Reading Aristotle

Argument and Exposition

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Contents

CHAPTER 11

Aristotle on the (Alleged) Inferiority of History to Poetry*

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Abstract

Aristotle's claim that poetry is "a more philosophic and better thing" than history (*Poet.* 9.1451b5–6) and his description of the "poetic universal" have been the source of much scholarly discussion. Although many scholars have mined *Poetics* 9 as a source of Aristotle's views toward history, in my contribution I caution against doing so. Critics of Aristotle's remarks have often failed to appreciate the expository principle that governs *Poetics* 6–12, which begins with a definition of tragedy and then elucidates the terms of that definition by means of a series of juxtapositions. The juxtaposition between poetry and history is one such instance that seeks to elucidate what sort of plot exemplifies a causal unity such that the events of a play unfold with likelihood or necessity. Within that context, Aristotle compares history and poetry in order to elucidate the object of poetic mimesis rather than to criticize history as a discipline. Viewing Aristotle as antagonistic toward history fails to appreciate the expository structure of the *Poetics* and obscures the resource that history provides to the poet, a point that I explore by considering what Aristotle would have thought of an "historical" tragedy like Aeschylus's *Persians*.

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In *Poetics* 9 and 23, Aristotle infamously contrasts history and poetry in a fashion that often offends modern readers—perhaps especially modern historians. As *Poetics* 9 puts it: "poetry is a more philosophical and better thing than history, since poetry states more universal things whereas history states particular things" (9.1451b5–7).[1] Modern historians such as de Ste. Croix have dismissed Aristotle's remarks as an instance of an inconsistent application of his own principles or, in the words of Martin Ostwald, "a deplorable blindness to historiography"; others, such as Collingwood and Finley, have claimed that Aristotle's remarks reflect a dearth of archive material or a "Greek" sense of timelessness.[2] Although Gomme seems correct to say that Aristotle's characterization of Herodotus—an explicit target in *Poetics* 9—is hardly adequate and that perhaps Aristotle would have emended "I did not mean this to be my last word about history", one is still left wondering what would have been Aristotle's thoughts about history (if indeed it crossed his mind at all).[3] Indeed, *Poetics* 9 appears to be what Heath in his chapter in this volume characterizes as "Aristotelian polemic at its most robust" (475 in this volume).

Although *Poetics* 9 and 23 look like the place to answer the question of what he thinks about history, I think we should refrain from doing so, at least without attending to the larger contexts of which the chapters are a part. I would like to argue that viewing *Poetics* 9 (and the additional remarks in *Poetics* 23) as establishing an antagonism between the genres of history and poetry loses sight of the explanatory and expository principles that Aristotle follows in *Poetics* 6–12, unnecessarily maligns history as a form of investigation, and obscures the possibility of history as a storehouse for poetical material. No doubt, in *Poetics* 9 Aristotle identifies the ἔργον or work of a poet—that he or she is "more a maker of stories (μύθων) than a maker of metered verses" (9.1451b27–28)—by means of a juxtaposition with the ἱστορικός; but the main point of the chapter is to distinguish the right sort of plot unity from plots organized chronologically or episodically. Whether history (much less ἱστορία) is in any way unphilosophical or constrained to chronicling particular events

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical references are to Aristotle's *De Arte Poetica*. Translations are my own, although they are indebted to those of Halliwell 1995 and Janko 1987; Greek text is Kassel 1966.

2 See de Ste. Croix 1992, 24; Ostwald 2002, 9; Collingwood 1946, 25–28, 42–43; Finley 1987, 15.

3 See Gomme 1954, 73. Armstrong 1998, 447 note 4 writes: "How could Aristotle seem to have got Herodotus, his sample historian so wrong (cf. 1451b2–4)? Herodotus tells stories, after all". By contrast, Heath 2009a, 70 implies that Aristotle gets the contrast right: "The poet's job description is more demanding than the historian's. Why? The historian reports a series of events, while the poet *constructs* a sequence of events".

are questions that are simply off the table—as they should be, since *Poetics* 9 is not intended as a critique of ἱστορία.[4] What seems more interesting is that *Poetics* 9 opens the door for "historical" or even "contemporary" plots along the lines of Aeschylus's *Persians*. Rather than criticize or disparage history, when understood within its larger context *Poetics* 9 incorporates history into the repertoire of the poet.

To explore these claims, I first look at how *Poetics* 9 fits within the broader analysis of *Poetics* 6–12 and more specifically that of plot unity in *Poetics* 7–9. Within that context, it is clear that Aristotle's juxtaposition of history and poetry grounds a contrast between different approaches to plot unity more so than any sort of critique of the discipline of history. In the second part of my paper, I show that Aristotle's remarks in *Poetics* 9 about the "philosophical" nature of poetry explain by contrast with history how a dramatic plot should be organized, specifically that its poetic universal should be "in accord with what is likely or necessary" (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον [9.1451b9]). In the third part of my paper I argue that reading poetry and history as antagonistic ignores the resources that Aristotle thinks history offers to the poet. To illustrate the point, I conclude my paper with speculation about how Aristotle would view an "historical" tragedy like Aeschylus's *Persians*.

