

5 Tapping the wellsprings of action

Aristotle's birth of tragedy as a mimesis of poetic *praxis*

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In *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, James Redfield shows how the *Iliad*'s tragic qualities are bound up with cultural contradictions. He thus illuminates many murky areas of Aristotle's *Poetics* by the light of Homer and develops a philosophical anthropology of the Homeric heroes.

In this essay I return to the way the *Poetics* and the *Iliad* cast light on one another, with special attention to Aristotle's insistence on "one complete action" and his account of the genesis of drama. I argue that, for Aristotle, the light shed by drama on action goes beyond what is conveyed by its plot. Aristotle sees in Homer a dramatic thought-action that culminates in moments where the performer appears to reach into the sources of his ongoing performance and to be enlivened by them. These "enlivening" moments are related to Aristotle's "one complete action," a certain kind of plot. Aspects of performance are harder to describe than plot, but they can, to a limited extent, be imitated, even in prose: and this is what Aristotle has done. Aristotle does not only admire Homer's "one action" on the level of plot. For Aristotle, Homer discloses or taps the roots of action in a way that shows he understands what action is. Aristotle's imitation of the dramatic thought-action found in Homer, and particularly in Homeric ring composition, conveys in prose a moment of culmination associated with performance, a kind of "possession" or reaching back to past generations that enlivens the ongoing performance.

First, then, I show how an appreciation of Homeric ring composition is reflected in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in his account of the birth of tragedy; here I summarise and make explicit what is left implicit in another study (Kretler 2018). I then indicate parallels to Aristotle's account elsewhere in Greek poetry. These make plausible the schema I bring out in Aristotle but also further clarify its shape and internal workings. Aristotle draws on a general poetic pattern but is fueled mainly by Homeric technique.

I offer these reflections in gratitude to James Redfield, whose teaching and writing stimulate so many to return to the well of ancient Greek poetic thinking.

One whole complete action: the shape of the *Iliad* and a pivotal speech

Aristotle insists that tragedy is a mimesis of *praxis* (action) that is one, whole and complete, having a beginning, middle and end (*Poetics* 1459a19; cf.

1450b24–26). This is, to say the least, a stumbling block for critics. One salient problem is that, after all, “one complete action” is the last thing one might expect from tragedy. Tragedy is a rounded whole not because the action, like a well-aimed arrow, hits its intended target, but because it diverges from its course in unexpected ways (*hamartia, peripeteia*).

Redfield solves the “one action” problem, with respect to the *Iliad*, by bringing into play the full social world depicted in the poem. A complete heroic action entails *hamartia* not so much because of derailed intention but because of contradictions inherent in culture. But completeness in action may be different from completeness of form:

An action is resolved when the needs and demands of the actors are either met or crushed out. Such an outcome is for the actors and concludes the action on the ethical level. Form, on the other hand, is for us; an action is formed when it reveals a lucid meaning to the contemplative eye of the poet and his audience.

(Redfield 1994, 219)

Redfield’s example of “formal” completeness is a case of ring composition. The most striking formal aspect of the *Iliad* is the way the end echoes its beginning:

In the beginning a father is refused the ransoming of his child; at the end a ransoming is permitted. In the beginning Achilles quarrels with a king; at the end he is reconciled with a king. Since the persons are different, however, these echoes are purely formal.

(Redfield 1994, 219)

The *Iliad* is a ring composition, that is, ABCXC'B 'A ' , where A' echoes A, etc.; but in the *Iliad*'s end is not quite its beginning.

Form and action are, however, tightly connected within this ring composition – just not at its endpoints. They are linked in the *Iliad*, moreover, in a way Aristotle appreciates.

The beginning and end of the *Iliad* echo one another in two ways. The famous chart that folds out of the back of Cedric Whitman’s book (Whitman 1958) traces a fully thematic ring composition. But there is another ring composition based on narrative chronology: the days at the poem’s end pass in clusters that mirror the temporal structure of the beginning (see Diagram 5.1¹).

Theme plays a role within this “calendrical” scheme as well: the central day is preceded and followed by a sequence of single days that mirror one another in theme and action.

It is at the calendrical centre of the poem that the pivotal Embassy to Achilles takes place (Book 9). This event unfolds in Achilles’s tent, which will in Book 24 transmogrify into something like the House of Hades; Priam and Achilles enter a “divine sphere” where “culture is overcome” (Redfield 1994, 218). In Book 9 too we are presented with a kind of liminal space: the Achaeans pray and make a solemn procession to Achilles’s tent to supplicate him, and here “the poem clearly

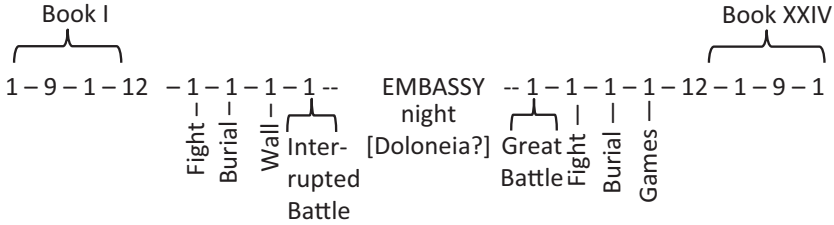


Diagram 5.1 Calendar of the *Iliad*.

From p. 257 of *HOMER AND THE HEROIC TRADITION* by Cedric H. Whitman, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1958 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, Copyright © renewed 1986 by Leda Whitman-Raymond and Rachel C. Whitman.

opens out into some previously unexplored territory” (ibid., 7). That is how Redfield describes the great speech of Achilles, which suddenly discloses that clear vision of the contradictions of culture that links Achilles with the poet himself. “The hero . . . is a man on the margin between culture and nature. Achilles has, as it were, been pushed over the edge; he looks back at culture from the outside” (ibid., 103). In his own elaborate speech that immediately follows Achilles’s, Phoenix, the second of three envoys, has his own way of stepping outside, and reporting back from the margin. Not, like Achilles, out of a “unique self-reflective consciousness” (ibid., 36), but by playing or becoming the other: through drama and mimesis.

As Redfield writes, it is Phoenix who:

without wishing to . . . gives the true pattern of heroic rage; the hero cannot choose to be reconciled, he can only come back under compulsion, overpowered by the irresistible claims of those closest to him . . . Achilles’ story, in fact, is not a departure from the heroic pattern but an enactment of that pattern.

