

THE UNIVERSALITY OF POETRY IN ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*

In chapter 9 of the *Poetics* Aristotle states that poetry is concerned with the universal (τὸ καθόλου 1451b6–15). In this paper I shall consider three questions arising out of this statement. First, what does it mean? Secondly, what constraints does it impose on the construction of (in particular) tragic plots? I shall consider this question with special reference to the possible role of chance in tragedy. Thirdly, why is poetry concerned with the universal – that is, why is poetry such that these constraints are appropriate?

I. UNIVERSALITY

(a) Chapter 9

Having introduced the term ‘universal’ in *Poetics* 9 Aristotle at once explains it: by ‘universal’ he means its being in accordance with probability or necessity that a person of such a kind should say or do things of such a kind (1451b8–9 *ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἶκος ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον*).¹ This is ‘universal’ in the sense that what happens in accordance with necessity or probability (or in other words, always or for the most part) instantiates general principles.

Any attempt to apply this formula as it stands to the paradigms of Greek literature will run into difficulties. For example, it is neither necessary nor probable that such a person as Achilles should bring about the death of his dearest friend; that is, this is not the kind of thing which such a person as Achilles would always or usually do. On the contrary, he would do anything to avoid it. It is, however, plausible to say that the death of his dearest friend is a necessary or probable result of the kind of thing that such a person as Achilles would necessarily say or do in the given circumstances of the *Iliad*, and – more precisely – in the circumstances constituted by various other people (Agamemnon, Athene, Patroclus etc.) saying or doing the kinds of thing that such people would necessarily say or do in that same situation. In other words, Aristotle’s formula is not sufficient on its own to describe a plot; a plot arises when a plurality of agents, each saying and doing the kinds of things that such persons would necessarily or probably say or do, interact.

This is, however, consistent with Aristotle’s theory. He does not treat the ‘single action’ of tragedy or epic as some one thing that some one person does; he tends rather to speak of the action having ‘agents’ in the plural (*πράττοντες* 1449b37, 1450a6, b4); so for Aristotle, too, the action of tragedy or epic is an interaction. This in turn is reflected in the larger context in which universality is introduced in chapter 9, which refers to the product of the interaction as ‘happenings’: ‘such things as would happen...in accordance with necessity or probability’ (*οἷα ἂν γένοιτο κατὰ τὸ εἶκος ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον* 1451a36–b5; cf. b17–19, 30–1, 1452a4–10); and Aristotle’s frequent use of a term best translated ‘events’ (*πράγματα*) similarly reflects his understanding of the action of a play as a consequent series of events resulting from

¹ For the relation of this to 1449b8 see M. Heath, ‘Aristotelian Comedy’, *CQ* 39 (1989), 348–52.

the actions of a plurality of agents.² Universality, then, is realised proximately in the necessity or probability of each character's words and deeds, but ultimately in the necessity or probability of the product of their interaction, that is, in the necessary or probable consequence of the events which constitute the action as a whole.

This is not to say, as some have supposed, that tragedy imitates universals. The object of tragic imitation is an action, and actions (*πράξεις*) are particulars (*EN* 1110b6–7). The contrast between poetry and history in *Poetics* 9 cannot mean that poetry has a special kind of object (universal) distinct from that of historiography (particular), since Aristotle recognises that the object of history (*τὰ γενόμενα*) and the object of poetry (*οἷα ἂν εἰκὸς γενέσθαι*) sometimes coincide (1451b15–19, 29–31). The point is rather that the selection of particulars to be imitated in tragedy is subject to the constraint that they instantiate general principles; that is, they must constitute a structured series of events that unfolds in accordance with necessity or probability. The selection of particulars to be recorded in a history is not subject to this constraint (1451a38–b11, 1459a21–9), although some sets of particulars recorded in histories may in fact satisfy it.³

The difference between poetry and history, therefore, is not one of content, but of constraints on content. This poses an obvious question: why is poetry subject to these constraints? I shall take up this problem in section (III) below, but wish first to clarify some of its implications.

(b) Chapter 17

Before proceeding further, it may be worth taking a brief look at *Poetics* 17, where the term 'universal' reappears, but (I believe) in a different sense.

The context is the recommendation that in approaching a story one should set it out in universal terms (*ἐκτιθεσθαι καθόλου*) before 'episodising' (1455a34–b2). Aristotle takes as his example the story of *Iphigeneia in Tauris* (1455b2–15). It is important to realise that although he has Euripides' play in mind, he is not talking about the play as such, nor even about the plot of Euripides' play; rather, he offers a hypothetical preliminary outline that could in fact be developed in different ways – either as Euripides or as Polyidus did (1455b9–10).⁴ The fact that he is talking about a preliminary outline, not about a realised plot, is also clear from the summary he provides, which states a series of events without exhibiting them as necessarily or probably consequent; it is only when Aristotle sketches the way in which this outline has been 'episodised' in Euripides' play that causal connections are indicated (note the two occurrences of *διὰ* in 1455b14–15, comparing *δι' ἄλληλα* and *διὰ τὰδε* at 1452a4, 21).⁵

Since such connections are crucial to universality as defined in chapter 9, it follows that 'universal' is being used differently in chapter 17. The preliminary outline is universal in the sense that it abstracts from the identity of the individuals involved, but when the plot proper is constructed, the identity of those individuals becomes crucial; for the causal connections between the main stages of the action are determined by considering what such persons as those would necessarily or probably

² Cf. S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1986), pp. 140–1 (on *πράγματα* as 'events'), 144 (on the term's 'mediating function').

³ Halliwell (n. 2), p. 22, speaks aptly of mimesis 'embodying' universals; less precise is the formulation on p. 55, which speaks of a 'representation' of universals.

⁴ Halliwell's discussion (n. 2), pp. 231–2, is flawed in part by the assumption that Aristotle is summarising the plot of Euripides' play as such.

