ARISTOTLE'S CRITICISM OF HOMER IN THE *POETICS*

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THERE are more references to the Homeric epics in Aristotle's *Poetics* than to any of the tragedians. These notices indicate that Aristotle saw a genetic relation between epic and tragedy, that he thought that epic and tragedy were fundamentally similar in their structural principles, and that the effect or function of the two genres was of the same kind. Homer's importance has not gone unnoticed, and G. Else in particular has emphasized Aristotle's admiration for him, but the references to epic have remained in the background in most recent studies and commentaries.[1] Yet when Aristotle's comments on epic, and this usually means the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, are isolated, they represent an imposing number and variety of illustrations. From the discussion of principles in the first five chapters to the comparison of epic and tragedy in the last four, Homer provides the prototype and model. We find, moreover, a constant stress on the *dramatic* values in Homer and the clear implication that the techniques of the two genres, at their best, have much in common. It would seem worthwhile, then, to bring these passages on Homer together, both for an easier grasp of their range and for a better assessment of their influence on Aristotle's criticism and theory.

In the following pages I have collected all the references to Homer and epic poetry found in the *Poetics*, presenting them as they occur in the text, and have, in conclusion, offered some observations on Aristotelian ideas, e.g., *hamartia*, which, though not explicitly applied to epic in the *Poetics*, might be thought relevant to an Aristotelian interpretation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

First, let us note the distribution of the references. Epic is frequently mentioned in Chapters 1–5 and the transition is clearly marked at the end of 5: "Some elements of the two genres are the same while some are peculiar to tragedy. Therefore whoever knows the difference between good and bad tragedy can also judge epic. For those elements in epic are also in tragedy but not all the elements in tragedy are found in epic" (49b16–20).[2] The middle chapters have relatively few references to Homer and epic, and these are particular rather than general. Three of the four concluding chapters are devoted exclusively to epic and the comparison of the two genres. Epic, then, figures prominently in those chapters on poetry as such, i.e., when Aristotle is considering the aesthetic basis of that kind of mimetic art which represents men acting; when he turns to a particular branch, namely tragedy, his references to epic are naturally fewer, though often telling; when he concludes with an explicit comparison of the two, the inference seems natural

1. *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957). Since then we have D. W. Lucas' commentary (Oxford, 1968) based on the new Oxford text (Oxford, 1965) by R. Kassel. Lately two publications designed for English readers have appeared: L. Golden and O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968); K. Telford, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago, 1961). To my mind the best critical work on the *Poetics* in recent years is J. Jones's *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1962). The following works will be cited by author: A. Gudeman, *Aristoteles: ΠΕΡΙ ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΗΣ* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1934); I. Bywater, *Aristotle: On the Art of Poetry* (Oxford, 1909); S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*[4] (London, 1907; repr. New York, 1951).

2. I have omitted the 14 figures in reference to the text. Unless otherwise noted the translations are mine and based on the new Oxford text. Solmsen ("The Origin and Methods of Aristotle's *Poetics*," *CQ*, XXIX [1935], 194) thought, on the basis of the first sentence of Chapter 6, that "a separate treatment of the ἔπος was intended by Aristotle from the beginning." Aristotle's actual procedure more nearly follows the last sentence of Chapter 5.

that in some sense he thinks he has been discussing both all along.

I

Chapter 1 contains two explicit references to epic. It heads the list of the various kinds of poetry which are in general mimetic. This fundamental similarity permits Aristotle to compare and evaluate the various branches of the art, as he does in the concluding chapter. Mimesis, rather than rhythm, language, or meter, distinguishes the poetic art from those forms of expression which happen to share its means; a comparison of Homer and Empedocles makes the point clear, for they have nothing in common save the use of meter (47b17–20).

The distinction in kinds of poetry which results from the differences in the objects imitated is the subject of Chapter 2. The objects are men acting, who will be of a higher or lower type according to the seriousness and nobility of their nature. As the commentators note, the language and spirit of the passage reflect an ethical tradition which is to be found in Homer, and it is not surprising that Homer, rather than one of the major tragedians, is the first poet mentioned (48a11–12): "Homer depicted men of a better kind [than the average]."[3] Epic and tragedy imitate the same kind of characters (*βελτίους*), which distinguishes them from comedy; this final observation in Chapter 2 is only the first of many indications of the affinity between the two genres.

Whatever the exact reading at the beginning of Chapter 3 may be, Homer again furnishes the first example, this time of the poet who uses the mixed (narrative-dramatic) medium.[4] Despite this apparent reference to Homer's narrative, Aristotle regularly thinks of Homer as a dramatic artist. The following comparison of Sophocles to Homer (both imitate serious, i.e., noble, characters) illustrates this habit. Epic and tragedy share their material cause, language in verse, imitate the same objects, and differ in their manner; yet even in manner the narrative poet may utilize the dramatic mode, in which case he cannot be differentiated from the tragedian.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of the origins of the mimetic impulse. When poetry proper emerged, it split into two directions, and once again the determining criterion is the kind of object imitated. More serious poets imitated noble actions while the more trivial imitated meaner actions. D. W. Lucas says of what follows, "It is astonishing that in a passage of this sort Homer should first be mentioned in connection with the *Margites* and comedy."[5] Perhaps. But the subsequent lines clearly show that Aristotle is thinking of Homer as the predecessor of all drama, not merely of comedy: "Just as Homer was an outstanding poet in his representation

3. It would be an easy matter to gather some ethical terms, e.g., *ἀρετή*, *ἀγαθός*, *κακός*, *αἰσχρόν*, shared by Aristotle and Homer, but, though the application of such terms may have in many usages remained broadly the same, it would be folly to assert an unchanged ethical outlook. A. W. H. Adkins has discussed the ethical terminology of Chapter 13 and its relation to fifth-century tragedy ("nor has the chapter any relevance to extant Greek tragedy," p. 101) in "Aristotle and The Best Kind of Tragedy," *CQ*, N.S. XVI (1966), 78–102. Lucas (*ad* 48a2) takes a more conventional approach and also sees greater continuity with the Homeric tradition. Else, quoting Jaeger, even more emphatically stresses the "identification with the old heroic, aristocratic code of conduct" (p. 76). As Lucas observes (48b38), "the kinship between Homer's epics and tragedy was widely recognized." He cites Plato *Tht.* 152E where we find *καὶ τῶν ποιητῶν οἱ ἄκροι τῆς ποιήσεως ἑκατέρας, κωμῳδίας μὲν Ἐπίχαρμος, τραγῳδίας δὲ Ὅμηρος*. Cf. Else, pp. 144–45, and Gudeman, pp. 107–9, where fuller citations may be found. Aristotle not only accepts the *communis opinio* (Gudeman), but analyzes epic and tragedy in such a way as to make clear their mimetic similarities.

