action, which an epigram could not do. That ability is what defines a tragedy as a tragedy; it is appropriate that the making of good plots is more difficult than the portrayal of good
characters, belonging as it does to a higher degree of the teleological development of literature; Aristotle sees the proof of this both in the achievements of early poets and in the difficulty which beginners have to build good plots:[2] "The plot, then, is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place" (Poetics 52, VI.14).

But there are other reasons apart from purely literary or generic ones which determine why plot should be more important than character. In Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics we also find the view that in actual life, and not merely in literature, character is subordinated to action because it is the product of action; it is developed in particular directions by the nature of our actions from our earliest days, and a person's bent of character can be manifested only in his/her actions. Similarly, in drama, "character" in its full sense can be manifested only in action, and must therefore play a subordinate part to plot. The superiority of tragedy to other genres is no doubt partly due to this coincidence of the relation between action and character in real life and in the dramatic genres.

Aristotle compares portrayal of character without a structuring action to the difference in painting between patches of colour and random and the superior organization of a sketch which represents something, even if it is colourless. "Thus tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action" (Poetics 52, VI.15).

Strictly speaking, it is the mythos, the plot of the tragedy which is the representation of an action. Aristotle speaks of "a plot giving an ordered combination of incidents", of plot being "the arrangement of the incidents" or "the imitation of the action" (Poetics 52, VI.6). Let us note in passing this difference between the action as considered as a series (pr‡xis) and the individual incidents which make it up (pr‡gmata).

So, we have three possible ways of looking at a tragedy, two possible levels of analysis of the story which is being represented. First, we have the tragedy itself, which allows us to separate the text as a
whole and the narrative elements of the text we isolate for analysis. In this way we can draw, for instance, an opposition between plot and character. Second, the tragedy is an action (pr‡xis), just as our daily activities may be described as actions. Third, it is a plot (mythos), an artistic structure which the poet builds out of the action; on the one hand we find mere incidents, on the other, the disposition of incidents. This sense of mythos as something which is made by the poet, as opposed to the action or story, which is inherited by him (although he may invent it as well) is something new in Aristotle. It did not exist in the Greek language before he defined it. The poet is the maker not of verses or of stories, but of this important intermediate structure whose presence had not been identified before Aristotle: plots. This distinction of Aristotle's will remain largely undeveloped until the twentieth century, when it is rediscovered by the Russian Formalists and developed by the Structuralists.

There is an important difference, however, between Aristotle's plot and the Formalist equivalent, which will be called siuzhet, and that is the abstract quality of the plot. The difference between the siuzhet and the actual literary text is never clearly defined. But Aristotle clearly conceives his mythos or plot as an abstraction to deal with the narrative aspect of tragedy, and other aspects of the text are comprised under the heads of thought and diction. Aristotle himself did not pay much attention to this opposition between action and plot; we may note that he does not include "action" as one of the six constituent elements of tragedy. He probably he felt that the presence of plot or mythos in that list accounted for both action and plot, fabula and story, as the action would only be seen through the plot. He seems to think that action is something in some way previous or external to the tragedy: it is only action-as-imitated, or plot, which is a central concept of poetics. This may be due in part to the Greek custom of using already known myths as the basis for the plots of their tragedies; those myths are clearly enough something different from the tragedy.

There is another difference between the terms siuzhet (or story) and plot. A plot is, in E. M. Forster's words, "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality" (Forster 97). We might further
specify: on causality as related to human projects, purposes and desires. A plot is a web of intentions and partial knowledge on the part of the characters, a conflict of interests which is usually resolved favourably according to the desires of one of the parties. The plot is a peculiarly dramatic construct: no wonder that the earliest analyses of plot structures are found in Aristotle and later dramatic theorists. A plot unfolds in such a way that the desires and expectations of the audience identify with those of the characters, and the interplay between the unfolding of the plot and the expectations of the audience is an important element in the experience of a work. Therefore, the concept of plot is usually associated with the analytical level of the story: a plot is an elaborated fabula, since the audience has been given a role to play in the plot. This is what Forster refers to when he says that mystery is essential to a plot. Of course he means mystery for the audience, not only mystery for the characters, and that involves already a specific choice of point of view. At the level of the fabula each character has of course his own point of view, but none is structurally privileged. A story, on the other hand, already defines a hierarchy of perspective, giving the audience a specific knowledge and position; this is all the more so if the story is the kind of story we usually call a plot.

