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Arist. *Poet.* 1454a31–33 Again*

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Among the examples on how not to portray a character in tragedy, Aristotle names the female protagonist of the *Iphigenia in Aulis*, claiming that she is drawn in violation of the principle of consistency: begging to spare her life she is much unlike her later self. Philologists stood for Euripides, charging Aristotle with a lack of intuitive understanding. Moreover, as has been pointed out, the unaffected character of Iphigenia’s behaviour could find a footing in the ample observations on human psychology Aristotle himself made elsewhere in the *Ethics* and *Rhetoric*. Certain modern scholars, however, tend to side with Aristotle. To argumentatively prove or disprove the feasibility of the change Iphigenia undergoes seems thus to be close to impossible, both psychologically and aesthetically. A thought not alien to the *Poetics* goes as simple as that: not all the shifts and turns, so human and so easily observed in life, should find their way into art. One supposes Aristotle all too well recognised the fact that no example would in this case prove to be free of blame, while holding that the general applicability and inherent veracity of his theory goes unimpaired by the fact that it could in principle be assailed.

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In chapter fifteen of the *Poetics*, which leaves an impression of being rather fragmentary, Aristotle drops in passing several remarks on the importance of character in its own right within the tragic plot and prescribes four requirements which a poet is advised to strive to meet should he wish to evoke the inherently tragic feelings of pity and fear. By way of a hallmark explanation, some negative examples are given. It is the one for ‘consistency’, the fourth requirement, that does prompt some locking of horns on part of Aristotle’s readership and, by nature of the example, Euripides scholarship. Reluctant as one is, there is no denying the fact that this example from *Iphigenia in Aulis* has drawn

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a disproportionate amount of attention due to it being one of the relatively few¹ in the *Poetics* to come from an extant tragedy of which we have considerable knowledge, albeit the posthumously (405 BC) staged draft still encourages reconstructions of varying merit.²

τέταρτον δὲ τὸ ὁμαλόν. κἄν γὰρ ἀνώμαλός τις ἢ ὁ τὴν μίμησιν παρέχων καὶ τοιοῦτον ἦθος ὑποτεθῆ, ὅμως ὁμαλῶς ἀνώμαλον δεῖ εἶναι. ἔστιν δὲ παράδειγμα πονηρίας μὲν ἦθους μὴ ἀναγκαΐας οἶον ὁ Μενέλαος ὁ ἐν τῷ Ὀρέστη, τοῦ δὲ ἀπρεπούς καὶ μὴ ἀρμόττοντος ὁ τε θρῆνος Ὀδυσσεώς ἐν τῇ Σκύλλῃ καὶ ἡ τῆς Μελανίππης ῥήσις, τοῦ δὲ ἀνωμάλου ἢ ἐν Αὐλίδι Ἰφιγένεια· οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔοικεν ἢ ἰκετεῦσα τῇ ὑστέρα.³

“And the 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. A case of baseness of character not required by any necessity, is, for example, Menelaus in the *Orestes*; of unsuitability and inappropriateness, the lamentation of Odysseus in the *Scylla* and the speech of Melanippe, and of inconsistency — the Iphigenia in Aulis; for the suppliant has no resemblance to the later one.”⁴

The sheer volume of scholarly output these much-thought-about and thought-into lines have prompted testifies to the thrill every student of ancient drama feels when an opportunity to challenge (or defend) the philosopher’s idea lies, seemingly, within reach. U. von Wilamowitz, an early champion of Euripides, expressed in 1889 his bewilderment and discontent that Aristotle “so gröblich sich versehen kann, die aulische Iphigenie zu tadeln, weil sie nicht entweder lediglich als schlachtopfer weint, oder als heldenjungfrau mutvolle reden hält.”⁵ J. Markland well before that observed that we should rather praise Euripides for the fact that he “*humani animi levitatem, et τὸ εὐμετάβλητον, et inconstantiam in consiliis suis per tot instabiles dramatis personas repraesentare*”⁶ thus represent-

¹ See Schoder 1969, 75 for a list of literary sources cited in the *Poetics*; to take Euripides only, Aristotle cites three extant plays (*IT*, *IA*, *Medea*), two lost (*Chresphontes*, *Melanippe*), and one unknown; other instances refer to his work in general.

² See Günther 1988, Diggle 1994, with Mastronarde 1996–1997, 201–202; Kovacs 1998, 270–272; 2003, 77–103.

³ The text follows Tarán 2012 here reproducing Kassel 1965. The the ms variants and editor’s emendations, though curious *per se*, are mostly irrelevant for the present discussion. The established text is sound. Vettori supposes that before τοῦ δὲ ἀνωμάλου an example of ἀνόμοιον was given, but Aristoteles was not obliged to exemplify all of his critical judgements.