4. Lucas' note on the problem is brief and clear. Else as usual stresses Aristotle's view of Homer as a dramatic artist (pp. 100–101).

5. 48b28. See, however, his notes at 48b35 and 36 where Homer's lead in dramatic *form* is recognized as Aristotle's primary theme. Else's remarks (pp. 146–47) on Homer and the forms of tragedy and comedy do full justice to Aristotle's argument.

of the serious (for he alone not only composed exceptionally in this respect but also makes his imitations dramatic), so he also showed the form of comedy, dramatizing the ludicrous rather than merely censuring" (48b34–38). For us the attribution of the *Margites* is not the question; but the repeated emphasis on Homer's dramatic power, and influence, is suggestive. The following lines fill out this history: "For the *Margites* is the [early] analogue to comedy just as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the analogues to tragedies. When tragedy and comedy appeared, the poets working in the two genres followed their natural bent; some, who had previously written lampoons, became comic poets, while others moved from epic to tragic composition. They made this transition because the later forms were greater and more worthy of esteem" (48b38–49a6). What Aristotle sees is not a strictly historical (Chapter 4 concludes with his controversial remarks on the history of tragedy) but an aesthetic prototype in Homer's art for fifth-century dramatic art. Whether this view is a reaction to Plato's hostility to poetry or not may remain at one side for us, since our investigation pertains to Homeric practice and Aristotelian theory. This is not question-begging; from beginning to end the chapter is concerned with what is "natural" and "proper," and it is in light of this terminology that Homer is seen as the artistic predecessor of Attic drama.[6]

Chapter 5 begins with notes on comedy, first concerning the type of characters imitated, then a paragraph, corresponding to the third section of Chapter 4, on the actual history of the form.[7] Aristotle distinguishes between the nature of the art and its progress toward realization of that nature. The last ten lines of Chapter 5 return to epic and tragedy, once again to suggest shared elements (imitation in metrical speech of serious subjects, 49b10) and their differences (epic has but one meter, is narrative, and is, comparatively, unlimited in time, 49b11–14). When we come to Aristotle's final comparison, these differences will be the foundation for the judgment of the superiority of tragedy as a genre. Differences in meter are of less consequence than differences in mode and extension. Though Homer is constantly praised as a dramatic artist, he still labors under the handicap of an essentially narrative form which is by definition greater in size, whether we take "time" to refer to actual performance or to the length of time of the action. These two attributes are handicaps a priori in Aristotle's theory, and it will be more appro-

6. "Natural" and "proper" in Chapter 4. The first sentence has *αἰτίαι φυσικαί*; thereafter *σύμφυτον* (48b5); *κατὰ φύσιν* (48b20); *ἐξ ἀρχῆς οἱ πεφυκότες* (48b22). The second main division of the chapter begins *διεσπάσθη δὲ κατὰ τὰ οἰκεῖα ἤθη ἡ ποίησις* (48b24); this language continues in *κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν φύσιν* (49a3–4), which is especially important for this paper. The third section speaks of tragedy finding its nature (*ἐπεὶ ἔσχε τὴν αὑτῆς φύσιν*, 49a15); *φύσις* and *οἰκεῖος* are again linked in *ἡ φύσις τὸ οἰκεῖον μέτρον εὗρε* (49a24). The three phases of the chapter's argument proceed from (a) the natural causes and pleasure of imitation, to (b) poetry's natural division according to both the character of the poet and the type of objects imitated, to (c) tragedy's eventual ("proceeding through many changes," 49a14) realization of its proper, natural form. The link between (a) and (b) must be Homer, since earlier poetry is lost (48b28–29), but Homer also represents epic poetry's highest achievement, i.e., the realization of its *φύσις*; the analysis of Chapters 1–3 permits Aristotle to link (b) and (c) because he has found more similarities than differences in these kinds. The key sentences are those quoted from 48b38 to 49a6.

7. The observations on comedy have an indirect interest. Comedy imitates *phauloi*, a "lower type," not because of utter depravity (*οὐ κατὰ πᾶσαν κακίαν*) but because of a certain ugliness (*αἰσχρόν*), a kind of which is ludicrous (*γελοῖον*). Aristotle illustrates by noting the distortion of the comic mask. Thersites (*Il.* 2. 212 ff.) seems the type: he is a man of unmeasured speech (*ἀμετροεπής*) whose knowledge and speech are disorderly, reckless, used for vain quarreling with the kings (*ἄκοσμα, μάψ, οὐ κατὰ κόσμον*) for whatever effect he thinks might be amusing (*γελοίιον*) to the Greeks; he is the ugliest man (*αἴσχιστος*) to come to Ilium, and Homer gives us the particulars. Too much might be made of the common language here but it does seem that Aristotle's and Homer's conception of the comic are much the same, and this apparent congruity reinforces the impression that their conception of the noble character and noble action are similar.

priate to discuss them in conclusion. The chapter ends: "Some parts (of the two genres) are the same, some are peculiar to tragedy. Therefore whoever knows what is good and bad in tragedy can also judge epic, for the parts of epic are also found in tragedy, but not all the parts of tragedy are found in epic" (49b16–20). "Parts" (or "elements") here anticipates the six listed in the next chapter, which strictly speaking would indicate the absence of song and spectacle in epic. But the preceding references to time imply a cohesion and intensity in tragedy not found in epic, and this implication is developed explicitly in Chapter 26. Though Aristotle may seem to moderns to err in adopting a hierarchical ordering of the genres, the approach clearly permits the more explicit formulation for tragedy to be applied analogously to epic.