⁵ On the term 'episode' here, and its relation to the apparently different usage in the following discussion of epic, see M. Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 52–3.

do or say – for example, it is in accordance with necessity or probability that such a person as Orestes should be seized with a fit of madness (ἡ μανία δι' ἧς ἐλήφθη 1455b14). It may seem paradoxical to say that the universal of chapter 17 needs to be particularised in order to achieve the universality of chapter 9; but there is in fact no contradiction, for the analyses in these chapters are carried on at two different levels, and there is no reason to expect universals to function in the same way at both levels.⁶

II. CHANCE

(a) *Introduction*

If, as I have argued, universality in *Poetics* 9 implies that tragic action is the product of an interaction between a plurality of agents, then the outcome of tragic action will not be explicable solely in terms of the character of any single agent. In *EN* 5.8 Aristotle discusses a variety of actions in which the outcome does not simply express the character of the agent, of which mischance (ἀτύχημα) is one (1135b16–17). So one might ask whether mischance is admissible in tragic action.

On the face of it, the answer seems obvious. Chance is defined in *Physics* 2.5 by contrast with what happens always or for the most part, that is, by contrast with the necessary or probable (196b10–17; cf. *Rhet.* 1369a32–4, *Top.* 112b14–15); but these are the very things on which the universality of *Poetics* 9 is founded. So universality and chance should be mutually exclusive. Accordingly, *Poetics* 1452a3–6 places chance in opposition to the kind of causal connection required of a poetic action. This point is widely taken;⁷ but I think the situation is less straightforward than appears at first sight.

Stinton, in a fundamental paper on *hamartia*, showed that the term as used in *Poetics* 13 can include certain classes of morally culpable actions as well as errors of fact, but flatly rules out mischance.⁸ At one point he suggests that in 1453a9–10 Aristotle's use of the phrase δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά where he might have been content with the negative μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν was specifically designed to make this point: 'there is no tautology. Aristotle is emphasizing that the change from good fortune to bad must result from action, i.e. not be the result of a mischance, an ἀτύχημα' (225). In its context this is a puzzling claim, since Stinton has just shown that the phrase δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά is entirely unemphatic; and Sorabji has subsequently pointed out that in *EN* 5.8 the term ἁμάρτημα is used in a broad sense that includes ἀτύχημα as well as in a narrower, exclusive sense.⁹ There is therefore no reason to conclude from the phrasing of chapter 13 that δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά is meant to exclude mischance; on the contrary, Aristotle's argument would be lacunose if the phrase is

⁶ The text at 1455b7–8 is disputed. L. A. Mackay, *AJP* 75 (1954), 300, seeing that the plot is not in question here, proposed the deletion of ἔξω τοῦ μύθου, which together with a transposition, a supplement by Hermann and repunctuation gives: τὸ δὲ ὅτι ἀνείλεν ὁ θεὸς ἐλθεῖν ἐκεῖ <καὶ> διὰ τίνα αἰτίαν ἔξω τοῦ καθόλου· καὶ ἐφ' ὅτι δέ. But this leaves intact a feeble doublet; it might be better therefore to remove διὰ τίνα αἰτίαν also, in which case ἐλθεῖν ἐκεῖ must either be transposed with Mackay or deleted (Bekker) to give: τὸ δὲ ὅτι ἀνείλεν ὁ θεὸς ἔξω τοῦ καθόλου· καὶ ἐφ' ὅτι δέ. It is easy to see how this cryptic (but not thereby un-Aristotelian) text could have attracted explanatory interpolation. On the other hand, the much simpler solution adopted by Kassel might be accepted on the assumption that the phrase ἔξω τοῦ μύθου is used loosely; and that is not an extravagant assumption when dealing with Aristotle.

⁷ See e.g. Halliwell (n. 2), pp. 208–10, for a good statement of the case.

⁸ T. C. W. Stinton, 'Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy', *CQ* 25 (1975), 221–54 = *Collected Papers on Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 143–85.

⁹ R. Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame* (London, 1980), pp. 295–8 (see also pp. 279ff.); cf. D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle Poetics* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 301–2.

more exclusive than μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν, since that limited negation is all he has attempted to establish. Nevertheless, it is perfectly possible that mischance should be excluded on other grounds, and Stinton does put forward other arguments against mischance; his case has two main thrusts, which I consider separately.

(b) *Chance and universality*

One of Stinton's arguments depends on the requirement of necessary or probable consequence, for which he cites chapter 9, and especially 1452a1ff.¹⁰ This is the argument from universality which I have already mentioned, and its *prima facie* force can be appreciated if one considers how Sorabji concludes the analysis of *Oedipus Tyrannus* on which he bases his argument for the inclusion of mischance in *hamartia*.¹¹

If Oedipus' parricide is to be fitted into one of the categories of *NE* 5.8, it is ... an *atuchêma*. For it was contrary to reasonable expectation for Oedipus that he should be slaying his father. The cause of this lay not in his own negligence, but in the external fact that the passer-by happened to be his father.

Does not 'happened to be' draw attention precisely to the lack of necessary or probable connection at which Stinton balked?

To see why this 'happened to be' is in fact innocuous, we must consider further the discussion of chance in *Physics* 2. Aristotle defines chance (τύχη) as αἰτία κατὰ συμβεβηκός ἐν τοῖς κατὰ προαίρεσιν τῶν ἐνεκά του (197a5–6); rather than attempting a literal translation, I shall quote Ross's exegesis:¹²

Chance is ... a name for that type of sequence of events in which a purposive action, through the concomitance of some other action or event with the first action's proper result, leads to a further result which might have been, but was not in fact, an object of purposive action.

The crucial point here is the link between chance and purposive action (ἐν τοῖς κατὰ προαίρεσιν). One implication of this link is that the description under which the action is considered is crucial. For example, in Oedipus' case, killing an aggressive passer-by was a deliberate act, but killing his own father was not – that was involved accidentally (κατὰ συμβεβηκός). Killing one's father is not, generally speaking, a necessary or probable consequence of an encounter with an aggressive passer-by; but it does not follow that the death of Oedipus' father is not the necessary or probable consequence of its antecedent circumstances taken as a whole. In fact, it clearly is; the father's death is a necessary or probable consequence of the encounter with this aggressive passer-by, given that the passer-by is identical with the father. So an event may be chance under one description, but necessary or probable under some other description; and under that second description, it would be consistent with Aristotle's requirement of universality.

We may compare at this point the statement in *EN* 5.8 that mischance comes about 'contrary to expectation' (παράλογως 1135b16; cf. *Phys.* 197a18–21, *Rhet.* 1374b6–7). This presumably does not mean that the event is not predictable at all, no matter how complete an observer's knowledge of the antecedent circumstances may be; since the discussion is concerned with the agent's responsibility, the meaning is more probably that the outcome is not predictable given what is knowable to the

¹⁰ Stinton (n. 8), pp. 225–6 (with p. 225 n. 2).

