

**The Rigorism of Aristotle in his Poetics**  
**Fact or Fiction? A reply**  
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**The Rigorism of Aristotle in his Poetics :**  
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Pauw, in defense of Aristotle, lays out, in his article the rigorism of Aristotle in his poetics: fact or fiction?<sup>(1)</sup>, an interpretation that calls for a reconsideration. Pauw suggests that when Aristotle lays down rigorous rules, these naturally pertain to the topmost layer of tragedies only, and are not for one moment meant to be the master plan according to which all tragedies must be constructed<sup>(2)</sup>. Upon a closer analysis of Aristotle choice of words, Pauw resumes, it is possible to distinguish the ideal tragedy. Aristotle, deliberately, uses obligatory terms such as "must", "should", "ought" and "necessary" to refer to ideal tragedy<sup>(3)</sup>. So far so good, but it deserves attention, here, that while Pauw refutes that rigidity covers all the Poetics, he maintains that it exists where ideal tragedy is meant. Nevertheless, Pauw does neither argue the justification of some of these rules, nor does he take into consideration the playwright's freedom of innovation. Let us examine, as an example, one of these rigid rules.

One of the four Aristotelean demands that a dramatist should not ignore in depicting a tragic character is consistency. Aristotle lays the principle as thus: "And fourth is consistency; for even if the person being imitated is an inconsistent sort, and that kind of character has been posited, still he should be consistently inconsistent"<sup>(4)</sup>.

Aristotle, here, as elsewhere, is succinct in defining his rule. He does not speak about it straight forwardly, but formulates this demand by indicating a special case of imitation; an inconsistent character. If that character is premised as inconsistent one, the play-wright has to keep this inconsistency throughout the course of action that character takes. In representing such a character, consistently inconsistent, this accomplishes the consistency demand. Consistent inconsistency is, as Else explains, a "Melancholy" state. So the character portrayed as "consistently inconsistent" will mean that the individual's traits or actions assigned to it should all spring from the common concept of "Melancholy" and thus be accounted for by varying amounts, states, and conditions of the same physiological principle<sup>(5)</sup>.

Now, if an inconsistent character can be consistent when its inconsistency occurs consistently; on the contrary, an inconsistent character is that which does not on all occasions react according to its original behaviour, but abruptly surprises the audience with an unexpected change in the course of the action. So, the character, to be consistent, should always remain the same without change or modification in the course of the play.

It may be obvious that Aristotle demands consistency in both character and actions. So does Horace<sup>(6)</sup>, but it marks a difference between the two positions that Horace formulates this demand from the view-point of character, Aristotle from the view-point of plot construction<sup>(7)</sup>.

Aristotle's emphasis on plot lies, I assume, behind his giving Iphigeneia, in Iphigeneia in Aulis, as an example of inconsistent character; for Iphigeneia as a suppliant is—in Aristotle opinion—unlike her later self<sup>(8)</sup>. The offence against the law of tragic characterization is not required by the plot and does not contribute to it. Here, Iphigeneia, in Aristotle's eyes, has two different characters speaking in two different situations. In Aristotle, such characterization is not necessary<sup>(9)</sup>. For Aristotle, consistency demand is governed by probability and necessity rule<sup>(10)</sup>. The fault criticized by Aristotle is that Iphigeneia's inconsistent behavior stands in no organic relation to the plot and its outcome. It should follow of necessity or probability that a tragic character, being a given kind of person, will say or do given kinds of things<sup>(11)</sup>.

Iphigeneia's heroism is inconsistent, to be sure, but is it meaningless, or, in other words, is Aristotle completely right in taking it as a defect against the law of tragic characterization? Unlike Else I do not find it bootless to ask such a question. Actually, Else himself could not resist answering it; he says; Iphigeneia's supplication is certainly natural and plausible enough for a young girl, and her decision to welcome martyrdom is conceivable in certain strong emotional states, but Euripides has done nothing to convince us that she is capable of such a state. Iphigeneia in her second speech, to use Aristotle's own phrase (1454 b 34), "says what the poet desires"<sup>(12)</sup>.

Nevertheless, Else's two critical notes, on Iphigeneia's second speech, are, both, incapable of convincing us that Aristotle is not rigorous in rejecting inconsistency in a character. It does not seem to be an obligatory duty for a playwright, and especially for Euripides, to introduce for a cer-

main change in situation of a certain character. It is, above all, an emotional state which owes its existence to new circumstances, or a new feeling.

In the case of Iphigeneia's change, she recognizes that she is fighting against difficult odds, so she sacrifices herself, making the best of a bad situation. For only by relinquishing her life does Iphigeneia gain her new friend-or rather her bridegroom. In case she wished to make use of this friendship to prolong her existence, she would have to destroy its necessary conditions and thus forfeit the friendship itself, for the expedition will not let Achilles save her and if he will do he might be destroyed.

In Iphigeneia's second speech is what the poet wants to say, still it should not be taken as a token of faulty characterization, for Aristotle allowed the poet the freedom to devise the right way of treating the myth<sup>(13)</sup>. Euripides did not trace Iphigeneia's change through its separate phases, to be sure, yet, it is meant to be as such, abrupt, for some dramatic purposes. In fact, Iphigeneia's change of heart at the end of the play has been hotly debated by the critics<sup>(14)</sup>, since Aristotle first objected to this alleged inconsistency in her characterization. But Iphigeneia is not the only inconsistent character in Greek tragedy, there are, also, Agamemnon in the Ajax<sup>(15)</sup>, Menelaus in Iphigeneia in Aulis<sup>(16)</sup> and Ismene in Antigone<sup>(17)</sup>. Inconsistency of such characters is justified by literature's relation with the "psyche" in its ability to act consistently or the reverse. The playwright might have been aware of his characters' inconsistencies, yet he creates them thus, for some dramatic purposes.

