

POISED BETWEEN THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR:
THE STATUS OF LITERATURE
ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*

To Prof. N. C. Conomis

This paper has a two-pronged purpose: to complement an earlier paper of mine on a related topic¹ as well as to corroborate the views Halliwell has put forth in two recent papers and in his book on mimesis, where the close connection between *Poet.* 4 and 9 is rightly emphasized.² In *Poet.* 4 Aristotle touches on the anthropological origin of poetry and argues that poetry came about as an effect of out two natural causes. To facilitate the understanding of Aristotle's train of thought I quote the relevant part of *Poet.* 4 (1448b 4-28):

Εοίκασι δὲ γεννηῆσαι μὲν ὅλως τὴν ποιητικὴν αἰτίαι δύο τινὲς καὶ αὐταὶ φυσικαί. τό τε γὰρ μιμῆσθαι σύμφυτον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐκ παιδῶν ἐστὶ καὶ τούτῳ διαφέρουσι τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὅτι μιμητικώτατόν ἐστι καὶ τὰς μαθήσεις ποιεῖται διὰ μιμήσεως τὰς πρώτας, καὶ τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασι πάντας. σημεῖον δὲ τούτου τὸ συμβαῖνον ἐπὶ τῶν ἔργων· ἃ γὰρ αὐτὰ λυπηρῶς ὀρώμεν, τούτων τὰς εἰκόνας τὰς μάλιστα ἠκριβωμένους χαίρομεν θεωροῦντες, οἷον θηρίων τε μορφᾶς τῶν ἀτιμοτάτων καὶ νεκρῶν. αἴτιον δὲ καὶ τούτου, ὅτι μανθάνειν οὐ μόνον τοῖς φιλοσόφοις ἤδιστον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὁμοίως, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ βραχὺ κοινωνοῦσιν αὐτοῦ. διὰ γὰρ τοῦτο χαίρουσι τὰς εἰκόνας ὀρώντες, ὅτι συμβαίνει θεωροῦντας μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος· ἐπεὶ ἐὰν μὴ τύχη προεω-

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1. «Fictionality and Effectiveness: Two Essential Characteristics of Literature in Aristotle's *Poetics*», *Ελληνικά* 52.1 (2002) 27-35.

2. See S. Halliwell, «Pleasure, Understanding and Emotion in Aristotle's *Poetics*» in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton 1992, pp. 241-260; «Aristotelian Mimesis and Human Understanding» in Ø. Andersen & J. Haarberg (eds), *Making Sense of Aristotle: Essays in Poetics*, London 2001, pp. 87-107; *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton - Oxford 2002, ch. 5-6 (this important study surveys in an exemplary manner the earlier literature on mimesis).

ροακῶς, οὐχ ἢ μίμημα ποιήσει τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀλλὰ διὰ τὴν ἀπεργασίαν ἢ τὴν χροιάν ἢ διὰ τοιαύτην τινὰ ἄλλην αἰτίαν. κατὰ φύσιν δὲ ὄντος ἡμῖν τοῦ μμεισθαι καὶ τῆς ἀρμονίας καὶ τοῦ ῥυθμοῦ (τὰ γὰρ μέτρα ὅτι μόρια τῶν ῥυθμῶν ἐστὶ φανερόν) ἐξ ἀρχῆς οἱ πεφυκότες πρὸς αὐτὰ μάλιστα κατὰ μικρὸν προάγοντες ἐγέννησαν τὴν ποιήσιν ἐκ τῶν αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων.

