Greek Influence Assignment
Assignment 15

- *reading.* Finish reading *Oedipus*, lines 912–end and study lesson notes and reading material for a quiz. Also read the excerpt of Aristotle's *Poetics* (below) and answer the questions that follow. Also, read Tennyson's "Tiresias," posted on the online assignment page under "Materials Needed."
- *Greek influence work.* After reading the play, enjoy a musical piece that was inspired by this ancient Greek tragedy: *Oedipus Tex*
- *narrative essay.* Start working on your narrative essay by coming up with an experience and in one to three sentences telling what the significance of the experience was to you.
- *picture.* Above right is a picture of Plato (right) and Aristotle (right).

- *optional viewing.* If you have the time and inclination, and if you just haven't imbibed enough patricide and pessimistic fate, you may want to watch *Sound of Music* star Christopher Plummer in a very different role as ***Oedipus Rex***. A very strange change in roles: from Austrian sea captain who marries a nun to a Greek tragic hero who marries his mother.
- *Dionysia.* In ancient Athens there was a competition of dramatic performances held during a festival of five days called the Dionysia. At least three days were dedicated to the performance of a tragedy. Like between teams in a sporting event, the rivalry was quite intense as the archons judged from the front rows of the theater. As in the days of ancient Athens, four groups from the class will have a competition as to who can write the best tragic plot for a play, based on our discussion of the necessary tragic elements that Aristotle talks about in his *Poetics*. The tragic plot will be a one-page summary (200–350 words) of what would be constructed into a play. The four groups will be the following.
  - THESPIS
    Lucas, Gabe, Steve
  - AESCHYLUS
    Felicity, Grace
  - SOPHOCLES
    Bridget, Theresa, Miriam
  - EURIPIDES
    Elise, Francesca

Long-Range Assignment

- Your new narrative is due the fourth week in January.
- The tragic plot line for the *Dionysia*. The contest will conclude on the second week of February.
- Because of schedule conflicts, our Greek Project evening will be on the 4th week of January.

Excerpt from Aristotle's *Poetics*

plots. Plots are either simple or complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without recognition. A complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such reversal, or by recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of propter hoc or post hoc.[1]

reversal. Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. Thus in the Oedipus, the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect. Again in the Lynceus, Lynceus is being led away to his death, and Danaus goes with him, meaning to slay him; but the outcome of the preceding incidents is that Danaus is killed and Lynceus saved. Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the Oedipus. There are indeed other forms. Even inanimate things of the most trivial kind may in a sense be objects of recognition. Again, we may recognize or discover whether a person has done a thing or not. But the recognition which is most intimately connected with the plot and action is, as we have said, the recognition of persons. This recognition, combined with Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents. Moreover, it is upon such situations that the issues of good or bad fortune will depend. Recognition, then, being between persons, it may happen that one person only is recognized by the other—when the latter is already known—or it may be necessary that the recognition should be on both sides. Thus Iphigenia is revealed to Orestes by the sending of the letter; but another act of recognition is required to make Orestes known to Iphigenia.

As the sequel to what has already been said, we must proceed to consider what the poet should aim at, and what he should avoid, in constructing his plots; and by what means the specific effect of Tragedy will be produced. A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families. A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely,

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[1] The term *propter hoc* refers to an action that necessarily and logically follows another, while *post hoc* refers to an action that follows chronologically but not logically.

from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse. The practice of the stage bears out our view. At first the poets recounted any legend that came in their way. Now, the best tragedies are founded on the story of a few houses—on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered something terrible. A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction. Hence they are in error who censure Euripides just because he follows this principle in his plays, many of which end unhappily. It is, as we have said, the right ending. The best proof is that on the stage and in dramatic competition, such plays, if well worked out, are the most tragic in effect; and Euripides, faulty though he may be in the general management of his subject, yet is felt to be the most tragic of the poets. In the second rank comes the kind of tragedy which some place first. Like the Odyssey, it has a double thread of plot, and also an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad. It is accounted the best because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to Comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies—like Orestes and Aegisthus—quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain.

fear and pity. Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the Oedipus. But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids. Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy; for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents. Let us then determine what are the circumstances which strike us as terrible or pitiful. Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention—except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another —if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind is done—these are the situations to be looked for by the poet. He may not indeed destroy the framework of the received legends—the fact, for instance, that Clytemnestra was slain by Orestes and Eriphyle by Alcmaeon—but he ought to show of his own, and skilfully handle the traditional. material. Let us explain more clearly what is meant by skilful handling. The action may be done consciously and with knowledge of the persons, in the manner of the older poets. It is thus too that Euripides makes Medea slay her children. Or, again, the deed of horror may be done, but done in ignorance, and the tie of kinship or friendship be discovered afterwards. The Oedipus of Sophocles is an example. Here, indeed, the incident is outside the drama proper; but cases occur where it falls within the action of the play: one may cite the Alcmaeon of Astydamas, or Telegonus in the Wounded Odysseus. Again, there is a third case—[to be about to act with knowledge of the persons and then not to act. The fourth case] is when some one is about to do an irreparable deed through ignorance, and makes the discovery before it is done. These are the only possible ways. For the deed must either be done or not done—and that wittingly or unwittingly. But of all these ways, to be about to act knowing the persons, and then not to act, is the worst. It is shocking without being tragic, for no

