

UNIVERSALS, PLOT AND FORM IN ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS**

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In the ninth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle draws a sharp distinction between the genres of tragic poetry and history:¹

διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποιήσις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἢ μὲν γὰρ ποιήσις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δὲ ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει (1451b5-7).²

For this reason poetry is more philosophical and serious than history: poetry speaks more of universals, while history speaks of particulars.

Despite the facts that both the syntax of the μέν/δέ construction and the contrast it draws are transparent, Aristotle's meaning in this passage is not entirely clear. For if (as he defines it elsewhere) tragedy is "the representation of an action" (μίμησις πράξεως, 1449b24), how can any single tragedy, as a particular representation, nonetheless

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¹ Since Aristotle's particular focus in the *Poetics* is on tragic poetry, I will use the terms 'tragedy', 'poetry' or 'tragic poetry' more or less interchangeably in my discussion. Epic similarly falls under the category of "more serious" poetry (σεμνότεροι, 1448b25; 1448b34-6; 1449b9-10), and while it is true that comic plots are also relevant to the argument (1449b7-9; see p. 14, *infra*), the genre at stake in the *Poetics* is tragedy, and any assertion about poetry in general must therefore reflect Aristotle's ideas about tragedy in particular.

² All references to the Aristotelian corpus will be to the following editions: R. Kassel, ed., *Aristotelis de Arte Poetica Liber* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1965); W.D. Ross, ed., *Aristotelis de Anima* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1956); L. Bywater, ed., *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1894); W.D. Ross, ed., *Aristotelis Ars Rhetorica* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1959); W.D. Ross, ed., *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1953)² 2 vols; W.D. Ross, ed., *Aristotelis Physica* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1950); W.D. Ross, ed., *Aristotle. Parva naturalia* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1955); P. Louis, ed., *Aristote. Les parties des animaux* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956); D. Harlfinger, ed. "Edizione critica del testo del 'De Ideis' di Aristotele" in W. Leszl, ed., *Il 'De Ideis' di Aristotele e la teoria platonica delle idee* (Florence: Olschki, 1975), 15-39. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

constitute or speak of universals (τὰ καθόλου)? The remark has puzzled critics, who attempt to explain it in various ways: the universals in tragedy are ‘generalized’,³ ‘action-types’ or ‘event-types’ in the plot,⁴ ‘general principles’ instantiated in the plot in accordance with necessity and probability,⁵ or not real universals at all, but rather the more nebulous ‘weak universals’ established by “a causally lucid and powerfully unified plot-structure” that have a “metaphorical presence.”⁶ These interpretations largely agree that plot structure is important for Aristotle’s notion of universals, but exactly how or why remains open to debate.

The present investigation is concerned with this debate over tragedy’s capacity to ‘speak of’ universals, specifically vis-à-vis the concept of plot as it is presented in the *Poetics*. Its first principles are straightforward and distinguish it from other scholarly attempts to elucidate the generalized idea of tragedy’s universals: the *Poetics* belongs to the Aristotelian corpus and is not only consistent with his philosophy, but also illuminable by it. In the case of tragedy, it speaks of universals because, like other substances both animate and inanimate in Aristotle’s philosophy, it is compounded of a universal form and matter. I will argue that the universals of which Aristotle writes are not abstract or distinct principles created out of the construction of the plot and possessing metaphorical presence, but are rather bound up with plot itself—understood not simply as the dramatic action, but also as the essence and *telos* of each particular tragedy. Plot is the form of tragic poetry, and the proper construction of a plot is, accordingly, crucial for a particular play’s achieving the end of the genre, which, for Aristotle, lies in the arousal of pity and fear as well as the catharsis which follows.⁷ Tragedy, therefore, is more philosophical than history because it operates on philosophical terms and becomes comprehensible within the framework of Aristotle’s teleology.

In seeking to clarify the role of universals in the *Poetics*, this examination supplements two recent studies that similarly begin from the assumption that one can interpret Aristotle’s *Poetics* on Aristotelian terms. Elizabeth Belfiore has treated the

³ D.W. Lucas, ed., *Aristotle. Poetics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), ad 1455b1; R. Janko, *Aristotle. Poetics*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), ad 51b5.

⁴ J.M. Armstrong, “Aristotle on the Philosophical Nature of Poetry,” *Classical Quarterly* 48 (1998): 451ff.

⁵ M. Heath, “The Universality of Poetry in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” *Classical Quarterly* 41 (1991): 390.

⁶ S. Halliwell, “Aristotelian Mimesis and Human Understanding,” in Ø. Anderson & J. Haarberg, edd., *Making Sense of Aristotle, Essays in Poetics*, (London: Duckworth, 2001), 100-1.

⁷ This is the end of the genre as advanced in the definition: “accomplishing through pity and fear the catharsis of emotions of this kind” (δι’ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν, 1449b27-8). I will not open the scholarly Pandora’s box pertaining to catharsis in this study, as my argument only requires that it is involved in the end at which tragedy aims, realized more clearly (for my purposes, at least) in the arousal of pity and fear.

analogy between poetry and living things, with particular reference to the *Poetics*' concern for the end and function of tragedy,⁸ and similarly, Martha Husain has demonstrated in detail that the *Poetics* is consistent with the larger framework of Aristotelian ontology.⁹ I lay particular stress on this methodology because the difficulties in interpreting the universals of which tragedy speaks stem (as I see it) either from a Platonizing error or a resistance to treating the *Poetics* and plot on Aristotelian terms. This argument serves to correct the error, and to this end, it consists of two parts. In the first, I discuss the ideas of plot and the *telos* of the genre in the arousal of pity and fear as they are presented in the *Poetics*; in the second half of the discussion, I turn to plot as form and the thorny matter of poetry's universals. While it draws on Belfiore and Husain, the analysis will focus primarily on interpreting the arguments put forth in the *Poetics* before reflecting on their Aristotelian framework. Yet comprehending that framework remains imperative: understanding tragedy in terms of Aristotle's ontology not only clarifies the former's relationship to universals, but also situates the idiosyncratic character of the *Poetics*' analyses within the Aristotelian system.¹⁰ The *Poetics* is as much an exercise of Aristotelian thought as it is a work of literary criticism, and Aristotle's view of tragedy is wholly his own.