1 "Likely or Necessary" Plots and the Context of *Poetics* 9

Although the *Poetics* as a whole is fragmentary in places, *Poetics* 4–12 is guided by and organized around a very clear expository principle, namely the stipulation of a definition and then the elucidation of that definition through the determination of its terms. Although my focus is on Aristotle's elucidation of his definition of tragedy in *Poetics* 9, the definition of tragedy "arises out of what has so far been said" (ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων [6.1449b23]), which refers to the developmental or perhaps even teleological account in *Poetics* 4–5 of the emergence of tragedy as a distinct form of enacted mimesis separate from comedy,

4 Carli 2011 conclusively shows that when Aristotle wishes to evaluate the epistemic pedigree of ἱστορία (for instance, in the biological writings, the *Constitution of Athens*, and the *Ars Rhetorica*), he has far more to say than what misinterpretations of *Poetics* 9 would suggest. As Ron Polansky has suggested to me, that ἱστορία includes rudimentary factual observation does not entail that it is limited only to "particulars" (a point also shown by Carli's work). Powell 1987 argues that Aristotle has in mind the "logographic" parts of Herodotus more so than the ἔργα μεγάλα τε και θωμαστά or the αἰτίη that Herodotus initially announces as the object of his investigation (Hdt. 1 1).

epic, and other forms of narrative representation. Aristotle first identifies the natural causes (αἰτίαι [4.1448b4–5]) responsible for the generation of the art of poetry—that humans by nature are "mimetic" and take pleasure in imitation—and then chronicles the development and differentiation of comedy, epic, and tragedy from mere improvisations. The broader explanatory principle of *Poetics* 4–12 is thus the establishment of a distinct natural kind, its definition, and then the elucidation of that definition. As Heath shows in his own chapter in this volume, *Poetics* 4–12 also clearly builds up to the evaluation of the best kind of tragic plot in *Poetics* 13–14.

Poetics 6 begins by offering a promissory note—deferring discussion of epic and comedy (the former is taken up in *Poetics* 23–26 and the latter, apparently, in the lost second book of the *Poetics*)—and then defines tragedy in part as "the mimesis of an action (πράξεως) that is good, complete, and of magnitude" (1449b24–25). *Poetics* 7–9 subsequently explore the notion of "action" in the definition by means of articulating what I will call the "practical unity" of a plot, namely that a plot derives its unity from imitating a single πρᾶξις or action.[5] *Poetics* 7 first unpacks the definition of tragedy with respect to the "wholeness" and "magnitude" of plot (7.1450b23–25). To say that tragedy imitates an action that is "whole" means that the action has a beginning, middle, and end—and the end is that which occurs "necessarily or usually" (ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ ὡς ἐπι τὸ πολύ [7.1450b29–30]). To say that the action imitated has a certain magnitude is to say that its length is sufficient to allow a transformation—from prosperity to adversity or from adversity to prosperity—again, to occur "in accord with a probable or necessary sequence of events" (κατὰ τὸ εἰκος ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον ἐφεξῆς [7.1451a12–13]).[6] Both claims taken together reiterate Aristotle's commitment

5 Both chapters 7 and 9 commence with transitional phrases (διωρισμένων δὲ τούτων [7.1450b21] and φανερὸν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων [9.1451a36]) that suggest an interconnected textual unit. Else 1967, 302 notes that *Poetics* 9 presents itself as "a direct inference from what has gone before". Halliwell 1987, 98 claims that *Poetics* 7–9 comprise a section of argument devoted to plot unity; Halliwell 1998, 99–106 sees the focus as the "necessity-and-probability principle".

6 Aristotle's sustained analysis of "the likely or the necessary" culminates in *Poetics* 9, although it is invoked repeatedly throughout the *Poetics*; see 7.1450b29–30, 7.1451a13–14, 8.1451a27–28, 10.1452a20, 11.1452a24, 15.1454a34, 17.1455a16–20, 18.1456a23–25, 19.1456b4, and 24.1460a23–24. As commentators generally note, "necessity" (ἀνάγκη) in Aristotle's phrase is simply what happens without exception rather than a more dramatic sense of "fate" or "inevitability"; by "likely" (τὸ εἰκός), he means "what happens for the most part" (a term explored at greater length in the *Rhetoric*, see for instance *Rhet.* I 2.1357a22–b25). See further Halliwell 1998, 99–106 and Frede 1992, 197–219.

to what I will call his "poetic realism", namely the doctrine that the parts or events in a tragedy should unfold in a causally interrelated sequence that is in accord with what is likely or necessary within the "logic" of the overall drama.[7] Whereas the discussions of "wholeness" and "magnitude" in *Poetics* 7 introduce necessity and likelihood as central characteristics of good plots, *Poetics* 8 and 9 elucidate such "poetic realism" by means of juxtaposition with plots that lack such causal determination.

One could imagine a plot deriving its unified structure by "imitating" the acts of a specific individual—for instance, the biographical chronicle of all the actions of a heroic person. *Poetics* 8 contemplates but rejects such an organizing principle for plot on the grounds that "an individual person performs many actions that yield no unitary action" (8.1451a18–19). Homer could have, of course, written the *Odyssey* as a chronicle of the life of Odysseus—beginning, perhaps, with his feigned madness to avoid fighting at Troy and continuing beyond his return home to Penelope. But such a chronicle has no "practical unity", and since no such single action unifies the biographical chronicle, its events would also lack "a necessary or probable connection" (8.1451a27–28); by contrast, the *Odyssey*'s greatness lies in the fact that it—like the *Iliad*—is unified around a single action the unfolding of which in time exhibits an internal structure, namely, it has a beginning, middle, and end, that are organically connected and causally interrelated (cf. 23.1459a37–b1).[8] *Poetics* 8 illuminates the notion of causally determinate plot structure—that events arise through what is necessary or probable—by means of a negative contrast with a sort of biographical tragedy unified by having an individual person as its object of imitation. But it does not follow that *Poetics* 8 thereby disparages biography or

7 "Realism" is a loaded term. Minimally, I take the term to convey what is plausible or believable (i.e., τὸ πιθανόν [9.1451b16]). What is possible is plausible (9.1451b15, 24.1460a25–27, 5.1460b23), but as Aristotle quotes Agathon, "it is probable (εἰκός) that many things occur contrary to what is likely (παρὰ τὸ εἰκός)" (19.1456a23–25, 25.1461b15; cf. *Rhet.* II 24.1402a9–13). Halliwell 1998, 103 notes that Aristotle's "realism" is not the same as verisimilitude or *vraisemblance*, since Aristotle is explicit that tragedy represents characters as better than they are in real life and comedy represents them as worse (2.1448a16–18, 5.1449b10, 15.1454b9–11). By contrast, Carli 2010, 320 goes too far when she claims that Aristotle "believes that there should be an essential homology between the arrangements of the incidents of a poem (that is, the plot) and the order of the world of human affairs".

