I. Introduction

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was a prolific writer, producing works with subjects ranging from biology to ethics. One of the most interesting and influential pieces is the *Poetics*, a work which explores poetry’s essential nature. Aristotle identifies and discusses poetry’s structural components by analyzing existing works of poetic art, but the nature of his analysis is such that he also describes what poetry should be and how best to achieve its aims.

There are two primary reasons why a philosopher such as Aristotle would care to treat the subject of poetics. First, the prevalence of poetry and art and the importance of art in the cultural life of a Greek citizen demand an investigation into poetry’s nature and influence. This is certainly the case in respect to tragedy. It played an important role in Athenian public life, so it seems justified that Aristotle would spend much of the *Poetics* (ch. VI-XXII) investigating the genre. The *Poetics* must also be viewed as a response to the negative view of art expounded by Aristotle’s teacher Plato, who viewed art as an imperfect and deceptive imitation (mimesis) of life which appealed to the irrational and detrimental passions and therefore acted contrary to philosophy. Aristotle contends, however, that mimesis is a natural and beneficial instrument for learning and that the passions which poetry stimulates are contingent on reason and released in a controlled environment.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses poetry as art and the genres of tragedy, epic, and comedy in a text that is usually divided into two books. The extant first book treats tragedy and epic, but the discussion of comedy did not survive and is now referred to as the ‘lost second book’ of the *Poetics*. The treatment of tragedy has been particularly
influential throughout history and many writers (e.g. Sidney, Corneille, Pope) have
looked to Aristotle for instruction in how to compose their dramas. So perhaps it is ironic
that a passage which holds such an important place in literary history should be full of
ambiguity. In the last phrase of his definition of tragedy in chapter six, Aristotle alludes
to the effect of tragedy: mimesis accomplishes through pity and fear the *katharsis* of such
emotions. But he does not explain what he means by *katharsis* nor does he mention the
concept again. The primary meaning of the word is purification or purgation, but what
does it mean that tragedy purifies us from emotion? Or purifies our emotions? Or purges
our emotions? And how are pity and fear involved? Do these emotions purge themselves?

The subject has been torn to pieces by previous commentators and literary
theorists. But an analysis of modern scholarship will allow us to gain an understanding of
*katharsis* and its place in Aristotle’s theory of art. One of the earliest and most dominant
theories of *katharsis* which has been entrenched in literary minds since its inception is
that *katharsis* is a release from emotion resulting in a feeling of relief, but others have
postulated that *katharsis* refers to a moralistic training of the emotions, an intellectual
clarification of our emotional response to tragedy, and a structural mechanism operating
within the action of the play. All of these theories have a certain value, and none can be
completely dismissed. But the key to understanding this section of the *Poetics*, I argue, is
to see *katharsis* primarily as a term of art which describes the interaction between
different modes of mimesis and the spectator. The effect of tragedy is peculiar to the
poetic art and must be understood in that context. When the term is approached in this
way, both Aristotle and his commentators can be seen in a new light, and the way is clear
for a proper understanding of this crucial text in Western literature.

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1 Poetics 1449b28.
II. *Katharsis* and the Definition of Tragedy

In chapter six of the *Poetics*, Aristotle provides a definition of tragedy, claiming that he is *ἀναλαβόντες αὐτής ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων τὸν γινόμενον ὁρον τῆς οὐσίας* – “taking up the definition of its essence which emerges from what has already been said.”

He goes on to define tragedy as:

Ἔστιν οὖν τραγῳδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένω λόγῳ χωρίς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, ὑδρόντων καὶ οὐ δὶ ἀπαγγελίας, δὶ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαινούσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν.

Tragedy, then, is mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions.

In fact the previous discussion on the differences between types of mimesis, namely tragedy, comedy, and epic, has provided enough material to construct a definition of tragedy, but only in respect to the first six qualifications: that tragedy is mimesis of an action, elevated, complete, of magnitude, with embellished language, and acted out. However, nothing in the previous five chapters prepares us for the final clause – δὶ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαινούσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. Nowhere does Aristotle discuss pity and fear, and even more mysterious is the meaning of *katharsis*, which can tentatively be translated as purgation or purification. The appearance of this

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3 Poetics 1449b24-28.
word at the end of the definition of tragedy suggests that it is the telos, the goal, effect, or at least an essential part of tragedy, but the word is not mentioned again in the treatise.4

Margaret Pabst Battin, in her discussion of the definition of tragedy,5 addresses the problem of the katharsis clause and explores Aristotle’s methodology of creating definitions. He points out that Aristotle’s method is consistent with his theories in the Posterior Analytics and Topics which simply “[codify] the techniques used by Plato and the Academy.” In short, Aristotle’s definition is “constructed in this long-familiar and thoroughly systematic way.”6 Yet Battin cannot deny that katharsis seems to be the telos of tragedy, and an essential feature of tragedy. She comes to the conclusion that “the fact that [Aristotle] was willing, so to speak, to spoil an otherwise perfectly straightforward and rigorous definition to include the notion of catharsis suggests that he accorded it more than ordinary importance, and surely considered it a central feature of tragedy.”7 In support of this assertion, Elizabeth Belfiore suggests that Aristotle makes a similar move in the beginning of the Metaphysics book VIII as he sums up an argument. He says that “we must reckon up the results out of what has been said, and drawing together the main points, add the completion [telos].”8 Whether katharsis is some sort of telos or not, it seems clear that it is an essential part of the definition of tragedy and cannot be discounted as a minor add-on.

4 With one exception in chapter xvii 1455b15, in a seemingly unrelated context. Aristotle is talking about Orestes’ rescue by purification- katharsis here refers to a purificatory ritual taking place in the story.
6 Battin, p.295.
7 Battin, p.301.
8 As translated in Belfiore, Elizabeth S. Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p.258; we must be cautious here, however, because it is unclear whether telos refers to the goal of what is described or to the completion of the discussion. Belfiore, however, seems to refer to the word telos not as the function of tragedy as others do, but as the conclusion of tragedy: katharsis is the goal not in the sense that tragedy exists to fulfill this function, but that katharsis must happen for tragedy to be successful.
The phrasing of \( \delta \iota \varepsilon \lambda \varepsilon \omega \kappa \alpha \phi \beta \omicron \iota \nu \kappa \alpha \phi \omicron \beta \omicron \varepsilon \nu \sigma \alpha \tau \rho \varsigma \nu \) has been much debated, and rightfully so. It is full of ambiguities, and different interpretations of each word have led to differing interpretations of the word *katharsis*. In its most basic sense, the clause means ‘[the mimesis] through pity and fear accomplishes the purgation/purification of/from such emotions.’

The first ambiguity lies in \( \delta \iota \varepsilon \lambda \varepsilon \omega \kappa \alpha \phi \beta \omicron \). The clause suggests that pity and fear somehow purge or purify themselves, but the more one tries to grasp such a concept, the more slippery it becomes. What does it mean that mimesis works through pity and fear? Is this the pity and fear of the spectators? And if so, why would Aristotle construct a definition based around structural components of tragedy only to introduce a concept that relies on the emotion of the spectator? Most commentators understand the phrase to mean something like “by means of pitiful and fearful events” (\( \varepsilon \lambda \varepsilon \iota \nu \omega \kappa \alpha \phi \omicron \beta \omicron \varepsilon \upsilon \nu \), and not without good reason, for Aristotle uses the phrase “pitiful and fearful events” multiple times later in the treatise. In fact, in chapter nine, Aristotle restates that “the mimesis is not only of a complete action but also of fearful and pitiable matters,” referring to the object of mimesis as \( \phi \omicron \beta \omicron \upsilon \rho \omicron \kappa \alpha \varepsilon \omicron \iota \nu \omega \kappa \alpha \phi \omicron \beta \omicron \varepsilon \nu \sigma \alpha \tau \rho \varsigma \nu \). \( ^9 \)

But is it reasonable to understand the phrase this way? H.D.F. Kitto, in a tongue-in-cheek comment, answers that he would “draw the not very surprising inference that Aristotle knew Greek- knew it well enough to choose the right words for “pitiful and fearful incidents”; and…that when he wrote \( \delta \iota \varepsilon \lambda \varepsilon \omega \kappa \alpha \phi \beta \omicron \).he meant something

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9 Poetics 1452a1-3.
different [than φοβερῶν καὶ ἔλεεινῶν].”10 This comment, however, stems from Kitto’s
desire to exclude the audience from being an integral part of Aristotle’s treatise, and his
analysis of textual evidence is affected by his personal beliefs about katharsis. I would
argue that semantically “through pity and fear” and “through pitiful and fearful events”
are synonymous. Pity and fear are human emotions; so to say that mimesis works through
pity and fear means that mimesis works through events that arouse pity and fear in the
spectator, or are at least judged pitiful and fearful by the spectator.11 The former
emphasizes the emotions themselves and the latter emphasizes the events that give rise to
the emotions, but the way that pity and fear function in tragedy remains the same. One
might object that the pity and fear refer to the emotions of the tragic protagonist, but it is
immediately obvious at the viewing of any tragedy that pity and fear are not always felt
by the characters and many other emotions (rage, despair, shame) may be featured more
prominently. In chapter eleven, Aristotle states that “such a joint recognition and reversal
will yield either pity or fear, just the type of actions of which tragedy is taken to be a
mimesis.”12 When Oedipus realizes the extent of his crimes and his fortunes change from
good to bad, his emotions are in no way limited to pity or fear, and there are other
emotions which would more accurately portray his mindset. Pity and fear are felt by the
spectators in response to the events they are witnessing.

In addition, poetry and mimesis are defined by their relation to their audiences.
Poetry is written to be read aloud; in the same way, tragedy is created to be performed. It
is almost impossible to separate the idea of theatre from an audience; mimesis is only

11 See discussion of pity and fear below for further elucidation on the connection between mimesis and pity
and fear.
12 Poetics 1452a38-39.
judged to be a representation of something when the spectator understands and declares it to be so. Therefore, one could argue that it is neither strange nor inconsistent for Aristotle to be defining an essential part of tragedy by its relation to the audience. “It would be anachronistic to insist that Aristotle could not have been defining tragedy in terms of its effect on the audience.”\textsuperscript{13} Aristotle takes it for granted that tragedy is written to be experienced by an audience. The ease with which most readers of the \textit{Poetics} understand pity and fear as relating to the audience is a testament to a natural inseparability of mimesis and the spectator.

Putting aside the matter of \textit{katharsis} for a little while, what does it mean to purge or purify such emotions (\textit{τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων})? The \textit{τοιούτων} here seems to refer back to the pity and fear just three words earlier, and it is almost natural to understand it this way because \textit{τοιούτων} is a pointing word, and here it seems to be pointing to the two emotions in closest proximity. But there are two problems with this understanding.\textsuperscript{14}

The first problem arises if \textit{τοιούτων} is to be understood as meaning the \textit{katharsis} of emotions “such as pity and fear.” If pity and fear are simply \textit{types} of emotions that can undergo \textit{katharsis}, then this reading suggests other tragic emotions exist. Yet Aristotle states that the portrayal of events that arouse pity and fear is the \textit{iðio}- the special feature of tragedy,\textsuperscript{15} and he does not discuss any other emotions in relation to tragedy throughout the text. Of course, the spectator is certainly able to feel other emotions while viewing a tragedy, but it is pity and fear that the poet seeks to arouse; Aristotle describes pity and


\textsuperscript{15} Poetics 1452b33.
fear as essential components of tragedy. It is through these emotions that a certain “pleasure” which is appropriate (οἰκείαν) to tragedy is generated.16

The second arises if τοιούτων is understood as if it were synonymous with τούτων- katharsis of these emotions, namely pity and fear. It might be also translated as “the aforesaid emotions.” This reading is in line with the emphasis Aristotle places on pity and fear in the Poetics and their status as the “tragic emotions.” However, τοιούτων is not the same as τούτων. If Aristotle had meant τούτων, there is no reason why he would not have said τούτων.

