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## Narratological Plots and Aristotle's Mythos <sup>1</sup>

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Any analysis of literary works depends largely on the critic's own prior beliefs about human nature and literature, which are rooted in the society in which he or she lives. Thus, an analysis of criticism must take into account the historically conditioned biases of the critic. Literary theorists of our own age, even while paying lip-service to this principle, are often too ready to assume the universality of their own biases. Claude Bremond (1973.327), for example, warns of the danger of projecting the habits of our own historical and local ways of thinking onto a narrative, yet he and others do not hesitate to appeal to an "intuition" about narratives, an intuition assumed to be shared by all or most readers. <sup>2</sup> According to Gerald Prince, "everybody has the same intuitions . . . about the nature of narratives" (1982.80). In fact, however, different readers have very different intuitions. Jonathan Culler's reconstruction of "the sequence of events that constitutes the action of the story" of Oedipous is very different from an outline of this story that Aristotle would give. According to Culler: "Oedipus is abandoned on Mt. [End Page 37] Cithaeron; he is rescued by a shepherd; he grows up in Corinth; he kills Laius at the cross-roads; he answers the Sphinx's riddle; he marries Jocasta; he seeks the murderer of Laius; he discovers his own guilt; he blinds himself and leaves his country" (1981.172). This outline leaves out events that are, in Aristotle's view, essential to the plot because they best arouse pity and fear: Oedipous' murder of Laios in ignorance that this man is his father and his discovery that he is Jokasta's son. On the other hand, Culler's outline includes events, such as the riddle of the Sphinx, that are not important for an Aristotelian plot.


Since there is no one right way of reading Sophokles' play, it is pointless to ask which approach to it is "best" in some absolute sense. However, it is essential to understand the assumptions, intuitions, and principles that inform a particular approach. It is especially important to do this in the case of Greek tragedy, where one of our purposes must be to understand the plays as artifacts of fifth-century Athenian culture. Because Aristotle's views, especially those on plot and character, are very different from those of modern scholars, the *Poetics* can provide a perspective closer to that of the original audience of the plays, and also help us to escape from the circle of our modern shared intuitions.

In this article, I call attention to some important ways in which Aristotle's theory of tragedy differs from modern narratological approaches to literature. I stress two main points: (1) the differences between Aristotle's concept of *mythos* and that of the English "plot"; (2) the fact that modern literary critics tend to emphasize the psychological aspects of characters and agents and the themes of a literary work, while Aristotle focuses on actions apart from agents and has no discussion of what we call "themes." I concentrate on narrative theory, because narratology is one of the most fruitful modern approaches, one of the newest, and one that has been most usefully applied to classical texts. <sup>3</sup> Moreover, its emphasis on narrative structure has particular affinities with Aristotle's views on the importance of the *mythos*. Narratology, of course, is not a single, unified theory, but includes a great many different and often conflicting ideas. Since it is not possible to survey the entire field here, I focus on some examples that are representative of the tendencies of many scholars. [End Page 38]

### 1. Narratology and the *Poetics*

In comparing Aristotle and modern literary criticism, it is important to begin with the understanding that Aristotle is concerned with a very different kind of subject matter from that studied by modern critics.

Modern theory must take into account such literary genres as the novel, the short story, and the journal, as well as other media such as film. Aristotle, on the other hand, focuses on a kind of drama, Greek tragedy, which was written for performance under strictly regulated conditions and produced in a single city during a single historical period. In the central chapters of the *Poetics*, Aristotle does not discuss *poiêtikê*, the craft of making, in general, but a very specific kind of *poiêtikê*: Greek tragedy of the fifth and fourth centuries. The subject matter Aristotle attempts to describe, characterize, and classify, then, is much more narrowly confined to a unique historical setting than are the works studied by most modern theorists. In reading the central chapters of the *Poetics*, it is essential to keep this historical context in mind. Aristotle's ideas on *mimêsis* in chapters 1-4 have broad implications, since he finds the roots of all forms of *poiêtikê*--literary, visual, musical--in the natural human impulse to imitate (*Po.* 4.1448b4-9). <sup>4</sup> However, many of his ideas about tragedy (pity and fear, catharsis, the kind of action that should be imitated) are specific to a particular kind of literature, written according to clearly prescribed rules and conventions, and performed as part of an actual religious festival; it should not simply be assumed that these theories can be generalized into a universal literary theory.

Another fundamental difference between Aristotle and modern scholars is that they often emphasize the study of narrative, while Aristotle concentrates on drama. For Aristotle, the dramatic genres, tragedy and comedy, are each the culmination of a long developmental process out of inferior genres (*Po.* 4-5). Aristotle holds that tragedy developed out of and is superior to a narrative genre, epic (*Po.* 4-5 and 26), and he states that tragedy has everything that epic has as well as some features of its own (*Po.* 5.1449b18-20). Most of the *Poetics* is concerned with tragedy. Aristotle mentions only one other narrative genre, history, about which he says little except to note that "poetry is more philosophical and more serious  than history" (*Po.* 9.1451b5-6). Modern scholars, on the **[End Page 39]** other hand, often neglect drama to concentrate on narrative forms. Vladimir Propp analyzes the plots of one narrative genre, the folktale, and Gérard Genette, in *Discours du récit*, is concerned with another narrative form, the novel. Genette's study of narrative forms is a reaction against a tendency, going back to Aristotle, to concentrate on drama: "Until the end of the nineteenth century, the novelistic scene was conceived, rather pitifully, as a pale copy of the dramatic scene: a second degree *mimesis*, an imitation of an imitation" (1972.193). This anti-dramatic stance predominates in modern scholarship, which has relatively little to say about drama. <sup>5</sup>

Other assumptions shared by many modern scholars concern the elements of literary texts. Until roughly the first half of the twentieth century, scholars focused on the three components of plot, characterization, and setting, the last often broadly interpreted as "atmosphere" or "tone." <sup>6</sup> Other subjects of study were "themes and meanings," "point of view," and style or "technique," the last defined by Mark Schorer as "any selection, structure, or distortion, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action." <sup>7</sup> At different times in history, priority was given to one or another of these subjects. For example, the earliest literary studies of *Tom Jones* emphasized plot; later, characterization was the focal point. Most twentieth-century scholars concentrate on the study of themes, for they assume "that the constituents of the novel must ultimately be interpreted in terms of a unifying vision of the world." A fourth modern approach gives priority to self-reflexivity, or what literary works tell us about themselves. <sup>8</sup>

In spite of the new labels given to them, the categories of narrative theory have not so much replaced as reinterpreted and renamed the traditional subjects of study: plot, characterization, setting, theme, point of view, and style. Narrative theory begins with a fundamental distinction between a story, a "succession of events" that is told (*histoire*) and the written or oral discourse (*récit*) that recounts the story. <sup>9</sup> One branch of narratology, which **[End Page 40]** began with Propp, is primarily engaged in content analysis, studying "the *histoire*, considered (as much as this can be done) in itself and without too much concern for the manner in which it is told." <sup>10</sup> These scholars are concerned with the contents of the *histoire*, whether this is thought to consist of the events of the story, the actions of the agents, or the thematic contents of the *histoire*. The other branch of narratology, of which Gérard Genette is a good representative, is primarily concerned with the formal structure of the *récit*, that is, "the manner in which it [sc. the *histoire*] is told." <sup>11</sup>

In narrative theory, the traditional category of plot may be analyzed in terms of "functions" or of relationships between *histoire* and *récit*, while what used to be called "technique" may be studied under Genette's headings of "order," "duration," "frequency," "mode," and "voice." Narrative theory is still much concerned with themes, studying, for example, "reflexivity," which is said to be "the theme of narrative."