As the distinction between action and plot remains undeveloped in Aristotle's theory, he deals with many of the elements of action as belonging to the plot, for instance: "Plots are simple or complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction" (Poetics 54, X.1). Sometimes he even uses the terms interchangeably. So it may be convenient not to elaborate too much on this distinction; we will study actions combined with plots, as Aristotle himself does. But we will keep it in mind, because at some points it does become significant. For instance, in chapter 18, when there is talk of the incidents of an action which lie outside the plot, for instance, past incidents which have a bearing on it but do not appear on stage.
1.2. Unity of Action

There was during the Renaissance and the Neo-classical age an important debate on the three Aristotelian unities of drama. Aristotle was supposed to have established three rules which every play ought to follow: unity of action, of place and of time. Aristotle does give some indications on these matters, but no absolute rules. He is much more tolerant than many of his later commentators, who were responsible for the strict formulation of the rules.

To begin with, he says that a plot ought to be proportionate, not too long and not too short. He is concerned above all with the correct understanding of the whole, so this "rule" of the length of the plot should be contemplated together with his observations on unity of plot and on catharsis: "in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory" (Poetics 53, VII.5). The nature of the action must also be taken into account:

the limit as fixed by the nature of the drama itself is this: the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous. And to define the matter roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad. (Poetics 53, VII.7)

As to the length of the action itself, Aristotle advises that it should not go much beyond one complete day. It must be pointed out that this was the practice of the major Greek tragedians. The same might be argued about the unity of place. There is no reference in the Poetics to such a unity, apart from an observation of
the fact that epic poetry has not the limitations set by the stage to the presentation of different places. The works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, however, usually are as strict in this respect as any Neoclassical critic might wish.

These supposed unities, or rather, these observations of Aristotle are wholly coherent with his main requirement for the plot of a tragedy, and also subservient to it. This requirement is our third unity, unity of action. "Unity of plot," Aristotle says, "does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero" (Poetics 53, VIII.1). The actions of a man do not necessarily build up a single pattern, a unified action which makes a coherent whole with a sense. And the action must be a whole:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles. (Poetics 52, VII.3)

This definition of beginning, middle and end derives from Plato's Phaedrus. It is not wholly truistic: "the acceptance of the statement that a story must have a beginning would seem to be that the story must start more or less with where its antecedents may be taken for granted, that is, where they are generic rather than specifically relevant."[3] The distinction is especially relevant in Greek tragedy, which relied for its plots on stories which were well known to the public. Aristotle draws this conclusion from the requirement of unity:

As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and
disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole. (Poetics 53, VIII.4)

Aristotle sees the whole as more than the sum of its parts, if only in that it includes the relations among the parts. Defined in this way, the unity of action has a much more general and comprehensive nature than will be allowed by later interpretations. We may notice that it is not too much to say that this is a structural definition of unity: its abstraction allows us to account for any kind of unity we may find in a plot, and in this respect it is difficult to go beyond it.

Aristotle compares the unity of the plot to the unity of a living being. It is only a comparison, but it has its importance. As Humphrey House has pointed out,[4] the comparison of the unity of a literary work with that of a living organism refutes the charge that Aristotle is describing a formal, dead, mechanical kind of unity. This is "unity" in a sense similar to that used in modern structuralist poetics.

However, it has an obvious shortcoming: being a structural definition of the plot, which is only one of the constituent elements of a tragedy, it fails to account for the whole of the tragedy. Aristotle's theory of tragedy and indeed the whole of his Poetics is plot-centered, and so it fails to account for many literary phenomena. It is the work that we might wish to define as a whole and as a structure, and not merely the plot. But we had better wait until the twentieth century, and be content in the meantime with Aristotle's theory of plots.
1.3. Kinds of Plots

Aristotle discards plots which do not keep this rule of unity as the worst. These plots he calls episodic: "I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" (Poetics 54, IX.10). Let us note in passing this intermediary analytical category, the episode. An episode is a partial sequence of actions whose peculiar unity is the bridge between the individual act and the whole of the action. Aristotle then divides plots into simple and complex:

An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call simple, when the change of fortune takes place without reversal of the situation and without recognition.

A complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by a discovery or reversal, or both. (Poetics 54, X.2)

We must be careful not to confuse this classification of Aristotle's with another one which he will use immediately, the one which divides plots into single and double. Here the criterion of classification is similar to the one used in defining episodic plots: we are considering whether there is a single focus of interest in the action. But from the examples set by Aristotle, double plots are not to be confused with episodic plots. In episodic plots, one focus of interest follows the other and the connection between them is not necessary; in double plots, both actions are developed simultaneously (f.i., in the Odyssey).
1.4. The Contents of the Tragic Action

But it remains to define those terms which are to serve as the basis of the first classification, reversal (peripeteia) and discovery (anagnorisis). To them we might add calamity (pathos). These are aspects of the action where form and content are indistinguishable.

Reversal of the situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity.

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a reversal of the situation, as in the Oedipus. (Poetics 54, XI.1-2)

The difference between reversal and recognition may seem obscure at first, but it becomes clearer when we notice that reversal concerns above all the expectations of the audience, and recognition those of the characters. Besides, reversal is related to the fortune of the characters, and recognition is relative to their identity. In reversal, the intention of the character produces results opposite to the desired ones; whereas there is not a specific intention in the case of recognition. Reversal is intimately connected with the requirement set by Aristotle for the best tragic plots, which involve a passage from happiness to unhappiness. Reversal has also a suggestion of sudden change from good to bad or bad to good. The key moment of reversal is the turning point (metabasis) where the downfall of the protagonist begins. It may be that the two meanings are not consciously divided by Aristotle. It is important to note that the reversal must be both intelligible and paradoxical. This is the key to Aristotle's conception of plot as integrating pleasure and instruction.
The definition of discovery, on the other hand, is related to the requirement that the tragic action must involve friends or next of kin, because only these relationships can bring about the greatest suffering on scene, and only they are capable of causing pity and fear, which are the objective proper to tragedy. There is a potential for irony here: the character's deeds or words escape his intention, as he is not in knowledge of all the facts, and are charged with another meaning by the situation. At the turning-point, "action is confronted by its own unintended outcome."[5] So, both peripeteia and anagnorisis are developments and complements of the basic ignorance or error (hamartia) of the character.

The best effects of pity and fear are obtained by the means of calamity, pathos: "The scene of suffering (pathos) is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like" (Poetics 54-55, XI.6)

The conditions set by Aristotle on these key elements of tragedy are strict: they must not be gratuitous, and the unity of the plot must be preserved. Reversal and recognition "should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of propter hoc [causal relationship] or post hoc [mere succession]" (Poetics 54, X.3). Succession does not equal causality; post hoc non ergo propter hoc. The disaster of the tragical hero must be a logical disaster. Aristotle bans supernatural or irrational solutions from the tragedy.

It is therefore evident that the unraveling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the deus ex machina. (Poetics 57, XV.7)

Here and elsewhere Aristotle is not describing actual Greek practice; he is rather defining his own ideal of poetry, one in which there is no place for the irrational except in peripheral areas of the work.

The formal requirements of unity, causality, and the element of surprise and point of view
1.5. The Effects of Tragic Action: Catharsis of Pity and Fear

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. (*Poetics* 56, XIV.1)

Aristotle has defined tragedy as the representation of a complete serious action through artistic language and dramatic representation which by means of pity and fear will bring about the purgation of such emotions. The original Greek term for "purgation" is catharsis. Catharsis is, then, a theory of the effects of literature on the receiver, in this case the audience of the tragedy. Nor the actual audience, which Aristotle seems to despise at times; rather an abstract audience. The theory of catharsis presupposes that there is an integral connection between some aspects of the structure of the work and the response of the audience. So we look at that response through the structure of the work.