Eva Schaper identifies two common readings of τοιούτων that seek to translate the word as “such” and explain the possible reference to other tragic emotions. The first is that “pity and fear are only striking examples of the kind of emotions tragedy arouses.”17 But, as mentioned earlier, the emphasis Aristotle places on pity and fear practically disqualifies such a loose reading. Aristotle does not even hint at any other emotion being proper to tragedy. The second reading she identifies is that “tragedy may arouse various emotions, but among its incidents must be those arousing pity and fear through which catharsis of ‘such emotions’ – passions in general including pity and fear- can be effected.”18 While no one denies that tragedy can arouse emotions other than pity and fear, it is necessary to ask why Aristotle would be saying this. Because pity and fear are the tragic emotions, why would he concern himself with secondary emotions aroused by the action? If only pitiful and fearful events are necessary subject matter for tragedy,

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16 Poetics 1453b10-14.
17 Schaper, p.136.
18 Schaper, p.137.
there would be no reason for Aristotle to remind us that other emotions can be felt in relation to tragic events, especially in a formal definition of the genre.

One solution, related but still distinct, is that τοιούτων implies that there is a *katharsis* of “these emotions (pity and fear) for tragedy, just as there are corresponding emotions which undergo *katharsis* in other contexts (like in comedy for example).” This reading depends on whether *katharsis* is a concept specific to tragedy or not, a question which there is no evidence for in the *Poetics* but could be supported by the usage of the word in the *Politics*.19 It is possible that Aristotle described a *katharsis* for comic emotions in the lost second book of the *Poetics*. The fact that Aristotle had discussed comedy and epic just before expounding the definition of tragedy might be an argument for accepting this reading; Aristotle was still thinking of tragedy in relation to other genres. In this context, pity and fear are still the only tragic emotions.

While the previous discussion has hinged upon παθημάτων being translated as “emotions,” it is necessary to point out that πάθημα (or πάθος, which means essentially the same thing and uses παθημάτων as its genitive plural with the greater frequency or than παθῶν)20 can also mean “incident” or “misfortune.” Perhaps the best translation is “suffering,” the former translation, emotion, being an internal suffering, and the latter, misfortune, being an external suffering.21 Most commentators understand παθημάτων as meaning “emotions,” because of the proximity of δι᾽ ἔλεος καὶ φόβου and the adjective τοιούτων which seems to point forward to the pity and fear references. But a few, most

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19 See discussion of Politics below.
20 Kitto, p.139; also see Else, p.229n25.
21 Kitto, p.139.
notably Gerald Else and his successors, take παθημάτων as “misfortunes.” In this sense, τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων would mean katharsis “of fearful and pitiful incidents.” The τοιούτων points to the kinds of pitiful and fearful incidents which Aristotle describes in chapters nine through fourteen in his discussion of good tragic plot, the same types of incidents to which δι᾽ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου seems to refer. τοιούτων points to δι᾽ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου and serves to emphasize the idea that there are various ways and plots by which pity and fear can be aroused.

As proof for this reading, Else points out that every other appearance of the words πάθος or πάθημα in the Poetics, with one exception in chapter nineteen where Aristotle is discussing how thought (διάνοια) is conveyed,\(^\text{22}\) πάθος is being used to mean “suffering” and refers to the “basic, indispensable ‘part’ of the tragic plot.”\(^\text{23}\) In fact, according to Else, Aristotle defines his use of πάθος in chapter eleven:\(^\text{24}\) πάθος δὲ ἐστὶ πράξεως φθαρτική ἢ ὀδυνηρά- pathos is a destructive or painful action. A problem arises, however, in wondering why Aristotle would use a term which he does not define for five more chapters.\(^\text{25}\)

The previous discussion has brought up problems in interpretation of the phrases in the katharsis clause, but by far the most perplexing problem is the meaning of the word katharsis itself, and the understanding of every other word in the clause depends on the explication of katharsis. The usages of the word itself are usually divided into three primary meanings: that of medical purgation and the resulting purification, a religious

\(^{22}\) Poetics 1455a38; here, emotions (πάθη) are discussed as outward manifestations of thought.

\(^{23}\) Else, p.229.

\(^{24}\) Poetics 1452b10-11.

\(^{25}\) Although he does not define katharsis, nor does he mention pity and fear until ch.IX.
purification, and a moral purification. But the boundaries between all three of these meanings are tenuous and run together in many instances. A fourth meaning is sometimes attributed to *katharsis*, that of “intellectual clarification,” which relies heavily on the use of the adverb καθαρῶς. Golden points out that the –σις ending denotes a process, in this case the process of making something καθαρός- pure, clean, clear.

While Aristotle himself only uses the word *katharsis* one other time in the *Poetics* in an unrelated sense, he uses it and its cognates 160 times in his other works, and it is to these that many have turned to gain insight into the *Poetics*. The majority of these usages carry a biological or medical meaning, frequently in conjunction with reproduction. In 59 of these occurrences, *katharsis* is used to describe menstruation. In *Problems*, *katharsis* is used 45 times in a medical context and refers to the purgation of harmful material which results in restoration of the body’s natural harmony. In reference to these usages, Elizabeth Belfiore points out that “in the few parallels in Aristotle’s works, nouns in the genitive governed by ‘katharsis’ and cognates refer to what is separated from something else…. [this] suggests that in the *Poetics* also, ‘katharsis of such emotions’ is likely to mean ‘katharsis consisting in the removal of such emotions.’”

But while we may be able to infer the grammatical relation of *katharsis* to its genitive object, we are still not able to make sense of *katharsis*; the biological or medical meanings seem to be completely alien to the subject matter of the *Poetics*. There is one

28 Belfiore describes the uses of *katharsis* in Aristotle's philosophy in chapter ix p.291-336.
29 Belfiore, p.293.
text, however, that may give us insight into Aristotle’s definition for *katharsis* which may bridge the gap between his usages. In book eight chapter five of the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses the merits of music in the education of the youth. He says that music serves the purpose both of education and of purgation (κάθαρσις)- the term purgation we use for the present without explanation, but we will return to discuss the meaning that we give to it more explicitly in our treatise on poetry (ἐν τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆς- and thirdly it serves for amusement...), it is clear that we should employ all the harmonies, yet not employ them in all the same way, but use the most ethical ones for education, and the active and passionate kinds for listening to when others are performing (for any experience (πάθος) that occurs violently in some souls is found in all, though with different degrees of intensity-for example pity and fear (ἔλεος καὶ φόβος), and also religious excitement (ἐνθουσίας); for some persons are very liable to this form of emotion, and under the influence of sacred music we see these people, when they use tunes that violently arouse the soul, being thrown into a state as if they had received medicinal treatment (ἰάτρεια) and taken a purge (τυγχόντας καθάρσιον); the same experience then must come also to the compassionate (ἐλεήμονας) and the timid (φοβητικοὺς) and other emotional people …and all must undergo a purgation (πίνακα κάθαρσιν) and a pleasant feeling of relief (κούφιζονθαι μὲ θ’ ἡδονῆς); and similarly also the purgative melodies afford harmless delight (χαρὰν ἀβλαβῆ) to people.31

Aristotle has created categories for music as representative of character, action, and emotion and identified three purposes for music: education, *katharsis*, and amusement. In his mention of *katharsis*, Aristotle claims that he will discuss it more clearly in his treatise about poetry. This sentence seems to provide a direct link between the *Poetics* and the *Politics* and establishes *katharsis* as a technical term. *Katharsis* as a result of music is analogous or at least related to *katharsis* as a result of tragedy. The only problem with this cross-reference is that Aristotle does not, in fact, explain his concept of

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30 Literally “to be relieved with/by means of pleasure;” this seems to carry a different meaning than it does in Halliwell’s translation. In his translation, the relief itself is pleasurable; but to me it seems that the resulting pleasure provides relief.

katharsis in the Poetics. As a result, some scholars have concluded that Aristotle must have explicated katharsis in the lost second book of the Poetics or in another work altogether.\textsuperscript{32} Allan Gilbert even claims that “somewhere in the complete work there probably was an account of the catharsis.”\textsuperscript{33} These arguments, however, depend too heavily on an argument from silence, and seem unlikely in view of Aristotle’s statement at the end of the Poetics. He concludes the first book of the Poetics with περὶ τραγῳδίας— about tragedy, “let this count as sufficient discussion.”\textsuperscript{34} He tells us that he has said everything about tragedy that he will say in the Poetics. There is no reason for him to leave the discussion of a concept as important as katharsis to a later book which is not even about tragedy. What this reference does tell us, however, is that the katharsis remarked upon in this section of the Politics is related to poetry in some sense, but whether the reference is to the Poetics itself, we cannot know for certain. It is worthwhile at least to examine what the Politics says about katharsis.

In this passage, Aristotle asserts that the youth should only concern themselves with playing “ethical” music, the learning and performance of which promotes ethical character. But when going to performances, the spectator should listen to music for amusement (διαγωγή), or for katharsis. Then Aristotle goes on to explain that everybody experiences emotions like pity and fear and religious excitement

\textsuperscript{32} Rackham, p.671n1.
\textsuperscript{33} Gilbert, Allan H. “The Aristotelian Catharsis.” The Philosophical Review 35.4 (1926), p.304; he goes on to explain that “Aristotle is giving an account of tragedy not by the method of the definition, but according to its component parts. The essential mark of tragedy, the presence of scenes exciting pity and fear, is brought in under one of these components, the plot. Some student, however, knowing Aristotle’s theory, wished to start with a definition, and naturally seized on the earliest possible place, the sixth chapter. There he put in the margin a note on pity and fear, which according to the remainder of the Poetics are essential to a definition, and another note on the purgation…which later crept into the text. There obviously is no external evidence of such a process.”
\textsuperscript{34} Poetics 1462b19.
(ἐνθουσιασμός), but some feel them with higher intensity. When enthusiastic people listen to sacred music, their souls are aroused, and they undergo a sort of medical treatment and katharsis. The result of this experience is pleasure and relief. Aristotle seems to be describing a homeopathic treatment for overly emotional people: they listen to music which arouses the same emotion by which they are overcome, and the influx of that emotion causes their emotions to be purged from the body which is then restored to its natural harmony; the relief from emotion is pleasurable.

In 1857, Jacob Bernays wrote an influential article about this passage, arguing that it was the key to understanding katharsis in the Poetics. Katharsis is a medical metaphor; Aristotle is understanding emotion as a pathology, and music (or theatre) as the cure. Bernays understands katharsis as “a designation transferred from the somatic to the mental for the type of treatment given to an oppressed person that does not seek to transform or suppress the element oppressing him, but rather to arouse and drive it into the open, and thereby to bring about the relief of the oppressed person;”35 “the puzzling mental manifestation is in fact clarified through being made visible by the comparison with pathological bodily manifestations.”36 It seems fitting that Aristotle the son of a royal physician should use such a metaphor, especially since “his psychological and ethical teachings…show an unflaggingly alert consideration and awareness of the corporeal.”37

So how does this interpretation of katharsis fit into Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy? Aristotle does not mention only ἐνθουσιασμός as an emotion which can be

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36 Bernays p.327.
37 Bernays p.328.
purged, but he also mentions pity and fear, the exact emotions that characterize tragedy. For Bernays, the *katharsis* clause in the *Poetics* means that tragedy “accomplishes the purgation of such emotions (pity and fear) through application of pity and fear.” Those who are liable to extreme forms of pity and fear go to the theatre and view tragic events which arouse those feelings. The application of pity and fear (δι᾽ ἔλεος καὶ φόβοι) causes the existing pity and fear to be purged (τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν).

Bernays also describes the use of πάθημα as further proof for his claim, stating that πάθημα refers not to the emotion itself, but to an emotional state. The tragic *katharsis* is not purgation of mere feelings, but of “affections of the mind.” 38 In addition, the relief (κουφίζεσθαι) and harmless pleasure (χαρὰν ἀβλαβῆ) that result from *katharsis* are analogous to the tragic pleasure which Aristotle remarks is the appropriate goal of tragedy. This theory has remained the most influential.

Bernays seems correct in his analysis of the *katharsis* of the *Politics*, but problems arise when he transfers the meaning over to the *Poetics* without adjustment. When thinking about tragedy, it is clear that emotions are aroused by the plot and are expressed by the spectator in weeping or some other outward signs of emotion. Perhaps the expression of those emotions aroused by the plot can even be described as a purgation, expressing the emotions instead of keeping them “bottled up” in the mind. But what Bernays seems to suggest is that tragedy is essentially a therapeutic event, a sort of institution which heals those of overly emotional natures. And not only does this theory seem totally alien to the subject matter of the *Poetics*—there is nothing in the treatise that alludes to *katharsis* as a homeopathic medical metaphor—but why would Aristotle, after

38 Bernays p.330.
carefully explicating the structural components of tragedy, include the purgation of a spectator’s pent-up emotions as essential to tragedy’s nature?