Plot and the *Telos* of Tragedy

The haste with which Aristotle focuses on the construction of plot (μῦθος) at the onset of the *Poetics* stands out.¹¹ For, vis-à-vis the other general topics outlined in the treatise's first sentence—namely, poetry's potential (δύναμιν), its kinds (εἰδῶν αὐτῆς) and the number and kind of its parts (ἐκ πόρων καὶ ποίων ἐκτὶ μορίων)—the prime factor in determining the quality of poetry is quickly established as the construction of the plot, which is crucial for the play turning out well.¹² To be fair, none would argue that plot is not central to the *Poetics*; over a third of the chapters treat it in one form or another, including (most significantly) the arguments and taxonomies at the heart of the treatise.¹³ Nonetheless, its importance, especially as pertains to the success of a poem, warrants some stress. For, so essential is the concept of plot to Aristotle's conception of

⁸ E. Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), esp. ch. 2.

⁹ M. Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle's Poetics*, (Albany: SUNY, 2002).

¹⁰ Aristotle's lack of concern for the parts of tragedy beyond plot have long posed problems for scholars who bristle at the lack of attention paid to spectacle (ὄψις) and song (μελοποιία)—not to mention the centrality of the chorus to the genre!

¹¹ *Po.* 1447a8-13. Lucas (*op. cit.*, ad 1447a9) points out the position of plot at this point as well.

¹² “[Our concern is] how plots must be constructed if the poem is going to turn out well” (πῶς δεῖ συνίστασθαι τοὺς μύθους εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ἔξειν ἢ ποιήσῃς, 1447a9-10).

¹³ See chapters 7-11, 13-14, and 16-18. G.F. Else, in *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 253, goes so far as to write of Aristotle's “obsession” with plot, and the focus is noted as well by B.R. Rees, “Aristotle's Approach to Poetry,” *Greece & Rome* 28 (1981): 23.

serious poetry that distinguishing them is nigh impossible. In his definition of tragedy (1449b24-28), for example, Aristotle asserts that tragedy is the representation of an action (μίμησις πράξεωσ, 1449b24).¹⁴ In short order, however, he says precisely the same thing about plot; like a tragic poem (of which it is only ever one of six parts—1450a7-10), plot is also the representation of an action (1451a31; 1452a13). The repetition is significant: for Aristotle, plot is not only primary to the craft of composing poetry, but is also so closely identified with a composition as a whole that when he subsequently writes that “_____ is the representation of an action and because of this most of all of agents,”¹⁵ ‘plot’, ‘poetry’, or ‘tragedy’ could be inserted seamlessly as the grammatical subject of the phrase without any distortion of its meaning. The idea operates as a kind of *pars pro toto*: like a form that is identifiable with its substance as a whole, plot is identified with tragic poetry.

So extensive is Aristotle’s identification of plot with tragedy that plot and the actions it represents comprise the *sine qua non* of the genre. For despite the fact that there are five other parts of tragedy (1450a9-10), they are (compared to plot) largely expendable:

ὥστε τὰ πράγματα καὶ ὁ μῦθος τέλος τῆς τραγωδίας, τὸ δὲ τέλος μέγιστον ἀπάντων. ἔτι ἄνευ μὲν πράξεωσ οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο τραγωδία, ἄνευ δὲ ἠθῶν γένοιτ’ ἂν. (1450a22-25).

As a result, actions and plot are the *telos* of tragedy, and the *telos* is the most important of all. **Without action there could not be tragedy**, but without character there could (*my stresses*).

The significance of this point cannot be understated: there is no tragedy without plot, or, put another way, the category ‘tragic’ is wholly dependent upon plot. In light of the way that Aristotle defines both as the representation of an action, this makes good sense: plot is synonymous with tragedy as a whole, and, as the representation of an action, is essential both to the genre and to Aristotle’s understanding of it. The quoted passage, however, indicates a further point: not only is plot that without which tragedy cannot exist, but it is also somehow the goal of tragedy—the *telos* (or final cause) towards which a particular composition is directed. The nature of this *telos* appears elsewhere: in the definition of tragedy, Aristotle describes it as the arousal of pity and fear, and the

¹⁴ In addition to stating this in the definition of tragedy (1449b24), this formula appears at 1449b36, 1450a16-17, 1450b24-25 and is present as well at 1452b1. I exclude for the moment other aspects of the definition.

¹⁵ ἔστιν τε μίμησις πράξεωσ καὶ διὰ ταύτην μάλιστα τῶν πραττόντων (1450b3). The grammatical subject is unclear: Lucas (*op. cit., ad loc.*) understands this passage as implying ‘tragedy’ (looking back to 1450a16), but given the proximity of plot (μῦθος) four lines above and the reference to agents (τῶν πραττόντων), there is no reason that Aristotle could not have elided ‘plot’.

resulting catharsis.¹⁶ I will turn to the matter of pity and fear shortly, but for the moment two related points appear. First, the framework of causality marks the discussion as peculiarly Aristotelian: true knowledge is, after all, the knowledge of causes.¹⁷ Second, it is therefore significant that plot is the *telos* of tragedy in the *Poetics*. For, in light of its status as the *sine qua non* of tragedy, plot's further role as goal makes it essential to the 'tragic' quality of the genre.

Inasmuch as it constitutes the *telos* of tragedy, the matter of plot warrants further elaboration. For although the definition of tragedy suggests that the arousal of pity and fear constitutes the *telos* of poetry, how this *telos* actually lies *in plot* is not immediately clear: getting from plot to pity and fear to the *telos* of tragedy requires deeper analysis of the *Poetics*. The problem is that Aristotle's idea of plot is a bit difficult to pin down: over the course of the treatise, it denotes both the particular actions that constitute a given play's contents as well as the more abstract structure of the play, and the combination of these two things relates it to the goal of the genre as a whole. Plot is not simply the representation of an action (1450a3-4), but is, more specifically, also the construction of events (τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων, 1450a4-5):¹⁸ as a construction (τὴν σύνθεσιν), it is formal and abstract, but as the construction of particular events (τῶν πραγμάτων), it is also poetic content—the stuff that happens in a particular tragedy. The latter notion of plot is more prominent in our contemporary parlance, but for Aristotle the twofold significance of plot as both form and content is integral to the argument.¹⁹ On the one hand, at the level of content, his analysis treats the kinds of action represented in a plot. The list is well known: tragedy is not a representation of any kind of action, he stipulates, but rather of a "complete and serious action having some importance" (ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεωσ σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, 1449b24-25). Particular kinds of action, as we will see, fulfill these criteria differently. On the other hand, at the level of form, Aristotle's analysis also categorizes the parts of plots, and ranks the forms they potentially take in an elaborate taxonomy. For Aristotle, the two

¹⁶ For the definition's reference to pity, fear and catharsis, see n. 7 (*supra*). The idea that tragedy has a goal (and can be more or less successful) appeared already in the treatise's first sentence with reference to plot structure (1447a9-10).

