Athetizing the Catharsis Clause in the Poetics

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ATHETIZING THE CATHARSIS CLAUSE IN THE POETICS
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The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy,
American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division Meeting, March 28, 1997

As Martha Nussbaum recounts to some extent in The Fragility of Goodness, and as I have shown before in greater detail, Plato explicitly uses the notion of catharsis in his epistemic, educational, ethical, political, and artistic theories. For instance, in the Sophist he says that catharsis is the separating of the bad from the good so that the good parts are left in a better state; hence, in terms of the acquisition of knowledge on the part of a student, “refutation (ton elenchon lekteon) is the greatest of the purifications (katharseon).” That is, the student will be left more purified, with a more appropriate modesty in regards to learning, when his conceit is purged. Plato also states in the Phaedo that the moral ideal is the katharsis of the emotions, and in his political treatises he indicates that the polis may be justifiably cleansed by its rulers, who, in dispensing with evil influence and bad poets through either exile or death, purify the state (katharmous poleis). The cognate katharon — “pure” — also enters in Plato’s related ontological theory in the Symposium, when he claims that the form of Beauty is pure. By implication, any instantiations of artistic beauties would be sullied. Clearly, then, catharsis and its cognate katharon can be found throughout Plato’s philosophy in general.

Because of the pervasiveness of catharsis in his theories, and because he stresses in the Laws that song and dance in religious rituals can give beneficial psychological relief from fear, it is hard to imagine that Plato did not recognize the possibility that tragedy gives catharsis, in spite of his silence on the issue. It is even harder to see why catharsis would not be a perfectly allowable goal of tragedy for him, even had he not seen the possibility himself, because a person whose emotions are catharted is morally ideal for him, as indicated already. Plato, we all know, does say that a representation of bad men or of pitiable events will tend to corrupt good citizens by feeding and inflaming their passions and by overruling reason. Apparently, for him, the benefits of any catharsis would not or could not begin to outweigh either the other psychological effects or the ethical and political damage. In this case, a theory that advocates catharsis for tragedy, such as Aristotle supposedly has, would not, in and of itself, appear to be an effective answer to Plato.

Whether or not all of the aforementioned points are taken into account, it is thought by Nussbaum and by many others, of course, that Aristotle responds to Plato with the doctrine of catharsis. However, there is no clear extant Peripatetic textual evidence which supports that view, and although Richard Janko may be right in claiming recently that a work of the Epicurean Philodemus refers to Peripatetic doctrine that includes catharsis, on Janko’s own account the doctrine is from On Poets. This is agreed to be an early work, when Aristotle was still greatly under the influence of Plato, and so the work is hardly Peripatetic. Moreover, as James Hutton, Francis Sparshott, Paul Woodruff, and Alexander Nehamas have demonstrated in their own ways, Aristotle agrees with his mentor much more than is often thought. Aristotle says, for instance, in Poetics 15 that unnecessary bad character should be kept out of tragedy and in Politics VII 17 that indecent pictures and speeches should be banned from the stage. In short, given all of the
above, there is no clear reason why Aristotle should be held as responding specifically to Plato with the doctrine of catharsis.

The only obvious ancient textual support for the view that catharsis is central to the Peripatetic's defense of tragedy stems from neo-Platonists living more than six hundred years after Aristotle: Iamblichus in the 3rd and 4th century, Proclus in the 5th, and Olympiodorus in the 6th. All of these figures suggest directly or indirectly that Aristotle is using the notion of catharsis to counter Plato, but none cite any relevant passages and, given their problematic summaries, it is very doubtful that they really captured Aristotle's view. Aristotle in the extant corpus actually responds with catharsis to the Platonic denigration of art in but one instance, when he defends ecstatic melodies in *Politics* VIII 7. However, catharsis is employed there to defend only that one kind of melody, and is no explicit justification even for the other kinds of melodies, much less for tragedy. Some commentators have tried to find an implicit defense of tragedy on the basis of catharsis in *Pol* VIII 7, but unsuccessfully in my view, for reasons I cannot give here because of limitations of space. I have suggested in the longer version of this introduction that we can find Aristotle's most articulate defense of tragedy shallowly buried in *Politics* VII 17 when he claims that education will protect young adults against the harmful effects of comedy and "such events" (*tōioutōn gignomenēs*). "Such events" seem to include tragedy given the discussion in the passage that immediately follows of Theodorus, whom Aristotle calls a tragic actor (1336b29).

In spite of all of this, it may still be thought that Aristotle uses catharsis in order to hoist Plato on an Athenian javelin of Plato's own making or that Aristotle is using catharsis against someone else. However, Jonathan Lear and others, including some of those mentioned already, have powerfully argued that none of the three commonly-accepted meaning of catharsis -- purification, purification, and clarification -- can represent Aristotle's meaning of the term in the definition of tragedy, given the severe inconsistencies that result with the rest of his own theories.

Today, rather than look for another meaning of catharsis that would be consistent with genuine Aristotelian doctrine, or rather than argue in a new way how catharsis might have been employed by Aristotle against Plato or against any other predecessor for that matter, I take a fresh approach. I start with Aristotle's theory of definition in order to claim that Aristotle could not reasonably have included the catharsis clause in the definition of tragedy on his own strictures. Moreover, in case we could solve this problem, I expose some very serious shortcomings that result in the *Poetics* itself, which are never or rarely acknowledged, if the catharsis clause is kept. Finally, given statements of Strabo and Plutarch, I suggest that the clause was probably a mistaken interpolation by an editor who repaired a damaged Aristotelian manuscript or who imagined that he was augmenting deficient Aristotelian doctrine. M.D. Petruševski ingeniously thought that the original manuscript contained the words *pramatōn sustasin*, "actions brought together," that the words were corrupted, and unfortunately restored as we have them, *pathēmatōn katharsin*. However, I shall argue ultimately that the whole catharsis clause, whether or not intended as a repair, is an illegitimate addition and should be marked accordingly.