To say that the function of tragedy is to release disturbing emotions such as pity and fear is to diminish its importance and equate tragedy with a therapy session. And while we can certainly understand how music plays this role, (everyone turns on melancholy music when in a melancholy mood, for example) it is hard to see how tragedy functions in this way. 39 First, the Politics claims that while all people experience emotions such as pity and fear, music performs a purgation for those who are acutely affected and crippled by emotion. But tragedy, like music, is enjoyed by everybody, not just the overly emotional. Katharsis is experienced by all (πασι). 40 Not everybody viewing a tragedy is crippled by emotion and “we can hardly suppose that Aristotle expected that men afflicted with morbid emotions would be brought to the Athenian theater on days when tragedies were presented.” 41 In addition, why would tragedy be necessary for the purging of emotions? Why not music representing emotions of pity or fear? There must be better or simpler ways to purge excessive emotion than through viewing tragedy. 42 It does not make sense that Aristotle would qualify tragedy in terms of purgation of emotions when there are numerous other ways for emotion to be excited and purged.

Second, Bernays has taken an idea that applies to music and applied it to drama without adjustment. And while music is a part of tragedy, Aristotle attributes the least importance to it. Leon Golden argues that “the mere fact that the same word is used both

40 Politics 1342a14.
41 Gilbert p.307.
42 Schaper p.136.
in the *Politics* and the *Poetics* is no guarantee by itself that the word has an identical meaning in both works.”

Golden ignores the fact that Aristotle himself mentions that he will “return to discuss the meaning that we give to *katharsis* more explicitly in our treatise on poetry,” thus connecting the ideas of *katharsis* in music and poetry, but he is correct in pointing out the differing contexts between the two works. “The *Politics* considers art as an instrument of the educational process…while the *Poetics* discusses art in terms of its essential nature.” In fact, Aristotle even tells us that *katharsis* as mentioned in the *Politics* is one specific instance of a broader concept, which he will explain “more explicitly” later; the purging of emotions in response to music is not the quintessential idea of *katharsis*, but one manifestation. Music and tragic drama are not analogous, and we cannot assume that the effect of one is the same as the other.

Jonathan Lear points out some additional difficulties in Bernays’ interpretation. First, he contends that Aristotle’s theory of medicine was not homeopathic at all but allopathic: men are cured by introducing what is opposite to their affliction. The kathartic effect might be a medical metaphor, but if so, it does not correspond to the process of medical purgation but to the result of a medical cure. Next, how are pity and fear purged? Emotions are always felt in relation to something else. A person does not just feel fear, but feels fear as a result of something fearful. Lear correctly points out that an emotion is an orientation to the world. “An emotion is too complex and world-directed

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44 Golden (1973) p.475; see p.474-478 for a detailed analysis of Aristotle’s differing attitudes towards art in the *Politics* and the *Poetics*.
46 Halliwell p.193.
an item for the purgation model to be of significant value.”47 In addition, Aristotle tells us that pity and fear are the appropriate responses to tragedy48 and spends five chapters discussing how best to arouse pity and fear. If the audience is already affected by feelings of pity and fear, why is Aristotle so exact in elucidating the right way to arouse those feelings?

Bernays’ pathological theory emphasizes a sort of physiological imbalance and that the significance of katharsis is purely emotional with the aim to correct a sort of disharmony. Bernays ignores any sort of cognitive significance to katharsis. Alan Paskow is right when he claims that it is not sufficient to say that Aristotle is interested solely in the fact of emotional excitation and not its psychological or cognitive meaning, for then catharsis as tragedy’s ultimate telos- a connection implied by the definition of tragedy in chapter six- could simply be provoked by plays of horror, good or bad. There would be no need for Aristotle to discuss the subtle psychological factors that invite the spectator’s interest in a great tragic play…Why should the poet generally and the tragedian in particular strive to represent as accurately as possible the probable or necessary (i.e. the universal) features of human affairs and why would Aristotle refer to such representations as the (epistemological) “aim” of the artist, if [catharsis] is to be understood in physiological terms?49

While the Politics may give us some insight into the possible meanings of tragic katharsis, we can not rely on its discussion to illustrate the meaning of katharsis in the Poetics. Instead, it is better to try to formulate a theory which makes sense in the context of the Poetics but which can also be reconciled with what Aristotle says about katharsis in the Politics.

III. The Nature of Pity and Fear

47 Lear p.317; note that Lear contends that Bernays interpretation of katharsis in Politics 8.7 is wrong.
48 Poetics 1452b1 and 1453b11-13.
The definition of tragedy in chapter six of the *Poetics* specifies that *katharsis* is accomplished through pity and fear (δι᾽ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου)\(^{50}\). Because these two emotions are brought up repeatedly throughout the treatise as those emotions peculiar (ἴδιον)\(^{51}\) to tragedy, it would be wise to examine the nature of pity and fear and their roles in tragedy in order to gain insight into the meaning of *katharsis*, to which they seem to be necessarily linked.

In chapter nine, Aristotle tells us that οὐ μόνον τελείας ἐστὶ πράξεως ἤ μίμησις ἀλλὰ καὶ φοβερῶν καὶ ἐλεεινῶν\(^{52}\)- The mimesis is not only of a complete action but of both fearful and pitiable matters. As he expresses in the definition of tragedy in chapter six, pity and fear are not only peculiar to tragedy, but necessary components of it. The portrayal of events which arouse pity and fear is essential to the nature of tragedy. In addition, the scope of tragic plot and its subject matter is limited to the kinds of events which evoke both pity and fear in response.

One must be careful not to conclude that the evocation of pity and fear is the function of tragedy, as one might be tempted to do considering the fact that Aristotle spends so much time contemplating the type of plot which would best evoke the two emotions; and of course, plot is “the soul of tragedy,”\(^{53}\) and must portray piteous and fearful situations. Pity and fear are the specific emotions associated with tragedy, but they are certainly not limited to that genre. One can feel pity and fear while reading Homer, listening to a speech, or reading a newspaper article. We do not require tragedy to arouse pity and fear. One might object that the function of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear.

\(^{50}\) Poetics 1449b26.  
\(^{51}\) Poetics 1452b33.  
\(^{52}\) Poetics 1452a2-3.  
\(^{53}\) Poetics 1450a38.
within the context of a well-constructed and intelligible drama, and while this is most certainly the goal of the tragic poet, we must investigate further to understand why the poet would want to do this. The poet aims to create a work which evokes pity and fear, but it is not a self-evident goal. There seems to be some greater goal which a tragic poet aims to achieve; pity and fear are merely tools for his use, causal antecedents for a higher function.

It is also important to note that the connection of pity and fear with poetry and drama does not begin with Aristotle, but had an established history in the world of Greek poetry. To provide a few examples, Elizabeth Belfiore points out that

Gorgias writes that poetry produces “very fearful [periphobos] shuddering and much-weeping pity” (DK B11: *Encomium of Helen*, 9). According to Plato (*Ion* 535c), the rhapsode produces phobos in the audience when he recites what is pitiable and fearful (phoberon) or terrible (deinon), and (*Phaedrus* 268c) the tragedians make pitiable and fearful (phoberas) speeches.\(^54\)

Aristotle is an heir to the vibrant and flourishing tradition of tragedy that played an important part in Athenian culture. Not only must we consider the *Poetics* as a response to previous writers, but, more specifically, to his predecessor, Plato. The treatise can be viewed as a prescriptive work, in which Aristotle sets down standards for what he thinks is the way to construct tragedy, but also a descriptive work which examines the already existing tragic tradition and explores its essential nature. Aristotle is interested in the tragic phenomenon and how pity and fear function as crucial components.

In chapter thirteen, Aristotle gives brief definitions of pity and fear:\(^55\) that we have ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον, φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅµοιον\(^56\) “pity for the

\(^{54}\) Belfiore, p. 227; also see Halliwell, p.170 for a discussion of the same subject.

\(^{55}\) Although this “definition” is not given as a definition per se, but is an aside in why we do not feel fear for a depraved man going from prosperity to adversity.

\(^{56}\) Poetics 1453a5.
undeserving, but fear for one like ourselves.” In chapter fourteen, we are told that “what is fearful and pitiable can result from the spectacle, but also from the actual structure of events, which is the higher priority and the aim of a superior poet. For the plot should be so structured that, even without seeing it performed, the person who hears the events that occur experiences horror (φοίτειν) and pity (ἐλεεῖν) at what comes about.”57 The spectacle, which includes costumes, scenery, facial expressions of the characters, etc., is only an aid to arousing pity and fear. The necessary way to arouse these critical responses, which relies purely on the poet and his skill, is through the ordering of events. Feeling pity and fear based on a spectacle is primarily an emotional event not based on rational cognition; we visually experience something which immediately impresses a feeling of fear or pity upon us. Perhaps viewing the physical signs of the protagonist’s distress evokes our pity. But for Aristotle, this is meaningless and has no significance; there is no real basis for the emotion unless some action has taken place which justifies it. Instead, Aristotle emphasizes that simply hearing about the events stimulates our emotions. Thus, it is not the viewing of a tragedy, but a cognitive understanding of its plot that is a prerequisite for the arousal of pity and fear.

So what is the ideal tragic material? What sorts of events arouse pity and fear? And how do these types of events result in katharsis? An examination of what Aristotle considers good tragic material will give us a hint to what he considers the function of tragedy to be. Aristotle takes up an inquiry into this topic in chapter thirteen where he lays out a few general qualifications for the construction of piteous and fearful events. First, plots should be complex. Simple plots are of “an action which is continuous, in the

57 Poetics 1453b1-5.
sense defined, and unitary, but whose transformation lacks reversal and recognition,” but complex plots are actions “whose transformation contains recognition or reversal or both…and ensue from the preceding events by necessity or probability.”

The plots which arouse pity and fear the best are those which result in a reversal (περιπέτεια) and a recognition (ἀναγνώρισις), the former being “a change to the opposite direction of events…in accord with probability and necessity,” and the latter being “a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or to enmity, and involving matters which bear on prosperity or adversity.” While each can occur separately by itself, both recognition and reversal together are ideal for creating feelings of pity and fear. Aristotle gives an example of a reversal which comes about through the necessities of the plot: “the person who comes to bring Oedipus happiness, and intends to rid him of his fear about his mother, effects the opposite by revealing Oedipus’ true identity.”

Aristotle then lays out a few more qualifications for the plot, which are related to the reversal and recognition, stating what plots should not be and why. Tragedy should not depict decent (ἐπιεικεῖς) men going from prosperity to adversity because instead of being pitiable and fearful, this turn of events is repugnant (µιαρόν). The word µιαρόν is primarily a word that means polluted or morally disgusting, and thus does not mean simply that we have distaste for seeing bad things happen to good men, but that those

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58 Poetics 1452a13-18.
59 Poetics 1452a22-23.
60 Poetics 1452a28-31.
61 Poetics 1452a24-26.
62 Poetics 1452b4; 1452b5-7.
63 Poetics 1452b33-36.
sorts of events incite a sort of moral outrage in us. Presumably if a man is good or decent, then on a basic level we feel that such a man does not deserve misfortune and we feel moral outrage in response.

Nor is a depraved (μοχθηροὺς) man going from adversity to prosperity in any way fearful or pitiable.64 Not only do we not pity or fear this man because a favorable turn of events does not arouse the emotions of pity or fear, but Aristotle points out that we do not even feel fellow-feeling (φιλάνθρωπον), for a wicked man does not deserve such a change in circumstances.65 In the same way, a depraved person falling from prosperity to adversity does not arouse our pity and fear, because we feel like someone of a depraved character deserves such misfortunes. And it is here where Aristotle gives us a clue to how pity and fear are aroused, stating that pity is felt “for the undeserving victim of adversity, the other [fear] for one like ourselves.”66

Aristotle has repeatedly qualified the proper subject matter of tragedy by who deserves what. The good man deserves prosperity but not adversity; the depraved man deserves adversity but not prosperity. So why then do we feel moral outrage for the decent man who falls into adversity instead of pity? He certainly is an undeserving victim of adversity. The answer, I believe, lies in two places: the first is in a sort of disbelief. It seems wrong and unjust that a decent man could undeservedly suffer; moral outrage overpowers any sort of pity. Furthermore, a decent man’s misfortune is not the result of his own faulty actions but of another outside force. We cannot pity because we cannot

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64 Poetics 1452a34.
65 Poetics 1452b38; Often used as evidence of other “such emotions” - the category of the philanthropic; the next sentence, however, draws a distinct line between “philanthropia” and pity and fear.
66 Poetics 1453a3.
rationalize what has happened. The other reason stems from fear, and will be taken up shortly.

