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# ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

## THE BEST KIND OF TRAGIC PLOT: Aristotle's argument in *Poetics* 13-14

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RESUMO: Nos capítulos 13 e 14 da *Poética*, Aristóteles discute o melhor tipo de enredo trágico. Em ambos os capítulos, a análise repousa na premissa de que enredos trágicos devem representar eventos que evoquem piedade e medo. De todo modo, os dois capítulos chegam a conclusões que são, geralmente, vistas como inconsistentes. Neste artigo, tentarei mostrar que é possível entender os dois capítulos como um argumento simples e coerente caso atentemos ao contexto polêmico que influencia o caminho no qual ele desenvolve seu argumento, e às partículas conectivas que articulam sua estrutura lógica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: *Poética* de Aristóteles, enredo trágico, *hamartía*

ABSTRACT: In chapters 13 and 14 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the best kind of tragic plot. In both chapters the analysis rests on the premise that tragic plots should represent events that evoke pity and fear. However, the two chapters reach conclusions which have generally been seen as inconsistent. In this paper, I shall try to show that it is possible to understand the two chapters as a single, coherent argument if we pay careful attention to the polemical context which influences the way in which he develops his argument, and to the connective particles which articulate its logical structure.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragic plot, *hamartía*

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### The problem

At the beginning of chapter 13 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle introduces his next topic: 'What, then, should one aim at and what should one avoid in constructing plots? What is the source of the effect at which tragedy aims?'<sup>1</sup> He then sets out the premises for his argument:

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<sup>1</sup> 13, 1452b28-30. Translations are taken from M. Heath, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Harmondsworth 1996), with some modifications. My participation in the conference '*Páthos: A Poética das Emoções*', held at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro in October 2008, was made by the financial support of the British Academy (Grant Reference OCG-51077); additional support was provided by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Leeds. I am grateful to the conference organisers for the invitation to contribute, and to other participants for stimulating discussion. That discussion made me acutely aware of how much more work needs to be done; the present version of the paper, based closely on the original conference presentation, is no more than an exploratory and provisional attempt to formulate the case for a new interpretation of Aristotle's chapters on the best kind of tragic plot.

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‘The construction of the best tragedy should be complex rather than simple; and it should also be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity, since that is the distinctive feature of this kind of imitation.’<sup>2</sup>

So Aristotle’s analysis of the best tragedy is governed by the premise that tragedy ‘should... be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity’. Here, then, we have a prime example of the poetics of emotion—as we would expect: pity and fear are built into the definition of tragedy.<sup>3</sup>

We are familiar with the discussion of the best kind of tragic plot in chapter 13. We know that Aristotle recommends tragedies in which ‘the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice’ undergoes a change from good fortune to bad fortune ‘not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error [*hamartia*] of some kind’ (tragedies like *Oedipus*, in fact).<sup>4</sup>

So it is surprising when in chapter 14 Aristotle restates his original question: ‘Since the poet should produce the pleasure which comes from pity and fear, and should do so by means of imitation, clearly this must be brought about in the events. Let us therefore take up the question what classes of events appear terrible or pitiable.’<sup>5</sup>

Strictly speaking, this is not exactly the same question as the one posed at the beginning of chapter 13. There he asked about the *structure* of the plot; here he asks about

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<sup>2</sup> 13, 1452b30-33.

<sup>3</sup> 6, 1449b27. The argument for the primacy of plot (6, 1450a15-39) makes it inevitable that the construction of the plot is the key to tragedy’s ἔργον (see especially 1450a29-33: ἔτι ἂν τις ἐφεξῆς θῆ ῥήσεις ἠθικὰς καὶ λέξει καὶ διανοίᾳ εὖ πεπονημένας, οὐ ποιήσει ὃ ἦν τῆς τραγωδίας ἔργον, ἀλλὰ πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ καταδεεστέροις τούτοις κεχρημένη τραγωδία, ἔχουσα δὲ μῦθον καὶ σύστασιν πραγμάτων). The discussion of complex plots (that is, plots which include recognition and/or reversal [περιπέτεια]) in ch. 10-11 did not explicitly state that complex plots are superior, but it did at least prepare the way for that claim, not least by showing how recognition and reversal relate to changes of fortune, and to pity and fear (11, 1452a31f., 38-b3). See further 6, 1450a33-5: πρὸς δὲ τούτοις τὰ μέγιστα οἷς ψυχαγωγεῖ ἡ τραγωδία τοῦ μύθου μέρη ἐστίν, αἱ τε περιπέτεια καὶ ἀναγνωρίσεις; 9, 1452a1-4: ἐπεὶ δὲ οὐ μόνον τελείας ἐστὶ πράξεως ἢ μίμησις ἀλλὰ καὶ φοβερῶν καὶ ἐλεεινῶν, ταῦτα δε γίνεται καὶ μάλιστα [καὶ μᾶλλον] ὅταν γένηται παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι’ ἄλληλα· τὸ γὰρ θαυμαστὸν οὕτως ἔξει. Aristotle has also made clear the fundamental role of changes of fortune in tragedy (7, 1451a11-15: ὡς δὲ ἀπλῶς διορίσαντας εἰπεῖν, ἐν ὅσῳ μεγέθει κατὰ τὸ εἶκος ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον ἐφεξῆς γιγνομένων συμβαίνει εἰς εὐτυχίαν ἐκ δυστυχίας ἢ ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίας μεταβάλλειν, ἰκανὸς ὅρος ἐστὶν τοῦ μεγέθους: note that Aristotle leaves the direction of change open in this passage).

<sup>4</sup> 13, 1453a7-12: ὁ μεταξὺ ἄρα τούτων λοιπός. ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μῆτε ἀρετῆ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη μῆτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι’ ἀμαρτίαν τινά, τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχία, οἷον Οἰδίπους καὶ Θυέστης καὶ οἱ ἐκ τῶν τοιούτων γενῶν ἐπιφανεῖς ἄνδρες.

<sup>5</sup> 14, 1453b11-15: ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν ἀπὸ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως δεῖ ἡδονὴν παρασκευάζειν τὸν ποιητὴν, φανερόν ὡς τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐμποιητέον. ποῖα οὖν δεῖνὰ ἢ ποῖα οἰκτρὰ φαίνεται τῶν συμπιπτόντων, λάβωμεν.

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*events*.<sup>6</sup> However, when he has decided ‘what classes of events appear terrible or pitiable’, he asks how such events are to be used *well*;<sup>7</sup> that is a question about plot-structure. The brief summary at the end of the chapter is very clear: ‘Enough has been said about the structure of events and what plots should be like.’<sup>8</sup> So most interpreters have concluded that the two chapters are addressing questions that are (at the very least) closely connected.

Most interpreters (including me) have also concluded that the answers they give are inconsistent.<sup>9</sup> In chapter 13, as we have seen, Aristotle appears to give first place to plots that end in misfortune. But in chapter 14, he ranks plots in which something terrible happens less favourably than plots in which the terrible event is averted.<sup>10</sup>

That apparent contradiction is one of the most worrying problems in the *Poetics*. I am going to suggest a good way of approaching the problem.