**Part I: The Posterior Analytics, and Catharsis in Epic**

More than a few commentators have recognized the link between the definition of tragedy and
Aristotle's general theory of definition as found in his logical or scientific treatises. A few such as M.P. Battin also remark that the account of tragedy provides the only example in the Aristotelian treatises of the procedure that for Aristotle is crucial in obtaining scientific knowledge. Commentators often rightly see, too, how the definition in Ch 6 results from a preliminary diaeresis, and they observe that the catharsis clause is the only part of the definition missing from a preliminary division, which is a serious problem on Aristotle's own account of definition. However, their resolutions to this problem appear to be very unsatisfactory, as a look at the final definition itself and then the preliminary divisions themselves shall begin to show. In Ch 6, Aristotle says:

Let us now discuss tragedy, taking up its definition (horon tēs ouias) that results from what has been said. Tragedy is a representation of an action that, having a certain magnitude, is serious and complete; in "sweetened" language, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in the manner of drama, not narrative; through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions (di' eleou kai phobou perainousa tēn tōn toioutōn pathēmatōn katharsin).

Actually, mathēmatōn is found in place of pathēmatōn in the manuscript that is considered to be our best authority, namely, Parisinus 1741, so the last phrase means something like "the catharsis of such learning." This reading, however, has never gained acceptance, and in my view would also be unworkable. Hence, for the moment I follow the commonplace emendation. In Aristotle's words, then, the definition has been gathered "from what has been said.”

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By water, this means by a dichotomous diaeresis, which, as commonly known, is the method to be used before a collection of traits in a final definition takes place (see Chart 1). However, the divisions from Chs 1-3 are only partial: two remaining conditions in the final definition, “having a certain magnitude” and “complete,” are obtained from Chs 4 & 5. More importantly, as mentioned, the condition of catharsis has no previous discussion, much less a previous division, which throws not only its legitimacy but that of the whole definition into doubt. This is because in the Posterior Analytics II 13, Aristotle says that, when defining by division, one should admit only crucial elements, arrange them in the right order, and not omit any. In addition, Aristotle says in the Metaph VII 12 that the differentia must be of previous differentia, thereby implying that the ordering of the parts in the final definition cannot be randomly juxtaposed. These strictures, then, undermine the integrity of the entire definition of tragedy, not only because the division for catharsis is missing but also because the ordering of some of the parts is different from the preliminary divisions. For instance, the first divisions in Ch 1 are of the means of mimesis, but the corresponding properties do not appear in the final definition until after the object of mimesis, namely, a representation of good men, which itself had not been introduced until Ch 2.

Optionally, Aristotle could be employing in the Poetics another kind of definition, which Gerald Else considers and which is found in the Parts of Animals 13. According to this treatise, one makes a series of different and separate mini-divisions before collecting all of the final characteristics. In this procedure, the order of the final collection appears unimportant as long as all the differentia are collected. Yet even if Else is right on this point, the catharsis clause, including the terms “pity,” “fear,” and “catharsis” themselves, has not been broached in the first five chapters of the Poetics. Thus, the definition of tragedy cannot be a good definition on either of the two “scientific” accounts of definition, and this is because no previous division of any kind containing the relevant terms was introduced.

Bywater and Hutton do not seem to recognize fully the ramifications of the inconsistency of the Poetics with the Post An. Else does recognize an omission but does not think a solution is needed, probably because for him the definition is in the process of being formulated. Battin astutely recognizes the problem but without any supporting argument says “the fact that [Aristotle] was willing...to spoil an otherwise perfectly straightforward and rigorous definition to include the notion of catharsis suggests that he accorded it more than ordinary importance, and surely considered it a central feature of tragedy” (p. 301). Later, I shall consider an opposite conclusion, that spoiling a perfectly straightforward and rigorous definition is not a mark of centrality, but for the moment it is important to note briefly that others, including O.B. Hardison, Jr. and Martha Nussbaum, have thought that an anticipation of the catharsis clause actually takes place in Chapter 4. They claim that the discussion thereof of pleasure in learning is the core of the idea that catharsis captures, asserting that catharsis means clarification. However, as alluded to already, numerous reasons can be and have been given, for instance, by Lear to show that such a view involves a distorted interpretation of Aristotle’s theory and that catharsis cannot really mean clarification. Even leaving aside these reasons, the other terms in the definition are without a doubt the same ones that are used in Chs 1-5 and the relation of catharsis, pity, and fear to pleasure in learning is so indirect that Hardison’s and Nussbaum’s claim seems to be a case of trying to save Aristotle at any cost.

I myself see but two ways out of the bind. The first is the easy but radical solution of
athetizing the catharsis passage in the definition of tragedy -- radical because it breaks one of the current rules of ancient scholarship, which is to accept the manuscript reading at all or virtually all costs. This radical solution, however, immediately restores the integrity of the definition, and, as we shall see, obviates the need to resolve a host of other problems. However, because athetesis admittedly should be used only as an absolutely last resort, the second way must be pursued first. That way reveals Aristotle to be employing another kind of definition, one which is outlined also in the *Posterior Analytics.*

This kind, akin to our use of necessary and sufficient conditions, stresses finding the combination of features that gets the extension correct and contains no explicit condition that initial divisions be presented before a collection takes place. Assuming he uses this form of definition, Aristotle could have simply included the catharsis clause in the definition of tragedy without employing a previous corresponding mini-division, even if he wished, as he does, to rely on previous mini-divisions for all of the other final differentiae. Moreover, since it is often agreed that the *Poetics* is a series of lecture notes, it might be that Aristotle added the catharsis clause some years after a first redaction. This solution on the surface appears satisfactory, but does it really hold up to examination?

