

The Problem of Dramatic Expectation in Aristotle's *Poetics*

Clinton D. Corcoran

ἐπεὶ δὲ οὐ μόνον τελείας ἐστὶ πράξεως ἢ μίμησις ἀλλὰ καὶ φοβερῶν καὶ ἔλεεινῶν, ταῦτα δὲ γίνεται καὶ μάλιστα ὅταν γένηται παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι' ἄλληλα· τὸ γὰρ θαυμαστὸν οὕτως ἔξει μᾶλλον ἢ εἰ ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου καὶ τῆς τύχης, ἐπεὶ καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τύχης ταῦτα θαυμασιώτατα δοκεῖ ὅσα ὥσπερ ἐπίτηδες φαίνεται γεγενῆσθαι.¹

A long-standing debate exists concerning the phrase παρὰ τὴν δόξαν ("contrary to expectation"). Does it refer to expectation on the part of the audience or a character? Butcher reads beyond the Greek, translating, "events come *on us* [the audience] by surprise," while others argue that it must be the expectation of the characters that is reversed.² D. W. Lucas (133) sets the problem as follows:

If those are right who explain *peripeteia* and *anagnoresis* in the light of παρὰ τὴν δόξαν (52a4), the question arises, whose δόξα? G. Else is emphatic that it is the expectation of the audience, and he is supported by the context of 52a4 where τὸ θαυμαστὸν is more easily applicable to the audience than to the characters. Yet this cannot be right. There are, for the audience, few major surprises in Greek tragedy....

¹ Arist. *Poet.* 1452a1–7: "But since the imitation of a complete action is not the only end [of tragedy], but also actions that are pitiful and fearful, this end is best produced when actions occur contrary to expectation, and yet still on account of one another. For they are more wondrous if they happen in this way rather than of themselves or by accident. For even things that occur by chance are most wondrous when they appear to come about for a purpose."

² S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*⁴ (New York 1951) 329ff; see also P. Turner, "The Reverse of Vahlen," *CR* n.s. 9 (1959) 207–215; F. L. Lucas, "The Reverse of Aristotle," *CR* 37 (1923: hereafter 'F. Lucas') 98–104; Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1957); D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle's Poetics: Introduction, Commentary, and Appendices* (Oxford 1968: 'D. Lucas').

But Lucas is, I believe, too quick to dismiss Else's suggestion. The solution to this puzzle may be that the expectation is not purely either the character's or the audience's, but one shared by both.³ I shall argue that the reversal of the action is the bridge that links the character's and the audience's expectations.

I. M. Glanville suggests that F. M. Cornford advanced just such a reading of the expectation passage in an unpublished article connecting the definition of reversal to the confutation of a general expectation. He explains that "the words *καθάπερ εἴρηται* occurring in the definition of *περιπέτεια* at 1452a22 do not refer to 7.1451a13 or to 10.1452a19, but instead to 9.1452a4, *παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι' ἄλληλα*."⁴ He further elaborates:

If the reference to 1452a4 is correct, *καθάπερ εἴρηται* will mean "occurring in the way that I have said" and be equivalent to *ὥστε γίνεσθαι παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι' ἄλληλα*, so that the full definition now runs: "*Περιπέτεια* is a change of the action to the opposite *such that events bring one another about in a way that is contrary to expectation*, but at the same time, we say, probable or necessary."⁵

³ Lucas seems to have hardened his position from an earlier article, "Pity, Terror, and *Peripeteia*," *CQ* n.s. 12 (1962) 52: "The purpose of this article is to show that if one has to be chosen to the exclusion of the other, the expectation of the characters must be intended, but further to suggest that Aristotle made no clear distinction between the two, because it was generally assumed that the audience watching the play shared to a great extent the experiences of the characters in the drama."

