The Hamartia of Aristotle

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ABSTRACT

The term hamartia, as it appears in Aristotle's Poetics, has baffled critics. Two schools of thought have dichotomized the meaning of the word. While the first attempts to explain it in terms of moral evil and proposes tragic suffering as the retributive consequence of a "tragic flaw" in the individual's character, the second rejects this moral interpretation but is unable to find a suitable interpretation or explanation for the word. The moral school's interpretation of hamartia is based on a perceived direct link between tragic character and tragic purpose, with tragic action being assigned a subordinate status. However, a careful scrutiny of the Poetics reveals that tragic flaw or moral weakness is not one of the requirements of tragedy and that a hero's misfortune is due, not to his nature, but to the wrong he has committed, either through ignorance or out of duty. Moreover, to Aristotle the requisite for consideration is positive, not negative character traits as in a tragic flaw, and tragic acts are committed not in character but out of character. A tragic hero, by his hamartia, brings a dislocation in the natural order. When he is punished, the disruption is removed and harmony is restored to the universe.

One passage which has baffled critics in the reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* and has led to a great deal of misconception of the source of the tragic situation as understood by Aristotle, appears in the *Poetics* where Aristotle defines the proper tragic character. In Chapter XIII he states:

> ο μεταξυ αρα τουτων λοιΠος εοτι δε τοιουτος ο μητε αρετη διαΦερων και δικαιοσυνη μητε δια ακιαν και μοΧθηριαν μεταβαλλων εις την δυστυΧιαν αλλα δι αμαρτιαν τινα των εν μεγαλη δοξη οντων και ευτυΧια οιον ΟιδιΠους και θυεστης και οι εκ των τοιουτων ενων εΠιΦανεις ανδρες
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> There remains then the man who occupies the mean between saintliness and depravity. He is not extraordinary in virtue and righteousness, and yet does not fall into bad

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> fortune because of evil and wickedness, but because of some *hamartia* of the kind found in men of high reputation and good fortune, such as Oedipus and Thyestes and famous men of similar families. (Aristotle, the *Poetics*, 1453a. 7-12.)

The word "hamartia" appears for the first time in Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the extract quoted above. According to Brian Vickers, two schools of thought have dichotomized the meaning of the word. The first school attempts to explain the word in terms of moral evil and proposes tragic suffering as the retributive consequence of a "tragic flaw" in the individual's character; the second school rejects this moral interpretation but is unable to find a suitable interpretation or explanation for the word.

It would appear the moral school was begun by the 10th Century Arab physician/philosopher Avicenna in his commentary on the *Poetics* where he uses the Arabic word *zalal*, meaning "error", to translate *hamartia*. According to Avicenna, this error implies a "straying from the path of duty and losing sight of what is more noble" (Avicenna, *The Cure*). To Avicenna, tragedy teaches us the right thing to do in our given circumstances, that is, the proper conduct in society. Avicenna, therefore, in his equation of the emotional and ethical effects of tragedy, became the first critic to attribute moral relevance to the tragic *hamartia*.

In the 16th Century, after the rediscovery of the *Poetics*, the moral school began to gain more ground. Most of the major Italian Renaissance critics, in their commentaries on the newly discovered *Poetics*, agreed with Avicenna that Aristotle had a moral concept in mind when he introduced the tragic *hamartia* in his definition of the tragic character. Four critics immediately come to mind in this context: Antonio Minturno, Lodovico Castelvetro, Giraldi Cinthio and Torquato Tasso. In his dialogic discussion of the tragic hero in Book II of his *L'arte poetica*, Minturno suggests that tragic heroes like Oedipus, Thyestes and Creon are unhappy "more through *human error* than through deliberate wickedness" (emphasis mine).[1] Similarly, Castelvetro, in his commentary on the tragic situation of pity and fear, argues that tragic characters, "through *error of mind*, act horribly when they believe they are acting fitly" (emphasis mine).[2]

Minturno and Castelvetro here perceive the tragic circumstance in terms of human weakness. In parallel translations Cinthio and Tasso render hamartia as "error", linking it to a moral incapacity, however benign, on the part of the tragic hero.[3]

These sixteenth century commentators on Aristotle spoke with authority and conviction and their moral thesis set the stage for the great error of the next three hundred years. Indeed, no subsequent study of the *Poetics* was spared the moral impetus of their debate and they influenced almost every writer and critic after them, including Hegel who almost two centuries later actually introduced the phrase "tragic flaw" as a translation of *hamartia*.[4] A.C. Bradley, the great Shakespearean scholar of the last century and an ardent disciple of Hegel, took up the mantle of the moral school, and in his monumental study of the psychological inwardness of the Shakespearean tragic character, did more than any other critic to advance the concept of tragic flaw as an essential ingredient of the tragic character.[5] But Hegel and Bradley are not experts in critical discourse, and their understanding of *hamartia* is primarily in relation to their discussions of drama generally.

