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## **Poeisis as political educator : Aristotle and the purpose of poeisis**

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## ABSTRACT

### POEISIS AS POLITICAL EDUCATOR: ARISTOTLE AND THE PURPOSE OF POEISIS

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This inquiry into Aristotle's thought focuses on the relationship between the poetic arts and moral education. Specifically, it looks at whether poetry can be used as a means for teaching moral virtue. Aristotle is clear that the arts, broadly speaking, are inferior to virtue. However, the political context of poetry as well as Aristotle's account of katharsis and the relationship between philosophy and poetry seem to indicate that the purpose of poetry may serve an educative function in the life of the city. I argue that while poetry is not moral education, it serves an educative role by facilitating an inquiry into the moral and intellectual virtues and how those virtues relate to the human condition.

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POEISIS AS POLITICAL EDUCATOR: ARISTOTLE AND  
THE PURPOSE OF POEISIS

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

Using literature as a way to understand politics is not a new idea in the history of political thought. Typically, literature is seen as a way to understand how a particular people existed at a particular time and place, serving as a form of fictional ethnography.<sup>1</sup> One example of this is in Catherine Zuckert's work using American novels to understand American political thought.<sup>2</sup> She is utilizing literature in order to speak both about particular historical circumstances as well as the enduring characteristics of a people. This fictional ethnographic method of literary analysis is not the only perspective on how to assess literature in a political way.

A different method is found in Steven Pinker's argument that literature had a pacifying effect on people in the 17th and 18th centuries, referring to the era as the Republic of Letters.<sup>3</sup> For him, the behavior of the audience was modified through their participation with literature. The central issue is what kind of education is being provided by engaging with a work of fiction. Is this education primarily derived from the pleasure experienced by the reader? Is the education provided through the emotional progression one takes through the plot of the story? Is the education a result of intellectual reflection after completing the initial experience with the work? Is the education particularized only to a specific range of emotional responses generated by the work? One central presumption that exists amongst these questions, and is perhaps central to the

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<sup>1</sup> By this, I mean an exploration into the actions, behaviors, customs, etc. of particular persons at a particular time and place, but the plot is the creation of imagination.

<sup>2</sup> See, "On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers," *The Journal of Politics* 43, 683-706. Also see her, "The Political Thought of Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Polity* 13, 163-183.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature Why Violence has Declined* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2011) 177-183.

issue of education itself, is that literature has political ramifications on its audience. This presumption is predicated on the idea that literature has an effect on the behaviors of its audience and that those behaviors, in turn, mold political actions.

This relationship between literature and political action dates back to the ancient Greeks, with both the pre-Socratics and Plato addressing the 'ancient feud between philosophy and poetry.' However, can poetry be understood as a form of literature, particularly given that poetry, for most of the ancient Greek culture, is actually a supernatural explanation for the phenomenon of the natural world? This debate between the rational and supernatural explanations of the world is the foundation of the feud between philosophy and poetry. Poetry is the translation of the Greek *poesis* which translates as, "to make or to create" and therefore could also be translated into literature or fiction. Therefore, Aristotle's response to the feud is helpful because it provides a way to discuss this tension and establishes a lens for assessing whether or not poetry provides a political education to its audience. This, then, allows for a subsequent inquiry into the questions latent within the issue of seeing literature as an educator because they are just as prevalent with poetry.

Before attempting to construct an answer for whether or not *poesis* can serve as a political educator, there are several foundational premises that have to be established. I will do this in two segments. The first will aim at examining the political context of Greek tragedy and establishing a definition of *katharsis*. The second will explore Aristotle's contention on the primacy of plot and the superiority of poetry to history as well as the relationship between equity and poetry, and then evaluate the epistemological relationship between virtue, action, and plot. Once these premises have been established, it is possible to provide a potential answer to the issue of using poetry to teach virtue, namely that poetry may not be able to directly habituate

people toward virtue, but may, instead, aim them toward a better understanding of what it means to be a virtuous human being.

## POLITICAL CONTEXT OF POETRY

Before beginning an exploration into Aristotle's perspective on whether or not tragedy provides a moral education, the framework of ancient Greek poetry must be briefly established given Aristotle's empirical methodology. This method is predicated on responding to the opinions and perspectives of his time and utilizing them to discover universal causes. If the historical and political context is not established, then his mode of inquiry is vastly undermined and the depth of his insight is marginalized. To begin, ancient Greek poetry<sup>1</sup> is, in several critical ways, vastly different than contemporary performance art. First, poetry was performed at a religious festival, typically the Dionysia, which was deeply tethered to the political life of the city through both the contributions of citizens and the oversight of the state. Michael Kellogg points out that the

[religious events] included sacred rituals, sacrifices, dithyrambic (choral) contests, the three days of tragedies, and the day set aside for comedies. Important political and military leaders were prominently in attendance, and spectators gathered from throughout the Greek world..<sup>2</sup>

The link between the religious festival and the latent democratic norms of the theatre, particularly in a post-Periclean Athens<sup>3</sup>, means that the exposure to poetry would have been wide

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<sup>1</sup> I use this term with the understanding that it is aligned with Aristotle's inclusive word *poiesis* which encompasses, "Epic poetry and Tragedy, as also Comedy, Dithyrambic poetry." Ingram Bywater, trans., *Aristotle's Poetics*, found in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), pg. 1455, line 1447a 15 . Unless otherwise noted, all citations will come from the Ingram Bywater translation. All future citations will provide the name of the text and the line number only.