⁴ I. M. Glanville, "Note on *PERIPETEIA*," *CQ* 41 (1947) 73. The other two passages seem unlikely to be referents of *καθάπερ εἴρηται*. Elizabeth Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton 1997) 149, has recently argued for a reference to chapter 10 because "The passage in *Poetics* 10 is nearer; moreover, it is the passage in which Aristotle first distinguishes simple and complex plots. The phrase 'contrary to expectation', on the other hand, occurs in a discussion of simple plots: the paragraph at 9.1451b33 begins with 'of simple plots', and there is no mention of complex plots until the beginning of the next chapter at 10.1452a12. Moreover, 'contrary to expectation' refers to a broad class of unexpected events, not only to those involved in *peripeteia*." I agree that "contrary to expectation" refers to a broad class of actions that can include a reversal of action, a reversal of fortune, or a reversal of intention. The discussion from 9.1451b33–52a11 concerns tragic plots in general and it is not limited to simple plots. Although 52a19 concerns the causation between incidents, it has little to do with the nature of reversals.

⁵ Glanville (*supra* n.4) 73; see also O. J. Schrier, "A Simple View of *Peripeteia*," *Mnemosyne* ser. 4 33 (1980) 96–118; D. Allen "Peripeteia quid sit, Caesar occisus ostendit," *Mnemosyne* ser. 4 29 (1976) 338–41; J. Kamerbeek, "A Note on Arist. Poet. C. XI, 1452 A 22–26, 29–33," *Mnemosyne* ser. 4 18 (1965) 279ff; Turner (*supra* n.2) 207–215; F. Lucas 98–104.

Thus *peripeteia* and *anagnoresis* should be read in the light of the phrase *παρὰ τὴν δόξαν* (52a4)—or better put, *παρὰ τὴν δόξαν* should be read in light of the larger plot elements of reversal and recognition. Kamerbeek (*supra* n.5: 279) agrees with Glanville:

As is well-known the passage [1452a22–26, 29–33] is as controversial as any in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Else (with Bywater and Butcher) seems to be right in taking τῶν πραττομένων 22, 3 as meaning "the events of the play as it moves along" against Vahlen's interpretation, viz. "What one did or is doing for a particular purpose" and that τῶν πραττομένων depends on μεταβολή.

But these three elements—reversal of actions, reversal of intention, and expectation—are *not* exclusive; in fact, they are complementary. Schriber (*supra* n.5: 108) proposes an elegant resolution to the debate: the reversal of intention does not exclude the interpretation of reversal as a change in the course of events, but rather it becomes the pivotal causal action in the tragic sequence:

Aristotle repeats τὸναντίον not without purpose, referring back to 1.22, where it is used in the definition. But what he means is simply this: instead of realizing his intention to make Oedipus happy and to free him from his fear, the Messenger exactly produces the opposite effect; this implies: he plunges him into a sea of sorrow. The Messenger's appearance, therefore, brings about a μεταβολή ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν, in other terms, a μεταβολή τῶν πραττομένων εἰς τὸ ἐναντίον in the life of Oedipus.

Of course the Messenger is surprised; of course Oedipus is surprised; and of course, as Lucas is correct to point out, the audience does know Oedipus' identity. But none of this changes the fact that it is quite a peculiar or perhaps *amazing* sequence of actions in which we discover we may have murdered our father and married our mother. This is the kind of thing that does not normally happen; it is against all normal expectation. Wonder is a function of the construction of events, and events that are contrary to the expectation of the audience make the most wondrous of reversals.

Viewed as actions, *mythos*, *ethos*, and *dianoia* are all parts of the plot. Character and thought are subclasses of actions within any plot. The reversals of fortune and intention of the characters will naturally be subsumed as a part of the larger reversal of

action within which it takes place. We may classify these elements that occur *παρὰ τὴν δόξαν* (1452a4) as:

1. Reversal of action:

ἔστι δὲ περιπέτεια μὲν ἢ εἰς τὸ ἐναντίον τῶν πραττομένων μεταβολή καθάπερ εἴρηται (1452a22)

2. Reversal of fortune:

εἰσὶν δὲ κατὰ μὲν τὰ ἥθη ποιοὶ τινες, κατὰ δὲ τὰ πράξεις εὐδαίμονες ἢ τοῦναντίον (1450a19)

3. Reversal of intention (of characters):

Messenger, Danaus (1452a24–29).⁶

The corresponding reversals of the first three elements of plot may be events that proceed “contrary to expectation.” Thus reversals of action, changes of fortune, and reversals of intention may all be events that proceed “contrary to expectation.” In the best plots the reversal of action would usually cause the change of fortune and the reversal of intention.

