

Is Tragedy the “Imitation of a *Serious* Action”?

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BUTCHER and Bywater, Cooper and Else and nearly all of the other translators and interpreters of the *Poetics* who have been influential in our time, however much they may disagree on other major points in Aristotle’s famous definition of tragedy, achieve a startling unanimity of opinion in rendering its first clause as “tragedy is an imitation of a serious action” (ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας . . .).¹ Although, as we shall see later, ‘serious’ is a term with complex overtones, its use in this context, following the discussion of the history and nature of tragedy and comedy in chapters IV and V of the *Poetics*, suggests to most readers that the clause in which it occurs is to be understood as a means of differentiating the serious nature of tragic action from the supposedly non-serious nature of comic action.

Against this common interpretation of the passage, I believe that two important objections can be raised. First, the word *σπουδαῖος*, which is translated as ‘serious’ in the context under discussion, is not used by Aristotle in the *Poetics* to denote an essential quality of action but rather of *character*.² Secondly, whenever *σπουδαῖος* is used in the *Poetics* to refer to character, it does not bear the commonly accepted meaning of ‘serious’ mentioned above. On the basis of both

¹ See the translation of this phrase at 1449b24 in the editions of S. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York 1951); I. Bywater, *Aristotle On the Art of Poetry* (Oxford 1909); L. Cooper, *Aristotle On the Art of Poetry* (Ithaca 1947); G. Else, *Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1957); and cf. A. Gudeman, *Aristoteles ΠΕΡΙ ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΗΣ* (Berlin 1934) 161: “*σπουδαία* im Gegensatz zur Komödie”; Schmid-Stählin, I.2.37: “der ernsthafte Charakter der Handlung”; M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie I*² (Göttingen 1954) 489: “. . . Darstellung einer ernsten . . . Handlung.” I am indebted to William M. Calder III for calling to my attention the last three references which clearly indicate the extensive influence of this interpretation of the clause in the scholarly literature on the *Poetics*. A different and better treatment of this term is offered by G. M. A. Grube, *Aristotle: On Poetry and Style* (Indianapolis 1958) *ad loc.* and pp. xxi-xxii. See n. 8 below for a further discussion of Grube’s interpretation.

² See 1448a2–5; 1448a25–27; 1449b17–18; 1461a4–9; 1448b34; 1449b9–10.

of these objections I shall suggest a retranslation and reinterpretation of the first clause of Aristotle's definition of tragedy.

Aristotle discusses the essential nature of action with considerable care and at some length in the *Poetics*, but in none of the passages in which this subject is treated is the criterion of 'serious' or 'non-serious' used to define an essential quality of action. Where Aristotle discusses the essential qualities of action, the qualities that we would most expect to be summarized in his definition of tragedy, we find that they consist of completeness (having a beginning, middle and end), proper magnitude (not being too long or too short), unity (being concerned with one theme) and artistic universality (as opposed to history's concern with the particular).³ These, and these alone, are the ways in which Aristotle discusses and categorizes the essential nature of actions in the *Poetics*.

Completeness and magnitude, with unity perhaps implied, are used by Aristotle specifically in his definition to express essential characteristics of action which are more fully discussed elsewhere in the *Poetics*. In passages where Aristotle is concerned with actions, they are never differentiated on the basis of their 'seriousness' or 'non-seriousness,' and so the importation of such a term into the definition of tragedy as an essential qualification of action is unwarranted. For Aristotle all actions, be they tragic, comic or epic, must be judged on the criteria of completeness, magnitude, unity and universality. Distinctions between various kinds of action, such as tragic and comic, are not made by Aristotle on the basis of any essential quality of action itself, but on the basis of *the kind of character imitated*, which is the aspect of the work of art that is explicitly charged with this responsibility in the *Poetics*.⁴

In the *Poetics*, then, there is only one way in which Aristotle differentiates tragedy from comedy, and that is on the basis of the kinds of character they imitate: tragedy imitates the actions of the *σπουδαῖοι*, comedy the actions of the *φάυλοι*.⁵ It is also on the basis of their imitating the same *kind of character* that Aristotle holds that tragedy and epic are similar, although they differ in the manner of their presentation.⁶ Thus, regularly in the *Poetics*, Aristotle uses the term

³ See 1450b21–1451b11.