¹⁷ "Our inquiry is concerned with knowledge, and we do not suppose that we know something before we grasp its 'why', (and this is grasping its primary cause)" [ἐπεὶ γὰρ τοῦ εἰδέναι χάριν ἢ πραγματεία, εἰδέναι δὲ οὐ πρότερον οἴομεθα ἕκαστον πρὶν ἂν λάβωμεν τὸ διὰ τί περὶ ἕκαστον (τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ λαβεῖν τὴν πρώτην αἰτίαν), *Ph.* 194b17-20]. See also *Metaph.* 993b23-4.

¹⁸ So Janko (*op. cit., ad loc.*) translates τὴν σύνθεσιν as 'construction', while Lucas (*op. cit., ad loc.*) glosses the term as "structure."

¹⁹ One can compare the idea that the soul, for Aristotle, is the form of the body, but also situated in the heart—that is, in a material body (*Juv.* 469a5-7; *Metaph.* 1035b14ff.). See W.F.R. Hardie, "Aristotle's Treatment of the Relation Between the Soul and the Body" *Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1964): 53-72; T. Tracy, "Heart and Soul in Aristotle," in J. Anton and A. Preus, edd., *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2, (Albany: SUNY, 1985), 321-339.

aspects of plot as form and content go hand in hand, so much so that he makes no distinction between them.

The complexity of plot as both form and content is integral to much of the discussion. For, although the seventh chapter announces structure as its topic,²⁰ the composition of plot depends in large part upon having the proper kind of action, which is to say that the proper form of a tragic plot depends in part upon its having the proper content. To this end, Aristotle qualifies his earlier definition that a plot's action be complete and have magnitude (1449b24-25) by adding that the action must also be 'whole' or 'united' (ὅλη, 1450b23-26). This qualification serves to clarify further the earlier definition; because it has a beginning, middle, and end, a 'united' action includes the idea of a complete action within it.²¹ The beginning, Aristotle states, follows nothing prior by necessity, but is itself followed by something else (1450b27-28). Likewise, the middle is both preceded and followed by something else, and the end follows something prior but is itself not followed (1450b29-31). All of these arguments are structural,²² but at no point does the main idea—that at issue are the structures of *particular* events (i.e., the play's contents)—fall from sight. An action must be whole and complete, but wholeness and completeness are determined by the connections between the beginning, middle, and end of a plot's actions.

The connections that unite a plot lie in probability and necessity (τὸ εἰκός/τὸ ἀναγκαῖον), and these principles cement Aristotle's idea of plot as denoting not just the content of a tragedy but, more importantly, its structure as well.²³ The poet's task (ἔργον), Aristotle tells us, is not simply to relate things that have happened, but the sort of things "which might happen and which are possible according to the principles of probability and necessity."²⁴ In this statement, the distinction between poetry and history becomes important: as a simple succession of particular events, things that have happened (τὰ γενόμενα) are the concern of history, whereas the poet is concerned with

²⁰ "[Let us discuss] what sort of construction of actions there should be" (ποῖαν τινὰ δεῖ τὴν κύστασιν εἶναι τῶν πραγμάτων, 1450b21-22).

²¹ "The action that has a beginning, middle, and end is united" (ὅλον δέ ἐστιν τὸ ἔχον ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσον καὶ τελευτήν, 1450b26-27).

²² "It is necessary, then, that well constructed plots neither begin nor end at random, but to employ the aforementioned ideas" (δεῖ ἄρα τοὺς συνεστῶτας εὔ μύθους μήθ' ὁπόθεν ἔτυχεν ἄρχεσθαι μήθ' ὅπου ἔτυχε τελευτᾶν, ἀλλὰ κεχρηῆσθαι ταῖς εἰρημέναις ιδέαις, 1450b32-34).

²³ "according to probability or necessity" (κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον): see, variously, 1451a12-13, 27-28, 38; 1451b9, 35; 1452a20, 24; 1454a34-36. In chapter seven, he uses slightly different terminology, labeling the connections as that which "occur [or arise] by nature" πέφυκεν εἶναι [ἢ γίνεσθαι] (1450b28, 29) or that which happens "necessarily" ἐξ ἀνάγκης (1450b27, 30).

²⁴ οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν... ἀλλ' οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον (1451a36-38).

the kinds of things that might happen (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο, 1451b4-5).²⁵ Yet the poet's concern lies not simply with the kind of events at issue, but, via the principles of probability and necessity, his aim of representing a complete and whole action is also bound up with how these events fit together. The construction of a plot (and not simply the quality of its contents) is essential to a tragedy's success; while Aristotle allows for the possibility that a poet would compose plots that are not determined according to probability or necessity, he ranks episodic plots of this kind as "worst" (χείριστα, 1451b34).

The criticism of episodic plots is a significant moment in the *Poetics*, and not simply because it is bound up with the distinction Aristotle draws between history and poetry. For because episodic plots (like history) lack the principles of probability and necessity, they fail both in the criterion of poetic unity and in achieving the primary function of tragedy—arousing pity and fear:

ἐπεὶ δὲ οὐ μόνον τελείας ἐστὶ πράξεως ἢ μίμησις ἀλλὰ καὶ φοβερῶν
καὶ ἐλεεινῶν, ταῦτα δὲ γίνεται καὶ μάλιστα [καὶ μᾶλλον] ὅταν
γένηται παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι' ἄλληλα· (1452a1-4).²⁶

Since the representation is not only of a completed action but also of frightful and piteous [actions], these things occur most of all when they happen through one another [but] contrary to expectation.

At last the relationship of plot to the *telos* of tragedy in pity and fear starts to emerge. Even though episodic plots may represent possible actions occurring by mechanical succession, a plot that occurs in accordance with necessity and probability more fully reflects the aims of tragedy in arousing pity and fear through the representation of a complete action.²⁷ The effectiveness of the drama depends, in large part, on the plausible organization of its events: the most amazing events (θαυμασιώτατα), Aristotle states, occur not by chance (ἀπὸ τύχης) or spontaneously (ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου), but as though by design (ὥσπερ ἐπίτηδες, 1452a5-7). For this reason, an impossible but

²⁵ Aristotle distinguishes history and poetry by means of this difference between actual events (τὰ γενόμενα) and possible events (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο, 1451b4-5). For history writes solely of actual events—i.e. "what Alcibiades did or suffered" (τί Ἀλκιβιάδης ἔπραξεν ἢ τί ἔπαθεν, 1451b11)—which lack a principle of probability: as Aristotle puts it, it is evident that actual events are possible since they could not have occurred if they were impossible (1451b17-19). I will shortly discuss how probability and necessity are not only the mark of a poetic plot, but also essential to its capacity to speak of universals (pp. 19-20, *infra*).