For specialized scholarship on the *hamartia* of Aristotle we must turn to three Aristotelian critics of the 20th century: S.H. Butcher and Lane Cooper (two of the chief exponents of the moral school) and Gerald Else, the most authoritative critic of the second school.[6] Butcher, in *The Poetics of Aristotle* (1920), calls *hamartia* "some error or frailty", as he wavers between "error" and "frailty." Lane Cooper (1947) translates *hamartia* as "some error of judgment or shortcoming." In a long commentary on his conception of *hamartia* as "moral flaw", Cooper first argues that the etymology of the word makes it possible to apply it to both the inner and outward faults of man. But as Else rightly points out, such semasiological investigations of the word have been carried out in the past,[7] and none of the studies has revealed the word's true meaning. Else reminds us that the *Poetics* was written in the fourth century B.C., when "αμαρτανειν, αμαρτια, and their cognates and compounds display such a wide range of meanings—all the way from simple error or failure to 'sin' or as close to it as a classical Greek ever comes" (379).

Three cognates of the Greek word *hamartia* appear in the *Poetics*: αμαρτανω, αμαρτια and αμαρτημα. *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English*

Lexicon gives the meanings of all three words. The verb αμαρτανω (from which the infinitive, αμαρτανειν, is derived) is translated as "to miss, miss the mark,...to fail of doing, fail of one's purpose, go wrong; to be deprived of a thing, lose it, to fail, do wrong, error, sin" (38). The same lexicon gives the meaning of both αμαρτημα and αμαρτια as "a failure, error, sin" (ibid). The word αμαρτανειν is first used in the *Poetics* in Chapter 8, 1451a.20. Cooper translates it as "faulty choice" (30), Butcher as "error" (33) and Else as "wrong" (296). When the same word appears in Chapter 13, 1453a.24, Cooper has "error" (42), Butcher, "error" (47), and Else, "error" (399). In Chapter 15, 1454b.17, it becomes for Cooper "mistakes" (51), for Butcher, "error" (57) and for Else, "wrong". In Chapter 19, 1456b.15, Cooper gives the meaning as "fault" (64), Butcher as "fault" (71) and Else passes over the chapter entirely. Finally, in Chapter 25, 1460b.23, Cooper translates "fault", Butcher, "error", and again Else passes over the chapter. The cognate *hamartema* appears four times in the *Poetics*: first, in Chapter 5, 1449a.34, where Cooper renders it as "shortcoming and deformity" (14), Butcher as "some defect or ugliness" (21) and Else as "mistake or piece of ugliness"; then thrice in Chapter 25, 1460b.19 and 30, and 1461b.8. In 1469b.19, Cooper has "mistake" (84), in 1460b. 30 he has "error" (85) and in 1461b.8, "mistake" (89). Butcher has "error" (99) and "mistake" (105), respectively; again, Else has no commentary on Chapter 25.

Aristotle uses the controversial word *hamartia* itself five times in the *Poetics*. Apart from Chapter 13 where it comes up twice, it occurs once in Chapter 16 and twice in Chapter 25. In Chapter 16, 1454b.35, Cooper translates it as "fault" (53), Butcher as "fault" (59) and Else omits the Chapter entirely. In Chapter 25, 1460b.15 and 17, Cooper renders the word as "errors" and "fault" (84), Butcher respectively as "faults" and "error" (99)[8] and Else does not discuss the chapter. In Chapter 13, *hamartia* is first contrasted with *kakia* in 1453a.10, then with *mochtheria* in 1455a.16. In 1453a.10, Cooper translates it as "some error of judgment or shortcoming" and Butcher as "some error or frailty", while Else has "some mistake". In 1453a.16, for *hamartian megalen* Cooper has "a serious defect in judgment or shortcoming in conduct", Butcher has "some great error or frailty" and Else "a big mistake". A careful look at the interpretations of *hamartia*

given by Cooper and Butcher reveals an interesting discrimination in their translations. For the verb *hamartano,* on three occasions Cooper translates it as "fault," as "error" on one occasion, and as "mistake" on another. Butcher has "error" on four occasions and "fault" on one. It is difficult to justify these shifts in rendition of the same word. Cooper is particularly guilty of this arbitrariness.

Cooper's commentary on hamartia goes beyond etymology and semantics and wades into thematics. In a long discussion of the tragic character, he contends that most tragic heroes suffer from a general flaw which he calls a "blindness of heart":

> Under this general flaw may be gathered the specific flaws of various heroes, for example: 'the wrath of Achilles' in the *Iliad*; the overweening curiosity and presumption of Odysseus in the encounter with the Cyclops; 'Man's first disobedience' in *Paradise Lost*; the jealousy of Othello; the ambition of Macbeth; the rashness of Lear. It is this flaw in the inward eye which mars the vision of agents whose penetration otherwise is keen, such as Oedipus and Hamlet, making their outward activity at critical junctures sometimes too slow and sometimes too hasty (40-1).

