

XIX.—Aeschylean *Onkos* in Sophocles and Aristotle

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In this paper I propose to read *onkos* in Aristotle's *Poetics* 18.7 (56A.2) as the designation of his fourth class of tragedies. If that is accepted, it will appear that his classification in Chapter 18 is in fact independent of any analysis of parts of tragedy elsewhere in the *Poetics* and may derive from Sophocles as cited in Plutarch, *Moralia* 79B.

In Aristotle *Poetics* 18.7 a word or more has fallen out. Aristotle has named three kinds of tragedy, and illustrated them by examples: the complex (*πεπλεγμένη*), the painful (*παθητική*), and the ethical (*ἠθική*). Of the name of the fourth only the letters OHC remain. The plays that exemplify the fourth class are the *Phorcydes*, *Prometheus* (or *Prometheuses*, if we accept the emendation of Bergk, which Gudeman adopts and records as the reading of the Arabic version) and scenes in Hades. Possibly we should see in "scenes in Hades" a reference to Book 11 of the *Odyssey*.

No previous attempt to emend this passage is satisfactory; the most generally adopted emendations have been τὸ τερατῶδες, 'the miraculous' or 'monstrous,' τὸ ἀπλοῦν, 'the simple,' and Bywater's ὄψις, 'spectacle.'¹ The first two have no paleographical probability and are not even satisfactory in meaning. Aristotle has said that the monstrous has nothing in common with tragedy (14.4: 53B.8–10). Hence we should not expect him to select the monstrous as a significant feature by which to classify tragedies. The simple, on the other hand, includes too much, for the plays that Aristotle cites under the headings painful and ethical are also simple. The reading *opsis* is paleographically plausible, as Bywater demonstrates,² but it is in meaning the most unsatisfactory emendation of all, for Aristotle considers that a tragedy produces its effect even without

¹ Schrader's *τερατῶδες* is adopted in the Budé text of J. Hardy. Bywater's *ὄψις* appears in his Oxford text and in the Loeb edition of Fyfe. Lane Cooper translates ἡ ἀπλῆ in his interpretation that is now in modified form published as a supplement to *Fifteen Greek Plays* (New York, Oxford U. Pr., 1943). Alfred Gudeman has the same reading in his edition (Berlin and Leipzig, 1934). For a recent discussion of the whole problem and a proposal to regard the fourth class as belonging to the category of thought see Allan H. Gilbert, "Aristotle's Four Species of Tragedy (*Poetics* 18) and Their Importance for Dramatic Criticism," *AJPh* 68 (1947) 363–81.

² In *The Journal of Philology*, 14 (1885) 1–18.

spectacle (6.28: 50B.18). The *Prometheus* when read has no spectacle, but is still effective. How then can the spectacular be considered a significant element in it, especially since the poet himself is not a creator of the spectacle, but leaves that to the property man?

Thus a vacuum is left in the text and to some extent in the interpretation of Aristotle. This is not the first time that I have attempted a solution of the problem, and my second effort is necessarily a recantation of the first.³ I hope that my previous failure, which resulted from the endeavor to apply to this passage principles derived from other parts of the *Poetics*, will not prejudice the candid critic against the present attempt, which derives from a classification of his own tragedies by Sophocles that may have served Aristotle as a point of departure. Sophocles, as quoted by Plutarch in *Moralia* 79B, refers to his earliest poetical activity as playing with Aeschylean *onkos*.⁴ Sophocles then went on to harsh, intricate, and ethical compositions. The question whether Sophocles was referring only to style need not detain us now. Since Aristotle chooses examples of his fourth class from Aeschylus, since he may well be influenced by Sophocles' classification, and since *onkos*, 'majesty,' has the virtue of including any supernatural elements and of being consistent with simplicity and spectacle, it deserves consideration. Let us see whether it passes the paleographical test and also conveys an appropriate meaning.