<sup>12</sup> Much of what used to be called "point of view," "setting," or "tone" is now termed "focalization" or "perspective." Although characterization has received relatively little attention by narratologists, interest in psychology, in "character" or *êthos* in a broad sense, is intense, as is apparent, if not always explicit, in studies of "focalization" and in psychologically oriented interpretations of plot and action.

The aspects of literature studied by Aristotle differ significantly from the categories of modern scholars. The six "qualitative parts" of tragedy (*Po.* 6) are, in order of importance: plot (*mythos*), character (*êthos*), thought (*dianoia*), style (*lexis*), song (*melopoiia*), and spectacle (*opsis*). Like modern critics, Aristotle studies plot, character, and style, but setting and theme are not subjects of study in the *Poetics*. He pays little attention, for example, to the philosophical, political, social, and religious ideas that may be contained in tragedy or to the contemporary historical issues that it may reflect. *Dianoia*, the third part of tragedy, is concerned with the rhetorical aspects of the speeches of the dramatic figures (*Po.* 6.1450b4-12, 19.1456a34-38) and does not correspond to the modern concept of the "themes" of the play as a whole. On the other hand, Aristotle studies [End Page 41] subjects specific to Greek tragedy--song and spectacle--that are not among the modern canonical subjects. These differences in approach are greater than is usually recognized, for Aristotle's concepts of plot and character differ greatly from those of modern scholars. Aristotle also differs from modern critics in the relative importance he gives to the different categories, for he holds that *êthos* is second to plot.

Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the plot, "the composition of the events" (*Po.* 6.1450a4-5), writing that "the plot is the beginning and the first principle and, as it were, the soul of tragedy" (6.1450a38-39). He also draws an absolute distinction between plot and character (*êthos*). *Êthos* is "that according to which we say that those acting are qualified" (6.1450a5-6), and "that which indicates what kind of choice" is made (6.1450b8-9; cf. 15.1454a17-19). Although plot is essential to tragedy, *êthos* is second to plot (6.1450a39), and there can even be tragedies without *êthos* (6.1450a23-25). This means that psychological and ethical considerations are secondary to the events themselves. In stressing the primacy of plot over *êthos*, Aristotle writes: "Tragedy is imitation not of human beings but of actions and of a life" (6.1450a16-17), and he illustrates the difference between plot and character by comparing plot to an outline drawing and character to color added to this outline (6.1450a39-b3).

Another way of understanding the distinction between plot without *êthos* and plot with added ethical color is to imagine a drama in which the same action is represented in two different ways. The first scene represents the killing of one person by another in dumb show, by means of figures of whom we see only the shadows. This act is simply a killing, without any ethical coloring. Later in the play, the same action is again portrayed, this time with figures whose words tell why they act as they do. <sup>13</sup> This is killing with ethical coloring: it is treacherous assassination, or heroic defense of wronged innocence, or a terrible mistake, or merciful euthanasia. For this play to be effective, it must be possible to represent actions without ethical coloring, without *êthos*.

In giving priority to plot, Aristotle is not saying that *êthos* is unimportant or that there can be *good* tragedies without it. In fact, two [End Page 42] tragedies with the same plot might well be distinguished from each other, in part, by their use of *êthos*, as happens in the case of the two Iphigeneia tragedies, that of Euripides and that of Polyidos, discussed in the passage quoted below. Instead of denigrating *êthos*, Aristotle is making the point that tragedy arouses pity and fear because it represents certain events, such as patricide and incest, and not because it represents a particular individual, who has particular ethical and psychological qualities, doing deeds in a particular way. Aristotle defines the agents of the dramatic action not in ethical terms ("the villain," "the hero"), but in terms of the objective social and biological relationships among them: they may be *philoï* (friends or kin), enemies, or neutrals (14.1453b15-16). Aristotle provides examples of events without ethical coloring when he gives outline sketches of the plots of Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris* and of Homer's *Odyssey*:

A certain girl, after being sacrificed and disappearing from the view of those sacrificing her, was settled in another land where the custom was to sacrifice strangers to the goddess, and she came to hold that priesthood. A while later, it happened that the brother of the priestess arrived. . . . He arrived, was seized, and when about to be sacrificed, he made himself known, either as Euripides or as Polyidos wrote it, saying, as was plausible, that not only his sister, but he also had to be sacrificed. From this [revelation] comes rescue (*Po.* 17.1455b3-12).

A certain man is away from home for many years, carefully watched by Poseidon and

alone. Moreover, things at home are in such a state that his possessions are wasted by suitors and his son is plotted against. He himself arrives, storm-tossed, and making himself recognized by some, attacks and is himself saved while he destroys his enemies (*Po.* 17.1455b17-23).

Aristotle demonstrates the practical applications of his theory by giving an exhaustive list of basic plot patterns: "and besides these, no other way is possible. For it is necessary for people either to act or not, and [to do so] with knowledge or without knowledge" (14.1453b36-37). There are four basic plot patterns (14.1453b27-54a9): (1) the act may be done by those who know of their relationship, as happens in Euripides' *Medea*; (2) it **[End Page 43]** may be done in ignorance of this relationship, with recognition of *philia* coming after the act, as occurs in Sophokles' *Oedipus the King*; (3) the action may be about to occur but be prevented by recognition, as happens in Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*; (4) someone may be about to harm a *philos*, with knowledge of the relationship, but fail to act, as happens when Haimon in Sophokles' *Antigone* tries to strike his father, but misses. In each of these four basic plot patterns, *philos* harms or is about to harm *philos*. Such events arouse pity and fear in themselves, even without being staged (14.1453b1-7) and apart from any individual characterization.

Another way in which Aristotle differs significantly from many modern scholars is that he makes no mention of the "themes" or "meanings" of tragedy. Modern critics might say that the philosopher nevertheless has thematic concerns when he states that terrible events are central to tragedy. There is no objection to our calling human suffering a "theme" of tragedy, provided we recognize that nothing in the *Poetics* corresponds to this term and that Aristotle is not concerned with the "idea" of human suffering but with the terrible events experienced by humans. His focus is always on actions, and he never considers the "guiding ideas and abstract notions" (Wolpers 1993.89) contained in tragedy. The *Poetics* is a treatise concerned primarily with the organization of the plot. It begins with a clear statement of goals: "Concerning the poetic art itself and its forms, what sort of power each one has, and how one should organize plots if the poetic composition is going to be good, and again of how many and what kinds of parts [it consists], and similarly concerning the other things belonging to the same method of inquiry, let us speak beginning according to nature, first from first things" (*Po.* 1.1447a8-13). Our text of the *Poetics* does just this. It considers the poetic art as a whole and its forms (*eidé*) or genres; it distinguishes the different (emotional) effects produced by different genres of poetry; it emphasizes the organization of the plot; and it discusses the number and nature of the "parts" of tragedy. Although the *Poetics* calls attention to elements in a play that are useful for modern analyses of "themes" and "ideas," interpretation, in the sense of the search for the "meaning" of a tragedy, is simply not a goal of this work.

Aristotle's views, sketched here in outline, will become clearer as they are contrasted in the next sections with modern ideas on plot, character, theme, and conflict and resolution. **[End Page 44]**

## 2. Plots and Functions

Peter Brooks calls attention to an important ambiguity when he quotes two of the four senses of the word "plot" given in the *American Heritage Dictionary*: (3) "The series of events consisting of an outline of the action of a narrative or drama"; and (4) "A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; scheme." According to Brooks:

[I]n modern literature this [last] sense of plot nearly always attaches itself to the others: the organizing line of plot is more often than not some scheme or machination, a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose which goes against the ostensible and dominant legalities of the fictional world, the realization of a blocked and resisted desire. Plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving. <sup>14</sup>

Marie-Laure Ryan puns on these two senses of "plot": "Plots originate in knots. . . . In order to disentangle the lines . . . characters resort to plotting" (1991.120).