⁴ See 1448a1–8, 16–18. Cf. Else (*supra* n. 1) 69ff.

⁵ See 1448b24–27; 1449a2–6.

⁶ See 1449b9–20.

σπουδαῖος in an essential relationship to character. Since a person's character is stamped on his deeds, *σπουδαῖος* can be used to describe the actions of one who possesses this quality of character; but when used in this way, it is not an essential quality of action but only a metaphorical one, i.e., one transferred from the character of the agent to the actions performed by the agent.⁷ For this reason, *σπουδαῖος*, as traditionally understood, has no place in an essential definition of tragic *action*. Furthermore, when used in the contexts in which it occurs to provide an essential qualification of character, *σπουδαῖος* does not bear the commonly accepted meaning of 'serious' and so does not provide justification for the customary translation.

We must seek now to determine what *σπουδαῖος* really means in the Aristotelian critical vocabulary and to show why the usual rendering of the word, in the context under discussion, is either wrong or highly misleading. As our starting point we have an explicit definition of *σπουδαῖος* which Aristotle gives in the *Categories*:

ἐνίστε δὲ καὶ ὀνόματος κειμένου οὐ λέγεται παρωνύμως τὸ κατ'
αὐτὴν ποιὸν λεγόμενον, οἷον ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς ὁ σπουδαῖος· τῷ
γὰρ ἀρετὴν ἔχειν σπουδαῖος λέγεται, ἀλλ' οὐ παρωνύμως ἀπὸ
τῆς ἀρετῆς. (8.10b8)

Aristotle thus clearly understands *σπουδαῖος* to be the adjectival form of *ἀρετή*, and the word is regularly found in this sense in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁸ Since *ἀρετή* is the particular excellence of any thing

⁷ See 1461a4–9 for an indication of how Aristotle conceives of noble action as conditioned by and dependent on nobility of character. He points out here that the motives of the agent and the conditions under which he operates must be taken into consideration in forming our ultimate judgment as to whether an action is noble or not.

⁸ I am indebted to Benedict Einarson for first pointing out to me the close connection between *σπουδαῖος* and *ἀρετή* in Aristotelian thought. An excellent discussion of the relationship of these two terms is provided by Butcher (*supra* n. 1) 228–34. For other examples of this usage see *EN* 1099a23, 1113a25 and 1166a12–13. On the last two passages see also J. Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London 1900) *ad loc.* Grube (*supra* n. 1), recognizing the connection between *σπουδαῖος* and *ἀρετή*, translates *σπουδαῖος* as '[morally] good.' My objection to this is that the noun, *ἀρετή*, and its adjective, *σπουδαῖος*, as they are used by Aristotle and as they apply to tragedy, have a far greater range of meanings than those simply associated with moral virtue. This can be seen from the discussion of *ἀρετή* which Aristotle gives us in *Rh.* A 9:

μέρη δὲ ἀρετῆς δικαιοσύνη, ἀνδρία, σωφροσύνη, μεγαλοπρέπεια, μεγαλοψυχία, ἐλευθεριότης, πραότης, φρόνησις, σοφία.

No one English word can adequately render *ἀρετή* and *σπουδαῖος* but in the discussion that follows I have chosen a translation which I believe is in conformity with the range of meanings that Aristotle attributes to these terms. We should mention here that the question of whether the *Categories* was written by Aristotle or by a member of his school has

or person, *σπουδαῖος*, as the adjective related to the noun, must bear some such meaning as 'excellent', 'good' or 'noble'.⁹ Now it is quite true that Aristotle is capable of using the same word in different senses in different works, but it is a necessary and advisable procedure to test the explicitly given definition in all contexts in which the word occurs to see whether the meaning of the word is thereby illuminated. If the definition fits the new context, one may feel substantial confidence in interpreting the passage in question in accordance with it; if the definition appears inapplicable, one must seek other, indirect means of understanding the new passage. In regard to the interpretation of *σπουδαῖος* in the *Poetics*, each occurrence of the word can be easily, clearly and, I maintain, best understood in terms of the close relationship between *σπουδαῖος* and *ἀρετή* which Aristotle posited in the *Categories*.

