

SHOULD THERE HAVE BEEN A *POLIS* IN ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*?

In her contribution to the collection *Tragedy and the Tragic*, Edith Hall asks 'is there a *polis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*?'¹ She concludes that there is not, and sees the absence as in need of explanation. It is certainly strikingly at variance with a prominent emphasis in much recent scholarship on tragedy;² but Hall also notes that awareness of a relationship between tragedy and its social context is in evidence in other fifth- and fourth-century sources, including other works by Aristotle. Hall's explanation of Aristotle's approach in the *Poetics* looks to his personal status, as an outsider in Athens, and historical moment, at a time when tragedy was 'about' to be internationalized; Aristotle's deliberate divorce of poetry and the *polis*, she suggests, caught an emergent tendency (304–5).

Hall's question is prompted by Aristotle's apparent failure to attend to a topic of dominant interest to classicists with an orientation to cultural and social history. The terms of her answer reflect the same dominant interests. But Aristotle was not, except incidentally, a cultural or social historian. In this paper I shall argue that the issues which Hall's question raises take on a different appearance when we read the *Poetics* in the context of Aristotle's philosophical anthropology – that is, as an attempt to achieve an understanding of poetry as a universal human activity.

1. THE 'DIVORCE' OF POLITICS AND POETRY?

One of the few occurrences of a cognate of *polis* in the *Poetics* may seem to support Hall's position: 'correctness is not the same thing in politics and poetry' (25, 1460b13–15). Hall (302) interprets this as claiming that 'poetry is not to be assessed by criteria to do with the *polis*', and comments: 'Aristotle has estranged the natural bed-partners poetry and the *polis* throughout his *Poetics*, but he here declares their decree absolute.' There are two reasons why this cannot be right.

First, Aristotle's account makes ethical concepts internal to poetry. At the very earliest stage of poetry's development, primitive improvisations split into poems of praise and blame (4, 1448b24–7). Among more developed forms of poetry, tragedy aims to elicit pity, which is a response to undeserved misfortune (13, 1453a5); so an exercise of ethical judgement is needed both to devise tragic plots and to respond to them appropriately. Hence in chapters 13–14 criteria for rating plot types are derived

¹ E. Hall, 'Is there a *polis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*?', in M.S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford, 1996), 295–309. The evolution of the present paper was assisted by audiences at Leeds, Newcastle, Huelva and Seville. Its completion was made possible by an award under the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Research Leave scheme (grant reference AH/D501210/1), with additional support from the University of Leeds.

² It has, perhaps, become a prominent overemphasis; but Hall's question retains its validity even if the emphasis is moderated. Cautious recent discussions include P.J. Rhodes, 'Nothing to do with democracy: Athenian drama and the *polis*', *JHS* 123 (2003), 104–19; M. Heath, 'The "social function" of tragedy: clarifications and questions', in D.L. Cairns and V. Liapis (edd.), *Dionysalexandros: Essays on Aeschylus and his Fellow Tragedians in honour of A.F. Garvie* (Swansea, 2006), 253–81.

from ethically significant aspects of tragedy's object, that is, of the characters and their actions and interactions. Comedy, defined as an imitation of inferior actions and characters (5, 1449a32–4), also demands ethical judgement in poet and audience. You will miss the point of a comedy if you do not recognize a norm violation as such, and do not realize that the characters are behaving in ways that are disgraceful and therefore absurd. So when Aristotle says that 'correctness is not the same thing in politics and poetry', he does not mean that they are unconnected, but that they are not coextensive. If something that is done or said in a tragedy is ethically bad, that does not mean that the tragedy is poetically bad: if it is said or done by a bad person, that is unobjectionable poetically (25, 1461a4–9), provided that the character is not unnecessarily bad (15, 1454a28–9). The qualification shows that ethical badness is relevant to evaluating poetic correctness, even though judgements of ethical and poetic correctness are not identical.

Poetry's relationship to politics is therefore different from its relationship to natural science. Aristotle repeatedly criticizes Empedocles in the physical, biological and metaphysical works as if he were a predecessor contributing to the same kind of enterprise as Aristotle, putting forward theories about the world. He does not criticize Homer in the same way. Aristotle admired Empedocles' command of stylistic features characteristic of poetry, including metaphor, to the point of describing him as 'Homeric' (*On Poets* F70 Rose = F17 Gigon = Diog. Laert. 8.57); but he is also critical of Empedocles when he substitutes metaphor for the kind of explanation that is needed for a genuine understanding of nature (*Mete.* 2.3, 357a24–8). In a similar vein, he criticizes the Platonist theory of Forms for being 'empty verbiage and poetic metaphors' (*Metaph.* 1.9, 991a20–2 = 13.5, 1079b24–6; cf. *An. Post.* 2.13, 97b37–9).³ What he says in *Poetics* 25 about the misrepresentation of a horse or deer in visual art (1450b18f. 31–2), or about the misrepresentation of gods in poetry (1460b33–61a1), shows that errors in these areas are not a criterion of good or bad poetry. Poetry is independent of natural science to an extent that it cannot be independent of ethics and politics.

That brings us to the second point. Politics, for Aristotle, is the 'architectonic' discipline, which determines which other activities are to be permitted in the *polis*, subject to what limitations (*Eth. Nic.* 1.2, 1094a26–b2). It is therefore inherent in the nature of politics as Aristotle conceives it that there could not be a human activity that is not answerable to politics. But that is consistent with acknowledging the autonomy of poetics within its own sphere of competence. Contrast, for example, the positions of Plato and Aristotle on the question of whether plots must be ethically and politically acceptable, globally considered. Plato would require this: his complaint against poetry is, in part, that it shows the unjust as happy and the just in misery (*Resp.* 3, 392b). Aristotle does have qualms about an exceptionally good person suffering misfortune in tragedy (*Poet.* 13, 1452b34–3a1), and in chapter 14 he expresses a preference for plots that avoid imminent undeserved outcomes (14, 1454a4–7). However, the analysis of the best kind of tragic plot is unequivocal in finding undeserved outcomes preferable to double plots, in which the good characters end happily and the bad unhappily (13, 1453a30–6). Aristotle's argument for this conclusion is based on premises about the nature of tragedy that are internal to

³ Aristotle himself uses metaphors: it is not the use of metaphor that he finds objectionable, but the misuse. Discussion: G.E.R. Lloyd, *Aristotelian Explorations* (Cambridge, 1996), 205–22; A. Marcos, 'The tension between Aristotle's theories and uses of metaphor', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 28 (1997), 123–39.

poetics, not on principles imported from politics. The case is even clearer with comedy: while tragedy *allows* ethical badness under certain conditions, comedy by definition *requires* characters, and thus actions and words, that are ethically inappropriate.⁴ This analysis, too, is internal to poetics. Poetry is therefore related to politics both internally (because it incorporates ethical values) and externally (because of the architectonic role of politics); but its autonomy is not thereby negated.⁵

We can derive two corollaries from poetry's internal and external relations to ethics and politics. First, if poetry is ethical, it is social; society is implicated in any human activity with an ethical dimension. This requires a qualification of Hall's thesis. Social context must provide an implicit horizon for Aristotle's discussion of tragedy even where the *polis* is not explicitly thematized. Of course, if poetry is a universal human practice, no *particular* social context is implied. The society involved in any actual poetic practice is necessarily *some* particular society, for the simple reason that all actual societies are particular societies. But poetics, to the extent that it is concerned with the universal practice, legitimately abstracts from that particularity. Secondly, while the ethical norms presupposed by an actual poetic practice will be those of the particular host community, ethics and politics look beyond the standards current in particular communities. What is ethically normative relative to a local set of values need not be ethically normative in an absolute sense. This point will become relevant later.