Cooper is here guilty of two faults. He confounds the plot and character of tragedy and epic, which Aristotle sees as distinct genres with distinct features and characteristics. Secondly, Cooper's identification of Milton's and Shakespeare's heroes with characters of Greek tragedy is flawed. The characters of Milton and Shakespeare are consciously conceived within the framework of Christian ethics. They are based on the Christian doctrine of unity of character and being which postulates that the character cannot be separated from the action, that action and character are complementary. This is opposed to the Pre-Christian pagan ethical concept of morality, what Potts calls "the pagan morality of doing rather than being" (11), which is at the background of Aristotle's persistent insistence in the *Poetics* on the separation of character and action.

The moral school of Aristotelian critical discourse intimates a direct link between tragic character and tragic purpose and sidelines tragic

action to subordination. But a careful scrutiny of the *Poetics* abundantly demonstrates otherwise and affirms the centrality of plot in the tragic enterprise. I list below excerpts from the *Poetics* on the relative importance of action in carrying out the objectives of tragedy. All quotations are from the translation of Allan H. Gilbert.[9] The following extracts are from chapter 6:

- Tragedy then is the imitation of an action (1449b.24).
- The most important of these is the putting together of the separate actions, for tragedy is an imitation not of men but of actions and life (1450a.15-16).
- And happiness and unhappiness reside in action, and the end is some sort of action, not a quality, for according to their characters men are what they are, but according to their actions they are happy or the reverse (1450a. 17-19).
- They do not, then, act in order to represent character, but in the course of their actions they show what their characters are (1450a.20).
- So in the actions and the plot is found the end of tragedy, and the end is more important than anything else (1540a.21).
- Without action there can be no tragedy, but without characters there can be one (1450a.22).
- The soul of tragedy is the plot; the characters are in the second place (1450a.37-38).
- The plot is an imitation of an action and presents char acters primarily for the sake of what they do (1450b.3-4).

The necessity of plot in the attainment of the tragic end is reiterated in other chapters: Chapter 7, 1450b.21; Chapter 9, 1451b.19; Chapter 11, 1452a.29; Chapter 14, 1453b.1; Chapter 15, 1454a. 16; Chapter 17, 1455a.34; and Chapter 18, 1455b.24.

If plot rather than character is the propelling engine of tragedy, and Aristotle has ruled strongly on the matter in his *Poetics*, what then may explain the stubborn obsession with the character and his tragic flaw as

the source of the tragic hamartia? Perhaps the Italian Renaissance critics, the initiators of the tragic flaw theory, may provide the answer. When the *Poetics* was first discovered in the Renaissance, Italian critics were the first commentators to actually see the original text and to have the opportunity to pass judgment. Italian commentaries on the *Poetics* were widely publicized long before the Greek text became generally available, and most European scholars first read the treatise second hand in Italian translations. Inevitably, these early Italian readings (or misreadings) of Aristotle influenced later readings of the text. A concept like the unity of place, with no Aristotelian sanction, came to be ascribed to the master by Castelvetro and his contemporaries.[10] The same critics began the "characterization" of *hamartia* where the tragic hero is burdened with a tragic weakness.

The early Italians then were responsible for propagating the moral school, and to appreciate why these early critics and their followers, notwithstanding Aristotle's own statements to the contrary, insisted on reading the tragic *hamartia* as an inherent character trait, we must examine the dichotomy between the classical psyche steeped in a pagan morality and the Christian mind with its belief in Original Sin. To the pagan mind a man's actions are not necessarily determined by his character but most often by forces beyond his control; hence a good man is capable of evil action. The ancients separated a man's character from his actions, with the latter rather than the former usually being the cause of his good or bad fortune. Christian morality is the opposite. Because of the notion of original sin, no man is without blemish of character. Therefore, when the Christian Renaissance came to translate the pagan Classics, the Christian sensibility was perplexed by the apparent amorality of the pagan message. How can innocent persons be punished for unpremeditated crimes? Why should a good man suffer for acts committed not through evil or wickedness? In the face of this apparent absence of a moral code of conduct, the Christian critics of the Renaissance, in their interpretation of the pagan stories, ardently searched for moral defects of character to explain the heroes' fall from grace. A good example is Castelvetro's discussion in his *Poetics* Chapter IX, 223-226 of the tragic events in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and

Euripides' *Hippolytus* and M*edea*, where the Italian critic imposes tragic flaws on the three female characters to justify their fall.

The point can now be forcefully made that any reading of *hamartia* which links it to character has no basis in Aristotle or Greek tragedy, and perhaps for a proper appreciation of why post-classical criticism places such moral emphasis on the tragic situation we may turn to the Christian lexicon, *Anno Domini.* In the Greek Bible, the word *hamartia* underwent a metamorphosis of meaning distinct from its classical usage. Throughout the New Testament the word is used to describe "sin". 1 John 3: 9-10, our most illustrative text on New Testament understanding of hamartia, reads in the Greek:

> Πας ο γεγεννημενος εκ του θεου αμαρτιαν Ου Ποιει, οτι σΠερμα αυτου εν αυτω μενει Και ου δυναται αμαρταν□ιν, οτι εκ του θεου γεγεννηται.