<sup>2</sup> Michael K. Kellogg, *The Greek Search for Wisdom*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2012), pg. 81.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 81. Here, Kellogg points out that, "A fund established by Pericles allowed all Athenian citizens to attend the theater free of charge."

scale. This, combined with the fact that the Greek religion is not based in dogma but in ritual, means attendance at the religious festivals would have been nearly universal.<sup>4</sup>

The works of Homer and Hesiod were also ubiquitous in ancient Athenian life, serving as a foundation for both moral and religious education. Hugh Lloyd-Jones argues that, "People learned about the gods, and about the justice of Zeus, not from sacred books but from the poets, notably from the early poets, Homer and Hesiod."<sup>5</sup> Greek religion, then, was not predicated on divine revelation in the way that the Abrahamic religions were, but instead, was understood through the works of the muse who spoke through the poet. Poetry, then, was the connection between the gods and man. The universality of poetry can also be found in Plato's comment that there are those who are, "praisers of Homer who say that this poet educated Greece".<sup>6</sup> However, Plato also contends that, "only so much of poetry as is hymns to gods or celebration of good men should be admitted into a city,"<sup>7</sup> which is representative of the tension between philosophy and poetry, between providing an explanation of phenomenon through reason or through revelation.<sup>8</sup> This tension shows how seriously Plato took poetry because he understood the power the poets had since they were, at least as far as Greek custom was concerned, displaying the relationship between the gods and man. This placed the poets, especially Homer and Hesiod but also the later tragedians and comedians, in a place of pivotal influence over the behavior of Greek citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> See Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Ancient Greek Religion," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 145 (December, 2001), pg. 460-462.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 461.

<sup>6</sup> Allan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1991), pg. 290, line 606e.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 290, line 607a.

<sup>8</sup> Though falling outside of the parameters of this essay, this tension is explored by various others elsewhere. See Elliot Bartky, "Plato and the Politics of Aristotle's 'Poetics,'" *The Review of Politics* 54 (Autumn, 1992), pg. 598-607; Thomas Shearer Duncan, "Plato and Poetry," *The Classical Journal* 40 (May, 1945), pg. 481-494; M. Pabst Battin, "Plato on True and False Poetry," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (Winter, 1977), pg. 163-174; Irwin Edman, "Poetry and Truth in Plato," *The Journal of Philosophy* 33 (October, 1936), pg. 605-609.

This prevalence displays why the state would have had such a compelling interest in regulating the content of the tragedies being performed at the religious festivals. By the fifth century, tragedies were composed of actors, minstrels, and a chorus, which would range in size depending upon the funding that was available. Franz Stoessl points out that,

The equipping of the choruses was one of the duties rich citizens had to perform for the community and was equivalent to a tax on their property. If a poet wanted to perform a tragedy he had first to apply to the archon who was in charge of the festival.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, citizens were not simply consumers of poetry, but they were also vital participants in the construction of the product. He continues that, "The archon could grant or refuse the chorus. Thus it depended upon the state and its officials whether or not a poet could perform a drama...dramatic art was subject to the struggle of political forces and was itself a part of this struggle."<sup>10</sup> The archon, being drawn from the tumultuous nature of the Athenian political landscape, would have been politically sensitive to the content of the plays that were performed at the religious festivals, and, therefore, had an interest in making sure that the tragedies and comedies that were performed met a certain level of state appropriateness insomuch as the political condition in Athens was tolerant of the poet's perspective. If the poets had the power to shape moral and religious practices, then the poetry performed at the festivals would have had the ability to rile up the passions of the audience. The state, then, had a role to play in regulating the interpretation of the interaction between gods and man at the state sponsored religious festival, if for nothing else, to regulate the passions of the democratic populace.

The active oversight of the Greek state into the content of poetry should not be seen as something foreign to the Greek perspective. One thing to be cautious of here is to assign the

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<sup>9</sup> Franz Stoessl, "Aeschylus as a Political Thinker" *The American Journal of Philology* 73 (1952): 113

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

'state' a modern understanding of an entity distinct from the people with an overarching bureaucratic labyrinth.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the state and the populace, particularly in fifth century Athens, would have been integrated so deeply that to make a distinction between state and citizen would be better stated as a state office-holder and potential office-holder. This is the foundation of Aristotle's claim that, "He who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state; and, speaking generally, a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life."<sup>12</sup> Citizens are those who have the ability to take place in the ruling of the state, but are also included in those that are ruled; citizens are both ruled and ruler. Therefore, the state, as such, is not an entity that is disconnected from the people and rules over them, but instead, is something that is comprised of individuals who share in ruling others and being ruled by others. The state, then, is something that is indistinguishable from the populace, and thus, those things that would rule the populace would also rule the state.