¹¹ Sorabji (n. 9), p. 297. I should stress that my sole concern here is whether the events, thus interpreted, are consistent with Aristotle's theory; whether the events should be interpreted in this way (which I doubt: see section (IIc) below) is another issue.

¹² W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Physics* (Oxford, 1937), p. 519.

agent.¹³ Thus unpredictability (from some particular point of view) does not entail causal unintelligibility. This indeed is evident even from the *Poetics*; for Aristotle, a favoured pattern for tragic plots is occurrence *παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι' ἄλληλα* (1452a4) – contrary to expectation, and yet causally coherent.

It follows that chance as such is not inconsistent with universality, and that the principle of universality provides no grounds for excluding mischance from the scope of tragic *hamartia*. For an event may be necessary or probable given appropriate prior conditions (thus satisfying the principle of universality), but nevertheless unpredictable given what is knowable to the agent (and thus a mischance in the sense of *EN* 5.8). It is necessary or probable that such a person as Oedipus will kill an aggressive passer-by; and there is a necessary connection between this action and the killing of the father, given that the passer-by is in fact Oedipus' father – they are the same event. But the killing of the father is still a mischance in the sense of *EN* 5.8, if it is granted that the identity of the passer-by is not something that Oedipus could have known or inferred.

When Aristotle rejects chance in 1452a4–6 he has a different kind of situation in view. The example of a chance event which he gives there is one in which a statue of Mityls falls on and kills Mityls' murderer. In this case, the relation between the murder of Mityls and the death of Mityls' murderer is chance; for the murder of Mityls does not constitute part of any set of prior conditions from which the death of the murderer follows as a necessary or probable consequence; there is no causal connection between the two events. Like the ill-formed epics of *Poetics* 8, such a story juxtaposes unrelated events from a single life, and so violates the constraints on content implied by the principle of universality.¹⁴ So the death of Mityls' murderer is chance in the sense that it involves a purely fortuitous concatenation of causally unrelated events; mischance in that sense is indeed inconsistent with the requirement of necessity or probability, and therefore with universality.

It might, however, still be argued that the problem with which we started has not been addressed, since the appropriate prior conditions which make the father's death necessary or probable in Oedipus' case are themselves purely fortuitous: the passer-by *happened to be* his father; we have merely gone round in a circle. The problem here can be illustrated by a modification of the story of Mityls' murderer. If we introduce into this story an avenger (human or divine) who dislodges the statue at a crucial moment, connectedness is restored between the murder and the death of the murderer. The story modified in this way lacks the element of coincidence that we find in the story of Oedipus: the fatal falling of the statue is a necessary or probable consequence of the killing of Mityls *simpliciter*, but the killing of the father is only a necessary or probable consequence of the killing of the passer-by given a prior condition (the identity of the father and the passer-by) which is causally independent of the killing of the passer-by.¹⁵ The modified story of Mityls' murderer is causally

¹³ Knowable, not simply known; for if it were knowable but unknown the action would be an instance, at best, of *ἀμαρτήματα* in the narrower sense (*μὴ παραλόγως ἄνευ δὲ κακίας EN* 1135b17–18).

¹⁴ There is another incidental reason why this story cannot furnish a tragic plot: the falling of the statue is neither an action nor the result of an action (in the more precise terminology of *Physics* 2 it is *ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου* rather than *ἀπὸ τύχης*). But the absence of agent and action cannot be the feature with which Aristotle is primarily concerned here, for the murderer's death would no less objectionably fortuitous if we supposed the fall of the statue to be an act of random terrorism.

¹⁵ Strictly speaking, there is a prior condition on which the necessary or probable connection between the killing of Mityls and the fatal falling of the statue depends, but which is causally

coherent throughout; by contrast, Oedipus' story rests on an irreducible element of inexplicable chance.

It might help at this point if we substitute a purely hypothetical example. Let us suppose that Bill, an armed fugitive, has taken refuge in a remote farmhouse; he hears a nocturnal intruder and opens fire, killing the intruder. The intruder's death is a necessary or probable outcome, and is also deliberate. But what about the death of Ben, Bill's brother? That too is a necessary and probable outcome, given that Ben is the intruder; but since Bill was not in a position to know this, Ben's death is not deliberate but accidental and a mischance as defined in *EN* 5.8. Consider now two possible reasons for Ben's intrusion:

(a) Ben came on purpose to find and assist Bill. On this supposition, Ben's death is the necessary or probable consequence of his presence, and his presence is not coincidental – he is there because Bill is there. Even though Ben's death is a mischance there is nothing in this plot that is inconsistent with the criterion of universality, since the outcome is connected with the antecedent circumstances, and the antecedent circumstances themselves are not fortuitous (there is what Sorabji calls a 'connected explanation' of the cluster of events).¹⁶

(b) Ben entered the nearest building to take shelter from a storm, not knowing that Bill was there. In this case Ben's death is again a necessary or probable consequence of his presence, but his presence is not connected with Bill's presence; it is pure coincidence. Thus in this plot Ben's death follows by necessity or probability from antecedent circumstances that are purely fortuitous; and it is chance in this more radical sense (analogous to the passer-by 'happening to be' Oedipus' father) to which there seems to be an objection.

There are, however, two Aristotelian lines of defence for plots of this second type.¹⁷ First, Aristotle allows irrationalities 'outside the tragedy', that is, in those elements of the action which precede the play (1454b6–8, 1460a27–32); Ben's fortuitous arrival could be made to fall under this concession. Secondly, and more radically, the starting-point of the action is by definition not a necessary or probable consequence of some prior situation; a well-formed plot has a beginning, a middle and an end, and a beginning is defined as lacking necessary or probable antecedents (1450b27–8). The initial conditions of the action could be specified so as to include the fortuitous presence of Ben. That is to say, the possibility of a tragic mischance that does not have a connected explanation, but rests on fortuitous antecedent circumstances, is built into Aristotle's way of delimiting a complete action as such.¹⁸

independent of the killing of Mityls: namely, the existence of an agent such as would desire and be able to effect vengeance on Mityls' behalf should he be murdered. But this does not rob the argument of its force, since the existence of such a potential avenger could be regarded as intrinsically probable, while the fact that the passer-by 'happens to be' the father is intrinsically improbable.