8 MacIntyre 1984, 204–220 proposes to ground Aristotle's normative philosophy in a notion of "narrative order" as an alternative to his outdated teleological biology. According to *Poetics* 8, human lives do not exhibit such an order. For further reflection on the point, see Halliwell 2012.

character sketches.[9] Rather, *Poetics* 8 clearly follows the explanatory principle implied by the investigation of the definition of tragedy two chapters earlier; it compares biographical unity as a principle for organizing a plot with the notion of practical unity in order to elucidate the latter.

The place of *Poetics* 9 within the overall discussion of plot, I believe, exhibits a parallel comparison between chronological unity and practical unity, following the explanatory model of the two previous chapters. As Heath puts it in his own chapter in this volume, Aristotle's explanatory model "exhibits the process of thinking one's way to a conclusion as more instructive than one which simply states or proves the conclusion" (337, below). One could imagine a plot deriving its unified structure by imitating the acts of a specific time period—one that exhibited both a beginning and an end and a chronological succession of events. *Poetics* 9 (and 23) are devoted to showing the error of unifying a plot in such a fashion, just like *Poetics* 8 was devoted to showing the error of unifying a plot around a biography.[10] Homer could have, of course, written the *Iliad* as the chronicle of the events during the Trojan War—from say the seduction of Helen through the story of the Trojan horse or the murder of Priam (23.1459a30–32). But according to Aristotle, such an account fails to exhibit an internal unity according to which events follow "in accord with what is likely or necessary". Put succinctly, chronological succession does not entail necessary or likely succession: *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is both a logical fallacy and a poor principle for plot construction. As Aristotle puts it in the sequel of *Poetics* 10, with respect to the parts of a plot it makes a great difference whether things happen *because* of their antecedents (διὰ τάδε) or only *after* their antecedents (μετὰ τάδε [10.1452a20–21]).

9 Theophrastus composed precisely such a work, *Characters*, which identifies the sorts of things that specific character types (e.g., the boor, the grouch, the fraud) are likely to do.

10 As noted above, *Poetics* 6 (1449b21–22) offers a promissory note about the examination of epic that builds upon the differentiation of forms of mimesis in *Poetics* 4–5; *Poetics* 23–26 fulfills that promise and indeed presupposes the earlier differentiation, especially in its contrasts between tragedy and epic. Although *Poetics* 23 is devoted to the analysis of epic, rather than tragedy, and is structurally distinct from the analysis of plot in *Poetics* 7–9, Aristotle's description of epic plot mirrors that of tragic plot, viz. it should concern "a single, whole, and complete action, with beginning, middle, and end" (23.1459a18–20). Else 1967, 571 notes that "most epics are simply histories-in-verse. They relate what happened to happen to one man or a number of men during a given period, instead of presenting a single, unified action with a beginning, middle, and end … But this natural assumption is corrected by Aristotle. Epic is to follow the pattern of tragedy, not history, in its structure".

Poetics 23 takes up the point by means of a contrast between epic and history. Aristotle writes that the internal structure of epic

> should not be like histories, which require an exposition not of a single action (μιᾶς πράξεως) but of a single period (ἑνὸς χρόνου), with all the events (in their contingent relationships)[11] that happened to one person or more during it. For just as there was a chronological coincidence between the sea battle at Salamis and the battle against the Carthaginians in Sicily, though they in no way converged on the same goal, so in a continuous stretch of time event sometimes follows event without yielding any single goal.[12]
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> 23.1459a21–29

Aristotle's explicit point is that whereas history takes chronological unity as an organizing principle of its account, a principle that lacks a *telos* or aim that necessarily or logically connects events,[13] poetry ought to compose plots in which "the component events should be so structured that if any is displaced or removed, the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated" (8.1451a32–34). Apparently drawing upon a metaphor from Plato's *Phaedrus*, Aristotle likens the parts of both tragedy and epic to a living animal whose organic parts

11 "In their contingent relationships" is the Halliwell 1995 translation of ὧν ἕκαστον ὡς ἔτυχεν ἔχει πρὸς ἄλληλα (1459a24). Although Carli 2011, 328–331 is correct to stand behind the more literal rendering of the Greek (she provides "each of which events relates to the others as the case may be"), she appears to miss the force of Aristotle's example of the battles of Salamis and Sicily.

12 It is unclear what stories Aristotle is familiar with concerning the battles of Salamis and Himera, which apparently took place on the same day in 480 BCE. Herodotus reports a Sicilian tradition about the coincidence of the two battles (VI 166), within an extended narrative about the initial actions of the Hellenic League, which included sending messengers to Argos, Sicily, Corcyra, and Crete (VI 145–171). Gomme 1954, 72–74 takes Aristotle to task for falsely presenting the example as if it were one that Herodotus presents as chronological ordering. But Aristotle may be alluding to a different tradition, written by the historian Ephorus and preserved in Diodorus Siculus (XI 1.4), which claimed that Xerxes sought to open a "second front" in his war on Greece and proposed to Carthage an alliance that would coordinate their attacks on both the Greek mainland and Greek western colonies. See further, Else 1967, 575–577.