2. THE STRATEGY OF THE POETICS

Aristotle begins the *Poetics* by declaring the treatise's subject matter: 'about poetry...' Poetry is not defined, perhaps because it is to be redefined (at least for the purposes of this treatise: the terminological innovation is not one that he adheres to elsewhere). What Aristotle is concerned with in the *Poetics* is not coextensive with what is generally (in ancient or modern usage) called poetry. Empedocles and Homer both compose in verse, and the shared medium means that there are points of overlap between them with regard to language and style. But they are not engaged in the same kind of enterprise (1, 1447b17–20); that is why the success of their works is not judged by the same criteria.⁶ In Aristotle's view, 'poetry' (as the word is normally used) does not mark out a class of human activities that can usefully be studied together. Aristotle's proposal is that a subset of the activities normally classed as poetry falls under the larger class of human activities that are imitative (1, 1447a13–16), and that the activities in this subset do form a coherent grouping that can usefully be studied together.

Aristotle next identifies three respects in which imitative activities may differ: medium, object and mode (1, 1447a16–18). In chapters 1–3 he uses these variables to construct a three-dimensional matrix within which poetry (in his restricted sense) can be differentiated from other imitative activities, and the various kinds of poetry can be

⁴ M. Heath, 'Aristotelian comedy', *CQ* 39 (1989), 344–54.

⁵ Subordination, with a sphere of autonomy that is not to be invaded by the dominant partner – this describes the wife's position in Aristotle's ideal marriage (*Eth. Nic.* 8.10, 1160b34–61a). Hall's divorce imagery gets things exactly the wrong way round!

⁶ R. Bodéüs, *Aristotle and the Theology of the Living Immortals* (Albany, NY, 2000), 212f. argues that *φυσιολόγος* (as distinct from *φυσικός*) expresses 'a slight pejorative nuance pointing to a flaw'; if so, the choice of the description *φυσιολόγος* for Empedocles at 1, 1447b19 hints at this difference in criteria. Being 'Homeric' entails complete success for Homer; but if Empedocles is engaged in a fundamentally different enterprise, being 'Homeric' implies that his pursuit of that enterprise is in some degree flawed.

differentiated from each other. For example, tragedy has the same medium and mode as comedy, but a different object (3, 1448a24–7). However, locating tragedy in a particular matrix cell is far from giving a full account of its nature. For example, tragedy's place in the matrix does not in itself enable us to predict that stories with opposite outcomes for the better and worse characters (as in the *Odyssey*) do not make the best kind of tragic plot; in chapter 13 Aristotle will have to argue against the preference for double plots from more substantive premises about the nature of tragedy. So these opening chapters only provide a general framework within which the study of tragedy (and epic and comedy) can proceed.

In chapter 4 Aristotle moves on to the origins and development of poetry.⁷ First, he shows how poetry is rooted in anthropological universals: the natural human inclinations towards imitating and taking pleasure in imitations, and towards rhythm and melody (4, 1448b4–9, 20–4). These instincts between them explain the existence of the class of imitative activities in general, and the existence of poetry (imitation in rhythmically and melodically elaborated language) in particular. So the matrix was not a purely *a priori* construct: it was drawn up in awareness of the empirical observations with which chapter 4 opens, and in turn helps to make them intelligible. Likewise, the fact that the matrix defines the objects of imitation on a scale of ethical value (2, 1448a1–5) anticipates the observation that the historical development of poetic forms is ethically differentiated (we have already noted the early bifurcation into praise- and blame-poetry). And the difference in poetic modes (3, 1448a19–24) is traced in Aristotle's account of the emergence of, and preference for, dramatic as distinct from narrative forms (4, 1448b34–9a6).

Aristotle's outline history of poetry delivers as its end product the main poetic genres – tragedy, comedy and epic (6, 1449b21–4) – in their fully developed form. However, we have still not been given any information that would enable us to deduce that a play with a double plot is not an optimal tragedy, or to understand why that should be so. The nature of tragedy is still underdetermined. This gap is addressed in the detailed analysis of tragedy that begins in chapter 6. In the course of this analysis we are told (among other things) that a play with opposite outcomes for the better and worse characters is not an optimal tragedy, and this claim is argued on more or less explicit premises about the nature of tragedy. Even here, however, these premises are taken as given: they are built into (or easily derived from) the definition of tragedy.

Aristotle's procedure points to a limit of the enquiry undertaken in the *Poetics*, which takes the developed genres for granted. The question is not why those particular poetic genres do and should exist: that is presupposed. Rather, Aristotle's goal is a reasoned determination of what must be done in order to produce good specimens of each kind. This limitation is inherent in the notion of an Aristotelian *tekhnê*. Medical *tekhnê*, for example, does not tell us whether to pursue health: that goal is presupposed, since it is not the task of a *tekhnê* to determine or evaluate its own ends (*Eth. Nic.* 3.3, 1112b11–15). Nor, strictly speaking, is it the task of medical *tekhnê* to tell us what health is. Medical *tekhnê* provides a reasoned understanding of the procedures by which health is produced ('the causes of each thing they do, and why it should be done thus', *Part. an.* 1.1, 639b14–19), but health itself is a first principle which medicine derives from observation and experience. If a deeper understanding is required, it may be sought from natural science (*φυσική*); but scientific understanding is distinct from medical *tekhnê*, and is cultivated only by the

⁷ The origins and early stages of anything are revealing: *Pol.* 1.2, 1252a24–6.

more philosophically inclined and sophisticated doctors (*Sens.* 1, 436a17–b1; *Resp.* 27, 480b22–30). We do not even need medical *tekhnē* to tell us how to be healthy: experience (ἐμπειρία) may enable a medical practitioner to recognise *that* certain treatments are effective in producing health in each given case. The contribution of medical *tekhnē* is to convert the practitioner's experience-based ability into an understanding of *why* those treatments are effective in producing health (*Metaph.* 1.1, 980b28–981a30; *An. post.* 2.19, 100a3–9). In the case of poetry, similarly, Aristotle's readers already knew what tragedy is, and practising tragedians knew from experience how to compose successful tragedies. Poetic *tekhnē* converts the experience-based recognition *that* certain ways of composing tragedies are effective into a rational understanding of *why* they are effective. In doing so, it may help us to correct omissions, obscurities and confusions in our pre-technical familiarity with tragedy; it is, nevertheless, the poetic practice with which we are already incompletely, obscurely or confusedly familiar that is the concern of poetic *tekhnē*.⁸

3. ATHENIAN TRAGEDY, GREEK TRAGEDY, TRAGEDY

What poetic practice is it, more precisely, that Aristotle is talking about in the detailed analysis that begins in chapter 6? Hall's question arises from a sense that Aristotle must be talking about Athenian tragedy, there being nothing else to talk about: 'Athens held a virtually complete monopoly over the generation of tragedy' (304). Hall cites Plato in support of this claim: 'anyone who thinks that he can write tragedy well does not go round in a circle outside Attica, putting on shows in the other cities, but makes a beeline here' (*Lach.* 183A7–B2). Yet this passage surely presupposes that there *are* opportunities to produce tragedy in other cities; it is only those who think they are particularly good at tragedy who go to Athens. Nor is it likely that even these people have estimated their ability as tragedians on the basis of no (or virtually no) opportunity to produce tragedies outside Athens. It is more plausible to imagine people whose success in an established tragic circuit outside Athens gives them the confidence to try to break into Hollywood.⁹

Athens did not in fact have 'a virtually complete monopoly' on tragedy in Aristotle's day.¹⁰ More importantly, Aristotle had reasons for thinking that this was no recent development. He would have known, as do we, that there is good evidence from the fifth century of Athenian tragedians who produced plays outside Athens (Aeschylus in Sicily, Euripides and Agathon in Macedonia),¹¹ and of tragedians who

⁸ On the nature of poetic *tekhnē* see also M. Heath, 'Cognition in Aristotle's *Poetics*', *Mnemosyne* 62 (2009), 51–75, at 58–62.