"Plot" in Brooks' first sense, "a series of events," comes closest to being Aristotelian, for Aristotle defines *mythos* (plot) as "the composition of the events" (*Po.* 6.1450a4-5), and he sharply distinguishes plot from *êthos*, which alone makes the composition of events into an intentional, goal-oriented structure. However, "plot" in Brooks' second sense, in which psychological issues are central, dominates modern



theory, just as he says. R. S. Crane explicitly argues for the integration of plot and character when he states that we should see plot as a "particular temporal synthesis . . . of the elements of action, character, and thought" (1952.620; cf. 618). John Jones attributes this view of "plot" to Aristotle, writing that the *Poetics* has a concept of "characterful action," in which "the human self is present in its acts" (1962.33). Stephen Halliwell also blurs the Aristotelian distinction between character and plot when he writes that the *Poetics* has an "agent-centred perspective" (1986.146). Halliwell's statement that "we must be **[End Page 45]** able to identify it [sc. Aristotelian character] as a specific dimension of the action" is quoted with approval by Simon Goldhill. <sup>15</sup> This "agent-centred perspective," however, is modern rather than Aristotelian. <sup>16</sup>

Narrative theory often claims to emphasize plot rather than character and psychology. Both Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Brooks attribute to Vladimir Propp an Aristotelian subordination of character to plot, but some examples will help to show that, from Propp on, modern narratology has only a "quasi-Aristotelian sense of plot." <sup>17</sup>

Propp reverses Aristotle's theory that "tragedy is imitation not of human beings but of actions," by writing that stories are about characters who act. <sup>18</sup> In his analysis, the basic elements in stories are "functions": "Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (Propp 1968.21). Proppian functions appear at first glance to be much the same as the events, without added ethical color, that make up an Aristotelian plot, for "functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled" (21). Nevertheless, it is evident from Propp's account, at least in translation, that many of his functions are in fact ethically colored, either in themselves or because they are defined in terms of a character who has specific ethical qualities. For example, the ethically loaded term "villainy" is part of the definition of function #8, which is summarized as: "The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family" (30). Propp defines function #16 as "struggle" and summarizes it as: "The hero and the villain join in direct combat" (51). "Struggle" is itself defined in terms of the villain: "struggle has been defined above as struggle *with a villain*" (68, emphasis in translation). Propp's "hero" is implicitly given ethical qualities by being opposed to the villain, as well as by more explicit characterization. There are two kinds of heroes, "seekers" and "victimized heroes" (36), for the "hero" is "that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain . . . or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person" (50). The "victim" of the "villain" is, by implication, innocent, while the "seeker" is ethically qualified in that this hero makes virtuous decisions by agreeing to help someone else. Propp stresses the **[End Page 46]** element of choice <sup>19</sup> in summarizing function #10 as: "The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction," and in writing that: "a volitional decision, of course, precedes the search" (38); that is, a seeker searches for something, for a particular reason. It is, perhaps, because ethical qualifications are inherent in Propp's descriptions of such characters as "hero," "villain," and "seeker" that he excludes "internal" ethical and psychological characteristics from his category of "attributes." For he defines attributes as "the totality of all the *external* qualities of the characters" (87, emphasis added).

Propp also reveals his bias toward characters and psychology by beginning his account of the functions of the hero not with a discussion of actions but with a distinction between the two kinds of heroes ("seekers" and "victimized heroes"), while stating that he leaves for later consideration the question of "whether or not tales develop in the same manner *with each type of hero*." <sup>20</sup> Propp's phrasing (at least in translation) also consistently emphasizes characters: "functions of the *dramatis personae*," "function is understood as *an act of a character*," "functions of characters" (21). In all of these ways, perhaps because of the nature of his subject, the folktale, Propp shifts from the emphasis on events apart from characters with which he begins to an implicit focus on the characters who act.

Propp's bias toward character and agent is noted by Claude Bremond, who adopts Propp's notion of "functions," but who, unlike his predecessor, explicitly stresses the priority of agents:

Contrary to the stated principles of Propp (*but not to his practice*), we refuse to eliminate references to characters from the structure of the *récit*. A function is not simply a name for an action . . . without determinate agent or patient. . . . On the contrary, the function of an action can only be defined within the context of the interests or initiatives of a character, who is its patient or agent . . . [W]e will say that the structure of the *récit* is based, not on a sequence of actions, but on an ordering of *roles*. <sup>21</sup> **[End Page 47]**

The same agent-centered perspective is evident in the writings of Algirdas Greimas, who, attempting a "linguistic reinterpretation" of Propp's theories, defines the *énoncé narratif* (= Propp's "function") as "a relation between the *actants* that constitute it." He lists two kinds of relations: that between subject and object and that among sender, object, and receiver (Greimas 1973.161-62). According to Rimmon-Kenan, "Greimas . . . indicates the subordination of characters [to action] by calling them '*actants*'" (1983.34). The opposite is true, however, for Greimas' definition of action in terms of relations between *actants* gives priority to agents. While action cannot be separated rigidly from agent, it is nevertheless possible to distinguish between theories that focus on action for its own sake (plot in Brooks' first sense) from those that give primary importance to agents and psychology (plot in Brooks' second sense). <sup>22</sup> Greimas' psychological bias is evident in his writing of the "hero" who performs an action and whose "competence," that is, "wishing, and/or being able and/or knowing how" is of central importance (1973.164). Roland Barthes provides an illuminating comment on the theories of Bremond, Todorov, and Greimas. In all three, he writes, character is defined by its participation in a sphere of actions. For this reason, this "level of description" is called "the level of Actions," even though it is really the level of characters. <sup>23</sup> The same psychological bias is evident in the narrative theories of Ryan, who distinguishes between what she calls "happenings," that is, "events that just take place, without having been planned by anybody," from "moves," in which "the change was motivated by an intent." "Moves," she writes, "constitute the essence of narrative." <sup>24</sup> That is, intentions and motivations are essential, while events are secondary.

### 3. Characters and Focalizers

According to Aristotle, although plot is essential to tragedy, character is a secondary and inessential part, like coloring that fills in an outline drawing (*Po.* 6.1450b1-3). He advises the playwright to begin by outlining the universal, the plot, to which names, that is, characterization, can then be [End Page 48] added (*Po.* 17.1455a34-b13). Henry James reverses this procedure by beginning with character. <sup>25</sup> He recounts as follows the way in which he began to write *The Portrait of a Lady*:





Trying to recover here, for recognition, the germ of my idea, I see that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a "plot," nefarious name, in any flash, upon the fancy, of a set of relations, or in any one of those situations that, by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement . . . but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a "subject," certainly of a setting, were to need to be super-added. <sup>26</sup>

E. M. Forster believes that "Aristotle is wrong," and, like James, he gives priority to character over plot, to "the secret life, which each of us leads privately and to which (in his characters) the novelist has access" (1927.126). While this reversal of Aristotle is often cited, it is less often noted that Forster goes on to say that his theory is limited to the novel and that Aristotle was right concerning the drama: "In the drama all human happiness and misery does and must take the form of action. Otherwise its existence remains unknown, and this is the great difference between the drama and the novel" (1927.127).