¹⁶ Sorabji (n. 9), pp. 10–11.

¹⁷ This point is anticipated by Halliwell (n. 2), p. 208 n. 11, although I would distinguish (as he does not do here) 'outside the play' from 'outside the plot'. This distinction is entailed by 1454b6–8 and 1455b24–32 (the complication includes *τὰ ἔξωθεν* but starts *ἀπ' ἀρχῆς*: this is contradictory unless the beginning [sc. of the plot] may be outside [sc. of the play]; thus *τὰ προπεπραγμένα* at 1455b30 are, as one might expect, among the *πράγματα* of the plot); cf. also 1453b31–4, 1454b2–6. Seemingly anomalous is 1460a27–33, where *ἔξω τοῦ μυθεύματος* is equivalent to 'outside the play'. (Halliwell recognises the distinction at p. 211 n. 14, but fails to see that it is consistent with ch. 7, which is about the structure of a complete action, not about the structure of a play.)

¹⁸ Aristotle's principle of delimitation – the closure of the causal sequence – is admittedly problematic; see Heath (n. 5), pp. 41–2 (but p. 42 n. 7 is in error: see nn. 6 and 17 above). But this does not affect the present argument.

There are, therefore, two ways of reconciling plots with fortuitous prior conditions with Aristotle's criteria. This is not to say that plots which rest on such conditions are as good as plots which do not; I would say that they are clearly inferior, and that their inferiority is bound up with their looser causal structure (although a reasoned and Aristotelian statement of why this should make them inferior will depend on the rationale of the universality-requirement, a question to which I return in section (III)). But a plot may be inferior without being invalid; Aristotle regards simple plots as inferior to complex ones (1452b30–2); but simple plots as such are not ill-formed, in the way that episodic plots are (1451b33–5). In the same way, plots with coincidental prior conditions may be inferior to those without, but this does not mean that they are ill-formed.

I conclude, therefore, that a tragic plot may involve chance in either or both of two senses, without violating Aristotle's principle of universality.

First, there is the kind of mischance constituted by an outcome which is incidental to a deliberate action as such, but necessarily or probably dependent on it under some other description. This is acceptable as a tragic action, and indeed has positive tragic potential.¹⁹ An example would be the killing of the brother in unavoidable ignorance common to both of my Bill-and-Ben plots, and also (of course) Oedipus' killing his father.

Secondly, there are those outcomes which are chance in the sense that they follow (in accordance with necessity or probability) from an initial situation that is purely coincidental, such as that assumed in my second Bill-and-Ben plot or in the Oedipus story. Plots of this kind are acceptable if handled by way of prior conditions or elements of the action preceding the play; but this is not an ideal procedure.

However, chance in the sense of a concatenation of actions that have no necessary or probable dependence one on another is excluded by Aristotle's theory. Thus Bill's death when the derelict farmhouse eventually burns down will not satisfy Aristotle's criteria; for even if the precarious state of the building's electrical wiring has been established as an initial condition, there will be no connection between the shooting and the fatal fire. The objection would be the same as to the unmodified version of the death of Mity's murderer.²⁰

(c) *Chance and the gods*

The preceding discussion assumed that the identity of Oedipus' father with the aggressive passer-by was genuinely fortuitous. In a discussion of the kinds of chance events which might be consistent with Aristotle's requirement of universality this assumption was convenient for illustrative purposes, but it is not an assumption derived from Aristotle himself. Nor is it self-evidently correct. Within a traditional Greek religious outlook, a connected explanation of the sequence of events would be readily available; since the family is cursed, it cannot have been pure chance that Oedipus encountered his father in circumstances which would necessarily or probably lead to the father's death.²¹ The killing of the father would still be a mischance, but the whole complex of events would be closer to the story of Mity's murderer as hypothetically modified to include an avenger; it would be a plot of the type that does

¹⁹ Cf. the analysis in *Poetics* 14, where ignorance is crucial to the most favoured types of plot (there is nothing in context to suggest that this ignorance must be avoidable, so as to exclude mischance).

²⁰ Unless there were some third event (e.g. the suicide of their mother) consequent on the two deaths together (cf. 1459a27–9 *ἐξ ὧν ἐν οὐδὲν γίγνεται τέλος*).

²¹ Cf. H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley, 1971), pp. 103–28.

not require fortuitous prior conditions, and so artistically superior. Could Aristotle have accepted this view of the play? If it is the case that Aristotle systematically excludes divine agency, he could not. This position has recently been restated by Halliwell, but is in my view incorrect.

The first stage of Halliwell's argument is that 'a direct connection can be observed between the *Poetics*' insistence on human agency and the work's neglect of the religious element in Greek tragedy'.²² It is not clear what grounds there are for attributing to Aristotle an insistence on *human* agency, apart from the alleged systematic exclusion of divine agency that is in question; it is perhaps an inference from Aristotle's use of *πράττειν* and its cognates.²³ But there is no reason to restrict this group of words to human subjects, even in Aristotle's own theology,²⁴ and the denial that (for example) Dionysus is one of the *πράττοντες* in the *Bacchae* is an eccentricity we need not attribute to Aristotle.

Halliwell's other arguments are no more successful. It is not true that in 1454a37–b6 'Aristotle explicitly denounces the use of gods in the solution of dramatic action',²⁵ what he is concerned with there is divine (or indeed any) solutions which do not arise from the plot (1454a37–b1). Where the involvement of gods in the action is consistent with the requirement of necessity or probability, Aristotle could not (consistently with his own principles) object. Nor can it be argued that divine involvement must be inconsistent with necessity or probability for Aristotle, given his theological outlook. He makes it clear in 1460b9–11 that, as well as what is (or ought to be) true, what is said or thought to be true is an admissible object of imitation, and on this basis accepts popular theology as material for poetry (1460b35–61a1). Halliwell's contention that this acceptance of popular theology 'is advanced only as an instance of how poets can be defended against certain types of criticism, and not as a positive injunction' is surely beside the point; Aristotle clearly regards it as a successful defence, and to be successful it must be consistent with his general theory.²⁶

As confirmation of his thesis Halliwell refers to the treatment of the *Iphigeneia* in chapter 17. I have already argued (n. 4 above) that his discussion of this passage is misleading, since Aristotle is not talking about the plot of Euripides' play but about a preliminary outline. The dismissal of divine motivation at this level of analysis does not imply that it is unimportant in the plot (still less in the thematic structure of the play), any more than the failure to mention Orestes' madness or purification until the outline is 'episodised' implies that Aristotle thought that these too were unimportant elements of the plot (clearly he did not, since they supply crucial elements of causal connection). Halliwell claims that 'Aristotle is inconsistent enough to mention Poseidon's involvement in the *Odyssey*' immediately after (1455b18); I would take this instead as evidence that Aristotle had no intention of excluding the divine.