²⁶ This agrees with the definition of tragedy: δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιοῦτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν (1449b27-28). At *EN* 1105b21-23, Aristotle lists fear and pity among the passions (πάθη), and at 1106a4-6 he makes clear that people are moved (κινεῖσθαι) with respect to the passions.

²⁷ One can compare the way in which the pleasures which accompany the activities of the virtuous individual are those proper to mankind (*EN* 1176a2-29).

believable turn of events is superior to the possible but unbelievable;²⁸ the plausibility or necessity of the poetic action supersedes other concerns.²⁹

In chapters 10-11 and 13-14, the argument becomes increasingly structural and taxonomical, as Aristotle discusses the parts of plot and the ways in which they can be utilized within the framework of probability and necessity for the purpose of arousing pity and fear.³⁰ Here again, the relationship between plot, *telos*, and both pity and fear is at stake. These parts of plot are suffering (πάθος), recognition (ἀναγνώρισις), and reversal (περιπέτεια, 1452b9-10), and Aristotle's discussion of them is well known. Concerning reversal, he argues that the best change of fortune involves neither an excessively good nor an excessively bad man (1453a7-8), but one who suffers a sudden change from prosperity to misfortune "through some error" (δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά, 1453a8-10). The taxonomy of recognition is similarly straightforward: the best kinds of recognition involve an individual's intention to harm a *philos* and recognition of the relationship before taking action (1453b34-36), or an individual acting unknowingly against a *philos* and recognizing the relationship after the fact (1453b29-31).³¹ The presence of recognition, reversal, or both makes a plot complex (1452a14-18), and when they occur simultaneously with one another, they are most effective in arousing pity and fear (1452a32-33).

While Aristotle's classification of recognition and reversal is unambiguous, the subtleties of the taxonomy are intriguing. For while it is clear that the primary criterion for an effective tragedy is the arousal of pity and fear, which Aristotle believes to be produced by crimes among *philo*i (as well as the recognitions and reversals attendant

²⁸ "With respect to the composition, a believable impossibility is more choice-worthy than an unbelievable possibility" (πρός τε γὰρ τὴν ποιήσιν αἰρετώτερον πιθανὸν ἀδύνατον ἢ ἀπίθανον καὶ δυνατόν, 1461b11-12). See also 1460a26-27: "it is necessary to prefer impossible likelihoods rather than possible unbelievabilities" (προαιρεῖσθαι τε δεῖ ἀδύνατα εἰκότα μᾶλλον ἢ δυνατὰ ἀπίθανα).

²⁹ Aristotle cites the example of the statue of Mityes in Argos, which fell on the man who had murdered Mityes as he looked up it (1452a7-9). For Aristotle, this is not simply random chance, but happened as though on purpose. The impossibility—that a statue would deliberately fall on a man—is ignored in light of the plausibility of the scenario.

³⁰ The use of reversal and recognition distinguishes a complex (πεπλεγμένος) plot from a simple (ἀπλοῦς) one (1452a14-18). Aristotle is clear that reversal and recognition must involve probability and necessity: "it is necessary that these things happen from the construction of the plot itself, so it occurs from the preceding that they happen either by necessity or probability" (ταῦτα δὲ δεῖ γίνεσθαι ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς συστάσεως τοῦ μύθου, ὥστε ἐκ τῶν προγεγενημένων συμβαίνειν ἢ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ κατὰ τὸ εἶδος γίνεσθαι ταῦτα: 1452a18-20).

³¹ In chapter sixteen, Aristotle describes such recognitions occurring out of the actions themselves (ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων, 1455a16-17) as the best. I will not discuss the two further scenarios Aristotle describes (1453b27-28, 1453b37-38) as neither involves recognition (as well as being dramatically inferior to the examples cited).

upon them),³² it is not readily apparent why he holds that actions involving *philo*i are best suited toward this end, nor why the tragic protagonist cannot be overly wicked or virtuous. The solution lies in understanding further how pity and fear function in Aristotle. According to the criteria already laid out, a character's suffering must occur via probability and necessity. But, in addition, the suffering must also be amazing in the eyes of the audience, which is to say that it is not enough for the representation of a particular suffering to be believable or to have happened as if by design (ὥσπερ ἐπίτηδες, 1452a7) to produce pity and fear. In other words, not every kind of suffering is suitable for the properly tragic inspiration of these emotions.

Pity and fear are social emotions in Aristotle, which is to say that they presuppose an emotional connection. Aristotle illustrates this relationship in the *Rhetoric*: “whatever people fear for themselves, they pity when it happens to others” (ὅσα ἐφ’ αὐτῶν φοβοῦνται, ταῦτα ἐπ’ ἄλλων γιγνόμενα ἐλεοῦσιν, 1386a28-9).³³ These emotions are essentially two aspects of the same relationship an individual has to any given experience of suffering, but crucial to Aristotle's argument is the kind of individual whose sufferings one can relate to. In the *Poetics*' classification of reversal (περιπέτεια), the ideal protagonist excels neither in virtue nor in wickedness (1453a7-12) but suffers on account of an error, and the reason for portraying protagonists of this kind is so that they will neither be so virtuous as to be an object of admiration for the audience, nor so wicked as to be an object of contempt. According to Aristotle, the audience must be able to identify with protagonists in order to feel pity and fear on account of their suffering: “pity is for the undeserving [person], fear for the similar one.”³⁴ In order to feel pity, one must be capable both of identifying with another's suffering and of imagining it happening to oneself or to one's family and friends,³⁵ and in order to feel fear, one must similarly be

³² “For such a recognition and reversal will involve either pity or fear (for tragedy is assumed to be the representation of such actions)” [ἢ γὰρ τοιαύτη ἀναγνώρισις καὶ περιπέτεια ἢ ἔλεον ἔξει ἢ φόβον (οἷων πράξεων ἢ τραγωδία μίμησις ὑπόκειται), 1452a38-b1].

³³ *Rh.* 1386a27-28.

³⁴ ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον, φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον, 1453a5-6. The *Rhetoric* also discusses undeserved suffering: see 1385b14, 1385b34-1386a1, 1386b7ff.

