

**The Department of English**

**Raja N. L. Khan Women's College (Autonomous)**

**Midnapore, West Bengal**

**Study Material--1**

**On**

**The Background of Classical Literature**

**(Catharsis)**

**For**

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### ❖ Catharsis:

Catharsis refers to the purification or purgation of emotions like pity and fear through art. Aristotle in his *Poetics* brings out the concept of catharsis while defining tragedy. But Aristotle's catharsis in Greek "signifies 'purgation', or 'purification', or both—is much disputed" (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, P. 408). The critics agree in one point. After watching tragic representations of suffering and defeat, the audience sometimes feel relieved, not depressed. Aristotle uses this effect on the readers, which he calls the pleasure of pity and fear and this is the fundamental way to differentiate the tragic form of representations from the comic and other forms. Let us have a look at the definition of tragedy given by Aristotle:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions. (*The Art of Poetry*, P. 35)

For Aristotle, the dramatist's principle aim is to produce this effect in the minds of the audiences in the highest degree and that will help in determining the moral qualities of the protagonist and the plot of the tragic representation.

Aristotle's use of the term 'catharsis' is purely based on medical sense; it's a medical metaphor. The concept can be compared to the evacuation of the *katamenia*—the menstrual fluid or other reproductive material. Again, critics like F. L. Lucas opposes the usage of words like *purification* and *cleansing* to interpret *catharsis*; he is in favour of using the term *purgation* as the probable translation of catharsis as the human souls are purged of extreme passions. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, German writer, philosopher, art critic, deftly avoids the medical attribution. He thinks of the real life of human beings and interprets catharsis as the purification that helps in bringing out proper balance to pity and fear. Tragedy helps in correction of emotions. After watching a tragic representation, the audience will learn to correct their emotions.

So, 'purgation' or 'purification'—these two have remained the probable interpretations of catharsis over the years. It's an intense emotional effect that the tragedy produces in the minds of the audience. The audience can feel the emotions of pity and fear at the end of the tragedy as they can relate the protagonist's fate to their own.

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## V. Catharsis

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We have grown used to feeling—again vaguely—that serious literature is hardly respectable unless it performs some ‘catharsis.’ ‘Catharsis’ has come, for reasons that are not entirely clear, to be one of the biggest of the ‘big’ ideas in the field of aesthetics and criticism, the Mt. Everest or Kilimanjaro that looms on all literary horizons. But all this may be nothing but a self-propagating mirage. Aristotle does not *tell* us that catharsis is so important, that it is the ‘biggest’ idea about tragedy. If it were, we should expect it to be at least mentioned again by name somewhere in the discussion of tragedy. As it is, pity and fear are mentioned repeatedly, and the tragic pleasure three times; catharsis never appears again, by name, after its sudden appearance in chapter 6.<sup>1</sup>

Thus skillfully and boldly Professor Else challenges the traditional position which the term “catharsis” has held in the history of literary criticism. His perceptive remarks compel us to refocus our attention on this critical term in Aristotle’s definition of tragedy.

As Professor Else points out in his analysis, catharsis as one of the “big” ideas in literary criticism has been interpreted in two major ways. The term has been taken to mean either the “purgation” of the emotions of pity and fear from the consciousness of the audience that witnesses the tragedy or as the “purification” in a moral or ethical sense of these emotions.<sup>2</sup> Else shows that both of these views have no basis in the text of the

<sup>1</sup> G. F. Else, *Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge [Mass] 1957) 443–44.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed survey and evaluation of the various interpretations of catharsis that have been advanced previously by scholars see Else (above, note 1) 225–32, 439–43. Else refers to two works by Heinrich Otte in which are found perceptive discussions of the catharsis question. They are *Kennt Aristoteles die sogenannte tragische Katharsis?* (Berlin 1912) 45–63 and *Neue Beiträge zur Aristotelischen Begriffsbestimmung der Tragödie* (Berlin 1928) 62–78. In pages 64–67 of the latter work evidence for various Platonic interpretations of catharsis is cited. Several of these Platonic usages lend support to the interpretation of catharsis that is presented in this paper.

*Poetics*, but are derived from the use of catharsis in other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts. Else, intelligently insisting that the *Poetics* should first and foremost be interpreted out of itself, advances the following new interpretation of catharsis:

Thus the catharsis is not a change or end-product in the spectator's soul, or in the fear and pity (i.e., the dispositions to them) in his soul, but a process carried forward in the emotional material of the play by its structural elements, above all by the recognition. For the recognition is the pay-off, to use a vulgar but expressive modernism; or, in more conventional figure, it is the hinge on which the emotional structure of the play turns. The catharsis, that is, the purification of the tragic act by the demonstration that its motive was not *μιαρόν*, is accomplished by the whole structure of the drama, but above all by the recognition.<sup>3</sup>

Else, then, makes catharsis an "operational factor within the tragic structure" rather than the "be-all and end-all of tragedy itself."

We now have three major interpretations of catharsis: "purgation" of emotions;<sup>4</sup> "purification" of emotions; and that process by which the criminal and sinful acts committed by the tragic hero are shown to be pure of guilt, and which thus establishes the conditions under which the emotion of pity may be shown the hero. However, if the term is taken in this last sense, then it also, as Else notes in the case of the interpretations of "purgation" and "purification," would not have been prepared for by the previous development of the argument in the *Poetics*. It is the thesis of this paper that another interpretation of catharsis is possible which will bring it organically into connection with the argument of the *Poetics* that leads up to the use of the term in chapter 6 and will place it in a more effective and intimate relationship with other statements in the *Poetics*.

In our analysis we shall follow Else's sound principle that the *Poetics* should be interpreted out of the *Poetics*, for he has cogently shown the difficulties that arise when we rely on external sources for an interpretation of this term.<sup>5</sup> However, in following the

<sup>3</sup> Else (above, note 1) 439.

<sup>4</sup> The current influence of the "purgation" theory of catharsis may be seen in the papers of Mr. A. M. Quinton and Miss R. Meager in *The Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 34 (1960) 156, 177.

<sup>5</sup> Else (above, note 1) 440-41.

spirit of this requirement, an interpretation of catharsis will be offered in this paper which differs radically both from Else's view and the traditional interpretations of this term.

As Else points out, all of the elements of the formal definition of tragedy which Aristotle gives in chapter 6 have been treated or hinted at previously in the *Poetics*.<sup>6</sup> This is true because all of the elements of the definition which lead up to the final catharsis clause are concerned with what has traditionally been translated as the "object" (*ἔτραρα*), "manner" (*ἑτέρωσ*), and "means" (*ἑτέροις*) of imitation; and these three factors have been discussed in detail in chapters 1–5. Now the catharsis clause comes at the end of the definition, forms its climax, and is clearly distinguished from the discussion of the object, manner and means of imitation. Thus its most logical function in the definition is to indicate some end, purpose or goal of the particular form of imitation which we call "tragedy."<sup>7</sup>

If the catharsis clause indicates, in some sense, the "final cause" of tragedy, we may well make the attempt to determine whether or not elsewhere in the *Poetics* such a final cause is discussed or suggested and then, if this turns out to be the case, to see if it can be brought into harmony with the term "catharsis."

In chapter 1 Aristotle tells us that all poetry is a form of imitation. In chapter 4 he notes that the origin of poetry as well as the reason that mankind values it lies in its character as imitation. For imitation, he indicates, is the way men most naturally learn and learning is naturally pleasant to all men. Aristotle tells us in chapter 4 exactly what this learning consists in: *διὰ γὰρ τοῦτο χαίρουσι τὰς εἰκόνας ὁρῶντες, ὅτι συμβαίνει θεωροῦντας μαθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, ὡς ὅτι οὗτος ἐκείνος*. The act of learning which Aristotle refers to can be most clearly understood to mean the act of inferring, from the particular act witnessed in the artistic presentation, the universal class to which

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this point see Else (above, note 1) 224.

<sup>7</sup> Else (above, note 1) 439–40 is strongly opposed to taking catharsis as the end or goal of tragedy. He says, "Bernays' own explanation, for all the revolution it brought in the assessment of Aristotle's doctrine as a whole, was at one with the rest in assuming that catharsis is the 'work' or end, the *τέλος* of tragedy. But Aristotle nowhere says or implies this, even in the definition in chapter 6. He speaks repeatedly of the need for tragedy to arouse pity and fear, and he alludes three times (14. 53b12; 23. 59a21; 26. 62b14) to the special pleasure it is to give; but nowhere is catharsis said or implied to be the *τέλος*." My reasons for taking a contrary view are presented in the text.

this act belongs.<sup>8</sup> The artist so organizes his work that the spectator is able to infer, from the individual circumstances pictured before him, the universal law which subsumes them. This movement from the particular to the universal involves a learning process in that it renders clearer and more distinct the significance of the events presented in the work of art. For this reason, Aristotle tells us in chapter 4, men take pleasure even in witnessing the representation of unpleasant things such as the forms of the lowest animals and of corpses (we may add also the unpleasant events portrayed in tragedy), since learning and the consequent pleasure of learning occur under these circumstances also. Thus learning is the essential goal of poetry in general. This learning process takes place, we may repeat, when those who view the artistic presentation perceive *ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*. This definition of the nature of poetry is extended further in chapter 9 where Aristotle tells us that:

*φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποιήσις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποιήσις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ' ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει. ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἶκός ἢ το ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἡ ποιήσις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη.*

Here we have an explicit statement that the nature of the learning process involved in poetry is that of seeing the relationship between the individual act and the universal law it illustrates. It is clearly indicated that the aim of poetry is to express what is universal in the form of particular or "historical" events. This process of observing or inferring the universal character implied in the individual is the process of learning and is by nature a source of pleasure to mankind. Now in chapter 14 Aristotle tells us that we must not expect every kind of pleasure from tragedy but only that which is appropriate for it:

*οὐ γὰρ πᾶσαν δεῖ ζητεῖν ἡδονὴν ἀπὸ τραγωδίας ἀλλὰ τὴν οἰκείαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν ἀπὸ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως δεῖ ἡδονὴν παρασκευάζειν τὸν ποιητὴν, φανερόν ὡς τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς πράγμασι ἐμποιητέον.*

However, we already know from chapter 4 that the pleasure of poetry in general consists of learning, that is, of proceeding from the particular to the universal. Thus the pleasure of tragedy as a

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Aristotle's conception of learning see Else (above, note 1) 131-32.

species of poetry must also consist of learning. Tragedy, however, as a division of poetry is defined by Aristotle in both chapters 6 and 14 as concerned, specifically and appropriately, with the pleasure derived from pity and fear. Since tragedy as a species of poetry must involve learning<sup>9</sup> and since, according to Aristotle, it is specifically concerned with pitiful and fearful situations, we must assume that tragedy in some way involves learning about pity and fear. Since learning for Aristotle means proceeding from the particular to the universal, we must also assume that tragedy consists of the artistic representation of particular pitiful and fearful events in such a way that we are led to see the universal laws that make these particular events meaningful. This learning process by which we become aware of the universal law governing the particular pitiful and fearful events that have been presented is, then, the goal and end of tragedy as we can discover it in other sections of the *Poetics* that relate to the formal definition of tragedy given in chapter 6. We must now see how this end or goal relates to the end or goal set for tragedy in this formal definition which we recall is δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. If either of the traditional views or Else's view of catharsis is accepted, then there is no relation between these two statements of end or goal in the *Poetics*, and the term "catharsis" has not been articulated with the arguments which precede and follow the formal definition of tragedy in chapter 6. The following interpretation of catharsis is presented as one which would organically unite it with the general argument of the *Poetics*.