In rejecting the view that Aristotle had a systematic tendency to exclude divine agency from tragedy in principle, I am not of course denying that his understanding

²² Halliwell (n. 2), p. 148.

²³ This seems to be implied on, e.g., pp. 140, 143.

²⁴ God has an *οἰκεία πράξις*, and only *ἐξωτερικαὶ πράξεις* cannot be attributed to him: *Pol.* 1325b28–30; cf. *EN* 1154b24–8.

²⁵ This and the following arguments are from Halliwell (n. 2), pp. 231–3.

²⁶ It is possible to marginalise the theses of ch. 25 by dismissing it as an anomaly within Aristotle's theoretical system; but this seems to me a doctrinaire procedure. Is it not more reasonable to suppose that Aristotle's practical engagement with poetry provides valuable evidence of how he himself understood his principles? If so, then ch. 25 is in a sense a key chapter for the interpretation of the *Poetics*. (Halliwell also raises a question, p. 233, about the bearing of ch. 25 on the 'quasi-philosophical value' ascribed in ch. 9; I shall take up this point in section (III) below.)

of the role the gods play in tragedy may in practice have been seriously inadequate; I deny only that any such inadequacy is entailed by the theoretical position developed in the *Poetics*. The application of Aristotle's principles can in fact help us to a better understanding of the theological dimensions of tragic action; if a tragic action fails of necessary or probable connection without the assumption of divine agency, then – precisely on Aristotelian principles – we should consider the possibility that the connection is supplied by implicit divine agency.²⁷ For example, the downfall of Polymestor in Euripides' *Hecuba* is the result of some grossly implausible coincidences, unless we infer that the gods are at work.²⁸ I am not at all confident that Aristotle himself would have made this inference when reading the play; but it would not have been his theory of tragedy that prevented him from doing so.

(d) *Chance and action*

I turn now to the other side of Stinton's argument against mischance (see section (IIa) above). This is that in cases of mischance 'the agent is not responsible – the ἀρχὴ τῆς αἰτίας does not lie with him'; the same point is held to exclude 'wholly compulsory' actions.²⁹ It is, however, unclear from where we are to derive the premise that tragic action entails responsibility (in the sense that it is absent in these cases). It cannot be derived from the concept of *hamartia*, because that is what Stinton is trying to illuminate; it seems rather to be from the very notion of action.³⁰ But that is not cogent. 'Action' renders *πράξις*, and mischance and compulsion are both treated by Aristotle as species of *πράξις*; they are *ἀκούσια*, but the phrase *ἄκων πράττει* is not in any way paradoxical (e.g. 1135a16–18 *ἀδικεῖ μὲν καὶ δικαιοπραγεῖ ὅταν ἐκὼν τις αὐτὰ πράττη· ὅταν δ' ἄκων, οὐτ' ἀδικεῖ οὐτε δικαιοπραγεῖ*). Furthermore, *ἀκούσια* are subject to pardon (*συγγνώμη* 1109b32, 1136a5), which means that they are, in a sense, responsible; that is, they are subject to moral evaluation – as growing old, which is neither *ἐκούσιον* nor *ἀκούσιον* (1135a33–b2), is not.³¹ Indeed, *ἀκούσια* are

²⁷ The concept of an agent with an implied role in the *πράξις* should not be thought difficult. The conspicuous place which Dionysus has in Euripides' play makes him a usefully clear illustration of divine agency; but it must be remembered that Aristotle's analysis is directed primarily towards plots, rather than plays (see n. 17 above). Consider, e.g., *Hippolytus*; Aphrodite's agency is crucial to the plot (cf. M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London, 1987), p. 53), but it would be no less crucial even if it were conveyed obliquely or implicitly and she did not appear on stage.

²⁸ Cf. M. Heath, *BICS* 34 (1987), 66–8. As an example of how Aristotle's own practice might be corrected in this way from his principles, one may consider his objection to Aegaeus' appearance in *Medea* (1461b20–1); is it in fact irrational? Given the evidence of divine agency in this play (cf. Heath (n. 27), p. 57), one might entertain the possibility that it is in accordance with necessity or probability.

²⁹ Stinton (n. 8), p. 232, cf. p. 226. The association of chance and compulsion is of course justified; cf. *Rhet.* 1369b5 *βία δέ, ὅσα παρ' ἐπιθυμίαν ἢ τοὺς λογισμοὺς γίγνεται δι' αὐτῶν πραττόντων*. 'Wholly compulsory' allows for those acts which, though compelled, are not *ἀκούσια* without qualification, according to *EN* 3.1; cf. Stinton, pp. 228–9.

³⁰ Cf. Stinton (n. 8), p. 225: 'the change from good fortune to bad must result from some action, i.e. not be the result of a mischance'.

³¹ E. Belfiore, 'Aristotle's Concept of *praxis* in the *Poetics*', *CJ* 79 (1983/4), 110–24, argues that in the *Poetics* *πράξις* 'never means "a morally (or ethically) qualified action"', that is, an action for which one may appropriately be praised or blamed' (p. 110). This is partly, of course, because the primary use of *πράξις* in the *Poetics* is to refer to the 'single action', which (as we have seen) is not something which some one person does, but a product of interaction. Nevertheless, this interaction is constituted by the actions of many agents, and these actions are as such appropriate candidates for moral evaluation; so Belfiore's argument (with which I am broadly sympathetic) needs qualification. A *πράξις* is evaluated on the basis of *προαίρεσις*; if the *προαίρεσις* cannot be determined, then evaluation is not possible in practice. But Aristotle indicates that in drama *προαίρεσις* may not be made clear (1454a16–18; in this case, the tragedy

sometimes pitiable (1109b32), which would seem to make them suitable for tragedy. Plato supports this conclusion (*Rep.* 603c): *πράττοντας, φαμέν, ἀνθρώπους μιμεῖται ἢ μιμητικὴ βιαίους ἢ ἐκουσίας πράξεις, καὶ ἐκ τοῦ πράττειν ἢ εὖ οἰομένους ἢ κακῶς πεπραγέναι, καὶ ἐν τούτοις δὴ πᾶσιν ἢ λυπουμένους ἢ χαίροντας.*