(Redfield 1994, 105)

This pattern of heroic rage is the “return course” of the poem’s plot, and it emerges out of a dramatic unfolding. There is an opening out of perspective that emerges via actorly process, as the performer embodies Phoenix, who in turn is possessed by his own characters.

The speech of Phoenix is the central of three speeches of the Embassy, which stands at the centre of Book 9 (see Diagram 5.2²). Book 9 in turn forms the centre of the “calendrical” schema of the poem mentioned earlier; the speech is itself one of the most elaborate ring-compositional speeches in the poem.

Like other ring-composed speeches, this one reaches an enlivening turning point that violently shifts the point of view of the speaker mid-course (Lohmann 1970, 22). Such a turning point may be a personal reminiscence, a vividly imagined object, a mythological exemplum from a previous generation of heroes, or

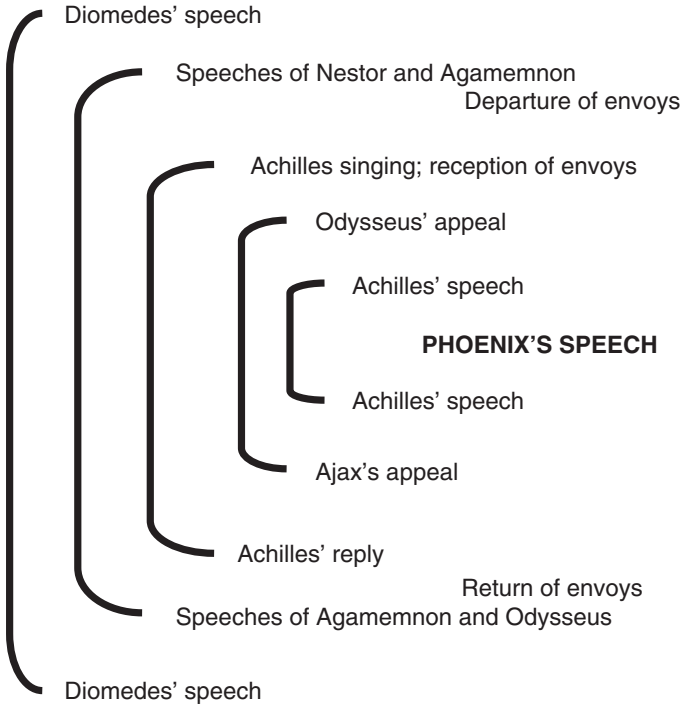


Diagram 5.2 Phoenix's speech within *Iliad* Book 9.

the quotation of direct speech (ibid., 25). In this as in other ring compositions, “between the indication of the goal and its achievement, the world has changed.”³

The enlivening midpoint is seen most clearly – and even thematized – in Nestor's speech advising his son how to win, and enacting in advance, the chariot race in the funeral games for Patroklos (*Iliad* 23.306–348).⁴ In the first half, the speech is abstracted in time and place, and pessimistic; when Nestor reaches the centre, and vividly describes the turning point at which the competitors are aiming, he moves into the concrete, and suddenly becomes wildly hopeful about his son's chances. Vividly “seeing” and describing the far-off turning post (where none other than Phoenix keeps watch),⁵ animates Nestor, even though he is only going around it in speech.

Here the enlivening turn is instantiated in the very object that forms the turning post. For, as Nagy (1990, 215) notes, “the narrative itself ostentatiously raises the possibility that this turning point is a *sêma*, ‘tomb’” (*Iliad* 23.331–33). Nagy connects this with the conventional identification, in chariot races at the pan-Hellenic Games, of the turning point with the tomb of a hero.⁶ He also draws a connection to the fact that at least one hero, Taraxippos, “upsetter of horses,” was thought to

be active from his tomb. Drawing on the inherited semantics of *néomai*, “return” or “return to light and life,”⁷ Nagy connects the turning point in Nestor’s chariot race speech with the image of a return from death in Pindar:

ἀφνεὸς πενιχρὸς τε θανάτου παρὰ | **σῆμα νέονται**
Pindar *Nemean* 7.19–20

Both rich and poor **return [verb *néomai*]** by going past the **sêma** of Death.

The language is that of chariot racing, it seems, with the verb *néomai* ‘return’ connoting the “home stretch” after rounding the turning point. Here, too, as with Nestor’s *sêma*, the turning point is not just a ‘sign’: it is a “sign of Death” – or, to use the Homeric application, a ‘tomb.’

(Nagy 1990, 219)

Two points: first, the chariot race, with Nestor’s speech, models the animation that can occur in Homeric ring composition and connects it to the image of return from death at a turning post or tomb; I return to the link between racecourse and performance later. Second, Nestor’s speech is linked to Phoenix himself, since Phoenix stands as a judge (*skopos*) at the very point where, in describing it, Nestor becomes animated. This link seems to reflect the structure of the poem (cf. Kretler 2018, Interlude 1).

As the turning point for speeches, far more common than a vividly described object is a vividly recalled event or direct speech in the past. Thus

a “chronological gradient” develops between the rings and the centre; i.e. concentrically structured speeches or parts of speeches very often develop from the present to the past and back again to the present.

(Lohmann 1970, 26, trans. 1997, 86).

This chronological gradient is found in Phoenix’s speech, where the middle section of the third panel suddenly develops unexpected layers of complexity (Lohmann 1970, 255). The “intensification” (ibid., 25) occurs at the central point of the story, where Phoenix accesses a generation of heroes still earlier than Meleager.⁸ At the start, Phoenix presents Meleager as a model for Achilles to follow; by the end, Meleager is a model to avoid. Briefly, Meleager has killed his mother’s brother(s); this leads to a battle between two cities and induces his mother to curse him. Like Achilles, Meleager withdraws from battle and is visited by a series of suppliants. Meleager is persuaded to return to battle, but only when his city is already in flames, and his own wife Kleopatra supplicates him, delivering a quasi-lament, cataloguing the atrocities befalling a captured city.