Returning to the prominent place of poetry, what role would the poets have taken given the influence of their craft? Peter Arnott argues that

In the fifth century at least, the drama, like all poetry, was considered primarily as a teaching medium. The poet was the *didaskalos*, teacher, not merely in the sense that he taught his actors and choruses, but also with the implication that he instructed his public, through a medium that offered the widest possibilities for the dissemination of ideas and information, and which could also, in a single hearing, reach the greater part of the body politic.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Greg Anderson, "The Personality of the Greek State," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 129 (2009), pg. 1-22. Here Anderson sets out to explore whether or not the Greek 'state' actually aligns with our contemporary conception of statehood. See also Anthony D. Smith, *The Antiquity of Nations*, (Malden; Polity Press, 2008). Smith sets out, particularly in chapter five, to do exactly what one should not do: apply modern concepts of the nation back into antiquity, but his discussion is fruitful nonetheless because it shows the way that we understand the state is antithetical to the ancients.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1275b 18-21.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Arnott, "Greek Drama as Education," *Educational Theatre Journal* 22 (1970), pg. 35.

This indicates that the poet, confirming Plato's concern, was a person who had great political influence since his craft was able to reach nearly every citizen and actively engage them in the craft. Arnott goes on to point out that Aristophanes, in *The Frogs*, is able to make Aeschylus defend the position of whether or not the poet was actually a kind of teacher for the populace. This demonstrates that the convention was so widely believed that he was able to parody it without having to set-up the paradigm within the comedy.<sup>14</sup>

Plato's criticism of poetry clearly indicates that he, too, saw the poet as a kind of teacher and was concerned with the kind of things being taught by the poets. This is derived from the political influence that poetry had over the populace, their work being nearly ubiquitous amongst the citizenry. This is partially why Aristotle argues that the tragedies, for the most part, "adhere to the historic names,"<sup>15</sup> meaning that a poet could presume a baseline familiarity with the characters and events from the members of the audience. This further re-enforces the fact that the poet was a kind of a teacher of the populace, and that their craft, being a certain manifestation of the relationship between the divine and man, placed them in a central role as a teaching agent.

Within this political context of poetry, as a prominent political institution, a unifying tool for teaching identity, a medium between the divine and the secular, and a democratic product and process, tragedy and comedy rose to their pinnacle in fifth century Athens. By the time Aristotle was writing, nearly a century later, the flourishing of the art had diminished, but the power of the medium still held sway. This is the context of Aristotle's *Poetics*, understanding poetry as an artistic medium, an ethical tool, a political tool, a religious staple, and a political process. With

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, found in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 1464.

this framework in mind, it's now beneficial to explore one of the most difficult terms in Aristotle's perspective on poetry, *katharsis*.

## KATHARSIS

The opening lines of the *Poetics* indicate that the arts are a *mimesis* - a representation<sup>1</sup> - meaning that they fall under the broad category of the technical crafts (*techne*) but are a particular kind of *techne*, one that is representative of the nature of the form of human action (*praxis*).<sup>2</sup> Aristotle says, "Epic poetry and Tragedy, as also Comedy, Dithyrambic poetry, and most flute playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of *mimesis*,"<sup>3</sup> indicating that poetry falls within a broader range of mimetic arts. In Book 8 of the *Politics*, Aristotle clearly indicates that musical education, which falls under this overarching category of mimetic arts, is a critical facet for understanding the proper use of leisure time.<sup>4</sup> Leisure time is, "better than occupation and is its end; and therefore the question must be asked, what ought we to do when at leisure?"<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, in the subsequent discussion, outlines that we must be educated to the proper end of leisure, namely, toward happiness (*eudaimonia*), and that musical education has been included in the curriculum because it is for the "intellectual enjoyment in leisure."<sup>6</sup> Given that music is a mimetic art, does this indicate that the other mimetic arts are also aimed at

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, see Stephen Halliwell, trans., *Aristotle's Poetics* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill 1987), pg. 71. Halliwell contends that 'mimesis' has often been translated as 'imitation' but instead should be translated as 'representation' because the English word 'imitation' does not have the same connotation as 'mimesis,' - he argues that the plasticity of the word 'representation' is more applicable.

<sup>2</sup> See Silvia Carli, "Poetry is More Philosophical than History: Aristotle on Mimesis and Form," *Review of Metaphysics* 64 (December, 2010), pg. 305.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, line 1447a 15. I have changed Bywater's 'imitation' back to 'mimesis' and will do so for all citations. Given the difficulty noted on translating *mimesis* into either imitation or representation, I have chosen to keep the transliterated word in order to avoid the translation issues.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Jowett, trans., *Aristotle's Politics*, found in *ibid*, 1307. All future citations will include the name of the text and the line numbers only.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 1338a 32-35 .

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 1338b 22.

the intellectual enjoyment of leisure? Perhaps the even more difficult problem, however, is not the active participation in creating the mimetic art, as is the case with playing an instrument or creating a play or painting, but in the passive participation of the mimetic art, as in watching a play, and whether or not this passive kind of participation also serves an educational purpose. This distinction, between the active and passive experiences with the mimetic arts, is something that will be discussed at more length later in the essay, but it is necessary to acknowledge it as a problem, especially as it relates to defining *katharsis*.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that tragedy is the best form of poetry because it is more noble and serious than the others.<sup>7</sup> It also provides Aristotle's perspective on what the purpose of tragedy is, what the best way to achieve that purpose is, and what makes an excellent tragedy. It, however, does not provide a clear answer to whether or not the passive participation in the mimetic arts provides a particular kind of education. There is a great deal of controversy over this topic, specifically over Aristotle's use of the term 'katharsis' and the relationship katharsis has with tragedy, namely with the emotions of pity and fear. Before delving into whether or not Aristotle does in fact contend that even passive participation in the mimetic arts does provide an education, it's necessary to first explore the purpose of katharsis which is, perhaps, one of the most difficult topics to contend with in the surviving writing of Aristotle. In order to do this, it is beneficial to outline the contending perspectives on the purpose of katharsis to construct a framework that underlies the exploration of poetry as a moral teacher.