³⁵ So M. Nussbaum, in “Compassion: the Basic Social Emotion,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996): 35, points out that Aristotelian pity is anticipatory; to feel pity is to be “aware both of the bad lot of the sufferer and of the fact that [the suffering] is, right now, not one's own.” Aristotle says something similar in the *Rhetoric*: “let pity then be a certain pain... [at what] befalls an undeserving person, which an individual might expect either himself or one of his friends to suffer, especially when it seems to be nearby. For clearly the individual who is on the verge of pitying the occurrence of such a thing supposes that he or one of his friends might suffer some [similar] misfortune” (ἔστω δὲ ἔλεος λύπη τις... τοῦ ἀναξίου τυγχάνειν, ὃ κὰν αὐτὸς προσδοκῆσειεν ἂν παθεῖν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ τινα, καὶ τοῦτο ὅταν πλησίον φαίνεται· δῆλον γὰρ ὅτι ἀνάγκη τὸν μέλλοντα ἐλεήσειν ὑπάρχειν τοιοῦτον οἷον οἷεσθαι παθεῖν ἂν τι κακὸν ἢ αὐτὸν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ τινα, *Rh.* 1385b13-18).

able to imagine those sufferings befalling oneself.³⁶ When a protagonist is unlike the audience, however, the result is that neither emotion is aroused (1452b34-1453a1).

Aristotle's idea of likeness is not only central to the emotional nexus of tragedy, but also has consequences for the kinds of suffering that are appropriate to it. Here we return to the idea that pity and fear are aroused specifically by crimes among *philoï*. As Elizabeth Belfiore argues, the idea that a tragic protagonist be 'alike' is loaded for Aristotle, since, for him, *philia* is essential to human life.³⁷ Because the only thing piteous or fearful about a catastrophe wrought among enemies or individuals with no specific relationship to one another is the suffering itself (1453b17-19), only plots that depict suffering amongst *philoï* arouse the pity and fear that are proper (οἰκεία) to tragedy.³⁸ Belfiore explains the mechanism well: "loss of *philoï* or harm to them is, because of our nature as political and *philial* animals, the most terrible and pitiable thing humans can suffer."³⁹ For Aristotle, pity and fear are aroused in the first place because the protagonist's suffering is undeserved (ἀνάξιος, 1453a5), but furthermore, because the protagonist is also 'like' the audience both in terms of the proportion of virtue and vice, and in terms of the suffering experienced at the hands of a *philos*. In a well-constructed and complex plot whose actions transpire through probability and necessity, the suffering—or even the threat of it—produces tragic pity and fear in its audience by virtue of the circumstances surrounding it. Everyone has *philoï*, after all, and the bonds of *philia* operate in relationships both private and public, both in the *polis* and the *oikos*. Thus, however impossible its events might appear, a well-constructed plot depicting the harming of *philoï* according to necessity and probability arouses, for Aristotle, the strongest feelings of pity and fear in its audience, since its members can easily imagine themselves in such a situation. It is for this reason that plot "as a whole is the intrinsic *telos* of a tragedy":⁴⁰ the achievement of the *telos* in arousing pity and fear depends both upon the proper construction of plot and on the appropriate kinds of action within it.

Universals and the Form of Tragedy

The idea that the structure of plot is essential to a tragedy's achievement of its *telos* prepares the way for the second half of the discussion. For, not only does tragedy's final cause (that is, its *telos*) come into focus via plot's aim of arousing pity and fear (not

³⁶ "It is necessary that frightful things of this kind are those which seem to have a great potential of destroying us or of hurting us to the point of great pain" (ἀνάγκη τὰ τοιαῦτα φοβερὰ εἶναι ὅσα φαίνεται δύναμιν ἔχειν μεγάλην τοῦ φθεῖρειν ἢ βλάπτειν βλάβας εἰς λύπην μεγάλην συντεινούσας· *Rh.* 1382a28-30).

³⁷ Belfiore (*op. cit.*, 75-79). She refers to *EN* 1155a4-6, 16-22 (amongst other places).

³⁸ "For one ought not to seek all kinds of pleasure from tragedy but that which is proper to it. And since the poet must provide through representation the kind of pleasure that arises out of pity and fear, it is clear that this must be worked into the actions" (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 πράγμασιν ἐμποιητέον, 1453b10-14).

³⁹ Belfiore (*op. cit.*, 79).

⁴⁰ Husain (*op. cit.*, 52).

to mention our understanding of it), but by the same token, so too does its formal cause. We have already seen that plot is synonymous with tragedy for the purposes of definition, but, in the following discussion, we will also see the extent to which plot is the universal form of tragedy, providing the terms by which Aristotle is able to classify and understand the genre at all. For, we must recall that, without plot and the actions it represents, tragedy cannot exist (1450a23-25).

The references to universals (τὰ καθόλου) within the *Poetics* reveal Aristotle's concern for plot structure, but also demonstrate that he considers plot the essence—that is, the form—of a tragic composition. The term only occurs seven times in the treatise,⁴¹ but its meaning can be carefully traced as denoting the form a plot takes. In the fifth chapter, Aristotle describes how Crates was the first to “let go of particular iambic lampoon and compose generalized dialogue and plots” in his comedies (ἀφήμενος τῆς ἰαμβικῆς ἰδέας καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μύθους, 1449b8).⁴² That the dialogue and plots are described for the first time as generalized (καθόλου) is important: Crates is the first to compose poems with a plot that is sketched out and of a particular, definite form (in contrast to his previous personal invectives).⁴³ Aristotle uses καθόλου in a similar way in chapter 17, when he recommends that a poet work on his plots first:

τούς τε λόγους καὶ τοὺς πεποιημένους δεῖ καὶ αὐτὸν ποιοῦντα ἐκτίθεσθαι καθόλου, εἴθ' οὕτως ἐπεισοδιοῦν καὶ παρατείνειν (1455a34-b2).

And as for the stories, both the ones already made up and those he composes on his own, it is necessary he set them out as universals, and then introduce episodes and extend them.

Here (as in the case of Crates), καθόλου refers directly to the organization of events in an abstract sense; the plot *qua* καθόλου is no particular play, but the general form of any number of dramas.⁴⁴ The subsequent plot summary of *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (1455b3-12) confirms this sense of καθόλου as the form of the plot; Aristotle's description excludes specific episodic details such as names and places, and is so concerned with the abstract organization of events that it even posits that the brother's

⁴¹ I will only discuss six of these, as the meaning at 1450b12 concerns διάνοια and not plot.