Aristotle has described to us the plots which are “untragic,” but then moves onto the ideal type of tragic plot which arouse pity and fear. The kind of man portrayed is the one between the two extremes (Ὁ μεταξὺ τῶν λοιπῶν) who is “not preeminent (διαφέρων) in virtue and justice, and one who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error (ἁμαρτίαν).” The ideal character of tragedy lies somewhere in between good and depraved. This man is good enough in character that any adversity which occurs is not the result of an evil deed, but through an error, a mistake of judgment. We can pity this man because despite having a good character, he suffers adversity and misfortune. But his case is different from the decent man’s in that his misfortunes were not undeserved, but came about through an error. And not only did he make a mistake, but he did so in ignorance. Aristotle says that “better is the act done in ignorance and followed by recognition.” How can a man who was ignorant of the significance of his actions completely deserve his downfall? His adversity did not come from an outside source which he has no control over, but, although his actions may have been done in ignorance, his adversity is still a result of his own actions, the same actions which comprise the action of the play; the spectator can view each step which leads up to the recognition and reversal from prosperity to adversity.

One important factor in the tragic plot is necessity (ἀνάγκη) and probability (τὸ εἰκός). Aristotle has said that recognition and reversal “emerge from the very structure of

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67 Poetics 1453a7-9.
68 Poetics 1454a2.
the plot, so that they ensue from the preceding events by necessity or probability.” The philosopher here is specifically referring to the actions of the characters as having necessary or likely consequences. Although plot holds the primary importance in tragedy, it is “character (ἦθος) [that] reveals moral choice (προαίρεσιν).” The action of the plot stems from the decisions of the characters, whether made in ignorance or knowledge. Because the action is based on decisions, there must have been an opportunity to have done or to do otherwise.

Moral virtue is impossible without a certain indeterminacy of events in the world. For anything to be at stake, we must be able to change the course of events. For our actions to be significant, we must be able to predict the outcome of our actions with some success but not perfectly.

The adversity that the tragic protagonist faces is a result of his own actions. Even if done in ignorance, he is still liable for his own choices. Oedipus tried to escape his fate and suffered. His case is an extreme example of how moral choice affected his fortune. We can assign blame to him for trying to flee his fate, allowing his rage to overpower him as he kills his father on the road and marrying his mother as a result of the former actions. It does not matter that Oedipus had no intention of committing such horrible crimes. What is important is that every decision and action which Oedipus made leads directly to his downfall. And as the audience, we can see every step leading up to the crime and ultimate recognition and judge for ourselves that each consequence was necessary or probable. In relation to the emotions, however, we are able to identify with the mistake and ignorance of the protagonist. “The possibility of pity raises questions of causation and

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69 Poetics 1452a19-20.
70 “Praxis includes the action of both mortals and gods, but not that of natural physical processes…it does not refer simply to deeds or behavior, but also to the motivation that resulted in deeds.” Battin, p.301n20.
71 Poetics 1450b8-9.
responsibility, but the innocence which Aristotelian pity presupposes nonetheless has to be accommodated to the underlying demand for intelligibility in the tragic action.”73

It is easy to feel pity for a man in such a situation. So where does fear come in? Aristotle has told us that we have fear “for one like ourselves.” The tragic protagonist’s character lies somewhere in between the moral extremes of virtue and depravity. Although he is not so virtuous that he is unable to make a mistake, he is certainly not a man who would willingly act against virtue. In short, he is like us; no one thinks of himself as depraved, but most people are willing to admit they are not the pinnacle of virtue. An error or mistake in judgment is something every audience member can understand and relate to. We can fear for the protagonist because we understand his plight, and by the same reasoning, we also can feel pity for a man we are able to identify with. No one wants to accept that a good man can experience misfortune just because of an error, a mistake which we all are just as likely to make.

In response to the question raised above about why we cannot pity or fear the good man who has suffered misfortune, perhaps another reason is that we cannot fear for the perfectly virtuous man because we do not relate to him. While everybody wants to see himself as good, no one sees himself as morally perfect. And because the misfortune a good man suffers is from an outside source, not from himself as in the case of a mistake in judgment, the adversity experienced is not always foreseen; how can we know what bad things will happen to us if they occur either randomly or as a result of no actions of our own? Fearing involves a certain element of foresight and comprehension; you cannot reasonably be afraid if there is no reason to believe that an adverse event will ever occur.

73 Halliwell, p.174.
The distinctions Aristotle draws between pity and fear are tenuous. In fact, they are beginning to sound very alike. We can fear for someone else because we are like him, but we can pity him for the same reason? What does it mean to fear for someone else? To gain clarification about tragic pity and fear, many have looked to book two of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, in which the philosopher discusses pity, fear, and other emotions in relation to the rhetorical art, and how one can appeal to them to achieve his rhetorical aims.

When comparing ideas from different works of Aristotle, it is necessary to approach with caution. Not only is it possible that Aristotle’s philosophical ideas change depending on the dates they were recorded, reflecting the philosopher’s evolution of thought, but more importantly, each work deals with a different topic and is approached differently by Aristotle. The *Rhetoric* deals with the use of emotions to achieve a certain effect, and the *Poetics* is a treatise dealing with the components of tragedy and the essential nature of poetry. Moreover, the *Poetics* deals with pity and fear in a much narrower sense than the *Rhetoric* does. Nevertheless, the two works share the same author and deal with subject matter applying to the universal human condition. Justification that the two works may be discussed in relation to each other may be found in the *Politics*, where Aristotle states that “feeling pain and delight at representations of reality is close to feeling them towards actual reality.”

In book two chapter five of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines fear as “a painful or troubled feeling caused by the impression of an imminent evil that causes destruction or pain” which they fear “only if they appear to be not far off but near at hand and

74 Politics 1340a23-25; as discussed in Halliwell, p.196. Although this could beg the question of using one text to gain clarification of another.
threatening, for men do not fear things that are very remote.”⁷⁵ Men fear things which cause them pain but only if they perceive that there is a real possibility of the feared event happening soon. Aristotle goes on to say that “all things that are to be feared are more so when, after an error (ἁμαρτίαν) has been committed, it is impossible to repair it.”⁷⁶ Just as Aristotle remarks in the Poetics, fear is heightened when the situation involves an error. But we will only feel fear if we perceive the consequences of the error to be absolute. This does not mean that the consequences have to take place; some of the best tragedies involve a catastrophe at the point of recognition, such as in Iphigeneia at Tauris.⁷⁷

But the spectator must believe that the disastrous consequences will transpire. And in order to make the audience afraid, “it is necessary to make them think they [my emphasis] are likely to suffer, by reminding them that others greater than they have suffered, and showing that their equals are suffering or have suffered.”⁷⁸ By observing the vulnerabilities and misfortunes of someone to whom we are equal, we are able to fear the same things for ourselves. This is exactly what Aristotle describes in the Poetics. Tragedians portray good men whom we can identify with. Because we are like them, we can fear for them because we can fear the same things for ourselves. There is a certain cognizance and deliberation involved: if he can suffer misfortune because of his mistakes, I can too. Herein lies the distinction between pity and fear. We can feel fear because we can imagine the same events happening to us, so in response we fear for the

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⁷⁵ Rhetoric 1382a32; all translations are by J.H. Freese unless indicated otherwise; Freese, J.H. Aristotle: Rhetoric. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.
⁷⁶ Rhetoric 1382b12.
⁷⁷ Poetics 1454a2-3, 6.
⁷⁸ Rhetoric1383a15.
protagonist. But because the misfortune does not happen to us but to another whom we can still identify with, we are able to feel pity.

In chapter eight, Aristotle defines pity as “a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful [things], which befalls one who does not deserve it; and evil which one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, and when it seems near…one who is likely to feel pity much be such as to think that he, or one of his friends, is liable to suffer some evil.” Just as with fear, pity is formed in response to evil or painful events in respect to one who does not deserve misfortune, just as it is qualified in the Poetics. We concluded earlier that one feels pity when he identifies with the character experiencing adversity and thus can imagine himself experiencing the same things, but Aristotle actually states it here. In addition, “men also pity those who resemble them in age, character, habits, position, or family.” The spectator does not simply identify with the protagonist because of his moral character, or the fact that he makes mistakes, but because of other factors as well which only serve to make the character seem real, to “bring the character to life” to use a modern expression.

But because the Rhetoric is dealing with “real” emotions, meaning those emotions in response to actual occurrences in the world, while the Poetics deals with a sort of “tragic” version of pity and fear, there are certain claims about the two emotions that do not seem compatible at first. The most obvious incongruity is that in the Rhetoric, pity and fear are discussed separately, fear in chapter five and pity in chapter eight. The two emotions can be felt completely apart from each other. In the Poetics, however, pity and fear are tied together as to seem inseparable. Aristotle certainly does not contend in the

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79 Rhetoric 1385b2.
80 Rhetoric 1386a13.
Poetics that pity and fear cannot be felt alone, but what he does suggest is a necessary pairing to achieve the effect of tragedy. And the reason why they are inseparable is mimesis.

We have determined that pity is for another, an undeserving victim, while fear is for oneself, or for another based on the realization that the same events can happen to ourselves. In fact, “all that men fear in regard to themselves excites their pity when others are the victims.” In real life, we can only feel one at a time: either we are the perceived victims or others are. But, in tragedy, we can feel both at the same time because of mimesis. Because the protagonist is “like us,” we identify with him and fear for ourselves almost as if we were him. Everyone has experienced this phenomenon: why do we enjoy horror movies? Perhaps because for a moment we almost believe and can imagine that the dangers are happening to us. One might object that the characters experiencing the action in the drama do not experience fear. Instead, they feel anger, dismay, hopelessness, or some other emotion in response to their misfortune. Their ignorance prevents them from foreseeing their downfalls, and thus cannot fear. But we the audience can pick up the threads; we can put two and two together to anticipate the reversal. After the reversal and recognition occurs, our mental powers can grasp our own fragile situations. We recognize another’s vulnerability in ourselves. To use Oedipus as an example, Elizabeth Belfiore points out that “we do not fear Oedipus, nor do we fear that we ourselves will discover that we have committed parricide and incest. Instead, we feel fear for ourselves in response to another’s sufferings in a way that we do not in typical real-life situations.” But because we as spectators do not really believe that we are the main

81 Rhetoric 1386a13.
82 Belfiore, p.179.
character portrayed in a tragedy, we are able to feel pity for his misfortune. Pity and fear must be inseparable in tragedy because of the nature of mimesis in which we can be ourselves and someone else simultaneously. There is a constant friction between pitying and fearing, between being oneself and being another whose life we are able to imagine ourselves living.

Keeping in mind how pity and fear work through mimesis, it is possible to read some of Aristotle’s descriptions of pity and fear put forth in the *Rhetoric* and apply them to tragic plots. For example, Aristotle has said that things to be feared must appear to be “near at hand.” A tragedy is unified in plot, with a beginning, middle, and end, which portrays a continuous action. We see all the steps leading up to misfortune unified in the action of the play, and we know that there is an impending disaster which will occur or be realized by the end of the play. The nature of the tragedy’s action necessitates that the spectator perceives danger close at hand, and thus we are able to feel the pinnacle of pity and fear. Here is where the spectacle is beneficial; it helps create a sense of threat. In the same way, the universal content of tragedy suggests that such a misfortune can occur at any time. Our fear is not contingent on the actual performance of the tragedy but the knowledge that such events can happen to us, the spectators.