Part of the difficulty in defining the purpose of katharsis is that Aristotle never provides a clear definition of what the term means, and he uses it in different ways in different texts. For example, he says in the *Politics* that,

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 25 - 1449a 30.

We maintain further that music should be studied, not for the sake of one, but of many benefits, that is to say, with a view to (1) education, (2) katharsis (the word 'katharsis' we use to present without explanation, but when hereafter we speak of poetry, we will treat the subject with more precision); music may also serve (3) for intellectual enjoyment, for relaxation and for recreation after exertion.<sup>8</sup>

This passage indicates that, at least for music, katharsis is different than the intellectual enjoyment and the educational purpose of music. It also shows that Aristotle intended to explore the idea of katharsis more in the *Poetics*, but there he rarely uses the term except insofar as to say it is part of the function of tragedy.<sup>9</sup> This leads to the foundation of the tension over what *katharsis* means to Aristotle. From the cited passage from the *Politics*, Jowett translated *katharsis* as 'purgation,' which is indicative of one of the perspectives on katharsis. W.F. Trench contends that this understanding of catharsis dates to the Renaissance period. There some held that the purpose of katharsis was, "to get so hardened by the sight of human suffering in drama, that we should be able to pass it by unmoved when we met it in real life."<sup>10</sup> This would mean that the purpose of tragedy was to actually purge the emotional response out of the human condition. In essence, this transforms the emotions into a pathology that need to be removed from the body.<sup>11</sup> However, this perspective misunderstands Aristotle's perspective on the emotions.

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341b 35-40. I have changed Jowett's translation of 'katharsis' as 'purgation' back to the transliteration. I have done this in order to avoid any unnecessary confusion in the subsequent discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b 22-28

<sup>10</sup> W.F. Trench, "The Function of Poetry According to Aristotle," *An Irish Quarterly Review* 19 (December, 1930), 550. See also Baxter Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism: The Late Renaissance in Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 205-300.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Lear, "Katharsis," *Phronesis* 33 (1988), pg. 297, 299. Halliwell also contends that this is the foundation of the perspective, noting that this perspective fundamentally misunderstands Aristotle's perspective on the emotions of pity and fear. See Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 90. Trench also agrees with this perspective, arguing that Bernays perspective caused 'criticism [to] break away on a false scent again.' See Trench, "Function of Poetry," pg. 551. Leon Golden also rejects this perspective. See Leon Golden, "The Purgation Theory of Catharsis," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (Summer, 1973), pg. 473-479. The overwhelming perspective is that the use of 'katharsis' as a purging of the emotions is an inappropriate translation of the Greek as well as being disconnected from the context of Greek culture. However, the other consensus is the fact that while katharsis is understood as 'to cleanse', the moral underpinnings of 'purge' or even 'cleanse' is not present in the Greek.

Jonathan Lear argues that katharsis cannot be a purging of emotions, as the term is used in the biological works of Aristotle<sup>12</sup>, because the emotions are not just feelings, but also include "an orientation toward the world."<sup>13</sup> Lear is correct here. Aristotle argues in the *Rhetoric* that, "The Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure,"<sup>14</sup> and continues, using the topic of anger for his launching point that, "we must discover (1) what the state of mind of angry people is, (2) who the people are with whom they usually get angry, and (3) on what ground they get angry with them."<sup>15</sup> Here, it is clear that the emotion is not simply the actual feeling of anger, but also the intellectual condition that corresponds to the emotion. More support for this comes from Aristotle's discussion of fear. He says that, "fear is felt by those who believe something to be likely to happen to them, at the hands of particular persons, in a particular form, and at a particular time."<sup>16</sup> The emotions, therefore, are not simply reactions to stimuli; they are predicated on our character. I will return to this topic later when discussing the relationship between virtue and the emotions, but it is essential to establish that katharsis cannot be a removal of the emotional reactions to stimuli from the human experience. Ultimately, both Trench and Lear disregard this perspective as being fundamentally flawed, and thus, contend that the perspective has lost relevancy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 298-301. His discussion of Aristotle using 'catharsis' to mean a kind of physical expulsion, specifically menstrual discharge, is particularly useful. He rejects the notion that Aristotle was intending to use catharsis in this way when discussing the mimetic arts. Even if he did intend that catharsis have a cleansing effect on the audience, it is a different kind of cleansing than that of a bodily release.

<sup>13</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 302.

<sup>14</sup> W. Rhys Roberts, trans., *Aristotle's Rhetorica* found in McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), pg. 1380, line 1378a 20-21. All future citations will provide the name of the text and the line number only.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, 1378a 23-26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 1382b 33-35

<sup>17</sup> See Trent, "The Function of Poetry," 551 and Lear, "Katharsis," 302.