In the *Poetics*, where *σπουδαῖος* occurs outside of the definition of tragedy in chapter VI, it is frequently rendered by translators as 'excellent,' 'good,' 'noble' or some synonym. It may sometimes be legitimately translated as 'serious' in these contexts but with a meaning quite different from the commonly accepted one for the occurrence of the term in the definition of tragedy. In those contexts where 'serious' is a legitimate translation, it is always with the nuance found in such English expressions as "to take something seriously" or "a matter of serious import." Here 'serious' means "of high significance", expressing a principal quality of the *ἀρετή* of any thing or person. Where *σπουδαῖος* occurs in the definition of tragedy, it can be legitimately, although not completely, translated by this nuance of 'serious' provided that it be referred to character rather than to action, as we have argued above. We have indicated, however, that in the definition of tragedy *σπουδαῖος* is commonly understood as a term which merely differentiates the categories of non-comic and comic literary genres. My argument is that if *σπουδαῖος* is understood in this sense of 'serious,' then a misinterpretation of Aristotle's use of the term is involved; if it is understood in the more significant sense discussed above, nevertheless, appearing as it does without

been raised by some scholars. W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* (New York 1956) 9–10 shows that the arguments against Aristotelian authorship are inconclusive. In any event, there is no doubt that the *Categories* represents authentic Aristotelian doctrine.

⁹ Bywater renders the term as 'good,' Butcher as 'higher' and Else as '[of] high character.' See n. 1 for bibliographical references.

interpretative commentary in various translations, it is a highly ambiguous term which creates an erroneous impression. Our argument suggests to us that in the definition of tragedy we must strike the word 'serious,' whether it be to eliminate an error of mistaken interpretation or an error of ambiguous and misleading translation.

To replace 'serious' in the context under discussion I should prefer the term 'noble'; its opposite quality, *φᾶῦλος*, would then be rendered by 'ignoble.' The use of these terms, I believe, is justified by a comparison of the heroes of the most significant Greek tragedies with those of the most effective Aristophanic comedies. The tragic heroes show courage, integrity and endurance; the comic heroes are exemplars of every kind of sin, venal and venial, such as lust, greed and folly. Aristotle's use of the adjectives *καλός* and *βελτίων*¹⁰ as synonyms for *σπουδαῖος*, when he discusses the actions which tragedy imitates as opposed to comedy, clearly brings out the nuance of 'nobility' which is involved in the objects imitated by tragedy—the actions of men who are *σπουδαῖοι*—and supports the interpretation of *σπουδαῖος* given above.¹¹

¹⁰ See 1448b25–26 and 1454b8–9; 1448a17–18.

¹¹ Butcher (*supra* n.1), whose perceptive discussion of the relationship of *σπουδαῖος* to *ἀρετή* has already been cited, wrestles hard with the problem of the meaning of *σπουδαῖος* in the definition of tragedy. He sees, as we have argued, that "logically, it ought, no doubt, to bear the same meaning—'good,' 'noble'—as applied to the tragic action, that it bore in the previous divisions of poetry as applied to the persons whom tragedy represents (234–35)." However, he goes on to assert what we most emphatically deny, that "... Aristotle imperceptibly glides into the meaning 'serious,' 'elevated,' 'grand,'—a meaning which the word readily admits of in reference to a *thing* ... This new shade of meaning, which enters into the definition, is required in order to differentiate the tragic action from the *γελοία πράξις* of Comedy. He can hardly have realised the important bearings of the change by which the word *σπουδαῖος* is freed from the limited moral reference which attaches to it in ch. ii (235)." Butcher makes his position even more explicit when he writes, "No one English word completely renders *σπουδαῖος*. The translation 'noble,' which has the merit of applying to the characters as well as to the action, yet suggests too much a purely moral quality, while at the same time it does not adequately bring out the implied antithesis to comedy. *Grave* and *great*—these are the two ideas contained in the word (241)." By translating *σπουδαῖος* as 'serious' in the definition of tragedy, Butcher shows us that he takes the word in its sense of 'grave' and feels that its essential function is to "bring out the implied antithesis to comedy." In this paper I have given the reasons for my belief that this approach does not do justice to Aristotle's argument.