Hamartia appears as both noun (*hamartia*) and verb (*hamartano)* in the extract above to denote human frailty. We may literally translate the Greek:

> Anyone born of God cannot commit *hamartia* because the seed of God remains in him, and therefore he cannot *harmatanein* since he is born of God.

The key to the meaning of *hamartia* here hinges on two pivotal assumptions:

- The seed of God is present in anyone born of God.
- God is perfect and divine and a person with God's seed implanted in him is unable to commit hamartia, even if he so desires, since it is not in his nature to commit *hamartia.*

Evidently, the meaning of *hamartia* here is related to the doctrine of sin, and throughout the Greek Testament *hamartia* translates as sin, a moral flaw in the human behaviour interlinked with character. This new understanding of *hamartia* acknowledged by the Christian Renaissance was unknown to the ancients who dichotomized action and being.

In its historical context from Homer to Aristotle, a period spanning some five hundred years [850BC to 322BC], there was very little change in the use of the word *hamartia* in the Greek literary script. From the Old Ionic dialect of Homer, through the New Ionic of Thucydides, to the Attic dialect of Plato, Aristotle's contemporary, the meaning of *hamartia* was often associated with an external activity rather than with an inherent weakness of character. The word *hamartia* itself is rare in ancient literature, but its cognates and compounds, such as *hamartano, hamartema, hamartole* and *examartano*, abound in the literary tradition of ancient Greece. In Homer, especially in the *Iliad*, the verb *hamartano* is used several times during battle to describe the hurling of missiles at an enemy and the failure to hit the target, as in the *Iliad*, VIII: 309-11; X: 372; and XI, 232-5, in all of which instances the word is used to describe the failure of a thrown missile to hit its target in warfare, hence the absence of accurate aim. In Homer, then, *hamartia* and its cognates mean "missing the mark".

In Thucydides, the word hamartia is used at least once, but the variants *hamartano* and *hamartema* appear a number of times, usually in contrast with the verb *adikeo* and its substantive *adikema*. In the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1: XXI, 1, Thucydides uses *hamartanoi* to describe an error of opinion, and in 1: XXXIII, 3, the expression *gnomes hamartanei* means error in judgment. Again, in 1: XXXVIII, 5 - XLII, 2, *hamartano* is on three occasions differentially set against *adikeo*, which connotes injury and injustice. In 1: XXXVIII, 5, *adikoumenoi* delineates the moral wrongness of waging an unusual war against the enemy whilst *hamartanomen* suggests that such a morally wrong war may be an error or miscalculation. In 1: XXXIX, 3, *edikemetha* conveys the injustice of the enemy's assault, and *hamartematon* expresses the tactical blunders of the enemy in battle. Finally, in 1: XLII, 2, the expression *elachista hamartane* means an error of action, as opposed to the expression *keleuousin adikein* which denotes instigation to evil. In 1: XXII, 5, in a passage unique for its semblance to Aristotle's diction in his definition of the tragic hero, Thucydides juxtaposes *hamartia* with *kakia*, a word which connotes evil and wickedness. From these we may observe that in Thucydides, *hamartia* means error or a failed purpose, signification more significantly subjective than its earlier Homeric sense.

Plato was a contemporary, indeed the teacher of Aristotle, and his understanding of *hamartia* is similar to Aristotle's. In Plato's dialogues, the word *hamartia* and its cognates largely echo the meaning in Thucydides, who was his contemporary but not Aristotle's. Let us take a few examples. In the *Apology*, 22D, Socrates equates *hamartema* with vanity of knowledge which he perceives, not as a weakness of disposition, but as a general failing associated with certain professions whose special expertise sometimes leads to a false profession of proficiency in unrelated fields. In the *Crito*, 53A, Socrates explains *examartano* in terms of breaking the law by escaping from lawful custody; and in the *Phaedrus*, 263A, Socrates again uses the verb *hamartano* to describe a faulty statement which lacks art. In the *Phaedo*, 113D-114A, Socrates gives four instances of acts of *hamartema*: grave deeds of sacrilege such as *hierosylia* (desecrating or stealing from consecrated grounds); wicked and abominable murders; acts of outrage or violence against a parent in a moment of passion, which one regrets afterwards; and acts of murder in a moment of passion, also regretted afterwards.

We observe from the four examples above that Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, establishes two types of *hamartia*: the deed done deliberately [the first two instances] and the deed done unwittingly [the remaining two examples]. Aristotle makes similar observations about the tragic situation. In the *Poetics*, Chapter XIV, 1453b, 1-50, Aristotle observes that a good tragedy involves family members or people with mutual affection for each other and prescribes four situations of tragedy, "besides which there is no other":

- the deed done by those who know and understand
- the deed not done because the culprit knows and understands
- the deed done in ignorance, with knowledge and understanding afterwards
- the deed not done because of sudden recognition and knowledge.