⁹ E. Csapo, 'Some social and economic conditions behind the rise of the acting profession in the fifth and fourth centuries BC', in C. Hugoniot, F. Hurlet and S. Milanezi (edd.), *Le statut de l'acteur dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Tours, 2004), 53–76, at 70–1 reaches similar conclusions on this passage.

¹⁰ P.E. Easterling, 'Euripides outside Athens: a speculative note', *ICS* 19 (1994), 72–80; O. Taplin, 'Spreading the word through performance', in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (edd.) *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge, 1999), 33–57; *id.*, 'Aeschylus' *Persai* – the entry of tragedy into the celebration culture of the 470s', in D.L. Cairns and V. Liapis (edd.), *Dionysalexandros: Essays on Aeschylus and his Fellow Tragedians in honour of A.F. Garvie* (Swansea, 2006), 1–10; C. Dearden, 'Plays for export', *Phoenix* 453 (1999), 222–48; W. Allan, 'Euripides in Megale Hellas: some aspects of the early reception of tragedy', *G&R* 48 (2001), 67–86; Csapo (n. 9).

¹¹ This does not depend on the reliability of the biographical tradition about Euripides settling, or dying, in Macedonia: a recent sceptical view in S. Scullion, 'Euripides and Macedon, or the silence of the *Frogs*', *CQ* 53 (2003), 389–400.

were not Athenian.¹² He also had access to evidence which, though less convincing to modern eyes, made the supposition that Athens had monopolized even the earlier history of tragedy contentious among his contemporaries. He records that 'some of the Peloponnesians' lay claim to tragedy (3, 1448a34–5). Herodotus' report (5.67) of 'tragic choruses' in Sicyon at the beginning of the sixth century enables us to identify these Peloponnesians more exactly. A claim for the priority of Epigenes of Sicyon over Thespis, known to us from later sources, was probably already current.¹³ Athenians might have been willing to concede 'tragic choruses' to the Peloponnesians, provided that they could maintain that the decisive move in the creation of tragedy proper was Thespis' invention of the first actor. But the Sicyonians appear to have pre-empted (or replied to) that response: the Dorians' appeal to an etymological argument based on the word 'drama' (1448a35–b2) strongly suggests that they were laying claim to priority in developing a dramatic form with at least one actor, and not simply a form of choral lyric.¹⁴

Aristotle, then, knew that tragedy was not an exclusively Athenian phenomenon, and had reason not to take it for granted that it had ever been. So it is unlikely that he was writing about *Athenian* tragedy. It does not follow that he was writing even about the larger phenomenon of *Greek* tragedy. It is true that the examples he uses in his analysis of tragedy are all from Greek tragedies. That was inevitable: he based inferences on, and took illustrative examples from, the only dramatic tradition to which he had access. So it might seem that the question whether Aristotle was writing about Greek tragedy or about tragedy makes a distinction without a difference. An analogy may help to clarify why the distinction is significant. In his discussion of the development of human culture in *Metaphysics* 1.1, Aristotle argues (981b13–25) that the development of the theoretical sciences required an advanced society, with a leisured class; that is why mathematics originated in Egypt, among priests. Imagine an Egyptian reflecting on mathematics at a time before its international dissemination. He only has access to mathematics in Egypt, and may assume (rightly) that mathematics in Egypt is the only mathematics in existence. But he would be wrong to equate mathematics in Egypt with mathematics as such, or to give an account of mathematics that included contingent facts about the way it was embedded in contemporary Egyptian society (for example, being practised by priests). He would need to abstract what is essential to mathematics from the accidental details of its manifestation in Egypt. All human practices are socially embedded. But an account of a practice such as mathematics need not, and arguably should not, be an account of how it is embedded in a particular society, even if contingently that is the only

¹² Pratinas of Phlius (*TrGF* 4) and his son Aristias (*TrGF* 9); Aristarchus of Tegea (*TrGF* 14); Neophron of Sicyon (*TrGF* 15); Ion of Chios (*TrGF* 19); Achaeus of Eretria (*TrGF* 20). Cf. M. Kaimio, 'The citizenship of the theatre-makers in Athens', *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft* 23 (1999), 43–61.

¹³ *Suda* θ282: 'Thespis of Icaria (a town in Attica): sixteenth tragedian in succession to the first tragic poet, Epigenes of Sicyon; or as some say, second after Epigenes. But others say he was the first tragedian ...'; cf. *Suda* ο806 ('nothing to do with Dionysus'), Pausanias ο32, etc. This tradition has been traced plausibly to a Sicyonian inscription that Heraclides of Pontus used as a source for the early history of poetry: M.L. West, 'The early chronology of Attic tragedy', *CQ* 39 (1989), 251–4.

¹⁴ Aristotle is said to have attributed tragedies to Empedocles (*On Poets* F70 Rose = F17 Gigon). If that is right, he was at least aware of (without necessarily accepting) another non-Athenian history of tragedy. Note also the reference to Arion's tragedies attributed to Solon (F30a West), discussed by C. Lord, 'Aristotle's history of poetry', *TAPhA* 104 (1974), 195–229, at 224–7.

society in which it is presently embedded. We might say that mathematics was contingently local to Egypt, but in principle universal. My suggestion is that Aristotle saw tragedy likewise as a contingently local, but in principle universal, human practice.¹⁵

4. UNIVERSALITY, NATURE, CULTURE

There are two ways in which a practice might be universal. Some practices are found in all, or virtually all, human societies. For example, any society that did not have language would be catastrophically impoverished.¹⁶ Other practices are not found in all human societies, and could not be. The special circumstances required for the development of mathematics means that it could not be a feature of every human society. Yet mathematics is a human good – not so much, in Aristotle's view, because of its instrumental value, but because of the intrinsic value of purely theoretical understanding (*Metaph.* 1.1, 981b13–25; 1.2, 982a14–19, b11–28). A society in which mathematics has not developed is impoverished, though not catastrophically so. Non-mathematicians are not wretched. Mathematics, then, is not universal in fact – not *descriptively* universal: you will not find it in every human society. But it is *normatively* universal: it is something that every society would have to acquire if it is to have achieved its optimal development. My thesis is that, for Aristotle, tragedy too is normatively universal.