The idea of inconsistent character is widely accepted by many critics. Webster says; in spite of Aristotle, inconsistency is justified by unpredictable but intelligible reactions to circumstances that may arise in the course of the play<sup>(18)</sup>. Conacher ascribes the surprising speed of change in a character to circumstances, also, and to the dramatist's requirements<sup>(19)</sup>. Lesky says: the change is related to the conception of the psychological processes which induce such an attempt<sup>(20)</sup>. The sudden change of characters can be seen -as Trypanis observes- as a step towards modern psychological drama<sup>(21)</sup>. Other critics see that inconsistency has the privilege of causing a dramatic effect. A change of heart without the benefit of persuasion by others may be used by a dramatist to heighten effect<sup>(22)</sup>. Disregard for strict consistency in character is, in Kirkwood's opinion, a legitimate dramatic liberty and it may even be a dramatic

necessity. By inconsistency an effect can be achieved through structure or through the heightening of emotion at a crucial moment<sup>(23)</sup>.

None of these opinions can easily be rejected in discussing the consistency concept in Aristotle's poetics. Indeed it seems wiser to evaluate characters in the light of their sentiments than to classify sentiments as acceptable or unacceptable on the basis of premature evaluation of the characters. Moreover, an analysis of the inconsistent characters related to the "psyche" should be taken into consideration.

Much more could be said on Aristotle's rigorism in the Poetics, yet I have chosen one example which helps to show how Aristotle, in some sense, was too rigid in laying down such a principle.

## Notes

- 1 - D.A. Pauw, *The Rigorism of Aristotle in his Poetics: Fact or Fiction?* *AClass*, XXI, 1978, pp. 71-81.
- 2 - *Ibid*, pp. 71-73.
- 3 - *Ibid*, pp. 80-81.
- 4 - *Ar. Poet.*, 1454A, 26-28 Translated by, G.F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics, The Argument*, p. 455.  
The other Aristotelean demands in a tragic character are Goodness (1454A, 16-22), Harmony (1454A, 22-24) and Similarity (1454A, 24-25).
- 5 - G.F. Else, *Op. cit.*, p. 462.
- 6 - Horace, *Ars Poetica*, vv. 119-120.
- 7 - C.O. Brink, *Horace On Poetry, The "Ars Poetica"*, p. 198, N. 119.
- 8 - *Ar., Poet.*, 1454A, 32-33 "Iphigeneia as a suppliant "refers to her long speech of supplication (Iph. Au. 1211-1252) and "her later self" refers to the later one in which she announces her decision to welcome martyrdom (Iph. Au. 1368-1410).
- 9 - *Ar., Poet.*, 1454A, 28-33.
- 10- *Ibid*, 1454A, 33-36.
- 11- G.F. Else, *Op. cit*, pp. 467-468.
- 12- *Ibid*, p. 465, N. 33.
- 13- *Ar., Poet.*, 1453B 22-26.
- 14- Iphigeneia's change of heart has been censured by some critics, see:
  - G.F. Else, *Op. cit*, p. 467, N. 40.
  - Jacqueline de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy*, p. 25.
  - F.A. Wright, *Feminism in Greek Literature*, p. 97.
  - Peter Walcot, *Greek Drama in its Theatrical & Social Context*, p. 62.Nevertheless, Other critics justify Iphigeneia's change for different reasons, See for example:
  - G.M.A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides*, pp. 436-437.
  - E.M. Blaiklock, *The Male Characters of Euripides, A Study in Realism*, p. 120.

- Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, pp. 397-398.
  - T.B.L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides*, P. 281.
  - D.J. Conacher, *Euripidean drama*, pp. 262-264.
  - A.E. Haigh, *the tragic drama of the Greeks*. pp. 315-316.
  - B.M.W. Knox, *Word and Action*. pp. 245-246.
  - C.A. Trypanis, *Greek poetry from Homer to Seferis*. p. 185.
- 15- Agamemnon who forbids Ajax'burial (V. 1050 & VV. 1226-1263) very soon permits it after a short vivid discussion with Odysseus (VV. 1328-1373).
  - 16- Menelaus who taunts his brother Agamemnon when the latter sent a message to stop the arrival of Iphigeneia (VV.320-414) rapidly, after the messenger had declared Iphigeneia arrival, changes and tries to find a way to stop the sacrifice.
  - 17- Ismene who refuses to share her sister in burying Polynices (VV. 39-99) surprisingly, in the presence of Creon, attributes the burial to herself (VV. 536-564).
  - 18- I.B.L. Webster, *Op. Cit.*, p. 281.
  - 19- D.J. Conacher, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 262-263.
  - 20- Albin Lesky, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 397-398.
  - 21- C.A. Trypanis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 185.
  - 22- K.J. Dover, *Greek popular morality in the time of Plato & Aristotle*. pp. 16-17.
  - 23- G.M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama*, p. 158.

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