13 Carli 2011, 328–329 is correct to point out that Aristotle's "sometimes" (ἐνίοτε [23.1459a28]) implies that there are instances in which historical events do aim toward some *telos*. But I think she is wrong to suggest that it is the historian's job to make his or her object the search for such a *telos* in chronological events.

consist in an interrelated whole (7.1450b34, 23.1459a20–21; cf. *Phdr*. 264b–c). Chronological succession can never provide such organic interconnection, and Aristotle's main point consists in drawing the contrast and cautioning poets from forgetting the difference between their art and the art of history.[14]

If my understanding of the explanatory principle that guides the inquiry of *Poetics* 6–9 is correct, then Aristotle's remarks about history in *Poetics* 9 need to be understood as one of several comparisons he makes to elucidate the notion of plot unity.[15] The contrasts between practical unity and both biographical and chronological unity exhibit less a criticism or devaluation of biography and history and more a clarification of the proper principle for unifying dramatic plots. *Poetics* 8–9 elucidates the poet's ἔργον, that he is "more a maker of plots than of verses" (9.1451b27–28), by contrasting different principles for unifying plots. But that the poet is not an historian or a biographer is by no means a criticism of history or biography. Elsewhere, Aristotle points out that the poet is also not a natural scientist (even if a natural scientist like Empedocles can put his works into verse [1.1447b17–19]), but such an observation in no way disparages natural science. Focusing on how to read Aristotle's argument in *Poetics* 6–12 guards an interpretation from taking Aristotle's remarks about history out of its explanatory context (which his critics seem prone to do). Let me now turn to the arguments of *Poetics* 9 to support the claim that even though Aristotle states that poetry is a "more philosophical and better" thing than history, he does not therein mean to criticize history.

14 Would the converse hold, viz. that Aristotle would caution the historian to refrain from storytelling? Although Aristotle never explicitly quotes Thucydides (*Athenian Constitution* 33.2 appears to refer to *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* VIII 97.2), I suspect he would be sympathetic to the claim in Cornford 1907 that Thucydides's *History* retains a narrative arc like a tragedy. De Ste. Croix 1992, 51 argues that Thucydides has "lessons … that are implicit in the narrative and do not need to be spelt out in the *History* in general terms"; but as Heath 2009a, 70 note 43 notes, spelling out a point in terms of universality is precisely what is at issue.

15 Aristotle's contrast between different kinds of unity—"biographical" unity, "chronological" unity, "tragic" (or praxis-focused) unity—invites the question of whether Aristotle has in mind a "focal" sense of unity that either tragedy represents or that is an approximation of the unity of natural substances. Certainly Aristotle's discussion of the parts of tragedy makes one wonder whether he envisions the unity of tragedy as an organic whole that imitates the mereology of natural substances.

11 Chronological, Practical, and Episodic Unity in *Poetics* 9

Although the allegedly polemical contrast of history and poetry at first glance seems to be the subject matter of *Poetics* 9, in fact the chapter continues the inquiry begun in the two previous chapters concerning the claim that plots must be "in accord with what is likely or necessary". Aristotle contrasts history and poetry to elucidate his doctrine of "poetic realism", but it is misleading to read *Poetics* 9 as a critique of history rather than a comparison between poetry and history (a point also made in Carli 2010, 317–318). Rather, *Poetics* 9 as a whole contrasts three kinds of unity for the organizations of plots—that of chronological unity or temporal succession, practical unity (namely, one organized around a single πρᾶξις or action), and episodic unity—in order to determine which sort of plot is most in accord with what is "likely or necessary". The claim that poetry is "a more philosophical and better thing" (φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον [9.1451a6–7]) than history is minimally an evaluative claim about the architectonic status of literary genres, but it serves primarily as part of Aristotle's explanation of "poetic universals".

Poetics 9 begins by drawing an inference from the discussion of its preceding chapters, viz. that it is the function (ἔργον) of the poet to relate not what has happened but what may happen in accord with what is possible or necessary (9.1451a36–38). To amplify the point, Aristotle invokes a contrast: some think that the defining mark of the poet is that he or she puts his words into verse, whereas others use prose. But the work of Herodotus could be put into verse and he would still not be a poet, since his work articulates a chronological unity or succession of events (9.1451b2–4; cf. 2.1447b13–20).[16] Thus Aristotle's contrast: to elucidate poetic unity, he contrasts it with chronological unity. The difference between the poet, who aims at practical unity, and the historian, who aims at chronological unity, is that:

16 Such is the point of disagreement for more sympathetic readers of Herodotus. Sicking 1998, 153 quite plausibly points out that although parts of the *History* (e.g., book 2's record of customs in Egypt) seem to lack narrative force, *History* I and VII–IX present an extended narrative—beginning with Croesus, but continuing through the account of Xerxes, and cumulating in the early stages of Athenian expansionism (a problem that Aristotle himself seems to allude to in *Politics* V 4.1304a22)—about the dangers of accumulated wealth and power. Aristotle in general is not especially appreciative of Herodotus and at one point even calls him ὁ μυθολόγος (*GA* III 5.756b5, discussing Hdt. II 93). See also *GA* II 2.736a10 and *HA* III 22.523a15 with Hdt. III 101; *EE* VII 2.1236b9 with Hdt. II 68; *Rhet.* III 16.1417a7 with Hdt. II 30; and *HA* VI 31.579b2 with Hdt. III 108.

> One states what has happened (τὰ γενόμενα) whereas the other states the kinds of things that could happen (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο). On account of this (διό), poetry is a more philosophical and better thing than history, since poetry states more universal things whereas history states particular things. Universal means the kinds of things that it suits a certain kind of person to say or do in terms of what is likely or necessary: poetry aims for this, even though attaching names to the agents. A particular means what Alcibiades did or experienced.
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> 9.1451b4–11

To explicate Aristotle's contrast between chronological and practical unity, let me state first what he means by the so-called "poetic universal" he invokes in this passage and then explain his claim that poetry is "a more philosophical and better thing" than history.