If that is right, then it must be possible to give an account of tragedy as a component in the good life for human beings – as the realization of some human good. It would not be the task of poetics to give that account. Our earlier discussion of the limitations of an Aristotelian *tekhnê* suggests that we should turn to a scientific understanding of human nature. However, human beings do not have to wait for a scientific account of why poetry is a human good in order to know that it is good. Over time, Aristotle holds, human beings will tend to discover ways of improving what they do, and to build those improvements into their practices: 'we should consider the immense period of time and the many years during which it would not have gone unnoticed if these things were any good' (*Pol.* 2.5, 1264a1–4). Thus we should expect communities in different times and places to converge on good ways of doing things: 'we should take it, indeed, that pretty well everything else too has been discovered many times in the long course of history, or rather an infinite number of times. For need is likely to teach the necessities, and once they are present, it is reasonable that the things that contribute to refinement and luxury should develop'

¹⁵ Cf. G. Most, 'Generating genres: the idea of the tragic', in M. Depew and D. Obbink (edd.), *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 15–35, at 23: 'As a natural kind, tragedy ... is justified, not temporarily and locally by its link to contingent social institutions, but permanently and universally because it corresponds to fundamental constituents of human nature.' D. Dutton, 'Aesthetics and evolutionary psychology', in J. Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford, 2003), 693–705, at 693–4: 'Aristotle's *Poetics* can be understood as a catalogue of the features that he expects the arts, primarily drama and fiction, to possess precisely because they are created by and for human beings with a stable intellectual, imaginative, and emotional nature. For example, he argues that main themes of tragedy will involve the disruption of normal family relations ... His unspoken implication is that this fascination with stresses and ruptures of families represents a permanent feature of *human interest*, and not merely a local manifestation of Greek cultural concerns.'

¹⁶ The remote non-Greek peoples who Aristotle says live by perception alone, like non-human animals (*Eth. Nic.* 7.5, 1149a9–11), are presumably catastrophically impoverished exceptions from most human norms.

(*Pol.* 7.10, 1329b25–30). Hence we should expect humans to discover tragedy, and to optimize it over time.

This accords with the fact that Aristotle sees tragedy as a natural phenomenon. That is true of poetry in general: it arises from natural human instincts for imitation, melody and rhythm (4, 1448b4–24). But the end point of tragedy's development is also natural: 'after undergoing many transformations tragedy came to rest, because it had attained its natural state' (4, 1449a14–15). A thing's nature is what it is like when its development is complete (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b32–3); and what exists by nature tends towards a certain completion, provided that there is no impediment (*Ph.* 2.8, 199b15–18).¹⁷ The qualification is important. To say that tragedy developed to its natural state is not to say that this was an inevitable process.¹⁸ In a given tradition of tragic poetry there may be impediments, both to achieving the natural end point of development and to maintaining it if achieved. So the progress of tragedy to its natural state is a contingent process. That raises a variety of questions. What conditions are required for a tradition of tragic drama to develop to its natural state? What are the possible impediments? What kinds of contingency influence tragedy's development, and the form it actually takes in a particular time and place? And what are the limits to local variation from normatively universal tragedy if the practice is to remain genuinely *tragedy*?

5. THE CONTINGENCY OF TRAGEDY

Aristotle outlines the typical pattern for the development of human societies at the beginning of the *Politics* (1.2, 1252a24–b30). The story begins with scattered individuals, struggling to survive. The natural instinct to reproduce brings male and female together, at first in isolated households. When their children are old enough to leave the parental home and start their own families, a village is formed: a group of related households, under the overall guidance of the extended family's patriarch. But villages are not self-sufficient. The need to make survival even more secure leads to villages coming together to form cities; the city is the first level of social organization at which self-sufficiency is achieved. Once self-sufficiency has been secured, it becomes possible for humans to pursue goals that go beyond mere survival. The city comes into existence for the sake of living, but it continues in existence for the sake of living *well* (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b29–30; cf. 3.9, 1280a31–2).

The typical pattern for the development of human cultures, which Aristotle outlines at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* (1.1, 981b13–25), follows a similar path.

¹⁷ Note that these two references come from *Politics* and *Physics*. Tragedy's development to a natural end state is not a specifically biological metaphor, as some interpreters of the *Poetics* have assumed. It is the nature of stones to fall (e.g. *Eth. Nic.* 2.1, 1103a20–1); it is the nature of human beings to come together to form the self-sufficient social groups called 'cities' (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252b27–3a9). On the question of how a product of human craft and deliberation, whether poetry or the *polis*, may exist 'by nature' see (e.g.) T.J. Saunders, *Aristotle's Politics Books I and II* (Oxford, 1995), 61–3; F.D. Miller, *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford, 1995), 27–56 (esp. 37–45); Lloyd (n. 3), 184–204; R. Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (Oxford 2002), 242–6.

¹⁸ At this point I part company with Most (n. 15), 23: 'For Aristotle, tragedy is a *natural species* of poetry ... Although in its invention and at various moments in the course of its development, tragedy was helped along by individuals of genius, it expresses in its mimetic and formal structure the basic capacities innate in human beings, and it could not have ended up otherwise than it had: the great poets, whether by instinct or design, simply hastened a natural process that would have reached the same conclusion, only more slowly, even without those poets.'

At first, efforts are concentrated on the arts that are necessary for survival. In a second stage, when survival has been secured, people start to develop arts that provide for relaxation and enjoyment. Finally, effort is invested in activities such as the purely theoretical sciences that supply neither the necessities of life nor enjoyment. As we have already seen in the case of mathematics, the final stage presupposes a society that has developed to the point of having sufficient surplus wealth to support a leisured class. This suggests that the level of material prosperity in a society is one of the factors which will influence the development of its poetic tradition.

Poetry, which provides relaxation and enjoyment but is not essential to survival, might seem to belong to the second phase of Aristotle's model. But that model is concerned with the discovery of arts that go beyond 'common perceptions' (981b14). Since poetry is rooted in natural human instincts, common to all (*Poet.* 4, 1448b4–24), we would expect its most primitive forms to arise spontaneously in every human society.¹⁹ The improvised activities out of which the poetic tradition was gradually developed (1448b23–4) would be present from the start. Nor would it take much to initiate the gradual development: political animals with an ability to share their perceptions of good and bad, right and wrong (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a7–18), and with an instinct for rhythm and melody (*Poet.* 4, 1448b20–2), would surely take to songs of praise and blame like ducks to water.

Invectives, hymns and encomia (1448b24–7) would not require much leisure or any elaborate supporting apparatus. But the full appreciation of music and advanced poetic forms does require leisure and the self-cultivation that leisure makes possible. The elaborate institutional framework of the Athenian dramatic festivals, with permanent theatres and a system for covering production costs,²⁰ suggests that the most advanced developments will require a high level of material prosperity. Admittedly, drama is not completely dependent on formal institutional arrangements. Comedy was performed by volunteers before its adoption into an official festival programme (5, 1449a37–b2), perhaps by performers wandering from village to village (3, 1448a35–8). The material demands of this kind of informal dramatic performance would be modest. But we would also expect performances given under such conditions to be less sophisticated than plays that enjoyed the financial and organizational support which went with inclusion in an official festival programme. An adequate material basis must therefore be one element of contingency in the development of tragedy: not all societies could sustain it.

Aristotle mentions the link that the Megarians make between their democracy and the origins of comedy (3, 1448a31–3). Although he does not comment on the claim, he is at the very least aware of the possibility that the path of poetry's development may be influenced by a community's political, as well as its material, conditions. In fact, the architectonic role which he attributes to politics (*Eth. Nic.* 1.2, 1094a26–b2) positively implies that a society's poetic practices are likely to be informally influenced by its political structure, even if there is no formal regulation.

¹⁹ P.C. Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Evolution* (Cambridge, 2003), 23: 'Thus it appears to be a universal that all or almost all societies have verse, which is to say a verbal art involving formalized cyclical organisation of speech based on fixed, recurring patterns of acoustic properties. Tale telling also appears to be a literary universal ... Finally, some form of enactment for such tales seems to be universal as well, though more limitedly.' Hogan offers an unusually sophisticated (non-normative) discussion of literary universals, making use of (*inter alia*) Sanskrit poetics and contemporary cognitive psychology. His grip on classical material is, unfortunately, not entirely secure.