In an insightful follow-up commentary on these four situations, Aristotle points out that a tragic deed need not be committed for tragedy to be effected. In other words, a tragedy need not contain a *hamartia* and its

consequent misfortune and suffering. Indeed, of the four conditions of tragedy, Aristotle considers the fourth as the best and "the most tragic", where a *hamartia* is avoided at the very last moment. Aristotle himself cites Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* as an example of the best tragedy, where just before his sacrifice, Iphigenia recognizes Orestes as her long lost brother, and consequently avoids the *hamartia* of his murder. Bypassing the *hamartia*, however, does not necessarily make a good tragedy. On the contrary, Aristotle insists that the second situation is the worst and the most 'untragic,' where a *hamartia* is missed at the very last moment by a culprit who all along knows and understands the implications and facts of the deed. Such a position merely plays upon our feelings of horror by carrying us to the point of tragedy and retreating without any real suffering. To Aristotle, this is inexcusable, and the event is not tragic. For an example of this kind of tragic situation, Aristotle refers us to the end of Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Haemon, in righteous anger at his father's guilt in Antigone's death, draws his sword in the heat of passion to strike him but hesitates, and Creon flees as Haemon turns the dagger on himself.[11] To Aristotle, Sophocles should not have had Haemon act in this way, and the son should either have killed the guilty father or not drawn his sword at all. As it turns out, we are suddenly, and with horror, confronted with a possible patricide with all its implications, however justifiable, but one which does not, for no obvious reasons, materialize.

From Aristotle's discussion in Chapter XIV, only the first and third situations contain *hamartia*, in the sense that the deed is actually carried through under those circumstances, and they are respectively, in the view of Aristotle, the third and second most tragic situations after the fourth. Indeed, the first and third situations echo Socrates' four examples of *hamartema* in the *Phaedo*. The first situation, though only the third in Aristotle's scale of preference, is the most common among Greek tragedians, and is mirrored in Socrates' first two examples in the *Phaedo*, viz. grave deeds of sacrilege, and wicked and abominable murders. According to Aristotle, in this situation the deed is deliberately done in full knowledge and understanding, and he uses Euripides' *Medea* as illustration where Medea, to spite her husband, kills her sons in full knowledge and understanding of her action.[12] As Aristotle points out, this

type of tragic situation is the practice of the ancient poets and abounds in Greek tragedy: Phaedra's incestuous lust for her stepson and her willful plotting of his murder [Euripides' *Hippolytus*]; Clytemnestra's vicious murder of her husband to make way for her adulterous relationship with Aegisthus [Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*]; Orestes' murder of his mother to avenge his father's death [Aeschylus' *The Choephori*]; and many others.

The third situation, the second best according to Aristotle, is where the deed is done in ignorance. Socrates' last two examples of *hamartema* in the *Phaedo* are our nearest equivalent of Aristotle's second most tragic situation. In the *Phaedo* example, even though the *hamartema* is committed in full knowledge, the act is done in the rashness of passion, to be regretted later. Here, the tragic deed is done in the blindness of the moment which occasions a momentary incapacity to understand and appreciate its meaning. The inevitable remorse which follows is therefore a movement to *gnosis* from an initial *agonia*, as in the case of Aristotle's best *hamartia* which is his second best tragedy.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is Aristotle's supreme model of the best *hamartia*. But there are others. Theseus in Euripides' *Hippolytus* murders his son in full knowledge of his identity, but in the heat of passion and in ignorance of his son's innocence. In the end, when Artemis reveals the truth to him, he has compunction and begs for forgiveness. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Agamemnon chooses to sacrifice his daughter for the sake of expediency, an action the chorus describe as madness and an act of *hamartia*. He repents too late and suffers the guilt the rest of his life. Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* undergoes a similar fate when in the blindness of ignorance he unwittingly causes the deaths of his son and wife. The *hamartia* of all these characters – Oedipus, Theseus, Agamemnon and Creon – cannot be a "flaw in the inward eye", as Lane Cooper insists.[13] Their wrong actions betray a certain blindness, but it is not an inward blindness of disposition but a blindness of perception. They suffer not from a moral blindness of character but from an external incapacity due to ignorance or to the impetuosity of an unguarded moment. Such a false step can in no way be described as an inward flaw or a moral shortcoming. The temper of Oedipus is not as instrumental as *agnoia* [ignorance] in the commission of his crimes, which include

willful acts of impiety. The source of the tragic *mathesis* in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not Oedipus' temperamental character but his patricide and incest, both committed in *agnoia*. Oedipus' patricide is more a result of his ignorance than his temper, and his marriage to his mother is an act of pure ignorance. Besides, these are crimes of the mythical Oedipus which Sophocles skillfully wrote out of his play to make provision for Oedipus' acts of impiety which so dominate the play and which form the bedrock of the literary Oedipus' tragic hamartia. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is therefore not a tragedy of character where the hero falls from grace to grass because of a tragic flaw, but rather a complex tragedy of action in which the fall is occasioned by a final *anagnorisis*, leading to a movement from ignorance to knowledge and resulting in the hero's misfortune.