The next two chapters, beginning with the famous definition, the "parts" of tragedy, the ranking of these with definition and comment, the well-known emphasis on action and plot, pass without a single reference to a poet, tragic or otherwise. Not until Chapter 8, when he rejects that plot which is about one man, does he mention a poet once again. In composing the *Odyssey*, Homer saw that unity of action was primary, so he did not include all the adventures of Odysseus but "made the incidents revolve around one action, just as he did in the *Iliad*" (51a22–30).[8] No principle in the *Poetics* is more central to Aristotle's doctrine of form. To illustrate, he turns not to the plots of Attic tragedy but to the epics he takes to be their natural antecedents (in a eulogistic parenthesis he wonders whether Homer's success stemmed from art or native genius).

Subsequent chapters are more discursive and contain examples from various poets. In Chapter 13, when he is discussing types of plot, Aristotle ranks that of the *Odyssey* in the second group because of its double denouement, for good and for bad, according to merits of the characters. This and the preceding paragraph in praise of Euripides' unhappy endings may seem a necessary corrective to the last sentence of Chapter 7, in which Aristotle implied that changes from good fortune to bad or bad to good are equally admissible. Though this statement is intelligible, the censure is not so severe as we might suppose because the climactic scene, and the suffering depicted there in the most tragic dramas, is but a part of the total tragic effect for Aristotle.[9] Even if we accept "corrective," however, we must recognize that for Aristotle the *Odyssey* uses a kind of plot found in tragedy, though the pleasure derived from it is not the true tragic pleasure but one more proper to comedy (53a35–36), where enemies customarily quit the stage as friends. We shall return to this topic later, as well as to a discussion of the *Iliad*, which seems to me to satisfy Aristotle's first type.

The two examples from the *Iliad* cited in Chapter 15 involve textual difficulties. Arguing for the desirability of necessary or likely plots, Aristotle condemns the *deus ex machina* in the *Medea* and "the scene about the departure in the *Iliad*" (54b2), which surely refers to Athena's intervention in Book 2.[10] Though the two scenes are hardly similar, they both utilize arbitrary, unexpected devices to realize their conclusions. They are instances of the irrational too manifest for dramatic plausibility. After commenting on the *Oedipus*

8. On the problem of 51a25–27, from which some have concluded Aristotle did not know *Od.* 19. 395–466, see M. Chambers' note in *CP*, LXI (1966), 186–87. On the unity of the *Iliad*, see 59a30.

9. On the question of happy and unhappy endings see Jones, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 46 ff.

10. Kassel keeps ἐν τῇ Ἰλίαδι 54b2; Else reads ἐν τῇ ⟨ἐν⟩ Αὐλίδι (see pp. 471 ff.), following (apparently) Sykutris. The change does not seem necessary.

Tyrannus, Aristotle cites the *Iliad* as a case of exemplary character portrayal. *Personae* ought to have peculiar features, yet be better, more noble, than the average man.[11] Like Achilles, who is irascible yet nonetheless a good man, tragic characters ought to possess qualities of personality and ethos which make them true to life and still better than most men (54b11–15).[12] Once again the terminology as well as the point of view reflect the aristocratic and aesthetic conventions of Greek society from Homer onward. The choice of Achilles from epic is more striking because several faults of character portrayal by Euripides precede this praise.

Aristotle's delight in the *Odyssey* derives largely from its numerous recognition scenes, and in Chapter 16 he refers to it for three examples. Two involve the use of the scar: the bath scene (Book 19) is preferred because it proceeds from (by) *peripeteia* (54b29–30). What is the "reversal" here? Is *peripeteia* used in the same sense as in Chapter 11? This example remains distinct from either of those in the earlier chapter (the *OT* and the *Lynceus* of Theodectes). On the one hand there is no reversal of the situation, and on the other it is strained to speak of a reversal of Odysseus' intention or expectation. Though he certainly does not want to be recognized by all, the specification of an old maid servant (19. 346–48) anticipates the appointment of Eurycleia and is characteristic of his risk-taking throughout the scenes in the palace.[13] O. B. Hardison and L. Golden (p. 211) think that *peripeteia* may apply to the larger sequence of events leading to the reversal and recognition in Book 22. This view, however, is not compatible with the notion that *peripeteia* denotes a *sudden* reversal. If Aristotle assumes the audience's point of view, we may perhaps be justified in seeing the suspense of an apparent reversal in the bath scene, one which is actually averted by the quick reaction of the hero. Though Aristotle does not discuss this kind of (inadvertently) threatened recognition, which Homer had used earlier in the Amphinomus scene (esp. 18. 125 ff.), this mode seems compatible with the psychology of his theory.[14] The threat of recognition leading to reversal is more likely to arouse fear, and any other emotion for that matter, than Odysseus' use of the scar at 21. 217 ff. to secure his recognition by the swineherd (54b27–28). The third type of recognition depends on memory; Odysseus' reaction to Demodocus' song of Troy is used. Odysseus weeps from the recollection of his sufferings and so prompts Alcinous' question and the revelation of his identity. These examples do not tell us a great deal about the *Odyssey*, but they do reveal how congenial it was to Aristotle as a source for the elements of tragic action

11. βελτιόνων ἢ ἡμεῖς 54b9; καλλίους 54b11.

12. Kassel daggers παράδειγμα . . . Ὁμηρος 54b14–15. Certainly παράδειγμα σκληρότητος is out of place and either Lobel's (*CQ*, XXIII [1929], 76) or Gudeman's transposition helps. Though it looks like a gloss (Gudeman's objection that σκληρός is not used of Achilles in the *Iliad* is hardly compelling), the clause would be spare indeed without something more than ἀγαθόν. Else's ὁμοῖον is attractive but perhaps too neat.