²⁰ P. Wilson, *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia* (Cambridge, 2000).

In addition, Aristotle records a Sicilian contribution to the development of comedy (5, 1449b5–9), and a number of Athenian contributions to the development of comedy and tragedy (4, 1449a15–19; 5, 1449b7–8). There is no indication in these cases that the development depended on specific political or social conditions; Aristotle's attention is rather on the individuals responsible – Aeschylus and Sophocles in tragedy (4, 1449a15–19), Epicharmus (3, 1448a32–4) and Crates (5, 1449b7–9) in comedy. So Aristotle thinks that the contributions made by individual innovators are significant.²¹ Those innovations may be the product of exceptional individual talent: Aristotle repeatedly refers to Homer in this light (4, 1448b34–9a2; 23, 1459a30–1; 24, 1459b12–13, 1460a5–11). In a different sphere, we may recall that Aristotle is very impressed by his own contribution to logic. He points out that he had no predecessors on whose work he could build, but even so has brought the subject to a state at least as far advanced as that of other disciplines – though he concedes that there is still work to be done (*Soph. el.* 34, 183b34–6, 184b1–8). However, he sees that as an exceptional case. His point is precisely that progress in every other art has been an incremental process. Once a start has been made, a series of small improvements can make a big difference (*Soph. el.* 34, 183b17–34; cf. *Eth. Nic.* 1.7, 1098a22–6). Poetry was generated out of improvised activities 'by a process of *gradual* (κατὰ μικρόν) innovation' (*Poet.* 4, 1448b22–4); and 'tragedy was *gradually* (κατὰ μικρόν) enhanced as people developed each new aspect of it that came to light' (4, 1449a13–14). If a poetic tradition depended on exceptional individual talent for its progress, its development would be extremely contingent, since the appearance of exceptional talent is rare and unpredictable. As it is, even minor talent may play a crucial role in enabling future advances. Consider Aristotle's comment on the relationship between a famous lyric poet and one of his less distinguished predecessors: 'There is a lot of lyric poetry we would not have had without Timocreon; but without Phrynis, we would not have had Timocreon' (*Metaph.* 2.1, 993b15–16).

It is also important that the poets who make these advances do not need to understand what they are doing.²² Even in the case of Homer, Aristotle leaves open the question whether his success in creating good plot structures was due to 'art or instinct' (*Poet.* 8, 1451a19–24). The poets who discovered that a limited number of families in the mythological repertoire provide the best subjects for tragedy were not even working from instinct: they were 'guided by chance rather than art' (14, 1454a10–13). So improvements may result from blind trial and error. That makes the development of poetry a more robust process. Nevertheless, innovations will only accumulate if people register their significance. The poets who stumbled on the tragic potential of certain families observed *that* tragedies based on those families worked particularly well. They managed to identify the factor that accounted for the success of these tragedies, even if they did not have a deep understanding of *why* those

²¹ Here, too, I disagree with Most (n. 15), 23: 'Perhaps this is why Aristotle's account of the historical evolution of tragedy, strangely enough, refuses to mention the traditional inventor of the genre, Thespis; for by suppressing the name of its originator, Aristotle makes the genre seem less accidental and Athenian, more inevitable and human. As with any natural kind, nature herself would have come up with the genre sooner or later.' Where there was nothing controversial in attributing a key role to an individual (notably Homer), Aristotle does not hesitate to do so. But to single out Thespis as the inventor of tragedy would be to endorse a specifically Athenian claim that, as we have seen, was contested in the fourth century (see n. 13 above). For his current purposes, Aristotle had nothing to gain from taking a position in this debate; hence the neutral tone of his report of the Peloponnesian claim to tragedy.

²² Heath (n. 8), 60.

families were the best subjects for tragedy. Contrast the fate of Homer's innovations in epic. Even after Homer had showed the way, other epic poets did not follow his quasi-dramatic narrative technique (*Poet.* 4, 1448b35–6; 24, 146a5–11); and they also went on composing plots based on a single person or a single period of time even after Homer showed that plots should be based on a unified action (8, 1451a16–22; 23, 1459a37–8). Because they lacked Homer's instinct and Aristotle's theoretical insight, they failed to identify the elements of Homer's technique that explained his poems' excellence. So these improvements did not become part of the tradition of epic poetry.

Poets compose for audiences, and the feedback they get from audiences is likely to influence them. In fact, feedback from audiences may be indispensable, since craftsmen, including poets, are not necessarily the best judges of their own work – just as, in general, people are not best judges in their own case (*Eth. Nic.* 9.7, 1167b34–8a3; cf. 4.2, 1120b13–14; *Pol.* 3.9, 1280a15–16). So the mechanisms of development are not purely individual, but are also inherently social. When Aristotle refers to tragedy and comedy being 'more highly esteemed' than other forms of poetry (*Poet.* 4, 1449a2–6), he implies that the modal innovation that led to drama was socially mediated: it caught on because audiences recognized its superiority and responded favourably.

Not all social feedback is benign in its effects, however. Consider the phenomenon of 'episodic' plots, 'in which the sequence of episodes is neither necessary nor probable' (9, 1450b34–5; cf. *Metaph.* 14.3, 1090b19–20; 12.10, 1075b37–6a1; Theophrastus *Metaph.* 4a14). Aristotle says that 'second-rate poets compose plots of this kind of their own accord', but adds: 'good poets do so on account of the actors – in writing pieces for competitive display they draw out the plot beyond its potential, and are often forced to distort the sequence' (9, 1450b35–52a1). Plot is, in Aristotle's view, the most important aspect of tragedy (6, 1450a15–39). But the inclusion of a competition between actors as well as a competition between dramatists in the dramatic festivals had the (presumably unforeseen and unintended) consequence of creating an incentive to distort proper plot structures. Presumably the actors had the support of a significant part of the audience. The distortion of plot structure would have done nothing to serve the ambitions of actors if spectators had not enjoyed the actors' virtuoso displays. Moreover, if the poorly structured plays had not been popular, poets would have had a powerful incentive to resist the actors' demands.

It is not only the structure of tragic plots that can deviate from what is naturally best: so can the content. In chapter 13 of the *Poetics* Aristotle argues that in the best kind of tragic plot a person who is neither outstandingly virtuous nor wicked suffers a change from good fortune to bad fortune, which 'is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind' (1453a8–10). But he recognizes that some people prefer the kind of plot 'which has a double structure like the *Odyssey*, and which ends with the opposite outcome for better and worse people' (1453a30–3). In this case, too, tragedians come under social pressure to deviate from the true nature of tragedy: 'the poets follow the audiences' lead and compose whatever is to their taste' (1453a34–5). The double plot, Aristotle says, 'is thought to come first because of the weakness (*ἀσθένεια*) of audiences' (1453a33–4). This weakness is symptomatic of an ethical failure.²³ Hence, as well as the influence of the material conditions of society on the development of poetry, the phenomenon of social feedback means that we

²³ Similarly, when Aristotle compares the dominance of actors in the theatre to the dominance of delivery in political oratory, he ascribes it to the moral deficiency (*μοχθηρία*) of the auditors (*Rh.* 3.1, 1403b31–4a8).

must also take account of society's ethical conditions. That is not surprising if, as we saw at the outset, ethics is internal to poetry. Since tragedy is designed to elicit pity, which involves ethical judgement, it is bound to be influenced for better or worse by the host community's current ethical state.

