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Food for Thought:
Text and Sense in Aristotle, *Poetics* 19

JOHN T. KIRBY

ἔστι δὲ κατὰ τὴν διάνοιαν ταῦτα, ὅσα ὑπὸ
τοῦ λόγου δεῖ παρασκευασθῆναι. μέρη δὲ τούτων τό τε ἀπο-
δεικνύειν καὶ τὸ λθεῖν καὶ τὸ πάθη παρασκευάζειν (οἷον
ἔλεον ἢ φόβον ἢ ὀργὴν καὶ ὅσα τοιαῦτα) καὶ ἔτι μέγεθος 56b1
καὶ μικρότητας. δῆλον δὲ ὅτι καὶ ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἀπὸ
τῶν αὐτῶν ιδεῶν δεῖ χρησθῆναι ὅταν ἢ ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ ἢ
μεγάλαι ἢ εἰκότα δέη παρασκευάζειν· πλὴν τοσοῦτον δια-
φέρει, ὅτι τὰ μὲν δεῖ φαίνεσθαι ἀνευ διδασκαλίας, τὰ δὲ 5
ἐν τῷ λόγῳ ὑπὸ τοῦ λέγοντος παρασκευάζεσθαι καὶ παρὰ
τὸν λόγον γίνεσθαι. (1456a36-b7)

b1-2 καὶ ἔτι μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας secl. Else || 2 μικρότητας Parisinus
1741, Riccardianus 46: (σ)μικρότητα Par. 2038 et alii recs. (sic et Arab.;
exiguitatem Margoliouth in uers. lat.) || 3 ιδεῶν apographa Parisini 1741
(cf. 1450b34): εἰδεῶν Par. 1741, Ricc. 46 (cf. 1447a8, 1456a33) || 4 δέη
recs.: δεῖ Ricc. 46 (*oportet* Moerbeke in uers. lat.): δ' ἢ Par. 1741

Perusal of the standard commentaries on the *Poetics* will show that the difficulties of chapter 19, which is concerned with διάνοια or "thought," have led to various interpretations. I have supplied a portion of the text, from Kassel's 1965 Oxford edition, and furnished my own apparatus.

The passage is in essence an exploration of the contours of διάνοια as it applies in the composition of a tragedy. According to his habit, Aristotle offers a dialectical διαίρεσις of the topic of discussion, breaking it down into component parts. In this instance, however, the very syntax makes discernment of the διαίρεσις difficult; and more than one construction is possible. Having cautioned my reader that there is no universally accepted schematization of the train of thought here, I would like to offer my own (Figure 1). From this diagram it will be clear that I understand διάνοια as operative on two levels within the performance of a play: in the words spoken by the characters (ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου) and in their actions (ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν).¹ The markers τὰ μὲν and τὰ δέ (b5) also reflect this major

¹ Cf. D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle. Poetics* (Oxford 1968) 196 (ad b2).

distinction. What cannot be made clear in the diagram, however, is the fact that over and above both the words and the actions of the *dramatis personae* is the planning and craft of the playwright, from which the text indeed takes its being. Aristotle conceives of this as well in terms of *διάνοια*, as will become clear from our examination of b3–4.

I would like to devote some scrutiny to several phrases in this most difficult passage.

καὶ ἔτι μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας: Else considers this phrase a gloss that intrudes upon and destroys an essentially binary construction.² Without it, he is free to redistribute *τὸ τε ἀποδεικνύει καὶ τὸ λύειν* and *τὸ πάθη παρασκευάζειν* under the headings of *λόγος* and *πράγματα* respectively. This is a bold solution (as so many of Else's are) and provides a synthetic understanding of our passage; but the adoption of such a solution has repercussions further on, as we shall see.

τὰ μὲν . . . τὰ δέ: Having disposed of *καὶ ἔτι μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας*, Else seeks to make *τὰ μὲν* and *τὰ δέ* refer to *ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ* and *μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα* respectively: *ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ* are to be "brought home (to the spectator) without (explicit) exposition"; *μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα* are to be "deliberately produced in speech."³ This, however, is unnecessarily restrictive: it limits *ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ* to events, whereas things spoken may also be *ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ*;⁴ and it does not acknowledge that of course events in the play, as well as points of argument, may be *μεγάλα* or *εἰκότα*.⁵ I think rather that *τὰ δέ* should be read with the words that follow, i.e. *τὰ δὲ ἐν τῷ λόγῳ*, "things spoken" or "argumentation," as opposed to *πράγματα*, "things done." Else attempts to discredit this construction: he assumes that *τὰ μὲν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν* must mean "verbal effects gotten through action."⁶ But I find it more sensible to understand *τὰ μὲν* (sc. ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν) as = *τὰ πράγματα* themselves, which may be *ἢ ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ ἢ μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα*. The actual phrase *ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν* is used in precisely the same way at 1454b6–7 as here at 1456b2; and it is important to keep in mind that Aristotle's common term for the construction of the *mūthos* is *σύνθεσις πραγμάτων*, the "assembling of *πράγματα*." I have schematized the *διαίρεσις* according to this understanding; but I question the authenticity of the reading *ἢ μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα*, and to that I now turn.