The Statue of Mityls anecdote that immediately follows 1452a7 is an excellent example of a change in the course of action, a reversal of fortune, and an action that is contrary to a character's intention (1452a7–11). The end “seems a fitting outcome” in that, as Aristotle notes, it has the appearance of design and it satisfies our moral sense. Yet it could not be considered a full reversal unless it were built into a plot in which, as in this case, all the incidents leading up to it formed a necessary or probable sequence connecting crime to punishment. Nussbaum, who argues persuasively for the rôle of luck in Aristotelian tragedy (“luck is seriously powerful”) is unwilling to admit the Mityls example as a probable incident.⁷ Chance incidents, Nussbaum writes, “are also to be distinguished from *atuchema*, or a mischance that has a purely arbitrary or external origin. (An example of the latter is probably Aristotle's case in which someone is killed when a statue happens to fall down on him.)”⁸ But the fact that this is, in itself, a chance or mischance event does not exclude its being an event that fits a greater design.

⁶ Besides reversals of action (these two events being the turning points of these plays) and bringing about reversals of fortune for Oedipus, Danaus, and Lyneus, the messenger and Danaus also suffer reversals of intention (thought). In seeking to relieve Oedipus of his fear, his information in fact confirms it, in going to kill his enemy Danaus is in fact the one slain.

⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness, Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge 1986) 384f.

⁸ Nussbaum (*supra* n.7) 382.

Aristotle uses the Mitys story to illustrate the way in which even coincidental events that are contrary to expectation may still follow the rule of ‘probable and necessary’ actions. The Mitys story is fitting in that (1) the trend of actions turns back on itself and the murderer is killed by his victim, making it a complete action; (2) there is a morally fitting reversal of fortune, because the murderer does not escape punishment; and (3) there is a reversal of expectation, because the action is contrary to expectation yet ends perfectly as the agent becomes the instrument of his or her own unravelling. One may even imagine a reversal of intention in a situation in which the murderer may have had the statue erected in order to hide his crime, yet it picks him out. Although rare, the causation here is not impossible. As Aristotle says, “Such an event is probable in Agathon’s sense of the word: ‘it is probable,’ he says, ‘that many things should happen contrary to probability.’”⁹ For Aristotle, events constructed in this way are the most amazing (θαυμασιώτατα, 1452a6).

Perhaps the best example of the difference between a general reversal of expectation and the subtype of intention is the famous example of a reversal from the *History of Animals* (590B13–19): “polypus eats crab, crab eats conger, conger eats polypus.”¹⁰ Aristotle’s use of the term *peripeteia* in this passage is noteworthy. Belfiore is mistaken to consider this ichthyological reversal a “red-herring.”¹¹ The example reveals an action that is both contrary to expectation and which doubles back on itself, but involves no intention on the part of anything in the causal sequence.¹² For Belfiore, “Unfortunately, it is impossible to decide which fish is subject to *peripeteia*, for we cannot determine the referent of τούτων. Grammatically, we would expect it to refer to the crayfish, who are mastered by larger fish in the example immediately following ‘for’.”¹³ But the passage is not really so unclear; it makes good sense if what is reversed is not any particular intention (for nothing involved in

⁹ *Poet.* 1456a23ff: ἔστιν δὲ τοῦτο εἰκὸς ὡσπερ Ἀγάθων λέγει, εἰκὸς γὰρ γίνεσθαι πολλὰ καὶ παρὰ τὸ εἰκός. Tr. Butcher 69.