Elizabeth Belfiore mentions a few seeming incongruities between the discussions of pity and fear in the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* which are worth examining. First, while pity and fear are linked so closely in tragedy, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle comments that “the terrible (τὸ δεινόν) is different from the pitiable, for it drives out pity, and often serves

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83 Rhetoric 1382a32
84 Belfiore, p. 179
to produce the opposite feeling.”85 Earlier on in the same treatise, the same idea is put forth, that “for those who are panic-stricken are incapable of pity, because they are preoccupied with their own emotion.”86 Is Aristotle suggesting that a person cannot feel pity and fear at the same time? I think that once again, the problem is solved by relation to mimesis. In real-life situations, if there is impending danger for another which we do not think can be easily averted, we will pity the victim. But if the danger comes so close that we begin to fear for ourselves, then there is no pity left, but simply fear. In tragedy, danger can never come so close that we abandon pity in favor of sheer panic because the danger, although we can surely imagine its reality, is not real, and each member of the audience knows this. If we perceived any true threat to ourselves, each person would run out of the theatre in terror. And this certainly does not happen.

The next objection identified by Belfiore is that in the *Rhetoric*, “fear is said to be felt at the *phantasia* (appearance or expectation) of imminent danger to ourselves. Tragic fear, on the other hand, is felt ‘concerning someone similar’ to us (Po. 1453a5-7).”87 This objection has been discussed above, but it is worth repeating that mimesis once again allows tragic fear to be reconciled with the account in the *Rhetoric*. Because we are “like” the tragic protagonist, the nature of observing an imitation allows us to identify with the fearful situation and feel fear not only for the character, but in a certain sense, for ourselves.

The next two ideas are a little more difficult and express the differences between rhetoric and poetry. Fear as explained in the *Rhetoric* is aroused in response to particular dangers, while tragic fear is aroused “in response to ‘the universal’ expressed in poetry.”

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85 Rhetoric 1386a12.
86 Rhetoric 1385b6.
Along the same line of thought, “real-life fear is typically aroused by the phantasia of imminent destructive or painful evils (Rhet. 2.5.1382a21-22). The Poetics (1453b17-22), however, tells us that tragic fear is best aroused not by a merely destructive or painful action (a pathos), but by a pathos between philoi.”

Thus far, we have begun to draw a distinction between “real” fear and pity and their tragic counterparts. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle has described fear in a general way; he seeks to provide a complete picture of the emotion of fear. It “deals with situations that are not admissible in good tragedy.” In the Poetics, however, Aristotle describes fear as it manifests itself when confronted with a scene of suffering (πάθος). “Tragic” pity and fear are simply the pity and fear Aristotle describes in the Rhetoric, but limited to certain situations; Aristotle certainly does not contend that the situations described in the Poetics are the only circumstances which elicit pity and fear. Instead, they are specific kinds of sufferings which achieve a specific effect. It is through this kind of pity and fear that katharsis is achieved. While it is the goal of tragedy to arouse pity and fear, feeling these emotions is not the telos, but a means by which some other function, katharsis, is accomplished.

So how is tragic fear a specific form of real fear? The fear the audience experiences is not contingent on whether the protagonist has committed parricide or incest, for example, but hinges on the recognition and reversal. Tragic fear does not deal primarily with physical evils, although they certainly form a vital part of the plot, but is a response to an error made in ignorance and of the shame and misfortune which follow.

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89 For a detailed discussion of the range of rhetoric’s subject matter and specific examples, see Belfiore, p. 232-234.
such an action. Belfiore points out that the meaning of φόβος can include fear of an evil reputation and of disgrace. This is certainly a component in why we feel pity and fear toward one who experiences a tragic downfall.\(^90\) Aristotle is also concerned with eliciting strong feelings of pity and fear, and there are certain situations which bring forth more powerful forms of these emotions. Notice that real-life fear “is typically [my emphasis] aroused by the phantasia of imminent destructive or painful evils,” but tragic fear “is best [my emphasis] aroused…by a pathos between philoi.”\(^91\)

Alan Paskow suggests that as spectators, we “are fascinated by conflicts that occur within the family, for they constitute the archetypal struggles that define the character of all our other interpersonal relationships.”\(^92\) Fear and pity reach their heights when a terrible deed is enacted between loved ones, because “if enemy acts toward enemy, there is nothing pitiable in either the deed or the prospect of it, except for the suffering as such; nor if the parties are neutrals.”\(^93\) It is especially pitiable because harm at the hands of a loved one is what we least expect and the recognition of such a crime is all the more worthy of our pity and fear.

The proper material for tragedy is those sufferings which, when portrayed through mimesis, the spectator can feel both pity and fear toward. Perhaps evil action against one’s enemy might instill fear, but it is certainly not pitiable. Many have remarked that the content of tragedy is universal; it deals with sufferings and issues that each person can relate to, no matter what his personal background and experiences are. This is because tragedy does not appeal to knowledge of a particular danger, but appeals to a deep

\(^90\) Belfiore, p.185; also see discussion of same topic in ch.VI p. 189-225; for its relation to katharsis, see ch. X, p.340-360.
\(^91\) Belfiore, p.179; see previous paragraph.
\(^92\) Paskow, p.62.
\(^93\) Poetics 1453b14-18.
understanding of the human condition. This is not just an emotional response but a
cognitive one. And I would contend that the emotions of pity and fear are felt
simultaneously because they are responses to this universality of tragic material. Mimesis
of these sorts of sufferings provides an opportunity for the spectator to access mentally
and respond emotionally to the universal human condition. Pity and fear are the signs that
this process is occurring.94

Comparison of the accounts of the nature of pity and fear in the *Rhetoric* and the
*Poetics* has served to underline the relation of the two emotions, how they complement
each other, and most importantly, the importance of mimesis in their interaction. It is
mimesis that allows us to feel pity and fear at the same time; we can feel pity for the
sufferings of another but also fear for one who is like us. It is the friction between these
emotions that provides us with an experience unique to tragedy, that of comprehending
cognitively and emotionally an incident which resounds with our idea of universal human
experience. Because mimesis accomplishes *katharsis* through pity and fear, it is
necessary to recognize the role that these emotions play in the denouement of the tragic
plot and their effect on the spectator.

Now that we have examined the role pity and fear play in the tragic plot, one
might wonder why anyone would ever willingly go see a drama and feel a “painful or
troubled feeling” in response to suffering involving “great pain or destruction.”95 In fact,
“if these works were known to produce real pity and fear, it would seem that only

94 I am indebted to Davis, p. 39-42 for a clarified idea of how pity and fear work together.
95 Rhetoric 1382a32.
masochists would voluntarily view them."\textsuperscript{96} But contrary to expectation, Aristotle speaks of a specific pleasure of tragedy:

Those who use spectacle to create an effect not of the fearful but only of the sensational have nothing at all in common with tragedy, as it is not every pleasure (ἡδονήν) one should seek from tragedy, but the appropriate kind (τὴν οἰκείαν). And since the poet should create the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through mimesis, obviously this should be built into the events.\textsuperscript{97}

This is all the explanation Aristotle provides as to the proper pleasure of tragedy. So what is the tragic pleasure? How do we experience pleasure when confronted with pain and destruction? Aristotle indicates that there is a specific kind of pleasure which comes from tragedy, a pleasure which is contingent on pity and fear as they are evoked through mimesis. Tragic pleasure is not simply a result of feeling pity and fear, but of feeling the two emotions \textit{as they are necessary components of a specific kind of plot}.

There are clues in Aristotle’s works that perhaps painful emotions have a pleasurable side. In fact, Belfiore goes on to state that “it is a common Greek view that there is a certain pleasure involved in painful emotions.”\textsuperscript{98} In the \textit{Rhetoric}, for example, Aristotle explains that in fearing, “there should remain some hope of being saved,”\textsuperscript{99} and that hope is an emotion that brings pleasure; there is pleasure “for those who hope.”\textsuperscript{100} Fear is accompanied by the hope for something pleasant, the acquisition of safety and return to the normal state of affairs. When Plato is speaking against poetry in book X of the \textit{Republic}, he describes pleasure as a result of filling “a hunger which can only be

\textsuperscript{97} Poetics1453b10-14.
\textsuperscript{98} Belfiore, p.228.
\textsuperscript{99} Rhetoric 1383a14.
\textsuperscript{100} Rhetoric 1370a6.
satisfied by weeping and wholesale lamentation.”101 But even if there is some sort of pleasure which accompanies painful emotions, why is there a special category of tragic pleasure? Aristotle has told us that this pleasure comes from pity and fear through mimesis. Tragic pleasure cannot simply be a result of feeling painful emotions, but is an effect which hinges on the nature of plot and mimesis.

Perhaps tragedy “gives us a greater hope of safety by helping us to understand fearful things.”102 And this does not mean that we did not understand fearful things before, but the nature of tragedy allows us to view a slimmed-down and polished version of events. Because tragedy portrays a complete action which must be linked by necessity or probability, the poet writes about only those events which are relevant to the action. The spectators are not distracted by unrelated events, but have the opportunity to witness each action step-by-step: this character’s action causes x which causes y. When such a causation is laid out for us, it is easy to understand what we are fearing and why we fear it. As a result, we have hope that adversity will be overcome. When we know the causes of our errors, we know how to react accordingly, and this gives us hope.

IV. What is *Katharsis*?

In formulating a definition for *katharsis*, it is necessary to keep in mind what Aristotle deems to be necessary components of tragedy and why they are important.103 Why are pity and fear the emotions appropriate to tragedy? What effects do pity and fear have that make tragedy different from other genres? What could *katharsis* be describing

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101 Plato, Republic X.606a5; translation by Tom Griffith (2000).
102 Belfiore, p.229.
that is in line with what Aristotle identifies as the necessary components of tragedy, its function, and its effect on the spectator?

In addition to Bernays’ homeopathic theory of *katharsis*, there are a number of other theories which attempt to describe *katharsis* purely in terms of what Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, which either ignore the passage in book eight of the *Politics* or adapt its meaning to fit its claims. They generally take three additional forms, describing *katharsis* as a sort of moral purification, an intellectual clarification, or a structural component of the drama.

*Katharsis* as moral purification was the most popular theory throughout the neo-classical period until Bernays sought to refute it by offering his own theory based on a homeopathic medical metaphor. In this case, one would translate the *katharsis* clause as “purification from such emotions,” implying that emotions are harmful and one needs to be purified from them. Halliwell identifies three kinds of moralistic interpretation.

In the first, tragedy “teaches the audience by example- or counter-example- to curb its own emotions and the faults which they may cause.”104 By watching the representation of a good man who makes a mistake, we learn what not to do and to avoid the faults which our emotions may instigate. *Katharsis* here is tantamount to learning about morality. And while it is certainly possible that we do learn about right and wrong from tragedy, this cannot be essential to its nature. This interpretation does not answer why pity and fear are so important to tragedy. Fear seems to indicate that one is learning from the protagonist’s flaws, but pity does not coincide with this moralistic attitude at all. In addition, the fear felt “is wholly self-regarding,”105 there is no fear for another. And if

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104 Halliwell, p.351.
105 Halliwell, p.351.
we go to the theatre to curb our emotions, why are we limited to the removal of pity and fear instead of other passions? Just as Bernays’ theory reduces *katharsis* to a therapy session, the moralistic version of *katharsis* transforms the theatre into a school, and the moral truths learned from the protagonist’s downfall are not specific to tragedy but can be learned through other means such as personal experience or imitating virtuous men.

A similar theory which at times overlaps with the former is that *katharsis* is the “acquisition of emotional fortitude: through exposure to others’ greater sufferings, our susceptibility to pity and fear in our own lives is lessened.”\(^{106}\) By viewing others misfortunes, we harden ourselves toward the feelings of pity and fear; the goal is “the reduction of emotional susceptibility.”\(^{107}\) Besides sharing the faults of the previous theory of moralistic *katharsis*, this view seems to conform to a stoic ideal and it is hard to understand why Aristotle would advocate such a principle. Even in the *Poetics*, Aristotle describes the goal of tragedy as a certain pleasure. Why is it necessary to purge the soul of pity and fear but to acquire pleasure, the former being philanthropic and the latter carrying connotations of excess and hedonism?