Like novelists, narratologists, from Propp on, often show an implicit bias in favor of character and psychology, even when they claim to be concerned primarily with plot. This focus on character is apparent in many ways. Sometimes it is explicit, as in the statement of Tzvetan Todorov that, in Western literature from *Don Quixote* to *Ulysses*, "the character seems to us to play a primary role, around which the other elements of the *récit* are organized" (1966.132). At other times, a psychological bias is less obvious. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan complains that the study of characters and characterization has been generally neglected by contemporary criticism, <sup>27</sup> and [End Page 49] she criticizes Genette, in particular, for lack of attention to the characters of a literary work. <sup>28</sup> However, although Genette does not explicitly discuss characterization, his implicit bias favoring agent over action is apparent in the fact that two of the three "aspects" of his *récit*--mode and voice--include some of the elements of the traditional category of "point of view." Genette's mode, "the forms and degrees of mimetic narrative 'representation,'" includes the subcategory of "perspective" or "focalization," which is "concerned with perspective of vision"--as is one element of point of view. Voice, "the relations between the verbal actions and the subject who reports them," includes another element of point of view, that "concerned with the speaker rather than with the center of vision." <sup>29</sup> Genette is concerned with people

rather than actions when he asks who narrates the *récit* ("who speaks?": voice), from whose perspective the *récit* is narrated ("who sees?": mode), and to whom the *récit* is narrated (narratee: voice). <sup>30</sup> Many narratologists have adopted Genette's term "focalization" (Genette 1972.206-11), together with his psychological bias, interpreting texts as the communication of a vision to an audience. According to Mieke Bal: "Focalization is the relationship between the 'vision,' the agent that sees, and that which is seen." <sup>31</sup> Irene de Jong, who has applied Bal's theories to classical texts, summarizes the ideas of her teacher: "Bal approaches narrative texts semiotically, that is to say as a form of communication between an *author* sending a message and a *hearer/reader* receiving that message. The content of this message is a *vision* on a series of events *caused or experienced by characters*." <sup>32</sup> In this kind of approach, people are assumed to be more important than events, for the latter are significant only as they are seen or experienced by characters.

De Jong's own account of focalization is explicitly psychological. She defines a *fabula* (equivalent to Genette's *histoire*) as "a chronological series of events caused or experienced by characters in a fictional world" and a story (equivalent to Genette's *récit*) as "the elements of the *fabula* (events, characters, space, time) as perceived, ordered, and interpreted by a focalizer." <sup>33</sup> [End Page 50] She writes: "That which the narrator tells, the object of his narration, is a story . . . The *story*, consisting of a *fabula* . . . looked at from a certain, specific angle, is the result of the focalizing activity (focalization) of a focalizer. Focalization comprises not only 'seeing,' but ordering, interpreting, in short all mental activities." The third element is the text: "The *text*, consisting of a finite, structured whole of language signs, is the result of the narrating activity (narration) of a narrator" (de Jong 1987.31). Unlike Genette, who admits the possibility of a non-focalized *récit*, <sup>34</sup> de Jong holds that whether the focalizer is the narrator or someone else, "narrating implies focalizing" and "one cannot narrate without focalizing." <sup>35</sup>

Even though focalization can be a useful concept, it is important to understand that it tends to bring certain assumptions with it. In the first place, emphasis on focalization can encourage excessive psychologizing. De Jong discusses *Iliad* 7.311-12, where Aias is said to be   "happy on account of his victory" (1987.101, her translation). This statement is puzzling because the duel between Hektor and Aias was stopped before either had won a victory. De Jong rejects Malcolm Willcock's explanation, that Aias "had certainly been superior, if not strictly victorious." Her own view is that  as object of  represents the focalization of Ajax, who rejoices about what he *interprets* as a victory." <sup>36</sup> While Willcock's statement merely points out, as a matter of objective fact, that Aias had been superior, de Jong's makes the much stronger claim that Aias "interprets" an event in a certain way. Her account of these words as the "focalization" of Aias, moreover, suggests that the best way of reading the passage is to put ourselves in Aias' place, to see things through his eyes, and to enter into his rather complex mental state (he experiences something, interprets it, and then feels something as a result). This interpretation fails to take into account the possibility that Aias may not be represented from the point of view of any specific person.

Moreover, the idea that every text has a focalizer can lead to difficulties. For example, Aristotle's account of the plot of the *Odyssey* (quoted above, section 1) is surely a "text" according to the first part of de [End Page 51] Jong's definition: "a finite, structured whole of language signs." Yet this text does not appear to have a focalizer who interprets; the narrator simply narrates without seeing, ordering, or interpreting the *fabula*, the "chronological series of events." It would, of course, be possible to invent or deduce a focalizer, saying, for example, that the narrator sees or interprets Homer's *Odyssey* from an Aristotelian point of view, for Aristotle, like every narrator, necessarily selects certain events according to certain criteria. <sup>37</sup> Aristotle, however, is not interpreting Homer's story; he is recounting the *fabula* of which Homer's story is itself one of many possible "interpretations." <sup>38</sup> De Jong might attempt to deny that Aristotle is recounting a *fabula*, arguing that it is not possible to "narrate" a *fabula* at all, since every narration has a focalizer and is, therefore, a story, not a *fabula*. She might, similarly, deny that a sequence of unfocalized words is a "text." De Jong, indeed, appears to make these moves, for the second part of the definition quoted above states that a text "is the result of the narrating activity (narration) of a narrator," and she defines "text" in her "Glossary" as "the *focalized* story . . . put into words by a narrator." <sup>39</sup> By defining "text" and "story" (the narration and what is narrated) in terms of focalization, de Jong makes her statement that "one cannot narrate without focalizing" true by definition, but gives us no reason to accept her definition. Her approach raises other problems as well. Are there sequences of words that are not "texts"? If so, how do we distinguish them from "texts"? What is a *fabula* if it cannot be communicated without becoming a (focalized) story? How can we distinguish

*fabula* from story? <sup>40</sup> But if the distinctions between *fabula* and story, text and nontext are problematic, so is de Jong's concept of focalization, for it is the addition of focalization that turns a *fabula* into a story: a story is a *fabula* looked at from a certain, specific angle. Moreover, if every sequence of words has focalization, just because it selects and orders, "focalization" becomes meaningless or otiose, a mere synonym for "narration." A telephone directory compiled by computer selects the names of subscribers who do not have unlisted [End Page 52] numbers and orders them alphabetically, but is it meaningful to say that the phone book has focalization?

When applied to Greek tragedy, the assumption that every narrative has focalization carries with it the risk of reading modern psychological interpretations into ancient dramas. <sup>41</sup> Although it is now considered naïve to ask what exactly went through Agamemnon's mind when he decided to sacrifice his daughter, the search for an obligatory focalizer does exactly this. "When he went under the yoke of necessity" [?] [?] Ais. Ag. 218), the Chorus state in narrating the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. The phrasing leaves it an open question as to whether the necessity is externally imposed, self-imposed, or a combination of both. However, if this statement necessarily has a focalizer, the audience is forced to ask who it is. If Agamemnon is the focalizer, then the statement could be interpreted to mean that he views his act as compulsory. If the focalizer is the Chorus, as characters or as mouthpiece of the poet, the interpretation might instead be that they regard his action as necessary, or that they believe that he thinks this is so, or that it is in fact fated. The very question about a focalizer, however, turns our focus away from the act itself: from the image of an animal harnessed to plow or cart to the mental processes of a human being. <sup>42</sup> It is better to hold that the text simply presents us with the act and the image.

To say that every narrative has a focalizer is like saying that every action in a play has *êthos*. But if drama can allow a distinction between an act without *êthos* (a murder in dumb show, in the example given in section 1, above) and the same act with added ethical color, why should we limit narrative to only one manner of presentation? <sup>43</sup> [End Page 53]

#### 4. Theme

Instead of beginning with a character, as Henry James does, Edgar Allan Poe holds that the writer of a tale begins with "the idea of the tale, its thesis" (1984.586, emphasis in original):

A skillful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain *single effect* to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect.