¹⁰ G. Schneider, *Aristoteles, De Animalibus Historiae* (Leipzig 1811) 349: Οἱ δὲ κάραβοι κρατοῦσι μὲν τῶν μεγάλων ἰχθύων, καὶ τις συμβαίνει περιπέτεια τούτων ἐνίοις. Τοὺς μὲν γὰρ καράβους οἱ πολύποδες κρατοῦσιν.

¹¹ E. Belfiore, “ΠΕΡΙΠΕΤΕΙΑ as Discontinuous Action: Aristotle’s *Poetics* 11.1452a22–29,” *CP* 83 (1988) 183–94.

¹² Belfiore (*supra* n.4) 152; *HA* 590b13; Butcher (*supra* n.2) 331.

¹³ Belfiore (*supra* n.11) 193, and (*supra* n.4) 152f.

this sequence has any intentions beyond instinct), but rather the general human expectation (ἔνδοξα) of this causal sequence. The *koinos topos* "big fish usually eat small fish" is reversed when you become the food of your food. As F. Lucas comments (101), "Change the *dramatis personae* to man, chicken, worm, and you get a touch of life's *macabre* irony, over which Webster might have chuckled and James Thomson actually does. The eater is eaten by what is meat for his meat." What is reversed is then the ἔνδοξα shared by 'most or all men', not the intention of any of the presumably non-rational sea creatures.

Several logical consequences follow the above divisions. Reversals of fortune and intention are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for a true reversal of action, yet given the nature of tragic actions, they will almost invariably accompany such changes. A reversal that controverts a character's intention may be the best kind of action contrary to expectation, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for a reversal of action. And the best recognitions are those that are concomitant with a reversal of the action, fortune, and intention (1452a32f). Reversals that entail recognitions that are contrary to expectation and yet still follow one another are, as Aristotle notes, logically the best.¹⁴ But this leaves the obvious question: why are they the best?

The continuation of the expectation passage (1452a4-7) suggests an answer. The reversals of action, fortune, and intention provide a learning opportunity for the audience and character: they teach the rule, or its exception, thereby illustrating the universal in poetry. Golden rightly emphasizes that learning is the essential element of a well constructed plot: "I argue that in the *Poetics*, Aristotle's theoretical treatise on art, only one essential pleasure is assigned to all forms of *mimesis*, including tragic and comic *mimesis*, and that is the pleasure of learning and inference."¹⁵ He quotes Aristotle's *Rhet.* 1371b2-10 to make the point:

Since learning and wonder are pleasant, such things as artistic imitation must be pleasant; for example, painting, sculpture,

¹⁴ Just as tragedy is possible without character, so a reversal of the action is possible without a change of fortune for the protagonist. This is obvious in comedies in which the world may disintegrate around the comic protagonists while they continue on oblivious to their surroundings.

¹⁵ LEON GOLDEN, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (= *American Classical Studies* 29 [Atlanta 1992: hereafter 'Golden']) 102; cf. his "Aristotle on Comedy," *JAesthArtCrit* 42 (1984) 286-90.

and poetry—indeed, every successful imitation of an object, even though the object which is imitated is not itself pleasing. Our delight is not in the original; rather there is an inference: *This is that*; and so the act of learning takes place.¹⁶

Aristotle observes (*Poet.* 1448b17) that “The reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning and inferring, and saying perhaps, ‘That is a So and So’.”¹⁷ We know what happens to Oedipus, but what we really want to know is *how* it could happen.¹⁸ It is the construction of the events, not the ending, that brings us back to great drama again and again. What set of circumstances and choices brings about the doom of this kind of character? Contrary to popular belief, knowing the end of a drama does not reduce our fascination or wonder with it. Thus, an action’s being “contrary to expectation” is not primarily due to surprise or suddenness, but rather to amazement and wonder (τὸ θαυμαστόν) at the construction of events. Aristotle continues: “So also hairbreadth escapes from danger are pleasant, for such things excite our wonder (θαυμαστά).”¹⁹ Escapes are exciting and fascinating because we want to know *how* such impossible odds can be overcome, just as in a tragedy we want to know *how* things went wrong.²⁰ In a reversal the known is shown by a probable sequence to be connected to something we do not expect it to be connected to, but once that result is revealed we feel and recognize the connection. What is contrary to expectation is the unfolding of the peculiar series of events: they confound ἔνδοξα and produce wonder, and then learning, and finally delight from the learning. Thus the pleasure of actions that proceed contrary to expectation is fourfold. First they cause surprise (παρὰ τὴν δόξαν), then wonder (τὸ θαυμαστόν), then learning