The third theory is that of moderation, a reading which was advocated by Lessing and to which Bernays replies in his famous essay on *katharsis*. The emotions are not reduced or purged from the mind but readjusted to their proper balance. Lessing himself translates *katharsis* as a “cleansing” which

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\text{consists in nothing other than the transformation of the passions into practical virtues, yet with every virtue, according to our philosopher, one finds an extreme on this side and on that, between which it stands: so must tragedy, if it is to transform our pity into a virtue, be capable of cleansing us of both extremes of pity; which is to be understood also of fear.}^{108}
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\(^{106}\) Halliwell, p.351.  
\(^{107}\) Halliwell, p.352.  
\(^{108}\) Bernays quoting Lessing, p.320.
“The arousal of pity and fear, by the best tragic means, accustoms us to feeling these emotions in the right way and to the right extent.”\textsuperscript{109} When we experience the events of the theatre and feel emotions in response, we are preparing ourselves for future encounters with similar events and thus moderate our emotions.

Lessing claims that the Aristotelian theory of the mean backs up this reading, that virtue of character is found in the state between excess and deficiency.\textsuperscript{110} Tragedy for Lessing is “essentially a moral event” and the theatre is transformed into a “moral house of correction that must keep in readiness the remedial method conducive for every irregular turning of pity and fear.”\textsuperscript{111} This theory is sophisticated in its conception of emotions, that a person can be trained to respond to certain situations. But the focus here is not on the arousal of emotion, but of expressing emotion in certain contexts. Feeling pity toward a good man who suffers adversity because of a mistake made in ignorance is certainly an appropriate context. Lessing’s theory also provides an explanation for the tragic pleasure: because all men desire to understand and feel pleasure when they fulfill this desire,\textsuperscript{112} then “if tragedy helps to provide an ethical education, then in experiencing it we come better to understand the world, as fit object of our emotional responses, and better to understand ourselves, in particular, the emotional responses of which we are capable and which the events portrayed require.”\textsuperscript{113}

While the idea of moderated passions resulting in virtue is a very Aristotelian idea, there is no evidence in the \textit{Poetics} that this is what Aristotle envisions for tragedy.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[109] Halliwell, p.352.
\item[111] Bernays, p.321.
\item[112] Metaphysics 1.1.
\item[113] Lear, p.319.
\end{footnotes}
Aristotle does not discuss or allude to the right way to arouse pity and fear nor the right extent that the spectator should feel those emotions; instead, he illustrates how best to arouse pity and fear, so that both emotions will be felt to the greatest extent. He only cares that pity and fear are in fact evoked.

This theory of moderation claims to teach men about situations to which pity and fear are the proper responses and to what extent those emotions are appropriate. But the question again arises: why is tragedy needed to do this? Why would this be an essential component of tragedy? And why are the best tragedies written about only a few families\textsuperscript{114} who commit atrocious acts such as parricide and incest if tragedy is to prepare our responses to future events. Not many of us will have to deal with such a crime in the course of our lives. And is pitying a good man who commits incest in ignorance the right extent or context of feeling pity? If so, the standards for pity and fear seem to be set quite high.

One might reply that tragedy teaches us about universals instead of particulars.\textsuperscript{115} Instead of learning about how to respond to a case of incest, we learn to feel pity or fear for ourselves or for another in a case of ignorance and συμπίστα, for example. And this is certainly true. But there are two additional problems with this education angle.\textsuperscript{116} Tragedy is not attended only by the youth in need of education, but by all, whether virtuous or ignoble, and all experience katharsis. But virtuous men who attend tragedies are not in need of a moral education. Also, while the exact nature of katharsis in the Politics is not clear, what Aristotle does make apparent is that katharsis is not synonymous with education, but he has envisioned them as two separate purposes.

\textsuperscript{114} Poetics 1453a18.
\textsuperscript{115} Poetics 1451b6-7.
\textsuperscript{116} Lear, p.319.
An aspect of tragedy which Bernays ignores and Lessing touches on but does not explore is the cognitive dimension. We feel pity and fear in response to tragedy, but they are contingent on an understanding of the events and on a cognitive awareness of one’s own connection with the tragic protagonist. Aristotle does not simply describe events which will arouse pity or fear but types of situations which, when understood as mimesis, necessarily evoke pity and fear; these two emotions are not simply felt in response to the specific event (i.e. incest, parricide), but to the universal idea of human suffering. We do not necessarily identify with the horrific deeds the tragic protagonist commits, but with the situation of making a mistake in ignorance which, when recognized, effects a reversal from prosperity to adversity. And it is important that the adversity suffered is not primarily a result of outside forces, but is self-imposed because of the character’s cognitive recognition of the deed he has committed: Jocasta hangs herself when she learns about her incest and Oedipus blinds and exiles himself. In a different example, Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon but in consequence is slain by her son, Orestes.

Because of the importance of this cognitive dimension to tragedy, some have postulated katharsis to mean “intellectual clarification,” that by means of pity and fear, in the context described above, the mimesis effects an intellectual clarification of such emotions. We do not learn the right way to experience pity and fear nor do we train our emotions for future situations. Instead, when we feel pity and fear we are able to examine the necessary and probable events which comprise the action and the reasons why we are emotionally affected and consequently to explore the universal human condition to which we are responding.
Leon Golden, in his discussion of Bernays’ purgation theory of *katharsis*, points out that Bernays was not aware of all the usages of the word *katharsis* and knew only of the medical meaning of purgation and the religious meaning of ritual purification.\(^{117}\) His interpretation of the *Poetics*, therefore, was limited. Golden provides evidence that *katharsis* can carry a connotation of the intellectual clarification and that *katharsis* in the *Poetics* appropriates this meaning.

*Katharsis* as intellectual clarification is derived from the adjective καθαρός and similarly the adverb καθαρώς. In its basic sense, κάθαρσις is the process of making something physically καθαρός, clean or clear, but it can just as easily mean clean in a metaphorical sense, hence the idea of purgation or purification. But we find in the writings of the philosophers Epicurus and Philodemus that *katharsis* means intellectual clarification,\(^{118}\) and the sense is furthered with the frequent use of καθαρώς in an intellectual sense.\(^{119}\) Plato himself uses *katharsis* in this way. In his argument for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates arguing that the soul cannot know anything clearly (καθαρώς τι εἰσέσθαι)\(^{120}\) or acquire true wisdom (φρόνησις) while the soul is connected with the body. Κάθαρσις then refers to the process of separating the soul from the body for the purpose of attaining true knowledge;\(^{121}\) it carries a connotation of intellectual clarification. Plato, however, is not making it out to be a technical term, but is describing how the soul is purified. And while Aristotle does not

\(^{117}\) Golden (1973) p.474; Bernays, p.326.
\(^{118}\) Golden (1973) p.474.
\(^{119}\) Golden (1962) p. 56-57; see for additional evidence and quotations.
\(^{120}\) Phaedo 66d8; see also καθαρώς γνώσαι in 66e5 or καθαρώς έντευξεσθαι in 68b4.
\(^{121}\) Phaedo 67c5-d2.
use *katharsis* to explain the separation of soul and body, he must have been aware that *katharsis* could carry a cognitive connotation of purification as “knowing clearly.”

Golden attaches to tragic *katharsis* a meaning of intellectual clarification and applies Aristotle’s comments on mimesis in chapter four as confirmation of this view. In chapter four of the *Poetics*, Aristotle tells us that it is natural for human beings to engage in mimesis (τὸ γὰρ μιμεῖσθαι σύμφωνον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις) and that all take pleasure in mimetic objects (τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασι πάντας).122 The pleasure taken from mimesis is that of learning (ὅτι μαθάνειν ἠδίστουν):

χαίρουσι τὰς εἰκόνας ὀρώντες, ὃτι συμβαίνει θεωροῦντας μαθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἐκαστον, οίον ὅτι οὕτος ἐκεῖνος.123

people enjoy looking at images, because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each element means, for instance “this person is so-and-so.”

Aristotle is describing a process of inference: we enjoy looking at representations because “from the particular act witnessed in the artistic presentation [we can infer] the universal class to which this act belongs.”124 This is the reason why men create poetry and it is poetry’s goal. Aristotle also tells us that “we enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as the forms of the vilest animals and of corpses.”125 Things which in real life bring us pain are able to bring pleasure when portrayed in a work of art because of this learning process. We can look at

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122 Poetics 1448b4-8.
123 Poetics 1448b15-17.
125 Poetics 1446b10-12.
the representation of a corpse or the unpleasant events of a play and infer ὃτι οὕτως ἐκεῖνος.

Moreover, when creating works of mimesis, artists create plots so that we are able to view the universal law which underlies a specific action. In chapter nine, Aristotle qualifies poetry as portraying universals, i.e. “the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability or necessity.”¹²⁶ Tragedy is a genre of poetry which illustrates universals and is subject to the learning process with which Aristotle characterizes poetry. Golden therefore argues that “tragedy consists of the artistic representation of particular pitiful and fearful events in such a way that we are led to see the universal laws that make these particular events meaningful. This learning process…is the goal and end of tragedy.”¹²⁷ Learning is pleasurable and is the goal of poetry. Aristotle also tells us “the poet should create the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through mimesis,” and this pleasure is appropriate to tragedy.¹²⁸ It seems that learning must also be the goal of tragedy and that the tragic pleasure which Aristotle describes is that pleasure which comes from the learning process inherent in mimesis. In tragedy, this pleasure comes from pity and fear. Consequently, “we must assume that tragedy in some way involves learning about pity and fear.”

For Golden, *katharsis* is synonymous with learning about pity and fear: through pitiful and fearful situations the mimesis effects the intellectual clarification of such (the aforesaid pitiful and fearful) events. What the *katharsis* clause signifies is that the plot, the mimesis, is structured in a way that our feelings of pity and fear which are evoked in

¹²⁶ Poetics 1450b38-39.
¹²⁸ Poetics 1453b11-13.
response to the tragic action help point us toward the universal law that the poet is conveying. The nature of mimesis is such that we can feel pity toward another by watching the events as outsiders and analyzing the causes of the resulting adversity, or we can feel fear for another because we identify with the protagonist and come to understand the depths of human suffering and the universal human condition. As the audience, for example, we can see and predict what will happen to Oedipus and fear for him. But at the same time we can identify with Oedipus’ ignorance and error in judgment and pity him.

So what is the universal human condition that we learn about when faced with pitiful and fearful events? In response to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, Golden hypothesizes that we learn “the fundamental limitation of the human intellect in dealing with the unfathomable mystery that surrounds divine nature.” The adversity that Oedipus suffers is a particular instance of this law of nature.

This theory is deserving of merit in a few senses which earlier theories are not. It rightly interprets *katharsis* using material from the *Poetics* and creates a reading of *katharsis* which is integrated and coheres with the rest of the book. Aristotle does contend that the definition of tragedy comes ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων- out of what has been said, and this interpretation of *katharsis* satisfies that claim. The learning process described in chapter four would set up his mention of *katharsis* as the telos of tragedy. The theory also acknowledges the cognitive dimension that is inherent in emotion. Pity and fear arise in response to the spectator’s identification with the tragic protagonist’s situation instead of simply in response to a certain style of music, for example.

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129 Although pity and fear are still not mentioned prior to the definition of tragedy.
Classifying *katharsis* as intellectual clarification also attributes to mimesis the importance that Aristotle seems to give it. As we have seen in our examination of pity and fear, it is because of mimesis that pity and fear are felt together and this friction between pity and fear is unique to tragedy. Pity and fear are not assigned arbitrarily to tragedy. The fact that pity and fear are the tragic emotions conveys something important, and any theory about tragic *katharsis* must address the association of pity and fear with mimesis and explain its peculiar effect.

There are still problems, however, with understanding *katharsis* to mean “intellectual clarification.” First, it does not mesh at all with the use of *katharsis* in the *Politics*. Despite Golden’s objections that the different contexts for the *Politics* and *Poetics* disqualify any sort of connection they might seem to have, Aristote’s own comments in the *Politics* link the treatment of *katharsis* in relation to music and poetry and suggest that the two accounts should be able to be reconciled at some level. The intellectual clarification theory of tragic *katharsis* seems too cognitive and specific to poetry (as opposed to art) to be related to musical *katharsis*. It is difficult to understand how the two views can be reconciled.