The paleographical test will not take long. Written in uncials so that K would resemble IC, *onkos* might easily lose its final syllable OC by haplography. The meaningless letters OIK might then be read by another scribe as OHC. The merest displacement of the cross-stroke of gamma is sufficient to effect the transformation. This solution is even better than Bywater's, for he has to suppose that a scribe wrote something unintelligible in place of a not unfamiliar word. Such a mistake is less probable than my supposition that the scribe, intending to write what he saw, omitted a syllable by haplography, and so unintentionally produced a meaningless jumble.

Of course some may prefer *δγκῶδες* or another adjective to *δγκος* in spite of the paleographical probability that favors the noun.

³ See my article "Aristotle and Menander," *TAPhA* 69 (1938) 1-18. Much of my discussion, however, is still valid.

⁴ F. R. Earp suggested that the *Poetics* owes something to Sophocles' *On the Chorus*, in his book *The Style of Sophocles* (Cambridge, 1944) 12 f.

Against this it may be argued that the earlier adjectives describe kinds of tragedy and that by shifting to the neuter Aristotle indicates that he is dealing now with a nondescript group. All tragedies were majestic; most of them had also some distinct form by which they could be classified. The fourth group, however, is largely formless, and has nothing of tragedy but its majesty. The word *onkos*, being ambiguous, may be taken in a depreciative sense, and so Aristotle probably meant it. "The rest is exaltation, inflation, humbug." Aristotle's depreciation of Aeschylus makes us think less of *him*, not of Aeschylus. It is in line with his tendency to discard and belittle the otherworldliness of Plato in his philosophical works.

The meaning of *onkos* is satisfactory in the context. The word has at least three uses: one factual, one laudatory, and one derogatory. It is used in the first place for the actual weight or size of an object, being in this sense a synonym of *baros* or *megethos*. In the second or appreciative sense it is used for impressiveness or majesty in the presentation of something that is grand or weighty in itself. It is a synonym of *σεμνόν*, 'august,' for Aristotle speaks of the heroic meter, that is, dactylic hexameter, both as *σεμνόν* (*Rhet.* 3.8.4: 1408B.32) and as *ὀγκῶδες*, 'weighty' (*Poet.* 24.9: 59B.35). The third sense is frequent in later criticism and is depreciative, meaning turgidity, flamboyance, or tumidity. The author of the treatise *On the Sublime*, whom it is convenient to call Longinus, takes an example of this false sublime from Aeschylus (3.1-4), and objects to it, even though tragedy is a *πρᾶγμα ὀγκηρὸν φύσει*, 'a thing in its nature grandiose.' For the tumid he uses the participle *οἰδοῦν*, 'swollen,' which is the derogatory epithet that Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (940) applies to the art of Aeschylus. In this passage of the *Frogs* Aeschylus points out that grandeur of subject and grandeur of style go together. Just as the heroes of tragedy are decked in grander clothes than ordinary men, so the style of tragedy should be grand. He accuses Euripides of despoiling this grand tradition (*Frogs* 1057-62). Since it is a generally accepted axiom that the style should fit the subject, it follows that *onkos* is a term appropriate to subject matter as well as to style.

It is obvious that Aeschylean *onkos* is being ridiculed and defended throughout the scenes of the *Frogs* (830-1527) in which Aeschylus is present. The *baros*, 'weight' (1367), of the poetry of Aeschylus, which surpasses that of Euripides by the test of the

scales, is synonymous with *onkos*. Note how by using the word *onkos* in *Poetics* 24.4-7: 59B.17-30 Aristotle glides from *μήκος*, *μέγεθος*, 'length, size,' to *μεγαλοπρέπεια* 'magnificence.' Aeschylus was the inventor of grandeur and majesty in tragedy according to the *Frogs* (1004 f.); in the *Poetics* (4.17: 49A.19-21) we are told that from slight stories and comic diction tragedy rose only tardily to majesty (*ἀπεσεμνύθη*). Aristotle includes *megethos* in his definition of tragedy (6.2: 49B.25). Hence I suggest that majesty is a positive quality that belongs to tragedy, according to Aristotle, even when its scene is pitched among gods or monsters or the denizens of Hades. Thus Aeschylean tragedy falls into the class of the grandiose whether we admire or deplore grandiosity. The mood of Aeschylus is one of exaltation, and he exalts many themes by his poetic gift. He is generally appreciated by modern critics more than by ancient, for Christianity has taken seriously the wonders of heaven and hell, and we are now less strict in demanding realism of our poets.