κάθαρσις, like other nouns in Greek ending in -σις, signifies an activity and means the process of making something καθαρός. The word κάθαρσις itself is not a very common one and is used in a number of unique senses in the extant literature, ranging from the medical use of the term to denote a physical purgation to Socrates' use of the word to describe the separation of the soul from the body.<sup>10</sup> The previous interpreters of catharsis have

<sup>9</sup> Else (above, note 1) 447-50 recognizes that the pleasure of tragedy "is basically intellectual," but he also sees an emotional basis for it as well. My interpretation of catharsis stresses the intellectual aspect of tragic pleasure as primary and any other associated pleasures as secondary.

<sup>10</sup> On this latter usage see H. Skulsky, "Aristotle's *Poetics* Revisited," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958) 147-60. He argues that Aristotle uses catharsis in the

limited themselves to two major meanings of the word *καθαρός* in defining the term either as the process of purification or that of purgation. However, there is another meaning of *καθαρός*, associated specifically with its adverbial form *καθαρῶς*, which does not seem to have been investigated in this context but which I would like to suggest is relevant to our understanding of the meaning of the term “catharsis.” *LSJ* list under the heading of *καθαρός* a number of uses which are to be translated in the physical sense of “clean” or “clear.” From the notion of a landscape being clear of obstruction or of a liquid being clear of admixture or something being free of dirt and thus “clean” it is easy to see how the metaphorical uses of the word to denote purification or purgation could be derived. *LSJ*, however, also list some significant uses of the term *καθαρός* in its adverbial form *καθαρῶς* which mean “clear” not in a physical sense or in any of the derived metaphorical senses that have been mentioned above, but “clear” in the intellectual sense. The following quotations are cited as evidence for this point:

εἰ μέλλομέν ποτε καθαρῶς τι εἴσεσθαι . . .

εἰ γὰρ μὴ οἶόν τε μετὰ τοῦ σώματος μηδὲν καθαρῶς γνῶναι . . .

(Plato, *Phaedo* 66D, E)

μηδὲ τὴν λέξιν ἐπαινεῖν ὡς ἀκριβῶς καὶ καθαρῶς ἔχουσαν . . .

(Isocrates, *Philipp* 4)

οὐπώποθ' οὕτω καθαρῶς

οὐδενὸς ἠκούσαμεν . . .

same sense in which Plato used the term in the *Phaedo* and interprets it to mean a “supremely pleasant intuitive perception” or an “untainted perception.” Now Plato defines catharsis in the *Phaedo* by having Socrates ask, *κάθαρσις δὲ εἶναι ἄρα οὐ τοῦτο συμβαίνει, ὅπερ πάσαι ἐν τῷ λόγῳ λέγεται, τὸ χωρίζειν ὅτι μάλιστα ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ ἐθίσει αὐτὴν καθ' αὐτὴν πανταχόθεν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος συναγείρεσθαι τε καὶ ἀθροίζεσθαι, καὶ οἰκεῖν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν παρόντι καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔπειτα μόνῃ καθ' αὐτὴν, ἐκλυομένην ὥσπερ ἐκ δεσμῶν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος;* (67C, D) Catharsis, here, is clearly a purification process by which the soul is freed of the admixture of the body and thus becomes able to contemplate clearly. This process as described in the *Phaedo* is a difficult one, and its pursuit lies specifically in the province of the true philosopher. Catharsis, however, for Aristotle, in whatever way we ultimately interpret it, is an integral part of tragedy; and tragedy is, of course, a branch of poetry. Now poetry is a form of imitation; and imitation, Aristotle tells us, is natural and pleasant to all men and not only to philosophers (1448B, 12–15). Therefore it does not seem possible for catharsis to mean the same thing in the *Poetics* as it does in *Phaedo* 67. It will be argued in this paper that catharsis is a far more commonplace activity than that described by Plato in the terms quoted above.

ὡς ὑπὸ τοῦ μὴ γνῶναι καθαρῶς ὑμεῖς ἐποιήσατ' ἀναλδεῖς.  
(Aristophanes, *Wasps* 631–32, 1045)

τὰ μὲν ἀγγέλλεις δείματ' ἀκούειν,  
τὰ δὲ θαρσύνεις, κούδὲν καθαρῶς.  
(Euripides, *Rhesus* 34–35)

In these references we see that the adverb *καθαρῶς* consistently bears an intellectual sense, and this meaning of the word is as easily derived and is as fully justified as the others which have been discussed above. Thus it becomes possible to translate *κάθαρσις*, on the basis of this evidence, as the act of “making clear” or the process of “clarification” by means of which something that is intellectually obscure is made clear to an observer. Indeed Butcher translates the term “catharsis” at one point in his analysis as the process of “clarifying,” but he uses the word only as a synonym for purification or refinement and does not understand it in an intellectual sense.<sup>11</sup> I would like to suggest further that Aristotle has told us exactly what he means by the process of “clarification” when he says in chapter 4 that the pleasure we find in poetry derives from the spectator’s ability *μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκείνος*, and when he states in chapter 9 that *τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἄττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἢ ποιήσις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη*. The process of inference described by Aristotle “clarifies” the nature of the individual act by providing, through the medium of art, the means of ascending from the particular event witnessed to an understanding of its universal nature, and thus it permits us to understand the individual act more clearly and distinctly. This appears to be exactly what Aristotle has in mind by the process he describes as *μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκείνος*.

<sup>11</sup> S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York 1951) 240–73. On this point see especially Butcher’s remarks on 255 and 267. It must be admitted here that all of the uses of *καθαρῶς* that are cited above can be interpreted with reference to the word’s root meanings of “pure” or “clean.” However, in every case the purity involved must be discriminated by the intellect; and this, I argue, is ample justification for interpreting the term “catharsis” as an intellectual activity. I would, of course, agree with the anonymous referee of this paper who indicated that what we should really like to have here is an example of this special sense of catharsis in Aristotle’s own usage. In the absence of such evidence, the answer to the riddle of catharsis must be pursued on the basis of probability and internal consistency.

Thus in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the particular facts relate to the personal story of Oedipus' attempt to escape the fate destined for him and his involvement in a series of events which force him to commit the very acts he has sought to escape. These particular pitiful and fearful events have been so skillfully arranged and presented by the poet that we are led to see that there lies behind them a universal condition of human existence that is responsible for these particular pitiful and fearful events. This universal condition is the fundamental limitation of the human intellect in dealing with the unfathomable mystery that surrounds divine purpose. The particular events which happened to Oedipus, pitiful and fearful in their character, and the emotions we feel in response to them are related by the skill of the poet in constructing his plot and defining his characters to their source in this universal cause of pity and fear in human existence. By seeing that the particular events which have befallen Oedipus can be understood as an individual manifestation of this universal condition, we come to understand more clearly and distinctly the nature of these events, i.e. we come to see *ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*. Through this process of perceiving that the source of the particular pitiful and fearful events of the play is a universal condition of existence, our understanding of the nature of pity and fear, as they relate to the human situation, has been "clarified."

We must now see how this interpretation of catharsis fits into the complete structure of the *Poetics*. If catharsis is understood as "clarification" in the intellectual sense of the word, then the final clause of the definition of tragedy in chapter 6 may be translated as, "achieving, through the representation of pitiful and fearful situations, the clarification of such incidents."<sup>12</sup>

If catharsis is interpreted in this way, then it would fulfill the important requirement which Else set forth that the terms of the *Poetics* should be interpreted out of the *Poetics*, for then catharsis would become nothing more, but nothing less, than a synonym for the process of inference which Aristotle described in chapter 4 as *μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*. The inference *ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος* is the act of clarification or the

<sup>12</sup> My justification for adding the term "representation" to this definition is taken from Aristotle's statement in chapter 14 that the poet should seek to produce pleasure *ἀπὸ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως*. For arguments supporting the translation of *δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου* as "pitiful and fearful situations" and *παθημάτων* as "incidents" see Else's sound and perceptive analysis, (above, note 1) 228–29 and 231, note 36.

“catharsis.” Such an interpretation of catharsis would have the advantage of being derived directly from Aristotle’s previous argument and thus would justify Aristotle’s statement in chapter 6 that his definition comes *ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων*. Furthermore, this interpretation would also unite the term “catharsis” organically with the statements made by Aristotle in chapter 9 about the universality of poetry and in chapter 14 concerning the nature of the particular pleasure found in tragedy.

If this view of catharsis is accepted, then we may well ask what is to be done with the traditional interpretations which have had such an important place in critical literature and have in many cases been used with success as interpretative instruments. It is not possible to deny that at the end of any tragedy the emotions that have been aroused are relieved; whether they have been “purified” in any moral sense is a more difficult question to settle. However, when we look at the whole realm of art we see that the emotions engendered by the work of art, whether they be those of pity and fear, or joy and exultation, are all “relieved” when the stimulus of the work of art is removed. This results not from the form of any particular art but from the essential character of art itself which is, as Aristotle perceptively tells us, the imitation of nature. We can see that it is art *qua* imitation of nature that insures this relief of emotion, for we know that in nature itself the emotions and their relief would take a very different course than they do when presented on the printed page or in the theater. We have argued, however, that this relief of emotions has nothing to do with the term “catharsis” that is introduced by Aristotle in the formal definition of tragedy in chapter 6 of the *Poetics*.

The history of attempts to explain and define catharsis is a long and tangled one, and any new interpretation must be viewed critically. In favor of the interpretation that I have presented in this paper, I have argued that, under it, catharsis becomes a far more meaningful part of Aristotle’s complete analysis of poetry than when it is understood in any of the principal senses that have been accepted up to now. Moreover, this interpretation of catharsis takes on added significance when considered in connection with the Platonic view of art which must have loomed large in Aristotle’s mind as he formulated his theory of poetry. In Book 10 of the *Republic* Plato charges that poetry is a distant

imitation of reality which hinders rather than aids the pursuit of truth. Under the interpretation I have presented, Aristotle counters this argument by claiming that the function of art is to bring about a clarification of reality. Thus art becomes a significant and respectable domain of philosophy. In addition, this interpretation of catharsis is consistent with Aristotle's regular procedure in attaching the highest significance to the intellectual value of any concept or activity.<sup>13</sup> Thus he defines god as νοῦ ἐνέργεια;<sup>14</sup> he indicates that a central argument in rhetoric is a form of syllogism, the enthymeme;<sup>15</sup> he argues that the highest virtue is wisdom;<sup>16</sup> he declares that the best life is the contemplative.<sup>17</sup> Because Aristotle holds the above views, I maintain that it is very appropriate for him to have conceived of catharsis as an intellectual climax to the artistic process. However, the most important argument in favor of this interpretation is that it conforms to a reality we all recognize. For what is the essential and most profound achievement of art if not the illumination of human experience?

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Benedict Einarson for a number of suggestions and specifically for calling my attention to examples of Aristotle's practice of emphasizing the intellectual aspect of any concept or activity. This does not imply that he accepts the conclusions drawn in this paper, which remain, of course, my sole responsibility.

<sup>14</sup> *Met.* 1072b, 25–29.

<sup>15</sup> *Rhet.* 1356a, 35 ff., 1393a, 23 ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 1141a, 9–17, 1145a, 2–11.

<sup>17</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 1177a, 12 ff.