Many twentieth-century scholars have also believed that the theme, thesis, or idea is the most important aspect of a literary work. This thematic approach to literature is concerned not so much with events in themselves as with interpretations of events. As Claude Bérard notes, such an interpretive approach has inherent difficulties: "To indicate the thematic 'content' of the functional unities assumes an interpretive and critical intervention of the analyst, which runs a greater risk of arbitrariness." <sup>44</sup>

This interpretive assumption has, nevertheless, frequently been made in modern scholarship. According to Monroe Beardsley, "the problem of interpretation" is "to determine the themes and theses of a literary work." That is, the reader tries to discover "some general statement that the poem may be said to afford, or to contain, some observation or reflection about life or art or man or reality . . . the doctrine, or ideological content, or *thesis* of the poem." Beardsley defines "theme" as "something named by an abstract noun or phrase: the futility of war, the mutability of joy; heroism, inhumanity." He distinguishes "theme," which has no truth value, from "thesis," which is "something about, or in, the work that *can* be called true or false," for example "that the decline of the Southern aristocracy is regrettable." Both "theme" and "thesis" differ from the "subject," to which we refer "by a concrete noun or nominative construction: a war, a love affair, the Aztecs, the taming of a shrew" (Beardsley 1981.403-04, emphasis in original). While many other definitions have been proposed since Beardsley wrote, his [End Page 54] formulation is still among the clearest and most useful. <sup>45</sup> Themes, in the sense of "guiding ideas and abstract notions" (Wolpers 1993.89) are the primary object of study, the sources of unity and meaning, for those who adopt a thematic approach to literature.



The idea that a work should have thematic or "organic" unity was stressed by Romantic literary theory and continues to be highly influential. <sup>46</sup> Many traditional literary studies interpret Greek tragedy as the dramatization of political, ethical, religious, social, philosophical, or psychological ideas. For example, many attempt to find in Euripides' *Andromakhe* a kind of unity provided by a "dominant character or . . . idea" or by a "character or a theme" (Stevens 1971.8-9). The play may be said to be "a study of feminine psychology" (9), to have a political purpose, or to be a "violent attack on the Spartan mind" (11); or its theme may be said to be "the disastrous [Trojan] war, its trivial origin and its tragic aftermath." <sup>47</sup>

Many modern theories of criticism, however much they differ in other respects, share a thematic approach to literature. Freudians view tragedy as the representation of psychological ideas: Oedipal conflicts, repressed desires, the death wish. Structuralism, instead of finding the theme in the explicit story line, finds it in ideas represented by certain binary relations: nature-culture, male-female, mortal-god, raw-cooked. Northrop Frye's theory is also thematic, with each of his four *mythoi*--comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony--having an "archetypal theme." Thus, "*agon* or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance . . . *Pathos* or catastrophe . . . is the archetypal theme of tragedy. *Spargmos*, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent . . . is the archetypal theme of irony and satire. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph . . . is the archetypal theme of comedy." <sup>48</sup> Feminist, Marxist, or anthropological approaches may also be concerned with ideas and themes, frequently thought to be represented by characters. For example, Sophokles' *Antigone* could be seen as a representative of cooperative feminine values in [End Page 55] conflict with the competitive, patriarchal social and political structure represented by Kreon, while Euripides' *Bacchae* might be interpreted in terms of the class struggle between the common people, represented by Dionysos and the Chorus, and the elite, represented by Pentheus. Deconstruction, in practice if not in theory, also focuses on themes, namely, those of opposition, inconsistency, and ambiguity. As Rimmon-Kenan notes: "It seems to me nevertheless that deconstructivist practice . . . often falls . . . into the 'trap' of the suggestion of a theme--if only the theme of the absence of theme, or that of the impossibility of finding a stable signification" (1985.405). Other reader-based theories frequently focus on ideas, departing from traditional thematic approaches only in holding that ideas are not so much "in" the work as "put into" it by the active reader. Narrative theory also studies the "themes" of literature. Culler, for example, holds that every narrative has a "structure of signification," in which "events are justified by their appropriateness to a thematic structure" (1980.31, 32). Of particular interest for narrative studies is "the theme of narrative" itself (Prince 1990.4). Indeed, whether or not they explicitly identify themselves as such, <sup>49</sup> thematic studies are now becoming fashionable again, as evidenced by a number of recent collections of essays. <sup>50</sup>

In spite of their pervasive importance in literary studies, it is very difficult to say exactly what themes are. Almost anything can count as a theme. As Thomas Pavel notes, "For a theme, to be perceived is to be" (1993.127). David Perkins refers to "the fertile conceptual chaos, in which anyone can call anything a 'theme,'" and he gives some examples of the way in which the term is used: "[A] 'theme' may be a very general concept (madness, time), a nexus of several concepts, a myth (the dying god), an archetypal pattern (the underworld journey), a mythological or historical figure (Faust, Napoleon), a social ideology (the frontier) . . . a *topos* (*carpe diem*, *ubi sunt*), an image, or a symbol" (1993.120 and 110). "Theme" is used in so many different ways by scholars that it is fair to say that Propp's practice, though not his frankness, is shared by all: "But since no single, generally accepted, interpretation of the word 'theme' (*sjuzét*) exists, we have carte blanche and may define this concept in our own way" (1968.113).

Although some may find this "conceptual chaos" to be "fertile," it is also extraordinarily confusing for the reader. Many narratologists use [End Page 56] "theme" in Beardsley's sense to refer to an idea or concept in a work, as opposed to its subject, but others use the term in another sense, to refer broadly to the *histoire*. Thus, Genette writes that one kind of narratology is "thematic in a broad sense (analysis of the *histoire* or of the narrative contents)" (1983.12). This is in accord with French usage, for "*thème*" means "everything that constitutes the subject of . . . a work." <sup>51</sup> These two senses of "theme," Beardsley's and Genette's, are often conflated. Mark Edwards uses "theme" in Genette's sense when he writes: "These plot structures are commonly called themes; narratologically, they form the 'story' (or *fabula*)." However, he conflates the *histoire* with the Beardsleyan "theme" in stating that among those plot structures or story patterns that recur frequently in literature is the pattern of "withdrawal, devastation, return" (Edwards 1992.286). Propp uses the corresponding Russian term *sjuzét* in different

senses. <sup>52</sup> He begins by rejecting classifications of folk tales according to "category" (e.g., fantasy, daily life, animals) and "theme" (*sjuzét*) (e.g., those unjustly persecuted, the hero-fool, fights with dragons), arguing that "the division according to theme leads to total chaos" (1968.5-8). Nevertheless, Propp explicitly appeals to the concept of theme in characterizing his own method: "We are undertaking a comparison of the themes [*mezsjuzetnoe sravnenie*] of these tales" (19). Many of the definitions of Propp's "functions" cannot be distinguished from Beardsleyan themes. For example, while one of Propp's functions is "villainy," one of Beardsley's themes is "heroism." <sup>53</sup> Pavel notes further confusion in the representation of Propp's ideas by his followers: "Although . . . Propp's . . . morphology complements rather than opposes thematics, yet, by a whim of intellectual history, his structural analysis became the founding text of modern narratology, a trend which resolutely turned its back on thematics." <sup>54</sup>

The difficulties scholars have in stating just what a theme is are well exemplified in the statements of Alexander Zholkovsky, one of the narratologists who is most explicit about his concern with theme. Zholkovsky studies the relations between "theme" and "text," stating that he "proceeds from the assumption that a literary text is an expressive embodiment of a nonexpressive theme" (1984.19, the English is his own translation). However, **[End Page 57]** it is hard to determine what he means by "theme." When he defines "theme" as "the invariant of all the components of a particular text" (19), Zholkovsky appears to use "theme" to mean something like *histoire*. On the other hand, he appears to use the term in a sense closer to Beardsley's when he says that a theme may be "ideological" or "syntactic," and that it may deal with "life" or with "literature" (25). Nevertheless, Zholkovsky denies that his "themes" "equal traditional 'ideas'": they are instead something "more subtle and more abstract" (25). Zholkovsky's wide-ranging examples do not help to clarify the concept. He states that, according to Aristotle, the "theme of tragedy" is "pity and fear" (22); other "themes" are "unity," "harmony," "conflict," "regularity" (26); the theme of a tale he discusses is "life is similar to the world's design" (87); two of Pasternak's central themes are "unity, or contact," and that of the "'magnificent intensity' of existence" (138); Pushkin's "central theme" is "an objective view of reality seen as the field of interaction between the two ambivalently evaluated poles: changeability, disorder vs. unchangeability, order . . ." (159); the theme of a certain poem is "unhappy love" (180). Ultimately, Zholkovsky falls back on intuition: "Usually the process of critical discovery starts with an intuitive groping for the theme of the text" (86, cf. 27-28).