I suggest that Aristotle included in the denotation of *onkos* not only grandeur of subject and style but the miraculous that he deprecates as an element in tragedy. Note that the rhetorician (not Aristotle) whom Cicero translated in the *Topica* (10.45) considered the miraculous or impossible as a means of amplification: In hoc genere oratoribus et philosophis concessum est ut muta etiam loquantur, ut mortui ab inferis excitentur, ut aliquid quod fieri nullo modo possit augendae rei gratia dicatur aut minuendae, multa alia mirabilia. Aeschylus was the poet of exaltation, intoxication, and frenzy *par excellence*. The chorus of the *Frogs* (1005) credit him with starting *τραγικὸν λῆρον*, 'the delirium of tragedy.' His unearthly scenes were no doubt a part of his frenzy. Hence we need not be surprised to find Aristotle packing the residue of tragedies that are neither painful nor ethical, because they are too far from human experience, into the category of majesty or exaltation, *onkos*.

When Aristotle goes on to say⁵ that all effects of tragedy should, if possible, be included in every tragedy, he means that recognition and reversal should be got in as most important, then *pathos* and *êthos* and *onkos* in that order, as far as possible. It is clear that the elements of suffering and moral responsibility are found to some

⁵ *Poetics* 18.9: 56A.3 f.: *μάλιστα μὲν οὖν ἅπαντα δεῖ πειρᾶσθαι ἔχειν, εἰ δὲ μή, τὰ μέγιστα καὶ πλείστα.*

extent even in the *Prometheus*. No doubt there is in *Iliad* 6 a scene that belongs to the moral rather than the tragic pattern of the *Iliad*⁶ though the *Iliad* as a whole is tragic; in the *Iliad* human ideals both transcend the limits of ordinary life and are frustrated. The element of the supernatural is also frequent in the *Iliad*, so that it lacks neither *onkos* nor *êthos*. In the *Odyssey* there is some suffering and there are supernatural scenes in Hades, as well as monsters on earth, but the general pattern of familiar characters behaving well in ordinary relationships and winning ultimate success is always clear; hence the story deserves to be classed as ethical as well as complex. In Sophocles' *Electra* the suffering of Electra is tragic, though the victory of the virtuous Orestes is ethical in effect. Like most ethical tragedies the *Electra* is complex, since the good characters pass from misery to happiness. Chrysothemis presumably introduces an element of *êthos*; she has honesty and charm and requires to be rescued as much as her sister. In the tragic *Ajax*, Athena introduces an element of *onkos*, while Tecmessa is all *êthos*. Whether Aristotle would agree with precisely these examples or not, it is clear that he must have had in mind some such analysis of the mixed effects in drama.

The element of *êthos* may be thought to require further definition. I believe that in this connection the word is used in a way that seems complicated to us but was obvious to the Greeks because they habitually associated in one picture the usual, the right, the desirable, and that at whose success any civilized person must rejoice. For them the study of civilized living included morals, and that again included psychology, so that personality and gracious living are included in a single pattern. In a tragic play we find ourselves outside this pattern. In a complex play we either start or end with it, according to the tragic or untragic ending of the complex plot. The yearning for home and dear ones is strong in the *Odyssey*, and the gratification of that yearning at the end is part of the ethical plot, for that in Aristotle's opinion belongs to comedy; and plays with happy endings, no matter how seriously they are designed, are still in our day classed as comedies.