The next perspective to consider is that Aristotle is responding to Plato's criticism of poetry in the *Republic*, and that he is redefining the kathartic experience. Halliwell argues that, "We can be moderately confident only that [the *Poetics*] offers a response to the Platonic view that tragedy arouses emotions which ought, for the sake of general psychological and moral well-being, to be kept in check (*Republic* 10, 603-5)."<sup>18</sup> This would mean that the Platonic perspective on katharsis is to direct the emotions to their proper end; that the unleashing of emotions must be limited to the appropriate places, and to the appropriate times. The question, then, is whether or not Plato is seeking to do the same thing as Aristotle regarding katharsis. Elliot Bartky argues that, "Plato's quarrel with tragedy is not, then, with its erotic appeal but...with its inability to direct eros to its proper end."<sup>19</sup> Tragedy, according to Bartky's interpretation of Plato, is not flawed because it swells the emotions but because it improperly directs the emotions.

This improper direction is what leads Bartky to argue that, for Plato, tragedy is inferior to the epic poems of Homer in providing this direction. Bartky argues that,

The success of both tragedy and epic requires the catharsis of those pathological desires for family and property. Catharsis occurs when the fear and pity of the audience are aroused through the witnessing of the destruction of families and fortunes. Plato, recognizing that the subject matter of tragic poetry is the warfare which results in the destruction of families and fortunes, knows that Homer points beyond the common understanding of the war over families and fortunes. By arousing passions which the city had fought to suppress, especially the fear of death, Homer leads us to consider the failure of the city.<sup>20</sup>

While the aim here is not to juxtapose the thought of Plato and Aristotle on tragedy, Bartky's point is one to consider<sup>21</sup>, particularly with regard to Aristotle responding to Plato, because it

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<sup>18</sup> Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Bartky, "Plato and the Politics of Aristotle's 'Poetics,'" pg. 595.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 603.

<sup>21</sup> His contention of the 'pathological condition of family and fortune' must be understood as a Platonic perspective and not an Aristotelian one. Aristotle does not contend that the family and private property are things that

raises the issue of the political nature of poetry and whether the purpose of poetry should be political or apolitical. First, in this sense, katharsis seems to mean a different kind of cleansing than the numbing of the body toward emotional stimuli. Here, it seems to play both a pacifying and realigning role. Katharsis, from this Platonic perspective, is aimed at allowing the correct emotions to be released in order to aim the audience at something higher than their particular concerns. Therefore, the works of Homer are better at providing this ascension away from the particular and toward the universal. Bartky's contention that Homer's katharsis moves us toward fearing death and away from the divisions of the city would seem to indicate that Homer's work, in a sense, is post-political; it is attempting to shift the focus of the audience away from their contingent existence and toward a higher understanding of what it means to live. If this is the case, then it would follow that the Homeric poems are more aligned with Socratic philosophy inasmuch as it deals with political concerns but its aim is meta-political.

It is in this sense, in causing the audience to move away from their particular political concerns and toward the more universalistic life of the philosopher that Plato and Aristotle perhaps contrast most starkly. It is because the tragedians are able to swell both fear and pity toward the plight of the family, the fragility of fortune, and the contingent nature of man's existence that Aristotle argues that tragedy is better than epic poetry.<sup>22</sup> The scope of tragedy is narrower, which augments its ability to generate katharsis. To Plato, the appeal of the Homeric epic is to disconnect the individual from their particular political circumstance and connect them with the universality of their humanity. Aristotle, in contrast, utilizes the particularity of tragedy

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jeopardize the utilization of justice, whereas, Plato's discussion of the city in speech seem to indicate that these two things are hindrances to the application of true justice when a city is predicated on living with luxuries.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1149a 10-19. See also chapter 13 of the work for his discussion on the best way to generate the tragic effect.

to show that the localized circumstance illuminates a particular facet of the human condition.

This illumination makes the facet intelligible because it utilizes a specific political experience in order to generate pity and fear for one's own particular circumstance. Therefore, in this way, the purpose of poetry is more political for Aristotle than it is for Plato, and thus, tragedy is better than Homer.

Granting that Aristotle is responding to Plato's criticisms by making the poetry more political, the question still remains as to what the purpose of katharsis actually is. Leon Golden argues that katharsis is understood as a kind of intellectual clarification.<sup>23</sup> Here, Golden is arguing that the kathartic effect is not just to aim emotions toward their appropriate end, but to provide an intellectual clarity about a specific facet of the human condition. He states that the, "movement from the particular to the universal involves a learning process in that it renders clearer and more distinct the significance of the events presented in the work of art."<sup>24</sup> This learning process is a kind of ascension away from the particulars and toward the universal, and therefore, is something that is completely intellectual. The pleasures drawn from engaging with tragedy, therefore, are wholly intellectual pleasures.

The pleasures derived from tragedy are predicated on the relationship between the universal and the particular, and it is through understanding both that Aristotle says man has pleasure at the sight of the mimetic arts.<sup>25</sup> This pleasure is derived from our capacity to understand the form that the art is representing as well as the compositional elements that are specific to the expression of the artist. The example Aristotle gives is that of a painting; we

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<sup>23</sup> See Leon Golden, "Catharsis", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 93 (1962), pg. 51-60; Leon Golden, "Mimesis and Catharsis," *Classical Philology* 64 (1969), pg. 45-53.