The same problems that arose in relation to interpreting *katharsis* as moral education arise when interpreting *katharsis* as intellectual clarification, simply another form of education. The *Politics* distinctly speaks of education and *katharsis* as two separate functions. Certain types of music are engaged in and performed by the youth for the sake of education. But a different type of music is used for *katharsis* and its merit does not lie in performing it but in listening when others are performing. Aristotle also

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131 Politics 1342a3-4.
sets up a distinction in the appropriate audience. If *katharsis* were primarily a type of education, it would follow that the appropriate audience would be the youth or others in need of an education about the world. But Aristotle suggests that tragedies are best enjoyed by the cultivated and educated, and that good tragedies should not “pander to the taste of the spectators.”¹³² “It is hard to escape the conclusion that, for Aristotle, education is for youths, tragic *katharsis* is for educated, cultivated adults.”¹³³

Jonathan Lear also has a convincing argument that “there is little textual support in the *Poetics* for the hypothesis that the peculiar pleasure of tragedy is a cognitive pleasure.”¹³⁴ The main support for the interpretation of *katharsis* as intellectual clarification comes from chapter four when Aristotle discusses learning. But it is important to note that the philosopher is not trying to illuminate poetry’s pleasure. Instead, Aristotle is attempting to explain the origins of why men partake in imitations and why they began to create poetry. He also contends that Golden in particular has misunderstood the kind of learning which takes place at the examination of mimetic objects. The spectator of mimesis does learn and infer what each thing is, but the learning does not consist in understanding the universal law or cause for each thing but in a simple inference based on the artist’s skill, a recognition that “this is that.” Aristotle says that “if one happens not to have seen the subject before, the image will not give pleasure *qua* mimesis but because of its execution or colour, or for some other such reason.”¹³⁵ First, we must already have knowledge of what we are viewing for the mimesis to give pleasure. If we do not recognize what is being represented, we do not find pleasure in the

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¹³² *Poetics* 1453a34-35.
¹³³ Lear, p.320.
¹³⁴ Lear, p.321.
¹³⁵ *Poetics* 1448b17-19.
mimesis but in its colors or form. There is no acquisition of real knowledge as Golden supposes, but a drawing on knowledge which we already possess. Second, we do not find pleasure in viewing corpses because we are learning somehow about its cause or a universal law which subsumes it, but because the mimesis of a corpse is an accurate representation of a real corpse. Perhaps we can learn about the universal law or the cause of the pitiful and fearful events portrayed in tragedy and in some cases we surely do, but the mimetic pleasure which Aristotle describes is based on the skill of the artist at accurately representing real events. Furthermore, when events are necessary or probable, they are more true to life. And of course we can better identify with the action of tragedy if its events are the types of situations which arise in real life and we ourselves have suffered similar things. As a result, we feel pity and fear to a greater extent; our feelings of pity and fear are contingent on the accuracy of representation and the mimesis of the true and universal human condition.

Finally, we must ask why tragedy would be needed for us to learn about universal laws of human nature. Mimesis through pity and fear might serve to highlight the reasons why we are feeling those emotions, thus pointing us to their causes, but there is nothing inherent in that mimetic situation which always makes us think about causes and universals. The spectator might be aware that he feels pity for Oedipus because Oedipus unwittingly brought about his own downfall as a result of an error in judgment - he tried to run away from his fate - and we understand and sympathize with his ignorance and mistake because we have all acted in similar manners. But feeling pity and fear does not necessitate the thought that there is a “fundamental limitation of the human intellect in dealing with the unfathomable mystery that surrounds divine nature.” Moreover, it is
possible to learn these types of universal laws from contexts other than poetry. We do not need tragedy to learn about why we feel pity and fear. It might even be easier to investigate those universal causes in a different context.

Gerald Else has put forth another interpretation of *katharsis* which, although radically different from the previous theories, deserves our attention. It too claims to be derived from the text of the *Poetics*. Else sees *katharsis* not as an effect on the audience, but a structural component operating within the plot. Aristotle has been systematically creating a definition of tragedy based on structural components within the drama: the mimesis must be of an action which is complete, of magnitude, etc. But when he gets to the *katharsis* clause, Aristotle seems to abandon the definition based on structural components and to define tragedy based on its effect on the audience. Else sees this as a logical incongruity. Throughout the rest of the treatise Aristotle discusses only the structural components of tragedy and they comprise the focus of the *Poetics*. Keeping in line with this thought, Else concludes that the *katharsis* clause must point to some structural component of tragedy as well.

The *katharsis* clause, then, he translates as ‘the mimesis through a course of pity and fear brings about the *katharsis* of the tragic incidents.’ He argues that the fact that the mimesis carries forward (*περαιόν οὐσιά*) the *katharsis* signifies that *katharsis* is a structural component operating within the process of the play.\(^\text{136}\) He also remarks that δι᾽ ἔλέου καὶ φόβου can mean ‘through (a sequence of)’ and refers “not to an emotional end-effect with which we leave the theater, but to pity and fear as they are incorporated in the

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\(^{136}\) Else p.230.
structure of the play by the poet.” Else understands παθημάτων to mean “incidents” or “misfortunes,” taking as evidence Aristotle’s comment in chapter eleven that πάθος ἐστι πράξις φθαρτική ἢ ὀδυνηρά - pathos is a destructive or painful action. Pathos is a necessary component of tragic action and this becomes clear to us when we see that “peripety and recognition are limited to complex plots while the pathos is not, and the calculations of the tragic quality of a play are based upon the way the pathos is brought about, revealed, averted, etc.” Τοιούτων, as modifying παθημάτων, refers to the kinds of tragic plots which Aristotle later describes as pitiful and fearful. In its basic meaning, katharsis must mean purification; the events of a tragedy cannot be purged, but purified.

But would Aristotle use a term, πάθος, which is not defined until five chapters later? The whole question is speculative, but it is important to keep in mind. Perhaps it was obvious to a Greek reader that the pathos Aristotle mentioned did not refer to emotion or the readers of the Poetics were familiar enough with Aristotle’s ideas to understand it as such. The fact that Aristotle does not mention katharsis again, nor does he prepare the readers for the mention of katharsis or pity and fear prior to the definition of tragedy disqualifies us from making definitive arguments using Aristotle’s organization as evidence.

So what does it mean for a process of purification to be carried out within a plot? Aristotle has put forth a few qualifications for tragedy. Besides representing suffering and pitiful and fearful events, the tragic action must take place between philoi, a hamartia must be made in ignorance, a recognition by the tragic protagonist of his crime must

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138 Else p.229.
occur, and a reversal from good fortune to bad results. What we are viewing in a tragedy is a decent man changing from prosperity to adversity. Aristotle, however, says that this kind of action is “not fearful not yet pitiable but repugnant (µιαρὸν).”\textsuperscript{139} But the tragic events are pitiful and fearful. The difference lies in that the tragic protagonist does not go from prosperity to adversity for no reason, but because he has made a \textit{hamartia}, an error in judgment. The mistake made is a serious crime, often a blood-crime between family members, parricide. This blood-crime is also \textit{miaron}. In fact, the word \textit{miaron} applies “above all to the pollution of blood-guilt.”\textsuperscript{140} Else argues that “the moral shock we feel at the plunge of a virtuous man into misery is a pale and derivative thing compared to our revulsion at the murder of a father or mother or son or brother.”\textsuperscript{141} The tragic protagonist has committed a serious crime and can be considered \textit{miaron}. This character, however, although made an error in judgment and acted in ignorance, and therefore we do not want to consider him guilty; he does not deserve his misfortune. \textit{Katharsis} therefore is “the purification of the tragic act by the demonstration that its motive was not µιαρὸν, is accomplished by the whole structure of the drama, but above all by the recognition.”\textsuperscript{142}

The role the tragic emotions play is one of judgment. We feel fear when we judge that the tragic hero is like us and pity when we judge that he does not deserve his misfortune. “These judgments are not after-effects of the spectator’s feeling, they are the prerequisites to it, the conditions which must be satisfied \textit{before his psyche will allow the emotions to be felt.”} The progression of the action makes it so we as spectators understand that the protagonist did not intend his action. We might stop and remember

\textsuperscript{139} Poetics1452b35.
\textsuperscript{140} Else, p.368.
\textsuperscript{141} Else, p.424.
\textsuperscript{142} Else, p.439.
that Else was intent on separating the pity and fear from the emotions of the spectator in respect to the *katharsis* clause, but here the emotions are necessarily the spectator’s. Else’s defense is that the spectator is the “judge in whose sight the tragic act must be ‘purified.’”[but] the spectator does not perform the purification…it is presented to him, and his conscience accepts and certifies it to his emotions.”143 Pity and fear are felt by the spectators, but they are contingent on the structure of events.

Else’s interpretation of *katharsis* makes it a structural component inherent in the plot. It is not the *telos* of tragedy, but a process “carried forward in the emotional material of the play by its structural elements, above all by the recognition.”144 The action of the play unfolds in such a way that we come to understand that the tragic hero acted in ignorance and thus is not deserving of misfortune; he is not polluted by blood-guilt, but his intentions prove that he is not *miaron* and qualified to be pitied. Pity and fear are necessary reactions to these events.

Else has done well in constructing a theory of *katharsis* derived from the *Poetics* itself. He attributes to *hamartia*, recognition and reversal the importance that Aristotle seems to give them. The idea that the tragic emotions involve a cognitive judgment is also in line with what we have concluded about how pity and fear work in tragedy. But Else makes some leaps that are not necessarily supported by the text of the *Poetics*.

Saying that the events portray a process whereby the tragic hero is judged to be free (κάθσρος) from blood-guilt145 is different from saying that the tragic incidents are

143 Else, p.437-8.
144 Else, p.439.
145 Else explains this in detail p.431-433; to be declared innocent is to be κάθσρος.
purified. In the former the person is declared purified because his intention or motive was not miaron. But in the latter, the tragic act is purified because “its [my emphasis] motive was not μιαρὸν.” An action cannot have motive; only a person can have motive. And the tragic action in and of itself cannot be declared katharos because the deed is by nature miaron. It is the doer who is declared innocent: he is free from the pollution of his crime which is miaron. While stating that the mimesis ‘effects a purification of such incidents’ might carry the connotation that the performer of the tragic acts is purified, we must assume that Aristotle would want to use the most precise language possible in a definition.

The conception of judging the tragic action to be katharos stems from Aristotle’s qualification that the representation of a decent man falling from prosperity to adversity is miaron. From this, Else jumps to the idea that we make a judgment whether the act committed is miaron or not. But what Aristotle is describing is a change from good fortune to bad; we feel moral shock if a decent man unjustly experiences adversity. What is miaron is the unjust change of fortune, not any act committed by the decent man or anyone else. Else transfers the miaron reference from an unjust change of fortune to a moral judgment about a specific act, making a jump that does not necessarily follow from the claims of the text.

Else also undermines the importance of fear to tragedy. Pity is the sign that we have judged the tragic protagonist to be innocent of the taint of his crimes. Else only mentions fear as a result of the spectator judging himself to be like the hero. But

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146 Saying that the tragic incidents are purified sounds like katharsis refers to the resolution of the plot. In fact some of Else’s successors have come to this conclusion. See H. Goldstein, “Mimesis and Katharsis Reexamined.” (1966) p.567-577 and Kitto, p.133-147.

147 Else, p.436.
Aristotle puts equal emphasis on pity and fear throughout the treatise and they are always found in conjunction. Furthermore, the recognition is “the hinge on which the emotional structure of the play turns,” and it is suggested that pity and fear are aroused as a result of the recognition of the tragic deeds. What then do we fear? We cannot fear for the tragic hero because he has already committed his crimes and is now suffering the resulting adversity. Else does not explain why we feel fear at all. Pity is the important emotion and it alone is the sign of *katharsis*.