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The Process of Aristotelian Catharsis: A Reidentification

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NOREEN W. KRUSE

## The Process of Aristotelian Catharsis: A Reidentification

Aristotle's *Poetics* has long been recognized by scholars and critics as a valuable instrument in both the analysis and the production of drama. Many believe that far from being an outdated, impractical theory, the *Poetics* is still viable,<sup>1</sup> and modern theorists have used Aristotelian concepts, to some degree, in formulating their own ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-four centuries after their inception, Aristotle's principles can still serve as the bases for the establishment of generic criteria which assist in both the identification and the production of tragic drama, the formulation of analytical instruments which will help us understand individual tragedies, and the foundation of theoretical propositions which relate to the corpus of serious dramas. However, if Aristotle is to be utilized to our advantage in these tasks, we must not ignore the finer points in his

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<sup>1</sup> Among others who indicate Aristotle's *Poetics* is viable today see John Gassner, "Aristotelian Literary Criticism," in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art: With a Critical Text and Translation of the Poetics*, trans., and comm. S. H. Butcher, 4th ed. (1894; rpt. New York, 1951), pp. xxxvii-xxxviii, lxxi; Elder Olson, "The Poetic Method of Aristotle: Its Powers and Limitations," in *Aristotle's "Poetics" and English Literature: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. and introd. Elder Olson (Chicago, 1965), p. 190, originally in *English Institute Essays, 1952* (New York, 1952), pp. 70-94; Lane Cooper, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Its Meaning and Influences* (New York, 1963), pp. 145-48; Frank L. Lucas, *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics*, 2nd ed. (1927; rpt. New York, 1962), pp. 17-18; and Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (Rensselaer, N. Y., 1961), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Among others see Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre* (Princeton, N. J., 1949); Elder Olson, *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama* (Detroit, 1961); and Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Garden City, N. Y., 1968).

theory of tragedy. It is for this reason that I believe it is time to reexamine his doctrine of catharsis, not only for a better comprehension of the process, but to ascertain whether or not catharsis can have practical relevance for us today.

In this essay, I will attempt to provide some insight into the components of catharsis. I will offer suggestions as to how a slightly different understanding of the process might assist contemporary critical endeavors and have productive value for those in theatre.<sup>3</sup>

The particular salience of this doctrine lies in the fact that the *Poetics*, like Aristotle's other works, is teleologically conceived, and catharsis is related to the end which a successful tragedy must achieve. The function of a serious, imitated action of a sufficiently narrow scope, when presented dramatically in pleasing language, is the production of fear and pity and the performance of some kind of catharsis.<sup>4</sup> The *Poetics* demonstrates how the principles upon which tragic dramas are to be based will most effectively produce the desired objectives. Since this success or failure of a tragedy is dependent upon fear, pity, and catharsis, it will be necessary to review the ways in which the concept is most frequently understood.

#### *Interpretations of Catharsis*

Within the *Poetics*, Aristotle is not at all clear as to what catharsis entails. In fact, his original text is not as lucid as translations make it appear. Leon Golden renders that part of Aristotle's definition which treats catharsis as follows: "It is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents."<sup>5</sup> Butcher and Bywater, respectively, translate the same lines as: "in the form of action, not narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions";<sup>6</sup> and, "in a dramatic, not a narrative form, with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (6. 1449b25-26).

It is impossible to discern from these translations whether catharsis applies to emotions or incidents. Despite the certainty any English translation must imply, Aristotle might have meant either. In actuality, he refers only to the catharsis of something akin to "these things," which is much too ambiguous a phrase to label

<sup>3</sup> Even though I am dealing with a single Greek term, I have worked exclusively with English translations and have cited none of the many available philological materials. My treatment is intended to be logical rather than philological, and I am basing my own understanding upon a broader review of Aristotelian thought instead of a minute analysis of language.

<sup>4</sup> *Poet.*, in *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater, introd. Friedrich Solmsen (New York, 1954), 6. 1449b22-27. All references, except where otherwise indicated, are to the Bywater translation. Subsequent references to the work are incorporated in the text.

<sup>5</sup> *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature*, trans. Leon Golden, comm. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), 6. 1449b8-10. In the Greek, the citation refers to 1449b26, but I will follow the line numbers indicated in the English translations.

<sup>6</sup> *Poet.*, trans. Butcher, 6. 1449b2-3.

either "incidents" or "emotions" with overwhelming confidence.<sup>7</sup> In the past, though, most scholars have accepted one interpretation or the other, along with the arguments supporting those choices; and, furthermore, for some inexplicable reason, the choice of one interpretation has seemed to necessitate a complete rejection of any other notion relating to catharsis.

Some commentators believe catharsis is a moral or intellectual clarification or enlightenment for the audience. However, catharsis has been identified more frequently as the purgation of audience members' emotions, the purification of an action—which would otherwise be considered censurable—through plotted elements, or even the removal from the mimesis of that which would, in reality, produce confusion. While Brunius recognizes that this lone element had inspired 1,425 different interpretations prior to 1931 and many more after that date,<sup>8</sup> the multitude of speculations about catharsis can be divided into three basic categories: clarification, purgation, and cleansing. Each of these views has features which render it worthy of consideration as the "best" explanation.

The first interpretation stresses catharsis as a process of clarification or enlightenment. According to Hardison, for example, the term means "clarification" and is aligned with the pleasure Aristotle says we derive from learning something. In tragedy, Hardison claims, this enlightenment is associated both with our discovery of the relationship between incidents and universals and with our ascertainment of how things come about.<sup>9</sup> Gassner thinks that catharsis is an emotional purgation and that the characters in a drama act as our proxies, but he also believes that it is the intellectual and moral clarification we experience while watching a tragedy which separates this form from melodrama and enables the catharsis to take place.<sup>10</sup>

The second point of view, catharsis as emotional purgation or therapeutic relief, assumes that pity and fear are, in many respects, disturbing and uncomfortable emotions. Therefore, they should be eliminated. Somehow, in viewing a tragedy, these affections are raised to a pitch, and when they are finally relieved, the morbid element is thrown off. Butcher, for example, contends that "as the tragic action progresses, when the tumult of the mind, first roused, has afterwards subsided, the lower forms of emotion are found to have been transmuted into higher and more refined forms."<sup>11</sup>

The homeopathic understanding has much to recommend it. Indeed, in the *Politics*, the only other work in which Aristotle mentions catharsis, his reference is

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Professor Donald Marshall of the University of Iowa English Department and the Department of Literature, Science, and the Arts for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>8</sup> Teddy Brunius, *Inspiration and Katharsis: The Interpretation of Aristotle's The Poetics*, VI, 1449b26 (Stockholm, 1966), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Hardison, pp. 116–118.

<sup>10</sup> John Gassner, "Catharsis and the Modern Theatre," in *Aristotle's "Poetics" and English Literature*, pp. 109–10. Originally in Barrett H. Clark, ed. *European Theories of Drama*, rev. Henry Popkin (New York, 1965), pp. 514–18.

<sup>11</sup> Butcher, p. 254.

limited to the concept of emotional relief, and this through music.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, catharsis interpreted as a psychological release for the spectators renders the concept a better rejoinder to the Platonic dictum that tragedy encourages debilitating emotions than do the readings which relate to cleansing and clarification.

The third understanding, catharsis as cleansing or purification, identifies the concept as a function of plot or a product of mimesis. Schaper, among others, believes that "it would be entirely un-Aristotelian to think of the *telos* of something in terms other than structural." It is her contention that a "therapeutic interpretation" forces us to "shift from a structural analysis to descriptive psychology, and to regard tragedy as a means of achieving a certain end."<sup>13</sup>

Gerald Else also considers catharsis a function of the action and something which occurs within the plot:

The spectator or reader of the play is the judge in whose sight the tragic act must be "purified," so that he may pity instead of execrating the doer. . . . The spectator or reader does not *perform* the purification, any more than the judges at the Delphinion or in Plato's state did so. The purification, that is, the proof of the purity of the hero's motive in performing an otherwise "unclean" act, is *presented* to him and his conscience accepts and certifies it to his emotions, issues a license, so to speak, which says: "you may pity this man, for he is *καθαρός* like us, a good man rather than a bad and he is free of pollution."<sup>14</sup>

While H. D. F. Kitto refuses to accept Else's interpretation of purification through a presentation of mitigating elements, he agrees that the catharsis occurs within the tragedy itself. Kitto considers catharsis an aesthetic "cleaning up" of the "distressful" "raw material" of the tragic event, or an artistic representation which removes the "uncertain, contingent, [and] purely accidental," so that the action is rendered "clear-cut and significant." Kitto explains that "the mimesis clears away everything but what is meaningful. . . . It works this catharsis of the event by evoking our pity and fear (says Aristotle), and cannot work such catharsis on events which resist pity and fear—such as excite nothing but revulsion. It is because the mimesis does this that it makes the distressful event a source of pleasure to us; an event that moves our pity and fear is one of deep significance to all."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> It is upon the comparison of the term as used in Book 8 of the *Politics* with its use in the *Poetics* that Bernays based his interpretation of catharsis. For an amplification see Butcher, pp. 252–55.

<sup>13</sup> Eva Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 18 (1968), 135–36.

<sup>14</sup> *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 437–38.

<sup>15</sup> "Catharsis," in *The Classic Tradition: Literary and Historical Studies in Honor of Harry Caplan*, ed. Luitpold Wallach (Ithaca, N. Y., 1966), pp. 144–45. Although Kitto identifies the pleasure derived from tragedy with the audience's ability to contemplate and better understand universal principles, the refinement of the raw materials which leads to this knowledge is a process of the imitation. Therefore, catharsis is prior to clarification for Kitto and not identified with it. Furthermore, since action is the object of Aristotelian mimesis and plot is the most significant element of tragedy, Kitto's interpretation of catharsis relates closely to others which locate the concept within the dramatic structure. Although Kitto's rebuttal of Else's claim that particular incidents are purified is convincing as it relates to the specific line mentioning catharsis, his location of catharsis in mimesis actually supports a contention that the sequence of the action and the structure of the drama generate the tragic response in the audience.

*Problems with a Clarifying Catharsis*

Interpretations which forward catharsis solely as clarification are the least convincing. Aristotle does contend that the delight we experience in viewing imitations of even painful objects can be explained by the fact that learning is the greatest of pleasures (4. 1448b10–15). However, tragedy imitates “not only a complete action, but also incidents arousing pity and fear” (10. 1452a1–2). The generation of these affective states in the audience, not the spectators’ recognition either of incidents or of their own feelings in response to those incidents “is the distinctive function of [tragic] imitation” (13. 1452b32–33). If it is considered independently of the other two interpretations, as an explanation of catharsis, “clarification” implies that knowledge—rather than the evocation of particular emotions—is the purpose of this kind of drama and asks only for an audience cognizant of its human situation. This view does not deal with the generation or resolution of fear and pity, either as they may be reflected in the plotted incidents or as they relate to the spectators.

Furthermore, although the understanding of catharsis as clarification is dependent upon Aristotle’s belief that we gain pleasure when we learn through an artistic imitation, this interpretation fails to take into account Aristotle’s distinction between pleasures of the body and pleasures of the soul. Pleasures of the body are “those connected with a purely human exercise of the senses,” and among these are the pleasures we derive from art.<sup>16</sup> Thus, tragic pleasure cannot be separated from somatic elements, and explanations of catharsis as clarification have no way in which to deal with the physical features of aesthetic enjoyment; the rational factors involved in the response to tragedy comprise only a part of the process.

Perhaps even more significant is the fact that emotional states are concomitant with specific, physical conditions, as Aristotle makes clear in *De Partibus Animalium*. He indicates in *De Motu* that these psycho-physiological states have as their efficient causes something outside the organism itself. Thus, depending upon his purpose, Aristotle may propose a biological description or depict the cognitive response to an efficient cause when he defines an emotion. Consequently, “anger” is both an inclination on the part of the organism to retaliate and the blood boiling around the organism’s heart. Gardiner labels the first a “logical” definition and the second a “physical” definition and claims that both must be taken into consideration in any full description of an Aristotelian emotion.<sup>17</sup>

This dual definition of emotional states is necessary to a comprehension of catharsis, for the term is employed in conjunction with fear and pity, which, we may

<sup>16</sup> H. N. Gardiner, “The Psychology of the Affections in Plato and Aristotle: II Aristotle,” *The Philosophical Review*, 28 (1919), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Gardiner, p. 17.

assume, are prompted whenever we view an imitation of fearful and pitiable incidents.