disaster follows It is, therefore, never, or very rarely, found in poetry. One instance, however, is in the Antigone, where Haemon threatens to kill Creon. The next and better way is that the deed should be perpetrated. Still better, that it should be perpetrated in ignorance, and the discovery made afterwards. There is then nothing to shock us, while the discovery produces a startling effect. The last case is the best, as when in the Cresphontes Merope is about to slay her son, but, recognizing who he is, spares his life. So in the Iphigenia, the sister recognizes the brother just in time. Again in the Helle, the son recognizes the mother when on the point of giving her up. This, then, is why a few families only, as has been already observed, furnish the subjects of tragedy. It was not art, but happy chance, that led the poets in search of subjects to impress the tragic quality upon their plots. They are compelled, therefore, to have recourse to those houses whose history contains moving incidents like these. Enough has now been said concerning the structure of the incidents, and the right kind of plot.

characters. In respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good. Now any speech or action that manifests moral purpose of any kind will be expressive of character: the character will be good if the purpose is good. This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety. There is a type of manly valor; but valor in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate. Thirdly, character must be true to life: for this is a distinct thing from goodness and propriety, as here described. The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. As an example of motiveless degradation of character, we have Menelaus in the Orestes; of character indecorous and inappropriate, the lament of Odysseus in the Scylla, and the speech of Melanippe; of inconsistency, the Iphigenia at Aulis—for Iphigenia the suppliant in no way resembles her later self. As in the structure of the plot, so too in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable. Thus a person of a given character should speak or act in a given way, by the rule either of necessity or of probability; just as this event should follow that by necessary or probable sequence. It is therefore evident that the unraveling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the Deus ex Machina—as in the Medea, or in the return of the Greeks in the Iliad. The Deus ex Machina should be employed only for events external to the drama—for antecedent or subsequent events, which lie beyond the range of human knowledge, and which require to be reported or foretold; for to the gods we ascribe the power of seeing all things. Within the action there must be nothing irrational. If the irrational cannot be excluded, it should be outside the scope of the tragedy. Such is the irrational element the Oedipus of Sophocles. Again, since Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level, the example of good portrait painters should be followed. They, while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful. So too the poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it. In this way Achilles is portrayed by Agathon and Homer. These then are rules the poet should observe. Nor should he neglect those appeals to the senses, which, though not among the essentials, are the concomitants of poetry; for here too there is much room for error. But of this enough has been said in our published treatises.

kinds of recognition. What Recognition is has been already explained. We will now enumerate its kinds. First, the least artistic form, which, from poverty of wit, is most commonly employed—recognition by signs. Of these some are congenital—such as 'the spear which the earth-born race bear on their bodies,' or the stars introduced by Carcinus in his Thyestes. Others are acquired

after birth; and of these some are bodily marks, as scars; some external tokens, as necklaces, or the little ark in the Tyro by which the discovery is effected. Even these admit of more or less skilful treatment. Thus in the recognition of Odysseus by his scar, the discovery is made in one way by the nurse, in another by the swineherds. The use of tokens for the express purpose of proof—and, indeed, any formal proof with or without tokens—is a less artistic mode of recognition. A better kind is that which comes about by a turn of incident, as in the Bath Scene in the Odyssey. Next come the recognitions invented at will by the poet, and on that account wanting in art. For example, Orestes in the Iphigenia reveals the fact that he is Orestes. She, indeed, makes herself known by the letter; but he, by speaking himself, and saying what the poet, not what the plot requires. This, therefore, is nearly allied to the fault above mentioned—for Orestes might as well have brought tokens with him. Another similar instance is the 'voice of the shuttle' in the Tereus of Sophocles. The third kind depends on memory when the sight of some object awakens a feeling: as in the Cyprians of Dicaeogenes, where the hero breaks into tears on seeing the picture; or again in the Lay of Alcinous, where Odysseus, hearing the minstrel play the lyre, recalls the past and weeps; and hence the recognition. The fourth kind is by process of reasoning. Thus in the Choephori: 'Some one resembling me has come: no one resembles me but Orestes: therefore Orestes has come.' Such too is the discovery made by Iphigenia in the play of Polyidus the Sophist. It was a natural reflection for Orestes to make, 'So I too must die at the altar like my sister.' So, again, in the Tydeus of Theodectes, the father says, 'I came to find my son, and I lose my own life.' So too in the Phineidae: the women, on seeing the place, inferred their fate —'Here we are doomed to die, for here we were cast forth.' Again, there is a composite kind of recognition involving false inference on the part of one of the characters, as in the Odysseus Disguised as a Messenger. A said [that no one else was able to bend the bow; ... hence B (the disguised Odysseus) imagined that A would] recognize the bow which, in fact, he had not seen; and to bring about a recognition by this means—the expectation that A would recognize the bow —is false inference. But, of all recognitions, the best is that which arises from the incidents themselves, where the startling discovery is made by natural means. Such is that in the Oedipus of Sophocles, and in the Iphigenia; for it was natural that Iphigenia should wish to dispatch a letter. These recognitions alone dispense with the artificial aid of tokens or amulets. Next come the recognitions by process of reasoning.