This opens up a further range of potential impediments. The process that produces an adult human being is long and complex. As well as physical maturation, humans undergo a prolonged formation of ethical character through social interaction. The distinctive plasticity of human nature means that this process may have different, even opposite, outcomes. Stones have a very limited range of behaviours: unless you put an obstacle in their way, or impose an unnatural movement on them by force, they will continue their natural downward movement. You cannot train a stone to fly, no matter how often you throw it upwards (*Eth. Nic.* 2.1, 1103a20–2). Animals are more flexible in their behaviour. They respond to their perceived environment, and some animals can modify their behaviour in the light of experience. Unlike stones, some animals can be trained. Their behaviour is determined by habit as well as by nature. But the behaviour of humans is far more open to modification by habit, and also by reason, than that of any other animal (*Pol.* 7.13, 1332a38–b11). Aristotle says that humans do not acquire virtues by nature, or against nature: rather, 'we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit' (*Eth. Nic.* 2.1, 1103a23–6). But, equally, habit may make us imperfect. 'It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference' (1103b23–5).

Human ethical development is therefore highly contingent on social environment, and distortions in that environment will tend to distort the development of individuals. But the social environment is the product of the individuals it has produced in the past. So distortions in the social environment are likely to perpetuate themselves. That is unfortunate, because human societies invariably get off to a bad start. Aristotle believes that the world has always existed, and has always been populated by human beings. There was never a beginning to human history. But human history has not been uninterrupted. The world is subject to change, including a variety of cataclysms and catastrophes (*Met.* 1.14).²⁴ These may send human societies back to the start again. We noted earlier that Aristotle says that 'pretty well everything ... has been discovered many times in the long course of history, or rather an infinite number of times' (*Pol.* 7.10, 1329b26–7; cf. *Metaph.* 12.8, 1074b10–12; *Met.* 1.3, 339b16–30; *DC* 1.3, 270b16–25). He is not thinking, as we might, of convergent development across parallel cultural traditions; his picture is of the survivors of each round of catastrophes and their descendants working their way back from the most primitive state to civilization. The wheel has to be reinvented *ad infinitum*.

Plato in the *Laws* (3, 679D–E) paints a rosy picture of post-catastrophic populations: they have not had time to be corrupted. Aristotle appears to take a less optimistic view: they are like ordinary, stupid people today (*Pol.* 2.8, 1269a4–6).²⁵ In the aftermath of catastrophe people will struggle to subsist, and so they do not have

²⁴ Cf. Pl. *Ti.* 22B–23B; *Plt.* 270C–D; *Leg.* 3, 677A–80E; Theophrastus F184 FHS&G (= Philo, *De aeternitate mundi* 129–31, 145–9). See C. Natali, 'La teoria aristotelica delle catastrofi. Metodi di razionalizzazione di un mito', *RFIC* 105 (1977), 403–24; J.A. Palmer, 'Aristotle on the ancient theologians', *Apeiron* 33 (2000), 181–205.

²⁵ Strictly speaking, this claim is made in a summary of one side of a disputed question. But there is no indication that Aristotle rejects the premise.

leisure; but leisure is necessary for the acquisition of virtue (*Pol.* 7.9, 1328b39–9a2). So the founding populations of post-catastrophic society will always be ill equipped to establish a good society. Since the society they establish will be the dominant formative influence on the next generation, the initial conditions of every human society create inherited deficiencies that will be difficult to overcome.

The efforts of many populations are sabotaged by their circumstances. Aristotle believes that the climatic conditions of Europe (which is too cold) and Asia (which is too hot) have a damaging effect on the character and intelligence of non-Greeks (*Pol.* 7.6, 1327b20–9); and this means that their social structures are profoundly distorted (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252a34–b9).²⁶ But even societies that have made good progress face difficulties. Aristotle understands that elements of a social structure may have unintended and unrecognized systemic consequences. In his discussion of the Spartan constitution he argues that the good intentions of the ban on the sale of land have been frustrated by the oversight which fails to ban giving or bequeathing land (*Pol.* 2.9, 1270a11–b6), and he identifies regrettable – but unforeseeable – consequences in Solon's reforms in Athens (*Pol.* 2.12, 1274a11–21). When one adds to this the ethical obstacles to achieving a balanced social order, it is not surprising that Aristotle holds that the optimal constitution is rarely if ever achieved (*Pol.* 4.11, 1296a37–8). The bleakness of his conclusion is mitigated by the recognition that suboptimal may be good enough (*Pol.* 5.9, 1309b31–3).

6. THE LIMITS OF VARIATION

We have seen that the development of tragedy is subject to a variety of contingencies. It follows that there will be differences in the practice of tragedy, and differences in what is regarded as good tragedy, in different times and places. Some of these differences would make a difference to how good a tragedy a tragedy really is. In one passage (*Poet.* 7, 1451a6–9) Aristotle invites us to imagine a situation in which 100 tragedies had to be presented at one sitting (they would use a water clock to time them). Such a practice would be at variance with what is naturally best. There is a naturally optimum magnitude for a tragic plot (7, 1451a9–15); if a given community's institutional arrangements force poets to compose plots on a different scale, that will produce defective tragedies. But other variations would not make a tragedy better or worse as a tragedy. For example, all the tragedies Aristotle knew of were in Greek, but it can hardly be the case that being in Greek is essential to tragedy.²⁷ Presumably a Triballian audience would prefer tragedies in Triballian dialect. Being in Triballian would make a tragedy less acceptable to Athenians, but it would not make it any better or worse as a tragedy. So we can envisage local variations that may be important to a play's effectiveness in a given context, but that make no difference to whether the play is a good tragedy.

We may return to Hall's question here. Many tragedies celebrate Athenian heroes, cults and political institutions. But not *all* tragedies can have done so: not, for example, those which Aeschylus produced for Sicilian tyrants, or Euripides for Archelaus. Celebrating Athenian heroes, cults and institutions would no doubt make a tragedy more acceptable to an Athenian audience, but it is not essential to being a good tragedy. Perhaps we could move to a more abstract formulation: tragedy

²⁶ Discussion: M. Heath, 'Aristotle on natural slavery', *Phronesis* 53 (2008), 243–70.

²⁷ Since Aristotle regards language as conventional (*Int.* 1, 16a3–8, 19–29), he could not reasonably claim that being in one language or another is naturally best.

celebrates the heroes, cults and institutions of its patrons, whoever they may be. That is probably more widely true. But even if that is a correct generalization about tragedies, it is not essential. A tragedy which did not do so would not, for that reason alone, be a defective tragedy. The same point can be made with reference to another aspect of tragedy that Aristotle has been criticized for neglecting, the role of the gods. The gods are very important in Greek tragedy. But would we say that a tragedy (even a Greek one) which did not give a prominent role to the gods was for that reason defective as a tragedy? If not, then this is not an essential aspect of tragedy as such, and Aristotle's lack of emphasis can be justified. We saw earlier that Aristotle accepts that a tragedy's theological assumptions may adhere to the false theology of the host community's traditions without poetic error (25, 1460b33–61a1). So tragedy must allow for a variety of ways of conceiving the role of the gods. Generalizations about the way the gods are involved in Greek tragedies are very important to anyone whose primary interest is in those plays, or in the culture that produced them. Nevertheless, those generalizations cannot be definitive for tragedy as such.