It is not a theory of the immediate pleasure to which Aristotle makes reference at times. It is a theory which tries to find which are the ultimate effects of literature, the better to assess its role. But unfortunately represented by recognition and reversal are integrated in Aristotle's remark that pity and fear are heightened when things happen unexpectedly as well as logically, for then they will be more remarkable than if they seem merely mechanical or accidental: "The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design" (*Poetics* 54, IX.12).
Aristotle's account of catharsis is short and ambiguous.

This notion of catharsis has been interpreted in wildly different ways. Some theories we might call the "vaccine" theories: pity and fear are raised up where they did not exist before, and are then released. This produces a kind of emotional education which will prevent them from overpowering the spectator in the circumstances of his real life.

Other theories we might call the "security valve" theories: pity and fear which have been dangerously pent up or repressed in the mind of the audience are excited by the means of pathetic and violent action, and are then released; this would seem to be closer to some related medical senses of the word catharsis.

Still other interpretations, mainly neoclassical, speak of an education of virtue, warning against pride through fear and teaching pity. This seems to be out of the question, since Aristotle speaks of both pity and fear as of passions which must be cast away.

A further ambiguity is the precise nature of this being cast away, this purification. The word was used in religion as well as in medicine. Taking into account the general drift of Aristotelianism, it is more likely that Aristotle is referring to some kind of medical purification, to something that today we would call a psychological effect, rather than to a religious phenomenon.

We might also relate the idea of catharsis to Aristotle's conception of art as imitation. Just as the action on the stage is only the imitation of an action, the effects of pity and fear caused in the audience may be thought to be only the imitation of real emotions, which produce a sense of well-being as they are set against their real counterparts.

Yet another theory stands in opposition to all these previous ones. According to this theory, the cathartic effect is not located in the audience, but inside the play. Tragedy would require then scenes
representing pity and fear. It is the hero who is purified through pity and fear when he realizes the failing that has brought about his downfall. But even this last theory recognizes that the audience is presented with a moral progress in the hero, a spectacle which cannot but be beneficial to its morals.

In fact, Aristotle seems to consider that the capacity to elicit pity and fear is an objective attribute of the poetic material as handled by the playwright: "fearful and pitiful events". The homoeopathic overtones of the theory of catharsis suggest that these fearful and pitiful events are so for both characters and audience: the emotions involved are both the means and the object of the experience.

In any case, it is evident that Aristotle's theory is the very reverse of Plato's (there are, however, some suggestions of homoeopathic catharsis in the Laws, on the subject of Korybantic dancers). Plato saw in this kind of artistic imitations a kind of surrender to the passions. Both agree on the fact that tragedy excites the passions, but for Plato they remain so, while Aristotle insists that raising them is merely a means of casting them out. There are also different interpretations of "casting out". Probably he means the restoration of these passions to their right proportions, to the desirable "mean" which is the basis of his discussion of human qualities in the Ethics. Some theorists believe that this purification is carried out through a reciprocal effect of the two emotions, pity and fear. Pity draws us nearer to the object we pity, while fear drives us away from it. Catharsis would be some kind of equilibrium, of seeing things in a reasonable way, once both emotions have staved each other off. If Aristotle did not mean that, at least he did relate in an organic way the two emotions, pity and fear, in the Ethics.

These emotions had been identified as essentials of the tragic experience before Aristotle (catharsis, on the other hand, is uniquely Aristotelian). Common Greek attitudes of the time link pity to metabasis or change of fortune. Pity is felt, Aristotle argues, when the subject perceives an analogy between himself and the sufferer. Pity for others derives from fear for oneself; pity and fear are essentially linked. This very definition exemplifies Aristotle's refusal to sever thought from emotions, in his ethics as well as in his
poetics. Tragic fear differs from ordinary fear because it is focussed on the experience of others. There may be a suggestion that it derives too from our own experience of fear, by analogy and reasoning.