Fear, when “logically” defined, is “a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future.”<sup>18</sup> Aristotle asserts that “pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortunes and fear by that of one like ourselves” (13. 1453a3). In order to feel pity, we must also be capable of supposing that the same type of evil others have experienced could befall us.<sup>19</sup> As the image of misfortune detaches itself from others and moves nearer to us, we begin to feel fear. In other words, Aristotelian pity is a less intense degree of personal fear. Actually, we only fear for ourselves, even though fear and pity are both egotistically grounded in the human instinct for self-preservation. It may be true, as Leech suggests, that we experience pity in relation to other persons and fear in relation to impending events, but in both cases, we use ourselves as our points of reference.<sup>20</sup>

Aristotle is clear in his demand that the actions of tragedies provoke these emotional states in the spectators. Presumably, as we view tragic personae move to situations in which they are miserable because they have committed great errors (13. 1453a14–16), and as we realize that their circumstances have restricted their freedom to make choices, we will both pity their sufferings because they are like us—neither good nor bad (13. 1453a5–10)—and we will fear for ourselves because “anything causes us to feel fear that when it happens to, or threatens, others causes us to feel pity.”<sup>21</sup>

Aristotle writes, “The tragic pleasure is pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation” (14. 1453b12–14). But the pleasure we derive from tragedy must somehow be related to the elimination of the emotional states evoked by the drama, for elsewhere, Aristotle associates fear with pain and identifies both as “a kind of grief.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, because the tragic emotions have negative connotations, tragic pleasure must, in part, depend upon their elimination. The affective conditions must also be dissipated because of their potential dangers. Therefore, in the Aristotelian scheme, a need exists for an emotional purgation, and, for this reason, catharsis must in some way function as a psycho-physiological process which can be applied to audience response.

<sup>18</sup> *Rhet.*, in *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle*, 2. 1382a21.

<sup>19</sup> *Rhet.*, 2. 1385b17.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford Leech, “The Implications of Tragedy,” *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco, 1965), p. 345. Originally in *Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Other Studies in Seventeenth Century Drama* (London, 1950), pp. 3–20.

<sup>21</sup> *Rhet.*, 2. 1382b26–28.

<sup>22</sup> *Prob.*, Vol. 7 of *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, trans. E. S. Forster, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1927), 27. 948b20. Even though there may be doubt that the *Problemata* is actually Aristotle’s personal work, Aristotle is known to have written a text of this type. In his Preface, Forster states that although there may be questions as to the authors of some selections, “the doctrine throughout is Peripatetic.” Furthermore, what has been written concerning the relation between affective states and internal temperature in the *Problemata* is supported by Aristotle’s expression of the same principles in *De Partibus Animalium*.

*Problems with a Purgative Catharsis*

There are also arguments against the homeopathic, therapeutic view of catharsis as it is usually understood—even though proponents of this interpretation do not neglect Aristotle's demand that audiences respond in particular ways to tragic dramas. Those who believe catharsis parallels homeopathic therapy, however, ignore the implications of Aristotle's claim that emotional states are grounded in physical conditions.

For Aristotle, fear may be "physically" defined as a cooling in the region of thought, and, when this occurs, the individual will become despondent, even suicidal.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, an internal imbalance of heat and cold can adversely affect our characters.<sup>24</sup> If a tragedy generates fear and pity, then, it is wise to subdue these states, for their persistence poses a threat to the individual.

An emotional release could not have meant the same thing to Aristotle as it does to those who identify catharsis as purgation today, though. Aristotle opposes fear with the antithetical states of frenzy and excitement, the very conditions which those who promote the homeopathic, therapeutic concept of catharsis imply are necessary if purgation is to occur. When we are excited, Aristotle claims, the region of thought is heated; the internal turmoil demanded by those who claim fear and pity are raised to some kind of a pitch would necessitate a simultaneous heating and cooling in the region of thought.<sup>25</sup> For Aristotle, the presence of these antithetical conditions would be both logically and physically impossible. Any concept of catharsis which is defined as an emotional release must take into consideration Aristotle's beliefs about the physical groundings of affective conditions. Consequently, although catharsis could relate to an audience's emotional response, it should be identified as "a restoration of the body's internal, thermal balance" rather than as "purgation."

*Problems with a Cleansing Catharsis*

Catharsis seen as purification or a "cleaning up" conforms to Aristotle's structural analysis better than the other two explanations. However, a reading which identifies the concept solely in terms of cleansing is flawed. Aristotle calls not only for the mimesis of that which is pitiable and fearful; he demands that the tragic action evoke pity and fear in the spectators as well, a fact that Schaper, Else, and Kitto all acknowledge.

Now, the spectators may indeed pronounce a tragic persona free of pollution because of the purifying elements they see in the plot. Whether or not the pollution is of a religious nature, it appears reasonable that the audience members' acceptance of the features which modify the persona's error will give them license to feel pity

<sup>23</sup> *Prob.*, 30. 955a5–30.

<sup>24</sup> *Prob.*, 30. 955a30–35; *De part. an.*, Vol. 5 of *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, trans. William Ogle, ed. J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1912), 2. 651a5–15.

<sup>25</sup> *Prob.*, 30. 953a10–955a40; *De Part. an.*, 2. 650b12–651a20.

and, therefore, fear. Certainly, the tragic dramatist must also eliminate superfluous, confusing materials from the dramatic structure if the spectators are to be moved to pity and fear. It might even be that the emotional response itself imbues the distressful event with significance. This, however, is not enough.

These understandings of catharsis offer credible explanations as to why an audience will experience pity and fear, but they say nothing about a release from these potentially dangerous affections. Interpretations which identify catharsis only in relation to the materials selected by the dramatist for inclusion in the structure provide insight concerning the possible efficient cause of the tragic response, but they fail to deal with its final cause.

### *Catharsis—an Integration*

In view of the fact that Aristotle's theory of the interdependence of internal heat and emotional states is no longer credible, it would be foolish to try to explain precisely how he thought catharsis might function to reinstate a psycho-physiological equilibrium. However, I suggest that the concept of a dual definition of emotion—with both "logical" and "physical" elements—can be of use in reidentifying what catharsis might involve for contemporary critics and theorists, and I suggest it can do so without violating other Aristotelian principles.

Since nothing in the *Poetics* entirely excludes any of the most common interpretations, it is not unreasonable to suppose that catharsis can be seen as the integration of clarification, cleansing, and—rather than purgation—the restoration of emotional equilibrium. Catharsis, then, is a combination of scripted proofs which clarify situations and enlighten the audience so that the plotted actions first evoke and then modify the spectators' emotional responses.

Logically, catharsis is a function of plot and is the efficient cause of affective reactions. However, when physically defined (I am using "physically" in the loosest sense), catharsis refers to the dissipation of those emotional states which the material has produced. In this sense, catharsis is a final cause, produced by the textual or dramatized efficient cause. This view of catharsis does relate, in part, to audience psychology, but it is not opposed to Aristotle's structural analysis. Ultimately, the plotted incidents are the external agents of internal change. In the Aristotelian pattern, just as there can be no final cause without an efficient cause, it would be incredible to locate an efficient cause without presuming this would lead to a final cause.

As Else asserts, mitigating elements incorporated into the plot purify the tragic persona's actions. Certain incidents are offered as proofs that the persona should not be judged too harshly. These incidents clarify the situation for the audience by functioning as dramatized arguments. Once the situation has been clarified, the audience can feel fear and pity.

Furthermore, because it is impossible to feel pity for another unless we can imag-

ine that we might find ourselves in the same kind of unfortunate situation, the spectators viewing the tragic action will experience fear for themselves, as well as pity for the persona. They will experience fear because plotted incidents will lead them to understand that the tragic persona is like them, and because the sequence of action makes them aware of their own precarious existences in a universe where a human error or oversight can upset the established order.

If certain plotted elements generate fear and pity, then other plotted incidents must restore the audience's emotional balance. The debilitating affective states which the dramatized incidents have aroused must be alleviated, and their relief must be accomplished by the structure of the drama. The plot must contain further material of a quality which will modify uncomfortable emotional states in the audience, rather than actually purge its members of their fear and pity.

Perhaps the psychological equilibrium of the spectators is restored, as numerous others have suggested, when, at the end of a tragedy, the audience sees that the normal order, which was upset in the course of the action, is once more in effect, or when it is made aware of the propriety of a resolution.<sup>26</sup> The tragic emotions evoked by *Hamlet*, for example, might be assuaged when the spectators realize that although the central characters are all dead, the state has been restored and that Fortinbras, whose claim is legitimate, is the representative of the normal balance.

As Gassner asserts, and Kitto implies, clarification or enlightenment is a feature of this part of the cathartic process as well. Without cognizance of the relationship between our own existences and an ordered society, state, or universe, we will remain—at least for a time—paralyzed by our emotions.

### *Contemporary Applications*

An identification of catharsis as the combination of scripted proofs which both generate and modify spectators' responses through enlightenment has some advantages over those definitions which advocate a lone explanation.

First, this integration gives us greater critical and theoretical flexibility. We are no longer forced to cling tenaciously to a single view of catharsis, despite any weaknesses that view might harbor. This, in turn, should eliminate any need we might have to make the facts fit the theory, rather than allowing the theory to be drawn from the facts.

Second, by admitting all three interpretations, we can better account for audience response through textual examinations, since both the evocation and the alleviation of pity and fear must be prompted by scripted incidents. It could be, for example, that a reexamination of *King Lear* with this concept of catharsis in mind will

<sup>26</sup> Kitto would contend that the absence of those materials which would otherwise detract from an orderly imitation, as well as the structure of the imitated action, imposes the sense of a directed pattern and imparts significance to the tragedy. See Kitto, pp. 144–47.

demonstrate that audiences have been displeased with the ending because Shakespeare did not “purify” Lear’s actions in his presentation of the incidents, or he failed to show that equilibrium was restored in the larger order, or if he did indicate such a restoration of order, he neglected to attribute the proper emphasis to it and thus prove its significance to the spectators.

Third, this understanding of catharsis permits us to classify and, therefore, to evaluate tragedies with greater precision. As I have noted, in Aristotle’s schema, a tragedy is identified as such primarily because of the specific effect it is to produce. Therefore, a tragedy should be composed with certain ends in view—the generation of fear and pity in the spectators and the subsequent modification of these emotions. These objectives should become the overriding concerns in our attempts to determine whether a drama is a tragedy and, if this is the case, whether it is successful or unsuccessful. An understanding of tragedy based upon an integrated catharsis allows us to consider, as part of the genre, any serious drama which provokes and then assuages fear and pity. Questions relating to the subject matter offered become secondary considerations. We would no longer have to quibble about whether or not domestic dramas are admissible as tragedies, for example, because the fundamental criterion would be whether or not the downfall of the tragic persona is capable of both establishing and eliminating the tragic response.

Fourth, a combination of the three elements of catharsis can provide playwrights with a more concrete foundation upon which to construct their tragic dramas, since the tragic formula must initially appear in the text. This view of catharsis would permit them to create plots in which they could adapt pitiable and fearful incidents to the psychological constitutions of contemporary spectators and then balance the emotions they have provoked in terms of the philosophies upon which their cultures are based.

I do not expect that a reidentification of the components which comprise any Aristotelian element will revolutionize modern dramatic criticism or theory. Nor do I expect that my proposed approach to catharsis will finally settle all arguments as to what the concept “really” entails. However, I do offer my own understanding of this principle in hope that it might function as an initial step in bringing some order to dramatic criticism and in creating a more sensitive awareness of the nature of tragic drama.