However, we also saw earlier that there is a difference between theology and ethics in this regard: ethical criteria are internal to poetics in a way that theology is not. So it is not enough that a tragedy's ethical assumptions are consistent with the host community's traditions and norms. If those norms are themselves faulty, that would produce poetic error. Let us revisit the Triballians. In the *Topics* Aristotle uses them to illustrate the difference between absolute and relative ethical values (*Top.* 2.11, 115b22–6). Among the Triballians, sacrificing one's father is a fine thing (*καλόν*); but it is not fine in an absolute sense. Triballians presumably had the poetry of praise and blame. They would not have thought much of an invective that focused on someone's having sacrificed his father; but an encomium that expressed admiration for someone who had done so would have made perfect sense to them. Such an encomium would have been acceptable according to Triballian standards, though in absolute terms it would be a monstrosity. So far as we know, the Triballians never composed tragedies – that is, dramas designed to evoke pity and fear. If they had done, they would have found different things pitiable and fearful, because of their different ethical values.²⁸ Just as Triballians would prefer tragedies in Triballian dialect, so we can assume that they would prefer tragedies based on Triballian ethical norms. But a good tragedy according to Triballian standards would be a monstrosity in absolute terms.

How should we classify such a monstrosity? As a defective tragedy? Or should we say that Triballian ethics are so distorted that their play would not really be a proper tragedy at all? The question is perhaps more interesting in a case that does not involve such clear-cut violations of a universal ethical norm and is not so obviously trying to be a tragedy as my hypothetical Triballian drama. Aristotle never had to deal with

²⁸ One might (tongue in cheek) imagine a Triballian being puzzled by *Oedipus*: killing one's own father *by accident* is a missed opportunity, but is there any need to make quite so much fuss about it? Alternatively, a Triballian might conclude that *Oedipus* is about the importance of interpreting oracles correctly. Laius received a propitious oracle, reassuring him that he would *die* (*θανεῖν*) at his son's hand (713, cf. 1176 *κτενεῖν*), which is what any father should hope for. But he apparently misunderstood the prophecy, and feared that he would be *murdered* by his son (*φονεύς*, *ἐφοβεῖτο* 720–2). It was his attempt to avoid that outcome which made the misunderstanding come true (cf. the oracle to Oedipus at 793: *φονεύς*). When Oedipus heard *that* oracle, his attempt to avoid being his father's murderer (rather than, as is proper, sacrificing him) was perfectly reasonable. For a less flippant, and more illuminating, example of the effects of transposing a dramatic work between cultures see L. Bohannon, 'Shakespeare in the bush', *Natural History* 75 (1966), 28–33.

such a case: he never had the opportunity to consider the implications of genuine comparative literary evidence. But how might he have reacted to such evidence, had it been available? For example, classical Sanskrit drama proves that another culture could populate the matrix which Aristotle uses to classify poetic forms in the opening chapters of the *Poetics* in a different way. I said earlier that tragedy is under-determined by its location in the matrix. Sanskrit drama confirms that claim by filling the matrix cell that tragedy occupies with a different kind of drama – one that is about admirable people, but which does not give pity and fear the central role that those emotions have in tragedy.²⁹

Aristotle's criticism of the preference for double plots shows that even in his own culture people had different ideas about how that matrix cell is best filled. But because this was within his own cultural tradition, it was unproblematic for Aristotle to treat different preferred forms as variants of *tragedy*, and judge them according to his model of tragedy. Confronted with an alien tradition, it would have been less obvious whether a play is best classified as a deviant tragedy or as an example of another form occupying the same matrix cell. In the latter case, a further question will arise: is this other form a valid alternative to tragedy, or is the presence of another dramatic form in place of tragedy a symptom of the inferiority of the alien culture? Those are questions which it is manifestly impossible to resolve by invoking the poetics of tragedy.

We have seen that, faced with different preferences within his own culture, Aristotle reaches for an ethical criterion to explain an intrinsically inferior alternative preference: weak audiences prefer the second-best kind of tragic plot (13, 1453a34–5).³⁰ He might have found a similar argument just as plausible if he had needed to deal with different preferences in other cultures, since (as noted earlier) he believes that the character and intelligence of non-Greeks is adversely affected by climate.³¹ On the other hand, the Aristotelian corpus as a whole provides plentiful evidence of his willingness to change his mind, and he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of adapting theory to empirical evidence (*DC* 3.7, 306a5–17; *Gen. corr.* 1.2, 316a5–14; *Hist. an.* 1.6, 491a7–14; *Gen. an.* 2.8, 747b27–8a16; 3.10, 760b27–33). So if Aristotle had encountered alien dramatic forms which deviate from his tragic norms, he would have had grounds for considering alternatives to outright dismissal. One possibility would have been to revise his concept of tragedy in the light of this new evidence, stretching his definition of serious drama to accommodate the alien tradition. Another would have been to recognize the coexistence of other, equally valid forms of serious drama alongside tragedy in the same matrix cell. But a more nuanced solution is perhaps more likely: the distinction between absolute and relative values gives Aristotle the resources to concede to the alien tradition a qualified validity, consistent with its inferiority.

²⁹ Accessible translations of Sanskrit drama: M. Coulson (tr.), *Three Sanskrit Plays* (Harmondsworth, 1981); J.A.B. van Buitenen (tr.), *Two Plays of Ancient India* (New York, 1968); W.J. Johnson (tr.), *The Recognition of Sakuntala* (Oxford, 2001). B.S. Miller (ed.), *The Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kalidasa* (New York, 1984) includes, in addition to translations of Kalidasa's three plays, essays by D. Gitomer and E. Gerow on the theatre and dramatic theory. See also E. Gerow, *Indian Poetics* = J. Gond (ed.), *A History of Indian Literature*, V/3 (Wiesbaden 1977).

³⁰ Note that the inferiority of this plot type is not an inference from the weakness of the audience: Aristotle has already ranked plots on grounds internal to tragic poetics. In citing the audience's weakness he makes a brief foray beyond poetics to identify the external impediment which explains the preference for these inferior tragedies.

7. ARISTOTELIAN RELATIVISM

Aristotle distinguishes between unqualified and relative goods. For example, the diet that is healthy for a person in good health is healthy without qualification (*ἀπλῶς*). The same diet may not be suitable (may in fact be harmful) to an invalid; the diet appropriate to an invalid is also a healthy diet, but in a qualified and relative sense. It is, of course, the norm (good health) rather than the deviation (illness) that provides the criterion for distinguishing between unqualified and relative goods. Unqualified goods are, in a sense, superior to qualified goods; and it might therefore seem obvious that they are preferable. But if I am in a less than optimal condition, unqualified goods will not be good *for me*; I should therefore prefer the qualified goods which are appropriate to my condition – while, of course, also aiming to improve my condition, so that unqualified goods become good for me as well (*Eth. Nic.* 5.1, 1129b2–6; cf. 7.12, 1152b24–33; *Eth. Eud.* 7.2, 1235b30–6a7).

The distinction between unqualified and relative goods carries over to ethics. People whose conception of nature extends only to universal physical laws will infer from the variation of norms between different human communities that they must all be matters of local convention. Some norms are, indeed, purely conventional, but others are natural despite their local variability (*Eth. Nic.* 5.7, 1134b18–5a5). Just as a relative good may be genuinely good for the people to whom it is appropriate, even though it is not an unqualified good, so norms may be naturally binding on certain people or in certain circumstances even though they are not binding without qualification. Aristotle's comments on Triballian father sacrifice illustrate the radical potential of this argument. It is important to realize that he is not making an ethnographic report to the effect that Triballians *regard* sacrificing their fathers as a fine thing. Rather, he says that sacrificing their fathers *is* fine for Triballians (*Top.* 2.11, 115b22–6), in the same way that a particular diet may be genuinely beneficial in unhealthy conditions (b18–21), or taking medicine may be beneficial when one is ill (b26–9), although neither is beneficial in an unqualified sense.³² This principle can be generalized to all arts and sciences (*Pol.* 4.1, 1288b10–21). Hence political theory must not limit its attention to the form of society that is best without qualification: it must also be concerned with what is best for most people, and what is best under given conditions (*Pol.* 4.1, 1288b10–39; cf. 4.11, 1295a25–34).