Aristotle's account raises the question whether the production and enjoyment of mimetic products are two distinct causes or one and the same cause, in which case the second cause is the natural feeling for rhythm and harmony.³ I think that the production and enjoyment of mimetic products are in all probability two distinct causes. With the prepositional phrase κατὰ φύσιν Aristotle sums up the preceding discussion of natural causes as he turns his attention to two constituents of mimesis which humans have a natural inclination to engage in and whose products they do enjoy on account of their nature. According to *Poet.* 1448a 25 mimesis is constituted by ἐν οἷς τε (καὶ ἅ) καὶ ὧς, i.e. by its means, its subject and the manner in which it is carried out. Harmony and rhythm belong to ἐν οἷς and are, therefore, constituents of literary mimesis so that they cannot be in themselves a cause of, and a necessary condition for, literary production because their use is optional –literary mimesis can have speech as its sole means. In other words, literary mimesis cannot be equated with two of its contingent means to which Aristotle turns his attention because the topic coming up next is metrical mimesis, as is made clear by the fact that in the following lines he refers to Homer and the *Margites* which he takes to be an early form of comedy (*Poet.* 1448b 28ff.).⁴ Although Aristotle has emphasized that Empedocles is not a poet but a natural philosopher despite the use of the hexameter (*Poet.* 1447b 16ff.), he repeats this point about meter in *Poet.* 9, this time with regard to Herodotus' historical work, because next he takes up the difference between poetry and history. Aristotle has made it clear that meter is not indispensable to literary mimesis (meter is subsumed under rhythm; see *Poet.* 1448b 21) but the oldest piece of scopic literature he knows of, the *Margites*, is a poem

3. See e.g. the comment on *Poet.* 1448b 22 in D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle Poetics*, Oxford 1968, pp. 74-75, who opts for the second alternative. G. M. Sifakis, *Aristotle on the Function of Tragic Poetry*, Herakleion 2001, and Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (above, n. 2) acknowledge this problem but do not address it because either alternative is irrelevant to their argument.

4. On *Margites* in this context see D. J. Jakob, «Die Stellung des *Margites* in der Entwicklung der Komödie», *Ελληνικά* 43 (1993) 275-279. Such transitions from one topic to another are characteristic of oral style (for literature on the oral style of the *Poetics* see D. J. Jakob, «Aristoteles über die Einheit der Zeit in der Tragödie: Zu *Poetik* 1449b 9-16», in H.-Chr. Günther & A. Rengakos [eds], *Beiträge zur antiken Philosophie, Festschrift W. Kullmann*, Stuttgart 1997, p. 247 n. 8).

and it is thus reasonable to assume that according to him all pre-Homeric literature, both scoptic and serious (ψόγοι and ἐγκώμια or ὕμνοι respectively), was in metrical form.

In view of the above the enjoyment of mimetic products is one of the two natural causes of poetry. This conclusion is in line with the views Aristotle puts forth in *Poet.* 9 and with his thesis that tragedy aims chiefly at causing a certain kind of pleasure. As already remarked, *Poet.* 4 and 9 are indeed closely connected. *Poet.* 4 deals mainly with the visual arts but raises a question that pertains to literature as well, namely whether the viewer of a painting needs some pre-existing knowledge in order to appreciate the painting. If pre-existing knowledge is indeed required, aesthetic pleasure is cognitive in nature, for the viewer makes an inference (συλλογιῶσθαι) that brings what is represented in the painting under his or her pre-existing knowledge (οὗτος ἐκεῖνος). The same is obviously the case in tragedy too which, as Aristotle himself notes, draws upon the mythological tradition. In *Poet.* 9 the cognitive process of recognition and identification contributes to the believability of poetry, for events in myths are thought to have really happened in the distant past and the audience is ready to believe that they really took place.

The remark about tragedy in *Poet.* 9 complements the parallel point about the visual arts in *Poet.* 4.⁵ Tragedy is similar to the visual arts in another respect too: just as the viewer of a painting is paradoxically pleased by the representation of what is hardly enjoyable in real life (repelling animals or corpses), especially if they have been rendered with life-like accuracy (cf. Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 673-674), the audience of tragedy is similarly pleased by the extreme situations in tragic plots (incest, murder or mutilation of relatives), despite the fact that such situations are hardly pleasing in real life.⁶ This is most probably due to the fact that tragedy enriches our understanding of the human condition because it forces us to contemplate situations that in all likelihood we will never experience (such understanding will come in handy if we are ever called upon to judge actions similar to those of a tragic hero in order to mete out justice). To take as an example Euripides' *Medea*, is the heroine justified in killing her own children, or at least is the enormity of her crime somewhat mitigated,⁷ given that she is

5. The transition from the visual arts in *Poet.* 4 to literature in *Poet.* 9 is another point of contact between these two chapters.