13. The evidence that Odysseus does not anticipate recognition, though he may have expected Eurycleia's selection, is found at 19. 389 ff., particularly in the αὐτίκα of 390.

14. "Threatened, or impending discovery." This is closer to the thinking of Corneille, to whom the recognition was less significant than the emotional conflict which threatens disaster. For him, the conflict is in character (Aristotle would say "then in the spectator") torn, e.g., between duty and love. Recognition is replaced by dilemma. See P. Corneille, *Writings on the Theatre*, ed. by H. T. Barnwell (Oxford, 1965), *Discours* 2, p. 41. I agree with the argument of Lucas (*CQ*, N.S. XII [1962], 52–60) that Aristotle did not clearly distinguish between the expectation of the characters and of the audience. While the opinion of Gudeman and Bywater, following Victorius, that περιπέτεια is used in a looser, not technical sense (*repentino quodam casu*: Victorius), solves the problem, some may feel Aristotle's point a bit trivial for this view. The greatest objection to the intention / expectation school seems to me τῶν πραττομένων (52a22–23) which must refer to actions, not agents (Lucas' explanation appears ungrammatical), as Bywater and Else (p. 344) argue cogently. If there is a reversal of fortune, or even course of action, in *Odyssey* 19, it is surely difficult to see. If the temporary threat to Odysseus' disguise constitutes a περιπέτεια, the emotions aroused thereby are less intense than commentators on ἢ ἔλεον ἔξει ἢ φόβον (52a38–b1) have thought.

(the three parts of the plot listed at the end of Chapter 11 are reversal, recognition, and suffering). Modern studies of the theme of identity and self-discovery in the *Odyssey* may be more sophisticated, but they do not necessarily exclude the approach found in the *Poetics*, nor do they always provide so natural a transition to tragedy.

Chapter 17 continues the remarks on plotting and gives the poet some practical advice. After sketching the plot of Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, which he evidently admired, he observes that while episodes in drama should be short, epic poetry naturally increases the number and lengthens them, though the argument itself is not long. Again he uses the *Odyssey*: "A man is away from home for many years, prevented from return by Poseidon, and alone; at home the situation is such that his goods are being destroyed by suitors and his son is plotted against by them; storm-tossed he arrives home, identifies some people [as friends and enemies], attacks his enemies, destroys them but is [himself] saved. This is the essence, the rest is episodes" (55b17–23).[15] The emphasis here is on the situation, the problems to be solved, and the result of his effort. Neither the Telemachia nor the adventures related in the central books figure in this outline; they are parts of the episodic extension. The beginning, middle, and end are represented by the initial situation (his absence and the suitors' threat), return and recognitions, and the final successful attack. Such an outline shows the basic reversals and indicates their means. If we urge, as Joyce might, that this summary ignores the parallel action of the Telemachia and the involved confrontations between the generations and the sexes, and leaves us totally ignorant of the color and tone of the poem, Aristotle might reply that these aspects are fine in their place but they are not the essence of the argument, and moreover, that if we had really thought out the significance of recognition among friends and blood kin, we might not suppose him so old-fashioned after all.

A variation on this point is made in Chapter 18 when Aristotle admonishes the poet not to take the whole mass of an epic over into tragedy because epic structure in its fullest sense refers to the multiplicity of plots (*polumuthos*); consequently the poet should not take the plot of the *Iliad* over completely, i.e., not take the whole mass of its incidents into a single tragedy (56a13).[16]

Chapter 23 begins by stating the proper form of narrative: "It is necessary to put the plots together just as in tragedy, dramatically, and about one action, whole and complete, having a beginning, middle, and end, so that just like a single complete organism the poem will produce its proper pleasure" (59a18–21). The conception as well as the language repeat the beginning of Chapter 6; it follows that the proper pleasure of tragedy and epic are the same in kind, though because of its partial use

15. ἀναγνωρίσας τινὰς: my translation follows Kassel's text and Else's interpretation (p. 516). The paraphrase may be justified by the several instances in the *Poetics* where φιλίαν is the object (cf. 52a29–31); recognition has its proper effect in a situation where the μεταβολή leads εἰς φιλίαν ἢ εἰς ἔχθραν, which applies to Odysseus and the theme of testing (πειρᾶν). Yet the truth is that the passive is wanted (ἀναγνωρισθεὶς B) or Gudeman's ἀναγνωρισάντων τινῶν, based on Tkatsch's report *cum cognovissent quidam*, said to be in the Arabic version (not reported by Kassel; see his Praefatio, pp. x–xi). The sense of Chapter 11 seems to demand that the focus be on Odysseus, not his friends and enemies, for how can his perception of their friendship or enmity be thought to raise ἔλεον ἢ φόβον? The risk run by the hero offers the proper catalyst. Consequently, if our text is correct, Aristotle either contradicts the import of his earlier analysis, or the intensity of the emotional experience has been overrated by recent scholars (e.g., W. Schadewaldt, "Furcht und Mitleid?" *Hermes*, LXXXIII [1955], 129–71). If the latter is the case, Aristotle's theory would be more properly termed dramatic than tragic. Can we believe that Aristotle thought Odysseus' recognition of Eurycleia more thrilling than her recognition of him?

16. Discussion of 56b15–19, Protagoras' censure of Homer's μῆνιν ἄειδε θεά, is omitted.

of the dramatic mode the narrative genre will be somewhat less successful in rousing that peculiar pleasure.[17] As in Chapter 6, we have a comparison of the poetic art to the historical, with the same emphasis on the selectivity of the poetic method. Homer, as always, shows the way; he did not select the whole war at Troy, though it had a beginning and an end, but took a limited subject. His reasons are clear: to describe the whole war would have led to too large a mass, one not perspicuous, or, even if it had been held within limits, one still overcomplicated by the variety of its incidents. Homer preferred to use one part and to diversify this [theme] with episodes drawn from the war (59a30–37). While other epic poets have made rambling stories about one person or time or one action of many parts, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* yield one, or not more than two tragedies, thus evincing a greater unity than is found in those epics which have been broken up into as many as eight plays (59a37–b7).