First, if Aristotle included the catharsis clause in his initial draft, why did he incorporate the prefatory phrase indicating that the definition “results from what had already been said,” when nothing indeed had been said about catharsis? If Aristotle added the catharsis clause in a later redaction, the prefatory phrase could easily have been deleted in the Greek without impairing the sense of the passage. More crucially, if the catharsis clause were a later interpolation, why does he not add any explanation of it in either Ch 6 or 7? The *raison d'être* of these chapters without doubt is to explain the elements in the definition, and each and every other one except catharsis is covered in significant detail in those two chapters, and at some length in the subsequent parts of the treatise. Even music and the spectacle that attends the dramatic form of tragedy are treated with concern in Chs 6, 14, and 18, and in Chs 24 and 26, although Aristotle apparently prefers to leave the fullest discussion of these two “aesthetic” elements to other treatises or to other thinkers. In marked contrast, the term “catharsis” itself is only mentioned a second and last time in the whole *Poetics* when Aristotle discusses in Ch 17 how a playwright should sketch the outline of a plot and then fill in the details. Offering the drama of Orestes as an illustration, he recounts that the protagonist is captured because of his madness and saved by means of the purificatory rite (*dia tês katharseôs*). But this use of catharsis is utterly irrelevant to the definition of tragedy and could easily have been included whether or not catharsis is an essential condition of tragedy.

Hence, assuming that Aristotle himself included the catharsis phrase in the definition of tragedy, even in a later redaction, it is extremely puzzling why he did not add any relevant explanation in Chs 6-7, if only the brief note that he would discuss catharsis later. Without at least a note, his discussion of the parts of the definition is gravely incomplete.

A reply to this charge of incompleteness might run as follows: Let us assume that the catharsis clause is included in the definition in order to supply the final cause of tragedy, namely, its purpose, and let us consider the other elements in the definition to be formal or material causes. Because Aristotle only desires to explicate these latter types of causes in Chs 6-7, it might be said that he has good reason not to mention catharsis there. However, this reply would ignore that Aristotle does discuss the effects of the necessary parts in the chapters, including, for instance, that of spectacle. Given his concern with those effects, he likewise would have been
concerned with discussing the effect of the whole tragedy. More tellingly, he says with no hesitation in Ch 6 that “the plot is the end and purpose of the tragedy, and the end is everywhere the chief thing.” So, it is the plot and not catharsis that is the end of tragedy, and were catharsis instead the final cause, for him not to add a qualifying remark at this statement would be a blunder of immense proportions. At the least, it would cause extreme confusion in a chapter that is in many ways a model of explanation.

Other passages dealing with the function of tragedy also exhibit a callous disregard for catharsis, were it really part of the definition. In Ch 14 Aristotle declares that we should not seek from tragedy every kind of pleasure but the one proper to it, and that the poet should use representation to produce the pleasure (hédonē) from pity and fear. Pleasure may be, of course, related to catharsis as something that usually follows as a result of the cathartic process, but pleasure and catharsis are different phenomena, as Pol VIII 7 reveals at 1342a15. What Ch 14 really shows is that the psychological end of tragedy for Aristotle is to give a kind of pleasure that also involves a pain, analogous, say, in culinary terms to eating bittersweet chocolate. It is the kind of mixed pleasure that Plato discusses in the Philebus, for which tragedy and comedy are cited as examples. Conversely, Aristotle never even hints in Ch 14 that the end of tragedy is to give catharsis.

With the catharsis clause included in the definition, the subsequent discussions in Chs 6 and 14 of the function or end of tragedy are glaringly deficient. With the catharsis clause omitted, the end of tragedy is either the plot or is for a certain kind of (mixed) pleasure, which, especially if plot is the internal end and pleasure the external end, fits in very smoothly with the passages already mentioned and with other discussions in the final chapters, as we shall see later. It might be said to all of this that pity and fear are mentioned or suggested in at least the discussion of Ch 14, and that this is enough of an allusion to catharsis to connect it with pitiable and fearful pleasure, given the mention of pity, fear, and catharsis in the definition. In other words, it might be said that, in discussing pity and fear, Aristotle is, in effect, discussing catharsis. But this merely raises new problems or highlights more intensely old ones. For instance, why is catharsis still ignored in the explanation of the elements of the definition in Chs 6 and 7, and also why are pity and fear not even mentioned there? Where is the preliminary discussion of those emotions before the definition? Besides, given Chapter 14, should not the final, psychological cause of tragedy be a certain kind of pleasure, and should this not be captured in the definition? Other considerations regarding pity and fear are discussed by Nehamas, who in my view provides an overdue analysis in this context of these two important emotions that too often are thought to be necessarily connected to catharsis, and that, contrary to it, clearly have an important role in the later chapters of the Poetics. Suffice it to say, however, that the discussions of pity and fear in the Poetics reveal that Aristotle intended those emotions to be part of a certain kind of mixed pleasure and not to be a cause of catharsis.

Another place in which a discussion of catharsis is conspicuously called for, were it really an essential part of tragedy, is Ch 26, when Aristotle attempts to rank tragedy above epic. On the traditional readings, catharsis -- whether it means purgation, purification, or even clarification -- is supposed to make the audience better people. When we remember that both epic and tragedy for Plato can be harmful art forms in terms of content, and that epic can corrupt as easily as tragedy (Rep III), generating catharsis seemingly becomes a prominent advantage of tragedy. It is very
surprising, then, that Aristotle does not utilize catharsis to help accord tragedy favored status, especially if he is responding to Plato. Rather, the only considerations that Aristotle lists are that tragedy: (i) is more compressed and thus gives more intense an experience than epic (because the concentrated pleasure is better than the diluted one); (ii) has equal vividness in reading as well as representation; (iii) can use not only the metres that epic uses but others, and (iv) has all the elements that epic has plus music and spectacle, which give notable pleasures (1462a15-17). Why then does Aristotle not invoke catharsis at this opportune moment? It cannot be because epic, like ecstatic melodies, also gives a catharsis and because the common denominator thereby cancels the benefit of tragedy. The reason is that catharsis is simply not included in the entire account of epic.