6. On the aesthetic pleasure that paradoxically results from repelling subjects see Δ. Ι. Ιακώβ, *Η ποιητική της αρχαίας ελληνικής τραγωδίας*, Athens 1998, ch. 3; cf. A. D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy give Pleasure?*, Oxford 1996.

7. See A. P. Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy*, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London 1998, p. 192ff.

abandoned by Jason, unable to return to her homeland, socially marginalized as a barbarian woman and unlikely to secure asylum since she is a sorceress who had murdered Apsyrtus and Pelias? Is Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* guilty⁸ even if he did not know that the man whom he killed was his father and that the woman whom he married, the widow of the king of Thebes, was his mother? The audience come to grips with the play as they rely on their judgment and experience in their attempt to answer such questions which could also be raised by a non-mythological play.⁹

It can be safely concluded from the above that one of the two natural causes responsible for the genesis of poetry is the enjoyment of mimesis; as I argue elsewhere, the mimesis and its enjoyment constitute the creative act of literary production, the decisive criterion that determines the nature of literature.¹⁰ In other words the genesis of poetry was due to two factors, the production of poetry and the enjoyment accompanying its reception. In *Poet.* 4 (and complementarily in *Poet.* 9) Aristotle emphasizes the cognitive aspect of this enjoyment, whereas in *Poet.* 6 fear and pity will be mentioned as the emotions that, being primarily responsible for the pleasure caused by tragedy, lead to catharsis (the emotional pleasure is denoted in *Poet.* 9 by the verb εὐφραίνω and in *Poet.* 4 by the phrase ποιοῦμαι τὴν ἡδονήν). This pleasure is, therefore, both cognitive and emotional, as Sifakis and Halliwell have convincingly argued.¹¹

A brief discussion of the καθόλου in *Poet.* 9 is in place here because it is necessary to explain to what extent the pleasure derived from the knowledge of the universal is akin to philosophy without being identical with it, as the presence of the comparative μᾶλλον makes clear. In *Poet.* 4 Aristotle stresses that knowledge is pleasurable not only to philosophers but to all people, even if they enjoy it to a limited degree. As it turns out, all people enjoy

8. See B. Manuwald, «Oidipus und Adrastos. Bemerkungen zur neueren Diskussion um die Schuldfrage in Sophokles' "König Oidipus"», *RbM* 135 (1992) 1-13, esp. 2-3.

9. As it turns out from Aristotle's testimony about Agathon's *Antheus*, a tragic play need not draw on the mythological tradition.

10. Jakob (above, n. 1); see also R. Kannicht, «Handlung als Grundbegriff der aristotelischen Theorie des Drama», *Poetica* 8 (1976) 326-329 (= R. Kannicht, *Paradeigmata. Aufsätze zur griechischen Poesie*, Heidelberg 1996, p. 145ff.), G. Kloss, «Möglichkeit und Wahrscheinlichkeit im 9. Kapitel der aristotelischen *Poetik*», *RbM* 146 (2003) 160-183.