### Some working assumptions

One obvious fact about chapter 13 is that Aristotle is engaged in a debate. Chapter 13 is not an abstract analytical exercise, but argues against contemporary opponents who have different views about tragic plots. As we shall see, he has two sets of opponents: those who advocate a ‘double plot’; and those who criticise Euripides. It is worth noting that these

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<sup>6</sup> Structure: σύνθεσις, σύστασις; events: τὰ συμπίπτοντα. Some scholars have seen this distinction as the key to a solution to the problem of inconsistency: ch. 13 is about plot, ch. 14 is about an element of plot; ch. 13 is about the best form of *metabasis*, ch. 14 is about the best form of *pathos*; and the compatibility of the best plot-type and the best treatment of a key plot element is not addressed. This interpretation removes contradiction at the cost of eliminating cohesion. See J. Vahlen, *Beiträge zu Aristoteles' Poetik* (Leipzig 1914), 57f.; A. Gudeman, *Aristoteles. Poetik* (Berlin-Leipzig 1934), 266; G. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics. The Argument* (Cambridge MA 1957), 450-2 (modifying Vahlen); S.L. Radt, ‘Zum 13. Kapitel von Aristoteles' Poetik’, in S.L. Radt and C.J. Ruijgh (ed.), *Miscellanea tragica in honorem J.C. Kamerbeek* (Amsterdam 1976), 271-84. S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London 1986), 223 n.30 provides an effective critique of this approach.

<sup>7</sup> 14, 1453b25f.: δεῖ καὶ παραδεδομένοις χρῆσθαι καλῶς. τὸ δὲ καλῶς τί λέγομεν, εἴπωμεν σαφέστερον. The answer (which involves recognition: 1453b31, 35, 1454a3f.) brings us back to the complex plot, and therefore to plot-structure.

<sup>8</sup> 14, 1454a13-15: περὶ μὲν οὖν τῆς τῶν πραγμάτων συστάσεως καὶ ποίους τινὰς εἶναι δεῖ τοὺς μύθους εἶρηται ἰκανῶς.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Heath (n.1), xxxi: ‘Chapters 13 and 14 address the question of the best kind of tragic plot. Both chapters assume that the best kind of tragic plot is the one that is most effective in arousing pity and fear; but they take different lines of approach and reach seemingly incompatible conclusions.’ *Ibid.* xxxv: ‘If we insist that there is one kind of tragic plot that is best, then the two chapters are contradictory. But we have already seen that the concept of error in chapter 13 is designedly open-ended, and on the assumption that there may be a variety of excellent tragic plots, the two chapters could be allowed to reach different conclusions without contradiction.’ J. Moles, ‘Notes on Aristotle, *Poetics* 13 and 14’, *CQ* 29 (1979), 77-94 has a useful discussion, though in the end he is unable to escape the conclusion that there is a ‘flat contradiction’ (91).

<sup>10</sup> 14, 1454a4-9.

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opponents are not Plato.<sup>11</sup> We do not know who they are; but we must not let our own interest in how Aristotle responds to Plato's views on poetry distract us from the debate that Aristotle was actually engaged in.

So we must read chapter 13 as an argument. We need to pay careful attention to the *logical* structure of that argument. But we must also be alert to Aristotle's *rhetoric*—his debating tactics.

Let me give a very clear example of how Aristotle's conduct of his argument is influenced by the polemical context. At the end of chapter 13 he says:

Second-best is the structure which some say comes first—that which has a double structure like the *Odyssey*, and which ends with the opposite outcome for better and worse people. It is thought to come first because of the weakness of audiences; the poets follow the audiences' lead and compose whatever is to their taste. But this is not the pleasure which comes from tragedy; it is more characteristic of comedy. In comedy even people who are the bitterest enemies in the story, like Orestes and Aegisthus, go off reconciled in the end, and no one gets killed by anybody.<sup>12</sup>

Orestes' reconciliation with his father's murderer does match Aristotle's definition of the comic: it is disgraceful, and does not involve pain or destruction ('no one gets killed by anybody').<sup>13</sup> But that is nothing like the plot of the *Odyssey*: Odysseus is not reconciled to the suitors, and the suitors do get killed. Assimilating a *tragic* plot with a double structure to a *comic* burlesque of the Orestes story is totally unfair to the proponents of the double plot. Aristotle is making fun of his opponents. He brings this stage of his argument to a close with a deliberately polemical joke at the expense of a rival theory.

I said that Aristotle brings *this stage* of his argument to a close. The two chapters were

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. D.W. Lucas, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Oxford 1968), 146: 'One may suspect that throughout this passage on the tragic situation A. has been influenced by Plato's denunciation of epic and tragic poets who presented a world in which the good were often miserable and the wicked successful.' Scholarship on the *Poetics* often contextualises Aristotle's argument in a very limited and one-sided way. We are acutely aware of Plato's presence in the background, even though Plato is at most an indirect dialogue partner in *Poetics*. Others (including partners who are directly addressed, even if they are unnamed) have left at most fragments, and may have expressed their views in otherwise unrecorded oral debate; they are inevitably less salient to us, but may have been of more immediate concern to Aristotle.

<sup>12</sup> 13, 1453a30-39: δευτέρα δ' ἡ πρώτη λεγομένη ὑπὸ τινῶν ἐστὶν σύστασις, ἡ διπλῆν τε τὴν σύστασιν ἔχουσα καθάπερ ἡ Ὀδύσεια καὶ τελευτώσα ἐξ ἐναντίας τοῖς βελτίοσι καὶ χείροσι. δοκεῖ δὲ εἶναι πρώτη διὰ τὴν τῶν θεάτρων ἀσθένειαν· ἀκολουθοῦσι γὰρ οἱ ποιηταὶ κατ' εὐχὴν ποιοῦντες τοῖς θεαταῖς. ἔστιν δὲ οὐχ αὕτη ἀπὸ τραγωδίας ἡδονὴ ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τῆς κωμωδίας οἰκεία· ἐκεῖ γὰρ οἱ ἂν ἔχιστοι ὦσιν ἐν τῷ μύθῳ, οἷον Ὀρέστης καὶ Αἴγισθος, φίλοι γενόμενοι ἐπὶ τελευτῆς ἐξέρχονται, καὶ ἀποθνήσκει οὐδεὶς ὑπ' οὐδενός.

<sup>13</sup> 5, 1449a32-7: ἡ δὲ κωμωδία ἐστὶν ὥσπερ εἶπομεν μίμησις φαυλοτέρων μὲν, οὐ μέντοι κατὰ πᾶσαν κακίαν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ αἰσχροῦ ἐστὶ τὸ γελοῖον μόριον. τὸ γὰρ γελοῖον ἐστὶν ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ αἰσχος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν, οἷον εὐθύς τὸ γελοῖον πρόσωπον αἰχρὸν τι καὶ διεστραμμένον ἄνευ ὀδύνης.

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written to stand together: chapter 14 contains an explicit cross-reference back to chapter 13. So it would be *very* surprising if they really did contradict each other. And yet this cross-reference is introduced to explain (γάρ) a conclusion about the best kind of plot which appears to contradict the conclusion reached in chapter 13.<sup>14</sup> That is puzzling; to solve the puzzle, we must find a way to read the two chapters as a *single* argument—one that is consistent and cohesive, but also extended and complex.<sup>15</sup> We must be careful not to assume that a statement represents Aristotle’s last word on the question of the best kind of tragic plot, when we can see that he has more words to say. We must be patient, and make sure that we are giving due weight to the *whole* of his argument.

### Chapter 13: against double plot theory (i)

But we must begin, as is natural, with what comes first.

After stating that the best tragedy should be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity, Aristotle presents a famous argument—I shall call it the ‘elimination argument’. He considers possible combinations of characters (who may be good or bad) and changes of fortune (which may be from good fortune to bad fortune, or from bad fortune to good fortune). Aristotle shows that none of the possible combinations produces a plot which will evoke pity or fear. So, all these combinations are eliminated.