ἢ μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα: *ἢ ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ* (1456b3) make a pair here, and correspond (under the heading of *πράγματα*) to the mention of the *πάθη* at 1456a38–b1 (under the heading of effects provided *ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου*).

² G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, MA 1957) 564 and nn. 7–9. Kassel and other editors, however, print it without qualm.

³ Else (previous note) 561, 564–65.

⁴ As the ancients also recognized; cf. e.g. Eur. *Hipp.* 498 ὃ δεινὰ λέξασ'.

⁵ Or even *ἀναγκαῖα*—on which see below.

⁶ Else (above, note 2) 566 n. 12: "This is what has reduced the passage to the inanity we spoke of earlier."

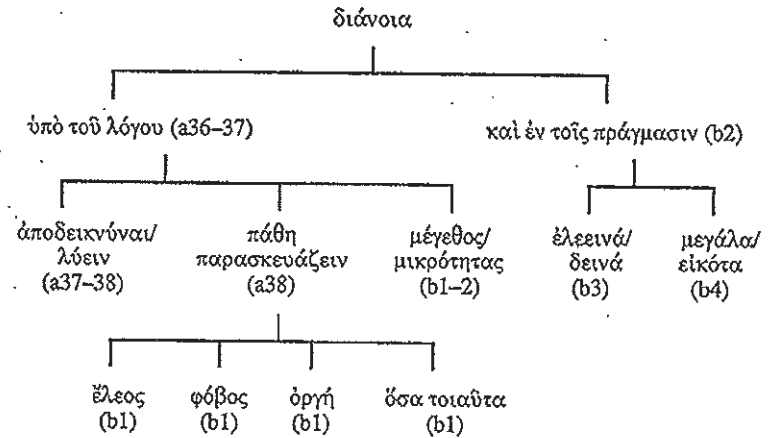


Figure 1

Vahlen in his *Beiträge* delineates three *μέρη* of *διάνοια* here: *τὸ τε ἀποδεικνύειν καὶ τὸ λύειν*, *τὸ πάθη παρασκευάζειν*, and *μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας*. In coming to 1456b3–4, he seeks to preserve this tripartite concept, and holds that *ἢ ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ* corresponds to *τὸ πάθη παρασκευάζειν*, *μεγάλα* to *μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας*, and *εἰκότα* to *τὸ τε ἀποδεικνύειν καὶ τὸ λύειν*.⁷ This provides a neat response, but it requires us to accept that *μεγάλα* and *εἰκότα* are each being used as a kind of shorthand for the longer phrases.⁸ In the interest of such a balance, I would have expected a simple *παθητικά* (or the equivalent) instead of the explicit pair *ἢ ἐλεεινὰ ἢ δεινὰ* in b3, which demands to be balanced with the pair *ἢ μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα* as another dyad.

What seems unnatural is the pair *μεγάλα/εἰκότα*, for several reasons: (1) When Aristotle pairs *μέγας* with another concept, it is regularly (as might be expected) with *μικρός*. In fact he has just done so at 1456b1–2.⁹ (2) "Probabilities" or "the probable," on the other hand, typically go in tandem with "necessary consequences" or "necessity," so that *εἰκότα* would typically be paired with *ἀναγκαῖα*; cf. 1451a38, *Rh.* 1357a22–b25, *APr.* 70a. (3) Aristotle has just remarked, at 1456a34–36, that *διάνοια* has an

⁷ J. Vahlen, *Beiträge zu Aristoteles Poetik* (Leipzig 1914) 281.

⁸ Assumed by I. Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (Oxford 1909) 257 (ad b4). A. Gudeman, *Aristoteles ΠΕΡΙ ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΗΣ* (Berlin 1934) 332 (ad loc.) quibbles with Bywater's wording, but also assumes the tripartition.