11. Pleasure and knowledge are inseparably related in *Od.* 12 where the Sirens point out emphatically to Odysseus that those who listen to their song return home full of knowledge and pleasure; see M. Finkelberg, *The Birth of Literary Fiction in Ancient Greece*, Oxford 1998, p. 95ff., and more recently Gr. M. Ledbetter, *Poetics Before Plato. Interpretation and Authority in Early Greek Theories of Poetry*, Princeton - Oxford 2003, pp. 27-34, esp. 27 n. 49 (with older literature on the Sirens' song).

knowledge irrespective of their education and despite the fact that they have access to knowledge occasionally and only in a superficial manner; moreover, the product of art as a conduit of this knowledge is on a par with all other subjects that interest a systematic thinker. In other words, literature treats of the *καθόλου* and it does so by having recourse not to the abstract thought and theoretical discourse of the philosophers but to a mythological plot about individuals which concretizes the *καθόλου* and renders it accessible to anyone even to a limited degree. As Halliwell has correctly pointed out, the *καθόλου* underlies, or is a substratum of, the dramatic text;¹² to use a palaeographical metaphor, it is an ideal archetype (the primordial myth that is beyond reconstruction?) whose particular manifestations, i.e. its diverse copies, are the dramatic texts.

A brief comparison of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* with the *Electra* of Sophocles and the *Electra* of Euripides¹³ will make the character of this substratum clearer. The command to kill his mother that Orestes receives from Apollo is beyond any doubt in the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus who even mentions the serious consequences Orestes will face in case he fails to commit matricide: in Sophocles the rightfulness of Orestes' action is unqualifyingly accepted,¹⁴ whereas in Aeschylus' Orestes is tried at the Areopagus but is acquitted. Euripides takes his cue from Aeschylus: in *Electra* the Dioscuri appear as gods from the machine who disapprove of Apollo's command, though they do not condone Clytaemestra's conduct either, and in *Orestes* the Argive court, a secular parallel to Aeschylus' Areopagus, condemns Orestes to death by stoning but Apollo intervenes at the end and the punishment is not carried out. In Sophocles, on the other hand, the main focus is on the heroine and her tormented life at the palace with her adulterous mother who killed her own husband – this is the reason for the extremely delayed recognition between the two siblings, which in its turn delays the revenge and its moral justification. The matricide is characteristically delayed in Euripides too because the setting is now Electra's cottage and Aegisthus will be murdered outside the palace, whereas Clytaemestra must be invited to the house of her daughter in order to be murdered. In the *Choephoroi*, on the contrary, Electra is totally absent from the second and most important part of

12. Halliwell's use of the term «substratum» is really apposite; he agrees with J. M. Armstrong, «Aristotle on the Philosophical Nature of Poetry», *CQ* 48 (1998) 447-455 that the *καθόλου* is a type of event or plot.

13. For the revenge motif in these plays see Burnett (above, n. 7), p. 99ff. (Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*), p. 119ff. (Sophocles' *Electra*) and p. 225ff. (Euripides' *Electra*).

14. One recalls the approval of Orestes' revenge in the *Odyssey*, though condoned here is not the matricide but the murder of Aegisthus who is likened to the suitors of Penelope.

the play and, as a consequence, the recognition between the two siblings in the first part is not capitalized upon. In the light of the above Ὁρέστης ἢ περὶ μητροκτονίας λόγος can very well be the common title of the three plays, despite their similarities and differences in dramatic technique or ideology. As already pointed out, however, the three plays do not treat of this issue philosophically in general and abstract terms but rather reflect on it, each with a particular version of the same myth as a case in point. The particular stands in for the universal¹⁵ because the audience is challenged to draw general conclusions from the particular case as well as to judge the different choices of the three playwrights. Is the god's advice right? Is the acquittal just? Should revenge be unconditionally justified? Ought one to take the law into one's own hands or have recourse to the legal institutions of the state?¹⁶

We can now attempt a more precise characterization of the καθόλου in *Poet.* 9. As is well known, although Aristotle names the agents in historical events (e.g. Ἀλκιβιάδης), he refers to the agents in a literary plot not by name but only as bearers of certain traits (τῷ ποιῶ) – prior, in other words, to the names of the agents in a literary plot are these agents' characters and their actions. Unlike historiography, drama centers not around individuals but around characters who act in a flexible manner. There is thus no unique *Antigone* – just as there is no unique discourse on matricide, there are *Antigones*¹⁷ (approximately contemporary like the three versions of Orestes' matricide discussed above or not) and each one of them particularizes the ideal myth thereby complementing, altering and reinterpreting it in accordance with the aesthetic standards and the ideological choices of each poet and each time. It is exactly the creativity of the poets that will lead Aristotle to his conclusion that the plot of a drama can very well be made up in its entirety by a poet.