The translation 'action' is itself in a sense misleading, since *πράξις* in Greek has a wider range of uses; *εὖ πράττειν* is not 'act well' but 'prosper', a usage accepted by Aristotle.³² Furthermore, Aristotle is willing to use *πράττειν* and *πάσχειν* indifferently of compulsory acts (*EN* 1110a1–3, b2). This should come as no surprise, since it is evident in the *Poetics* itself that *πάσχειν* can be regarded as a species of *πράττειν*; at 1452b11–12 *πάθος* is defined as *πῶξις φθαρτικὴ ἢ ὀδυνηρά*.³³ Thus the premise that tragedy imitates agents in action gives no ground for inferring that mischance, compulsion or passive experience lie outside the proper range of tragic material. When one turns to the single action which is constituted by the agents' actions, it is even clearer that the passive as well as the 'active' species of *πράξις* must be embraced by tragedy, for interaction implies acting on and being acted on; this correlation of active and passive experience is readily accommodated within Aristotle's account of tragedy (cf. 1453a21–22, 1453b17–22, 1454a12–13).³⁴

III. UNIVERSALITY, COGNITION AND EMOTION

I return now to the question raised at the end of section (Ia): why is universality required of poetry?

An easy answer would be that poetry is by definition concerned with the universal. But this is in fact not true, as *Poetics* 9 itself shows. Iambic poetry is concerned with the particular (1451b14–15);³⁵ so, presumably, is the corresponding elementary form of serious poetry (cf. 1448b25–7). It is true that Aristotle regards these genres as inferior. But the inferiority of particularising forms of poetry does not explain poetry's aspiration to universality; for history shares this inferiority without (in Aristotle's view) having any aspiration to universality – chronicling the events of a single period is simply appropriate to the function of a historian.³⁶ We are therefore brought back to our question: what is it about the function of poetry that makes universalised structures appropriate to it?

Chapter 9 might be thought to provide a clue when it states a preference for poetry over historiography precisely on the basis of its universality; poetry is 'more philosophical and more serious' than history (1451b5–6). But we must be careful here. Aristotle states that poetry is more philosophical and more serious because it is universal; it does not follow that poetry is universal in order to be more philosophical and more serious. To warrant that conclusion we would have to invoke independent evidence that being philosophical and (in this sense) serious is something that poetry as such aims at – that this is the (or an) end of poetry. If it is not, then the fact that

will lack *ἥθος*, which Aristotle regards as possible, though not desirable: 1450a24–9, cf. 1460a11). So the actions of dramatic agents are the kind of thing that is in principle subject to moral evaluation, but may not actually be so in practice.

³² *EN* 1100a21; *EE* 1233b22–5; *Rhet.* 1386b10–12, 25, 27–8, 87a9, b23; *Top.* 109b37, 110a2.

³³ Cf. Belfiore (n. 31), 121, aptly citing D. S. Margoliouth, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London, 1911), pp. 37–41.

³⁴ Contrast Halliwell (n. 2), pp. 144–8; the tendency to think in terms of one central agent (pp. 147–8, 217, 223–4) seems to me particularly misleading here.

³⁵ Iambic is poetry (1448b33–4) and is mimetic (1448b25–7 shows that it imitates actions); Halliwell (n. 2), p. 55 n. 15, is right here against R. Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy* (London, 1984), p. 61. In 1451b14 I believe one should read *περί τὸ καθ' ἑκάστον*; cf. Heath (n. 1), p. 351 n. 28.

³⁶ Cf. Heath (n. 5), pp. 48–9, 80–1.

poetry is more philosophical and more serious by virtue of its universality does not explain that universality, even though it gives philosophers (who have of course their own ends) a reason for taking it seriously.³⁷

Being philosophical and serious would most plausibly be seen as part of the end of poetry if the (or a) function of poetry was to enable us to learn about the world. But Aristotle shows no sign of believing this. The account in *Poetics* 4 of the anthropological basis of imitation does, it is true, indicate that learning is involved in our response to imitations, and indeed that it is the source of the pleasure which we take in imitations as such (1448b12–17). But the learning in question seems to be the recognition that 'this is so-and-so' (οὗτος ἐκεῖνος 1448b17), e.g. 'this is Alcibiades'; in other words, we learn who or what the imitation is an imitation of.³⁸ There is nothing in Aristotle's text to suggest that we learn from the imitation about the object imitated; on the contrary, Aristotle indicates that in order to grasp an imitation as such we must have some prior knowledge of the object imitated and, in the absence of that prior knowledge, the imitation cannot give pleasure *qua* imitation (1448b17–19). To recognise a portrait as a portrait of Alcibiades, we must already know what Alcibiades looks like. In the case of universalising genres of poetry, the prior knowledge required is presumably of the universals embodied in the action;³⁹ to recognise a tragic plot as an imitation of what would happen in accordance with necessity or probability, we must know what would happen necessarily or probably.⁴⁰ It seems, therefore, that the cognitive processes involved in the grasp of poetic action presuppose an understanding of the world, rather than producing it.

³⁷ Belfiore (n. 31), 119, argues that 'serious' in ch. 9 can be linked to the 'seriousness' of tragic action as defined in ch. 6 (1449b24); but this must be wrong. It is a *tragic* action that is by definition serious, but *poetry* that is more philosophical and more serious; the latter includes comedy (1449b7–9, 1451b11–15; cf. n. 1 above), and it is hard to believe that the σπουδαία πράξις of tragedy is to be divorced from the distinction between tragedy and comedy as imitating respectively σπουδαῖοι and φαῦλοι set out in ch. 2 (cf. 1448a25–9, 1448b25–6). Her argument is that 'serious and complete' in 1449b24 becomes 'complete and whole' in 1450b24, which is explained in terms of necessity and probability, which is the basis of universality in ch. 9. But this is a mistake: 'whole' in 1450b24 is not a substitute for 'serious', but a gloss on 'complete' (cf. *Phys.* 207a13, 228b14, *Met.* 1016b17).