Such a lament is not the speech act one would launch into while trying to persuade someone to *sack* a city. And indeed Phoenix’s speech inspires Achilles not to return, but instead to remain out of battle until fire reaches the Achaean ships, just as fire reaches Meleager’s city. (Even then, he sends Patroklos rather than

return himself.) The speech misses its original mark, but Achilles has been possessed by this “true pattern of heroic rage.”⁹

And Phoenix himself seems to have gone off the rails via a similar process of possession. An outline of the Meleager story’s ring-composition (abbreviated from Gaisser 1969, 18–19; cf. Lohmann 1970, 254–5) shows that it is not Meleager, the ostensible paradigm, at the centre of the ring:

I. The War of the Kouretes and the Aetolians 524–549

II. Meleager Retires from the Battle. 550–574

A The Battle Rages. 550–552

B Meleager’s Wrath 553–555 *χόλος*

C He Retires with Kleopatra. 556 *κεῖτο*

X KLEOPATRA’S MOTHER MARPESSA. 557–564

C’ He Retires with Kleopatra. 565 *παρκατέλεκτο*

B’ Meleager’s Wrath 565–572 *χόλον*

A’ The Battle Rages. 573–574

III. Meleager is Persuaded. 574–599. (Catalogue of suppliants, ending with Kleopatra.)

Instead of maintaining his focus on Meleager, Phoenix, snakes-and-ladders style,¹⁰ slips one layer further, past Meleager to Meleager’s wife Kleopatra, and then to Kleopatra’s mother Marpessa. Who? One might ask. Marpessa’s story is alluded to in such abbreviated fashion that it must have been familiar. Of immediate relevance, Marpessa was raped by Apollo and rescued by her husband; this story seems strangely to go underground, and to foment Kleopatra’s lament, cataloguing disasters that include rape. But Marpessa’s pivotal role in the speech is overdetermined; her story resonates not only within the Meleager portion of Phoenix’s speech but also with Phoenix’s autobiography, with which he begins. Both Marpessa and Phoenix are held in a curious “house arrest” by a furious father, and each is alert to the peril of abandonment in old age. It is as though Phoenix is drawn to her story because it resonates with his own, and thus “misses his aim” of presenting Meleager as a model. Through recounting the story of Marpessa at the midpoint, Phoenix veers off target, and he speaks as – he becomes – Marpessa’s daughter Kleopatra, delivering a raw supplication on behalf of the victims of a city-sacking.

As I argue elsewhere (Kretler 2018, chapter 2), part of the actorly process that shunts the performer as Phoenix into the troubled past of Marpessa, and into

speaking as Kleopatra, involves the multivalent use of curse gestures. Phoenix, ostensibly supplicating Achilles, tells a story in which several characters are cursing and supplicating. The curses summon underworld forces; but this is also just what Phoenix has, in effect, done in tapping Marpessa – in the process, turning his supplication of Achilles into a curse, and the *Iliad* into a tragedy. In being possessed by the vanquished and delivering a lament, Phoenix finds another way to the thought that “if the vanquished is no different from the victor, combat is meaningless” (Redfield 1994, 221).

Aristotle Homerikôtatos: becoming the character and making dramatic mimeseis

As Phoenix is “possessed” by Kleopatra, so too is the performing poet possessed by Phoenix – to the extent, as it is made to seem, of diverting the poem onto a tragic course. So Phoenix appears to introduce new actorly modes and orders, as it were: actorly “possession” induces a revolution outside the bounds of the speech, in the very plotline of the poem in which Phoenix is playing a role. And this is what Aristotle (following Plato) found most impressive and disturbing about Homer – his “becoming something else” (*Poetics* 1448a21–22). It is in speeches like Phoenix’s that the best clues are found about what was so disturbing about this “becoming.”

Insofar as the performer works his way into Phoenix, and Phoenix works his way into the person of Kleopatra via gesture, this is just how Aristotle would have the composer compose: in performance.

It is necessary to construct plots and to work them out with diction as much as possible setting them before the eyes. In this way, seeing things most vividly, just as if becoming present at them – the things as they are being done – one would discover what is appropriate and least miss contradictions . . . As far as possible, [one should compose] working it out with gestures too: for those who are in the emotions are most convincing – out of the same nature, and he distresses who is in distress and he is in a rage who is provoked most truly. So poetry is of a genius (εὐφροῦς, of a good nature) or a madman (μανικῶν); of these the former are easily shaped (εὐπλαστοί) and the latter get out of themselves altogether (ἔκστατικοί).¹¹

(*Poetics* 1455a21–34)¹²

Plot is the soul of tragedy; but Aristotle’s ideal plotter is a performer, in a circular process. As one becomes virtuous by doing virtuous deeds, one composes speeches by stepping into a character’s shoes and putting one’s hands into his gestures, so thoroughly that one is acting “out of the same nature” (ἀπὸ τῆς αὐτῆς φύσεως). Perhaps it is the power of plasticity (εὐπλαστοί; here, moulding oneself by incarnating another); perhaps it is ἔκστασις, getting outside oneself: Aristotle leaves it open. Composition in performance is Aristotle’s ideal. Does this entail that Aristotle thinks performance itself is essential? Given his explicit statements to the contrary, and his denigration of *opsis*, the visual element, there is plenty

of reason for doubt. But the passage on composition through gesture opens the way to seeing the connection between Aristotelian composition in performance and Homeric ring composition, and to explaining his extravagant championing of Homer as a dramatist, as in his account of the evolution of tragedy:

For just as Homer was preeminently the poet with respect to serious matters (not that he alone composed well, but that he alone made dramatic mimesis), so too he first demonstrated the *schema(ta)* (shapes) of comedy, making dramatic not invective but the laughable. For, just as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are analogous to tragedies, so too the *Margites* is analogous to comedies. And when tragedy and comedy had appeared, people rushed after each type of poetry according to their own nature: some became makers of comedy instead of lampoons, others became producers of tragedies instead of epics, on account of these shapes being greater and more honorable than those.

(*Poetics* 1448b34–1449a6)

Homer “made dramatic *mimesis*” or “made *mimesis* dramatic.” Homer is at first linked with serious matters (*spoudaia*), as we would expect; but suddenly we hear that Homer “demonstrated the *schemata* of comedy.” These *schemata*, as in the previously cited passage, seem to be not mere abstract “forms” but rather “gestures,” because of the verb *hypedeixen* “demonstrated” and because of the emphasis on dramatising and bringing things into appearance (*παραφανείσης*, an unusual word used later of epiphanic situations).

In the evolutionary process Homer plays a central but complex role. He is the culmination of the natural activities that brought forth *poiēsis* little by little out of improvisations (1448b20–34); and he is the font of both tragedy and comedy (1448b34–1449a2). He is an endpoint and a starting point, τέλος and ἀρχή.