The same plot structure informs Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Theseus' *hamartia* is not a character trait but his murder of his son in the blindness of his ignorance of the son's true virtue. This much Artemis confirms in her last speech, where she exonerates all three tragic characters: Theseus, Phaedra and Hippolytus:

> His death was not your will; men may well commit *hamartia*
> When the gods so ordain.[14]

Here, the act of *hamartia* is generalized to describe the fatal actions of all three central characters. Men may commit *hamartia* when the gods so decree. This statement separates the doer from the deed and blames external forces, not human depravity, for men's woes. This externalization applies to the character and actions of Phaedra, who perceives her incestuous desires for her stepson, not as a result of an internal weakness of character, but as an external madness brought upon her by her *ate*. Indeed, it is this absence of internalization which marks out Euripides' Phaedra from the Phaedra of Seneca and Racine, both of whom trace her malady to a tragic flaw in the personality. As for the character of Hippolytus, the central figure in the play, his absolute lack of moral flaw or frailty of character is so apparently evident that Jean Racine, working under the onus of the moral flaw doctrine, is compelled in his version of the myth to create the character with a *faiblesse* to satisfy his Christian perception of character:

> Pour ce qui est du personnage d'Hippolyte, j'avais remarqué dans les anciens qu'on reprochait à Euripide de l'avoir représenté comme un Philosophe exempt de toute imperfection; ce qui faisait que la mort de ce jeune Prince causait beaucoup plus d'indignation que de pitié. J'ai cru lui devoir donner quelque faiblesse qui le rendrait un peu coupable envers son père, sans pourtant lui rien ôter de cette gradeur d'âme avec la quelle il épargne l'honneur de Phèdre, et se laisse opprimer sans l'accuser [Preface to *Phèdre*]

Like Euripides, the other two major tragedians of ancient Greece, Sophocles and Aeschylus, never intended their tragic heroes to fall into misfortune because of evil or wickedness caused by an imperfection of character. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the *hamartia* of the central character is not a flawed personality but a wrong choice of action which leads to damnation. This is clearly articulated by the chorus of the elders of Argos in their opening parodos, where they define the *hamartia* of Agamemnon. In the translation below, the Greek word *hamartia* has been rendered as a reckless wrong:

> Hence that repentance late and long
> Which, since his madness passed, pays toll
> For that one reckless wrong.[15]

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the hamartia of Creon or Antigone is not what he or she is, but what he/she does. Antigone, however good the intention and justifiable the deed, acts against human law. A similar *hamartia* applies in the situation of Creon, who acts for human law against divine law. These actions are not caused by human failings; they are merely wrong acts. Creon's blindness is one of ignorance of the divine law, which leads to the death of a blood relation, his son. In the *Antigone*, in a short space of eight lines Sophocles uses the word *hamartia* thrice [1259, 1261 and 1269] to describe the crime of Creon, which is the act of killing his own son in ignorance. Below is Elizabeth Wyckoff's translation of the scene [1257-1269]:

[*The messenger goes into the house. Creon enters with his followers. They are carrying Haemon's body on a bier.*]

Chorus: But look, the king draws near.
His own hands bring
the witness of his *crime*,
the doom he brought on himself.

Creon: O *crimes* of my wicked heart,
harshness bringing death.
You see the killer, you see the kin he killed.
My planning was all unblest.
Son, you have died too soon.
Oh, you have gone away
through my *fault*, not your own.[16]

[I have italicized the three words which translate *hamartia*)

My analyses above are intended to firmly posit that the ancient Greek tragedians do not burden their tragic heroes with a weakness of character. In this, they are following the best traditions observed by Aristotle. The heroes of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus are not conceived in the same way Milton, Shakespeare or Racine perceives tragic character. We do not talk about the "character" of Oedipus, Agamemnon, Creon, Antigone, Theseus, Hippolytus or Phaedra, as we talk of the "character" of Milton's Satan, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Lear or Macbeth, or Racine's Phèdre. In Greek tragedy we are concerned, not with what the characters are, but with what they do or do not do, or what happens or does not happen to them. In Milton, Shakespeare and most Renaissance and post-Renaissance Western tragedy, it is the character of the heroes which sustains the tragic action; in Greek tragedy, character does not have such pivotal force because it is not conceived that way.

Let us examine the matter further by turning to Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, Chapter XV, Aristotle identifies four necessities of tragic character: He/she must be morally good, appropriate, true to life or to the mythical prototypes, and consistent (1454a, 16). Tragic flaw or moral weakness is

not one of the requirements, and Aristotle rejects baseness of character in tragedy[17] and insists that where frailty of character becomes necessary because of its presence in the mythical original, the flaw should be played down so as not to affect the goodness of the character.[18] Since a hero's misfortune is not due to his nature but to the wrong he has done, negative traits like anger, cowardice and cruelty should not be allowed to cloud our perception of his tragic situation.