"Theme" is still very much a part of critical thinking, although contemporary narratologists share Zholkovsky's difficulties in articulating the concept of "theme," together with his ultimate appeal to "intuition." Bremond writes that the continuity of the "thematic field" is "intuitively perceptible, even though it is not possible to abstract from it a conceptual kernel present in each of the manifestations of the theme." <sup>55</sup> Gerald Prince writes that he will try to give his own "intuitions" on the subject of theme, and admits that all selections are necessarily subjective (1985.426, 430-31). Menachem Brinker writes that interpretation has neither rules nor criteria, but that it is not anarchic, for reading literature thematically is like Wittgenstein's "seeing as" (1985.442). According to François Rastier: "Each theme . . . owes its existence only to an arbitrary choice (even if it can be reinforced by the intuition of remarkable recurrences)." <sup>56</sup> Appeals to intuition, however, must face the objection that one person's intuition may be very different from another's. **[End Page 58]**

Attention to elements that are often called "themes"--recurring words and images, allusions to the same events and ideas--can lead to interpretive insights, helping the reader to recognize details that might have been overlooked or to notice how several passages are interrelated. Difficulties can arise, however, when scholars adopt an approach that, beyond pointing out interesting similarities, goes on to claim that these similarities are the source of an overall literary unity or that they express the "meaning" of a work. Unless more evidence can be cited in support of this view, absurdities can arise. As J. F. Davidson writes (1985.20-21):

A motivated critic can . . . easily find one or more factors to produce a type of unity which satisfies theoretical, intellectual criteria. But is a unity achieved through motifs such as humanity/*sophrosyne* or the relationship between time and the hero really any more than a paper unity? . . . [The argument] that our criteria for unity must be able to stretch to accommodate each individual case, leads ultimately to the position that disunity is itself a type of unity.

Whatever its advantages and difficulties, the modern thematic approach to literature is very different

from Aristotle's plot-centered theory of tragedy. Beardsley's assumption that "the problem of interpretation" is "to determine the themes and theses of a literary work" was not shared by Plato and Aristotle, as Malcolm Heath has demonstrated. Heath writes that modern critics have a "centripetal" view of Greek tragedies, in that they attempt to show that there is, in ancient literary works, "a single theme or purpose to which all . . . elements are subservient" (1989.5), holding, for example, that an idea is "the integrating theme of the play" (6). A tragedy may "reflect the ambivalence and uncertainty" of human life (6); it may be about pacifism or about "how man is to live in a godless world" (8). These "techniques of 'thematic integration'" (8), according to Heath, are foreign to ancient "centrifugal" aesthetics, which allowed for greater diversity (10), more digressions, and permitted a "mobile focus," in which prominence is shared by two or more dramatic figures in succession (4-5). Heath notes that "Aristotle does not ever discuss the thematic structure of tragedy and epic; he apparently does not think (as many modern critics seem to do) that a tragedy is 'about' some philosophical or moral topic. If a tragedy is 'about' anything, [End Page 59] in Aristotle's view, it is about the events which make up the plot." [57](#) Aristotle's events, unlike Propp's functions, or Bremond's ordering of roles, or Beardsley's themes, are actions, without ethical or psychological coloring, and without thematic interpretation.

## 5. Conflict and Resolution

The most common of all thematic views is that tragedy, like other literary genres, is, or should be, centered on the particular theme of conflict, or conflict and resolution. This approach usually goes along with a focus on the agents who undergo the conflict. René Wellek and Austin Warren note that "it is customary to speak of all plots as involving conflict" (1962.217). More recently, Stefan Morawski argues that "the tragic derives from *coincidentia oppositorum* [*sic*]: the [*sic*] human existence torn by antinomic values" (1983.288). This view of literature is evident in the following definition:

A story, in the very broadest sense, is a conflict and its resolution. In order to understand a conflict, some information is required about the individual(s) involved. Therefore the simplest possible "blueprint" for a story is as follows.

- Introduce the character(s)
- Establish their situation
- Introduce the conflict (which disrupts their situation)
- Build suspense (as the conflict develops)
- Reach a climax (a climactic occurrence is precipitated by the forces in conflict)
- Show the resolution

This is not a formula--it's a definition. Unless those elements are present in a work, it is not a story. It may be something else, but it's not a story. The basic elements listed above are in every story from Little Miss Muffet to War and Peace. [58](#) [End Page 60]

So pervasive is this view of literature today that it is easy to forget how recent it is. As Michelle Gellrich has shown (1988, esp. 9), the first major exponent of the view that tragedy essentially involves conflict and resolution was the nineteenth-century philosopher Georg Hegel. According to Hegel, "Insofar as the collision generally requires a resolution, which follows the conflict of opposites, the situation that is replete with conflict is above all the subject matter of dramatic art." [59](#) The conflict-resolution view of literature was popularized in 1863 by Gustav Freytag (whose pyramid lives on in many a classroom) and in Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*. [60](#) Freytag views drama in Hegelian terms as the unity of "two contrasted elements . . . [of] efflux and influx of will-power, the accomplishment of a deed and its reaction on the soul, movement and counter-movement, strife and counter-strife, rising and sinking, binding and loosing." He divides drama into two halves, the arrangement of which is symbolized by a pyramid: "The drama possesses . . . a pyramidal structure. It rises from the *introduction* with the entrance of the exciting forces to the *climax*, and falls from here to the *catastrophe*. Between these three parts lie (the parts of) the *rise* and the *fall*." [61](#)

Many scholars analyze tragedy or the tragic in terms of conflict. <sup>62</sup> Gerald Else writes that "the essence of the tragic is an irreconcilable conflict between man's nature and his fate." <sup>63</sup> David Raphael writes that tragedy represents "a conflict between inevitable power, which we may call necessity, and the reaction to necessity of self-conscious effort" (1960.25). The view that tragedy involves conflict is often applied to Greek tragedy. For example, Bernard Knox writes that the Sophoklean "hero decides against compromise, and that decision is then assailed, by friendly advice, by threats, by actual force. But he refuses to yield . . . From this resolution stems the dramatic tension . . ." (1964.8). R. P. Winnington-Ingram writes about the *Antigone*: "That Sophocles has worked out his play in terms of contrasted pairs, that the roles of Creon and Antigone are antithetically [End Page 61] disposed for irreconcilable conflict, would be generally accepted by interpreters of the play" (1980.128). Arthur Waldock criticizes A. C. Bradley's version of the Hegelian view of tragedy, "that the essence of all tragedy is conflict," yet he himself appears to base his criticism of Euripides' *Hippolytos* on the idea that conflict is necessary to drama when he writes: "With her [sc. Phaidra's] departure goes all the interest of a genuine conflict . . . With her goes the true life of the play." <sup>64</sup>