Aristotle is, however, in this chapter not defining tragedy but distributing in groups the actual dramas that the Greeks called tragedy. He has to find a place for the small residue of plays that

⁶ See my article "The Moral Pattern in Homer," *TAPhA* 70 (1939) 158-90.

are neither complex nor simply tragic. He does speak of kinds (*εἶδη*), to be sure, but he argues that there must be kinds since there are groups (*μέρη*). Plato had laid down the law that analysis into kinds should be tested by seeing whether actual specimens when distributed fall into corresponding groups (*Politicus* 262B, 263B). The distinction between kinds or species and groups may not recommend itself to modern logicians, but it is clear from the discussion in Cicero's *Topica* 7.30–8.34 that it was considered important by ancient experts on classification: *Formas qui putat idem esse quod partes, confundit artem*. . . . Hence the use of two words, *divisio* and *partitio*, the first referring to classification in a case where there is a logical limit to the number of kinds, the second referring to a distribution into groups when there is no logical limit to possible groups. Classification is always likely to be upset by the appearance of new specimens. Hence I do not withdraw my former interpretation⁷ of *Poetics* 18.4: 55B.33 and my proposal to punctuate with a stop after *μέρη*.

Neither am I prepared to withdraw my interpretation of *êthos* as a formal element affecting the audience pleasurably and comfortably in untragic plays. In a recent article⁸ W. J. Verdenius, after a discussion of opposing views, including mine, comes to the conclusion that "the *ἡθικὴ* is a work in which the *ἡθη*, the inner tendencies of the performing characters, are prominent." This is as much as to say that a play with psychological interest is ethical in Aristotle's sense. Of course Aristotle has no other name than *êthos* for psychology in drama, but before we acquiesce in a conclusion that sheds no light whatsoever, we should consider that *êthos* has also a dozen other uses in ethics, rhetoric, and literary criticism. Let me list the thirteen: 1. Customary life. 2. Moral standards. 3. Moral and immoral behavior, i.e. morals. 4. Moral qualities abstractly considered, i.e. virtues. 5. Moral and immoral qualities. 6. Characteristics of persons. 7. Character drawing. 8. Psychological analysis in art. 9. Total personality of an individual. 10. Character or person in a work of fiction. 11. Intimate and favorable portrayal of a character to create a sympathetic attitude on the part of the audience apart from any suffering on his part; this is what *êthos* means in rhetoric as a rule. Where

⁷ See above, note 3.

⁸ "The meaning of *ἡθος* and *ἡθικός* in Aristotle's *Poetics*," *Mnemosyne*, Third Series, 12 (1945) 241–57.

there has been suffering, *pathos* is the effect that the orator should aim at, strong emotion. 12. Passages in a speech or drama that are characterized by rhetorical *êthos*. 13. Passages in which a character shows his quality by his policy or decisions (*Poetics* 6.24: 50B.8).

Where there are so many possibilities in one word, the only safe method is to study Aristotle's examples and see how his example of *êthos*, the *Odyssey*, differs from his examples of *pathos* including the *Iliad*. Now as far as psychology and character are concerned, Homer has made Achilles more interesting than Odysseus. The point to be observed, however, is that Achilles is destructive, while Odysseus is constructive. Passions disrupt life while tender feelings hold families, cities, and civilizations together. In the *Odyssey* we have homely people in homely settings. Their loyalty, charm, and success have an effect that is uplifting and produces a glow of good feeling for everyone but the suitors, monsters, and nymphs, who are slaughtered or disappointed without mercy. This general good feeling, which embraces socially desirable characters and eliminates others without regret, is, I do not doubt, what Aristotle means by philanthropy, friendly feeling. The philanthropic in later Greek is hardly more than the comfortable. The ethical plot is comforting to the audience and makes them better satisfied with and stronger supporters of ordinary life. There is no painful alloy in the pleasure that it brings.⁹ If scenes of suffering and death are, as Verdenius agrees, included in *pathos*, what does that leave for *êthos*? Obviously only such scenes as have no threat of suffering or death and only such dramas as show salvation from threatened death or suffering or from real suffering. What are we to do with plays that end happily, if we are not to class them as ethical? Aristotle provides no other category that will accept them.