Else has also objected that the tragedy was defined in terms of structural components, so the *katharsis* clause must refer to a structural component as well. But when studying the *Poetics*, it becomes clear that while we can infer Aristotle’s thoughts on these matters, his primary goal was not to describe the merits of tragedy and how pity and fear work through mimesis and how exactly they create pleasure. Rather, Aristotle’s aim is to analyze descriptively what sort of components have gone into making the best tragedies, and prescriptively what sort of features should be included in what he judges to be the best tragedies. It was necessary to state in the definition of tragedy its unique features, pity and fear, and its effect, *katharsis*, but only so that we as readers can keep in mind exactly why each structural component is needed. Perhaps he takes it for granted that pity and fear are the tragic emotions or perhaps he has explicated these features in other works (as the reference in the *Politics* suggests). But we cannot throw out the importance of tragedy’s effect just because Aristotle does not dwell on it. Mimesis and poetry must be partly defined by their relation to the audience because mimesis is only mimesis if another person judges it to be so.
From the preceding analyses, a few things have become apparent to us as necessary qualifications of tragedy and which must be included in any interpretation of *katharsis*. First, it must be able to explain the specific phrasing of the *katharsis* clause. What does it mean that mimesis works through pity and fear? What does the τοιούτων mean and what does it point to? Are the παθημάτων pity and fear, or are they even emotions? If so, how and why are emotions purged or purified or cleansed? Second, it must explain the relationship between the pity and fear and mimesis, how they work together and the importance of both emotions. Third, it must explain the cognitive and emotional effects of tragedy, considering both of equal value. The arousal of emotions is not the only effect of tragedy and in fact, our feelings of pity and fear are contingent on a sort of cognitive understanding of the situation. Fourth, it must explain the tragic pleasure which “comes from pity and fear through mimesis, [and is] built into the events.” Furthermore, because this pleasure is unique to tragedy, the pleasure of tragedy and tragedy’s function must be contingent on the fact that it is tragedy, thus we should not be able to fulfill tragedy’s function elsewhere.

*Katharsis* must be understood as a term of art which explains or alludes to the effect of tragedy. The fact that the word is never mentioned again suggests that, although a necessary concept, it is not a technical term, but a metaphorical word which when combined with the rest of the *katharsis* clauses would bring to mind that effect of tragedy which is peculiar to it: through pity and fear the mimesis accomplishes the *katharsis* of such emotions. Aristotle also tells us that a specific tragic pleasure is generated from pity and fear through mimesis. *Katharsis* and tragic pleasure, although their relationship

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remains unclear at this point, seem to be related. And I think an illumination of tragic pleasure will give us similar elucidation of *katharsis* and the effect of tragedy.

In chapter four, Aristotle describes the pleasure that human beings derive from works of mimesis. We delight in them because when we view them we understand and infer what each thing is, that “this is that” (θεωροῦντας μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἑκαστὸν, οίον ὃτι οὐτος ἐκείνος).\(^{149}\) Aristotle also says that we must have seen the object before in order to partake in the mimetic pleasure. This suggests that mimetic pleasure is not a cognitive pleasure derived from collecting new knowledge and learning about causes but a mimetic pleasure which consists of recognition and is contingent of the accuracy of representation. To apply this to a specific form of mimesis, tragedy, the spectator feels this mimetic pleasure not because tragedy teaches him something new about the world. If it attempted this then the spectator would not recognize the represented object or concept and therefore not find pleasure in it. Instead, the spectator cognitively recognizes that what he is viewing is an accurate representation of something in the world and consequently feels pleasure. We do not learn something new about the universal human condition, for example, but we are able to recognize its manifestations since we are familiar with them and have experienced them in our own lives. The plot is constructed in such a way that human suffering can be clearly seen and recognized by the spectator.

But this is a pleasure which is derived from poetry and mimesis in general. Tragic pleasure, however, is more specific: it comes from pity and fear through mimesis. Aristotle emphasizes that the plot must be a unified, complete action which depicts a

\(^{149}\) Poetics 1448b16-19.
necessary or probable course of events. And on one hand, the events must be intelligible so that we can recognize the events represented. The more necessary and probable the sequence of events, the more accurate the representation and the more mimetic pleasure the spectators achieve. But the emotions of pity and fear are also based on an intelligible sequence of events. Because both feelings are based on identification with the situation of the tragic protagonist, we must be able to imagine the tragic action happening to us, and this means it must accurately represent real life and our own experience. Aristotle states that poetry is universal not because he is alluding to the universal truths that it can teach us, but because it must portray “the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of probability or necessity.”\textsuperscript{150} It is important for tragic action to be necessary and probable because pity and fear can only be felt in such a plot structure.

“The audience’s cognitive appreciation of the plot’s intelligible structure and attendant pleasure are important, but they are causal antecedents of the proper effect and proper pleasure of tragedy.”\textsuperscript{151} The emphasis is not on intelligibility, but intelligibility for the sake of arousing pity and fear.

Aristotle is not just concerned with arousing pity and fear but arousing the emotions to the greatest extent possible. Thus he qualifies pitiful and fearful incidents as happening between \textit{philoi} and involving recognition and reversal from good fortune to bad because of a mistake made in ignorance. The tragic protagonist is a decent man, just as the spectators would identify themselves, but who is able to make a mistake, just like the rest of us. Our identification with the protagonist allows us to believe he is like us and does not deserve to suffer adversity.

\textsuperscript{150} Poetics 1451b8-9.
\textsuperscript{151} Lear, p.323.
Mimesis plays a huge role in this process and causes pity and fear to be juxtaposed. We can pity a man because, although we identify and understand his predicament, we are not him and not suffering alongside him. But we can fear because the universal themes of tragedy allow us to imagine the same things for ourselves. Fearing for the protagonist becomes the same as fearing for ourselves, but not completely. Mimesis gives us an opportunity for such an identification but we never get too close. We never truly believe we are Oedipus and suffer as he does and we never completely forget we are an audience. Enough distance exists for us to feel pity and fear at the same time without one overcoming the other.

One might object that the tragic action which takes place in tragedy, although the plot lays out necessary and probable causes for us, is unrealistic and no one really expects such misfortunes to befall him. How then can we fear or identify with the action? Jonathan Lear answers that these beliefs go to the heart of tragedy:

The tragic poet awakens us to the fact that there are certain emotional possibilities which we ignore in ordinary life. On the one hand, these possibilities are remote, so it is not completely unreasonable to ignore them in ordinary life; on the other hand, they lend content to the idea that in ordinary life we are living “inside the plain”: and they fuel our desire imaginatively to experience life outside the plain. Even in tragedy does not befall us, it goes to the root of the human condition that it is a possibility we must live with. And, even if remote, the possibility of tragedy is…threatening.152

The tragic experience is one of strong cognitive and emotional identification with someone who experiences a misfortune which, however remote the possibility of the same event happening in our own lives, deeply resonates with our own understanding of the human condition. It gives us a chance to feel and experience something which we would not be able to otherwise. Mimesis provides an opportunity for this unique

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152 Lear, p.334.
encounter, but pity and fear are the signs and means by which this tragic pleasure is accomplished. “Tragic poetry provides an arena in which one can imaginatively experience the tragic emotions; the performance of a play ‘captures our souls.’”\textsuperscript{153} It is not the feeling of pity and fear that brings us pleasure but that we can feel such painful emotions in an environment where we can imaginatively explore them without real consequences.

\textit{Katharsis} then does not signify the release of emotions which were built-up inside of us and aching to be agitated and released in a therapeutic setting. It does refer to the process by which we are able to arouse our emotions and release them “in a safe environment.”\textsuperscript{154} The resulting relief is not based on releasing emotions in and of itself, but on releasing emotions which have been created in relation to an artificial experience and do not stem from any danger in our own lives. We can experience the depths of human emotion and the human condition, but we do not have to take that emotion out of the theatre. The end of the tragedy, the recognition, reversal, and recognition provide a release of emotion: the emotion is aroused and purged in the course of the tragedy, and we walk away “free” from painful emotion. Tragedy then is mimesis of action which through pity and fear (and the unique way they function together in mimesis which creates that experience of cognitive and emotional identification with the character) accomplishes the releasing of such emotions in a manner that is distinctive to art. It is the release of emotions and our subsequent “purification”\textsuperscript{155} from emotion.

\textsuperscript{153} Lear, p.334.  
\textsuperscript{154} Lear, p.334.  
\textsuperscript{155} It’s almost impossible to separate the word “purification” from a religious connotation or from the idea that what you are purified from is tainted. Perhaps a better rendition would be the state of “being free.”
Katharsis is not a technical term per se, but a word that signifies a general effect of art. This is why Aristotle can use the word in the Politics to describe one purpose for music. Katharsis is not essentially education or corrective and it is not primarily for amusement but conveys a certain ability of mimesis. And it is possible to see how this feature of art can be likened to a medical cure or religious purification. Music is a type of mimesis, a type of art, and there is a certain kind of kathartic effect for it although it is not identical to that for tragedy. If katharsis is fundamentally artistic then this might also explain why Aristotle uses the word τοιούτων. It can point to pity and fear as being the tragic emotions which are released while still conveying that Aristotle is broadly referring to other emotions undergoing katharsis in other contexts of art.

V. Conclusion

The examination of katharsis has held a particularly important place in literary history, not only because Aristotle seems to pronounce it as the effect of tragedy but because he does not explain what he means by katharsis and therefore thwarts our attempts to definitively qualify tragedy’s telos. What interpreters of the Poetics must do is pick up the pieces of Aristotle’s argument and identify clues which describe katharsis and the effect of tragedy. In addition, it is possible to mold our understanding of katharsis by investigating what Aristotle has told us that tragedy can or cannot be.

Any attempt at defining katharsis must take into account the specific grammar of the katharsis clause and the mention of katharsis in book eight of the Politics. It must explain why pity and fear are the tragic emotions and how mimesis works through the two emotions to accomplish its effect, katharsis, which Aristotle regards as essential to
the genre of tragedy. In addition, it must elucidate the tragic pleasure and explain how mimesis, pity, and fear work to create a pleasure which is peculiar and appropriate to tragedy.

Bernays’ homeopathic theory of purgation is one of the earliest and thus has established itself as the most prevalent and influential theory of katharsis. The occurrence of the word katharsis, used to describe the utilization of music for purging emotions, has been employed for the clarification of katharsis in the Poetics. In this sense, katharsis would refer to the ability of tragedy to arouse and purge the emotions of those who are overly susceptible to pity and fear. But this explanation is inadequate. Although Aristotle says he will explicate katharsis in his work on poetry, he does not do so. It is foolish to assume that the concept of katharsis is identical in two differing contexts, especially since a homeopathic theory of katharsis is not supported by the text of the Poetics. What we can draw from the Politics, however, is that katharsis is a term of art and must describe the effect of mimesis, in the case of the Poetics, tragedy.

The idea of tragedy as a didactic tool to teach us either about morality or the moderation of emotion, while appropriating an Aristotelian idea of emotion based on habituation and the mean, is not supported by the text of the Poetics. The Politics tells us that katharsis is a concept separate from education, and we might wonder why tragedy is needed to teach about morality or the training of emotions. The theory would also seem to limit the merits of tragedy to those who need education, but Aristotle tells us that katharsis is experienced by all. It seems that tragedy cannot be primarily corrective.

Along the same line of thought is that katharsis refers to intellectual clarification of pity and fear and learning about the universal law that governs the action of tragedy.
The tragic pleasure is based on the learning which can result from mimesis. This theory rightly stresses the cognitive aspects of katharsis and the emotions and it utilizes the text of the Poetics as evidence. But the mimetic pleasure which Aristotle describes is not a result of new knowledge and insight into the human condition but the result of recognizing a manifestation of the human condition as we have understood it in our own lives. Tragedy depicts universal types of action not so that we can figure out how the world works but so that we recognize that the tragic hero is like us and we can feel pity and fear in response.

Else’s view of katharsis as a structural component of the plot does not address the importance of both pity and fear to tragedy, nor does it describe how they work with mimesis to achieve the effect of katharsis. By stressing the emphasis which Aristotle puts on recognition, reversal, and hamartia, we get a sense of how specific the effect of tragedy is. But the goal of tragedy is not to conclude that the protagonist is not miaron. Instead, Aristotle recommends such plot devices as means to evoke the tragic emotions of pity and fear.

The importance of pity and fear to tragedy cannot be overstated. The arousal of pity and fear works in conjunction with the specific ability of mimesis: it allows us to identify with the character to the extent that we feel fear for ourselves and for the character as if we were the same. But we also understand that we are observing the misfortune of another and thus can feel pity. Mimesis necessitates the friction between the two emotions and allows them to be felt in conjunction.

Tragedy is an arena for such a unique experience and provides an opportunity for us to feel and explore tragic events and our emotional response in the safe environment
which art creates. Tragic *katharsis* is a metaphor that refers to the arousal and subsequent purge of emotions during the course of the drama and is closely integrated with the pleasure derived from the imaginative freedom intrinsic in the cognitive and emotional experience that is tragedy. And even if we never fully understand what Aristotle meant by *katharsis*, it is clear that it represents the unique effect and pleasure of art.
Bibliography