¹⁶ Golden 102; Lane Cooper, tr. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle* (Englewood 1932) 65.

¹⁷ Else (*supra* n.2: 131f) reads: οὗτος ἐκεῖνο[ς].

¹⁸ Schrier (*supra* n.5: 115f) sees the tension created between the “what” of events and the “how” as an instrument for creating dramatic suspense.

¹⁹ 1371b10ff: καὶ αἱ περιπέτειαι καὶ τὸ παρὰ μικρὸν σώζεσθαι ἐκ τῶν κινδύνων· πάντα γὰρ θαυμαστά ταῦτα; tr. Cooper 65.

²⁰ The artistry of hairbreadth escapes in ‘thirties serials often violates this aesthetic principle, relying instead on a lapse of memory or a camera trick to make the inescapable escapable. For example, the last scene of an episode shows the danger much closer than it appears when the next episode picks up the story. On the contrary, the escapes of Aristophanes’ heroes always rely on invention, such as Dicaeopolis’ coal kidnapping scheme in the *Acharnians*.

(μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι), and finally delight in the learning (ὅτι μανθάνειν οὐ μόνον τοῖς φιλοσόφοις ἥδιστον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὁμοίως).²¹

Aristotle never expressly discusses ἀναγνώρησις as a reaction on the part of the audience. D. Lucas denies (133) that the phrase "contrary to expectation" can refer to the audience: "Since in general the audience knows the end of the story and the characters do not, the surprise must belong to the latter. This is clinched by the facts of *anagnoresis*. *Peripeteia* and *anagnoresis* are parallel forms of μεταβολή, as is emphasized by the μέν and δέ at 52a22 and 30." But if my argument is correct and the phrase "contrary to expectation" does apply to reversals of action, fortune, and thought in general, then whenever there is a concomitant reversal and recognition, a situation arises in which ἀναγνώρησις is a recognition or discovery for both the character and the audience.

This may be clarified by considering that what is recognition on the part of a tragic character is often the catalyst for catharsis in the audience. When Oedipus' attempt to demonstrate his wisdom reveals instead his deep ignorance of his origins, by extension we are shown our own ignorance. Oedipus' discovery of his ignorance about the human condition is a recognition that marks the convergence of the learning of the audience and the hero. As F. Lucas put it (102):

The *peripeteia* is the [result of] blinded human effort [that achieves] the very opposite of its aim. The *anagnoresis* [which it is misleading to render 'recognition' instead of 'discovery'—Aristotle expressly says (1452a34ff) that it may be not only of persons but also of *things* and *facts*] is the realization of that blindness, the opening of the eyes that Ate, who hurts men's minds, or Fate, or just human weakness had sealed.... In vain we pray, like Ajax, to perish at least in the sunlight, seeing the faces of our foes; for the blindness Tiresias taunts in Oedipus is the blindness of all men, knowing not themselves, knowing not what they do.