<sup>24</sup> Golden, "Catharsis," pg. 54.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 5-10.

delight in seeing the painting for what it represents as well as the way it is represented, and that we receive a higher degree of pleasure if we have more knowledge of the represented subject.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, in order to fully appreciate the experience of the mimetic arts, one must have a baseline of knowledge that facilitates moving beyond the particulars of composition and into the quality of the representation presented by the artist. A failure to have this baseline of knowledge means that the mimetic experience is limited only to the expressive qualities of the art, which is an incomplete mimetic experience. The full experience requires an understanding of the content of the art in order to move beyond the particular art work and toward the form that the art is representing. The association between the particular and the universal, then, is both a prerequisite, since one must know what a particular art work is portraying to make the relationship intelligible, and a consequence, since the work of art is going to provide an insight into the relationship of the particular and the form, of engaging with the arts. Golden, then, is correct in his assertion that the mimetic arts, specifically tragedy, serve as a teaching agent since they generate a response in the observer that leads them from the particular piece of art and toward the form that the piece of art is representing.

When Aristotle's perspective is understood within the previously established political context of Greek poetry, Golden's assertion has an even stronger amount of validity. Poetic myth already existed as a baseline for the audiences of the Athenian polis, and therefore, the prerequisite threshold was already met. Therefore, tragedy is able to provide the audience an educational lens for understanding a particular event. Golden argues that,

The process of inference described by Aristotle "clarifies" the nature of the individual act

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 1448b 15-18.

by providing, through the medium of art, the means of ascending from the particular event witnessed to an understanding of its universal nature, and thus it permits us to understand the individual act more clearly and distinctly.<sup>27</sup>

This 'ascension from the particular to the universal' is aimed specifically at events that arouse pity and fear. Aristotle makes it explicitly clear that is the purpose of poetry six different times in the *Poetics*. What, then, is audience member being pointed toward? Is it simply the intellectual clarity that the tragedy provides in the ascension itself? This seems to be a particularly low threshold, given Golden's claim that Aristotle argues, "that the function of art is to bring about a clarification of reality. Thus art becomes a significant and respectable domain of philosophy."<sup>28</sup> If tragedy is a part of philosophy, and its goal is to teach us about the reality of fear and pity and cause us to ascend toward a higher realm of knowledge, what is the goal of that ascension? Before turning to this point, however, Martha Nussbaum adds one criticism that is vital to better understand the Aristotelian perspective on the purpose of poetry.

Nussbaum agrees that katharsis before Plato meant to 'purify' and that Plato's contribution was to transform the word to mean 'to clear' or to 'clarify'.<sup>29</sup> She goes beyond Golden's perspective, though, when she states

In the context of rhetoric and poetry, especially in a work written in reaction to Platonic criticism of the cognitive value of rhetoric and poetry, we would have strong reason not only to translate the word this way but also to think of the 'clearing up' in question as psychological, epistemological and cognitive, rather than as literally physical.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Golden, "Catharsis," pg. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pg. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pg. 338-390. She here is agreeing with Golden who makes the same argument in Leon Golden, "Catharsis", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 93 (1962), pg. 56-58.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pg. 389-90.

Nussbaum agrees with Golden's assertion that katharsis is a kind of clarification, but she notes that Aristotle is responding to the Platonic conception of intellectual clarification. To her, the Aristotelian perspective on katharsis rejects the notion of a purely intellectual clarification because of Aristotle's perspective on the emotions.<sup>31</sup> Her critique of Golden is insightful because it highlights that Aristotle does not view the emotions as being a purely intellectual experience.

While Golden argues that Aristotle's views katharsis as a way to ascend toward a more enlightened state of intellectual excellence, Nussbaum argues that this is far too Platonic. She sees Plato's criticism of poetry is both of the form of poetry and of the poet himself; that the form fails to move the audience toward knowledge and that the poet lacks a sense of self-reflective awareness that is necessary to ascend toward knowledge.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the lack of a philosophic underpinning within poetry means that it is incapable of aiming the audience toward the highest things in life, and is only able to arouse emotions without the benefit of providing the clarity that only philosophy can.

She argues that Aristotle rejects this Platonic notion of poetry, and therefore, Nussbaum argues that Aristotle's understanding of poetry is as a more holistic aesthetic experience. Aristotle, by maintaining the necessity of the emotional experience for human beings, presents a defense of poetry. She argues, "that for Aristotle appropriate [emotional] responses are intrinsically valuable parts of good character and can, like good intellectual responses, help to constitute the refined 'perception' which is the best sort of human judgment." The emotional responses one has toward a particular event is indicative of one's moral habituation, and therefore, the emotions are an essential part of the human condition. If katharsis was only an

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, pg. 381.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, pg. 395.

intellectual experience, it would necessarily reject the notion that the emotions play a vital role in the human experience, a position which Aristotle does not hold. However, this does not mean that katharsis is a purely emotional response either.