It might be thought and has been said, that in spite of the absence of catharsis in the discussion of epic, it should also be the goal for Aristotle for that art form, especially if catharsis is a central part of his defense of poetry in general.40 When defining epic, Aristotle says that its plots should be constructed dramatically, about a single whole action that is complete, with a beginning, middle, and end, all of which is said about tragedy in Chs 6-7.41 He adds, in Ch 24, that epic has reversals, recognitions, and sufferings, which are the factors in Ch 18 that for him allow the dramatist to accomplish the tragic effect. In Ch 14, he also blatantly asserts that pity and fear in tragedy can be produced without spectacle and that the poet better relies on the plot for the effect. In merely hearing the story, a spectator will react accordingly, all of which obviously would apply similarly to epic. Besides, as Aristotle says, whoever knows good or bad tragedy knows good or bad epic;42 the epic poet Homer was the precursor of tragedians;43 and both art forms represent good men in action (Poetics 2). Because, then, for Aristotle epic and tragedy can be so alike with respect to the literary part of plot-making, the epic poet should be able, it seems, as much or almost as much as a tragedian to produce catharsis, which Plato appears to confirm in the Ion. There, the epic rhapsode Ion himself is portrayed as maintaining that he goes out of his senses when interpreting Homer and that, as a result, the audience weeps and casts terrible glances, apparently experiencing both pity and fear.44

Epic, then, has all the means it needs to produce catharsis,45 but there is absolutely no indication that for Aristotle it is intended to produce such an effect. And in fact, he indicates that the goal of epic is “to produce its proper pleasure (hêdonê).”46 Later, when ranking tragedy over epic in Ch 26, he also asserts that tragedy fulfills its specific function as an art better, “for it does not give any chance pleasure, but the one proper to it, as stated.”47 It might be frustrating to some that Aristotle does not say at this point what this specific function is, but he does call it a pleasure (hêdonê), rather than a catharsis.48 The likeliest explanation, it seems to me, is that he is referring in this statement to the claim he had just made, namely, that tragedy attains its end within narrower limits than epic, an end which is cashed out there as being pleasurable. Not only is the reference, then, perhaps grammatically and conceptually the closest possible one, but the thought reiterates the previous statements from Chs 14 and 23, that giving a certain pleasure is the aim of the poet. Finally, on this reading the Poetics abuts neatly with the account in Pol VIII 3 and 5, an account that reveals entertainment and contemplative pleasure to be the best end of music and by implication the best end of all art.

It is possible, of course, that the end of tragedy and epic was discussed in a lost portion of the Poetics or in another treatise, perhaps On Poets, and that Aristotle muddled his relatively clear
distinctions by identifying pleasure with catharsis. In this case, one could say that the goal of epic is catharsis, but there is no evidence at all from any extant Aristotelian text to attribute such a move to Aristotle and the distinction in the Politics VIII 7 contrasting “(innocent) pleasure” with catharsis weighs against it anyway.

Another explanation for the omission of catharsis in epic might have to do with the issue of which ancient poetic forms incorporated ecstatic melodies, the melodies that Aristotle defended in Pol VIII 7 with the doctrine of catharsis. Those melodies were apparently absent from epic, even though they -- or at least emotional melodies of some sort -- arguably were often or always included in tragedy and comedy. However, this explanation still leaves untouched why Aristotle does not take advantage of catharsis to rank tragedy over epic. The omission of catharsis, therefore, in the discussion of epic and in the listing of the comparative benefits of both tragedy and epic, is, it seems to me, very strong evidence that catharsis is not a central part of Aristotle’s mature defense of these two art forms. There seems to be no good reason why Aristotle would ignore catharsis while ranking tragedy over epic other than because a mutual catharsis would cancel the advantage. Since we have ruled out this alternative, the most natural explanation seems to be that generating catharsis is simply not part of tragedy’s essence.

**Part II: What Probably Led a Peripatetic to Interpolate the Catharsis Clause?**

All of the foregoing reveals, I trust, that Aristotle is in a much deeper quagmire than the interminable debates about the meaning of catharsis picture him to be in, if he really included catharsis in the definition of tragedy. In fact, that quagmire is so obvious, deep, and extensive that a thinker as perspicacious as Aristotle could not, it seems to me, have created it himself. The proposal, therefore, to excise the relevant clause appears not only to be radical but appropriate. But then a tantalizing question arises: Who interpolated the clause, and precisely for what reason?

Unless more manuscripts are discovered, no absolutely convincing answer, I think, can be given to this question, yet it might be philosophically instructive to determine how someone might have felt justified in augmenting Aristotle’s text. Here is one possibility, which captures a simple and ingenious, if ultimately short-sighted, intuition. A later Peripatetic, knowing Pol VIII and the Poetics, was in the employ of Apellecon of Teos, who, on Strabo’s and Plutarch’s account, was restoring primarily for profit Aristotle’s manuscripts after they were damaged by being kept in damp underground locations at Scepsis. The restorer imagined that for Aristotle the following proportion held: tragedy is to drama (in general) as the ecstatic melodies are to music (in general). That is, because Aristotle uses catharsis to defend the ecstatic melodies, the restorer probably thought that he similarly uses it to defend tragedy, especially since tragedy often or always involves pity and fear, the emotions that are mentioned alongside of ecstasy in Pol VIII. The restorer may also have thought (and with good reason if Janko is right about Philodemus) that in his early Academic work Aristotle did make use of catharsis in some ways, and so the restorer felt justified in including catharsis in the Poetics. Furthermore, he might have felt that the definition would be deficient without tragedy’s final cause.

However, although this entire intuition is very plausible, it cannot represent Aristotle’s settled outlook, in part because it generates the many difficult problems articulated in the main body of this paper, and in part because of the following two considerations. With regards to the
last and easiest consideration regarding deficient definition, when Aristotle defines man as “two-legged animal” in Met VII 12, he clearly shows that not all definitions require a final cause, and the theories of definition from Post Analy do not require that a final cause be included. With regards to the more difficult consideration, in which tragedy becomes analogous to ecstatic melodies, a few remarks are necessary.