But how can there be a good tragic plot, if all possible combinations have been eliminated? Aristotle escapes from the trap: ‘We are left, therefore, with the person intermediate between these.’<sup>16</sup> Aristotle uses the particle ἄρα, which suggests that the

<sup>14</sup> 14, 1454a9-13: διὰ γὰρ τοῦτο, ὅπερ πάλαι εἴρηται, οὐ περὶ πολλὰ γένη αἱ τραγωδίαι εἰσίν. ζητοῦντες γὰρ οὐκ ἀπὸ τέχνης ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ τύχης εὔρον τὸ τοιοῦτον παρασκευάζειν ἐν τοῖς μύθοις· ἀναγκάζονται οὖν ἐπὶ ταύτας τὰς οἰκίας ἀπαντᾶν ὅσαις τὰ τοιαῦτα συμβέβηκε πάθη. The γάρ explains 14, 1454a4-9: κράτιστον δὲ τὸ τελευταῖον, λέγω δὲ οἷον ἐν τῷ Κρεσφόντη ἢ Μερόπη μέλλει τὸν υἱὸν ἀποκτείνειν, ἀποκτείνει δὲ οὐ, ἀλλ’ ἀνεγνώρισε, καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἰφιγενείᾳ ἢ ἀδελφῇ τὸν ἀδελφόν, καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἑλλῆ ὁ υἱὸς τὴν μητέρα ἐκδιδόναι μέλλων ἀνεγνώρισε. The cross-reference is to 13, 1453a17-22: πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ οἱ ποιηταὶ τοὺς τυχόντας μύθους ἀπηρίθμουν, νῦν δὲ περὶ ὀλίγας οἰκίας αἱ κάλλιστα τραγωδίαι συντίθενται, οἷον περὶ Ἀλκμέωνα καὶ Οἰδίπου καὶ Ὀρέστην καὶ Μελέαγρον καὶ Τηλέφον καὶ ὅσοις ἄλλοις συμβέβηκεν ἢ παθεῖν δεινὰ ἢ ποιῆσαι. This is the first ‘sign’ confirming Aristotle’s claim about the best kind of plot, 13, 1453a12-17: ἀνάγκη ἄρα τὸν καλῶς ἔχοντα μῦθον ἀπλοῦν εἶναι μᾶλλον ἢ διπλοῦν, ὥσπερ τινές φασι, καὶ μεταβάλλειν οὐκ εἰς εὐτυχίαν ἐκ δυστυχίας ἀλλὰ τούναντίον ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μὴ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἀλλὰ δι’ μεγάλην ἀμαρτίαν ἢ οἷου εἴρηται ἢ βελτίονος μᾶλλον ἢ χείρονος.

<sup>15</sup> Contrast the interpretation of those who explain the apparent inconsistency by suggesting that Aristotle changed his mind. E.g. T.C.W. Stinton, ‘*Hamartia* in Aristotle and Greek tragedy’, *CQ* 25 (1975), 221-54, reprinted in *Collected Papers on Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1990), 143-85, at 183 for a ‘change of view’ on Aristotle’s part.

<sup>16</sup> 13, 1453a7: ὁ μεταξὺ ἄρα τούτων λοιπός.

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solution is an inference from the elimination argument. But there are two problems with that.

First, the elimination argument has assumed a polarity between good and bad characters; to make room for the ‘intermediate’ character, we must replace that polarity with a continuum. This sudden change in the terms of the argument is surprising.

Secondly, the inference is only valid if there is no possible alternative to the plot in which the ‘intermediate’ character (that is ‘the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice’) undergoes a change to bad fortune. But there is another possible plot—one which Aristotle has so far ignored. That is the double plot, the plot which ‘ends with the opposite outcome for better and worse people’.<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle does now introduce the double plot: ‘Necessarily, therefore, a well-formed plot will be simple rather than (as some people say) double...’.<sup>18</sup> Again, the particle ἄρα presents this as an inference, indeed as a *necessary* inference, from what he has just said. But that cannot be right. Since the inference about the plot based on the ‘intermediate’ character *presupposed* that no other possible plot is available, it cannot be used to *exclude* another kind of plot.

In fact, Aristotle’s argument here is astonishingly bad. All he has done so far is review a variety of single plots, and shown which of them is best (the one with the intermediate character). But showing that one kind of single plot is superior to other single plots cannot possibly prove that the best single plot is superior to the best double plot (whatever a double plot may be—at this point Aristotle does not explain what the double plot is: he just goes on to restate his own conclusion).

Aristotle was very good at arguing—so why does he argue so badly here?

To understand what he is doing, imagine that you are a supporter of the double plot. How would you argue your case? Surely, you would use the elimination argument. If a systematic review of all possible single plots shows that every one of them is unacceptable, then you can claim that the double plot is the only acceptable option. In other words, you would do exactly what Aristotle does—up to the point at which he introduces the intermediate character.

There, of course, you would part company with Aristotle. You would claim that the

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<sup>17</sup> 13, 1453a31-3.

<sup>18</sup> 13, 1453a12f.: ἀνάγκη ἄρα τὸν καλῶς ἔχοντα μῦθον ἀπλοῦν εἶναι μᾶλλον ἢ διπλοῦν, ὡσπερ τινὲς φασι.

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failure of every kind of single plot shows that a double plot is the only acceptable option. Elements that are incapable of producing a satisfactory plot on their own may be satisfactory when combined. The *Odyssey* is a good example. One might recall the account in Plato's *Ion* of a recitation of Odysseus on the threshold about to attack the suitors: it has a powerful emotional impact.<sup>19</sup> Ion's comment on this suggests that the scene inspires pity (perhaps) and (certainly) fear.<sup>20</sup> The hero is in a pitiable position, and the risks which he runs evoke the possibility of failure and a terrible ending—but his victory avoids this morally disgusting outcome;<sup>21</sup> and the downfall of his wicked enemies secures a satisfying effect.<sup>22</sup>

I said that the double plot theorist would part company with Aristotle. In fact, it was the other way round: Aristotle was parting company with the double plot theorist. He traces the steps of the double plot theorist's argument up to the point where all single plots appear to have been eliminated, and then ostentatiously defeats the case for double plots by showing that it had not covered all the possibilities. *Even when* you have eliminated the permutations with very good and very bad characters, there remains the intermediate character.

This would explain why Aristotle did not think it was necessary to explain what a double plot is. Anyone familiar with the contemporary debate would already know.<sup>23</sup> They would have recognised the elimination argument as an argument for the double plot theory; but they would not have known that Aristotle was going to refute the argument. This also explains why Aristotle did not prepare us for the appearance of the intermediate character. He was deliberately creating a surprise, which would add rhetorical force to his reply to the double plot theory.<sup>24</sup>

Aristotle's argument against double plot theory is that the inference it makes from the elimination argument is not valid. But, as I have said, Aristotle's own inference about the intermediate character is also invalid. He has shown that the double plot theorist's inference is

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<sup>19</sup> *Ion* 535b: ὅταν εὖ εἴπησ ἔπη καὶ ἐκπλήξῃς μάλιστα τοὺς θεωμένους, ἢ τὸν Ὀδυσσεῖα ὅταν ἐπὶ τὸν οὐδὸν ἐφαλλόμενον ἄδῃς, ἐκφανῇ γιγνόμενον τοῖς μνηστῆρσι καὶ ἐκχέοντα τοὺς οἰστούς πρὸ τῶν ποδῶν...