The first ten lines of Chapter 24 present another confusing yet important passage. Modern commentary has been much affected by Solmsen's separation of those sentences referring to "parts" (μέρη) from those treating "kinds" (εἴδη) and his judgment that the latter group represented Aristotle's original argument.[18] No doubt the passage is difficult, but I am not sure that the theory of later notes on the earlier text really helps, especially in a case where the later notes are said to be "if not just meaningless, yet rather trite and destitute of any peculiar idea or observation" (p. 195). The passage continues the analysis of similarities begun in Chapter 23 and asserts that epic plots, like those of tragedy, can be classified as simple, complex, ethical, or "pathetic." These terms refer to dominant but not mutually exclusive features of plot (except for simple and complex), as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* show. The *Iliad* is simple and "pathetic" (suffering figures prominently in it); the *Odyssey* is complex (it has numerous recognition scenes) and ethical (it has not only a variety of types of character but numerous decisions or choices). The confused references to Chapters 6 (μέρη) and 17 (εἴδη) here can be clarified somewhat if we remember that plot (μῦθος) is the most important of the six elements of drama which itself has three elements (μέρη μύθου) (52b9): reversals (*peripeteiai*), recognitions, and scenes of suffering. Depending upon their use of these elements, plots can be classified in four ways: simple, complex, pathetic, ethical. The last category seems to return to one of the parts (μέρη) of drama, but we should remember that it is the plot which offers opportunities for character portrayal.[19]

Epic by its nature lacks song and spectacle, two elements which have ranked lowest among the six. That they are still relatively unimportant is shown by the fact that they are mentioned in passing in the first paragraph while the significant differences are introduced emphatically (59b17). They are two, length and meter. The observation is not purely empirical: epics too will be perspicuous if they are

17. It should be noticed that my reading of the first sentences of Chapter 23 differs from the one preferred by most of the commentators (Else p. 275; Lucas, Gudeman *ad loc.*) in two respects: I take δραματικούς in the strict sense in which it was used at 48b35–37, i.e., epic ought to dramatize its scenes; consequently the καὶ περὶ μίαν πρᾶξιν is not merely explanatory but is coordinating. This view seems consistent with Aristotle's emphasis and usage. The ordinary interpretation actually makes δραματικούς irrelevant and hides Aristotle's bias in favor of direct representation. Plot is one of the four μέρη naturally shared by the two genres (59b9–11). The usual view also emphasizes aesthetic pleasure here and dissociates οἰκεία ἡδονή from catharsis, pity, and fear. But the plural at 62b13 clearly indicates a common ἡδονή, and it would be strange if the aesthetic prototype of tragedy did not in some degree share its function.

18. *Op. cit.* (n. 2), p. 195.

19. Perhaps the circular nature of this analysis led Aristotle to omit ἦθος at 59b12.

about the length of a set of tragedies and do not, like the old (Homeric) epics, exceed this limit. This reference to the old epics (59b20) indicates that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are too long, apparently more than twice as long as Aristotle thinks appropriate. He has tied himself to a "single sitting" theory for length, perhaps because of the nature of dramatic art's cathartic pleasure, and consequently he must fault works in excess of five thousand lines. Nor does he attempt to resolve the paradox which crops up when he asserts the advantage of epic over drama originating in this magnitude. In the longer narrative varied events happening at the same time and pertaining to the same action can be described, while drama is limited to the area of the stage; epic's variety augments the poem's dignity and interest (59b23–30). Though this would seem a likely juncture for a discussion of the different pleasures of the two genres, Aristotle apparently held that just as their rules of composition were essentially the same, so they shared the same effect.[20]

Perhaps no statement in the *Poetics* better illustrates Aristotle's interpretation of Homer as a dramatic poet than that which praises him "for knowing his own part" (60a6): the poet should speak as little as possible in his own person (as narrator he is not imitating) and should "bring on," as Homer does, a man or a woman or another character to act out his own part.[21] Had epic and tragedy ties less close, such praise might seem strange. Aristotle has no need to take up the controversial problem of the narrator's relation to his work because for him narrative is the antecedent of the dramatic; as such it naturally aspires toward the purer dramatic mode.[22] A moment's consideration of this doctrine applied to the *Aeneid* will reveal how narrow the perspective of the *Poetics* is.

This desire for objectivity appears in the next section of Chapter 24, where the marvelous (*τὸ θαυμαστόν*) is recommended to the tragic poet, though he will find that epic narrative more readily admits it. The reason is simple: we more easily credit a report of the marvelous than the sight, e.g., of Medea's chariot, on the stage. For the marvelous depends upon the irrational (*τὸ ἄλογον*), which narrative report tends to efface, whereas direct presentation highlights the irrationality which occasions the marvelous (Achilles' pursuit of Hector is the example).[23] Objectivity, then, is desirable in order to secure credibility, the suspension of disbelief, and the audience's empathetic involvement in the action, all of which the implausible or irrational, if too obvious, threatens. So probable impossibilities are preferred to improbable possibilities (60a26–27). Aristotle repeats this precept in Chapter 25, where the change of a word suggests a less rationalistic translation. "With respect to the requirements of art, a persuasive ('credible,' *πιθανόν*) impossibility ought to be preferred to an unpersuasive ('incredible,' *ἀπίθανον*) possibility" (61b12).[24]

Homer's "lies," Odysseus' tale of his past association with Penelope's husband (19. 164–260) and the landing in Ithaca, are praised because they convince, in the first case Penelope and indirectly the reader, in the second case the reader directly when the absurdity of landing asleep passes virtually unnoticed. Whether

20. So Rostagni (59a21); Gudeman is more guarded. Else (p. 573) does not think the reference in *οἰκεία ἡδονή* takes us back to 53b11 because "fear and pity are not mentioned in chapters 23 and 24." This demands great explicitness from the author of the catharsis theory.