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# ARISTOTELIAN CATHARSIS AND THE PURGATION OF WOMAN

John McCumber

Our culture has engendered, over centuries, an almost unremitting flow of books and articles concerning Aristotle's view of the "cleansing" effected by tragedy.<sup>1</sup> But the stream conveys different degrees of intellectual nourishment at different times. The present is not one of the fertile periods; Kenneth Bennett, in fact, has argued that discussion of "catharsis" has by now thinned to bloodless intellectual water and that the term has in fact lost all meaning in literary theory. A loss, indeed, after so many centuries, and perhaps one which reflects on us; for are we not today, in part if not wholly, the catch-basin of intellectual currents from the past?

But perhaps we can circumvent this loss (perhaps, even, this identity). We must, certainly, distinguish two possibilities. If in fact the intellectual nourishment afforded by the concept of catharsis has simply thinned out, the concept itself has not changed its intellectual situation. It is just where it always was, comprehensible in the same ways, only it is now less *nourishing* than previously—less informative about art and ourselves. But, more radically at first view, it may also be that the cultural flow has gone away entirely, simply dried up, in which case we are permitted to suspect that the concept itself is still at work in our culture but elsewhere, and that the nourishment it affords has been caught and held in some deeper terrain. It is this possibility that I will argue for here, by returning to the source of it all—Aristotle—and re-collecting his concept of catharsis in such a way as to locate it elsewhere.

Aristotle's *Politics* situates catharsis by speaking of it in medical terminology (*kathistamenous hosper iatreias*) [*Politics* 8.7 1342a10]). This eventually prompted the "medical" interpretation advanced in 1857 by Jakob Bernays, which has now largely supplanted the earlier "purification" view, which interpreted catharsis in religious terms and is attributed by Bernays to Goethe and Lessing.<sup>2</sup> According to Bernays, the tragedian uses his drama to

1. The topic is traced back to Milton in Ingram Bywater, "Milton and the Aristotelian Definition of Tragedy," *Journal of Philology* 64 (1901): 267–75; for a history of the issue in French scholarship, cf. J. Hardy's introduction to *Aristotle, Poétique*, ed. J. Hardy (Paris: Budé, 1977) 16–22. Also cf. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics* 224n, for further bibliographical notes.

2. Jakob Bernays, *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie* (Breslau, 1857); partial translation in Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji, *Articles on Aristotle*, 4 vols. (London: Duckworth, 1979) 4: 154–65. Cf. Bennett 206 f. for summaries of these two views.



expel from the spectator the cathartic emotions, fear and pity, and perhaps others as well. Catharsis is not an intellectualization or cleansing of the emotions, as in the purification view, but a purgation of them. Tragedians thus heal the soul much as doctors, often, heal the body: by getting rid of bad things in it. In the medical view, those bad things are the emotions themselves; on the religious view, they are some sort of impurity or cloudiness in the emotions. Freud's concept of the effect of tragedy as a discharge of unpleasant emotion clearly follows his uncle-in-law's.<sup>3</sup>

But *Politics* 8.7, with its medical language, in fact treats not tragedy but music.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the concern with Aristotle's concept of catharsis is in inverse proportion to the texts that inspire it, for his explicit discussion of catharsis in tragedy occupies just a line and a half of the *Poetics* [1449b27 f.]. To this, commentators usually add, in addition to *Politics* 8.7, some passages from *Poetics* chapters 13 and 14, which do not actually mention catharsis. But the relevance of passages beyond Aristotle's single explicit discussion cannot, of course, be determined unless we already know something about what catharsis is. Without such knowledge, both the use of such passages and their rejection can only multiply readings, diluting each of them.

Analysis of Aristotle's texts thus underdetermines the concept of catharsis rather radically; this underdetermination has given rise to a sequence of interpretations in which, we saw, a scientific perspective follows on a religious one—a narrative duplicating, remarkably, the overarching narrative of modern Western (male) culture itself: perhaps the thinning-out of catharsis is associated with a more general cultural desertification. In any case, my approach here will not extend this modern narrative but will seek illumination from a more ancient source. In Aristotle's view, the supreme example of tragedy, the play to which his texts refer more than any other and which is constantly before his mind at the crucial moments is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*.<sup>5</sup> Does that play itself have anything to tell us about catharsis? Can it and the *Poetics* be used as guides to, or checks on, each other so that we can demarcate a space, open up a topography, within which the concept of catharsis can collect itself again, in our recollection of it?<sup>6</sup> I will not ask here if other Greek dramas would lie within the same topography for Aristotle: he himself, as he tells us, is concerned only with those tragedies that are great, and are so by his own theory [*Poetics* 13.1453a19, 23]. Sophocles's story of Oedipus at Thebes is certainly among these.

### *Questions from the King*

This demarcation will be easier because *Oedipus the King*, like Oedipus the king, is a relentless questioner. I will begin by simply listing four questions it poses:

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3. For Bernays's connection to Freud, cf. Gilman.

4. Else argues against considering the *Poetics* in terms of the *Politics*, which renders catharsis a rather minor part of Aristotle's theory of tragedy [*Aristotle's Poetics* 224–31, 423–47]. Leon Golden formulates the following view: "The *Politics* considers art as an instrument of the educational process; . . . the *Poetics* discusses art in terms of its essential nature . . . there is every reason to believe that the two discussions of art have nothing to do with one another" ["The Purgation Theory of Catharsis," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1973): 474–79]. But surely this is excessive: essential natures are hardly divorced from instrumentality, as Martin Heidegger argues in *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927) 66–76. In fact (as I shall argue later) the *Poetics* is very well aware of the political functions of tragedy.

5. References to this will be to the text of Richard Jebb, in *Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments I: The Oedipus Tyrannus*; they will be given parenthetically in the text and flagged OT.

6. For the relation of analysis, narrative, and demarcation, cf. the general introduction to my *Poetic Interaction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989).

1. The play's first line refers to the Thebans as "children of Cadmus." Why does their mother, the earth herself into which Cadmus sowed the dragon's teeth, go unmentioned? Is this merely a case of Hellenic indifference to maternal matters? Why, then, the ensuing reference to "nourishment" (*trophe*)?

2. Lines 23–25 liken Thebes in its torment to a person drowning in a storm. In Jebb's translation, they run as follows: "For the city . . . is now too sorely vexed, and can no more lift her head from beneath the angry waves of death." This, however, fails to capture the exact sense of *phoiniou*; rendered literally, the lines say that the state cannot lift its head from waves which are not "angry" but "bloody." Why does Sophocles introduce the notion of blood into a metaphor that is already, so to speak, awash with meaning? Is not Kamerbeek's suggestion that we have here a "metaphor within a metaphor" [cited in Dawe], for all its charity, unduly vague? Jebb, apparently attempting to preserve Sophocles from drowning in incoherence, jumps in to note that *phoinios* in other Sophoclean plays is used simply to mean *thanasimos*, deadly. But he also provides an example, from the *Ajax*, where it retains its literal meaning. And this strange connection of blood with bad weather occurs again at 101 (*haima cheimazon polin*) and 1275 ff. (where Oedipus blinds himself in a "hail" of blood). So the wave is indeed "bloody." But why? How can blood and storms be connected in a coherent metaphoric, and why is this metaphoric, whatever it may be, repeatedly invoked?

3. Why does the play take place the night before the full moon? Why is this fact explicitly noted [*OT* 1088 f.]? Jebb and Dawe, among others, suggest that the play was performed the night before the Pandia, which occurred at the full moon of Elaphebolion. But this fact of itself hardly *requires* the chorus to mention the full moon. Are we to assume that Sophocles is sufficiently ignorant, or uncaring, of the nature of writing as to call in a reference that would make sense only in the context of the play's original performance? Why, even in that original context, is the mention not a mere distraction? And just how does this line relate to Oedipus's declaration, a few lines earlier, that he himself is "kin" to the moons?

4. Why, at the end of the play, is Oedipus so reluctant to go back into his former palace? Creon orders him to do so at 1430, but he contrives to remain onstage until 1515, when Creon repeats his command. Even then, Oedipus assents only on condition that he be given permission to leave not merely the home but the land itself and go into exile. Is this male pride? Inhuman hubris? Some sort of hamminess?

These questions, I suggest, are connected. They point us towards the intersection of blood and the moon, the mother and home: towards that terrain which traditionally has been given and denied the name of "woman."

But first they point us to that most classical anti-feminist, Aristotle. For *Oedipus the King* was a major influence on the *Poetics*, and Aristotle, I suspect, knew more than he cared to tell about how it works. Certainly the *Poetics* tells us little enough about certain things. Its very definition of tragedy is mysterious, for it starts with mimesis and ends with catharsis without really informing us how the two are related: "A tragedy . . . is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; . . . with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" [*Poetics* 1449b24 ff.].

Catharsis and mimesis, separated by three lines of Greek, are, as Gerald Else has noted, usually left unrelated by commentators, which brings up another question I will address here ["Aristotle on the Beauty of Tragedy" 196 ff.]. Mimesis, in the traditional handling, is the function of the play itself, while catharsis resides in its spectator. But in Aristotelian terms, they should not be so wholly separate. For mimesis provides the structure or form of the play, its plot, while catharsis is the play's purpose, its final cause

or telos.<sup>7</sup> And, as Eva Schaper has noted, structure and telos are for Aristotle not two different things. As Aristotle sometimes puts it, only their “being” is different: a thing’s telos is in fact its form or structuring principle, not yet residing wholly within the thing itself.<sup>8</sup> Allocating mimesis wholly to the play—to the object perceived—while catharsis is assigned in its entirety to the audience—to the perceiving subject—is thus anachronistic, since Aristotle lived long before Descartes’s division of reality into self-determining subjectivity and externally caused objectivity. It also appears to be analytically unsatisfactory, because neither catharsis nor mimesis should be wholly absent from either side of whatever line is drawn between spectator and spectacle. The play should, somehow, contain catharsis, and the spectator, mimesis. The latter, moreover, should develop into the former as its completion, somewhat in the way an acorn develops into an oak. But we cannot understand the relation of mimesis to catharsis unless we have first grasped the nature of catharsis itself, which directs us back to our original four questions and thence to the regions of woman herself.

### *The Nature of Catharsis*

There is controversy as to how exactly, in the medical interpretation, catharsis is supposed to work in Aristotle’s view—in part because there is controversy as to whether he was a homeopath or an allopath.<sup>9</sup> But there ought to be no controversy over the fact that biology precedes medicine: there would be no doctors without diseases, and no diseases without natural physiological functions to go awry. The art of healing, says Aristotle, resides in the patient as well as in the doctor. The doctor does not produce health *ex nihilo*, but intervenes in and modifies natural processes already underway. And purging, for Aristotle, is in fact an illustration of this [*Metaphysics* 5.2.1013a37 ff.; 5.12.1019a17 f.].

Natural physiological functions are, in general, indigestible matter to the metaphysical tradition, concerned as it is to pursue an intellectual or supersensible realm. They are also, paradoxically, foreign to the purgation view. Grounded, as Bennett notes, in the rise of science in the nineteenth century [206], this view sees catharsis as a wholly artificial phenomenon, instigated by the doctor/tragedian without regard to what actually goes on naturally in the patient/spectator. Indeed, *nothing* significant is in fact going on in the patient apart from the disease. Like the disease, the patient is object and not subject: material for manipulation by the (autonomous) doctor. As for manipulation, the patient is dominated, and as dominated human matter, is feminized; the purgation view of catharsis leads through the subject/object dichotomy it presupposes to a very traditional view of woman. So understood, catharsis is caught in a conceptual framework of expertise, action, and purpose—one that we can call “male.”