This passage as a whole poses problems. First Aristotle describes two streams of development: for the serious poets, hymns/encomia – epic – Homeric epic – Attic tragedy; for the “cheap” crowd, invective – iambus – *Margites* – comedy. When Aristotle then “adds separate suggestions about the emergence of tragedy and comedy from further forms of improvisation” (Halliwell 1987, 81), Halliwell finds that he makes “no effort . . . to relate these suggestions . . . to the larger evolutionary picture, within which Homeric works are deemed to have been the crucial factor underlying the emergence of both tragedy and comedy” (ibid.)¹³ So Aristotle has patched two accounts together;¹⁴ or there is some other schema at work. A clue is provided in Halliwell’s phrase “the pivotal significance of the Homeric poems” (ibid.).

I suggest that, rather than confusing two accounts, Aristotle is reinforcing his overall picture of Homer’s dramatic mimesis by enacting it in ring composition (1448b18–49a13): see Diagram 5.3.

So Aristotle has composed his account of the birth of tragedy as a ring composition. Why? And why put Homer at the center? Homer stands as the turning point for more than one reason. First, his placement there is an emblem of what he does with plot. This is true not only because he composed the *Iliad* as a ring. Within the story Aristotle is telling here, Homer transforms the plots of previous poetry.

A nature as origin [κατὰ φύσιν, 1448b20]

B primitive music [κατὰ μικρὸν ... προάγοντες, 1448b22–23]

C improvisations [ἐκ τῶν αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων, 1448b23–24]

D poetry divided “according to their own characters,” solemn vs. cheap;
encomia and hymns vs. invective, 1448b24–27

E before Homer, 1448b28

F *Margites*, 1448b30

G lampoon, 1448b31

X HOMER MAKES MIMESIS

DRAMATIC, 1448b35

G' comedy, 1448b36

F' *Margites*, 1448b38

E' after Homer, 1448a2

D' poets divide “according to their own natures”; tragedy and comedy
replace epic and iambic, 1449a2–6

C' improvisation [αὐτοσχεδιαστική, 1449a9–10]

B' primitive dance (the leaders of dithyramb and phallika) [κατὰ μικρὸν ... προαγόντων,
1449a13]

A' nature as telos [ἐπαύσατο ἐπει ἔσχε τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν, 1449a15]

Diagram 5.3 Aristotle's ring: the birth of tragedy and comedy.

As Halliwell points out, those noble men whose actions had been celebrated in encomia find themselves, in Homeric and Attic tragedy, involved in great changes of fortune, or transformations, which arouse pity and fear (Halliwell 1987, 81). The *peripeteia* (reversal) that Homer effects is, I suggest, part of the reason for his pivotal place in Aristotle's ring.

But the emphasis in the passage falls not on plot but rather on bringing things into appearance, and, as I have suggested, on gesture and enactment. Aristotle places Homer at the centre of a ring that begins and ends with primitive song and dance, as though he steps out into the middle of that dance as an exarchon himself. Homer stands at the centre of Aristotle's ring composition, enlivening

all that come after him by means of embodiment – showing the way through gestures. He makes the potential form actual not simply by directing potential poets to peripeteia or mimesis, but by pointing the way toward the source of action. Aristotle's Homer, like Marpessa for Phoenix, and like the turning point, where Phoenix stands, for Nestor, is an ancestral source to be tapped by poets on their way to being re-born as tragedians, and indeed comedians. Out of the ultimate matrix, nature, through the undifferentiated *communitas* of song and dance, and the spontaneous stirrings of improvisation, develops a form, epic, whose past yet living embodiment, Homer, remains to be tapped, reanimated and embodied by artists in the future.

Homer, unlike the proto-poets before him *and* the tragedians and comedians who follow him, seems not to have his “own nature” or his “own character.” In fact, by being sandwiched between these two groups of people, he muddles the bifurcation of nature that Aristotle is setting up.¹⁵ Only later do we find out why: because poetry is “of the well-natured or of the madman, for the former are shapable while the latter are *ekstatikoi*” (1455a32–33). Poetry is “of” a person whose nature can be moulded or who can get outside his nature, precisely by inhabiting someone else through gestures as they compose, such that they are proceeding “from the same nature,” in their emotions.

Likewise Homer confounds the evolutionary account of metre and genre. At first Aristotle claims that iambic metre came along in early blame poetry, fittingly, and iambic is so-called because people lampooned (ἰάμβιζον) each other in this metre (1449a31). Poets were divided into those of heroic (dactylic hexameter) and those of iambic metre (1448b32). But later Aristotle says that tragedy, from laughable and satyric beginnings, became dignified, and only then *changed from [trochaic] tetrameter to iambs* (1449a21). This is where Aristotle remarks that iambs are most suited to speech, and so when tragedy moved from being more danced to more spoken, “nature itself found the proper meter” (1449a24). But have we already forgotten that iambs are suited for lampoons? Why does tragedy, when it becomes dignified, switch to the less dignified metre? And why does tragedy suddenly have its origins in the laughable? Wasn't its origin in serious poets depicting serious people?

So Homer is a promiscuous funnel through which improvisers divided by character flow and eventually become poets divided by nature, no thanks to Homer! Homer's mixed nature problematizes the “natural” development of poetry, because Homeric poetry inhabits the nature of others and takes possession of others in turn.

Strictly speaking, a parallel between Aristotle and Phoenix or Nestor as performers of ring composition would manifest itself in a change in perspective in Aristotle himself rather than in the confounding quality in Aristotle's “Homer” that we have just been speaking of. But that is in fact what we see. For Aristotle himself gives the appearance of losing track of categories that he has set up, thus baffling his critics. As he approaches the Homeric midpoint – a “long interruption of the mainline of his genealogical argument” (Depew 2009, 129) – Aristotle veers from his position that Homer and Sophocles are alike in imitating *spoudaioi*,

the serious people (1448a26), unexpectedly bringing in the *Margites* and a relationship to proto-comedy, only to reiterate his usual view associating Homer in particular with *spoudaia* (1448b34), in the same sentence where he tells us that Homer demonstrated the shapes/gestures of comedy. There is no acknowledgement that here the very categories of nature and character, and even metre, are breaking down. In other words, approaching the midpoint, Aristotle seems to lose track of the idea that people do things “according to their own nature,” somewhat as Phoenix loses track of his own rhetorical goals, and as Nestor turns on a dime from pessimism to optimism.