First, as mentioned before, in promising an explanation of catharsis in a treatise on poetry, the Politics VIII 7 passage has been assumed by many commentators to be sufficient to guarantee the integrity of the catharsis phrase in our Poetics and, I imagine, is more than anything else responsible for someone thinking that catharsis should be included in the definition of tragedy, apart from the manuscripts showing such an inclusion. Certainly, the Politics passage has been primarily responsible for the longevity of Bernay’s view that catharsis means purgation, a view that still has pockets of adherents. However, our Poetics has absolutely none of the explanation of catharsis that the Politics promises. Diogenes Laertius -- admittedly not a very reliable source when it comes to tabulating works -- lists a number of treatises of Aristotle on poetry, drama, and art, including On Poets (3 books), Treatise on the Art of Poetry (2 books), Poetics (1 book), Of Tragedies (1 book), Dramatic Records (1 book), Dionysian Dramatic Victories (1 book), Homeric Problems (6 books), Collection of the Art of Theodectes, and other books on art and music. The explanation of catharsis may well have appeared in another of these treatises (assuming that Aristotle ever fulfilled his promise in the first place to write it). This, then, means that we need not think on the grounds of Pol VIII 7 that catharsis should be in our particular Poetics and in the particular location it now has. It need only mean that catharsis was included in one of those other works or in a lost portion of our treatise, and this latter option seems ruled out for reasons given before, one being that Aristotle in Chs 6 and 7 never even begins to explain catharsis when he clearly wishes to explicate in greater detail all of the the elements of the definition of tragedy.

A second reason why Aristotle could not reasonably have held the proportion tragedy : drama :: ecstatic melodies : music is as follows. The term tragedy in the Poetics seems to have at times (especially in Chs 1-5) its archaic or more general meaning, “serious drama,” maybe stemming from “goat-song” or something similar, which parallels Plato’s use of the term in the Laws in that there is no implication of disaster or regrettableness: tragedy is merely a mimesis of “serious” men and the best life, in contrast with comedy. As Aristotle recounts in Ch 4, tragedy developed from the dithyramb or from the epic and focussed on heroic men. Thus, the earlier tragedies and, apparently, simple tragedies, those without reversals and recognitions, did not and for Aristotle do not always deal with heroes who were seriously threatened, and, hence, some of those plays never caused pity or fear on the part of the audience, just the kind of milksop drama that Plato imagines at times for the ideal polis and just the kind of drama that an ancient Greek Hollywood mentality must have produced in many instances (see, e.g., the “trivial plots” of 1449a19). Some plays -- those, for example, with simple plots or with plots that, Aristotle says at 1451a12, proceed from misfortune to fortune -- are “tragedies,” then, without being tragic in our sense of the word. If catharsis is the goal of all tragedies, some of these would paradoxically appear not to be tragedies on his own criteria of Chapter 1-6.

There is one final family of reasons why the initially ingenious interpolation of the catharsis clause, suggesting that the whole genre of tragedy is analogous to ecstatic melodies, is not
compatible in the long run with uncontentious Aristotelian doctrine. Tragedy is the best species of drama, whereas the ecstatic melodies for Aristotle do not constitute the best melodies of music. As alluded to already, the four benefits of education, enjoyment, recreation, and relaxation listed in Pol VIII 7 would be better functions of music than the fifth, merely therapeutic benefit of catharsis, and likewise would be better functions of tragedy (see Pol VIII 3 & 5). There is seemingly no other genre of drama than comedy and tragedy for Aristotle, and hence no other dramatic form that could function as the analog of contemplative music. It follows, I would argue had I more time, that catharsis should not be essential in justifying tragic practice as a whole, just as it is not essential in justifying non-ecstatic or general musical practice. Another, related reason why catharsis cannot really be the goal of all tragedy has also been touched upon and pertains to music being included in the definition of tragedy. Since music is one of the essential parts of tragedy, the five musical benefits would thus contribute to the benefit of the whole enterprise. Yet, then, if catharsis is to be included in the definition, the other four benefits of music should similarly be included. In other words, had Aristotle really wanted catharsis to be the crucial, or the only, goal of tragedy, he presumably would have incorporated only ecstatic music, rather than music in general, in the initial diaeresis or in the final definition of tragedy. Or, he would have at least mentioned ecstatic music when he discusses music in the other parts of the Poetics, but in those places he only suggests that the kind of music is primarily imitative (Ch 6), that it should capture the relevant mood or scene rather than being an independent interlude (Ch 18), and that it gives significant pleasure (Ch 26). Nothing in any of those discussions even suggests that catharsis is a goal of tragic music.

This is sufficient speculation regarding the interpolation of the catharsis clause in the definition of tragedy and why the interpolation, although superficially plausible because of the role of catharsis in defending ecstatic melodies, is actually licentious. I must emphasize that I think catharsis is a possible value of at least one of the four kinds of tragedy that Aristotle mentions in Ch 18 -- perhaps tragedy of suffering -- even while I cannot believe that it was really included by him as an essential element of all types of the art form. Thus I am in no way totally sweeping aside the previous discussions of catharsis, as Petrusevski effectually does with his claim that the original words in the definition of tragedy were actually pragmatōn sysastin. Indeed, those previous discussions of catharsis may prove helpful in establishing how the proper psychological effect was to be sought in at least one species of tragedy, and perhaps also in comedy, or at least may reveal what Aristotle believed in his early Academic days, when he wrote On Poets.

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ENDNOTES

1. Esp. pp. 388-390

2. The introduction of this paper was given in a greatly expanded version (“Catharsis in Plato and Aristotle’s Silence”) at a teleconferencing session at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Eastern Division, Spring, 1996, and I am especially grateful to John Brown for arranging the session and to Nicholas Pappas for the reply. Part I was presented at SUNY, Stony Brook, March, 1996, and I wish to thank the Philosophy Department and Robert Crease for their sponsorship, and for the rewarding discussions and correspondence that ensued.

3. 230b-d

4. 69b-c


6. That beauty is at least one of the ends of art for Plato can be seen at *Republic* III and X (403c; 595c; 600e) and *Laws* VII (816d), and for Aristotle at *Poetics* 7.

7. *Laws* VII, 790d

8. *Rep* X, 607a

9. Janko claims that catharsis leads to moderation, although he returns to the meaning of catharsis as purgation/purification (1992, esp. pp. 345 and 350). If Janko is right, Aristotle, through advocating catharsis, could be addressing at least the ethical challenge. However, I address and reject Janko’s arguments in a forthcoming paper, “Does Catharsis Conduce to the Mean?,” (publisher undetermined).