Source: Poetics by Aristotle Translated by S. H. Butcher

Poetics
By Aristotle
Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which of the following is NOT true regarding simple and complex plots?
   a) These two plots obviously mirror the distinctions made in real life.
   b) Simple plots do not involve either reversal or recognition.
   c) Complex plots involve reversal and recognition.
   d) Plots involving reversal and recognition are propter hoc.
   e) Reversal of situation that is sudden, unexpected and random are the best and make up complex plots.

2. According to Aristotle, a good tragedy will have ___.
   a) a simple plot
   b) a complex plot
   c) aspects of both a complex and simple plot

d) reversal, but not recognition
e) recognition, but not reversal

3. Which of the following illustrates what Aristotle intends by the term "reversal"?
   a) A man marries a woman who apparently is poor but then later finds out that she is rich.
   b) A mother indulges her boy's every want and desire, but then suddenly decides this is not the best way to raise a child.
   c) A man wants to help his friend who is having a brawl with a brutish fellow; he enters the fight and accidentally stabs his friend rather than the brutish fellow.
   d) A student studies three hours for a test on Oedipus Rex, but realizes he has studied for the wrong test.
   e) An orphan grows up not knowing who is parents were, but is informed about them when he turns 21.

4. Which of the following plots is "recognition"?
   a) Tess makes a confession to Angel Clare about her past mistakes right after they are married. Angel Clare then detests her and leaves her. (Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Ubervilles)
   b) Michael Henchard thinks that Elizabeth-Jane is his real daughter, but then is informed that she is the daughter of the one to whom he "sold" his wife. (Thomas Hardy's Mayor of Casterbridge)
   c) By the unraveling details, Jocasta finally realizes who Oedipus is. (Oedipus Rex)
   d) All of the above
   e) None of the above

5. According to Aristotle, which of the following is the best form of recognition?
   a) a recognition that arises from the plot itself
   b) recognition by earthly or heavenly omens or signs
   c) some mark on the body that reveals a person, like a scar
   d) a bracelet or a other piece of jewelry that is discovered
   e) an object that awakens a feeling

6. Which of the following plots illustrates the best kind of recognition?
   a) Henchard realizes who Elizabeth-Jane is in Mayor of Casterbridge.
   b) Oedipus of Oedipus Rex realizes who he is.
   c) Othello of Shakespeare's play realizes who Desdemona is—his faithful wife—after he has killed her.
   d) When he awakes out of his madness, Lear realizes who Cordelia is—the best of his three daughters.
   e) All of the above

7. According to Aristotle, which of the following best follows the tragic plot?
   a) A good king suddenly loses all his riches and his kingdom.
   b) A great prince is brought low by some terrible event that is not his own doing.
   c) A villain dupes many people around him, and everyone suffers, but the villain prospers.
   d) A villain dupes many people around him, and everyone suffers for a while. The villain is discovered and he is justly punished.
   e) A plot that arouses pity but not fear.

8. According to Aristotle when does a spectator of a tragedy feel pity and fear respectively?
   a) When he sees a bad man who gets his just desserts and sees that he himself could have been harmed by such a one.
   b) When he sees a pure man have misfortune and thinks it is unjust.
   c) When he sees a flawed man experience misfortune that he has not caused himself, and thinks he could be such a one.
   d) When he sees a flawed man experience misfortune caused by his own actions and realizes that he could be such a one.
   e) None of the above

9. Which of the following does Aristotle agree concerning comedy?
   a) It is superior to tragedy.
   b) It has a single plot.
   c) The plot goes singly from bad to good.
   d) It has a double ending.
   e) Audiences show their bad taste for liking it more, even though it is equal to tragedy.

10. Which of the following characteristics is NOT necessary as laid out by Aristotle in his Poetics?
   a) The characteristic must be appropriate to the type of person.
   b) A character must be realistic.
   c) The character must act and be consistent
   d) As in plot, what a person says or does must be probable or necessary.
   e) Characters must be drawn up exactly as they are in life—"warts and all."