⁴² Crates' status as a comic poet does not contaminate the discussion of tragic poetry, as the point pertains to the meaning of καθόλου vis-à-vis plot. Comedy, like tragedy, has a structured plot, but the difference lies in the plot structures' respective goals: comedy does not aim to arouse pity and fear as tragedy does.

⁴³ Cf. Lucas (*op. cit.*, *ad loc.*). Lucas' point on καθόλου as 'generalizing' would be appropriate were λόγοι the only thing in question; the inclusion of μῦθοι here can only refer to the form of plot.

⁴⁴ Again, Lucas (*op. cit.*, *ad loc.*) reads καθόλου as “generalizing” as opposed to 'general.'

arrival can happen for some reason outside the plot (διὰ τινὰ αἰτίαν ἔξω τοῦ καθόλου, 1455b7-8).⁴⁵

Aristotle's desire that the poet get the form of the plot right before filling in the particulars is tied up not only with the sense of καθόλου as a universal form, but also with identifying this form with the *telos* of tragedy. For, as he puts it, the most effective plots are so well put together that, even without a performance, they can succeed in evoking pity and fear from an audience:

δεῖ γὰρ καὶ ἄνευ τοῦ ὄραϊν οὕτω συνεστάναι τὸν μῦθον ὥστε τὸν ἀκούοντα τὰ πράγματα γινόμενα καὶ φρίπτειν καὶ ἐλεεῖν ἐκ τῶν συμβαινόντων (1453b3-6).

For the poet ought to construct the plot so that even without watching [a production], someone who hears the events which occur would bristle and feel pity for the outcome.

This assertion is the single most important indication of the value Aristotle places on plot structure for the success of a tragedy. Plot itself, independent of the spectacle of a staged performance, is sufficient for the achievement of the genre's *telos*, and by this Aristotle means that, when the poet gets the form of his composition right—namely, when he constructs a complex plot incorporating suffering among *philoï*, reversal, and recognition—the realization of that form achieves the end of the genre.

The idea that the abstract structure of a tragic plot can be sufficient for achieving the *telos* of the genre in arousing pity and fear fortifies Aristotle's understanding of plot as the form of tragedy. So when he describes plot, for example, as being like the soul of tragedy (1450a38-9), this is not an empty simile but one with real content informed by analogy from other works. For soul, he tells us in *de Anima*, is both the origin (*de An.* 402a6-7) and the form of a physical body with the potential for life,⁴⁶ and the same framework holds true in the case of tragedy: plot is the form of tragedy with the potential for a particular end, namely, the arousal of pity and fear.⁴⁷ What makes tragedy tragic is its plot, whose construction—when unified and containing the appropriate suffering, recognition, and reversal—actualizes itself and its end in the arousal of the audience's tragic emotions.⁴⁸ As we were told already in the treatise's first sentence, the construction of plot is the primary criterion for the success of a poem (1447a9-10).

⁴⁵ I see no reason for Kassel to bracket this phrase, as its sense is fully appropriate to the sentence.

⁴⁶ ἀναγκαῖον ἄρα τὴν ψυχὴν οὐσίαν εἶναι ὡς εἶδος σώματος φυσικοῦ δυνάμει ζῶντων ἔχοντος (*de An.* 412a19-21). See also *PA* 641a18-21; 645b14-20, cited in Belfiore (*op. cit.*, 56).

⁴⁷ Husain (*op. cit.*, 64) agrees: "The examples Aristotle gives of such general plot-structure shows that emotive content is embedded in them, for they include not only the causal sequence of actions but also the family relationships that are constitutive of the pitiful and fearsome."

⁴⁸ So also Husain (*op. cit.*, 64): "For unless the complex soul of a living animal is itself one, it cannot unify all the parts of its body into one animal. And unless it is the animal's

I am not alone in considering the reference to plot as the soul of tragedy as a crucial moment in the *Poetics*; Elizabeth Belfiore similarly notes how Aristotle uses this analogy to portray tragedy as “a craft that imitates nature.”⁴⁹ Citing the point that plot involves a change (μετάβασις, 1452a16; μεταβάλλειν, 1451a14), Belfiore characterizes a poetic plot as a process akin to that which occurs in an organic substance: both are directed toward a specific *telos* for the sake of which they exist.⁵⁰ The analogy is fitting: on the side of *physis* (specifically, the case of an animal), the material body exists for the sake of the soul, which (as was noted) in the Aristotelian system is the form of the body with the potential for life. Thus, for Aristotle, soul is not simply the form of the body, but is also its *telos* (and its efficient cause, as well—*de An.* 415b8-12). Soul is the “functioning of a living thing,” which is to say that its activity is the function for whose purpose the organism is organized.⁵¹ The same applies for tragedy; just as the activity of the soul in an organism is internal, essential, and aimed at life, so too is the process of plot essential to tragedy and aimed at the specifically tragic *telos* of arousing of pity and fear.⁵² Without plot, a tragedy cannot be tragic, and the difference from the case of the soul is that soul is also the efficient cause, while a poetic plot requires a poet to compose it.

The fundamental quality of Aristotelian form—whether soul or plot—is important to keep in mind: in contrast to the case in the Platonic philosophy, these forms are not separable from matter (e.g. a body or tragic actions), but comprise their respective

specific nature as actuality, it cannot actualize the corresponding potentiality of all the parts of its body. As a fish must be one and specifically fishy in its entire being, so a tragedy must be one and specifically tragic in its entire being. And for that to be possible, its action must function analogously to the fish's soul.” For tragedy as a kind of *ousia*, see her discussion on pp. 29-34.

⁴⁹ Belfiore (*op. cit.*, 53.) See also Husain (*op. cit.*, 18-29); and (more generally) Geoffrey Lloyd, *The Revolutions of Wisdom. Studies in the Claims and Practice of Ancient Greek Science*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 188, who argues that the philosopher is “extraordinarily free with implicit and explicit comparisons of every kind between the role of φύσις and the τέχνηαι.”

⁵⁰ For the *telos* as the “for the sake of which” (τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα), see the parallel passages in *Metaph.* 1013a32ff.; *Ph.* 194b32-33.

⁵¹ Belfiore (*op. cit.*, 56); see also Husain (*op. cit.*, 50).