10. For instance, Cynthia Freeland says “it is well-known that one of Aristotle’s aims in the *Poetics* was to defend tragedy against Plato’s moral critique in *Republic* X” (p. 111). A psychologist, T. Scheff, states “Responding to Plato’s condemnation of drama for arousing the passions, and thereby undermining the State, Aristotle contended that drama may produce catharsis by purging the audience of pity and terror (p. 20).”

11. The passages are conveniently located in Janko, 1987, pp. 59-61. Janko also says “The first definite citation [of any passage in the *Poetics*, but not one pertaining to catharsis] is that in Porphyry, quoted by Simplicius *In Categ.* p. 36.16-31” (1991, p. 7, f. #25). James Hutton, however, says
Themistius (fourth century A.D.) takes from [the Poetics] the reference to the origin of comic plots in Sicily (Oratio 27, 337B from 1449b6), but [the Poetics] is not cited by title in any surviving writer earlier than the fifth century after Christ, when Ammonius and Boethius (fifth-sixth century) quote Chapter 20 on the "parts of speech" in their commentaries on the Aristotelian treatise On Interpretation (p. 24).

12. For instance, Proclus says that Aristotle had grounds for complaint against Plato because "it is possible to satisfy the emotions in due measure, and, by satisfying them, to keep them tractable for education, by treating the ache in them" (Janko tr., 1987, p. 60). However, as is clear from the Aristotelian ethical treatises (e.g., Nic Eth II and III), and as Nehamas indirectly shows (especially pp. 296-297), emotions like fear are not made tractable for education by having an ache treated or by satisfying them. It is habituation involving a rational component (or following a rational set of guidelines) that allows people to develop proper emotions. That is, one learns to handle fear by learning how to handle fearful circumstances, and if anything it is by suppressing or ignoring the fear or through some similar mechanism, not satisfying it, that one becomes more fearless.

13. See Stephen Halliwell, 1986, esp. pp. 195-156 and 201ff, for how Pol VIII 7 might be relevant to tragedy and for one of the most sophisticated defenses of the "clarification" view. Also see J. Lear, who rightly in my view undercuts Halliwell's arguments (esp. pp. 319 ff). Finally, see endnote 9.

14. I cannot repeat in any detail the massive secondary and tertiary literature showing why the three meanings of catharsis are not workable for the Poetics, but the following very brief summary might be useful. Catharsis cannot mean purgation because purging pity and fear would be too Platonic or too Speusippian a doctrine, involving an overly pessimistic attitude toward these emotions. For Aristotle, pity and fear should be felt in appropriate circumstances, and, furthermore, pity would not by its nature be able homeopathically to purge pity. Neither can catharsis mean purification because people or desirable emotions rather than unwanted emotions are the kinds of things that are purified. A person, especially a warrior, with pure(-ified) fear would not be a better, more courageous person than his counterpart, and would be even more of an anathema to a person who is worried about the Platonic critique of art. And, again, as with purgation, it is implausible to say that for Aristotle pity purifies pity. Finally, catharsis cannot mean clarification given the passage in Pol VIII 7, in which Aristotle distinguishes the cathartic melodies that are appropriate in the performances of music held in the theatre from the ethical ones that should be used primarily in education. Catharsis is not an ethical or clarificatory process in that passage, and by extension, would not be a clarificatory one in tragedy.

Lear gives an excellent account of why none of the three commonplace meanings are appropriate, and offers "relief" as the sense of catharsis. However, relief suggests also that pity and fear are undesirable, and hence this translation in my view is saddled with many of the problems of "purgation."

15. See endnote 58.

17. I find it surprising that scholars like Nussbaum, who take the view both that catharsis means clarification and that the goal of tragedy is cognitive, do not seem to make use of the reading *mathēmatōn*. Nevertheless, I doubt this reading will get them much further, partly because there is no hint of such an interpretation later in the *Poetics*, when Aristotle discusses the elements of the definition.


19. 1449a5; a15; a19; b11. It perhaps should be noted that Aristotle presents two of the distinctions in the two chapters that deal with the historical development of tragedy, whereas the first three chapters had been almost exclusively logical, employing the distinction between the three modes of mimesis.

20. A few have mentioned in private that perhaps Aristotle did not intend the catharsis clause to be part of the definition. If so, one of my goals -- to show that catharsis is not central to his defense of tragedy, whether or not against Plato -- has been reached. However, it would be stunning (to me at least) if the clause were not intended as part of the definition, given that the explanation which immediately follows that clause, explicating the meaning of terms in the definition, shows that Aristotle has not left his focus on the definition.

21. 97a22ff

22. Esp. 1038a25-35. Without taking full account of the *Posterior Analytics* and *Metaphysics* VII 12, Battin says "the order of the differentiae is slightly changed, but this of course has no effect upon the accuracy of the definition" (1975, p. 295). She may be right, for reasons I offer later, but these reasons then take us away from the kind of definition she assumes Aristotle is using.

23. Else, p. 16. Else rejects Platonic dichotomy, saying that epic cannot be included in the right-hand division of the first two "cuts" because it has no song, that is, *melos* (p. 67). But epic may have music in that it has accompaniment, even if it does not have full song, as is suggested by Book 8, line 250ff, of the *Odyssey*: the assembled guests must wait while the poet Demodocus gets a lyre before reciting. Moreover, it is extremely doubtful that *melos* means "song" in *Poetics* 1, for it is used interchangeably with *harmonía* there, just to mean "tune" (1447a22 & b25).

24. Hutton does recognize very well the connection of the general theory of definition in the *Post An* to the *Poetics* (pp. 9-13), but attempts implausibly to explain away the elements that actually come from Chs 4 & 5:

The author states: We may surmise that the *diaeresis* of Chs 1 through 3, which has successfully provided a rational background for the "parts," was set up chiefly for that very purpose. To supply all the *differentiae* that would yield a stringent definition of tragedy, though theoretically possible, would be tedious and impractical...
Accordingly, Aristotle has not scrupled to add to the definition the properties or qualities that are requisite for tragedy (p. 13).

As we have seen, however, the final few differentiae require neither a tedious nor an impractical discussion.