Poetics 9 has generated significant discussion on the meaning of the "poetic universal".[17] On the one hand, there appears to be a consensus that when Aristotle says that "universal (καθόλου) means the kinds of things that it suits a certain kind of person to say or do in terms of what is likely or necessary" (9.1451b8–9), he is using the term "universal" in a sense different from the way that it is used elsewhere in his writings, viz. as an attribute that is predicated of numerous individuals.[18] Rather, a "poetic universal" specifies the necessary or likely causal connection between a type of person and what he or she might do or say, whereas an "historic particular" concerns the contingent connection between a specific person and what he or she in fact did.[19] Aristotle seems to have in mind a "particular" along the lines of "Alcibiades mutilated the Herms on the eve of the Sicilian invasion". By contrast, a "poetic universal" is something like "Powerful hubristic men often disregard religious sensibilities".[20] In both

17 See, for instance, Heath 1991, 389–402; Armstrong 1998, 451–452; Heath 2009a, 68–72; Carli 2010, 333–336.

18 For the notion of καθόλου as an attribute predicated of numerous individuals, see *Int.* 7.17a38–b1. Armstrong 1998, 450–451 criticizes the claim that the "poetic universal" is such a predicate.

19 For consensus on this claim, see Halliwell 1998, 106–107; Heath 1991, 389–390; Armstrong 1998, 454; and Carli 2010, 304–305. Both Armstrong and Carli stress the novelty of their positions against others, but in doing so I think they overstate the extent of disagreement between commentators on this point.

20 The clearest expression of this view is Armstrong 1998, 451–454, which claims that the poetic universal is an "event-token", viz. a general rather than specific articulation of the relationship between a character and the actions that he or she is likely to do. What

instances, an action—saying or doing something—is predicated of a subject; but in the case of the universal, that subject is a general type whereas in the case of the particular, that subject is an actual person or token. In both instances, there is a relationship between the subject and the predicate; but in the case of the universal, that relationship (if it is truly a well-crafted poetic universal) is likely or necessary whereas in the case of the particular, that relationship is a contingent matter of fact.

Yet disagreement emerges over the epistemic significance of the poet's use of "poetic universals". At one end of the spectrum, Carli has argued that the poet's use of universals establishes "a profound kinship with philosophy, because of the intrinsic connection between mimesis and form … Like the lover of wisdom, the maker of plots has the capacity to see the determinate formal structures that make our world and its transformations intelligible".[21] For Carli, although poetry remains epistemically distinct from and inferior to philosophy, nonetheless the poet is a seeker of truth in the world, one who makes the fundamental structure of human action accessible for cognition. At the other end of the spectrum, Heath claims that "when Aristotle says that poetry is more philosophical than history, there is no implication that poets are particularly philosophical … [Aristotle] takes a consistently permissive attitude toward irrationalities and impossibilities in poetry, provided that the poet can prevent them *seeming* irrational or impossible".[22] Aristotle incorporates into "poetic license"[23] a repertoire of illusory techniques that aim at the production of tragic pleasure in an audience, including the use of the paradoxical to astonish (9.1452a3–11), the representation of untruths such as lies about the gods (25.1460b35–1461a1), the use of fallacious reasoning to bring about a recognition (16.1455a12–16, 24.1460a18–26), and even the representation of the impossible, if in doing so it attains the aim (*telos*) of the poetic art itself (25.1460b23–26).[24] It seems hard to reconcile the illusions produced by the poetic art with the claim that it produces proto-philosophical universals that approximate reality.

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is obscured in Armstrong's analysis (or at least in his term "event") is the relationship between the nature of a kind of character and what he or she is likely to do (which is the main focus of Aristotle's poetic universal).

21 See Carli 2010, 333.

22 See Heath 2009a, 71.

23 As Heath 2009a correctly notes.

24 By "impossible", Aristotle means something like Achilles's pursuit of Hector in the *Iliad* (XXII 131 ff.), which seems to imply an entire army of Greeks standing still and not pursuing Hector while Achilles forbids them to do so (24.1460a14–18).

I submit that the source of the disagreement stems from an ambiguity in Aristotle's use of the term καθόλου in the *Poetics*. As noted above, in *Poetics* 9 Aristotle intends by universal the representation of the likely or necessary causal connections between a character type and that character's actions. But elsewhere in the *Poetics*, Aristotle appears to use the term καθόλου in its more literal sense, namely something said "with respect to the whole" where the "whole" is the overall structure of a drama.[25] Thus, Aristotle notes that the Athenian comedian Crates was the first to abandon iambics (i.e., particularized comedies that made light of specific individuals) and compose "generalized speeches, that is plots" (καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μύθους [5.1449b7–9]). By "plot", Aristotle means the structure of a drama that gives it a sense of a whole with a beginning, middle, and end. One might more literally translate "καθόλου λόγος" (in this context) as "an account of the whole of the play". Aristotle uses the term καθόλου in a similar sense when he advises a poet in composing plots "to set them out as universal, and only then introduce episodes"; as he further clarifies:

> I mean that he might investigate what is universal in them in the following way, e.g., that of Iphigeneia: a girl has been sacrificed and disappears in a way unclear to the people who sacrificed her. She is set down in another country, where there is a law that foreigners must be sacrificed to the goddess; this is the priesthood she is given. Some time later it turns out that the priestess's brother arrives … after he arrives, he is captured. When he is about to be sacrificed, he makes himself known to [his sister].[26]
>
> 17.1455a34–b9

The "universal of Iphigenia" lacks a specification of logical connectives between actions (a detail emphasized in *Poetics* 9)[27] but it provides the notion

25 Commentators are split on whether these are two different senses of the term καθόλου: Heath 1991, 390–391 claims they are distinct; Armstrong 1998, 453–454 argues that they are not. Carli 2010, 329 notes 125–126 leans toward Armstrong but notes differences between the use of the term in *Poetics* 9 and 17. The one other use of the term καθόλου in the *Poetics* does not resolve the issue: Aristotle notes in his discussion of the part of "thought" (διάνοια) in drama that a speech in a play may say something "universal", but καθόλου here means a "general truth" (6.1450b12).