In order to assess what kind of reaction katharsis is, it is beneficial to return to Aristotle's understanding that the passions include a state of mind about one's place in the world.<sup>33</sup> To have such a cognitive awareness of one's place in the world is a uniquely human experience because it is drawn from our rational faculties. The kathartic release is rooted in this cognitive facet of the soul, but more specifically, is rooted in the part of the soul that directs the passions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the soul has both a rational and irrational component, and that the human virtues are tethered to the rational faculties.<sup>34</sup> The rational faculty is understood to be the cause of human action since it is the facet which utilizes reason to align actions to be in accord with virtue. The irrational part of the soul is divided into two pieces: the vegetative which has, "no share in human excellence"<sup>35</sup> and the appetitive which is only rational enough to follow the dictates of reason.<sup>36</sup> The rational facet of the soul is understood as the ability to use the 'rational principle'.<sup>37</sup> The question is where does kathartic clarification happen inside of the soul - Is it a purely intellectual, that being the part of the soul that is utilizing the rational principle? Is it in the appetitive part of the soul, meaning in the part of the soul that is able to follow the dictates of reason? Is it in the irrational, nutritive part of the soul?

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<sup>33</sup> See note 30-33.

<sup>34</sup> W.D. Ross, trans. *Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea*, found in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), pg. 950, line 1102a 26-32. All future citations will provide the name of the text and the line number only

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 1102b 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 1102b 30.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 1103a 1-3.

The last question, whether katharsis is within the irrational part of the soul, can be dismissed immediately since the nutritive part of the soul has no part in human excellence. However, the other two questions mark the distinction between the Golden and Nussbaum perspectives on katharsis. This distinction will also facilitate a better understanding of the purpose of poetry. It's been established that poetry serves an educational end, but to what end is still unclear. Nussbaum restores the vitality of emotional response to the Golden educative perspective, which rightly returns the tension between appetitive and rational facets of soul. Therefore, Nussbaum's argument that Aristotle's view of katharsis as a way to understand our 'perception' of who and what we are, is the most compelling. She claims,

That the pity and fear are not just tools of a clarification that is in and of the intellect alone; to respond in these ways is itself valuable, and a piece of clarification concerning who we are. It is a recognition of practical values, and therefore of ourselves, that is no less important than the recognitions and perceptions of intellect.<sup>38</sup>

By responding to tragedy with both fear of the actions and pity for the actors, the audience is provided a way to view themselves as human beings holistically, not just as intellectual creatures.

The role of the passions, particularly of fear and pity, serve as a critical foundation for Aristotle's entire ethical perspective, and therefore, it follows that his perspective on the passions with regard to poetry would serve a similar, critical foundation. The passions are not things to be purged or eliminated, but instead, are opportunities for human beings to learn about themselves. In essence, Golden's argument of the ascension toward knowledge is maintained, but here, the ascension is stripped of its Platonic overtones; the education of the soul toward the appropriate

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<sup>38</sup> Nussbaum, "The Fragility of Goodness," pg. 391.

response to the passions, that is moral virtue, is as important as the education of the soul toward intellect, that is intellectual virtue, for the human experience.

Before delving deeper into Aristotle's perspective on the purpose of poetry, it is essential to address the criticism of this Golden/Nussbaum argument and to evaluate the merits of the critique. Jonathan Lear contends that their position, while being true to certain facets of Aristotle's thought, is not truly reflective of it. He has a series of objections to the 'poetry as a moral educator' position. His first objection is with the notion that katharsis serves a purification or purgation role *vis-a-vis* the emotions since a virtuous person, who has no need for further emotional habituation, will still feel katharsis from a tragedy. His second objection is drawn from Aristotle's argument about music from the *Politics* and this use of katharsis it conflicts with the moral educator position. His third objection rejects the moral educative position because, he contends, that the events portrayed on the stage and events experienced in real life will not have the same emotional response. His fourth, and final, objection is that the moral educative perspective fails to explain the peculiar pleasure of tragedy.<sup>39</sup> These criticisms must be assessed against the moral educator perspective to see whether or not it is tenable. By defending the perspective, the inquiry will also assess whether or not Aristotle saw the purpose of poetry as a moral educator, and provide more clarity on the relationship between politics, education, and poetry.

Because music is a memetic art, the katharsis that comes music must be related to the katharsis created by tragedy, and therefore, I will address the second of Lear's objections first.<sup>40</sup> Aristotle opens book VIII of the *Politics* arguing that all people can, and should, be publically

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<sup>39</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 304.

<sup>40</sup> He actually does this himself. Without making it explicitly clear why he does this, his discussion is predicated on the same reason why I am exploring this objection first.

educated by the state because the individuals that comprise the state are intrinsically linked to the purpose of politics, that is, to live well.<sup>41</sup> The subsequent discussion of music education, its origin, development, and utilization within the polis cannot be disconnected from this broader understanding of the purpose of the city. Lear's discussion of musical katharsis, however, seems to be devoid of this broader context. He claims that

Aristotle explicitly says that although one should use all the different types of melodies, one should not use them for the same function. And when he says that music may be used 'for the sake of education and of katharsis', he is unambiguously listing different benefits that may be derived from music.<sup>42</sup>

The passage Lear specifically is addressing I have mentioned previously<sup>43</sup> but it is worth re-visiting some of the passage here. Specifically, Aristotle says that music education has three purposes, "(1) education, (2) katharsis, (3) intellectual enjoyment."<sup>44</sup> Lear also cites Aristotle's claim that, "It is clear, therefore, that all the modes must be employed by us, but not all of them in the same manner."<sup>45</sup> Even though Aristotle makes a distinction between the educational, kathartic, and intellectual enjoyment of music, it all still falls within the overarching purpose of public education whose aim is to teach people to live well. The issue, however, is derived from understanding katharsis as a kind of clarification that serves an educational purpose. Lear's first criticism, in essence, contends that because Aristotle makes a clear distinction between the moral educative modes of music and the kathartic modes, the two cannot serve the same end. On the surface, Lear's criticism seems to have strong merit because the distinction between the two modes seems to be predicated on a distinction between two ends. However, viewing katharsis as

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<sup>41</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337a 25-30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 305.