A related question should be addressed at this point: does bringing our pre-existing knowledge to bear on what or whom is represented serve any purpose?¹⁸ What is the benefit of knowing that the hero on stage or in a

15. See Halliwell, «Pleasure, Understanding and Emotion in Aristotle's *Poetics*» (above, n. 2) 251.

16. Such questions can be easily multiplied as long as one neither misinterprets nor overinterprets the text. This is not the place to discuss the limits of interpretation which, as a rule of thumb, should be subject to common sense.

17. Cf. G. Steiner, *Antigones. How the Antigone Legend has Endured in Western Literature, Art and Thought*, N. Haven - London 1996.

18. Cf. Lucas on *Poet.* 1448b 13 (p. 72): «When we have learned what already familiar thing a picture represents we have not learned much».

vase painting is e.g. Heracles? Is the identification in itself a sufficient condition for the production of pleasure? The answer is certainly negative. The viewer of a painting much certainly reason (συλλογίζεσθαι) in order to turn the painting into a silent narrative (cf. Simonides' famous characterization of poetry as *σιωπῶσα ποίησις*) based on the particular choices of the artist. Things are simpler with drama because the poet sets out the parameters of a certain situation and the motivation or thoughts of the characters. The poet, however, has full control over the causal sequence of events that constitute a unified whole, as Aristotle prescribes, and over the ideological evaluation of a particular act. As it turns out, Euripides' *Heracles* is partially brought under the pre-existing mythological knowledge of the audience that the hero killed his family, whereas the poet provides his own version of this tragic story by showing how the hero was led to his horrible act: the drama presupposes, therefore, both the pre-existing mythological knowledge of the audience and the personal contribution of the poet – it is a novel construct (that is, *ποίησις*) consisting in the personal story of the hero but allowing the audience to draw general conclusions,¹⁹ about e.g. the human condition which casts serious doubts on the existence of divine justice since it does not reward a man who has suffered innumerable misfortunes with tranquility but instead afflicts him with another calamity.²⁰ Therefore, when Aristotle points out in *Poet.* 4 that the audience learns and understands τί ἕκαστον, the latter is not something particular but the essence or the general meaning of what is imitated, that whose decoding enriches and widens the knowledge of the recipient.²¹ Considerable support to this conclusion is lent by the analysis of a play's reception put forth by B. Beckerman,²² according to whom there is a descriptive, a participational, a referential and a conceptual determinant of the response to a play: the first is identical with the text of the performed play; the second pertains to the emotional state of the audience who enter the world of illusion; the third is extrinsic to the drama and connects the work of fiction with reality; the fourth picks out the abstract reflection

19. According to *An. Post.* 71a 6-9 a syllogism is a transition from the καθ' ἕκαστον to the καθόλου: ἀμφοτέροι γὰρ (i.e. οἱ τε διὰ συλλογισμῶν καὶ οἱ δι' ἐπαγωγῆς λόγοι) διὰ προγινωσκομένων (cf. the participle προεσορακῶς in *Poet.* 4) ποιοῦνται τὴν διδασκαλίαν, οἱ μὲν λαμβάνοντες ὡς παρὰ ξυιέντων, οἱ δὲ δεικνύοντες τὸ καθόλου διὰ τοῦ δήλον εἶναι τὸ καθ' ἕκαστον.

20. See H. Yunis, *A New Creed: Fundamental Religious Beliefs in the Athenian Polis and Euripidean Drama*, Göttingen 1988, p. 149ff.