<sup>20</sup> *Ion* 535c: οὐ γὰρ σε ἀποκρυψάμενος ἔρω. ἐγὼ γὰρ ὅταν ἐλείνῳν τι λέγω, δακρύων ἐμπίμπλανταί μου οἱ ὀφθαλμοί: ὅταν τε φοβερὸν ἢ δεινόν, ὄρθαί αἱ τρίχες ἴστανται ὑπὸ φόβου καὶ ἡ καρδία πηδᾷ.

<sup>21</sup> 13, 1452b36: μιαρὸν.

<sup>22</sup> 13, 1453a2f.: τὸ φιλόανθρωπον. See n.31 below on the interpretation of this word.

<sup>23</sup> The unexpected reference to double plot theory at 1453a12f. also makes sense: it is here that Aristotle brings into the open the position that has been his implicit target throughout the argument so far.

<sup>24</sup> Radt (n.6) recognises that ch. 13 is structured to lead up to the refutation of double plot as its conclusion, but fails to give an account of how ch. 13-14 are consistent: Aristotle simply juxtaposes conclusions about different things (the overall structure of plot and the best *Gestaltung* of *pathos*) without worrying whether they can be combined.

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not necessarily true; but he has not shown that it is necessarily false. His way of staging the debate so far is very effective rhetorically, but it is not at all convincing logically. Aristotle, of course, knows that: the next stage of his argument is designed to put right the logical defect.

### οἱ ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρες

Before we see how he does that, I want to look at two details of the elimination argument.

The argument begins like this: ‘So it is clear first of all that decent men should not be seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune—this does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust.’<sup>25</sup>

The word I have translated as ‘decent’ is ἐπιεικής. Scholars have been puzzled by this choice of word. It is a rather weak term of moral commendation. But what Aristotle needs to exclude is the plot in which a change from good fortune to bad fortune happens to someone who is morally outstanding—someone who is ‘outstanding in moral excellence or justice’, as Aristotle says when he introduces the intermediate character.<sup>26</sup> That is not a meaning which a reader would naturally give to the word ἐπιεικής.<sup>27</sup>

If the elimination argument belongs to the double plot theorist, as I have suggested, then the use of this word makes sense. The double plot theorist is trying to eliminate *all* possible single plots. So he needs to exclude plots in which *any* decent person (not just someone ‘outstanding in moral excellence or justice’) undergoes a change to bad fortune. For

<sup>25</sup> 13, 1452b34-6: πρῶτον μὲν δῆλον ὅτι οὔτε τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρας δεῖ μεταβάλλοντας φαίνεσθαι ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν, οὐ γὰρ φοβερὸν οὐδὲ ἔλεεινὸν τοῦτο ἀλλὰ μισρὸν ἐστίν.

<sup>26</sup> 13, 1453a8: ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη.

<sup>27</sup> Lucas, *Aristotle's Poetics* (n.11), ad 52b34-6 has a good summary of the problem. Cf. Stinton (n.15), 164: ‘The first situation ruled out by Aristotle in ch. 13 as untragic is that morally good men, ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρες, should be represented as changing from good fortune to bad. This is in itself surprising and far from evident (δῆλον); for ἐπιεικής is a word of moderate commendation, and overlaps in sense with χρηστός and σπουδαῖος, words designating qualities which Aristotle elsewhere prescribes for the stage-figures of tragedy (*Po.* 3, 15 init.). This difficulty is partly resolved by the context: ἐπιεικεῖς, being opposed to ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη, must stand here for σφόδρα ἐπιεικής, morally faultless... though this is hard to get out of the Greek.’ P.J. van der Eijk addresses the problem differently in ‘Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452b34-36. A discrepancy between wording and meaning?’, *Mnemosyne* 39 (1986), 390-94. He suggests that μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη is equivalent to μήτε δι’ ἀρετὴν καὶ δικαιοσύνην, and so at 1452b34f. the implication is that it is μισρὸν for a morally good person to fall into misfortune *because of* his goodness (and not because of a *hamartia*). However, Aristotle’s use of contrasting forms of expression (μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων as against μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν) counts against this, and the point would not be obvious at 1452b34f. (moreover, van der Eijk acknowledges that 1453a7 ὁ μεταξὺ... τούτων becomes very difficult on his view). The phrase μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν suggests that the bad man’s fall in the elimination argument was tacitly assumed to be *because of* his badness; the fact that Aristotle does *not* say μήτε δι’ ἀρετὴν καὶ δικαιοσύνην suggests that the good man’s fall was tacitly assumed to be *despite* (not *because of*) his goodness.

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this purpose, a weak term of moral commendation is just what is needed. At first, Aristotle accepts his opponent's word; but when he introduces the 'intermediate' character, the ethical variable in tragic plots must be reassessed. Instead of a polarity, we must think of a continuous range of variation. Now the initial premise is only acceptable if it is interpreted in a very limited sense—so limited that the original formulation is seen to be misleading: it must be replaced with 'outstanding in moral excellence or justice'. This phrase is a retrospective *correction* to a formula adopted from an opponent on a purely temporary basis. When Aristotle goes on to speak of 'someone of the kind specified (or better than that, rather than worse)',<sup>28</sup> he lets us know that this is a major correction. He wants to allow plots that intrude significantly into the space that the double plot theorist had tried to fence off by using the word ἐπιεικής.

So the argument that a change from good to bad fortune for a morally good person is disgusting comes from the double plot theorist. Aristotle does not deny it, but he restricts its validity: it only applies to people who are 'outstanding in moral excellence or justice'. So it does not exclude a broad range of single plots, as the double plot theorist had hoped.

### τὸ φιλόανθρωπον

Another difficult word in the elimination argument is τὸ φιλόανθρωπον, which is absent from plots in which there is a change from bad to good fortune for a morally bad person,<sup>29</sup> and present in plots in which there is a change from good to bad fortune for a morally bad person, though without the pity and fear that is required for tragedy.<sup>30</sup>

The interpretation of this word is a much disputed question, which we do not need to enter into here in detail.<sup>31</sup> More immediately relevant is the question whether τὸ

<sup>28</sup> 13, 1453a16f.: ἢ οἴου εἶρηται ἢ βελτίονος μᾶλλον ἢ χείρονος.

<sup>29</sup> 13, 1452b36-53a1: οὔτε τοὺς μοχθηροὺς ἐξ ἀτυχίας εἰς εὐτυχίαν, ἀτραγωδίατον γὰρ τοῦτ' ἐστὶ πάντων, οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔχει ὦν δεῖ, οὔτε γὰρ φιλόανθρωπον οὔτε ἐλεινὸν οὔτε φοβερόν ἐστιν.

<sup>30</sup> 13, 1453a1-7: οὐδ' αὖ τὸν σφόδρα πονηρὸν ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μεταπίπτειν τὸ μὲν γὰρ φιλόανθρωπον ἔχει ἂν ἢ τοιαύτη σύστασις ἀλλ' οὔτε ἔλεον οὔτε φόβον, ὁ μὲν γὰρ περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον ἐστὶν δυστυχοῦντα, ὁ δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον, ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον, φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον, ὥστε οὔτε ἐλεινὸν οὔτε φοβερόν ἐστὶ τὸ συμβαῖνον.