³⁸ G. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 133, argues that learning and knowledge for Aristotle are of universals; hence 'if you have merely recognized the resemblance of one individual ... to another individual ... you have not learned anything.' He is followed by G. M. Sifakis, 'Learning from Art and Pleasure in Learning', *Studies in Honour of T. B. L. Webster* (Bristol, 1986), i.211–22. But (i) this oversimplifies Aristotle's account of knowledge (see *Met.* 1087a10–25, with the commentaries of Ross and Annas *ad loc.*); and (ii) what is involved is not simply the recognition of resemblances, but an inference of identity from resemblances or other signs (cf. Sifakis, p. 219: 'we recognize that a man with a lion-skin and club in a picture ... is Herakles, because we know that Herakles is always represented with these attributes'); hence the cause is known, and the inference is not wholly individual. Sifakis' interpretation of οὗτος ἐκεῖνος makes it the conclusion of a syllogism of which the first premise is not to be found in Aristotle (every well-imitated image is a representation of universals: but ch. 9 is concerned only with some kinds of poetry) and the second (e.g. the Athena Promachos by Pheidias is a well-imitated image of Athena as Promachos) cannot be affirmed unless the conclusion (the Athena Promachos by Pheidias is a representation of what Athena as Promachos must, necessarily or probably, be like) is already known (cf. εἰν μὴ τύχη προεωρακώς).

³⁹ Halliwell (n. 2), p. 77 n. 42, considers some other possibilities.

⁴⁰ The cognitive process described in 1448b15–17 is of a very rudimentary kind, and Aristotle emphasises that the pleasure it affords is available even to the least philosophical: 1448b13–15. The appreciation of a tragic plot is more sophisticated, since it involves grasping the plot as instantiating universals, and the cognitive pleasure is presumably therefore greater. However, this does not necessarily imply that grasping a tragic plot is positively difficult; according to *Rhet.* 1410b10–11, 'learning easily is naturally pleasant to all'.

It might be objected that this is too sharp an opposition. It may be that, through reflection on an imitation, we discern previously unrecognised implications of our existing grasp of universals when we discover that this pattern of action is consistent with them; in this sense, we could be said to be learning about the world's possibilities. I have no quarrel with this view, but can see no evidence in the *Poetics* for attributing it to Aristotle. And there is a further point to consider. The universals which are embodied in poetry need not tell us the truth about the world; as we have already seen in section (IIc), what is said or believed to be true is an admissible object of imitation as well as what is in fact true (1460b8–11).⁴¹ In other words, it is consistent with the nature of poetry that the possibilities which it discloses to us are those not of the real world but of commonly believed falsehood, for example about the gods (1460b35–61a1). Indeed, universality itself can be compromised; irrationalities are to be avoided by preference, but can be admitted 'outside the play' (1454b6–8, 1460a27–33; cf. n. 15 above). The justification for such departures from the norm would presumably be that offered in 1460b23–6 for impossibilities: they are technically correct if they help to achieve the end of poetry. But it is hard to see how impossibilities, irrationalities and popular falsehoods could help to achieve philosophical seriousness. It follows that philosophical seriousness is not the end of poetry; it is a valuable but incidental consequence of the universality to which poetry aspires in the pursuit of, and only to the extent that it serves, some other end.

The end of poetry envisaged in 1460b23–6 is emotional effect (*εἰ οὕτως ἐκπληκτικώτερον ἢ αὐτὸ ἢ ἄλλο ποιεῖ μέρος*); likewise, the task of the tragic poet is to afford tragedy's characteristic pleasure, which is the pleasure from pity and fear (1453b10–13).⁴² The centrality of emotional effect in tragedy is reflected in the range of contexts in which it is invoked: in arguing for the primacy of plot among the qualitative parts (1450a30–5); in arguing for the superiority of complex over simple plots;⁴³ and in the more elaborate analyses of what constitutes a good tragic plot in chapters 13 and 14. Even the magnitude of the tragic plot is determined with indirect reference to fear and pity in 1451a11–15, since it is clear that the change of fortune which provides the criterion of magnitude is itself required as the basis of the emotional response.⁴⁴ What bearing might tragic emotion have on the question of universality?

The characteristic emotions of tragedy are fear and pity. According to the *Rhetoric*, these two emotions have the same object, destructive or painful harms (*Rhet.* 1382a21–2, 1385b13–14, 1386a4–17); the qualification 'destructive or painful' is designed to exclude certain classes of harm – for example, moral states such as being unjust are specifically excluded (1382a23). The same qualification is applied to the material of tragedy (*Poet.* 1452b11–12; cf. 1449a35). The *Rhetoric* differentiates these

⁴¹ Cf. Halliwell (n. 2), p. 132; but this seems to undermine his stress (pp. 101–6) on the distinction between objective and subjective probability. I note in passing that the cognitive process involved in grasping a plot as instantiating universals is the same whether or not those universals are held true of the real world; the cognitive pleasure would therefore be the same.

⁴² I discuss the nature of this pleasure in 'Aristotle and the Pleasures of Tragedy' (forthcoming), and attempt to show why Aristotle might have regarded this as a morally serious end.

⁴³ 1452b31–2 takes the superiority of the complex plot as established; this is intelligible if the reference to a previous discussion of *περιπέτεια* in 1452a23 (*καθάπερ εἰρηται*) is to 1452a3–4, since that is an argument that events *παρὰ τὴν δόξαν δι' ἄλληλα* have greater emotional effect. (1452a23 cannot refer to 1451a12–14, which is only concerned with the change of fortune, a feature of simple plots as well as complex ones, whereas *περιπέτεια* is one of the defining features of complex plots; cf. I. M. Glanville, *CQ* 41 (1947), 73.)