21. See Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (above, n. 2) p. 199.

22. See H. Oranje, *Euripides' Bacchae. The Play and Its Audience*, Leiden 1984, p. 23ff.; B. Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama. Theory and Method of Analysis*, N. York 1970, p. 159ff.

instigated by the play. The level of this reflection depends on the cognitive horizon of those who respond to the play, be they ordinary people or philosophers. The difference, however, between philosophy and dramatic poetry with regard to the καθόλου lies in the fact that philosophy is an abstract demonstrative discourse void of emotions as well as of any reference to particulars, whereas in drama the first three determinants of the response to a play interact so as to particularize the καθόλου into a story which, as seen above, has a deeper and more general meaning as its substratum. We are now in a better position to understand Aristotle's claim that poetry λέγει μᾶλλον τὸ καθόλου: λέγει means not «has as object of mimesis» but rather «pertains to» or «aims at» and poetry is rather (μᾶλλον) akin to philosophy insofar as both philosophy and poetry aim at knowing the καθόλου, though poetry achieves this goal by particularized means similar, at least phenomenologically, to the narrative of a story. We also gain a firmer understanding of why Aristotle insists on the dramatization of actions whose paramount characteristic is unity. Such actions are independent of particular agents who lived at a given time and are, therefore, events in which anybody could be the principal agent.²³ This is suggested by Aristotle's reference to the matricide in the myths of Orestes and Alkmeon (*Poet.* 1453b 22): τοὺς μὲν οὖν παρειλημμένους μύθους λύειν οὐκ ἔστιν, λέγω δὲ οἷον τὴν Κλυταιμῆστραν ἀποθανοῦσαν ὑπὸ τοῦ Ὀρέστου καὶ τὴν Ἐριφύλην ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἀλκμέωνος, αὐτὸν δὲ εὐρίσκειν δεῖ καὶ τοῖς παραδεδομένοις χρῆσθαι καλῶς. τὸ δὲ καλῶς τί λέγομεν, εἴπωμεν σαφέστερον. The circumstances, the motivation and the general outlook might differ in the two versions of matricide (this is what εὐρίσκειν [= «ἐπινοεῖν»] means in this context) but the matricide is the crucial event that the poet must respect. The matricide is an event in which anybody could be the agent but, if any other event in the life of the heroes accretes to the matricide, it ceases to be independent of particular agents that committed it at particular times and, as a consequence, the action becomes ἐπεισοδιώδης, a type of plot Aristotle categorically rejects (*Poet.* 1451b

23. As Halliwell correctly points out in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (above, n. 2) the work of art is neither independent nor a mere reflection of a particular social reality. τὸ καθόλου is not, therefore, absolute, unchangeable and the same for everybody – it holds generally and depends on the expectations of those who respond to it; these expectations are shaped by factors that vary in each case and, as a consequence, give rise to different readings. The *Antigone* of Sophocles can, therefore, be read by different people in different ages as a conflict between the individual (or the family) and the state, a clash between religious duty and secular power, a reflection on the limits of law, a study of tyrannical behavior, a family drama or in the manner of Anouilh or Brecht; on the multiple readings of a tragic play see Δ. Ι. Ιακώβ, «Η Ανδρομάχη του Ευριπίδη. Δοκιμή πολλαπλής ανάγνωσης του δράματος», *Φιλολόγος* 68 (1996) 381-395.

33ff.). As it is, an action is independent of any particular agent if it has unity but not if its circumstances and motivation are repeated because these factors depend on the choices of the poet.²⁴

In the above I attempted not only to pin down the anthropological origins of poetry as well as to demonstrate the close relation between *Poet.* 4 and 9 but also to clarify, on the one hand, how pre-existing knowledge bears on a work of art and, on the other, what such a work aims at. The goal of a work of art is to impart understanding of the universal (τὸ καθόλου), the meaning encoded in the deep structure of the dramatic text, and to produce the pleasure that accompanies such understanding (the members of the audience usually decode the meaning of a play not during the performance but after they leave the theater). As it turns out, *Poet.* 9 is a chapter of pivotal importance because there Aristotle not only identifies fictionality and effectiveness as two essential characteristics of literature but also determines the ontological status of literature: the latter is poised between the universal