21. Else notes that *εἰσάγει* (60a10) is a technical term from the theater (p. 620).

22. Cf. Else, p. 572.

23. This example is also cited at 60b26.

24. *προαιρεῖσθαί τε δεῖ ἀδύνατα εἰκότα μᾶλλον ἢ δυνατὰ ἀπίθανα* 60a26–27. *αἱρετώτερον πιθανὸν ἀδύνατον ἢ ἀπίθανον καὶ δυνατόν* 61b11–12. For the purposes of art whatever is *πιθανά* will be *εἰκότα*.

we contemplate one character dealing with another or the author's narrative description, no awkward event or glaring irrationality should violate the spectator's (auditor's) imaginative experience. Bywater's note (60a26) and Butcher's translation ("The tragic plot . . .") both suggest that Aristotle returns to drama at 60a27; the truth is rather that he does not usually distinguish between Homer's dramatic art and that of Attic tragedy. When he compares Sophocles and Homer he is talking about artists whose purposes and techniques are to him obviously similar.[25]

The final chapter discusses the question of the "higher" art; we shall probably find as little merit in such evaluation as some will find in discussing the common attributes of the family labeled tragedy. Despite the distinction and the judgment in favor of tragedy, the common attributes emphasized throughout the *Poetics* appear here in the remark, "Tragedy does its work ('produces its effect,' Butcher) without movement [performance], like the epic; for it can convey its qualities ('reveal its power,' Butcher) through reading" (62a11–13).[26]

In light of this tendency to link Homeric epic and tragedy, what are the differences that make tragedy the distinctly superior genre? Just those, in fact, indigenous to the mode of presentation. In the first place, tragedy has, in addition to those elements shared with epic, music and spectacle, "no small part" through which its pleasures are produced most vividly.[27] This observation contradicts the slight importance attributed to these elements throughout the *Poetics*; disparaging epic for want of attributes never attached to it plainly begs the question of comparison. Yet in another way this is the track Aristotle wants, in which he finds a more valid category. This peculiar vividness of tragedy, he goes on to say, is apparent in reading as well as on the stage. With this comment we can see that the actual preference is for the unmediated imaginative experience, as distinguished from the epic poet's or novelist's guided tour. The mimetic pleasure is more readily achieved and more vivid (persuasive to sense and feeling) if its semblance of reality is undisturbed by the intervention of the poetic persona. Second, tragedy is preferred for its concentration; epic is diluted by its extension, which I take to refer primarily to the time lapse in perception of the whole.[28] But concentration also pertains to vividness because the shorter work can more readily hold the attention continuously, without interruption of the imaginative experience of the whole; at this point we may recall the earlier emphasis on clarity and perspicuity. The sympathetic experience of the spectator or reader is consequently heightened by uninterrupted emotional involvement in the action. "What, for example, would be the effect of the *Oedipus* of Sophocles, if it were cast into a form as long as the *Iliad*?" (Butcher 62b2–3). Technically Aristotle escapes apriority here because he has said that a poem might be an epic and still not be longer than a set of tragedies. He has, however, consistently used the Homeric poems as his standards of excellence in the genre; consequently the question resembles "What would a spaniel the size of an elephant look like?"

25. I shall not discuss here the numerous references to Homeric metaphor and diction found in Chapter 25.

26. The translation is Else's; Gudeman agrees with Butcher and Bywater that *ἔργον* or *τέλος* is to be understood with *τὸ αὐτῆς* (62a11). If so, the passage strengthens the argument (on 59a21 *οἰκεία ἡδονή*) that both induce the same emotions and produce the same kind of pleasure.

27. Kassel (after Spengel) brackets *καὶ τὰς ὄψεις* (62a16). It is curious that vividness (*τὸ ἐναργές*) has not been mentioned earlier. Aristotle has himself in a rather subjective corner here, especially when he concedes that this vividness appears even in reading.

28. 62a18 *τὸ τέλος* = *τὸ ἔργον* Rostagni; Else thinks *μήκει* probably = *χρόνῳ* here (p. 644).

This distension of the epic also vitiates its unity; here the very nature of the genre defeats the highest artistic success, for to shorten it makes the epic appear truncated (i.e., it will lack the dignity natural to magnitude) but to lengthen it inevitably results in dilution. Carried on by this line of reasoning, Aristotle says that "a token of this [truth] is that from any epic a number of tragedies can be made" (62b4–5), whereas earlier (59b3) he observed that one or at the most two tragedies could be made from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Those poems are now said to be constructed from a "number of actions" (62b8, ἐκ πλειόνων πράξεων), though they are as well made and unified as the genre permits.

Aristotle has got himself into a tangle in this last paragraph: (1) the emphasis on the visual element and song runs counter to earlier argument, and is hardly helped here by the reference to reading; (2) the implied criticism of Homer, to which he is forced by the criterion of concentration, runs counter to the letter (for Homer has been particularly praised for unity and superb construction) and the spirit of the preceding chapters. Yet finally such criticism must come if Homer is to be judged as a dramatic artist within a narrative genre.

One senses an embarrassed reconciliation in the penultimate paragraph: "If, then, tragedy is superior in all these respects and with respect to the function of the art besides (for the two arts should produce, not any chance pleasure, but the one proper to them), it is evident that it must be superior, since it attains the goal more than the epic [does]" (Else, 62b12–15). Nowhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle suggest that the two genres have their different respective pleasures. Since he defines tragic pleasure (53b10–13), closely identifies the structure and mode of imitation of the two genres, and nowhere distinguishes a pleasure peculiar to epic, it is very probable that the one definition covers both epic and tragedy. Though both aim at a catharsis of emotion through pity and fear, the succinctness and direct mimesis of drama give it an intrinsic advantage. It was Homer's misfortune to have been born before that time when his genius would have found the genre to match it.

II

The frequency and importance of the references to epic and the final comparison of the two genres offer strong evidence that Aristotle did not plan further commentary on narrative verse. His expressed intention (the first sentence of Chapter 6) to treat epic separately was made unnecessary by the recurrent use of examples from Homer; the extended comparison which concludes the *Poetics* simply recognizes the prominence of Homer in his notes. He may well have felt that Homer was too often cited in notes on dramatic poetry and that clarity required a reassertion of tragedy's place as the supreme form. Though it is no doubt futile to speculate on the extent to which Aristotle's thinking on tragedy was originally influenced by Homeric paradigms, we may safely assume that contentions about dramatic art other than those explicitly related to epic also have their application to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Neither *hamartia* nor catharsis is specifically related to epic in the *Poetics*.