I have suggested that Aristotle composed his account as a ring composition, and that in doing so Aristotle imitates Homeric ring composition, especially that in speeches, to convey a link between composition and performance at an enlivening central point. I now cast the net a little wider to indicate briefly how Aristotle’s ring resonates with a broader cluster of patterns in Greek poetic thought. Recognising the features Aristotle’s ring shares with other figures of wholeness and regeneration in the same “species,” as it were, points toward how the parts of his ring function as a whole. It may also provide hints as to the genetic heritage of Aristotle’s ring.

The shield of Achilles and Aristotle’s ring

First, within the Homeric poems, there is a family resemblance to the Shield of Achilles, “a kind of master simile” (Redfield 1994, 187) and an image of *poiêsis*. The most extended example of ecphrasis in the poem, the Shield’s performative virtues are less to the fore. Yet the Shield too, like the dramatically mimetic speeches, responds to comparison with Aristotle’s ring.

Redfield divides the Shield’s description into five circles whose themes form a ring composition: A) nature; B) the human world in itself; C) agricultural cycle/human beings with nature; B) human society as pure *communitas*; A) nature (Redfield 1994, 187–8).

When we put Aristotle’s ring side by side with the Shield, what stands out are correspondences at the beginnings and endings. Aristotle begins and ends with nature, with the *archê* (beginning/ruling principle) of what is common to all, and the *telos* (culmination) of fully-flourishing mimesis. The Shield likewise begins with nature, albeit nature “in the absence of man, as a realm of order and significance” (Redfield 1994, 187): the rotating celestial bodies, but also Ocean, who is made as the genesis for all (ὄς περ γένεσις πάντεσσι τέτυκται),¹⁶ it ends with Ocean alone, into which everything (except the Bear) must eventually plunge. Ocean is then a temporal and a spatial limit, but also a source and an endpoint, roughly corresponding to Aristotle’s nature as *archê* and then *telos*. Although Aristotle’s natural matrix is a human one, it is one of rhythm and *harmonia*: what human nature shares with the circling heavens. As the Shield’s stars as a group look forward to their earthly projection in the separate seasons, with their own harmonies (Redfield’s circle three), so too Aristotle’s rhythm and harmony are the natural substrate for the divergent tunes and rhythms unfolding in their turn.

Song and dance feature in the Shield's second, third and fourth circles (out of Redfield's five). In the second, there is wedding song and whirling dancers. In the third appears the lino-song, again with dancers. But the fourth circle does not merely contain song; it is entirely given over to a dance of young men and maidens.

Next to his own outermost sections, Aristotle has placed primitive song and dance (B/B'). To the Shield's fourth ring, the round dance, society "as pure *communitas*" (Redfield 1994, 187, citing Turner 1969), corresponds the dithyramb and phallic processions (*phallika*) – primitive enactments: note the Shield's comparison of the dance floor to the one made by Daidalos at Knossos once upon a time. Aristotle picks out the leaders (*exarchontes*, 1449a11) of these dances/processions, just as the Shield zooms in on the tumblers (and perhaps the bard), the *exarchontes* of the dance (18.606). Note also that the Shield follows up a round dance with a dance "in lines" (18.602), where Aristotle mentions first the dithyramb and then the processional *phallika*.

The simile used to describe the dancing in the Shield's fourth ring, of a seated potter trying (*πειρήσεται*) his wheel to see if it will run (18.601), seems more to describe Hephaestus, the "famous cripple" who is "elaborating" the dance, than it does the dancers, though he is working with metal rather than clay (see Stanley 1993, 12). Thus this ring seems to mirror the creation of the shield, which in turn mirrors the creation of the poem. This impression is heightened if we accept the verse about the bard leading the dance. Somewhat as the character (or lack thereof) of Aristotle's Homer has no bearing on his *poiēsis*, so too the Shield's smith, "lame in both legs," produces elaborate dance moves. The macrocosm emerges bit by bit out of the microcosm with each improvisatory turn of the potter's wheel (cf. *αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων/αὐτοσχεδιαστική*, at C and C' in Aristotle's ring).

Lonsdale points out that the "final vignette" on the Shield is a courtship dance (cf. *alphisiboiai*, line 593), and that it not only echoes the first vignette, the bridal procession with acrobatic dances: rather, "This courtship dance is in a sense preparatory to the wedding procession" (Lonsdale 1995, 276–7). Is there a similar pointing backward or closing of the ring in Aristotle? True, Aristotle does end with dances/processions associated with fertility, the *phallika*; those do not point back toward a wedding, but perhaps they point back toward the generative rhythm and *harmonia* σύμφυτον in human beings, and toward the birth imagery as a whole. The *phallika* that would "incorporate lampooning" (Depew 2009, 129) look back too to the invectives (*psogoi*) as the dithyramb looks back to, as a species of, the hymns (*hymnoi*) (1448b27).

This backtracking prompts a double-take at the leaders or initiators (*exarchontes*) shared by the Shield and Aristotle. If Aristotle's final section of dancers points back to the beginning as the Shield's fourth ring does, the *exarchontes* found there recall Aristotle's phrase *ex archēs* (1448b22), planted, in fact, in the counterpart position of the ring (B/B'). Aristotle's *exarchontes* have incorporated the *archē*; their bodies lead the circles and processions of others – perhaps as they summon the presence of Dionysus. Though chronologically we have returned to the primitive stages, here the proto-poets are takers of action, unmoved movers of their

circles and lines. In this – not to mention in their lofty appendages – they are even more vital than those who “rush after” poetry once tragedy and comedy have made their epiphany (1449a2–3). The comedians (*kômôidopoiôi*) and tragedians (*tragôidodidaskaloi*), doers and teachers as they may be,¹⁷ would seem more animated than the dithyramb and *phallika* dancers, if the standard is dramatisation. But in terms of the ring with an animating centre, crossing the finish line at speed, fully loaded with presence, strikes the right note. (Here we may recall Nestor’s breathless finish describing the return course, discussed above.)

The features shared by Aristotle’s birth of tragedy and the Shield are not only clustered near their endpoints but even serve to structure the whole. No sooner has Aristotle’s ring begun with communal nature than human character divides and reproduces itself. Likewise, on the Shield, not only are the two cities divided, but within the first, there are two men contesting, and in the second, two armies surrounding the city, divided two ways: bifurcations multiply seemingly gratuitously. Aristotle’s repeated dichotomies in the characters of primitive poets and their genres are roughly parallel in their seeming excess, a feature discussed in the following section.