Butcher, who, as we have seen, mentions the logical possibility that *σπουδαῖος* in the definition of tragedy should have the same meaning of 'noble' or 'good' which it has when it refers to character, does not give any supporting arguments for discounting this possibility and for accepting the commonly held interpretation of the term as 'serious.' This is especially strange since he cites in a footnote R. P. Hardie, "The *Poetics* of Aristotle," *Mind* n.s. 4 (1895) 350–64. Hardie had argued (357) that since Aristotle was constructing a scientific definition of tragedy, he could not have changed the meaning of *σπουδαῖος* in

Thus the distinction between tragedy and comedy is not made by Aristotle on the basis of the seriousness or non-seriousness of the action, but on the basis of the nobility or ignobility of the characters who perform the actions and on the metaphorical association of this quality of their character with their deeds. We reject, then, the translation "tragedy is an imitation of a serious action" first because Aristotle does not employ 'serious' as an essential quality of action, and thus it has no place, as traditionally interpreted, in the essential definition of tragic action; and, secondly, because *σπουδαῖος* as a term which has special and very specific reference to character in the *Poetics* does not bear the commonly accepted meaning of 'serious,' but rather that of 'noble.' For these reasons, I suggest that what Aristotle actually means, as opposed to the usual interpretation of his words, is that "tragedy is an imitation of a *noble* action" or, more fully and accurately, that "tragedy is an imitation of an action *that reveals nobility of character*."

If we accept this interpretation of Aristotle's words, we reap the following benefits in place of the disadvantages entailed in the traditional rendering. First, in the essential definition of tragedy we substitute a concept 'nobility of character' which is expressly used as a way of comparing tragedy to other literary genres, for a concept 'seriousness of action' which is not employed in the *Poetics* as an essential characteristic of action. Secondly, we introduce into the essential definition of tragedy the whole idea of character, which Aristotle tells us is the second most important element of plot and to which he devotes considerable attention in the *Poetics*. In the customary interpretation of this passage, the important subject of character is excluded from the definition while less important elements are mentioned, and the relatively trivial, even though true, point is made that tragedy is serious. Its seriousness is implied even by our revised translation and, of course, strongly implied by the association of tragedy with pity and fear. Finally, since our suggested revision accords greater significance and completeness to Aristotle's

this context from the meaning which it regularly has in other usages in the *Poetics*. Since the term is regularly used to mean 'noble' in other passages in the *Poetics*, he argued, it had to retain that meaning in the definition of tragedy. My own arguments for translating it as 'noble' in the definition of tragedy are derived from quite different considerations than those of Hardie, but I share his concern with the fact that the customary rendering of this term has been based on insufficient evidence (358).

definition, it is more consonant with his acknowledged skill in such matters than the traditional interpretation.

If we accept this new interpretation of the passage, we shall do more, however, than merely credit Aristotle with having constructed a better definition of a significant literary genre. Since for Aristotle art is an imitation of action, it has the capacity involved in all imitation to teach us about the action, itself, to bring us to a clarified vision of the essential meaning of the action as it relates to human experience. I suggest that the proposed interpretation, with its emphasis on nobility of character, is essential to defining, in art as well as in life, that which is truly tragic and to separating it not only from the comic but also from what is merely pathetic. Whoever ponders the lives and fates of Prometheus, Oedipus and Medea and beyond these, of Hamlet, Lear and Othello, perceives something far more significant than the seriousness of their plight; he observes, as I believe Aristotle observed, human beings exhibiting some virtue, some ἀρετή, be it courage, endurance or integrity in the face of an adversity of pitiful and fearful circumstances caused by some great miscalculation on their part;¹² that is, he observes human beings participating in an "action that reveals the nobility of their character."

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¹² 'Miscalculation' is the way in which I render Aristotle's ἀμαρτία. For a convincing demonstration that ἀμαρτία is an intellectual error, see M. Ostwald, "Aristotle on ἀμαρτία and Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*," in *Festschrift Ernst Kapp* (Hamburg 1958) 93-108. I am again indebted to William M. Calder III for calling to my attention P. van Braam, "Aristotle's Use of ἀμαρτία," *CQ* 6 (1912) 266-72, an earlier statement of this thesis.