This capture is not foreign to Aristotle. Indeed, the framework of purposive action, reinforced by science in the last century, devolves ultimately from him.<sup>10</sup> But his version of maleness is not caught up in the subject/object dichotomy, and natural biological processes were hardly foreign to him. He spent years as a working biologist, and his

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7. For a detailed account of this, cf. O. B. Hardison in *Hardison and Leon Golden’s Aristotle’s Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968)* 288.

8. Eva Schaper, “Aristotle’s Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968): 135 f. For Aristotle’s general connection of telos and form or structure, cf. *Physics* 2.7.198a25 seqq. and W. D. Ross, *Aristotle, 5th ed. rev. (London: Methuen, 1949)* 74.

9. Cf. K. G. Srivastava, “A New Look at the ‘Katharsis’ Clause of Aristotle’s Poetics,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 12 (1972): 258–75.

10. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 85.

biology, as D'Arcy Thompson first suggested, provides a key for understanding his more strictly philosophical works.<sup>11</sup> Such being the case, we ought to be able to trace Aristotle's concept of catharsis to roots lying beyond the medical realm, in the biological. In doing so, we could resituate that concept—in, precisely, a terrain more profound than the medical, a deeper landscape within which to recollect and revivify the concept. Which biological process we are to use to open up that terrain becomes clear with a glance at Bonitz's *Index Aristotelicum*. Its entry for *katharsis* contains just seven references to aesthetic phenomena—and over sixty to menstruation.<sup>12</sup>

The biological paradigm of catharsis, then, is not merely foreign matter to the metaphysical tradition. It is (at least, I would hazard, to the average metaphysician) one of the most mysterious and frightening of natural phenomena. That Aristotle found menstruation fascinating, if not frightening, is attested by his lengthy discussions of it. To sum these up as *de Generatione Animalium* has them,<sup>13</sup> menstruation is the result of an excess of nourishment. The body, in digestion, works food into a form it can use—that of blood. When more of this is produced than is needed to sustain life and health, the body discharges the “useful residues.” Along with them are carried other things the body cannot use, such as the seeds of disease. The purging of bad things is thus a contingent benefit of the real nature of catharsis, which is the elimination of something good and nourishing, blood. Medical purgation is an imitation of this natural process, artificially induced for the sake of that contingent benefit.

Such discharge of useful residues occurs in males as well, in the ejaculation of semen. But it is more thoroughly a female phenomenon, because it is ultimately due to weakness. Digestion, we may say, is for Aristotle a struggle to convert food into nourishment, or blood, and then to absorb the latter. Females are unable to perform the final absorption and emit large amounts of blood. Males, being stronger, are able to “overpower” even their unneeded nourishment and distill it from blood into the more concentrated semen, of which they emit smaller amounts. To menstruate is then to be overpowered by something that is in itself useful and nourishing.

Among all animals, Aristotle assures us, it is the human which menstruates most copiously and is most troubled by the flow; females of other species are in better condition. Men, of course, do not menstruate; men are stronger than women. But they, too, are worse off than members of their gender in other species, if not physically, then psychologically. For men are more prey to fear than are other male animals. Fear, says Aristotle, is occasioned by the image (*phantasia*) of something bad, and the actual presence of the misfortune dispels the fear of it: when I am actually eaten up by the tiger, or am in actual disgrace, I no longer fear these things.<sup>14</sup> Because man is the “rational animal,” he is more aware of causal connections than are members of other species, and it follows that he can be more aware of other things as having the potential to do him harm. As its Greek name (*andreia*) implies—and as the *Economics* states—courage is the manly virtue.<sup>15</sup> Fear is then the manly vice, and it is fear (with what we will see to be its displacement, pity) which tragic catharsis cleanses from the soul [*Poetics* 1453a3 ff.].

Or, rather, excess fear. For some fear, as the *Nicomachean Ethics* urges, is good and necessary—even noble [3.6.1115a12 f.]. Here, I suggest, is the first place of four where

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11. D'Arcy Thompson, trans., *Historia Animalium* (Oxford, 1910) vii; also cf. Marjorie Grene, *A Portrait of Aristotle* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963) 32 f.

12. H. Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicum* (Graz: Akademische Drucks- und Verlagsanstalt, 1956) 354b22–355a47. This was first published in 1870, which means that the menstrual context of Aristotelian catharsis has gone unremarked for 119 years.

13. 1.19.726a30 ff.; 2.4.738a23 ff.; 4.6.775b5 ff.; also cf. pseudo-Arist. *Problemata* 1.42.

14. *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.6.1115a10 f.; *Rhetoric* 1.16 1368b28; 2.8.

15. *Economics* 1343b30–a3; on the authenticity of this text, cf. Jean Tricot, trans., in *Aristotle, Economique* (Paris: Jean Vrin, 1983) 7–9.

the medical reading of catharsis can mislead us, and of two where the religious view can. For in both these readings, what is expelled is something bad or at best neutral—either an emotion itself or some impurity in it. But fear and pity, unlike the seeds of disease expelled via purgatives, are not in Aristotle’s view *per se* harmful to man [cf. Verdenius 369]. They are not even neutral. Nor need they be somehow “contaminated” in order to require cathartic cleansing. Rather, in themselves they are good for us—noble and necessary, if not exactly nourishing like blood. It is *only* their excess which is bad, and which must be gotten rid of by tragic catharsis [cf. *Politics* 8.7.1342a6 ff.].<sup>16</sup>

The medical analogy also misleads us, I will argue, because catharsis is not at bottom an artificial phenomenon, one initiated by man. Nor, of course, is it a supernatural process: we are for Aristotle raised above nature by philosophy, not by mystical practices. It is, rather, a natural happening: the tragedian merely induces a process which comes about of itself in a wholly natural way. If he administers a “medicine” to the spectator, the analogy is not to those types of drug used to cure diseases. It is more like the medicaments used by women from time immemorial to bring on their periods.

The third problem with the medical analogy is (unknowingly) pointed to by Bywater: “A catharsis in the medical sense of the word is an *iatreia*, only for occasional use” [156]. We use medicaments only when we get sick, and we do not get sick on schedule. But Greek tragedy was, precisely, scheduled. Plays were given on certain dates (such as just before the full moon of Elaphebolion), and these returned every year. Tragic catharsis thus has an aspect of regularity which is not captured by the medical analogy, though the analogy works well enough for music, which in Athens (as now) was available pretty much when needed. Hence, I suspect, Aristotle’s willingness to use medical terms in the *Politics*, where he discusses the catharsis accomplished by music, and the lack of them in the *Poetics*.

The foregoing means, finally, that the emotions expelled in catharsis cannot be simply adventitious, like a disease. They must be emotions which build up in the spectator with enough regularity to permit a scheduled cleansing. In particular, they must include a continual fearfulness of some sort.

Differing from the medical view on these four points, and from the religious one on the first two of them, the assimilation of catharsis to menstruation amounts, I suggest, to a relocation of the concept—one which places it not in the masculine framework of the doctor’s office or the equally masculine sanctuaries of Eleusis but in the infinitely more subtle and profound terrain of woman’s body.

In this “menstrual reading,” catharsis operates as follows. When a spectator is presented with a tragedy, he (the male pronoun, we will see, is wholly appropriate) is presented with images of fearful things happening to someone resembling him. In this presentation, as a standard case of Aristotelian sense-perception, the forms of the entities perceived—the sensible properties of the persons and events on the stage—enter into the spectator through his sensory organs [cf. *de Anima* 2.12]. Because those forms, as aesthetic, leave out much that is contingent, they are highly concentrated [cf. *Poetics* 1451a seqq.], and have the effect of evincing a universal in the spectator. Once he has grasped this universal—the plot and the characters revealed by it—the spectator is made to “shudder” [*Poetics* 14, esp. 1453b4 ff.]. The use of this word here [*phrittein*—cf. *phallon* at *OT* 150, and also the chorus’s *phriken* at *OT* 1306] is, I think, important. For *phrittein* does not denote, in the texts of Aristotle’s school, a voluntary motion: even when occasioned by the hearing of dreadful things, shuddering comes about involuntarily, via a

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16. I should note here, against Benjamin Jowett, that the Greek of this passage uses the words *eleemonas* and *phobetikous*, both of which in context clearly convey the notion of excess. Jowett’s translation suggests that any influence of pity and fear on a person requires catharsis, which is an extreme (and extremely Victorian) version of the purgation theory: cf. Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941) 1315.

心 寧 忘 誓 能  
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瓶 冠 致 兼 迹

natural physiological process.<sup>17</sup> The spectator cannot help his shudder; his fear overpowers him through its excess—he cannot absorb it.

Unabsorbed, the fear does not become part of the spectator, at least not in the sense of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, man is said to be an *arche praxeon*, a source of acts; and what is preeminently in the human individual as source of his acts are those reasonings and desires which lead to action.<sup>18</sup> To absorb fear would thus be to make it the basis for action. But the tragic spectator does not act to avoid the fearful things he sees—not because, like a woman, he is incapable of distilling his fear into a rational basis for action, but because such distillation is not necessary. For what he sees is only an imitation, a *mimesis*, of fearful things. It is of the same type as the images which provoke his real, everyday fears, but is not one of them and produces not flight but pleasure [*Poetics* 1453a2 ff., b12ff.]. The tragedy grinds to its terrible conclusion, but the spectator remains unharmed. The fearful image passes through and out of him; he is cleansed of it and of his fear. He leaves the theater feeling “lightened”<sup>19</sup> and recovered.

### *Catharsis as Mimesis: The Spectator*

Because the spectacle passes through the spectator in this way, Aristotle’s conception of catharsis cannot be understood in terms of the inviolability claimed by the modern subject. The spectator is not a mere object, however: he is capable of undergoing the displacement of fear into pity, which is non-objective. Indeed, pity can be viewed as a sort of willed imitation of fear. The audience of *Oedipus the King*, for example, cannot really be afraid that they have unknowingly killed their fathers and married their mothers; indeed, as Nietzsche pointed out [57], they cannot even, unlike the chorus, fear that Oedipus has really done so. But it is clear that if the audience had committed Oedipus’s crimes, they would fear finding that out, and that which arouses fear when we think of it happening to ourselves arouses pity when we see it happening to others [*Rhetoric* 1382b26 f., 1386a27 f.]. Hence, pity is not an externally caused passion but a displaced fear: an imitation of it, in which the quality in question inheres in an entity to which it does not, in the primary sense, belong. The audience does not really fear that what happens to Oedipus—the public revelation of his crimes—will happen to them, for they know their own births and the fates (to date) of their parents. But they imitate that fear. Moreover, it is when the imitation is seen as an imitation—when it is fully experienced as what it is, or achieves its full nature as an imitation—that catharsis comes about. Catharsis is thus the natural completion of mimesis in this sense: the recognition that the spectacle is only a spectacle, an imitation and not reality, *is* its passing out of the body, as opposed to its absorption into a basis for action.

But there is a second, more real level of fear operative here. Freud argued, of course, that identification with the tragic hero is justified. The spectator shares with the hero a desire to rebel against social constraints or, indeed, the universe itself (as Oedipus, in his original crimes, rebelled unwittingly against the very nature of things). Indeed, in what Freud calls psychological drama, the spectator must either share the neurosis of the hero or be brought to do so temporarily by the dramatist: “the repressed impulse is one of those which are similarly repressed in all of us” [309]. On this level, what actually happens to Oedipus is an instance of a more general type of fearful thing, having one’s own secrets, *whatever they may be*, publicly revealed. For Freud, as the quote above suggests, one

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17. *Poetics* 1453a2 ff., b4 ff.; for the involuntary nature of shuddering, cf. *pseud. Arist., Problemata* 7.886b9 ff.

18. *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1; also cf. 2.3.1112b32 ff.; 6.2.1139b3 ff.