<sup>31</sup> The main candidates are (i) satisfaction at justly deserved suffering; and (ii) humane feeling (sympathy for human suffering, detached from any assessment of desert). C. Carey, "Philanthropy" in Aristotle's *Poetics*, *Eranos* 86 (1988), 131-9, provides references (133). David Konstan has recently argued for a version of the latter view: D. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: studies in Aristotle and classical literature* (Toronto 2006), 214-8. He cites a number of passages in Demosthenes and the Aristotelian corpus in which φιλοανθρωπία 'is connected... with gentleness and a disposition to forgive those who err' (e.g. *Ath. Pol.* 16.2, 16.8). He regards as decisive a passage in the *Rhetoric* (2.13, 1390a18-23), in which young men are inclined to pity διὰ

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φιλόανθρωπον (whatever it is) is something that tragedy should aim at in. The text does seem to suggest that: ‘it has none of the right effects, since it is neither φιλόανθρωπος, nor does it evoke pity or fear’.<sup>32</sup> But Aristotle has not given any previous indication that this is something that is part of the tragic effect, and the word disappears in the rest of chapters 13-14.<sup>33</sup> On my interpretation, it is the double plot theorist who thinks that τὸ φιλόανθρωπον is something tragedy aims at. Here, too, Aristotle adopts the idea on a purely temporary basis; he is not ultimately committed to it.

### Chapter 13: against double plot theory (ii)

Let us now look at the next stage of Aristotle’s argument. After restating his view of the best kind of tragic plot,<sup>34</sup> he goes on to offer two kinds of evidence to support his version of the single plot.

First, he notes a trend in the practice of tragedians towards a limited range of suitable plots.<sup>35</sup> This is a ‘sign’<sup>36</sup> supporting Aristotle’s view of the best plot. Secondly, he rejects

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φιλόανθρωπία: ‘*Philanthrôpia* evidently represents an instinctive sensitivity to the suffering of others, not one that grows, as pity does, with experience and the consciousness it produces of one’s own vulnerability to misfortune’ (217; cf. 218: ‘a sympathetic response to another’s suffering irrespective of merit or of fear for oneself’). However, the larger context of the *Rhetoric* passage raises doubts. In the previous chapter (2.12, 1389b8-10) Aristotle has explained that young people are inclined to pity because they assume that everyone is good, and thus assume that they do not deserve their suffering. So φιλόανθρωπία is a state of character that disposes me to feel pity by making me ready to assume that others are as undeserving of suffering as I am. That does not fit the argument of *Poetics* 13: there τὸ φιλόανθρωπον is associated with a plot that fails to evoke fear or pity, because the bad man is unlike us and deserves to suffer; but the philanthropic young men of the *Rhetoric* feel pity because they assume that others do not deserve to suffer because they are like themselves. Konstan (215) says: ‘Aristotle states... that such a story may elicit the mysterious response he calls to *philanthrôpon*.’ But where does Aristotle state that this is a *response*? Carey argues convincingly that it is a mistake ‘to locate to *philanthrôpon* in the audience’: ‘τὸ φιλόανθρωπον like τὸ μικρόν is a quality in the plot, not a quality in the audience’ (137). Parallels exist in the fourth-century for an ‘attenuated’ use of φιλόανθρωπος; in this sense, ‘a plot or incident would... be φιλόανθρωπος in that it has an agreeable effect; it would be agreeable, pleasing, gratifying, satisfying.’ This is, as Carey notes, ‘the opposite of the μικρός plot’. The review of single plots therefore progresses from what is repulsive (and therefore lacks fear and pity), to what is not appealing, to what is appealing (but lacking in pity and fear). ‘This explanation would of course subsume the “moral sense” interpretation’ (Carey 138), though it is not identical with it. For this sense of φιλόανθρωπος Carey (134) cites Alcidas Soph. 16; see also Isocr. 15.132f. Cf. D. de Montmollin, ‘Le sens du terme *philanthrôpon* dans la *Poétique* d’Aristote’, *Phoenix* 19 (1965), 15-23, who adopts a similar interpretation, citing Dem. *Proem.* 23; Dem. 24.156, 191; Aesch. 2.15; Lyc. 3; Aristotle *Pol.* 2.5, 1263b15.

<sup>32</sup> 13, 1452b38-53a1: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔχει ὧν δεῖ, οὔτε γὰρ φιλόανθρωπον οὔτε ἐλεεινὸν οὔτε φοβερὸν ἐστίν.

<sup>33</sup> The absence of τὸ φιλόανθρωπον from the summary of tragedy’s characteristic pleasure at 1453b11f. (τὴν ἀπὸ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου... ἡδονὴν) is especially significant.

<sup>34</sup> 13, 1453a12-17.

<sup>35</sup> 13, 1453a17-22.

<sup>36</sup> 13, 1453a17: σημεῖον.

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criticisms of Euripides.<sup>37</sup> Aristotle introduces this point by saying: ‘this is why those who criticise Euripides... are making the same mistake’. So he is making an *inference from* his own theory, not providing *evidence for* it. But he goes on to provide that evidence—a further sign<sup>38</sup> that his claims are correct. He refers to the audience reception of the Euripidean plays that have been criticised: in (successful) performances, such plays appear most tragic and Euripides appears the most tragic of poets.

These two arguments depend on important background assumptions.

First, Aristotle believes that people will tend, over time, to find better ways to do things. Arts generally develop by a process of incremental improvement;<sup>39</sup> poetry, certainly, has advanced by gradual innovation and enhancement.<sup>40</sup> The process is not infallible: for example, epic poets failed to learn from Homer’s discovery of the way that plots should be unified.<sup>41</sup> But, in general, the evolved practice of practitioners of a mature art is good evidence for the way the art *should* be practised.

Secondly, Aristotle also believes that what people think has value as evidence.<sup>42</sup> The empirical data (*phainomena*) include, as well as observations, people’s opinions—especially opinions that have some claim to good standing (*endoxa*): for example, those that are held universally, or very widely, or by those most qualified to judge.<sup>43</sup> Those opinions are likely to

<sup>37</sup> 13, 1453a23-30.

<sup>38</sup> 13, 1453a26f.: σημείον δὲ μέγιστον.

<sup>39</sup> *SE* 34, 183b17-34 (Aristotle sees his own transformational contribution to logic as exceptional: 183b34-6, 184b1-8). Cf. *NE* 1.7, 1098a22-6: δόξειε δ’ ἂν παντὸς εἶναι προαγαγεῖν καὶ διαρθρῶσαι τὰ καλῶς ἔχοντα τῇ περιγραφῇ, καὶ ὁ χρόνος τῶν τοιούτων εὐρετῆς ἢ συνεργὸς ἀγαθὸς εἶναι· ὅθεν καὶ τῶν τεχνῶν γεγόνασιν αἱ ἐπιδόσεις· παντὸς γὰρ προσθεῖναι τὸ ἐλλείπον; *Pol.* 2.5, 1264a1-5: δεῖ δὲ μηδὲ τοῦτο αὐτὸ ἀγνοεῖν, ὅτι χρὴ προσέχειν τῷ πολλῷ χρόνῳ καὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς ἔτεσιν, ἐν οἷς οὐκ ἂν ἔλαθεν, εἰ ταῦτα καλῶς εἶχεν· πάντα γὰρ σχεδὸν εὐρηταί μὲν, ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν οὐ συνῆκται, τοῖς δ’ οὐ χρώνται γινώσκοντες.

<sup>40</sup> 4, 1448b22-4: ἐξ ἀρχῆς οἱ πρὸς αὐτὰ μάλιστα κατὰ μικρὸν προάγοντες ἐγέννησαν τὴν ποίησιν ἐκ τῶν αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων; 4, 1449a13f.: κατὰ μικρὸν ἠϋξήθη προαγόντων ὅσον ἐγίγνετο φανερόν αὐτῆς.

<sup>41</sup> 8, 1451a16-22; 23, 1459a37f.