26 Several lines later in the chapter, Aristotle offers a similar account of the *Odyssey* (17.1455b16–23), which is presumably another καθόλου (although Aristotle now calls it τῆς Ὀδυσσείας … ὁ λόγος [17.1455b16–17]).

27 The "poetic universal" in *Poetics* 17 also lacks names, episodes, and even crucial plot determinations: Aristotle is clear that such a universal is present in the different plays that Euripides and Polydius composed based on the same poetic universal (17.1455b9–10).

of an action unfolding sequentially as a plot, namely as a sense of a whole with a beginning, middle, and end (a detail lacking in the account of poetic universals in *Poetics* 9). But both of those aspects—likely or necessary causal connections and a sense of sequence within a narrative whole—distinguish the practical unity of a poet's plot from the chronological unity of an historian's account. Chronological unity, at least on Aristotle's account, can provide neither.

In what sense, then, is poetry "more philosophic" than history? The poet's use of universals that specify the likely or necessary causal structure of a play displays, without stating explicitly, the "why" (τὸ διότι) of an action; by contrast, the historian only shows a series of events, namely an account of the "that" (τὸ ὅτι) of a temporal sequence. Although displaying the "why" of an action is not the same thing as explaining that "why" (which is what philosophy itself does), the poet's role in providing such a display is the basis for Aristotle's use of the comparative form of "philosophical".[28] At the same time, saying that poetry deals with poetic universals that enact the "why" of an action does not by itself elevate poetry to the level of philosophy or even truth claims about the world.[29] The "why" that the poet discloses is true of the whole that a drama displays, but that drama may be entirely fictitious or even "untruthful" in the sense that it holds no corresponding relationship to the actual world. What I have entitled "poetic realism" throughout my paper concerns the plausibility that arises through the logical or causal connectives within a play—namely, that its events seem to unfold because of one another (9.1452a1–4, 10.1452a20–21). I see nothing in Aristotle's *Poetics* that commits him to the claim that what the poet discloses in a well-composed play is "true" in some sort of sense of corresponding to the "real world". Indeed, as Aristotle repeatedly reminds his reader, tragedy represents its characters as "better" than people are in real life

28 For Aristotle's juxtaposition of the "why" and the "that", see *Metaphysics* I 1.981a15–16, a24–31. See further Carli 2010, 309–312; cf. Heath 2009a, 60–61, 68–70. My explanation is consistent with Armstrong 1998, 448, which claims that poetry is more philosophic because "grasp of the universal enables the person with knowledge or skill to understand, with respect to her field, the reasons why things are the way they are or why tasks ought to be done in a certain way".

29 "Cognitivist" interpretations of catharsis—which identify the pleasure experienced in viewing tragedy solely with its cognitive understanding—sometimes seize upon the claim in *Poetics* 9 that tragedy is "more philosophical" in support of its position, but, as Lear 1992, 325 notes "if we look to what Aristotle means by 'universal' [in *Poetics* 9], it is clear that he does not mean 'universal which expresses the essence of the human condition', but something much less grandiose: that poetry should refrain from describing the particular events of particular people and instead portray the sorts of things a given type of person might say or do". Halliwell 1998, 110 concurs.

and comedy represents them as "worse".[30] For Aristotle, it is the essence of both comedy and tragedy to in some profound sense misrepresent reality rather than truthfully document it.

In what sense, then, is poetry "better" (σπουδαιότερον) than history? The root of Aristotle's comparative—σπουδαῖος—admits of several different meanings, none of which seems immediately relevant to the contrast between poetry and history. The term can mean "good" in an ethical sense, a sense that Aristotle uses when he claims that tragedy as a genre represents people who are good or better than they are in everyday life; by contrast, comedy represents people as bad (φαῦλος) or worse than they are in everyday life.[31] When Aristotle defines tragedy as the mimesis of an action that is σπουδαῖος, presumably he is again using the ethical sense of the term since tragedy represents the actions of good persons (6.1449b24). Since what is bad is in some sense laughable or unserious, Aristotle also sometimes uses the term σπουδαῖος in contrast as what is "serious" or "elevated"; thus,[32] he notes that comedy μὴ σπουδάζεσθαι or was not taken seriously (5.1449b1, cf. 19.1456b14–15). Some have thought to connect Aristotle's use of the comparative form of σπουδαῖος to his assertions about tragedy representing σπουδαῖος persons or actions, but such a claim fails because poetry in *Poetics* 9 explicitly includes comedy (e.g., 9.1451b11–15).[33] For the same reason, it is unclear why poetry—including comedy—is a more serious (as opposed to ridiculous) thing than history; surely comedy is far less serious (and represents people who are less good) than history, which presumably represents people such as they are (2.1448a4–5). Someone might argue that poetry is better insofar as grasping a universal is a higher cognitive achievement; but such a reading of σπουδαιότερον seems to make the term redundant after the claim that poetry is more philosophic.

Aristotle concludes his comparison of poetry and history by noting that "even should his poetry concern actual events (τὰ γενόμενα), he is no less a poet for that, as there is nothing to prevent some actual events being probable as well as possible, and it is through probability that the poet makes his material from them" (9.1451b29–32). Earlier in *Poetics* 9, τὰ γενόμενα or "the things that have happened" were identified as the domain of history (9.1451b4), but now

30 2.1448a16–18, 3.1448a27, 5.1449b10, 15.1454b9. Aristotle reports that Sophocles represents people as they ought (δεῖ) to be whereas Euripides represents them as they are (25.1460b32–34).

31 2.1448a1–5, 1448a16–18, 3.1448a27, 5.1449b9–10. In this sense of the term, Aristotle also refers to specific tragedies and actions as being either good or bad (5.1449b17, 25.1461a6).