Tragedy has positive ethical effects, but it is essential to recognize that this is not to be interpreted in a narrowly didactic sense. The obvious effect of tragedy, the raising of emotions, is the very reverse of its actual effect, their being cast out. If tragedy teaches, Aristotle seems to say, it is only in a hidden and indirect way. Poetry helps men to be rational, but it is not necessarily concerned with any more specific teaching. Aristotle is in favour of the best form of catharsis, which is an indirect way of teaching, but he is against poetic justice (the deus ex machina) which is an instance of carrying tragedy towards an end which is not its own, and trying to transform it into direct moralizing, without the essential requirements of pity and fear.

It remains to determine which is the best way to arise the emotions of pity and fear. We have seen it must be through elements in the plot, and not through spectacle. But not everything may be included in the plot. The monstrous, for instance, must be ruled out, as it will be in later classicist periods because of decorum. Aristotle's idea of decorum, however, is not the same: he is not concerned with indecency, but with generic propriety: "we must not demand of tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it" (Poetics 56, XIV.2).

Tragedy then must involve some calamity which befalls people who are friends or next of kin and which is caused by one of them. Aristotle classifies tragic plots using two criteria:

- whether the calamitous act is carried out or not.

- whether the agent knows that it is a calamitous act, that is, whether the recognition precedes or follows the act.
So, we have four possibilities, and, as Aristotle himself says, "These are the only possible ways. For the deed must either be done or not done--and that wittingly or unwittingly" (Poetics 56, XIV.7):

- "to be about to act knowing the persons and then not to act, is the worst. It is shocking without being tragic, for no disaster follows."

- "The next and better way is that the deed should be perpetrated."

- "Still better, that it should be perpetrated in ignorance, and the discovery made afterwards."

- "The last case is the best, as when in the Cresphontes Merope is about to to slay her son, but recognizing who he is, spares his life." (Poetics 56, XIV.6-9)

Let us notice that Aristotle seeks a logical ground for his classifications, and that he wants to exhaust all the possibilities.

Another similar attempt at classification is to be found in chapter 16. dealing with the different types of discovery, but we will not enter into it.

1.6. Sections of Tragedies. Sections of Plots

We have seen an abstractive classification of the constituent elements of tragedy into plot, character,
thought, diction, spectacle and song. This kind of division, which we have called abstractive or "vertical" gives us what has been called the "parts of quality" of a tragedy, meaning that they are present more or less simultaneously at every moment of the play. Our concern now is with a horizontal division into "parts of quantity," those parts into which the dramatic representation can be divided. They are "prologue, episode, exode, and choral song, this last being divided into parode and stasimon" (Poetics 55, XII.1). These are not very important for our purposes, since they belong specifically to Greek tragedy, and modern drama uses a division into acts, but it is important to notice that Aristotle made a difference between "horizontal" and "vertical" analysis, between parts of quantity and parts of quality. Moreover, he differentiates the horizontal parts of quantity from the horizontal parts of the action, which do not coincide with the parts of the plot if we pay attention not so much to the terms as to the reasoning process:

Every tragedy falls into two parts--complication and unraveling or dénouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the complication; the rest is the unraveling. By the complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good and bad fortune. The unraveling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end. (Poetics 58, XVIII.1)

The first part of this definition is peculiar to Greek tragedies, but the second has a more general value; it is more useful.
1.7. Character (ethos)

Character is the second constituent element of a tragedy. We have already seen some opinions of Aristotle's concerning the place of character and its relationship with plot. The subjects of the action Aristotle calls "agents", and not characters, a distinction which is perpetuated in narratological models up to Bal. Character is not clearly defined in the Poetics, but at one point Aristotle says that "By character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents" (Poetics 51, VI.6). Character, then, is not to be taken in the sense of "human being" (personaje) but rather in the sense of "personality", "disposition" (carácter). It is not the whole of the personality, but rather the disposition to act virtuously or otherwise, as manifested in deliberate ethical intention (proairesis). This is manifested both through action and speech: thence the importance of "thought". There is no place in Aristotle's theory for an unconscious revelation of character. It is made evident only in moral choice.