<sup>42</sup> When he approaches a question in ethics, for example, Aristotle insists on the importance of taking account of what people say. E.g. *NE* 1.8, 1098b9-12: ‘We must consider it [i.e. happiness], however, in the light not only of our conclusion and our premises, but also of what is commonly said about it; for with a true view all the data harmonise, but with a false one the facts soon clash’ (σκεπτέον δὲ περὶ αὐτῆς οὐ μόνον ἐκ τοῦ συμπεράσματος καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ λόγος, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκ τῶν λεγομένων περὶ αὐτῆς· τῷ μὲν γὰρ ἀληθεῖ πάντα συνάδει τὰ ὑπάρχοντα, τῷ δὲ ψευδεῖ ταχὺ διαφωνεῖ τάληθές).

<sup>43</sup> *Top.* 1.1, 100a29-b23: ‘Reasoning is dialectical, if it reasons from *endoxa*... *Endoxa* are opinions accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the wise (that is, by all of them, or by the majority, or by the most notable and illustrious’ (διαλεκτικὸς δὲ συλλογισμὸς ὁ ἐξ ἐνδόξων συλλογιζόμενος... ἐνδοξα δὲ τὰ δοκοῦντα πᾶσιν ἢ τοῖς πλείστοις ἢ τοῖς σοφοῖς, καὶ τούτοις ἢ πᾶσιν ἢ τοῖς πλείστοις ἢ τοῖς μάλιστα γνωρίμοις καὶ ἐνδόξοις); cf. *Top.* 1.10, 104a8-11. Note especially *EE* 1.6, 1216b30f.: ‘Every individual has some contribution to make to the truth’ (ἔχει γὰρ ἕκαστος οἰκεῖόν τι πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν); and cf. *Met.* 2.1, 993a30-b7: ‘The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain

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be in conflict, so they cannot be accepted uncritically. But a theory will be most in harmony with the *phainomena* if it shows that conflicting opinions all have some element of truth—or, if not all of them, at least the ‘the greater number and the most authoritative’.<sup>44</sup>

So Aristotle gives evidential weight to the way audiences actually respond to tragedy. Since he also recognises that those responses may conflict with each other, and may be partly incorrect, he must identify the elements of truth in them, and explain the errors. That is important when he completes his reply to the double plot theorist: he identifies the misguided preference for double plots as resulting from the audience’s ‘weakness’.<sup>45</sup> The double plot theorist had a moral objection to plots in which a good person changes from good to bad fortune. We have seen that Aristotle accepts that objection in a very restricted sense (‘outstanding in moral excellence or justice’), but not in the broad sense the double plot theorist intended. Here he argues additionally that the double plot theorist’s preference itself reflects moral weakness.<sup>46</sup>

It is only after he has finished turning the moral argument against the double plot theorist that Aristotle indulges in the mocking polemic with which I started.

### Chapter 13: a question left open

The defence of Euripides deserves further attention. The criticism is of how Euripides’

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the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed. Therefore, since the truth seems to be like the proverbial door, which no one can fail to hit, in this respect it must be easy, but the fact that we can have a whole truth and not the particular part we aim at shows the difficulty of it’ (ή περί τής ἀληθείας θεωρία τή μὲν χαλεπή τή δὲ ῥαδία. σημεῖον δὲ τὸ μήτ’ ἀξίως μηδένα δύνασθαι θιγεῖν αὐτῆς μήτε πάντας ἀποτυγχάνειν, ἀλλ’ ἕκαστον λέγειν τι περί τής φύσεως, καί καθ’ ἓνα μὲν ἢ μηθὲν ἢ μικρὸν ἐπιβάλλειν αὐτῇ, ἐκ πάντων δὲ συναθροισμένων γίγνεσθαι τι μέγεθος· ὥστ’ εἴπερ ἔοικεν ἔχειν καθάπερ τυγχάνομεν παροικιαζόμενοι, τίς ἂν θύρας ἀμάρτοι· ταύτη μὲν ἂν εἴη ῥαδία, τὸ δ’ ὅλον τι ἔχειν καὶ μέρος μὴ δύνασθαι δηλοῖ τὸ χαλεπὸν αὐτῆς).

<sup>44</sup> *EE* 7.2, 1235b13-18: ληπτέος δὴ τρόπος ὅστις ἡμῖν ἅμα τὰ τε δοκοῦντα περί τούτων μάλιστα ἀποδώσει, καὶ τὰς ἀπορίας λύσει καὶ τὰς ἐναντιώσεις. τοῦτο δ’ ἔσται, ἐὰν εὐλόγως φαίνεται τὰ ἐναντία δοκοῦντα· μάλιστα γὰρ ὁμολογούμενος ὁ τοιῦτος ἔσται λόγος τοῖς φαινομένοις. συμβαίνει δὲ μένειν τὰς ἐναντιώσεις, ἐὰν ἔστι <μὲν> ὡς ἀληθὲς ἢ τὸ λεγόμενον, ἔστι δ’ ὡς οὔ. *NE* 7.1, 1145b2-7: ‘We must, as in all other cases, set the *phainomena* before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the *endoxa*... or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both refute the objections and leave the *endoxa* undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently’ (δεῖ δ’, ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων, τιθέντας τὰ φαινόμενα καὶ πρῶτον διαπορήσαντας οὕτω δεικνύναι μάλιστα μὲν πάντα τὰ ἔνδοξα περί ταῦτα τὰ πάθη, εἰ δὲ μή, τὰ πλεῖστα καὶ κυριώτατα· ἐὰν γὰρ λύηται τε τὰ δυσχερῆ καὶ καταλείπηται τὰ ἔνδοξα, δεδειγμένον ἂν εἴη ἰκανῶς. *Endoxa* may be false (*Top.* 8.12, 162b27: εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἐκ ψευδῶν ἐνδόξων δέ...)

<sup>45</sup> 13, 1452a33-5: δοκεῖ δὲ εἶναι πρώτη διὰ τὴν τῶν θεάτρων ἀσθένειαν· ἀκολουθοῦσι γὰρ οἱ ποιηταὶ κατ’ εὐχὴν ποιῶντες τοῖς θεαταῖς.

<sup>46</sup> For τὸ φιλάνθρωπον as reflecting weakness see R.D. Lamberton, ‘*Philanthropia* and the evolution of dramatic taste’, *Phoenix* 37 (1983), 95-103, at 99.

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tragedies *end*.<sup>47</sup> But Aristotle has not said anything about how a good tragic plot should end. Since he has said so much about the change of fortune to bad fortune, it may seem strange to deny that he has said anything about endings. But I want to draw attention to a grammatical point. In Greek, the present tense of the infinitive and participle is used to speak of process, and the aorist tense to speak of completion. There is a wonderful illustration of this in a sentence from Aristotle's *Physics*, which appears to be an absurd tautology if it is read without attention to the changes of tense: 'that which cannot change is not capable of changing into that into which it cannot change'. The philosophical point depends on the difference between present and aorist infinitives: 'that which cannot complete a change [aorist] is not capable of being in the process of changing [present] into that into which it cannot complete a change [aorist]'.<sup>48</sup> In *Poetics* chapter 4 Aristotle uses aorist to describe *completed* changes in the history of tragedy's development.<sup>49</sup> But in chapter 13, when he describes the change of fortune, he always uses the *present* tense.<sup>50</sup> So he is commenting on the *process* of change rather than its *completion*—the direction of the change rather than its outcome.