24. Here lies a further point of contact with *Poet.* 8, where Aristotle points out that a biographical epic about Theseus or Heracles is of inferior quality because the many disparate events in the life of a person do not constitute a unified action. Action is, therefore, prior to the agent as an individual in poetry. It follows that history is centered around individuals (e.g. Ἀλκιβιάδης) and deals with the many disparate events in their lives, whereas poetry treats of unified events in which the agents are character types void of individuality (τῶ ποιῶ). According to Schmitt (esp. 545ff.) these character types determine the action but, as it turns out from *Poet.* 17 where the plot of *IT* is outlined, the character of Orestes or Iphigeneia does not play any significant role in the development of the plot. It is indeed hard to believe that action depends on the character of the agent in the light of the fact that Aristotle gives to plot precedence over ἦθος and defines tragedy as a mimesis of an action (not a character!). In Euripides' second *Hippolytus*, which is discussed by Schmitt, Phaedra is (according to an ancient testimony) more decent than her counterpart in Euripides' first *Hippolytus*. Does, though, Phaedra's character have any significance for the action, given that she and her stepson are both ruined at the end? It is not Phaedra's character that seems to matter but the behavior of Hippolytus who from a certain point of view opposes the divine will. By Aristotle's lights Hippolytus is ἐπιεικής but his grave ἀμαρτία to insist on purity as he conceives of it ultimately ruins him. Phaedra's decency might of course elicit the audience's compassion for her plight and raise the question why she is ruined; this is suggested by the case of the innocent Peleus in Pindar's *N.* 5 as well as by that of Bellerophon in *Il.* 6 (cf. Euripides' *Stheneboia*), two further instances of the Petiphar motif (see R. Lattimore, «Phaedra and Hippolytus», *Arion* 1 [1962] 5-18, esp. 4-5, and H. J. Tschiedel, *Phaedra und Hippolytus. Variationen eines tragischen Konfliktes*, Erlangen - Nürnberg 1969) where the heroes are rewarded for their respect of hospitality and their virtue. The failed attempt at adultery is similar to the matricide of Orestes and Alkmeon in that it is an event in which anybody can be the agent. Another such event is the opposition to the gods, on which see B. Goward, *Telling Tragedy. Narrative Technique in Aeschylus, Sophocles & Euripides*, London 1999, p. 157 n. 12, 13. On Schmitt's views see Manuwald (above, n. 8) 2-3. On ἦθος in the *Poetics* see Dale, *Collected Papers*, esp. pp. 164 and 154. For a fourth point of contact between *Poet.* 9 and 17 see Halliwell, «Pleasure, Understanding and Emotion in Aristotle's *Poetics*» (above, n. 2) 250.

and the particular, for a particular story about individuals is a legitimate stand in for the universal.²⁵

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25. Halliwell reaches a similar conclusion in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (above, n. 2) p. 201: «In the case of tragedy, Aristotle's whole theory suggest that an audience needs to have sufficient experience of life to understand various kinds of action, intention and character; to be able to distinguish degrees of innocence, responsibility and guilt; to know in an effectively mature way, what merits pity and fear, to have a grasp of human successes and failures, of the relationship between status and character, and so forth. All of these things, and much else besides, would contribute, in other words, to a complex form of the process which in chapter 4's general terms is described as a matter of understanding and inferring the significance of each element in a mimetic work. But tragedy does not just confirm its audiences in pre-existing comprehension of the world. It provides them with imaginative opportunities to test, refine, extend and perhaps even question the ideas and values on which such comprehension rests». Literature contributes to the understanding of human action because it treats of human action under ideal conditions, i.e. without irrelevant and disruptive events, whereas life itself does not facilitate this understanding because it is fragmented, unexpected and irrational.