"In respect of character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good" (Poetics 56, XV.1). Aristotle means here moral goodness, but later he will qualify this requirement. There is a place in his theory for bad characters, of course, and also for not so good characters. Moreover, he does not identify virtue and happiness, as Socrates and Plato had done. Tragedy deals for Aristotle with the vulnerability of external conditions of happiness, vulnerability of fortune and prosperity, and not of virtue. And anyway, he does not mean any kind of absolute moral goodness, but rather a fulfilment of the possibilities of each character:

This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman
may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety. Thirdly, character must be true to life. The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. (Poetics 57, XV.1-4)

With these rules, Aristotle sets the foundations of the doctrine of decorum in characterization, an its slippery requirement that characters in literary works must be both like characters in life and like characters in other literary works.

The last of the four requirements seems to lead us to a regressus in infinitum, but it becomes clearer from what follows that Aristotle is here demanding a certain idealization of character, in the sense of universalization, that is, of an interpretation of the way a character would act "according to the laws of necessity or probability":

So too, the poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it. In this way Achilles is portrayed by Agathon and Homer. (Poetics 57, XV.8)

The poet should then preserve the type with its defects, and at the same time ennoble it. Let us point out that this is a theory of character in tragedy.

We may also add here some requirements for tragedy taking "character" in our modern sense (personaje). Aristotle speaks in this respect not of "characters", but of actors. We see that the very name makes them subservient to the action. Besides, it has a connotation of activity which does not accommodate very well with the element of passivity and suffering which seems so strongly linked to many of the Greek tragedies. For Aristotle, tragedy must be centered on an active figure, the hero. Action is all: even the chorus is subjected to this rule. According to Aristotle, the chorus must be regarded as one of the actors.
Choral songs must not be lyrical interludes; they should instead be relevant to the plot. He prefers Sophocles' way to that of Euripides or Agathon. The chorus must get involved in the action.

Besides the general requirements of character, we have already seen some specific indications on the actors of tragedy. They must be men better than the average. They must also be friends or relatives. Aristotle observes that the fact that they belong to a small group of mythical families is convenient, even though it is not a necessary condition. The poet is free to invent his characters, provided that they fulfil the basic requirements.

The best way of producing pity and fear, according to Aristotle, is through a complex action (one with recognition, or reversal, or both) in which a man not eminently good or just falls into misfortune because of some error or frailty (hamartia). The character must not be too bad, because his downfall would not bring about terror or pity, and not too good because then the result would be disgust, and not pity. So, hamartia does not necessarily mean "sin", but rather "error" or "unskilfulness" in current Greek usage. In Aristotle's Ethics, it may include sin and crime, but the main sense is something like "rash and culpable negligence". The kind which seems favoured by Aristotle is man's blundering against the supernatural, such as we find in Oedipus Tyrannus.

However, and most surprisingly, Aristotle ignores the religious significance of tragedy. Aristotle has insisted on the conscious action of the characters, so there is not much place left for their being victims of fate; this Aristotle would consider an irrational element, alien to the plot itself. This attitude is another link between his theory of poetics and the whole of his philosophy, in which there is no place for the traditional beliefs. For him, the stories about the gods are significant only insomuch as they show what men think about the gods (cf. Xenophanes). This neglect impairs very seriously the value of his theory for an understanding of Greek tragedy, though its originality as a purposive and ideological theory is enhanced. "At the centre of the Poetics," according to Stephen Halliwell, "we see the results of a confrontation
between a confident rationalism and the tragic vision of the poets" (237).

The Aristotelian concepts remain to this day central in the analysis of narrative. Besides, Aristotle anticipated in more or less intuitive ways many other analytical distinctions which will be explicitly developed only later: the notion of a basic sequence of narrative functions, the comparative analysis of time between the fabula and the story, the reader's construction of narrative, etc.

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[1] Poetics 52, VI.9. This conception is contrary to that of Henry James in The Art of Fiction. James considers that plot is indissociable from character, and in any case would privilege character over plot. In a literary work, character is the determination of the incidents of the plot, and the incidents are the illustration of character.

[2] Individual achievement would therefore seem to maintain a phylogenetic relationship to the development of literature--a curious by-product of Aristotle's teleological conception.