Endings are first specified in the criticism of Euripides.<sup>51</sup> But when he defends Euripides against this criticism, Aristotle says that he has *already* stated that unfortunate endings are correct.<sup>52</sup> That is true: when he mentions tragedies on stories such as that of

<sup>47</sup> 13, 1453a23-30: 'This is why those who criticise Euripides for doing this in his tragedies, most of which end in bad fortune, are making the same mistake; for this is, as has been stated, correct. There is very powerful evidence for this. On stage and in performance people recognise that plays of this kind (provided that they are successfully executed) are the most tragic, and Euripides, even if his technique is faulty in other respects, is regarded as the most tragic of poets' (διὸ καὶ οἱ Εὐριπίδῃ ἐγκαλοῦντες τὸ αὐτὸ ἀμαρτάνουσιν ὅτι τοῦτο δρᾶ ἐν ταῖς τραγῳδίαις καὶ αἱ πολλὰ αὐτοῦ εἰς δυστυχίαν τελευτῶσιν. τοῦτο γὰρ ἔστιν ὥσπερ εἴρηται ὀρθόν· σημεῖον δὲ μέγιστον· ἐπὶ γὰρ τῶν σκηνῶν καὶ τῶν ἀγώνων τραγικώταται αἱ τοιαῦται φαίνονται, ἂν κατορθῶσιν, καὶ ὁ Εὐριπίδης, εἰ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα μὴ εὖ οἰκονομεῖ, ἀλλὰ τραγικώτατός γε τῶν ποιητῶν φαίνεται).

<sup>48</sup> *Phys.* 6.10, 241b7f.: οὐδὲ τὸ μεταβαλεῖν ἀδύνατον ἐνδέχοιτ' ἂν μεταβάλλειν εἰς ὃ ἀδύνατον μεταβαλεῖν.

<sup>49</sup> 4, 1449a14 μεταβολὰς μεταβαλοῦσα; 20 ἐκ σατυρικοῦ μεταβαλεῖν; also 5, 1449a37 μεταβάσεις.

<sup>50</sup> In ch.13 he uses the present participle (1452b34, 1453a9) and infinitive (1453a13f.) of μεταβάλλειν (also 1453a2 μεταπίπτειν) for the change of fortune. Elsewhere: in ch.7 he uses μεταβάλλειν for the change of fortune; in ch. 10-11 he uses μεταβάσις for the change of fortune (μεταβολή is used for the transition in reversal and recognition—respectively, μεταβολή to the opposite τῶν πραττομένων; μεταβολή to knowledge); in ch. 18 he uses μεταβαίνει (1455b27) and ἀρχή τῆς μεταβάσεως (55b29) for the change of fortune.

<sup>51</sup> 13, 1453a26 τελευτῶσιν. This term is carried on into the subsequent discussion of double plots 32 τελευτᾶσα, 38 ἐπὶ τελευτῆς. S.A. White, 'Aristotle's favourite tragedies', in A.O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton NJ 1992), 221-240, notes that 1453a24-6 is the first mention of endings (231, cf. 233). But I find his reconciliation of the two chapters (235) unconvincing.

<sup>52</sup> 13, 1453a26 τοῦτο γὰρ ἔστιν ὥσπερ εἴρηται ὀρθόν.

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Oedipus,<sup>53</sup> he commits himself to the view that such endings are correct. However, he has not said that *only* such endings are correct.

In the elimination argument the double plot theorist does assume that the outcome to which a process of change is directed is actually achieved. That allows him to exclude single plots, since he believes that plots which end in misfortune are incorrect. Aristotle refutes the double plot theorist by showing that such plots are, in fact, correct. But saying that such plots are *correct* is a limited claim. It does not mean that they are the *best*.

More precisely, it does not mean that they are the best of the best.

Aristotle has argued that the best kind of plot is that in which an ‘intermediate’ person is involved in a process of change of fortune on a trajectory from good to bad. *Within* that kind, *even* plots in which the change of fortune is completed are acceptable. That is enough to refute double plot theory. But because the best kind of plot has been defined in terms process, not completion, it *also* includes plots in which the change of fortune is not completed. It needs further argument to determine whether the two variants of the best kind of plot are equally good, or whether one is better than the other.

#### Chapter 14: the best of the best

Aristotle does not go directly to the next stage of his argument: there is a transitional passage. In it he draws a contrast between achieving tragic emotion by a well-constructed plot, and achieving it by ‘spectacle’ (what is seen on stage). Of course, Aristotle thinks that it is better to use plot than to rely on spectacle.<sup>54</sup> I suggest that this part of the transitional passage is relevant preparation for the argument that follows.

According to chapter 14, the best plot is one in which an act of violence is averted. In such plots there is no suffering—no *pathos*. That word is used in the *Poetics* both in a broad sense, and in a narrower technical sense, defined as ‘an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on)’.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, if an imminent act of violence is averted, there will be no *pathos* in this sense—no visible act of violence, and no visible effects of violence. Reliance on visual effect therefore becomes

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<sup>53</sup> 13, 1453a20-22.

<sup>54</sup> 14, 1453b1-3: ἔστιν μὲν οὖν τὸ φοβερὸν καὶ ἔλκειν ἕκ τῆς ὀψεως γίνεσθαι, ἔστιν δὲ καὶ ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς συστάσεως τῶν πραγμάτων, ὅπερ ἐστὶ πρότερον καὶ ποιητοῦ ἀμείνονος.

<sup>55</sup> 11, 1452b9-13: δύο μὲν οὖν τοῦ μύθου μέρη ταῦτ’ ἐστὶ, περιπέτεια καὶ ἀναγνώρισις· τρίτον δὲ πάθος. τούτων δὲ περιπέτεια μὲν καὶ ἀναγνώρισις εἴρηται, πάθος δὲ ἐστὶ πρᾶξις φθαρτικὴ ἢ ὀδυνηρά, οἷον οἱ τε ἐν τῷ φανερῷ θάνατοι καὶ αἱ περιωδυνίαι καὶ τρώσεις καὶ ὅσα τοιαῦτα.

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impossible in a plot of averted violence: the poet *has* to rely on the structure of the plot to achieve tragic effect.

The argument of chapter 14 is based on a close examination of possible patterns of violence within the family. There are two variables: whether or not the relationship is known to the person who intends to inflict violence on a family member; and whether or not the intended violence is actually carried out.

Of the four possible combinations, Aristotle excludes plots in which an act of violence is knowingly intended, but not carried out. That is disgusting (because of the intention) and untragic (because there is no *pathos*, no visible suffering).<sup>56</sup>

It is better if the act of violence is knowingly intended, and is carried out. That retains the disgusting element,<sup>57</sup> but since it has a *pathos* it is not untragic. Aristotle describes this as ‘the way that the old poets used to do it’,<sup>58</sup> implying that this type of plot has fallen out of favour. Since, as I said earlier, arts generally develop by a process of incremental improvement, the fact that tragedians have learned to avoid such plots would provide supporting evidence for its relatively low ranking. However, we should not forget that this is a relatively low ranking *within* the best kind of tragic plot. So Aristotle is not rejecting this plot-type. It is interesting that a plot is not excluded by having an element that is disgusting; that is another difference between Aristotle and the double plot theorist.<sup>59</sup>

‘But’, Aristotle says, ‘it is better if the action is performed in ignorance and followed by a recognition—there is nothing disgusting in this, and the recognition has great emotional impact.’<sup>60</sup>

Best of all are plots in which violence is intended in ignorance, and recognition

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<sup>56</sup> 14, 1453b37-9: τούτων δὲ τὸ μὲν γινώσκοντα μελλῆσαι καὶ μὴ πράξει χερίστον· τό τε γὰρ μισρὸν ἔχει, καὶ οὐ τραγικόν· ἀπαθὲς γάρ.