25. Else, 1963, pp. 221-232 and esp. 439ff. Else interprets the phrase ek ton eiremenon ton ginomenon horon tes ousias as referring to a process of becoming: "(Let us talk about tragedy...) picking out from what has been said the definition of its essence as it was (which was, which we saw in process of) becoming" (p. 222). Yet he still says the "items in the definition...are in fact taken both from the systematic chapters 1-3 and from the 'history' [of Ch 4-5]" (p. 222).


28. For instance, see Battin, 1975, p. 300, and Lear, pp. 318-326, esp. 321-322.

29. II 13, 96a24-96b24

30. Of course, the chapters were not separated in the original Greek, but were part of one continuous manuscript. According to private correspondence from Doug Hutchinson, to whom I am indebted for this history, the chapters were not marked off until the third edition of the Greek omnibus of Aristotle, Basle, 1550. The first omnibus, the Aldine from Venice in 1495-98, did not include the Poetics or the Rhetoric; rather those texts appeared in the Aldine press's Rhetores Graeci in 1508-9. The second omnibus of Aristotle’s work, Basle, 1531, included marginal lineation, and a second edition of that work in 1539 contained no internal means of reference. Finally, in 1550, in the third edition of the Basle work, the chapter divisions were introduced, by Simon Griener, Conrad Gesner et al.

31. In my PhD dissertation (1992), I argue that music and performance are essential, and spectacle necessary, for the kind of tragedy that Aristotle analyzes in the Poetics. Alternatively, see my “Poetics of Performance.”

32. 1456a25ff

33. 1459b10; 1461b31ff; 1462a3ff; 1462a16

34. For instance, see the end of Ch 15, 1454b15-17, which, however, is subject to much controversy.

35. 1450a22ff

36. Walter Watson has pointed out in private correspondence that the plot seems to be the intermediate end and that the catharsis would be the final end, or function. Yet, even granting this distinction, it is still surprising that Aristotle does not mention the difference, if only to forgeo
discussing it. Moreover, catharsis is treated as the intermediate end to pleasure in *Pol* VIII 7, and pleasure is treated as the end of poetry in the later chapters of the *Poetics*.

37. 1453b10-14

38. At 48a of the *Philebus*, Plato says that the “audience at tragedy and comedy feel pleasure and weep at once,” and at 50b he reports that “pleasure is mixed with pain in lamentations, tragedy, and comedy.”

39. Nehamas ends his very compelling article by addressing the catharsis issue. He translates the term as dénouement and reinterprets the catharsis clause in a strikingly original manner, thus making the *Poetics* much more cohesive philosophically. I note some of the problems with his view, however, in “Catharsis in Plato, and Aristotle’s Silence” (see endnote 2).

40. Hutton says that the *Poetics* ends “with a comparison of tragedy and epic in order to show that the common function (the stirring of pity and fear) is best performed by tragedy” (1982, p. 6). Also, Kenneth Telford claims that “as Ch 26 states, tragedy and epic have the same function -- namely the catharsis of pity and fear” (1961, p. 74). Yet, neither author cites any precise passage, and, contrary to Telford’s explicit claim, the text never states that the function of epic is to give the catharsis of pity and fear.

41. 1459a17ff

42. Ch 4, 144913

43. 1449a5-7; also see Ch 24

44. 533d, and esp 535d-3

45. Halliwell says “epic *katharsis* ought to be entailed by Ar.’s own comparison between tragedy and epic at 59b7-15; it was widely accepted in the Renaissance (though often for the wrong reasons), and has been in modern times by e.g. Rostagni” (1986, p. 200). Halliwell, unfortunately perhaps for us, does not explore the ramifications of this particular insight.

46. Ch 23, 1459a17ff

47. 1462b13

48. Hutton stresses in numerous places that “pleasure (which need not be mindless) is the only external purpose for poetry that the *Poetics* recognizes” (p. 11; also pp. 8-9, 14, 18-19, and 22).

49. See West, esp. pp. 33, 105, 351, and 355. West also recounts Aristoxenus’s statement (fr 79) that “Sophocles was credited with introducing the Phrygian mode to tragedy and using it in a rather dithyrambic manner,” p. 352.
50. Strabo in detail (Geography XIII 1, c. 54) and Plutarch briefly (Sylla, c. 26) recount the history of the transmission of Aristotle’s library. Strabo remarks on the damage because of moisture and of moths to the manuscripts, which were kept underground in Asia Minor by Neleus’s descendants to save them from the book-robbing kings of Pergamum. Apellicon of Teos, who purchased the library for a significant sum, was more concerned according to Strabo with books than with philosophy and was responsible for many faults in the subsequent restorations. Petrushevski argues, on the basis of various lacunae in the Poetics, that Strabo and Plutarch have not concocted a story (1954, pp. 240 and 244); see endnote 58.

My thesis does not depend on Strabo being correct, for there could have been any number of causes of a textual corruption or of an interpolation. Yet, I know of no evidence that Strabo’s account is mistaken.

51. Sparshott says “it is absurd to suppose that the [catharsis] clause [in the definition of tragedy] does not hark back to that passage [in the Politics], in which we are told of a katharsis of pity and fear and promised further information about katharsis in some work on poetry” (1983, p. 19). However, he, for one, seems to recognize that the absurdity depends on accepting that the catharsis clause deserves to be kept, for he recognizes that one might consider rejecting the catharsis clause altogether (p. 20). He opts to pursue a more difficult and less radical solution that I offer here, and that is to see catharsis as being a vague or rich term for Aristotle, one which “evokes a number of contexts and experiences without specifying any one or any set of them... [As Sparshott adds:] the vagueness of what he wrote shows that he had nothing precise in mind” (p. 26). This solution is similar to one that Watson seems to embrace although for Watson, as far as I can understand him, the term catharsis seems to include every possible goal in the Poetics, and so in an important sense is not vague but all-encompassing. Sparshott’s and Watson’s solutions, though, do not address the issues of this paper.

52. Theodectes is one of the three fourth-century tragedians that Aristotle mentions. The other two are Carcinus and Astydamas. I owe this point to Hutton (p. 23).