⁴⁴ Cf. Heath (n. 5), pp. 43–4.

two emotions according to their focus, fear being felt for oneself or those very close, pity for others (1382b25–6, 1386a18–25); but *Poet.* 1453a5–6 shows that this difference cannot be sustained in connection with tragedy.⁴⁵ More relevant is the fact that they have a different, though overlapping, reference in time. Fear anticipates a future harm, though one that closely impends (*σύνεγγυς* ... *ὥστε μέλλειν* 1382a25); pity relates to 'apparent' harm, which may be immediately imminent or may already have occurred (1386a35). Hence the pairing of fear and pity implies a progression from harm anticipated to harm realised, which is a change of fortune from good to bad.⁴⁶ From this follows the central place which the change of fortune has in Aristotle's theory of tragic plots (1451a12–15, 1452a14–18, 1455b26–9; cf. 1452b34–5, 1453a2, 9, 13–15).⁴⁷ A change of fortune is an action in the technical sense of the *Poetics*, that is, a series of events resulting from the actions of a plurality of agents – it is legitimate to specify 'the actions of ... agents', because good and bad fortune presuppose agency, as Aristotle argues in *Physics* 2.6 (197b1–13); he points out there that the common belief that good fortune (*εὐτυχία*) and well-being (*εὐδαιμονία*) are identical supports this conclusion, since well-being is a *πράξις* (197b3–15).⁴⁸

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of fearful and pitiable events, and is therefore concerned with good and bad fortune and the transition between them. Since good and bad fortune imply agency, it follows that tragedy is concerned with those sequences of events which are constituted by the interaction of agents; which is to say, tragedy is an imitation of an action (in the technical sense). But a unified imitation is an imitation of a unified object, and a unified action is one that is complete and whole (1451a30–2). A complete and whole action has been defined in terms of necessary or probable consequence (1450b26–30).⁴⁹ Therefore tragedy should be concerned with those sequences of events constituted by the interaction of agents which are in accordance with necessity and probability; in which case, tragedy should be universalised.

The last stages of this argument may seem too abstract. Granted that tragedy is an imitation of an action, what reason is there to define an action in such a way that a unified action is one which satisfies the condition of necessary or probable sequence? Aristotle can defend his position with a more concrete argument, and one that confirms the connection I have been trying to establish between the aspiration to universality and tragedy's emotional effect. In 1452a1–4 he states that the fearful and pitiable events of which tragedy is an imitation come about above all when things occur 'contrary to expectation because of one another'. The subsequent argument in

⁴⁵ Cf. Heath (n. 27), p. 12.

⁴⁶ Alternatively, there may be a progression from harm anticipated to harm on the verge of being realised; this is consistent with the cases of averted action discussed in ch. 14. For the emotional force of a merely imminent disaster see Stinton (n. 8), 253.

⁴⁷ That Aristotle envisages changes of fortune from bad to good, as well as from good to bad, as suitable tragic plots (1451a12–15, 1455b27) may seem surprising; but consider e.g. Euripides' *Ion*. Initially both Ion (deprived, though he does not know it, of his proper status) and Creusa are unfortunate, and both end in good fortune; what makes the play tragic is the imminence of worse disaster that besets the progress from bad to good fortune (see previous note).

⁴⁸ Thus *pace* Halliwell (n. 2), p. 203 n. 2, it is correct to say 'that *eutuchia* is dependent on action', and Belfiore's suggestion (n. 31), 115, that in 1450a17–20 *εὐδαιμονία* is used in a non-technical sense for *εὐτυχία* may be right (*εὐδαιμονία* at any rate includes *εὐτυχία*, given Aristotle's acceptance that 'external goods' are necessary). Kassell's athetesis is certainly incorrect: H.-J. Horn, *Hermes* 103 (1975), 292–9, has shown that it leaves Aristotle's argument incomplete; the objection to *κακοδαιμονία* in a17 (for which Halliwell *ibid.* cites a parallel from *Protr.* B46 Düring) casts no doubt on *καὶ τὸ τέλος* ... *κτλ.*

⁴⁹ Cf. Heath (n. 5), p. 41 with n. 6.

support of this claim (1452a4–11) shows that two thoughts are interwoven in it. First, ‘contrary to expectation’ is taken up in the reference to amazement; amazement, in Aristotle’s view, reinforces emotional response. But amazement is in turn said to be strengthened by the connectedness entailed in ‘because of one another’, and the rejection of chance reflects this. Aristotle is claiming, therefore, that connection in accordance with necessity and probability enhances the emotional effect which is the end of tragedy (cf. 1455a16–17). If this is true, then clearly it is reasonable to define the ‘action’ of which tragedy is an imitation in such a way that necessary or probable sequence is a condition of its completeness (that is, perfection).

Thus tragedy’s aspiration to universality is a consequence of the emotional effect that is (or is essential to) its end; tragedy aspires to universality because that is in practice the best way to achieve its emotive end. It is therefore easy to see why universality may be compromised if on a given occasion that will enhance the emotional effect. The practising poet must weigh the enhancement of emotivity that may be achieved by breaching universality on a particular occasion against the enhancement of emotivity that is achieved by maintaining it in general. It should be noted that the compromise is allowed in those contexts where it will have least salience, and therefore runs least risk of damaging the emotional effect of the action: outside the play (1454b6–8, 1460a28–31), or in epic, where irrationalities are not made visible to the audience and are therefore more likely to escape notice (1460a12–17; cf. 1455a22–9).

Since the universality of tragedy has been deduced from the end of tragedy itself, not from a general proposition about poetry, we can also see why some poetic genres, such as iambic, are not and do not aspire to be universalised; it will be because their ends are not such as to entail it (just as the end of historiography does not entail it). Hence they will appropriately be judged intrinsically inferior to universalising genres for the reason given in *Poetics* 9 – they are less philosophical and less serious.

If this argument is to be sustained, it must be possible to perform a similar deduction for the other poetic genres known to be universalised; but we are hampered here by the lack of equally developed accounts of these genres in the *Poetics*. Aristotle implies in 1462b12–14 that the *ἔργον* of epic is effectively the same as that of tragedy; if so, then the same argument applies. What of comedy? The argument seems no less plausible in principle. Connectedness is conducive to laughter as well as to fear and pity; for though it may be funny when someone slips on a random banana skin,⁵⁰ it is even funnier when the banana skin has been placed as a deliberate practical joke (and funniest of all, perhaps, when it was placed there by the victim).⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Provided, of course, that they are not hurt: τὸ γὰρ γελοῖόν ἐστιν ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ αἰσχρὸς ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν (1449a34–5).

⁵¹ A shortened version of this paper was read at a meeting of the Northern Association for Ancient Philosophy on 3 April 1991. I am indebted to the participants, and especially to Hans Gottschalk for his subsequent observations on the full text. The comments of *CQ*’s anonymous referee helped clarify the presentation of the argument at a number of points.