The happy ending gives pleasure to the audience, and Longinus (29.2) couples sublimity with *pathos*, pleasure with *êthos*. Tragedy is sublime, but its view includes much that is painful. It produces of course a peculiar pleasure of its own, as Aristotle says (14.4: 53B.11), as it separates our thoughts from emotional attachment to

⁹ Ancient philanthropy might include mercy to criminals if they were repentant, but offenders like the suitors of the *Odyssey* are not intended to be pitied, as they receive no mercy. Ancient philanthropy selected its objects with some care. Compare Tromp de Ruiter in *Mnemosyne* 59 (1931) 284: *Philanthropia antiqua pertinebat ad meros cognatos, familiares, amicos, cives, necdum erat benevolentia erga omnes homines promiscua.*

life, but the pleasure of mental catharsis is totally different from the emotional satisfaction with domestic and social life that comes when we see the brighter side of life in an "uplifting" play. I have in mind as modern illustrations such plays as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Eugene O'Neill's *Ah! Wilderness*. These express modern American *ethos* rather than ancient Greek, but the effect is the same. They comfort and bind the individual, if he likes them, to his own familiar world and to his intimates in that world.

Thus we have arrived at a reconstruction, plausible if not certain, of Aristotle's scale of dramatic effects. Arranging it in the reverse order and beginning chronologically at the bottom of the ladder we have: 1. Exaltation of a theme by supernatural trappings. 2. Appreciation of the familiar, civilized, and comforting. 3. Pity and terror induced by the sight of heroic suffering or death. 4. The mingled surprise, satisfaction, and reflection that are produced when a sudden discovery or reversal upsets human calculations and reveals the working of unnoticed causes in a probable course of events. Such a complex plot enhances the tragic or ethical effect. It is the only plot that can properly be classed as more philosophical than history, for in other types of plot there is no secret connection of events to set the detached observer reflecting. In other kinds of drama passions spin the plot; in this, events have a twist of their own that produces an ironical view of life as a web of circumstance. In simple plays there is a design woven of human character and emotion; in the complex play there is a real plot introduced by the author to surprise characters and audience alike. It is at the opposite pole to psychological interest. But of course Aristotle wanted both and more besides, if possible. It should be noted that, as we get away from the complex plot, the effects of *pathos*, *ethos*, and *onkos* depend more and more on the medium and embellishments of the drama—diction, music, and spectacle. Conversely the plot becomes more important as the effect becomes more intricate. Aristotle liked a drama that had an organic life of its own independent of the psychology of any one character. In this respect there will be few to agree with him now, for we are more interested in personality and moral problems than in any ingenious arrangement of events to produce an artificial philosophy. We are as suspicious of coincidence as Aristotle was of the intervention of gods in the action (15.10B-D; 54A.37-B.8). It is only an occasional writer like Lord Dunsany who can still entertain us by introducing gods

or ghosts into his plot. Thus *onkos* has fallen into desuetude since the days of Dante, Milton, and Goethe. They, however, still help us to understand the *onkos* of Aeschylus and to value it in spite of its rejection by Sophocles and Aristotle.