Of the two, *hamartia* is much the easier to discuss because we can with reasonable confidence locate "errors" in both poems which influence the action significantly.[29]

29. On *hamartia*, see R. D. Dawe, "Some Reflections on *Atē* and *Hamartia*," *HSCP*, LXXII (1968), 89–123. His historical study comes out in favor of an "error of judgment" theory, which seems to me very sensible. If my brief discussion tends to go on to the reason for the mistaken judgment, it is because of Aristotle's own remarks on Achilles. To note that characters may be ὀργίλους καὶ ῥᾳθύμους (54b12) just before using Achilles as an example of good depiction appears to imply a significant attribute so far as the dramatization is concerned.

Remembering the reference to Achilles in Chapter 15, following an allusion to the irascible type, some may conclude that we have here an example of moral error or fault in the man. Yet, while there is no need to deny that Achilles' temper contributes much to the occasion and perpetuation of the crisis, a mistake of judgment emphasized in the embassy scene and later presents a more immediate and vivid example. At the conclusion of Ajax' speech, Achilles asserts he will not again consider war until Hector comes to his own ship, having killed many Argives and left their ships burning (*Il.* 9. 650–55). His decision is stressed (*οὐ γὰρ πρὶν . . . πρίν γ'*, 650–51; cf. his recollection of it at 16. 61–63), inflexible and disastrous, but we do not see the realization of its danger until Book 16, when Patroclus appeals to him to aid the Greeks or at least permit him to do so (21–45). Achilles has made a mistake which would be slight but for his love of Patroclus. So one grief (16. 52), caused by wounded pride, is replaced by another (18. 22), caused by the loss of his dearest friend. His error stems from a judgment affected by passion. With fine consistency in the characterization Homer shows Achilles returning to battle in a rage as great as that in which he left it, perhaps best dramatized in the Lycaon scene (21. 34 ff.). Hardly less useful to the poem's plot is Hector's mistake in urging his people, against the advice of Polydamas, to remain outside the walls (22. 99 ff.). More clearly than Achilles', Hector's *hamartia* appears a mistake of judgment. But the decision to face Achilles is based upon a complex of social and ethical forces deeply rooted in the life of the epos (22. 105 ff.). His sense of shame is a compelling motive and a valid basis for action. The events which result from these mistakes lead necessarily to Hector's death, to which present and future suffering of family and city are closely tied. The reciprocal destinies of Hector and Achilles are united in the final book when Priam petitions for the corpse. Achilles' anguish has not been mitigated by his sword nor has Hector's honorable death lessened the grief of father and wife. The reconciling figure of Peleus recalls Achilles' own mortality and the vanity of his success and of Hector's striving.

Odysseus' pride and typically heroic desire for fame lead him to taunt Polyphemus; by revealing his name (*Od.* 9. 502–505), he enables the Cyclops to curse him effectively; in this way the enmity of Poseidon is motivated and the journey prolonged until his ultimate arrival, stripped of his company and threatened by the suitors. The plot structure of the *Odyssey* diminishes the potential seriousness of this *hamartia*: dramatic impact is lessened by Athena's advocacy, our certainty of his eventual return, and the late report of the incident. Perhaps Aristotle felt that the complexity of the *Odyssey*'s plot compensated aesthetically, at least to some extent, for the absence of tragic tone.

Catharsis is a different matter, not only because the term itself has been more hotly disputed, but also because it seems to have been more intimately connected with dramatic art as such. The vividness and compactness prized in Chapter 26 are, I believe, necessary for the kind of emotional purgation Aristotle associates with pity and fear. Epic's discursive nature runs contrary to this effect. The kind of definition which might serve epic and drama equally well is that of Leon Golden, who has defined it as a "clarification . . . nothing more, but nothing less than a synonym for the process of inference which Aristotle described in chapter 4."[30] This rational-

30. The quotation is from Golden's article "Catharsis," *TAPA*, XCIII (1962), 58; see also Golden and Hardison, pp. 114 ff. Since Else's attack on the traditional interpretations, there has been a tendency to transfer catharsis to the action, i.e., to speak of "the purification of the tragic act" (Else, p. 439). Cf. H. D. F. Kitto, "Catharsis," in *The Classical*

istic approach might actually favor epic's fuller structure; more time granted to the contemplation of the intricate workings of man's fate might bring the sensitive reader to a more profound understanding of the limitations of the human intellect.[31] But the fact that epic might be more effective than tragedy in achieving their proper pleasure, if I have correctly interpreted Golden, tells against this definition. At 62b12–15 they are said to aim at a similar kind of pleasure, and tragedy is said to excel epic in the achievement of its end. In light of the immediately preceding observations on the superior vividness, compactness, and unity of tragedy, we must infer that these attributes are specifically related to attaining the proper effect (pleasure).

Nowhere, in fact, does Homeric epic appear less influential in the *Poetics* than in the area of pity, fear, and catharsis. As difficult as matters psychological are to judge, we must still conclude that the very essence of Homer's style and composition is opposed to the kind of intense excitement implied by the various passages relevant to drama's peculiar pleasure. Nothing could distract the audience more from the embassy scene, and its consequences, than the lay of Dolon. Though Patroclus' sympathy for the Greeks may excite some sense of impending difference between himself and Achilles, little in *Iliad* 11–15 is foreboding. Hector's increasing confidence prepares us for his subsequent decision to fight, but possibly only in the final confrontation is a truly intense tragic pleasure experienced. Even here some will feel that the digression on the springs (22. 147 ff.) or Athene and Zeus's brief conversation (177 ff.) is more characteristic of the Homeric manner than of Aristotle's requirements. Homer's technique is in fact better illustrated by Books 17 and 23, both of which retard the action after scenes of pathos. Rather than take the report of Patroclus' death immediately to Achilles, Homer offers the fight over the body, prolonged and desultory. Book 23 presents the more coherent but less thematically relevant funeral games. In each case dramatic economy demands a sharper turn toward the events and decisions of Book 18 and Book 24, but to Homer, for whom the tree so often precedes the forest, nothing was more natural than the leisurely pace, the augmenting of contrasts, and the respect for detail in the total fabric of his narrative. The comparisons of Chapter 26 show that Gudeman was right to doubt that Aristotle's praise stemmed from a consideration of episode-free narratives.[32] Though he has freely drawn upon Homeric plots for illustration and has emphasized Homer's dramatization, Aristotle cannot, ultimately, ignore the episodes and the third person. The habit of using epic examples in a text on dramatic poetry creates a dilemma of sorts. The resolution, based on a prejudice for the natural attributes of drama, is hardly successful, though his principles of mimesis are maintained consistently.