Many narratologists also focus on conflict. This is in part due to the general influence of Hegel and Freytag and partly to the specific legacy of structuralism inherited by narrative theory. Indeed, "Lévi-Strauss's concept of mediation is distinctly Hegelian" (Burkert 1979.13). Among those who stress conflict are Bal, who adapts William Hendricks' idea of the central importance of "confrontation" as a criterion for significant events, Hayden White, who adopts the Hegelian view that narrative represents conflict, and Prince, who writes: "The narrativity of a text depends on the extent to which that text fulfills a receiver's desire by representing oriented temporal wholes, involving some sort of conflict." <sup>65</sup> For Propp also, the center of focus is the conflict between two agents: hero and villain. Propp takes one function, #8, "villainy," to be "exceptionally important, since by means of it, the actual movement of the tale is created." This function is summarized as: "The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family" (1968.30). Other important functions are: #10, "the seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction" (38); #16, "the hero and the villain join in direct combat" (51); and #18, "the villain is defeated" (53). Propp sums up the essentials: "Morphologically, a tale . . . may be termed any development proceeding from villainy . . . or a lack . . . through intermediary functions to marriage . . . or to other functions employed as a dénouement" (92). This account, with its emphasis on overcoming a villain or an impersonal hindering force, in effect, reduces the tale to an expression of the theme of conflict and resolution. Thomas Pavel emphasizes both psychology and the idea of conflict in stating: "Narratively chaotic universes lack the cohesion of open confrontations or of fully controlled purposeful actions" (1985.125). He views "plots as strategic clashes," in which a "Move" is "the choice of an action among a number of alternatives, in a certain strategic situation and according to [End Page 62] certain rules." <sup>66</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan adopts Pavel's notion of the "narrative move," writing: "For a move to occur and a plot to be started, there must be some sort of *conflict* in the textual universe." For example, there may be a conflict between knowledge and wish, so that "the satisfaction of a character's desires is only made possible by his or her ignorance of facts, as in the myth of Oedipus." <sup>67</sup>

Pervasive as it is, the view that tragedy involves conflict is, as Gellrich demonstrates, at odds with Aristotle's views in the *Poetics*. She notes that, although many have read a conflict theory of tragedy into the *Poetics* (Gellrich 1988.16-19), Aristotle instead emphasizes "structural elements" (95), and "does not organize his central defining categories around explicitly conflictual terms" (108). In fact, he systematically excludes conflict (103). Gellrich's thesis that Aristotle's *Poetics* minimizes conflict is an important insight. Her view is corroborated by Alasdair MacIntyre, who holds that Aristotle's theory of ethics had the implication that tragic conflict is only apparent. <sup>68</sup>

It might, at first, seem that Aristotle builds conflict into his theory by concentrating on acts of violence. However, violence is not the same as, and does not necessarily entail, conflict. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definitions of "conflict": (1) "an encounter with arms; a fight, battle"; (2.b) "a mental or spiritual struggle within a man"; (c) "the clashing or variance of opposed principles, statements, arguments, etc." <sup>69</sup> As these definitions show, conflict requires two opposing forces, which is not true of violence. Greek animal sacrifice, for example, in which the animal is made to "consent" to its own death, is a violent act carried out so as to eliminate conflict, as are many human sacrifices in Greek tragedy. Far from stressing conflict, Aristotle's *Poetics* praises the imitation of violent acts in which conflicts between kin are minimized or eliminated by the ignorance of the agent. This is one reason why Aristotle likes Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, in which sister is about to kill brother in ignorance of the



relationship. **[End Page 63]** Only in the worst kind of plot, that in which kin harms kin with knowledge of the relationship, can one person knowingly conflict with the person to whom he or she does violence. Moreover, Aristotle's relegation of *êthos* to a secondary role and his complete lack of interest in "theme" rule out a focus on conflict either in the sense of struggle within a person or in the sense of the clashing of opposed principles. The *agon*, a debate between characters, in which conflicting principles are often dramatized, belongs to *dianoia* (thought), which is only the third part of tragedy.

The *histoire* is the what  
and the *discours* is the how  
but what I want to know, Brigham,  
is *le pourquoi*.

Why are we sitting here around the campfire? [70](#)

Ultimately, any theory of literature must answer this question. We read literature, or watch a performance, because it has significance for us as human beings. Part of the answer has to do with the appeal of narrative structure itself, which is deeply rooted in our social and perhaps even biological natures as humans. Aristotle had remarkable insights into these matters. His emphasis on plot, the imitation of action (*Po.* 1450a3-4), is closely connected with his view that imitation as a whole is uniquely human and a means of education for both children and adults (*Po.* 4).

Although Aristotle's views cannot be generalized so as to apply to genres that did not exist during his lifetime, and we may wish to question some of his ideas about Greek tragedy, they deserve serious attention for their own sake. His ideas can also be useful in helping us to understand and to examine critically modern views we may accept without full awareness. I have argued that Aristotle's assumptions about literature differ substantially from those shared by many twentieth-century scholars and writers. Aristotle reverses the views of many modern scholars in holding that plot, action without ethical coloring, is of primary importance, while character is only "second." On the other hand, he does not discuss theme or conflict, which are of great importance for many modern theorists. Both Aristotelian scholarship and modern literary theory can benefit from a fuller understanding of **[End Page 64]** these differences and from a concomitant reconsideration of the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

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## Notes

[1.](#) An earlier version of this article was read at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in San Diego, 1995, and a brief summary of the paper was published in *The Classical Bulletin* 73 (1997) 141-47. I am indebted to Marcia Eaton, John Kirby, André Lardinois, Nick Lowe, and *Arethusa's* anonymous reader for helpful discussions and comments on earlier drafts. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[2.](#) Bal 1985.9, 18, 25; Bremond 1973.309; Culler 1975.123, 127, 140; Pavel 1985.115; Ryan 1985.720. Other examples are given below, section 4. See Smith (1977, esp. 164-70) on the frequent misguided appeals to "intuition" in narrative theory and their basis in the appeal to the intuitions of competent speakers in transformational-generative linguistics.

[3.](#) Cf. Kennedy 1989.497-98. Good summaries of narrative theory are given by W. Martin 1986, Rimmon-Kenan 1983. On narratology and classical studies, see Schein 1991 and the bibliography in de Jong and Sullivan 1994.281-83.

[4.](#) On the broader implications of Aristotle's theory of *mimêsis*, see Kirby 1991, who argues that the theory "approaches the status of a comprehensive typology of aesthetics" (119).

[5.](#) An exception is Pfister 1988.2, who points out that drama has been largely neglected by nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism. Two narratologists who are concerned, ex-ceptionally, with drama, are de Jong 1991 and Pavel 1985.

[6.](#) Welleck and Warren 1962.216.

[7.](#) Schorer 1967.67; "themes and meanings," "point of view": 66. For a survey of early twentieth-century criticism, focusing on the novel, see Booth 1958 and W. Martin 1986.15-30.

[8.](#) Culler 1981.63, summarizing Indyk 1980.270-426.

[9.](#) Genette 1972.71-72. Other writers use other terms such as *fabula-sjuzét*, *histoire-discours*, or *fabula-story*. On the distinction and the confusing terminology, see Bordwell 1985.21-26; Brooks 1984.12-14; Carroll 1988.150-52 and 250, n. 10; Culler 1981.170; Genette 1983.10-11; W. Martin 1986.107-09; Rimmon 1976.35-37, 60.

[10.](#) Genette 1983.12. Among those concerned with content, Genette lists Bremond, Greimas, and Todorov, in some of his works.

[11.](#) Genette 1983.12. As he points out, many scholars straddle the fence. On what Genette calls the "two narratologies," see also Pavel 1985.14.

[12.](#) On "the theme of narrative," see Prince 1990.4.

[13.](#) Something like this occurs in the play within a play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 3.2, where a murder is first represented in dumb show and then by speaking figures. After the dumb show, Ophelia asks, "What means this, my lord?" and Hamlet says, after the Prologue enters, "We shall know by this fellow. The players cannot keep counsel, they'll tell all." I am indebted to Peter Belfiore for this example.

[14.](#) Brooks 1984.12. Cf. Prince 1987.72, definition #3 of "plot": "The global dynamic (goal-oriented and forward-moving) organization of narrative constituents." Ronen 1990.820-21 mistakenly quotes Prince's definition as an example of an "Aristotelian orientation."