⁵² Belfiore (*op. cit.*, 55) notes the following “less than exact” correspondence in the process-product distinction between living things and tragedy: “In nature, the process by means of which a living thing develops is different from the product, the completed living thing. This is also true of the craft of house building. . . . In the case of tragedy, however, the plot is both the process of imitating and the product produced by imitating.” I add a further distinction: for while one is tempted to use the analogy of the seed, whose externalization makes explicit what was already present as form without matter, the realization of tragedy's *telos*—the arousal of pity and fear—requires the efficient cause of the poet working on plot structure. On the seed as establishing the *telos* of the process of growing, see *Metaph.* 1049b14-1050a10.

essences. Uninformed matter is, after all, unintelligible for Aristotle. The distinction between Aristotelian and Platonic notions of form is particularly important because the equation of plot and form for which I am arguing has not been widely accepted by others,⁵³ and the resistance, to my mind, is due largely to a confusion of the philosophers' respective ideas.⁵⁴ Even leading experts on the *Poetics* such as Stephen Halliwell struggle somewhat with the distinction, and purport to treat the *Poetics*' analysis of tragedy as though it operated without reference to its formal and final causes.

In distancing myself from Halliwell, I am not taking issue with the understanding of Aristotle (Halliwell agrees, for example, that Aristotelian form cannot be detached from its substance), but rather with articulating more clearly how the *Poetics* operates within that Aristotelian framework. For, when Halliwell argues that the prescriptions of the *Poetics*' thirteenth and fourteenth chapters (concerning the best kind of change and suffering) are not limited to the abstract shape of the plot, he implicitly detaches poetic form from poetic matter:

These prescriptions **cannot be said to deal with form at the expense of substance**, since the plot-structure (*muthos*) with which they are concerned is **not simply the abstract shape of the plot**, but the totality of the represented action with all its causal connections and logic of development, as well as the integrated relation within it of action and character [*my stresses*].⁵⁵

Halliwell focuses on the “totality of the represented action” in arguing that the concern of these chapters is not simply abstract and formal. On the one hand, I am in complete agreement: as I have argued, in the *Poetics*, plot denotes both abstract form and the particular contents derived from human action.⁵⁶ But at the same time, the idea implicit in Halliwell's argument, that form can be discussed “at the expense of substance” seems to me to assume both that the two are distinguishable and that a substance can be intelligible apart from its form. These assumptions strike me as false and un-Aristotelian.

Aristotelian plot includes a notion of content, but it is the form of those contents that determines the quality of the play: the particular actions dramatized in a tragedy are tragic for Aristotle's system only to the extent that they are of a particular kind (namely, that they include suffering amongst *philoï*, recognition and reversal) and only to the

⁵³ Rees (*op. cit.*) agrees on the centrality of form, but does not treat the *Poetics* thoroughly enough to show how such a reading is proper to Aristotle, and so is rightly criticized by Stephen Halliwell [*Aristotle's Poetics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 5, 23] for such a 'formalist' reading. Lucas (*op. cit.*, ad 1450a38) notes that “Soul is the ‘form’ of man, and plot is of equivalent importance in tragedy” but leaves his discussion at that.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Halliwell's criticism of Armstrong's tentative classification of the universal as a plot-type (2001, 98), and Halliwell's own tentative treatment of the issue (2001, 100-101).

⁵⁵ Halliwell (1996, 5).

⁵⁶ See pp. 8-9 (*supra*).

extent that they are structured in a particular way, namely, according to the principles of probability and necessity for the purpose of arousing pity and fear. The poetic substance is both unintelligible and, more critically, not tragic without such a formal framework. Thus, when Halliwell asserts that “One cannot, in Aristotle’s theory, pass judgement on the formal aspects of a work of art without a grasp of the substance to which they give a form” he inverts the relation between form and substance in Aristotle’s philosophy;⁵⁷ one cannot understand Aristotelian substance at all without reference to its causes—especially the formal and final. In the specific case of tragedy (as Aristotle himself argues), even when read (rather than performed), a well-organized plot is sufficient for achieving the end of the genre in arousing pity and fear (1453b3-6). Contrary to the assertion, it is, in fact, the case that one can pass judgment on a work of art without grasping it as a particular representation.

To my mind, the error is understandable and fundamentally Platonic. For in the idea that the represented human actions (*qua* ‘matter’ of a poetic substance) can be understood without reference at some level to form (or indeed, that they can be distinguished at all from it), one finds implicit the Platonic separation (*χωρισμός*) of form and matter.⁵⁸ Such a separation is foreign to Aristotle’s philosophy;⁵⁹ his substance is a composite of a universal form which is knowable and a material substrate (*ὑποκείμενον*) that is *informed*.⁶⁰ As a so-called hylomorphic compound or concrete universal, one such body contains both matter and form, which are distinguishable logically (but not physically) within it. For, matter has its form within it as a potentiality and cannot exist without reference to form:

ἔτι ἡ ὕλη ἔστι δυνάμει ὅτι ἔλθοι ἂν εἰς τὸ εἶδος· ὅταν δέ γε ἐνεργείᾳ ᾗ,
τότε ἐν τῷ εἶδει ἐστὶν (*Metaph.*, 1050a15-16).

Matter exists potentially because it might achieve its form, and whenever it actually exists, at that time it is in its form.

⁵⁷ Halliwell (1996, 5).

⁵⁸ See, for example, *Phd.* 67d4-5, 9-10.

⁵⁹ Cf. the third-man criticisms of Aristotle in *On Ideas* (84.22-7): “If that which is truly predicated of some plurality is also some other thing besides those things of which it is predicated and is **separate from them** (for this is what those who propose ideas suppose they prove: for this reason they think Man-itself is something, because Man is truly predicated of the plurality of particular men and is different from those particulars). But if this is so, there will be a third man...” [εἰ τὸ κατηγορούμενον τινῶν πλειόνων ἀληθῶς καὶ ἔστιν ἄλλο παρὰ τὰ ὧν κατηγορεῖται, **κεχωρισμένον αὐτῶν** (τοῦτο γὰρ ἡγοῦνται δεικνύναι οἱ τὰς ιδέας τιθέμενοι· διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶ τι αὐτοάνθρωπος κατ’ αὐτούς, ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος κατὰ τῶν καθ’ ἕκαστα ἀνθρώπων πλειόνων ὄντων ἀληθῶς κατηγορεῖται καὶ ἄλλος τῶν καθ’ ἕκαστα ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν)—ἀλλ’ εἰ τοῦτο, ἔσται τις τρίτος ἄνθρωπος] (*my stresses*).

⁶⁰ *Metaph.* 1042a25ff.