What about the middle? Here the Shield correspondence may not be as fruitful. (The Shield’s physical structure as concentric rings potentially confuses the matter: what we are discussing here is the ring-compositional structure of its description, whose centre is not at the physical centre of the Shield.) In the centre of Aristotle’s ring stands a figure who collapses these distinctions and gives birth, through enactment, to the various transformations. On Redfield’s schema for the Shield, the ring-compositional centre belongs to the agricultural/seasonal circle. Redfield does not locate a precise centre, though it would seem to lie between the second and third season (since Redfield sees the seasons as four). Stanley’s schema (Stanley 1993, 10), using three seasons, puts the scepter-bearing king at the centre, taking pleasure in the harvest. On the Shield, the bard or the potter, or Hephaestus himself – or even the Bear or the object of her gaze, Orion (18.487–89) – might make iconic equivalents for Homer’s central orchestrating position that are more appealing than the king.

To recall our initial focus, however, on the turning point as *regenerative*, just this is seen in miniature in the refreshing cup of wine a man hands the ploughmen as they reach the turning point of each row of the field.¹⁸ It is too bad, I thought, that this refreshing cup is not offered at the turning point of the ring, for example where (to take Stanley’s schema) the king is standing. Still, the phrase *στρέψαντες ἰκοῖατο τέλσον* (turning, they would reach the endpoint, 18.544) does appear at the mathematical (in terms of lines) centre of the Shield – that is, if one includes the line about the bard.

As we would recognise the bard on the Shield, or Hephaestus himself, as an image of the poet performing it, so we may “take pleasure in gazing on images especially accurately made” (1448b11) “because as we gaze we learn and we put together what each thing is, like that this is that” (1448b16). So too we by nature delight in rhythms and can take pleasure in recognising the “sections” of Aristotle’s rhythmic composition.

With so bald a portrait as the bard in the Shield, the pleasure of recognition would not be as great. “When we have learnt what already familiar thing a picture represents we have not learnt much” (Lucas 1968, 72). But from the Shield as a whole, as Redfield has shown, we learn much about the wellsprings of the *Iliad*; and from Aristotle’s image we learn about Aristotle’s perception of Homer and mimesis. If we do not at first recognise the pattern, all the better. “For Aristotle a dramatic text moves and engrosses us when we recognize in it some comprehensible pattern of causes – and . . . it moves us most when this pattern comes to us unexpectedly and thus extends our understanding” (Redfield 1994, 67, quoting *Poetics* 1452a1–4).

If modern readers have trouble recognising it, Aristotle’s ring falls within a more general pattern of Greek poetry and thought, a pattern recognisable to his readers – and to his live audience of students, assisted by whatever visual aids Aristotle used in lecture. The Shield helps bring the workings of Aristotle’s ring into focus, but both Aristotle’s ring and the Shield should be seen against the background of such broader patterns. This can only be gestured at here.

The frieze of dancers on the Shield of Achilles is, it is true, “a motif not unknown to Geometric pottery” (Whitman 1958, 205), and in fact just these dancers form the tenor of the simile of the potter trying his wheel. But the more general pattern, the movement to and from a reanimating/transforming centre, seems even more at home within choral poetry itself, with its turns and returns.

The previously mentioned “chronological gradient” seen in Homeric speeches, complete with animating central episode, is indeed at home in choral poetry, and appears for example throughout the Pindaric corpus. Though Pindar’s use of ring composition is more complex, there is still a central exploit in the past at which the dancers are aiming, and once they arrive, they “somatiz[e]” the hero’s qualities (Mullen 1982, 65) in a way that stops short of shedding their own identities. Pindar’s odes illustrate the relation of one connected action to a past moment of heroic action or suffering that resonates through the ancestors down to the victor at the focus of the celebration. This contact with a primal scene is rooted in choreographed movement rather than histrionic presencing. Pindar choreographs moments of beginning and completion, and Pindar himself uses the terms *archê* and *telos* in a way suggestive, to Mullen, of Aristotle. One way Pindar choreographs these patterns is through the triadic structure of strophe-antistrophe-epode. However the dancers stepped this out, the turn and counterturn do not come together to form a ring composition, in the sense that, despite its name, the antistrophe metrically reproduces, rather than reverses, the strophe. Nevertheless a strophe can narrate an approach to a central point, as we shall see. “However it may have been used by others, for this poet the triadic form was there to make manifest both the beginnings and the ends of mortal action, and thus somehow to implicate in the dance the Olympians who further them” (Mullen 1982, 117).

In the following section I flesh out Mullen’s suggestion about the kinship between Aristotelian beginnings and endings and choral poetry, using not Pindar but Euripides. On the register of myth and image, Pindar’s *Nemean* 7, cited above, presents the schema of a return from death at the turning point of a chariot race, a

race such as that dramatised in Nestor's speech. The racecourse schema appears in another choral example, the second stasimon of Euripides's *Heracles*. Although this is an example from tragedy, it shows how features found in Aristotle's ring might be rooted in choral movements. The racecourse of death is here found in a constellation of features that make this Euripidean ode, too, a fruitful comparandum for Aristotle's ring.

Reanimation and the separation of noble and base in a Euripidean ode

In Euripides's *Heracles*, the titular hero returns from Hades just in time to save his wife and children from the evil tyrant Lycus. But once Lycus is safely dead, Heracles is driven mad and turns on his family and kills them. The helpless chorus of old men sings the second stasimon just as Heracles has arrived, and it ostensibly celebrates him as a saviour. But the ironies in the ode are heavy – at least on a second viewing – given that Heracles is going to kill Lycus; but for his own second act he will kill his own children.

This ode (lines 637–700) is the prime example in Richard Martin's stimulating discussion (Martin 2007), which I draw on here, of choral poetry's rich imagery of proper limits and of passing beyond that limit; the chorus is often singing of its own limits in a way that may reflect their ongoing dance.