A condition for the occurrence of catharsis is the intersection of the audience's recognition with that of the hero's discovery. His recognition is now their pity for what they had feared all along. When their knowledge is identical with the hero's, the tension of the audience's knowing something the hero does not know is relieved, and their pity and fear are then purged. Thus,

²¹ *Poet.* 1452a4–7, 1448b16, 1448b13f.

in a very fundamental way, it is impossible for the audience not to experience what the hero recognizes. The emotional and intellectual component of the catharsis are inseparable. Catharsis cannot simply mean clarification or homeopathic purgation; it must be an intellectual recognition and an emotional release at one and the time.²²

In conclusion, the poet may choose a course of action contrary to opinions that are generally held (ἔνδοξα) in order to demonstrate the error they involve (*hamartema* or *hamartia*). The knowledge gained from a concomitant reversal and recognition may parallel a character's or the audience's expectation, but it does not belong to either one alone. All that is necessary is that it is thought to be a generally accepted position, proverb, or maxim (that wealth is blind: *cf. Ploutos*), or that it is accepted by sophists (*cf. Clouds*) or professionals (*cf. the jurors in Wasps*). Hence the audience and characters learn in a reversal 'what exceptions there may be' to the ἔνδοξα about the general

²² Else (*supra* n.2: 433–39, 446–50) has a similar discussion of catharsis as a kind of Aristotelian moral judgment that combines a "prerequisite" intellectual recognition with a subsequent emotional purification: "It is a pleasure springing from emotion, but an emotion authorized and released by an intellectually conditioned structure of action" (449). Recognition that the tragic deed is done in ignorance but still from some fault, *i.e.*, that it is not simply *miaros*. There is some responsibility for the act and contrition for it allowing for purification. Thus, "the catharsis is not a change or end-product in the spectator's soul, or in the fear and pity (*i.e.*, the dispositons to them) in his soul, but a process carried forward in the emotional material of the play by its structural elements, above all by the recognition" (439). Else identifies recognition as a process tied to the structural elements of a play and the direct cause of the emotions produced. As Else notes, his theory leaves only *Oedipus Rex* and *Iphigenia in Tauris* as plays that perfectly fit this model (446). If Else's theory of catharsis were correct, then he would be right to criticize Aristotle's theory as fitting too few plays and missing many other masterpieces (446). But the notion of recognition being tied to purification is too restrictive. Recognition may be of any flawed action (*hamartema*) or character fault (*hamartia*), and even of the rôle of chance events in life if they are tied properly to the plot. The notion of purification is too restrictive in another sense; the construction of events in *Bacchae*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Agamemnon*, or the plots of Aristophanes' comedies, creates the dramatic pleasure of wonder. Wonder is tied directly to a recognition of how one event unexpectedly but logically results in another. Not all tragedy relies on the protagonist's learning in a recognition of moral fault or in experiencing a purification. Here we may think of the *Medea*. Furthermore, there may not be a fault at all, as is arguably the case in *Antigone*. Else denies that the idea of catharsis is relevant to comedy because there is no *hamartia* or pathos to be purified, but comic plots and agons are often set in motion by the recognition of the unexpected consequences of an initial *hamartema* (447).

course of affairs, character, or thoughts.²³ Plot (*mythos*) is an extended argument in the form of actions, fates, and expectations, a passage between the contraries (*τὸ ἐναντίον*) of ignorance and knowledge (1452a22). Aristotle calls reversal and recognition the most emotionally powerful parts of the plot because they are capable of entrancing or possessing (*ψυχαγωγεῖ*) the audience (1450a32). Janko translates, "the most important things with which tragedy *enthralls* [us] are parts of the plot—reversals and recognitions."²⁴ Thus the best change of actions, fortune, and intention take place contrary to expectation, because the imitation of this type of action produces the greatest wonder at the occurrence, the most tragic emotions, and the greatest amount of learning.²⁵

HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY

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²³ I agree with Poulheria Kyriakou, "Aristotle's Philosophical *Poetics*," *Mnemosyne* SER. 4 46 (1993) 347, who argues that the entire plot of a tragedy can be "translated into a 'πρότασις ἔνδοξος,' and that plot (*mythos*) can be considered "as an enthymematic polysyllogism."

²⁴ R. Janko, *Aristotle, Poetics I* (Indianapolis 1987) 9.

²⁵ My thanks to the many careful notes of the anonymous reader.