⁴ Translation adopted from Else 1957, 455 with minor alterations to it. A. Schmitt 2008, 21 is adequate and clear: “Das Vierte ist, dass der Charakter konsistent sein soll. Denn auch wenn der, der das Vorbild für die Nachahmung bietet, sich selbst nicht treu bleibt, und ein solcher Charakter Gegenstand der Nachahmung ist, muss das Ungleichmäßige als dessen charakterliche Konstante dargestellt werden. Ein Beispiel für einen Charakter, der ohne Not als verdorben dargestellt wird, ist die Zeichnung des Menelaos im *Orest*. Ein Beispiel für ein Verhalten, das zu einem Charakter nicht passt und ihm nicht angemessen ist, gibt die Klage-Arie [threnos] des Odysseus in der *Skylia* und die Rede [rhesis] der Melanippe. Ein Beispiel für eine Charakterzeichnung, der es an Konstanz mangelt, bietet die *Iphigenie in Aulis*. Denn die flehentlich bittende Iphigenie hat keinerlei Ähnlichkeit mit der Iphigenie im späteren Verlauf des Stücks”. Bywater 1909, 43, who reads ὑποτιθεῖς in 1454a27, translates “even if inconsistency be part of the man before one for imitation as presenting that form of character”, which is verbose and complicated in the middle due to the participle. Something like ‘even if the original character (‘in the myth’, thus Lucas 1968, 160) is inconsistent and such a character is intended for representation (not, as Lucas, *ibid.*, ‘supplied’ by the myth), they should be consistently inconsistent’ could be offered as an alternative.

⁵ Wilamowitz 1906, 115 (an introduction to his *Heracles* turned into *the* introduction).

⁶ Markland 1811, 95, ad v. 1375.

ing τὸ ἀνώμαλον ὀμαλῶς. Aristotle scholars are careful to suppose that the philosopher had his own subjective reasons for such criticism, or pass over this passage in silence.⁷

Argumentative defenses of the tragedian, quite surprisingly, can go along the lines of Aristotelian moral philosophy, with scholars looking for proofs of Iphigenia's 'constancy,' 'a being-equal-to-oneself' in the *Nicomachean* (1168b) and *Eudemian* (1240a) *Ethics*. Thus, M. McDonald offers grounds for Iphigenia's consistency in her φιλία: a "reverent and dutiful daughter," Iphigenia "listens well," "respects her father's lesson" and, seeing that "it is not her character that has changed, but her circumstances and her reaction to them," she "acts naturally and nobly when she makes her final choice ... and acquires immortal fame in the process".⁸ Indeed, there is little real action in this play populated with men pressed hard by circumstances in which they shift and turn, a welcome foil for a heroic act of resolution. It thus remains largely unexplained why Aristotle himself failed to interpret and justify Iphigenia's behaviour in terms of his own moral philosophy which McDonald so admirably wields against him. The 1990s saw what seems a considerable surge in interest in this play and Iphigenia's character in particular: W. Stockert in his commentary relies on the passage in the *Rhetoric* 1389a, where Aristotle observes a specific propensity of the young and inexperienced to impulsive, heroic deeds.⁹ Cf. *Rhet.* 1389a–b:

οἱ μὲν οὖν νέοι τὰ ἥθη εἰσὶν ἐπιθυμητικοί, καὶ οἷοι ποιεῖν ὧν ἂν ἐπιθυμήσωσι. <...> εὐμετάβολοι δὲ καὶ ἀψίκороι πρὸς τὰς ἐπιθυμίας, καὶ σφόδρα μὲν ἐπιθυμοῦσι ταχέως δὲ παύονται (ὄξειαι γὰρ αἱ βουλήσεις καὶ οὐ μεγάλαι, ὥσπερ αἱ τῶν καμνόντων δίψαι καὶ πείναι), καὶ θυμικοί καὶ ὀξύθυμοι καὶ οἷοι ἀκολουθεῖν τῇ ὀργῇ. καὶ ἥττους εἰσὶ τοῦ θυμοῦ· διὰ γὰρ φιλοτιμίαν οὐκ ἀνέχονται ὀλιγωρούμενοι, ἀλλ' ἀγανακτοῦσιν ἂν οἶωνται ἀδικεῖσθαι. καὶ φιλότιμοι μὲν εἰσιν, μᾶλλον δὲ φιλόνοικοι (ὑπεροχῆς γὰρ ἐπιθυμεῖ ἡ νεότης, ἡ δὲ νίκη ὑπεροχὴ τις), <...> καὶ ἀνδρείοτεροι (θυμῶδεις γὰρ καὶ εὐέλπιδες, ὧν τὸ μὲν μὴ φοβεῖσθαι τὸ δὲ θαρρεῖν ποιεῖ· <...> καὶ μεγαλόψυχοι (οὐ γὰρ ὑπὸ τοῦ βίου πω τεταπεινῶνται, ἀλλὰ τῶν ἀναγκαίων ἄπειροί εἰσιν, καὶ τὸ ἀξιοῦν αὐτὸν μεγάλων μεγαλοψυχία· τοῦτο δ' εὐέλπιδος).