19. kouphizesthai, *Politics* 1342a14; cf. k’anakouphisai at OT 23.

secret everyone has is the desire to commit the very crimes that Oedipus in fact committed. The fear that one's own antisocial desires will become public is thus not pity but very real fear for one's own self. It is also hardly adventitious: as long as such desires remain present, fear of their revelation would require regular purging (and thus tragic catharsis, unlike Freudian psychoanalysis, would never come to an end in a definitive cure). Again on this level, the catharsis is the natural completion of the mimesis: when the spectator realizes that the tragedy was Oedipus's, not his own, he realizes that his own secrets are safe. The fear that they will be revealed is, for a time, assuaged.

But Freud's reading of catharsis, though intended to be more specific than Aristotle's, is in fact more general. For in it, fear and pity have lost their status as the preeminently tragic emotions: the impulses to be discharged through the tragedy include those to "freedom in religious, social, and sexual matters, and to 'blow off steam' in every direction" [305 ff.]. Our re-situating of Aristotle's concept of catharsis must attempt to restore to fear and pity their peculiar dramatic status. The first thing to note in this regard is that if pity is a type of displaced fear, then its status as tragic emotion is probably dependent upon that of fear. And the status of fear can be understood, I will argue, not psychologically but only socially. Again, the menstrual reading of catharsis can be of value here. For it has, as feminist, not merely psychological but also political ramifications. It suggests, in fact, that there is a political level of fear still deeper than the Freudian. This deeper level actually contains, I will suggest, fear of two related sorts of thing.

In view of Plato's well-known attacks on art as destructive to society, Aristotle *ought* to have been aware of the political significance of tragedy, and several passages show that in fact, though he never gives a definitive discussion of the topic, he *was* aware of them. In *Poetics* 26, for example, Aristotle argues (against Plato) that tragedy does not necessarily debase its audience. He is plainly aware, throughout the *Poetics*, that tragedy developed at Athens, the *polis par excellence*. And he seems, in fact, to accept the theory that while comedy developed in the *komai*, or villages—mere concatenations of households aiming to provide the necessities of life—tragedy developed in the city. There alone could action be, not necessary only but noble as well, and the city developed from the villages for the purpose of pursuing the Noble, *to kalon*.<sup>20</sup> Tragic catharsis is clearly connected to the pursuit of the Noble, because one who undergoes catharsis is always freeborn and educated. *Politics* 8.7 excludes from catharsis even those free men who follow trades, such as mechanics and laborers: denizens of the realm of necessity rather than of Nobility, they seek only relaxation from art [*Poetics* 1342a18 ff.].<sup>21</sup> *A fortiori*, women and slaves would also be unfit to experience catharsis—the latter because they follow trades; the former because they have no education.

We have seen, so far, two objects expelled in tragic catharsis, two "katharmata": the imitation fear, or pity, that the spectator feels on behalf of Oedipus; and the real fear that his own antisocial impulses will become public. A third katharma, approaching the political sphere, is familial in nature. As Gerald Else has noted [*Aristotle's Poetics* 422, 424, 429 f.], the tragic plot for Aristotle always springs from a *miaros*, a blood-pollution: an act which brings evil on one's entire family [cf. *Poetics* 13.1453a18 ff.]. Oedipus, as he puts it himself, has both spilled the blood of his father and confused the blood of his children/siblings [*OT* 1400 ff.], and this specific set of acts evokes the more general fear of having one's own blood polluted by the injury of a kinsman. This generalized fear is very real—indeed, is apparently the greatest of all fears [*Poetics* 1453b14 ff.]. Like the

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20. *Poetics* 1448a36 ff., 1449a38 ff.; *Politics* 1.1–2; 3.9.1281a1 ff.; on the general distinction between the realms of necessity and Nobility, cf. de Generatione Animalium B731b20 seqq.; Nicomachean Ethics 8.1.1255a22–30; also cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958) 22–78.

21. Verdenius, wrongly equating *anapausis* with catharsis, gets this point backwards.

others, it too is carried away when the spectator realizes that what he has seen is merely a spectacle—when the mimesis is achieved.

These two fears—that of undergoing something similar to what Oedipus undergoes (with its displacement, pity) and that of suffering injustice within the family—can only be linked by yet another fear, a fourth katharma: the fear on the part of the spectator, not that injury should be done him, but that he should do it and himself become *miaros*, literally “covered with blood.” For unless the spectator can fear this, he cannot identify with Oedipus, the perpetrator of just such an injustice; his fear of familial injustice will remain wholly passive, and the process of catharsis cannot get underway. But why should one fear doing, rather than suffering, injustice?

The fear of becoming covered with blood is ultimately nothing other than the fear that one should be defined by something that happened within the family (as is Oedipus, in the end) rather than by one’s pursuit of the Noble in the political sphere. Thus, to be subject to blood-pollution was to be driven from citizenship, *de facto* if not *de jure*, and to relapse into the domain of “necessity,” of the family and village. This is a fifth katharma, and a constant one. We will not fear relapsing into the family if we are already circumscribed by it, as life is in the villages. On the other hand, fear of blood-pollution, as fear for one’s political status itself, would be the most politically debilitating of fears: the *polis* requires tragic catharsis to keep it from getting out of hand. Thus, tragedy required the *polis* for its development, and vice versa: the attainment of political status itself is precarious, and the fear of its loss is purged in tragedy.

The historical context of classical Athens suggests that behind this fear lies yet another—another level, left unspoken by Aristotle but clearly indicated by the menstrual reading of catharsis. After the reforms of Solon, about 575 BC, women were excluded from political life. They were relegated entirely to the *oikos*, the household, and—as Pericles put it ca. 431—were best not spoken of, for good or evil.<sup>22</sup> They were, in sum, condemned to pay, whether they had actually harmed anybody or not, the penalty for blood-pollution. Thus, to be defined by family life was to be defined the way Athenian women were in fact defined. It is woman, the creature of blood, who is primordially and by a cyclical process of nature “covered with blood”—not the man, who can convert blood into semen and village life into politics. The great fear of the latter was, it appears, being sent to join the former. The psychological catharsis effected by tragedy thus mirrors, in the male, the biological process undergone monthly by the female. But it also distances him safely from it. For the spectator is not, to his own great relief,<sup>23</sup> really menstruating. He is merely imitating menstruation.

### *Mimesis as Catharsis: The Spectacle*

We find that, in a complex and tacit way, catharsis in the spectator is actually a mimesis. On a first, overt level, the spectator feels a sympathetic, imitation fear—in the case of the spectator of *Oedipus the King*, that he will kill his father and marry his mother, like the protagonist with whom he identifies. This mimetic fear passes through him in a real process of catharsis, just as an herb taken by a woman to bring on her period passes through her body, bringing the blood and taking with it other catharmata. On its deepest level, catharsis is a mimesis of menstruation itself.

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22. Cf. Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken, 1975) 57–119; *Thucydides*, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.45.2.

23. The relief is, for Freud as for Aristotle, unacknowledged. For Freud’s problems with the issue of male menstruation, which was an anti-Semitic canard from medieval times on (Jewish men were asserted to menstruate), cf. Gilman.

While no one seems to have attempted to find mimesis in the spectator, numerous writers have tried to locate catharsis in the play itself. In these readings, either the characters undergo it—as Richard B. Sewall holds Oedipus does—or the events themselves in the play are somehow “cleansed” as the play goes on, as Leon Golden and K. G. Srivastava have argued.<sup>24</sup> Catharsis certainly occurs in *Oedipus the King* but more straightforwardly than any of these authors have suggested: the chorus, in its words from the early *phrena pallon* [OT 150] to its final serenity once the evil is safely dispelled, offers some of the greatest expressions of the “cathartic emotions,” fear and pity, that have ever been written. In the chorus, catharsis is actually depicted; the completion of this mimesis is, again, a catharsis, for the chorus gets rid of its fear and achieves final, generalized resignation in the face of death itself [OT 1524–30]. But this, we might say, is because the chorus is not on either side of the line between spectacle and spectators, but straddles it: it is a spectator on the stage, not part of the plot. Thus, while we have found catharsis and mimesis together on the line, so to speak, between play and spectator, we have yet to find it within the play itself. Can we say that in telling its story the play depicts a catharsis, in addition to provoking one in the spectator? What if, indeed, tragedy for Aristotle ultimately tells the story of a catharsis? Then catharsis would be the connecting concept, the formative guiding thread of the whole plot—and it would culminate, as Aristotelian form should, in the attainment of itself as telos: the completion of the story itself depicts the achievement of catharsis.

Aristotle does not say this, and his texts do not serve as a guide in this matter. Yet his view that the tragic plot begins with a *miarōn* suggests that the play does somehow present us with the cleansing of a blood pollution. And this may not be unconnected with catharsis, on our menstrual reading of that. So I will use the *Poetics* as a check, turning first to *Oedipus the King* to find out whether or not the story it tells can be construed as a catharsis. I will then return to Aristotle to suggest that this reading of *Oedipus the King* illuminates two of Aristotle’s other aesthetic concepts, those of the tragic flaw (*hamartia*) and of action (*praxis*).

Armed with our awareness of the connection between catharsis and blood, we can see that an important symbolic catharsis is undergone by Oedipus himself, at 1275 ff. I quote Jebb’s translation of the messenger’s report: “. . . not once alone but oft struck he his eyes with lifted hand; and at each blow the ensanguined eyeballs bedewed his beard, nor sent forth sluggish drops of gore, but all at once a dark shower of blood came down like hail.”

Here again, Jebb’s translation misses one important thing. The word he translates as “eyeballs,” *glēnai*, has that as its first meaning in, for example, Liddell and Scott. Reading it thus, Oedipus’s self-mutilation is an obvious act of self-castration. But is this all there is to it? After all, Oedipus does not cut but stabs himself, and repeatedly, with a pair of sharp spikes. This does not sound much like an act of castration.

*Glēne*’s third meaning in Liddell and Scott is “socket of a joint,” and one wonders if the term should be translated as “socket” in the present passage as well. Of Liddell and Scott’s two main attestations of “eyeball,” *Iliad* 14.494 concerns Ilioneus, whose *glēne*, clearly an eyeball, is knocked out by a spear. But that the term can refer to the socket, rather than merely the ball, of the eye is suggested by the other attestation, *Odyssey* 9.390. This refers to Polyphemus, whose eye is put out by an enormous sharpened log and whose eyeball may very well, at that point, have been crushed into non-existence. And Autenrieth notes that *Iliad* 7.164 uses *glēne*, presumably in a sense derived from “socket,” as a pejorative for “woman” (like the English “cunt”).

24. Among these we may mention Scott Buchanan, *Poetry and Mathematics* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962) 148; Else, Aristotle’s *Poetics* 229; Leon Golden, “Catharsis,” *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 93 (1962): 51–60; Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959) 21; and K. G. Srivastava, “How Does Tragedy Achieve Katharsis?” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 15 (1975): 132–43.



Reading *glene* as “socket,” especially the socket of a woman, we find the lines inscribe a blood-storm from the vagina in terms suggesting the onset of a particularly difficult period. What Oedipus deprives himself of by this is, as we might expect, something which, like blood, is good in itself: vision. And it is, as we might also expect, because (as he tells us) *further* vision would be of no use to him [OT 1371–90]: would be an excess—he has seen enough. Oedipus’s self-blinding by repeated stabs can, I suggest, be viewed not as castration but as an act of self-intercourse—one which, as extremely vigorous intercourse is popularly thought to do, brings on a period. This hardly deprives the castration-interpretation of its force: in both cases, what Oedipus is doing is ending his own masculinity. (It would also leave intact readings that associated the blinding with defloration.) But in the “socket” reading he reduces himself not to a eunuch but to a sort of woman, or at least to an androgyne like the other blind wise “man” in the play, Teiresias.