This blend of ethical universalism and contextual relativism means that politics, the architectonic discipline which regulates poetry along with other activities in the community, would have good reason to take an interest in forms of poetry that are adapted to their host communities and that realize a human good which, though not absolute, is good relative to local conditions. Only a culture that comes close to being optimal (such as Greek culture) could be expected to have developed the optimal poetic forms. Most human societies are suboptimal, and will accordingly produce

³¹ According to Hogan (n. 19), 98–121, romantic tragicomedy is the most common plot type across different traditions, followed by heroic tragicomedy; 'tragedy in general ... is considerably less common cross-culturally than comedy' (103). Aristotle would perhaps not have been surprised.

³² According to Timaeus (*FGrH* 566F46) and Demon (*FGrH* 327F18), ritual killing of elderly parents was a custom of the Sardinians. The fact that the victims are expected to be pleased by this attention (hence, on one account, the proverbial Sardonic laughter) suggests one way in which Triballian parent sacrifice could be understood as a natural (though not an absolute) good: if sacrificing one's parent to a god is honorific, it would be a way of respecting the fundamental obligation towards one's parents (cf. *Top.* 1.11, 105a3–9), and fine for that reason.

suboptimal cultural practices – ones that suit local conditions, but are therefore locally and relatively good, though not good absolutely. Thus it would be open to Aristotle to conclude that the form of serious drama exemplified by the Sanskrit tradition, though intrinsically inferior to tragedy, was nevertheless genuinely good for the society in which it flourished.³³

We do not need to speculate about Aristotle's response to cross-cultural evidence to see him applying this principle. The variation *within* a society raises the possibility of a socially stratified poetics, as we can see from the treatment of instrumental music in *Politics* 8.³⁴ Musical education is needed if one is to progress beyond the natural pleasure in the common (*κοινόν*) element of music (which even some animals, as well as the servile masses and children, can enjoy) to an appreciation of fine melodies and rhythms (*Pol.* 8.6, 1341a13–17; cf. 8.5, 1340a2–5).³⁵ But there are styles of music which are inimical to such education. Aristotle comments disapprovingly on the infiltration into the schoolroom of the astonishing but excessive innovations which professional musicians have introduced into competitive performance (8.6, 1341a11–13). As in the case of tragic plot structures, the audience shares responsibility for this development: the audience's vulgar and unstable tastes have had a malign influence on the standards of competitive performance (8.7, 1341b10–18).

In a well-ordered society, it should not be difficult to regulate education so as to exclude such innovations from schools. But what about public performances? Aristotle concludes that different kinds of musical performance should be organized for different kinds of audience. A cultured audience will want to listen to music with fine melodies and rhythms; but for the vulgar lower classes, performers should be allowed to provide musical entertainments that correspond to the unnatural distortion of their auditors' souls (8.7, 1342a18–28). It might be thought that, in giving the vulgar masses music which is, though not good without qualification, at any rate good *for them*, Aristotle must have their moral improvement in mind. But there is nothing in the text to suggest that he would make any stronger claim than he does for cathartic music: it provides people with 'a harmless pleasure' (8.7, 1342b15–16). Aristotle's assumption may be that the malformed souls of the vulgar masses are beyond recovery (*Eth. Nic.* 10.9, 1179b10–18), and precisely for that reason immune to the harm that such music could do to the still malleable souls of young people. If so, Aristotle's main concern in recommending separate performances for the vulgar has less to do with the benefit to them (beyond providing them with harmless pleasure) than with a desire to protect high-quality musical performances from the deformation that is likely to result if the demands of the vulgar masses are not satisfied elsewhere.

³³ It should, however, be noted that practices that are prevalent in a given society may not be, objectively, even a qualified good for that society. Social practices may be dysfunctional. As Aristotle observes, oligarchs and democrats often behave in ways that are not good for oligarchy or democracy: *Pol.* 5.9, 1310a12–38.

³⁴ For an excellent discussion see A. Ford, 'Catharsis: the power of music in Aristotle's *Politics*', in P. Murray and P. Wilson (edd.), *Music and the Muses* (Oxford, 2004), 309–36.

³⁵ The fact that ability to judge what is musically fine requires education (cf. *Pol.* 8.6, 1340b35–9) must severely qualify the claim made elsewhere for the good collective judgement of the many in music and poetry (*Pol.* 3.11, 1281a39–b10). For discussion see A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton, 2002), 286–92; T. Samaras, 'Aristotle's *Politics*: the city of Book Seven and the question of ideology', *CQ* 57 (2007), 77–89, at 83–4.

8. CONCLUSION

Tragedy, like instrumental music, is exposed to risk. Aristotle believed that the poor judgement and ethical deficiencies of poets, performers and audiences had already had a detrimental effect in his own society. What could be done to preserve the quality of tragedy? One obvious precaution would be to ensure that the prize in the competition between dramatists is awarded by experts who understand what tragedy ought to be, and who will be able to resist the audience's attempts to influence their judgement. That might be difficult to arrange in democratic Athens; but since Aristotle does not think that Athenian democracy is a good way to run a city, he would not be surprised that it cannot prevent the corruption of music and poetry. That, however, is speculation: Aristotle does not discuss the problem. Had he done so, it would not have been in the *Poetics*. It is the architectonic discipline of politics which carries the responsibility of regulating the practice of other arts. So it is in the *Politics* that Aristotle recommends separate musical performances for different classes of audience. It is in the *Politics*, too, that he recommends excluding children from the audience of comedy, to ensure that the obscenity does not corrupt their still unformed character (*Pol.* 7.17, 1336b20–3).

These two instances of political regulation are dissimilar: the former is intended to protect music from inferior audiences; the latter is intended to protect children from comedy. This does not imply that politics has determined that comedy in general, or the particular style of comedy in question, is a bad thing. Children should be excluded from comedy, not because there is something wrong with comedy, but because there is something wrong with children: they are not yet sufficiently mature and stable in character to appreciate comedy properly. Aristotle expresses no anxiety about the effect of comedy on adults; he assumes that their education will have rendered them immune to any potentially harmful influence (7.17, 1336b22–3).

Aristotle therefore looks to politics for guidance about how the practice of drama should be managed in the city, but he does not need politics to tell him whether poetry is a good thing, and whether it should be allowed in the city. We noted earlier that poetics retains a limited autonomy. That is possible, because poetics is not dependent on politics for its access to a scientific account of human nature – still less for access to the observational and experiential data which that science seeks to explain. So if politics (or, rather, some political theorist) told him that poetry, or particular kinds of poetry (such as tragedy and comedy), are bad things, and that they should be excluded from the city, Aristotle would have independent grounds for rejecting the claim. Poetry exists by nature; how could the product of human nature possibly be bad for humans?

There is one possibility. One could perhaps imagine a community in which the citizens' character is so insecure that they might indeed be harmed by tragedy's portrayal of undeserved misfortune. In this case, politics would be right to recommend a ban on tragedy. But this situation would parallel the case of comedy and children. The problem is not that there is something wrong with tragedy, but that there is something wrong with the citizens of that community. From this point of view, Plato's anxieties about the effects of tragedy on the ideal city of his *Republic* would be evidence that, so far from being ideal, the city is profoundly unnatural.