"The young are eager by character and can readily do whatever they desire; <...> changeable and quickly tiring of their desires, they desire keenly, but soon cool down (for their desires are keen, but not strong, much like the thirst and hunger of the sick), they are passionate and irascible, and given to fits of strong emotion, unable to control them; being ambitious, they cannot bear to be slighted, and become indignant every time they think themselves wronged. They seek honours, being especially fond of victories (for youth desires superiority, and a victory is some kind of superiority) <...> And they are more brave (for they are spirited and hopeful, the former makes them not afraid, the latter stirs them to courage) <...> They are high-minded (life has not yet humbled them, nor the virtue of necessity made

⁷ Bywater 1909, 229 tacitly refers the reader to lines ll. 1211–1212 and 1368–1369. of the play; Lucas 1968, 161: "such changes are rare in Greek tragedy; that of Neoptolemus in the Phil. is one with which neither A., nor anyone else could find fault... The use of masks must have worked against variations of character within the play." They are much more numerous than Lucas would have it; Neoptolemus undergoes no real change, but is, on the opposite, true to his φύσις, which Aristotle could not have failed to observe; the masks in the 5th c. were neutral in expression. Tarán 2012, 267 comments on the meaning of ἡ ἰκετεύουσα and Moerbecke's Lt. transl. *ministrans* (Minio-Paluello [1953] noted, that his ms probably read οἰκετεύουσα).

⁸ McDonald 1990, 69–84.

⁹ Stockert 1992, a study in 'change of mind' in Greek tragedy, Gibert 1995, along with a swell of articles; see McDonald 1990, 69–70, n. 1 for an overview, and also Funke 1964, Knox 1966, Sansone 1991. For more exotic interpretations, see McDonald 1990, 69, n. 1.

itself known; and the thinking of one being worthy of great things is a sign of high-mindedness, this is a quality of one hopeful).”

(Transl. mine)

However, these insights did not find their way into the *Poetics*, and it seems to be not due to any dearth of understanding on part of Aristotle of the behaviour he so keenly observed elsewhere.

A number of arguments for Iphigenia's integrity were offered by scholars of the last decades out of the dramatic situation itself: B. Knox holds that “the change of mind has been well prepared for in Euripides' play — it comes as the climax of a series of swift and sudden changes of decision which is unparalleled in ancient drama”,¹⁰ (which is, however, no definite proof), with J. Gibert even establishing a pattern of mind-change, into which Iphigenia's decision will fit;¹¹ D. Sansone is likewise kind to Iphigenia and her poet, suggesting that “witnessing the willingness of Achilles (who is in a situation similar to her own) to die for her sake, she is emotionally transformed”¹² (it pays to remember that Achilles promises are verbal gymnastics), while W. Stockert holds that the simplicity of a girl whose hopes of marriage were frustrated gave way to a more mature decision due to the changed circumstances.¹³

Aristotle however, is not alone in his censure: H. Funke in a sound piece of criticism held that Iphigenia speaks not with her own words and not from her own mind, but was deluded by the rhetoric of her deceitful father, thus making the wrong choice for the wrong reason;¹⁴ H. Siegel observes a case of “self-delusion”, making the best out of a hopeless case, while M. Lefkowitz disposes of the situation in terms of “consent turned into a free choice”.¹⁵

Among the multitude of interpretations and justifications which tend to be off the point, a sound view expressed by A. Lesky and supported by J. C. Kamerbeek¹⁶ seems to be the only feasible solution: while astutely observing the qualities of young people in life (the passage in the *Rhetoric* 1389a–b cited above is easy proof), Aristotle could not suffer these in tragedy.

Moreover, his very terminology may not be sufficient and its application overstrict; being theoretically well-grounded it is often incapacitated when it comes to fitting in the examples, and, as a result, there is evidently little to no place for the dramatically very effective (thus τραγικώτατος of 1453a 29–30) lability of a Euripidean character.

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¹⁰ Knox 1966, 229.

¹¹ Gibert 1995, 240.

¹² Sansone 1991, 165.

¹³ Stockert 1992, 26–37.

¹⁴ Funke 1964, 298–299.

¹⁵ Lefkowitz 1986, 95.

¹⁶ Lesky 1958, 146, with discussion 151–152.

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