Thus, the chorus is purged of its fear throughout the play but is merely a sort of spectator, rather than an actor. That Oedipus himself casts off his vision in a storm of blood is only one incident in the play, not the entirety of its plot; and it only foreshadows the final “cleansing” which takes place at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*. A more complex case, one which persists throughout the entire play, concerns the polis itself. For it is Thebes which, as we saw, is succumbing to the blood-storm in lines 23 ff. and 101. The problems that bedevil the polis are not of the sort that could be assigned to the male, political level, such as factionalism or military weakness, but are much deeper—natural problems with the (female) “earth” itself: plagues, blights, and barrenness. Indeed, Thebes is recurrently said to be “sick”—*nosein*, which means serious discomfort or unease, and which Aristotle applies to women in their period [OT 60 f., 150, 169, 217, 303, 307; *de Generatione Animalium* 775b9]. But if we are to say that the polis undergoes a natural feminine *nosos* and menstruates, what it gets rid of is none other than Oedipus himself, who at the end is banished from the polis and enters a “stormy sea of dread trouble” [OT 1527].

Indeed, Oedipus’s identification of himself with the moons [*hoi de suggeneis menes me mikron kai Megan diorisan*, OT 1082 f.] suffices to establish what we might call the menstrual dimension of his identity. For the common term (not Aristotle’s) for the menstrual period is “*ta katamenia*,” literally, “the things according to the moon” or “the monthlies.” What Oedipus is here asserting is that he himself is a “monthly,” something to be purged with the moon. And what the polis rids itself of in this manner is, again, something nourishing for it: Oedipus himself, and especially his untutored cleverness. This had once set right the city by saving it from the Sphinx [OT 39 ff., 394, 1065]; but it is now being pushed to excess by Oedipus’s desire to know everything about the plague and his own ancestry. In this reading, then, the entire plot of the play depicts a catharsis—one by which the suffering body of Thebes, the Theban earth, rids herself of the cleverness of Oedipus, his vision. The catharsis is completed when Oedipus, at play’s end, returns to the house—to the domain of necessity.

### *Other Concepts*

In the menstrual reading, the rigid separation of mimesis and catharsis is undone: the former is not exclusively the province of the spectacle, and the latter is not that of the spectator. Spectator and spectacle do not relate as inviolable (male) subject and violated (female) object but mutually interpenetrate, transforming one another in a variety of ways. Returning to the *Poetics* with this in mind can clarify other aesthetic concepts of Aristotle’s. One of these is that of *hamartia*, or the tragic flaw. Aristotle’s discussion of this has a puzzling feature. Tragedy, as opposed to comedy, presents “noble actions and actions of noble men” and is “an imitation of personages better than the ordinary man” [*Poetics* 4.1448b26 f., 15.1454b8 f.; also cf. 4.1449b31 f.]. But Aristotle also says that

the tragic hero is someone “not pre-eminently virtuous and just” but merely someone of ordinary merit in high station who has a great flaw which brings him down [*Poetics* 13.1453a7–11]. The general problem, I take it, is this: if someone is truly excellent in all respects, any story of his downfall will be unbelievable except as a random accident. As we will see below, random accident cannot be the moving force in a tragedy, so there must be a flaw in the hero to account for his misfortune. But if the hero is flawed, his misfortune is not as fearful to others as if he were not: spectators need not identify with his flaw and may even feel that he deserves his downfall (in the New Testament, *hamartia* would be the standard word for “sin”). The tragic hero must, in sum, be flawed and not-flawed: flawed because otherwise his downfall will be a mere accident of fate and hence not tragic; unflawed because he must be better than ordinary people, and hence a hero.

Bywater’s solution, in his translation and commentary, is to take *hamartia* as “error in judgment,” approximating it to Aristotle’s usage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *hamartia* denotes an act performed in ignorance of the circumstances obtaining.<sup>25</sup> Such is certainly the case when Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother: he knew that those actions were criminal, but did not know that he was performing them. But those acts also cannot have resulted from his tragic flaw. For the function Aristotle assigns to *hamartia* at *Poetics* 13.1453a7–11 is to undo the protagonist; and the tragic flaw, identified there as part of the plot, must come into play during the drama itself. Oedipus’s crimes, however, occurred prior to the play, and did not of themselves bring about the reversal of fortune which the play presents. What, in the play, undoes Oedipus is what van Braam calls “his perverse persistence, in spite of all warning, in unveiling the mystery and finding the murderer of Laius” [272].

A more persuasive resolution of the problem, I suggest, is to understand *hamartia* as we must understand it in the menstrual reading: as the presence in excess of some quality which in itself is good. Such a quality is the cleverness and intellectual daring of Oedipus, which once saved the city. Because the quality in question is good (not merely neutral), the hero is a hero, but because it is present to excess, he is flawed.

The other concept I will discuss in this connection is that of *praxis*, the action which the tragedy “imitates.” Aristotle’s definitions of this concept, we should note, get progressively narrower in the course of the *Poetics*. At 6.1450a16 f., what the tragedy imitates is said to be “action and life and happiness and unhappiness,” which is not merely broad but all-inclusive. At 7.1450b23–25, it is “an action that is whole and complete and possessing a certain magnitude,” and at 8.1451b8–10, we find ourselves referred to “the sort of thing a man of a certain type will do or say either probably or necessarily.”

Since catharsis, in the menstrual reading, is a natural process and not an action, there appears to be a serious discrepancy between Aristotle’s text and my account of *Oedipus the King*: I am claiming that the play tells the story of a catharsis, of a natural process, and Aristotle claims that it tells the story of an action. Moreover, Aristotle identifies Oedipus’s “action” as what he did to his father and mother, killing and marrying them respectively, and to his children, begetting them [1453b29 ff]. But that identification is of the “action” of Oedipus in the traditional story. It cannot be the specific action which *Oedipus the King* itself imitates because it is not portrayed in the play, which as I have noted presents rather the story of how that action, performed long before, is discovered. But how are we to construe Oedipus’s relentless pursuit of the truth as the depiction of a catharsis?

In general, it is possible that we are drawing the distinction between action and natural process too sharply. The kind of action the tragedy imitates is not simply something someone does, but has a “universal” at its base. It is an instance of what we might call a rational structure of action, and in virtue of that is not peculiar to the character who

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25. Bywater 1453a; Bywater is defended in van Braam. Else also takes this view [*Aristotle’s Poetics* 377–85], as does D. W. Lucas, ed., Aristotle: *Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 299–307.

performs it but extends beyond him, to be a possibility for others like him. That is why others can identify with the protagonist [*Poetics* 7.1450b21–25; 17.1455b1–3]. Moreover, *Poetics* 7 tells us that the structure of an action is one which unfolds over time, having a beginning, middle, and end which are related either by necessity or by probability. Once the action has been set underway by a specific incident, succeeding incidents either must follow or will usually follow [also cf. *Poetics* 9. 1453b34]. It is because they are joined by such necessity or likelihood that the episodes come together, in a unified plot, to instance a “universal” structure of action.

Aristotle’s recurrent use, in these passages, of the phraseology of “necessity and likelihood” parallels his characterization of nature in *Physics* 2.5 as the realm of what happens “always or for the most part” (the account of natural processes in *Physics* 2.8 carries this still further). As Aristotle himself remarks in the *Poetics*, the account of the plot as having a beginning, middle, and end gives it a unity analogous to that of a living creature [7.1450b34]. Indeed, this whole discussion is drawn from Plato’s account at *Phaedrus* 264c, which is explicitly based on the idea of a living creature. It is thus rash to dissociate the tragic action, presented in the plot, from nature altogether.

In fact, *praxis* in Aristotle basically signifies not intentional acts but the proper motion of any entity which can exist as a substance, and this sort of motion, in his sense, can be nothing but “natural.”<sup>26</sup> In general, Aristotle understands human action not as the result of some supernatural intrusion into the course of nature—as thinkers from Augustine to Kant, for example, understand it in terms of the “will”—but as a natural process, embedded within the larger, and likewise natural, cosmic order. As the doctor merely intervenes in natural physiological processes, so man in general, in all his *praxeis*, operates in accordance with nature, intervening in and modifying the natural processes of the cosmos but initiating nothing *ex nihilo*.<sup>27</sup> Thus it is that, though Oedipus blames Apollo and himself for his blinding [OT 1329], what is “at fault” for the whole disaster is referred to not as a divinity but as fortune (*tuche*) [OT 442, 977 f.], fate (*moira*) [OT 863, 1458], and time itself [OT 1212]. A child of the first of these, Oedipus waxes and wanes with the moons, as we saw; he is a natural being, and the revelation of this is his undoing [OT 438]: all things are noble in their time [OT 1516], and his time as a happy man is over.

Oedipus’s action in the play is then a process of discovery which results in his cleansing himself of his vision. On a more basic level, however, the action of the play is a natural process of catharsis: that by which the suffering mother, the earth of Thebes, is in the course of time cleansed of the cleverness and daring of Oedipus.

### *Answers from the Mother*

The questions with which I began can now, briefly, be answered.

1. The mother of the Thebans, the Theban earth itself, is not invoked at the beginning of the play, because part of the purpose of the play (as of this paper) is to penetrate beneath the “masculine” veneer of purposive action and to disclose the cathartic process of that very mother-earth. Hence, Oedipus the statesman and political healer, who in the beginning uses medical terminology [cf. OT 68, 99], becomes Oedipus the quasi-female natural being. This is a level of the play that Aristotle, philosopher of purposive action and of most other things masculine, does not mention. But his biological use of the word “catharsis” provides the key to unlock it.

2. The introduction of blood into the metaphor of the storm is not a simple

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26. *Metaphysics* 9.9.1048b22; cf. *Politics* 1254a7 f.; also cf. Joachim Ritter, “Die Lehre vom Ursprung und Sinn der Theorie bei Aristoteles,” *Metaphysik und Politik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969) 25 f.

27. Cf. *de Anima* 3.10 for human agency as rationally ordering, but not beginning, actions.

incoherence but points beyond meteorology to menstruation, the blood-storm of woman. It indicates that the story to be told is, so to speak, one of social menstruation or catharsis. In it, something in itself good but present to excess is driven out of the social organism—a kind of *praxis* that Aristotle does not mention but which his concepts can accommodate.

3. Because this is a natural process, and one in accordance with the months, it is fitting that the play take place around the time of the moon's fullness. And it is fitting that the chorus—spectator and actor in one—call attention to it. For the almost-full moon would then refer at once to the catharsis depicted in the play and to that effected in the spectator by the yearly round of tragedy. It would remind a reader of the cultural and political context of the play, one which he ignores at his peril. And it would show that our identity is to be not merely the kind of cultural catch-basin to which the beginning of this paper appealed but nourishment for nature itself—nourishment which can at any time become excessive, and hence discardable.

4. If the play penetrates “masculine” veneers to reveal “feminine” processes underlying them, we must admit that Oedipus himself—like Aristotle—does not mention this. But his refusal to go back into the palace shows it. For the door of the palace stands open before him like a giant vagina, traditional refuge of the unmanly;<sup>28</sup> and behind the door is the home, the crypt of woman. To be in the home, where, as Creon notes, only kinsmen will see and hear him [*OT* 1430 f.], would socially ratify his own feminization. This, I suggest, is why Oedipus fights so fearfully to stay on stage, or to leave Thebes altogether: better, he is saying, to be an exile on the roads than a woman in the home.<sup>29</sup>

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28. When, in 102 BC, the men of the Cimbri were retreating before the Romans, the women of the tribe lifted their dresses as the men ran towards them, saying “If you're afraid, run back in where you came from and hide there”: René Alleau et al., *Guide de la Provence mystérieuse* (Paris: Tchou Princesse, 1982) 566.

29. Only later does he come, like a contemporary househusband, to “taste the sweets of home” [*Oedipus at Coloneus* 339 ff., 431 ff., 769].