54. Laws VII 817b. Lillian Lawler, in her rigorous study of dance in ancient Greek theatre, indicates that the term tragedy was even used more broadly at times. While speaking of late writers and lexicographers of antiquity, she says:

Philoxenus the dithyrambist, for example, is called tragikos by a scholiast on Aristophanes’ Plutus (290). By some late authors the word seems to be used literally, as coming from tragos, “goat,” and referring to the dances of the satyr play; we may instance Etymologicum Magnum 764, s.v. “tragoedia,” where tragedy and the satyr play are obviously confused, and where the choruses are said
at times to imitate the *schemata* of goats. Many modern scholars think that in the lexicographers the word *tragikos* means merely “pertaining to the drama” (p. 34).

55. Aristotle speaks of tragedy as if it must involve pity and fear in Chs 9 (1452a2-3), 11 (1452b1), 13 (1452b33), and 14 (1453b1ff). But, the chapters in whole or in part may have been added after a first redaction. In Ch 13 (1453a23ff), plays with unhappy endings are most tragic and the best. In Ch 14, though, the *Cresphontes* is cited as an example of the best kind of tragedy, those that end happily (1454a5ff). No one to my knowledge has ever resolved this contradiction convincingly. It seems to me that the chapters may be from different periods, or may have been collated by a later editor, and, if so, that Ch 14 may have been earlier (“middle-period Aristotle”), because it seems to fit better with Chs 1-5. Ch 13 may then have resulted because arguably over a period of time during Aristotle’s life “tragedy” became more restricted to plays with unhappy endings (rather than just to serious drama, although it continues to mean that, too, at times). Also, Ch 13 or 14 (as well as other portions of our *Poetics*) may have come from the book *Of Tragedies*. This may well resolve the contradiction between the two chapters, because the term tragedy would have a slightly different context or meaning in each. Scholars like de Montmollin argue for there being different redactions of the *Poetics*, and there is very widespread agreement that some chapters have been interpolated from other texts. Finally, even granting that tragedy always involves pity and fear, the question of whether these emotions need be bound up with catharsis or are only part of a certain kind of pleasure (as in Ch 14) becomes crucial, and I have addressed this already.

56. I presume that Aristotle ranked tragedy not only over epic but over comedy, too, given that comedy represents men who are *phauloi*, bad or ignoble (*Poetics* 2). However, there may be ways in which comedy is better (and indeed Aristotle praises it in Ch 5 for being the first dramatic genre to come up with “universal” plots as opposed to particular, historical stories).

57. There are four species of tragedy given in *Poetics* 18 -- complex tragedy, tragedy of suffering, tragedy of character, and either tragedy of spectacle or simple tragedy (1455b32-1456a3). The text is corrupt and *opsis* (spectacle) is not definite. The other option is that the fourth species is “of simple plots,” the reason being that Aristotle says in Ch 24 (1459b9) that there are four kinds of epic, as of tragedy, and he lists them as simple, complex, (of) character, and (of) suffering, with the last three terms being exactly the same as the uncorrupted terms which denote the species of tragedy: *haplê, peplegmenê, ethikê, pathêikê*.

It may be that only tragedy of suffering is designed for catharsis, even if the others involve pity and fear (which, as I have stressed, may primarily be required only to give a certain kind of pleasure). However, I will not argue this point, because Aristotle says so little about the four kinds of tragedy. Rather, I simply propose that an alternative proportion holds -- *tragedy of suffering : drama :: ecstatic melodies : music* -- for just as there are different musical species, only one of which involves catharsis, the same may well hold for tragedy. It may be that in a lost text Aristotle designates catharsis as the precise end of tragedy of suffering, either without designating it as the end of the other species or expressly excluding it from the other species.

19
58. Petrusevski’s view was written first in 1948 and published more widely in 1954. A summary of the view is neatly presented by Teddy Brunius, who says that he is inclined to believe Petrusevski’s conjecture. But Brunius, apparently recognizing that a four-hundred year puzzle generates a life of its own that resists demise, states that the conjecture “is almost too elegant and too reasonable to be accepted at once” (p. 270).

Petrusevski’s view is this: The word *katharsis* was never written by Aristotle. Rather, the original phrase conveyed the idea that tragedy has, or produces, pity and fear in the actions brought together (*pragmatŏn sy̱stasi̱n*). These last two words subsequently were corrupted, and were thought later by scholars who knew *Pol* VIII 7 to be *pathēmatŏn katharsin*. Petrusevski goes so far as to claim that there is no tragic catharsis, only a musical catharsis, which was discussed in a lost portion of the *Poetics* that dealt with music.

I agree with Petrusevski that there may be a lost portion that discussed music, because, as Chs 1 and 6 show, music is one of the essential properties of Aristotelian tragedy. Petrusevski may also be right about there only being a musical catharsis, partly for reasons given before in this paper, but only if music here is used broadly to include dance; even then, however, the claim is arguable. At any rate, one of Petrusevski’s reasons for rejecting catharsis has to do with his recognition that the definition will be abrogated because no previous discussion of catharsis takes place before the definition itself (1954, p 240). Therefore, I cannot accept his ingenious solution because, likewise, pity and fear are not discussed either in Chs 1-5, and should not be in the definition. To be consistent, Petrusevski should omit the entire pity and fear clause. If he were to reply that on my own account of Aristotle’s third type of definition, using “necessary and sufficient conditions” (*Post Analyt* II 13, 96a24-96b24), the entire *pragmatŏn sy̱stasi̱n* clause could have been added without a preliminary division, I would agree. However, it is then still problematic that pity and fear are never mentioned in Chs 6-7, when Aristotle explains all of the other elements, including plot. Moreover, although the inclusion of *pragmatŏn sy̱stasi̱n* is benign, in that it clearly covers what is essential in all tragedies, the same thing does not appear to be the case with respect to pity and fear. As I discussed earlier, if we look at Chs 1-5, in which the term tragedy really only seems to mean “serious drama,” it seems that there are cases in which tragedy does not imply pity and fear. In the later chapters (e.g. Ch 13), the word tragedy appears to have become more restrictive, but this may only mean that the various chapters come from different works and from different periods, and that Aristotle has captured a change in Greek usage over some decades (see endnote 55). Petrusevski’s solution would obscure all of this.