⁹ Though, as we have seen, the authenticity of the phrase there has been questioned.

especially close connection with rhetoric. Now both pairs, μέγας/μικρός and εικότα/ἀναγκαῖα, have close connections with rhetorical invention:

(a) μέγας/μικρός embodies the rhetorical motif of size or degree. We are told at *Rhetoric* 1403a17–25 that τὸ αὐξεῖν καὶ μειοῦν is πρὸς τὸ δεῖξαι ὅτι μέγα ἢ μικρόν. Furthermore, it is a concern of all three species of oratory (*Rh.* 1391b31–92a1), though αὐξήσις is especially suited to epideictic (*Rh.* 1368a22–27). Related, though distinct, is the line of argument known as the τόπος τοῦ μᾶλλον καὶ ἥττον (*Rh.* 1358a14, 1397b12–27).¹⁰ Castelvetro, in his 16th-century commentary on the *Poetics*, was to my knowledge the first to suggest the possibility of repeating the μέγας/μικρός pair from b1–2 here at b4. He, however, prints εικότα in his text. Else (the “gloss” notwithstanding) also perceives the binary structure of the sentence; but he too prints εικότα at b4.

(b) εικότα and ἀναγκαῖα are the materials for the προτάσεις or premises of syllogism. We see this treated extensively at *Rhetoric* 1357a–b, *Prior Analytics* 70a–b, *Posterior Analytics* 74b–75a, and *Topics* 112b. On the verbal level this is the way a speaker will reason and offer rationale for assertions; but at *Poetics* 1451a36–38 Aristotle has stipulated that in composing a μῦθος, the author should take care to see that the events of the story flow one from another κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. This is crucial for our understanding of 1456b4, because (as I understand the διαίρεσις there) it is presented as of fundamental importance that the plot-structure be organized syllogistically—i.e. in such a way that the audience can make sense of why one event occurs as the result of another.

I submit, then, that ἡ μεγάλη ἢ εἰκότα at b4 is corrupt. But while either substantive could be replaced to make a dyad that is relevant in a rhetorical framework, the topic more germane to the discussion of what is needed ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν is that of rationale in plot-structure—διάνοια par excellence on the part of the author. Thus it is more likely that Aristotle originally wrote ἡ ἀναγκαῖα ἢ εἰκότα here.

ἄνευ διδασκαλίας: διδασκαλία is commonly taken as equivalent to ἀπόδειξις, i.e. the giving of information (whether to a dramatic character or to the audience). D. W. Lucas maintains that it has “nothing to do with production,”¹¹ but it may possibly be a technical theater-term referring to the words of a play-script, the actors’ “lines”: LSJ s.v. διδασκαλία II.1

¹⁰ τὸ αὐξεῖν καὶ μειοῦν is said at 1403a to be, not a τόπος, but rather the subject-matter (περὶ ἧ) of a certain kind of enthymeme. The μᾶλλον καὶ ἥττον is a general line of argument used to shape enthymemes, while αὐξεῖν καὶ μειοῦν are applications of particular enthymemes. They differ further in that αὐξήσις and μείωσις are each capable of independent formulation, while an argument *a fortiori* consists in the very connection drawn between the μᾶλλον and ἥττον. However, Aristotle recognized the kinship of these concepts: at *Rh.* 1359a23 we find μέγεθος and μικρότης mentioned in conjunction with τὸ μείζον and τὸ ἔλαττον. The reader should mark that Aristotle uses the word τόπος in more than one sense; see G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton 1963) 100–01.

¹¹ Lucas (above, note 1) 196.

shows that by the time of the epigrammatist Dioscorides, whose *floruit* was only a century or so after Aristotle’s own, the word could be metonymic for the plays produced; and even before Aristotle’s time, χοροδιδάσκαλος was the term for the person who taught the chorus their lines. So it is simplest and clearest to understand ἄνευ διδασκαλίας as = “without dialogue.”

The gist of the passage as I understand it, then, is as follows. (1) διάνοια in drama functions on two levels: in the playwright’s mind, as the work is being composed, and in the characters’ minds, as the μῦθος unfolds onstage. (2) As regards the characters, dramatic dialogue has three μέρη: (a) proof and refutation, (b) stimulation of the emotions, and (c) degrees of importance. (3) As regards the playwright, in putting together the events of the story—ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν—διάνοια should be used in the same way—ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν ἰδεῶν δεῖ χρῆσθαι (sc. τῆι διανοίᾳ)—as when deciding about dialogue, except that πράγματα must achieve their effect without the vehicle of language (ἄνευ διδασκαλίας): “Events, on the one hand (τὰ μὲν), must be perceived independent of verbal explanation, while argumentation, on the other (τὰ δὲ ἐν τῷ λόγῳ), must (by definition) be provided orally by the speaker, and must come into being as a result of speech.” Thus (a) the piteous or fearful events themselves elicit pity and fear from the audience, and (b) the flow of causality in the plot must be recognizably clear as coming from connections that are either necessary or probable.¹²

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¹² The text of this study was completed in February 1993. I am grateful to Professor Miroslav Marcovich, Professor Neil O’Sullivan, and the late Father William M. A. Grimaldi for their helpful critiques of an earlier version of this essay, and to Professor David Sansone for his expert editorial help.