Still, we must remember that the seed of tragedy is in epic; however imperfectly,

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Tradition (Ithaca, 1966), pp. 133–47, as well as the commentary of Telford, e.g., pp. 82–83, and G. K. Gresseth, "The System of Aristotle's *Poetics*," *TAPA*, LXXXIX (1958), esp. 328–32. My own views are more traditional (i.e., medical and purgative), though too much ink has been wasted in fine distinctions (purgation and purification may be but different aspects of the same phenomenon). Lucas' Appendix II offers a short, clear account of various interpretations.

31. See Golden's brief analysis of the *OT*, *op. cit.* (n. 30), p. 58. The single objection raised in my text to Golden's argument is of course not the only reason for rejecting his view.

32. P. 402. His comment at 62b1 sums the matter up nicely: "Ein dicht zusammengedrängter Inhalt gewährt einen höheren Genuss als einer, der durch die auf ihn angewandte Arbeitszeit eine unübersichtliche Ausdehnung erhält" (p. 451).

epic offers something of the tragic pleasure. Pity and fear are not alien to our engagement with the men and women of the *Iliad*. For all their greatness they are "like ourselves," and who will say either Achilles or Hector deserves his fate? In selecting these particular emotions Aristotle seems to have touched upon fundamental values in tragic literature, if their continued use is any criterion. They are neither a random choice nor unrelated; both require characterization which is true to life, and both are predicated on a degree of empathy from the audience. These values will converge in all scenes of suffering. Their intensity depends on dramatic economy and plausibility. In epic these two factors rest uncomfortably because of the natural diffuseness of the genre. Plot coherence brakes the epic ramble, and any episode, no matter how it is related to the primary action, will be more vivid if direct (dramatic) presentation of thought and character is utilized.

A number of common topics in modern criticism are either not mentioned or are disguised in the method of the *Poetics*. Perhaps the most prominent omission is thematics. In a certain sense theme is treated: Aristotle clearly appreciated the way each of the epic plots holds to its "argument," and many moderns would look at the wrath and return motifs as the primary themes of the two epics.[33] Aristotle prefers to speak of actions, their structure, complication, and resolution. Whereas we might be inclined to analyze Telemachus' journey as a variation on the primary theme of Odysseus' return, Aristotle would be more likely to describe the formal components of the subplot and then the mechanics of its integration into the main story. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. If we sense something missing in the *Poetics* on this subject, it is because Aristotle thought mimetic art in its purest form representational. His attention focused not on the significance of the event but on its coherence. For him noble men (σπουδαῖοι) will necessarily be engaged in significant actions; that engagement defines the class. "Seriousness" is entailed by the kind of object imitated, but since art like life aims, not at a state of being, but at an activity, the first responsibility of artist and critic is to the organization of the event.

Many students may wonder if Aristotle should not have discussed tone, for whatever formal similarities exist between the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and Greek tragedy, no one will find the epics equally tragic in this respect, nor need we mention the *Philoctetes* or *Orestes*. Much of the play on Olympus in the *Iliad* is indeed relief, whereas the machinations of Odysseus and Athena are so much of a piece that the harmony of their various enterprises can only serve to lighten the trials of the hero and presage the final purgation and resolution. Recognition and reversal are too common in comedy, and the effect of scenes of suffering too dependent on context, for these structural components to provide adequate differentiae. For Aristotle tone is a function of the nature of agent and action, not merely one or the other, but their congruence in an intelligible whole. At the deepest ethical level the action of the *Odyssey* is serious; if the divisions between good and evil seem too clear-cut, it is yet a substantive issue for social order. Aristotle's requirements for rational, credible plotting are also important here: serious drama lacks the contrivance of comedy, and while epic admits more of

33. "Argument": λόγος. See Gudeman on 55a34: he compares 53a22 with 60a27 (λόγος ≃ μῦθος) and 55b8 with 55b17.

the marvelous than tragedy, in its best form these episodes do not impugn the argument of the story.

A final comment on Homer's place in the *Poetics* remains. Much of what has been said touches on or implies a continuity in ethical values from the time of the epic into the fourth century. A cursory view of the language of the *Poetics* would seem to support this view, though it has recently been attacked most vigorously.[34] Aristotle's habit of beginning with the given, what has been said and thought, may be deceptive, yet it is difficult not to feel that the ethical field of tragedy implied by the *Poetics* is more congenial to Homeric epic than to much of Euripidean drama. Though his criticism is certainly more aesthetic than ethical in its origin and argument, some typical ideas, e.g., the emphasis on action, have deeper roots in Greek thought than the tragedy of the fifth century. The entire subject is much complicated by the nature of our text, the possibility of second thoughts and the probability of corruption, yet no discussion of tragedy will long avoid a definition of the "serious." If we proceed somewhat negatively it may be said that the frequent use of the Homeric paradigm to illustrate formal procedures suggests that Aristotle did not perceive a fundamental lack of harmony between the ethical premises of the *Poetics* and those of epic. The same argument should of course hold for tragedy, and if significant changes in social-value theory did occur in the fourth century, we are still compelled to believe that the philosopher thought his treatise practically applicable.

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34. Adkins, *op. cit.* (n. 3).