The context of the ode is that Heracles has just returned from Hades. The ode consists of two strophic pairs, a structure that mirrors the content of the ode in a complex fashion. In the first strophe the old men, somewhat Nestor-like, sing of their lost youth and the burden of old age. By the end of the first strophe they have dismissed old age, bidding it be gone into the sky "on wing." In the antistrophe they turn to a reanimation fantasy, singing that if the gods were intelligent they would arrange things such that the good would come back for a second life after death, while the bad would not. They put this in terms of the racecourse schema: coming back for a double youth would be a clear mark, *charakter*, of virtue. A second life doesn't make a very good marker.¹⁹ There is also ambiguity as to whether one life constitutes one "double course," such that the good would have a whole new "double course," or whether, as in Pindar, coming back from death is the "home stretch." The chorus, as they complete the antistrophe, admit that in reality life goes "whirling" on in the sheer accumulation of money and there is no distinguishing sign of virtue. But in the second strophe, they themselves are high-stepping it into their own second youth, touting the virtues of song and dance and saying "I shall not stop" mixing Muses and Graces, and celebrating memory and victorious Heracles, with Dionysus giver of wine. Finally, the second antistrophe culminates in their encomium for Heracles, whom they now declare definitively to be the "son of Zeus" and a surpassing benefactor. The chorus members equate themselves with the Delian maidens singing for Apollo. They seem to have found the standard of all judgements in a man who resists categories by surpassing them, and who is also, by the enthusiastic end, a source of a "life unbeaten by waves" (698–699; cf. line 664, whereby the ill-born would

have only a single *bioton*). Meanwhile, of course, Heracles is about to kill his own wife and children.

So the *Heracles* ode links reanimation at the turning point with the theme of separating the noble from the base, and with the actual confusion of these categories at the turning point. Meanwhile the old men seem to have found the fountain of youth in memory and in singing their god-man, oblivious to the fact that Heracles himself is, as Carson puts it (Carson 2006, 13), a two-part man, a man with a very different “return course” in this play. The chorus is newly animated by, or at least after, singing of the double youth, seeming to enlist themselves among the good, and wildly overshoot the mark in their encomium of their hero, the memory of whose deeds is fuelling their steps that will “never stop” – evincing the truth that old men turning young are no more a sign of anything than a second life would be. The ode’s two strophic pairs make for a more complex structure than simple ring composition. But their strophic movements are correlated to their double-life fantasy and their wild encomium in such a way that the choreography brings out the confusion of categories at the turning point. This undermines the old men’s fantasy, but manifests in detail, I am saying, the underlying schema, where confusion of the central point *is part of the point*, not merely ironic.

The *Heracles* ode wishes for a “clear sign” upon mortals distinguishing noble from bad; the sign itself, though, *is* their coming back around for a second youth. This theme of a clear sign at the turning point is seen too in the chariot race of *Iliad* 23 – not the *sêma* itself, but a sign on the contestants, as in the *Heracles* ode. Idomeneus and Ajax are competing to judge the winner coming around the bend, while Phoenix was stationed at the midpoint to verify just that himself. The narrator (23.454–455) singles out such a clear sign in the *sêma* on the leading horse’s head as he comes around the bend, though the characters fall into dispute. Here too we have a disputed sign, and the theme of old age and youth is in play in this passage.

Like the old men in Euripides’s chorus, Aristotle sets out to mark clear divisions between noble and base. While the praise and blame poetry that Aristotle mentions itself enacts judgement, Aristotle too winnows the poets’ characters at each stage of evolution within his teleological schema. (Note too Aristotle’s elaborate withholding of judgement [*episkopein; krinai*], about whether tragedy “already holds sufficiently in its kinds or not” [*Poetics* 1449a7–9].)

These distinctions are overstretched, in Aristotle’s scheme, well before they reach the breaking point in Aristotle’s figure of Homer. For only the base to blame the base, and the noble to praise the noble, is indeed “overly restrictive” (Nagy 1979, 254). Perhaps, as Nagy suggests, Aristotle is retrojecting his definitions of comedy and tragedy as base and noble media onto the blame and praise poets (Nagy 1979, 254–255): praise poets are noble because tragedians are noble. But shaping the discussion this way also allows Aristotle to enact a movement from speech acts that are not able to get outside their own categories – presumably the base blamers do not realise that they are just doing so because they are base – to a higher platform of judgement, or a stepping outside of or collapsing these categories, that comes with the full dramatisation of “Homer.” This movement includes

an impetus toward higher developments of schemata because they are “more honorable” (1449a6), but the ultimate is the midpoint, the transcending of categories in Aristotle’s Homer.

So the Euripidean ode makes plausible that Aristotle is drawing upon a traditional scheme when he combines the themes of a) multiple divisions into noble and base; b) a doubt that such a division is possible; c) a central figure praised for transcending those categories in a problematic fashion; d) the theme of animation at a central turning point. However the ode played out in detail, its strophic choreography rendered visible somehow the pattern of a double course bound up with judgement and animation. Such a visible pattern and others like it would likely have been part of the mental equipment of Aristotle and his students and readers. But whatever the ode may tell us about the sources for Aristotle’s birth of tragedy, even more vital is what it can tell us about how the elements in Aristotle’s ring are functioning together. If the motif of judgement is already problematized in the *Heracles* ode, it is plausible that Aristotle too is using these motifs in a non-straightforward fashion. Aristotle re-enacts rather than discourses upon the sources of drama in mimesis.

In this passage where Aristotle seems to be echoing a schema of arrival at an enlivening turning point, the matrices of drama are the kinds of processions and dances where some of the details of such a schema might be most at home. I would not assert that Aristotle “borrowed” the details of his ring from a particular genre or source. He may have. But ancient *mousikê* absorbs ideas and realities from society, crystallises them in its own way and releases them out again into the world. In fact *mousikê* was probably the primary mode in which this happened. And even if, as some claim, Aristotle stood at the end of this choral culture, he did not stand outside it, but was swept up in its figures too. Although within Aristotle’s ring Homer forms the culmination, this is a further development of an animation, or embodiment, seen *in nuce* already in the dance and in processions.

Aristotle’s circular thought-action

Having argued that Aristotle constructed his birth of tragedy as a ring centred around Homer, thus instantiating both a dramatic transformation and a unity coming into view, and having sketched some parallels in choral lyric, I now want to circle back to Aristotle’s idea of action. I mentioned earlier that Aristotle was attracted to Homeric performance because it made visible something about Aristotle’s own thinking about action. Ring composition is not foreign to Aristotle.²⁰ And Aristotle’s thought is fully compatible with what Mary Douglas (2007) calls “thinking in circles.” In action, for Aristotle, thinking casts its way back and back until it reaches the end (*eschaton*), the font from which action can proceed.