[15.](#) Halliwell 1986.152, quoted by Goldhill 1990.119.

[16.](#) See further, Belfiore 1992a.83-110 and 1992b.

[17.](#) Subordination: Rimmon-Kenan 1983.34; Brooks 1984.15; quotation: Brooks 5.

[18.](#) *Po.* 6.1450a16. Aristotle states in *Po.* 2 that imitators imitate people acting (prāttontaw: 1448a1), but he is careful to correct this loose formulation in chapter 6. See further, Belfiore 1992a.89-91.

[19.](#) Choice is part of the definition of *ēthos* in Aristotle's theory: *Poetics* 6.1450b8-9, 15.1454a17-19. See above, section 1.

[20.](#) Propp 1968.36, emphasis added here and in the rest of this paragraph.

[21.](#) Bremond 1973.132-33, first emphasis added. Dolez"el 1989.202, notes Bremond's "radical psychologization of the *récit*," and seems to suggest (203, n. 8) that Propp's functions are in fact psychologically colored: "In so far as it is a function, the action of killing can be 'harm done by a villain' or 'victory over the villain' or 'assistance of the helper,' etc."

[22.](#) See Pfister 1988.160.

[23.](#) "quoique étant celui des personnages," Barthes 1966.17. Cf. W. Martin 1986.116, who writes that Barthes acknowledges "the dominance of character over action in modern narrative."

[24.](#) Ryan 1985.740, 741; cf. 1991.129-30.

[25.](#) Noted by Ricoeur 1983.64-65.

[26.](#) James 1975.4. This passage is quoted by Gellie 1972.201 as an example of a "literary manifesto of the character-consciousness of our modern age." The modern emphasis on psychology in literature begins as early as the eighteenth century. See Wellek 1955.117.

- [27](#). Rimmon-Kenan 1983.29-31; cf. Chatman 1978.107-08, R. Martin 1993.
- [28](#). Rimmon 1976.57; Genette, in turn, criticizes her for excessive attention to character: 1983.93-94.
- [29](#). Genette's theories (1972) as summarized by Rimmon 1976.41 and 61.
- [30](#). Genette 1972.203 ("who speaks?" and "who sees?"), 265-67 (narratee).
- [31](#). Bal 1985.104. See also Bal 1981a and 1981b.
- [32](#). De Jong 1987.31, emphasis added. She states that she bases her work on that of Bal on p. 29.
- [33](#). De Jong 1987, "Glossary."
- [34](#). Genette 1972.206. His views are criticized by Bal 1981b.205, 1984.36-40.
- [35](#). De Jong 1987.211 and 223. These passage are quoted by Schein 1991.581, who gives an excellent evaluation of de Jong's strengths and weaknesses, including her frequent "arbitrary subjectivity" (584). Cf. Ronen 1994.183, who notes that "focalization and its associated concepts are inherently *anthropomorphic*" (emphasis in original).
- [36](#). De Jong 1987.102, quoting Willcock 1978 on 312 (emphasis in original).
- [37](#). For a survey of the different principles of selection used by scholars, see Ronen 1990.828-33.
- [38](#). This is clear in Aristotle's example of the Iphigeneia plot (*Po.* 17), which may be "episodized" in different ways.
- [39](#). De Jong 1987, "Glossary," emphasis added.
- [40](#). The *fabula*-story (or *histoire-récit*) distinction is philosophically problematic, as is that between imitation and object imitated: see Belfiore 1992a.50-53, Nehamas 1983, Smith 1981.
- [41](#). De Jong counts as narratives entire epics and novels, including "character-text" (1987.254, n. 2) and the speeches of characters in plays (1991). A good survey of modern views on character in Greek drama is provided by the essays in Pelling 1990. See also Easterling 1973 and Goldhill 1986.168-72. Good discussion of the dangers of too great an emphasis on psychology in reading Greek tragedy is provided by Gellie 1972.201-22.
- [42](#). De Jong is aware of the "inherent ambiguity" in "embedded focalization" like that in *Il.* 7.311-12 (1987.145), but does not consider the possibility that there is no focalization at all.
- [43](#). A good account of perspective in drama, which does not rely on the concept of focalization, is given by Pfister 1988.57-68.
- [44](#). Bérard 1989.306. On theme as interpretation, see also Bremond 1988.55 and Bremond and Pavel 1988.217-19.
- [45](#). More recent definitions are given in many of the articles in *Poétique* 64 (1985), *Communications* 47 (1988), *Strumenti critici* n.s. 4 (1989), Sollors 1993. See esp. the summary in Bremond and Pavel 1988.
- [46](#). See Eagleton 1983.74, 80-81, 112; Pfister 1988.218. On the concept of unity in antiquity, see Orsini 1975, who argues that the idea of "organic unity" begins with Plato's *Phaedrus* 264c, and Heath 1989, who takes issue with this view.
- [47](#). Stevens 1971.13. Cf. Foley 1985.201-02, who discusses, in connection with Eur. *HF*, attempts to find unity in "themes," "characters," and "tensions."
- [48](#). Frye 1957.192. On Aristotle and Frye, see Golden 1975 and Lyons 1997.

- [49](#). See Sollors 1993, "Introduction," p. xiii.
- [50](#). See esp. the works listed above, n. 45. Discussions of the recent history of thematic criticism are given by Pavel 1993 and Sollors 1993, "Introduction."
- [51](#). *Grand Larousse* 1978 s.v. "thème": "Tout ce qui constitue le sujet . . . d'une oeuvre."
- [52](#). I am indebted to Elliott Graham for help in translating the Russian original.
- [53](#). "Villainy" is function #8: Propp 1968.30; Beardsley 1981.403.
- [54](#). Pavel 1993.123. Evidence cited above shows that, in practice, narratology often studies themes.
- [55](#). Bremond 1985.419. Cf. Nagler 1974, who notes "examples of the same motif which do not share a single element in common" (82), but is not troubled by this fact because an "underlying Gestalt" is intuitively perceptible (18-19).
- [56](#). Rastier 1989.152. On "intuition" see also note 2, above.
- [57](#). Heath 1989.45. An excellent survey of the formal stylistic devices used by ancient writers to create (nonthematic) unity is that of Groningen 1958.
- [58](#). Marvel Comics 1983, inside back cover: instructions for writers.
- [59](#). Hegel 1927-30.278-79, quoted by Gellrich 1988.32.
- [60](#). Freytag 1968.115 (first published 1863); Prince 1987.71: definition #1 of "plot."
- [61](#). Freytag 1968.104 and 114-15, emphasis in translation. On Freytag, see Pfister 1988.1 and 239-42. W. Martin 1986.81 derives Freytag's theory from Aristotle. However, although Freytag does indeed adapt Aristotle's concepts of *desis* and *lysis*, his theory of drama as conflict is not Aristotelian.
- [62](#). See discussion by Burian 1997.181-83.
- [63](#). Else 1957.330, who also notes that "Aristotle does not speak of such a conflict."
- [64](#). Waldock 1951.28 (citing Bradley 1911) and 51-52.
- [65](#). Bal 1985.16 (citing Hendricks 1973); Prince 1982.160; cf. 147-48; White 1981.12-13, 18-19.
- [66](#). Pavel 1985.14 and 17, with 142, n. 12, citing the "game theory" of Rapoport 1966.13-21. According to Rapoport, "Preface," first page, "game theory deals with decisions in conflict situations."
- [67](#). Ryan 1991.120 and 121-22, emphasis in original. On Ryan's concept of "productive conflicts," see Ronen 1990.838-40.
- [68](#). MacIntyre 1984.157, 1988.141-42. I am indebted to Shane Drefcinski for these references.
- [69](#). *Oxford English Dictionary*, sixth printing in the US, 1973.
- [70](#). Le Guin 1981.188.

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