A proper tragic hero then, according to Aristotle, is not morally flawed. In moral terms Aristotle places him in a definite context. He must be good, though not too virtuous or righteous, but never villainous or evil or wicked, and if possible he may not even be tainted with such relatively minor negative traits as cowardice, anger and cruelty.[19] Such strict criteria disqualify the majority of the post-classical so-called tragic heroes of Western literature: Satan, Faustus, Richard III, Macbeth, Coriolanus, Lear, Hamlet, Othello and a host of others.

In Chapter VI of the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious".[20] The indefinite article qualifying the word "action" here suggests one single piece of action, hence a single, not a double plot, which focuses on the great tragic action of the central or any other figure. I quote Aristotle on the unity of action:

> A plot is not unified, as some think, because it is concerned with one man, for a countless number of things happen to one man, some of which cannot be combined with others in a single unit; thus there are many acts by one man which cannot form part of a unified action. Therefore all the poets who have written *Heracleids, Theseids*, and similar poems seem to have gone wrong, for they think that since Hercules was one man a plot dealing with him must also be a unit . . . It is necessary then, just as in other imitative arts there is one imitation of one thing, that the plot, being an imitation of an action, should be concerned with one thing . . .[21].

Aristotle's sentiments here explain why in Greek tragedy a tragic figure sometimes appears in several tragedies by the same or different authors,

and often plays major roles in more than one play. Since tragedy is about what a character does rather than what he is, a playwright may write as many tragedies on an individual as there are tragic situations in his life. The famous trilogies of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides are in this tradition, where because of a series of tragic situations revolving around a family or its members, several tragedies are composed on the family, each play being a complete and separate, autonomous unit. In these plays, as Aristotle strongly affirms, the characters "do not act in order to represent character, but in the course of their actions they show what their characters are".[22] Being human (remember they are neither saints nor villains), they are capable of human error, hence their potential for tragic action, and we do not blame their misfortune on negative character traits but on the wrong they have committed. This is the source of the pity we feel for them, and because their suffering is undeserved, it touches our *philanthropia*,[23] or human feeling.

As Aristotle points out, these tragic men and women fall into bad fortune not because of evil or wickedness, but because of some *hamartia* or wrong act they have already committed before the play opens, or commit in the course of the play. This is how Aristotle puts it in Chapter XIII, 1453a.12:

> The change . . . must be from good fortune to bad fortune, not because of wickedness but because of some great *hamartia*, either of such a man as has been indicated or of a better rather than a worse man. Proof of this is found in practice. For at first poets accepted plots as they chanced on them, but now the best tragedies are written about a few houses as on Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes Telephus and others on whom it came to suffer or do terrible things.[24]

Aristotle would accept for tragic consideration individuals who are better, not worse, than these six men in character or status. The requisite here is positive, not negative character traits as in a tragic flaw. None of the six tragic heroes mentioned here is a villain or has a tragic flaw which is instrumental in the commission of his *hamartia* or "terrible thing".

Alcmaeon's hamartia is matricide. In a play by the Greek tragedian, Astydamas, Eriphyle, the mother of Alcmaeon, for the love of gold kills Amphiaraus, her husband, through treachery. Alcmaeon, in revenge, kills his mother for his father's murder.[25] Oedipus' *hamartia* is his patricide and incest and consequential acts of impiety during the criminal investigation, all done in ignorance. Orestes, like Alcmeaon, kills his mother, Clytemnestra, in revenge for her murder of her husband, his father.[26] Meleager's hamartia is his killing of his mother's two brothers who have wronged him. For this crime his mother Althaea kills him in revenge and later commits suicide.[27] Thyestes commits hamartia by eating the cooked flesh of his own son in ignorance in a meal served by his treacherous brother, Atreus. Thyestes suffers remorse the rest of his life for this error. For this treachery, his son Aegisthus later revenges on Atreus' son, Agamemnon.[28] I cannot trace the story of Telephus, but from the bits and pieces I gather from Homer, the following outline may suffice: Mars, the god of war, secretly made love to the faithful Astyoche, wife of Telephus, unknown to her, and she brought forth twin sons of the god who were mistaken for her husband's.[29]