In the *Metaphysics*, for example, Aristotle maps out the wellsprings of action taken by a physician (here *poiêsis* rather than *praxis*) as follows:

And the healthy comes about from [the physician] thinking in this way: since this-here (*todi*) is health, it is necessary that, if there will be health, this-here

(*todi*) must obtain, for instance homogeneity, and if this, heat: and so he keeps on thinking, until he brings (the thought process) to that which he himself has the power, at the end, to do. Then the movement away from this point is called *poiêsis*, *poiêsis* toward becoming healthy. So it follows in a certain way that health comes about from health, and a house from a house; *out of that without matter, that which has matter*.²¹

Thought proceeds from the here-and-now backward to what is farthest away, there finding a way forward again into action (*poiêsis*). Aristotle's striking formulation, "out of that without matter, that which has matter," has thought tapping the source of matter itself. This is a picture of *poiêsis* rather than *praxis*, so it cannot be pressed too hard for the meaning of "one complete *praxis*." Nevertheless, the passage does resonate with Homeric *poiêsis*, both in the enlivening midpoint of ring-composed speeches, and in the gradual casting backward to find the way forward.

Phoenix delivers a speech at the calendrical centre, in a ring composition deeply embedded within Book 9, where the enlivening in performance bears fruit in the discovery of the "home stretch" of the poem's plot, the true tragic pattern that will inspire its inner audience, who will carry the poem to its telos. That is, of course, how things seem to the outer audience, us. We cannot know by what back and forth process this speech developed. From another point of view, just where the performer/composer has seeded for himself the kernel for the rest of his plot's development, and left himself a thread of Ariadne, the performer-as-Phoenix hurtles outside his cultural milieu toward the seedbed of Kleopatra and her mother Marpessa, only to find there the pattern of heroic rage. Through the speech of Phoenix the performer too finds himself in a space of transformation, and through him, so does the audience. It is a *katharsis*, both in the sense of a purification enacted imaginatively by the detached, formative understanding of the artist (Redfield 1994, 161), and of a sudden coming upon the source of action. The performer comes upon this source in the form of a pattern, and in another sense of *houtos ekeinos*, "this is that": the coming to presence that turns thought into action. *Houtos ekeinos*, the that is now the this, he (or rather she) is now I (thinks the poet/performer), she is now you/he (thinks the audience), "aha!" To borrow Ford's formulation on tragic *katharsis*:

A great deal of artistry was required on the poet's part, and no little critical attentiveness on the part of the audience. But the experience as a whole issued in something that was more like undergoing a mystic initiation than coolly appraising or observing a show.

(Ford 2016, 38)

The Homeric performer transforms and is transformed to a higher degree than early performers of dithyramb, who, according to the author of the Aristotelian Problem 19, "kept a grip on their character."²² This is why Homer, not the dithyramb, occupies the central point in Aristotle's ring-compositional scheme.

The kind of unity enacted here is a *peripeteia*, a turnaround or reversal, brought on by accessing a consciousness that belongs to a past generation, or is deeply ensconced in the character's memory, or is marginal to the group. And this kind of unity resembles a "whole action" in a different sense – in the sense that one is getting at the origins of an action, tapping into its source. An action seen as aiming at a goal that has just come into view. It has come into view because of a transformation that occurs in the course of speaking and being transformed, in the course of performance.

Notes

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- 1 Adapted from Whitman (1958, 257).
 - 2 From Whitman (1958, 281).
 - 3 Bakker (1997, 120–1), citing Gaiser (1969, 4) and Thalmann (1984, 22).
 - 4 Lohmann (1970, 17), trans. in Wright and Jones (1997, 77).
 - 5 On the connection between Phoenix and Nestor, and between Phoenix's role as judge here and his Book 9 speech, see Kretler (2018, Interlude 1).
 - 6 Nagy (1990, 215), citing Sinos (1980, 53n6). Cf. Mullen (1982, 60).
 - 7 Cf. Frame (1978).
 - 8 For the comparable move in Pindar, see Mullen (1982, 65).
 - 9 Cf. the place of the "root paradigm" in Victor Turner's social drama: Thomas Becket is possessed, for example, by "the action paradigm provided by the Via Crucis in Christian belief and ritual" within his own social drama. See Turner (1974, ch. 2); Turner (1982, 73).
 - 10 Cf. Plato's magnetic rings, *Ion* 533d.
 - 11 They are "liable to be 'possessed' from time to time" (Else 1967, 48).
 - 12 All translations from Aristotle are my own.
 - 13 Cf. Lucas (1968, 78 on 1449a6).
 - 14 As in Janko's (1987, 76) diagram:

lampoon	> Margites	> comedy	< phallic songs
hymn	> epic	> tragedy	< dithyramb and satyric poem
 - 15 Else deflects the usual interpretation of *κατὰ τὰ οἰκεῖα ἦθη* as referring to the character of primordial poets, since otherwise "Homer would be an insoluble paradox, not to say a monster. Was he both *σεμνότερος* and *εὐτελέστερος*?" (Else 1957, 136).
 - 16 As he is called at 14.246, as noted by Edwards (1991, 231) on *Iliad* 18.607–608.
 - 17 "There seems no reason for this elegant variation" of terms (Lucas 1968, 78 on 1449a4). But they serve almost as epithets to let these people stand forth as they are coming to be poets.
 - 18 See Edwards (1991, 222 on 18.543 and 544–547). Edwards observes, "The sudden insight into the labourers' minds (547) is noteworthy." It occurs in a scene "which includes movement and the desires of the depicted figures; the audience is thereby encouraged not to imagine the surface appearance of an image (the visual medium) but to imagine the world depicted therein . . . Lines 548–49 then call us back to the (visual and verbal) context of the scene" (Becker 1990, 143, quoted by Edwards 1991,

- 222). The penetration of one level of narration into another just at its centre, and the inhabiting of the minds found there, is reminiscent of ring-composed speeches such as Phoenix's.
- 19 As Bond (1981, 233) notes. If, that is, the second life *is* the marker of goodness, how do we know who around us is back for their second go-around? And even if they are recognisably on their second round, what good does this do us in their first round?
- 20 On Aristotle's use of ring composition see Barney (2010, 36–7, 41).
- 21 *Metaphysics* Z 1032b6–14.
- 22 On this passage see Mullen (1982, 53).

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