32 Perhaps anticipating Rodney Dangerfield.

33 See Heath 2009a, 399 note 37.

Aristotle points out that they are also the domain of the poet. I submit that Aristotle claims that poetry is a "better" thing than history because although by contrast history and poetry simply have different jobs or tasks, there is a sense in which poetry can operate in the domain of history in a way that history is incapable of reciprocating.[34] That art that has a more inclusive domain than another art is a more comprehensive and thus a better (σπουδαιότερον) art (cf. *NE* I 2.1094b4–5). Although *Poetics* 9 remains primarily a contrast between poetry and history, to this extent the text minimally offers an evaluative claim about the architectonic status of different literary genres.

Although I have focused on the discussion of poetry and history (which takes up the majority of *Poetics* 9), the remainder of *Poetics* 9 contrasts the "likelihood or necessity" found in plots organized by practical unity with that found (or more accurately, not found) in what Aristotle characterizes as "episodic plots", namely a play that strings together a series of episodes and thus lacks overall unity, rather like a series of unrelated skits.[35] Such episodic plots are those "in which the episodes follow one another with neither probability nor necessity" (1452b35) and appear to lack either the biographical unity described in *Poetics* 8 or the chronological unity described in the first part of *Poetics* 9.

Aristotle's characterization of episodic plots as being "worst" (χείρισται 9.1451b34) seems to imply the completion of the comparisons in *Poetics* 8–9. Aristotle's best plot connects a universal character type to his or her actions according to the principle of practical unity. Biographical plots connect likely actions to a character (either a universal type or an historical person), but are constrained to include all the details of that character's actions unfolding in time. Historical "plots" possess a chronological unity, but such unity is particular or contingent. Episodic plays appear to be more like skits of artlessly com-

34 My argument is thus a variant of the claim found in Armstrong 1998, 448–449 that σπουδαιότερον should be rendered as something like "superior" or "better".

35 Aristotle suggests that poets construct episodic plots either due to incompetence or (in the case of good poets) because they wish to showcase the skills of a particular actor (9.1451b35–37). What Aristotle seems to have in mind is the development of what Hall 2002, 12–15 describes as "virtuoso *tragoidoi*", namely "superstar" thespians whose performances resembled more concerts or recitals than theatrical productions. The Aristotelian *Problemata* XIX 15 appears to document the emergence of such professionals and the effects of competitive performance upon musical practices; the *Rhetoric* disapprovingly notes that actors have become more important than poets (III 1.1403b31–35). Lockwood, forthcoming, addresses Aristotle's critical attitude toward the problem of competitive performances.

bined incidents that lack any sort of unity. Within the context of these comparisons, Aristotle contrasts poetry with history since historical plots (especially those found in epic) exhibit a notion of chronological unity, namely succession in time. But such a contrast does not imply that history is in some sense unphilosophical or that the discipline fails to possess knowledge and it is a misinterpretation to elevate that contrast to the level of a disciplinary criticism.[36] Such a misinterpretation both misconstrues Aristotle's text and obscures the way that history is a sort of handmaiden to poetry, a topic to which I turn in the third part of my paper.

III "Historical" Tragedy in The *Poetics* and Aeschylus's *Persians*

Although the poet is a maker of stories, Aristotle claims that "even should his poetry concern actual events (τὰ γενόμενα), he is no less a poet for that, as there is nothing to prevent some actual events being probable as well as possible, and it is through probability that the poet makes his material from them" (9.1451b29–33). As noted above in the second part of my paper, when Aristotle points out that historical events usually lack any likely or necessary causal connections or tend toward some end, his "sometimes" (ἐνίοτε) implies that sometimes they do exhibit such patterns (23.1459a28). Aristotle clearly endorses—at least in principle—the genre of "historical" tragedies and viewing *Poetics* 9 as a criticism of history impedes appreciation of the storehouse of examples that history presents to the poet.[37] Such a play would need to be organized in accord

36 Finley 1987, 11–12 writes that *Poetics* 9 "has been explained away by clever exegesis, as if Aristotle were one of the pre-Socratic philosophers of whom only a few cryptic sentences survive, which can be made to fit a thousand different theories; or it has been politely dismissed as not dealing with history at all. This last argument has a dangerous element of truth in it. It is not only chapter nine which does not deal with history; Aristotle never does". Presumably Finley would characterize my position as one of the "clever exegetes"; but even if the results of my article are largely negative, viz. that *Poetics* 9 should not be read as a criticism of history, Carli 2011 provides the "positive" response to Finley's argument.

37 Janko 1987, 93 claims that in his discussion of "historical" tragedy, Aristotle is thinking primarily of stories from the Trojan War. Even if Aristotle primarily has events from the heroic age in mind, his comments remain applicable to "actual" events, whether contemporary or historical. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish "historical" from "mythological" plots because it is unclear that Aristotle distinguishes myth from history (our word for "myth" of course is Aristotle's own term for plot, i.e., μῦθος). Nonetheless, he does distinguish between plays that use completely fictitious names (such as Agathon's

with practical rather than chronological unity and the composition of its poetic universal would incorporate the poetic license Aristotle affords to tragedy in general, which would delimit criticism of its historical facticity. But if a poet discerned the basis for such a poetic universal within the particulars of historical experience, then he or she has clear license on Aristotelian grounds for producing such a non-traditional plot.

Although Aristotle never discusses Aeschylus's *Persians*, which was produced in 472 BCE and is the retelling of the battle of Salamis (480 BCE) from the perspective of the Persian royal court, I submit that the play is a good example of what Aristotle would praise as an historical tragedy.[38] Although it goes beyond the purpose of my paper to consider whether Aristotle would have agreed with the Athenian judges who awarded *Persians* first prize in 472, the drama illustrates the mix of history and poetic license that I think is characteristic of Aristotle's brief description of "historical" tragedy.[39] By means of conclusion to my paper, I would like to speculate about how Aristotle would view such a play.