All these terrible acts are committed not in character but out of character, either through ignorance, as in the case of Oedipus, Thyestes and Telephus' wife, or as a duty (through revenge), as in the case of Alcmaeon, Orestes and Meleager's mother. Anagnorisis then becomes the inevitable progression of the tragic circumstance, and the hero, as it were, wakes up from the nightmarish experience of his *hamartia*, and in his recognition of the truth of his situation experiences "a change from ignorance to knowledge – resulting in love or hate – by those marked out for good fortune or bad fortune".[30] Recognition is crucial to the untying of the tragic knot. According to Aristotle, "for every tragedy there is a tying of the knot, or complication, and an untying of it, or solution. The tying is composed of what is without the plot, and many times of some things within it; the rest is the untying".[31] Aristotle explains further that the tying includes every event both outside and inside the play, which adds to the complication of the tragic situation up to the point when recognition takes place and the change of fortune begins. The untying is the result of Recognition and everything else that happens when there is a change

from ignorance to knowledge. This follows that the *hamartia*, whether it occurs without or within the plot, is both the genesis and soul of the tying whilst Recognition is the genesis and soul of the untying. In other words, hamartia creates the complications whilst Recognition brings about the solution. Greek tragedy therefore does not present the tragic fall of a hero due to an inherent tragic flaw, but rather offers a complication and its denouement through the untying of the tragic knot.

In conclusion, the *hamartia* of Aristotle is simply a going wrong [not being wrong, for that would be an error of character, which is untragic], when the character is either ignorant of a particular wrong he is committing [like Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother in ignorance], or acts in the heat of passion [like Orestes killing his mother to revenge his father's death]. Under such circumstances, Greek society prescribes appropriate sanctions against the culprit to right the wrong done. A tragic hero, by his *hamartia*, brings a dislocation in the natural order. When he is punished, the disruption is removed and harmony is restored to the universe.

NOTES

1 Antonio Minturno. *L'arte poetica*. Bk. II, 78. Trans. Gilbert, p. 292.

2 Lodovico Castelvetro. *On the Poetics*. Chapter IX, 226, 14. Trans. Gilbert, p. 335.

3 See Giraldi Cinthio, *Discorsi*, 1543, and Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, B. II, 17.

4 See Hegel's discussion of tragedy in his *The Philosophy of Fine Art*.

5 See for instance Bradley's *Shakespearian Tragedy: Lectures on 'Hamlet', 'Othello', 'King Lear', 'Macbeth'*.

6 Gerald Else mentions other critics of the moral school such as Harsh, Philips, Pack and Manns. See Grald Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1967, p. 379n.

7 Else mentions critics like Hey, Phillips and Harsh—all advocates of the "moral flaw" theory—as earlier investigators in the semasiology of the word.

8 Note the way Cooper and Butcher seem to interchange "error" and "fault" for *hamartia* in Chapter 25, 1460b.15 and 17.

9 Allan H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*.

10 See Castelvetro, 535, 32 where in a clear misreading of Aristotle's *Poetics*, XXIV, 59b.17, he writes: "Tragedy...cannot represent any action except such as occurs in one place and within the space of twelve hours..."

11 See the Messenger's speech in Sophocles' *Antigone*, specifically 1231 ff.

12 Euripides, *Medea*, 1236 ff.

13 Lane Cooper, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*.

14 Euripides' *Hyppolytus*, 1433-4. Translation is partly by Philip Vellacott in *Euripides' Three Plays* (Penguin, 1970), p.70

15 Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, 222-4. Translation is by Philip Vellacott in *Aeschylus: The Orestelan Trilogy* (Penguin, 1965), p.50

16 David Greene (ed.), *Sophocles I* (Chicago, University Press, 1954), p.201.

17 In both Chapter XV, 1454a.16 and Chapter XXV, 1461b.15 of the *Poetics* Aristotle refers to the Menelaus of Euripides' *Orestes* as an example of an unnecessary wickedness of character.

18 In Chapter XV, 1454b.8 (*Poetics*) Aristotle refers us to Homer's Achilles as an example of hard but good character.

19 I have here summarised Aristotle's description of the tragic hero as set out in *The Poetics*, Chapter XIII, 1453a.7 and Chapter XV, 1454b.8.

20 Aristotle, *The Poetics*, Chapter VI, 1449b.20. Translated by Allan Gilbert, pp. 75-6.

21 *The Poetics*, Chapter VIII, 1451a.16. Quoted from Gilbert, pp. 80-1.

22 *The Poetics*, Chapter VI, 1450a.15; ibid, p.77.

23 *The Poetics*, Chapter XIII, 1452b.28.

24 Quoted from Gilbert, p.86.

25 My sources for the story of this play, which is now lost, are *The Poetics*, Chapter XIV, 1453b.1-26; and Homer, *The Odyssey*, XI, 326-7.

26 Aristotle compares the matricides of Orestes and Alcmaeon in *The Poetics*, Chapter XIV, 1453b.24-25.

27 Vide Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk VIII, 260-530.

28 Vide Aegisthus' speech in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, 1578-1612.

29 Homer, *Iliad* Bk II, 511-15; Homer, *Odyssey*, Bk XI, 516-21.

30 *The Poetics*, Chapter XI, 1452a.29. Quoted from Gilbert, p.84.

31 *The Poetics*, Chapter XVIII, 1455b.24. Quoted from Gilbert, pp. 95-6.

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