<sup>57</sup> This is implied by what he says about the *next* case, in which the violence is intended in ignorance: ‘there is nothing disgusting in this’ (14, 1454a3f.: τό τε γὰρ μισρὸν οὐ πρόσσεστιν).

<sup>58</sup> 14, 1453b27f.

<sup>59</sup> In ch. 13 (if my reading is correct) the double plot theorist assesses the plot in which a decent (ἐπιεικῆς) person falls into misfortune as ‘disgusting’ (μισρὸν), and rejects it for that reason. I have suggested that Aristotle implicitly restricts this assessment to plots in which a person of outstanding virtue falls into misfortune. Here he reintroduces the term, but with a different application: in ch. 13 it assessed a plot-type with reference to *outcome*; in ch. 14 it refers to the *intention* with which someone acts: it is disgusting when someone knowingly harms, or intends to harm, a *philos* (14, 1453b37-9, 54a3f.). It is perhaps worth noting that the three occurrences of μισρὸς in these two chapters are the only occurrences of this word in Aristotle. This distribution may suggest that the word was already established in contemporary discussion of tragic plot types as a quasi-technical term; but Aristotle differs from the double plot theorist with regard to what factors make a plot disgusting.

<sup>60</sup> 14, 1454a2-4: βέλτιον δὲ τὸ ἀγνοοῦντα μὲν πράξει, πράξαντα δὲ ἀναγνώρισαι· τό τε γὰρ μισρὸν οὐ πρόσσεστιν καὶ ἡ ἀναγνώρισις ἐκπληκτικόν.

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precedes and averts that violence.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, Aristotle does not explain why this is better. But in the light of the transitional argument we can at least see that it is the most technically pure, since it compels the poet to rely exclusively on the structure of the plot.

### Conclusions

Aristotle begins chapter 13 by tracing and refuting the elimination argument for the double plot. He reaches one negative conclusion: double plot theory is wrong. And he reaches a positive conclusion: the best kind of tragic plot is one in which a person who is not outstandingly virtuous is involved in a process of change from good to bad fortune, as a result of an error rather than moral depravity.

In what sense is double plot theory wrong? It is wrong to say that plots in which a change to bad fortune is completed are incorrect; that is disproved by the practice of tragedians, and by audience response to Euripides. But Aristotle does not say that the double plot itself is unacceptable or untragic.<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, he says it is ‘second best’, which does not mean bad.<sup>63</sup> After all, the paradigm is the *Odyssey*, which is certainly not a poem with a bad plot! Admittedly, the *Odyssey* is not a tragedy. But Aristotle himself has said in chapter 4 that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are both analogous to tragedy.<sup>64</sup> So Aristotle regards double plots as acceptable tragic plots, even though they are not the best kind.

The best kind includes plots in which the change of fortune is completed and those in which it is not completed. Aristotle shows (against Euripides’ critics) that plots in which the change of fortune is completed are correct; but that does not prove that they are optimal—it does not prove that they are the best of the best. So in chapter 14 he develops the analysis further. Taking up the implication in chapter 13 that these plots should be based on interactions within a family,<sup>65</sup> he argues that it is best if someone (we may assume, from chapter 13, someone who is not morally outstanding) interacts with a family member in

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<sup>61</sup> 14, 1454a4-9.

<sup>62</sup> If one is not distracted by the jocular exaggeration at the end of ch. 13.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *NE* 10.8, 1178a9: the political life is happy δευτέρως; it is inferior to the theoretical life, but it is not wretched.

<sup>64</sup> 4, 1448b38-9a2: ὁ γὰρ Μαργίτης ἀνάλογον ἔχει, ὡς περ Ἰλιάς καὶ Ἡὸδύσσεια πρὸς τὰς τραγωδίας, οὕτω καὶ οὗτος πρὸς τὰς κωμωδίας. Note that, although the *Odyssey* has a double plot, which in that respect is inferior to the (presumably) single plot of the *Iliad*, the plot of the *Odyssey* is complex, and in that respect superior (13, 1451b31f.) to the *Iliad*’s simple plot (23, 1459b7-15: the cross-reference to 1455b32-6a3 raises a difficult problem of text and interpretation, but at least confirms the analogy between tragic and epic plots). The quality of a poetic plot depends on many variables.

<sup>65</sup> 13, 1453a18f.: νῦν δὲ περὶ ὀλίγας οἰκίας αἱ κάλλιστα τραγωδίαι συντίθενται.

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ignorance (which is, at least, one *kind* of error) in a way that creates a trajectory from good fortune to bad fortune (the intended harm), but this outcome is averted by recognition (the error is revealed and corrected).<sup>66</sup>

Euripides' critics are not the same as double plot theorists.<sup>67</sup> So what kind of plot did they prefer to the Euripidean plots which they rejected? If they object to his plays *ending* in misfortune,<sup>68</sup> then we may guess that they prefer plots in which the outcome is averted.<sup>69</sup> So in a limited sense Aristotle agrees with them: he thinks that such plots are optimal within the best kind of plot. What he rejects is not their preference, but their *criticism* of Euripides. Rejecting their exclusive insistence on plots in which misfortune is avoided strengthens Aristotle's argument against the double plot theory, but it does not commit him to downgrading plots of averted misfortune. Euripides' critics are making the same error as double plot theorists, in that they mistakenly eliminate a class of good tragic plots: the double plot theorists eliminate the best kind as a whole, while Euripides' critics make too narrow a selection within the best kind. Aristotle avoids both kinds of narrowness, recognising the double plot as a secondary (but still acceptable) kind of tragic plot, and affirming the excellence of plots of averted misfortune without expelling plots which end in misfortune from the best kind.<sup>70</sup>

If I am right, the apparent inconsistency between the two chapters is an illusion created by a tradition of interpretation in which preconceptions about the nature of tragedy (preconceptions about what Aristotle *ought* to have thought about tragedy) have led to the tactically motivated preliminaries in chapter 13 being misread as his final conclusions. If we attend to the way Aristotle manages the debate with his contemporary opponents, that inconsistency disappears. We can then see that, Aristotle does not (as many people think)

<sup>66</sup> This automatically entails that the plot has the advantages of the complex plot.

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle says that they *also* make the *same* mistake: διὸ καὶ οἱ Εὐριπίδῃ ἐγκαλοῦντες τὸ αὐτὸ ἀμαρτάνουσι (13, 1453a23f.).

<sup>68</sup> 13, 1453a24-6.

<sup>69</sup> It is noteworthy that Euripides was the classical tragedian most frequently performed in the fourth century. So perhaps the contrast is not with other classical tragedians, but with contemporary tragedians; i.e. the critics of Euripides want the stage to be given over to new plays that do not have the (classical) unhappy endings.

<sup>70</sup> The *phainomena* he appeals to in response to Euripides' critics are powerful evidence against the rejection of such plots, but they are not decisive evidence that they are optimal: as noted above, Aristotle regards *phainomena* as evidence to be used critically. Note, too, that in ch. 14 he suggests that tragedians' convergence on a limited range of families results from 'chance not art' (1454a10-12: ζητοῦντες γὰρ οὐκ ἀπὸ τέχνης ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τύχης εὔρον τὸ τοιοῦτον παρασκευάζειν ἐν τοῖς μύθοις). The tradition, though it has converged on the best kind of tragic plot broadly defined, may fail to converge on the best *subkind*, because tragedians do not have a theoretical understanding of *why* certain things are best.

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insist that tragedies should conform to a narrowly defined ideal. Quite the reverse: he is arguing (on more than one front) *against* such narrowness, and constructing a strikingly diverse, graded hierarchy of acceptable tragic plot-types.

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