The question now arises whether, since Sophocles has thrown light on Aristotle, we may venture to reverse the process and interpret Plutarch's quotation from Sophocles in the light of Aristotle. It is not merely in the case of Aeschylean *onkos* that we have a parallel between the two. Sophocles' statement that the most ethical is the best may well have been in the back of Aristotle's mind when he asserted that the tragic outcome is the best (13.1-13: 52B.28-53A.39). To be sure, we cannot find a close connection between the development of Sophocles and the classification of Aristotle unless we assume that Plutarch's quotation is somewhat garbled, but I believe that examination will show that the text is probably corrupt and that Plutarch in any case is wresting the scripture of Sophocles for his own purpose.¹⁰ Here is what he says:

ὥσπερ γὰρ ὁ Σοφοκλῆς ἔλεγε τὸν Αἰσχύλου διαπεπαιχῶς ὄγκον, εἴτα τὸ πικρὸν καὶ κατὰ τεχνον τῆς αὐτοῦ κατασκευῆς, τρίτον ἤδη τὸ τῆς λέξεως μεταβάλλειν εἶδος, ὅπερ ἡθικώτατόν ἐστι καὶ βέλτιστον, οὕτως οἱ φιλοσοφούντες, ὅταν ἐκ τῶν πανηγυρικῶν καὶ κατὰ τεχνῶν εἰς τὸν ἀπτόμενον ἦθους καὶ πάθους λόγον μεταβῶσιν, ἀρχονται τὴν ἀληθῆ προκοπὴν προκόπτειν καὶ ἄτυφον.

'For as Sophocles said that, having played enough with the majesty of Aeschylus, then with the harshness and artifice of his own style of composition, he was now in the third place making a shift to the [kind of diction], which is the most ethical and best, just so, when students of philosophy pass from the ostentatious and artificial to the kind of discourse that involves ethical or tragic emotion, they begin to make real and uninflated progress.'

It should be noted that we have no reason to assume that Plutarch is repeating the exact words of Sophocles. In any case there are three stages in Sophocles and only two in Plutarch. He couples the artificial with the ostentatious, and seems to include the harsh with the ethical by equating harshness and *pathos* or tragic emotion. Thus the middle stage of Sophocles disappears

¹⁰ C. M. Bowra has carefully examined the language of this passage: "Sophocles on His Own Development," *AJPh* 61 (1940) 385-401. T. B. L. Webster (*An Introduction to Sophocles* [Oxford, 1936]), like Earp (above, note 4), attributes the quotation in Plutarch to a written work of Sophocles, *On the Chorus*. Bowra thinks that the language of the quotation may be Sophoclean as it stands.

in Plutarch. Note that Plutarch is discussing not style but the expression of feeling in rhetoric. In rhetoric *lexis* is the natural word for style, but Sophocles himself may well have used *poiêsis*, which would refer to construction as well as style in poetical composition. It seems to me even more likely that he would have named the style that is most ethical and best. Since he was shifting from the harsh, we should expect him to be shifting to the pleasant. It is possible, indeed probable, that the words 'kind of diction' are a marginal gloss that has displaced the word for 'pleasant.' Hence I suggest that Sophocles and perhaps Plutarch originally wrote something like *εἰς τρίτον ἔτι τὸ ἡδὺ μεταβάλλειν*. This would be more natural and logical than what is in the text, and it would be in line with the development that we find in Aristotle, but of course I suggest this only as one possibility among many.

At any rate we are not barred from speculating on the possibility that Sophocles was referring to three kinds of plot, and that his three kinds were recast as four by Aristotle, who differed from Sophocles in his view of the best kind of tragedy. We know that in early plays like the *Triptolemus* Sophocles used the supernatural to exalt the ritual and tradition of Athens. In the *Ajax* he was harsh and tragic, while ingenuity and artifice increase together with harshness in *Antigone*, *Trachiniae*, and *Oedipus Rex*. In the later plays the ending is pleasant. Whether Sophocles had written them when he made the quoted remark or not, they well illustrate his third stage. Presumably he shifted to the pleasant not once for all but occasionally, and it may be an accident that no extant play of his later than *Oedipus Rex* ends tragically. Aristotle manages to get the *Electra* into his preferred group by putting all complex plays into it regardless of the ending. He evidently took Sophocles as a model for drama; it would not be surprising if he also modeled his classification of tragedies on Sophocles.