That one could discuss matter or substance without reference to its universal form is rationally impossible for Aristotle.⁶¹ The two must coexist, and, as the discussion of a tragic plot—even in abstract—reveals, this is so as well in the case of tragedy.

In light of these ontological and teleological principles, the consequences for a properly Aristotelian understanding of tragedy now come into focus: plot is the universal form which tragedy (and the particular actions it dramatizes *qua* material) possesses potentially: a good tragedy realizes (or actualizes) its potential form more fully than a bad one, and to the extent that it realizes this form, it achieves its *telos* in arousing pity and fear.⁶² It is for this reason that Aristotle's theory of poetry is so consistently concerned with both the elements of plot and the best form (or plot) for a tragic composition.⁶³ The framework for Aristotle's discussion of tragedy is formalist and consistent with his philosophy: everything hinges on plot as the form and *telos* of the genre.

Understanding plot as the form and *telos* of tragedy brings the *Poetics* under the purview of Aristotle's larger philosophy, and allows one to get beyond the difficulties posed by tragedy's capacity to speak of universals. For, as soon as plot *qua* universal form is understood as essential and integral to tragedy, then the objection that a particular plot "cannot straightforwardly count as a universal" disappears.⁶⁴ Particular plays speak of universals inasmuch as the former are aimed at realizing their essential, universal form. So also are we beyond the point of speaking of the universals as 'generalized' in one form or another.⁶⁵ plot is tragedy itself—its origin and its *telos*—and, as the form of tragedy, it allows the genre to be understood as analogous to a concrete universal.

With this notion of plot as form in place, we can turn to the final two instances of καθόλου in the *Poetics*, at the point when Aristotle claims that poetry is more philosophical and "speaks more of universals, while history speaks of particulars" (ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποιητικὴ μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δ' ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει, 1451b6-7). The distinction in terms of plot has already been discussed:⁶⁶ while history represents things that have happened (τὰ γενόμενα), poetry involves the kinds of things that might happen (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο, 1451b4-5). The concept of the universal lies in the distinction: in the

⁶¹ Cf. Halliwell, who elsewhere understates the *locus* of form within a substance; e.g. "For universals are not, for Aristotle, substances..." (2001, 102); "a distinction between form and content is difficult in Aristotelian terms" ["Aristotle on Form and Unity" in M. Kelly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Vol. I*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 103]. Such a distinction is not 'difficult', but possible only logically!

⁶² The fourth cause, the efficient, is the poet himself, as was noted (p. 16, *supra*).

⁶³ So Husain (*op. cit.*, 43): "What a tragedy must achieve is its own *ousia*, its own essential being, and central to that is the achievement of the *katharsis* of the action." As noted initially (n. 7, *supra*), I prefer to focus on the arousal of pity and fear as tragedy's self-realization (given the problems in interpreting catharsis), but Husain's point is otherwise identical to mine.

⁶⁴ Halliwell (2001, 98).

⁶⁵ See nn. 3-6 (*supra*).

⁶⁶ See pp. 9-10 (*supra*).

following lines, Aristotle defines καθόλου as “the sort of thing a certain person will say or do according to probability or necessity” (ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἄττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον (1451b8-9), while the example he provides for the particulars of history is “what Alcibiades did or suffered” (τί Ἀλκιβιάδης ἔπραξεν ἢ τί ἔπαθεν, 1451b11). Put crudely, tragedy (ideally) has a plot with a complex structure—with reversal and/or recognition, structured according to probability and necessity for the purpose of arousing pity and fear—while history’s particulars resemble the simple episodic plots that are “worst” (χείρισται, 1451b33-4) in the analysis of poetry. The form (or, we could more properly say, the plot) of the former distinguishes it from the latter.

While the understanding of plot as form explains tragedy’s capacity to speak of universals, the final problem at stake concerns the assertion that tragedy is more philosophical (φιλοσοφώτερον, 1451b5) than history. Here it is important to keep in mind the ontological and teleological framework at work in Aristotle’s discussion: while previous scholarship treated the universals as ‘generalized’ ideas and provided one answer to the problem, namely, that poetry is more philosophical “because it gives us a more generalized view of human nature and action,”⁶⁷ the *Poetics*’ analysis of tragedy as a kind of substance suggests rather that ‘more philosophical’ pertains to tragedy’s status as an object of contemplation. For inasmuch as Aristotle categorizes and understands tragedy from within the framework of his larger philosophical system, tragedy is ‘more philosophical’ an object for thought than the simple case of history and its particulars. The *Poetics* treats the causes of tragedy, especially the final and formal, and true knowledge for Aristotle, as we know, is a knowledge of causes.⁶⁸ Tragedy is more philosophical because it invites analysis in philosophical terms.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed an interpretation of the *Poetics* which situates plot as the universal form of tragedy, and which argues that Aristotle’s prescriptions for the organization of plot are aimed principally at the *telos* of the genre, understood as the arousal of pity and fear. When Aristotle comments that tragedy speaks more of universals, then, he is referring to tragedy as a poetic substance compounded of universal form (plot) and particular matter (the particular poetic events), which is, as a whole, aimed at a particular end (arousing pity and fear). The universal is essential, and the particular events that might occur in a play lose their tragic quality if not structured appropriately for the *telos*. Plot structure determines the extent to which a play is more or less tragic and the degree to which achieves its emotional goal.

In this respect, I hope to have framed the argument of the *Poetics* within the larger Aristotelian philosophy, principally by demonstrating the former’s implicit concern for the causes of tragedy. This Aristotelian framework helps obviate some of the difficulties posed by the *Poetics*’ analysis, particularly inasmuch as it acknowledges their

⁶⁷ Janko (*op. cit.*, ad 1451b5).

⁶⁸ See n.17 (*supra*).

idiosyncratic character. For the *Poetics*' analyses are, above all, uniquely Aristotelian: its concern for form and *telos*, the disproportionate "obsession" with plot (at the expense of the other five parts of tragedy), and especially the lack of concern for other prominent aspects of the art such as the chorus, all mark the treatise as unusual. What I hope to have shown is that this is not the kind of study of poetry that another figure could have composed. While figures such as Belfiore and Husain have treated aspects of the *Poetics* in terms of Aristotle's larger philosophy, this study fills a need in subjecting the matters of plot and universals to similar analyses. In the end, what appears is a notion of tragedy as an Aristotelian substance whose universal form is plot, by means of which universal this art of poetry becomes more philosophical than, for example, history. For inasmuch as it has causes, tragedy is, for Aristotle, an object of knowledge, and can be treated philosophically.