In choosing to write a tragedy based on an historical event, Aeschylus followed his predecessor Phrynichus, whose *Phoenician Women* (produced in 476) also dramatized the naval defeat at Salamis and that Aeschylus alludes to in the opening lines of the *Persians*.[40] More infamously, in approximately 492 Phrynichus produced the *Capture of Miletus*, which depicted the siege and destruction of the Ionian city of Miletus. According to Herodotus (VI 21), the play's production caused the audience to burst into tears; Athens fined Phrynichus 1,000 drachmas "for reminding them of their own evils" and ordered that the play never be performed again. Although "historical" tragedies are unusual in the surviving corpus of tragedy, it is wrong to treat them as quasi-historical documentaries rather than literary productions.[41]

Antheus [9.1451b21–22]) and those that use "well-known" (γνώριμα) names or incidents; see also his discussion of "inherited" or "traditional" plots (τοῖς παραδεδομένοις [14.1453b22–26]).

38 Unless otherwise noted, line references within the text are to the Greek line numbers of Hall 2007. I have generally followed the translations of Sommerstein 2008.

39 Pelling 1997, 16–18 and Munteanu 2012, 151–163 argue that *Persians* could have produced something like Aristotelian fear and pity in an Athenian audience; Harrison 2000, 51 argues the contrary.

40 The Hypothesis for *Persians* claims that "In his treatise on Aeschylus's plots Glaucus says that the *Persians* was modeled on the *Phoenician Women* of Phrynichus".

41 Podlecki 1966 and Lattimore 1943 argue that the historical nature of *Persians* required verisimilitude in a way totally absent in tragedies based on mythological stories. By

Although Aeschylus interjects moments of verisimilitude into the play, for instance in the messenger's account of the battle of Salamis (353ff.) or the three catalogs he provides of Persian combatants (21–55, 302–330, 958–1001),[42] neither his audience nor the City Dionysia judges (who awarded the play first place) apparently had any problem with the exercise of poetic license and the recasting of events to suit narrative purposes. For example, Aeschylus depicts Darius as the voice of Greek wisdom and uses his character as a foil to Xerxes.[43] Aeschylus has Darius criticize his son for bridging the continents of Asia and Europe and conducting military campaigns on the Greek mainland (745–751), but as an Athenian audience would know full well, Darius did the same during his own expedition into Scythia in 513 (which included the bridging of the Bosporus) and his invasion of Attica in 490 (Hdt. IV 89, VI 102–104). A second instance of poetic license is Aeschylus's depiction of the battle as including two equal parts, a naval component in the bay of Salamis and a land component on the island of Psyttaleia.[44] The parallels between land and sea components serve a number of dramatic purposes, such as the humiliation of Persian nobles and the praise of Athenian forces (441ff.); but Aeschylus's depiction of the land battle on Psyttaleia drastically exaggerates its importance and strays from Herodotus's treatment of it.[45] Finally, the messenger's depiction of an ill-fated retreat and destruction of the Persian remnant at the River Strymon allows Aeschylus to show the cosmic or divine reversal of Xerxes's bridging of the Hellespont (495ff.): whereas Xerxes's invasion began with the shackling and bridging of natural forces, it ends with natural forces destroying his retreating army. But the destruction of the Persian army at the River Strymon

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contrast, Pelling 1997, 2 argues that the literary motifs present in the play (for instance, its use of light and darkness or sea and land), "fit too well" to be historical.

42 Hall 2007, 108–109 notes that although the historicity of Aeschylus's lists of names from the Persian forces is uncertain, a possible source is Herodotus's predecessor, Hecataeus, whose *Periegesis* purportedly enumerates "all the tribes under Darius and showing how great the king's power was" (Hdt. V 36).

43 Kennedy 2013, 79–81 provides numerous instances within the play that illustrate Aeschylus's literary juxtaposition of Darius and Xerxes independent of historical fact.

44 The messenger's depiction of the battle to the Persian queen repeatedly emphasizes the two-part nature of the battle at 433–434, 568, 676, 720, and 728. Pelling 1997, 9 notes that the motif of "land and sea" predominates throughout the play and it is "evocative … to have the Persians so outclassed at their own game—but only at the end, and only because the sea battle has gone the way it has".

45 See Herodotus VIII 95 (which devotes only a paragraph to the incident). Strauss 2005, 193–195 presents a modern historian's perspective.

apparently was entirely Aeschylus's invention.[46] Aeschylus is no stranger to poetic license: we know from his *Agamemnon* that he could enthrall an audience by even altering the identity of the king's murderer.[47] Aeschylus exercises the same poetic license in his "historical" tragedy, and it is a misunderstanding of dramatic verisimilitude to claim that such poetic license is precluded on "historical" grounds.

Although the existence of *Persians* does not by itself prove the claim that Aristotle has a place for history in his *Poetics*, at the least it presents an actual example of a poet working from τὰ γενόμενα to construct a poetic universal, one which is oriented by the poet's rather than the historian's function. But even if *Persians* appears repeatedly to recast particular details of the naval battle at Salamis, plausibility has its limits (albeit flexible ones). In addition to the historical liberties I note above, one is reminded that the play brings the dead king Darius back to life—on stage—in what must have been one of the most visually thrilling moments in the play (680 ff.). However "historical", Aeschylus's *Persians* remains a poetic tragedy, which I think Aristotle would have applauded.

46 See Lincoln 2000.

47 *Agamemnon* (1370 ff.) casts Clytemnestra as the killer; Homer, by contrast, in the *Odyssey* (1 40 ff.), identifies Aegisthus as Agamemnon's killer. By contrast, Aristotle claims that some details from traditional plots cannot be "undone" (he gives the example of Orestes killing his mother [14.1453b22–26]).