<sup>43</sup> See note 21.

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341b 35-37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 1342a 1-2.

a kind of emotional or intellectual point of clarification does not prevent it from serving an educational function even if its end is not purely educational. Within this understanding, the moral modes are aimed at teaching people to be virtuous, that is, to have a perspective toward the world that is aligned with right reason. The kathartic modes, then, are aimed at developing one's own sense of self as it relates to the emotional arousal of the passions.

Going further, Aristotle argues that katharsis is latent in the human experience and is connected to our emotional nature. He says,

Those who are influenced by pity and fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner clarified and their souls lightened and delighted. The clarifying melodies likewise give an innocent pleasure to mankind. Such are the modes and melodies in which those who perform music at the theatre should be invited to compete.<sup>46</sup>

This passage indicates that one cannot disconnect what Aristotle says in the *Politics* from what he says in the *Poetics*.<sup>47</sup> Katharsis, then, cannot be understood as being the same as education, but to say that clarity serves no educational purpose is incorrect. Instead, they should be understood as different facets that interconnect with one another. Each mode serves its particular function, and has its own particular end, but the end of the entire enterprise is still the education of the individual in music for the purpose of living well. Beyond this, Aristotle is arguing that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 1342a 12-16. I have changed the Jowett translation of katharsis to "purge" or "purgation" to "clarify" or "clarification" in order to avoid unnecessary confusion.

<sup>47</sup> This is the point of view made famous by G.F. Else's work *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957) and perpetuated by Golden in his, "Catharsis", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 93 (1962), pg. 56-58. Lear correctly points out that this is not a proper way to address the Aristotelian body of work, but instead, we must understand the corpus as being interconnected. See Jonathan Lear, "Katharsis," *Phronesis* 33 (1988), pg. 299. For a discussion of how Aristotle's methodology is consistent in the *Poetics* with his biological works, see also B.R. Rees, "Aristotle's Approach to Poetry," *Greece & Rome* 28 (April, 1981), pg. 23-39. In particular, he discusses the way that Aristotle divides the mimetic arts into different genus and species aligns well with his methodology presented in the biological works. This places the *Poetics* within the phronetic works (*Ethics* and *Politics*) and not within the epistemic works, and therefore, it must be understood as aiming people toward human action and not toward an epistemic truth.

katharsis, specifically the emotional release, is an enjoyable experience for all people. This indicates that the kathartic modes function on those who are either base or noble, educated and not. This is the foundation of Lear's second criticism in the second objection on the moral education position.

Lear contends that because Aristotle makes a distinction between audience types, this rules out the ability for katharsis to have the same project as education. He states that

Aristotle contrasts two types of audience: the vulgar crowd composed of artisans and laborers on the one hand, and those who are free and *have already been educated* on the other. In each case the characters of the audience have been formed and ethical education would be either futile or superfluous.<sup>48</sup>

Lear is using the Aristotelian cleavage between the virtuous and vulgar audience members out of its context. Aristotle argues that any public performance inherently is going to vulgarize the music that is performed<sup>49</sup> since the performance is not done to enhance the excellence of the performer but for the sake of the emotional experience of the audience. Therefore, when Aristotle is speaking of education, it is critical to keep in consideration that Aristotle is speaking of the education of an instrument for its own sake, and that through this education, one is made more virtuous. Music heard in performance is inherently more vulgar than that produced by oneself for its own sake, and therefore, the kathartic mode is more vulgar than the educational modes. This vulgarity, however, does not preclude katharsis from being involved in education since it shares in the overall purpose of being educated in music, which falls within the parameters of the necessary public education. Lear's assertion, then, that katharsis cannot be educative is based upon a distinction between the musical modes which he, in turn, makes into a

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<sup>48</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 305.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341b 15-18.

distinction between the ends of the modes. The musical modes serve different functions but they serve the same end, namely, educating individuals toward living well in political society.

Katharsis is not the same as the moral education provided by learning to play an instrument because katharsis is not something one actively does. However, it can serve as an educational tool for the passive reception of a music performance because it provides clarity for a person's emotional state of mind *vis-a-vis* the passions just like tragedy does. Lear's objection that katharsis is not the same as education is, on the surface, an accurate statement but does not take into consideration the overarching purpose of music education itself, namely facilitating people to live well in a political system, nor the possibility that there be a tiered-educational structure that exists between the action of playing music and the reception of hearing music. I will return to this issue later when I discuss the relationship between virtue, action, and plot as well as the relationship between equity and poetry.

Lear's next objection is whether or not the virtuous audience member would benefit from the katharsis of tragedy given that a virtuous person has no need for additional moral education. Lear contends that, "the proper tragic plot would be appreciated and enjoyed above all by a cultured person. It is hard to escape the conclusion that, for Aristotle, education is for youths, tragic katharsis is for educated, cultivated adults."<sup>50</sup> This is predicated on the idea that one who is already virtuous is best going to appreciate the arts because they are going to be able to best enjoy all things in life; this is without doubt. However, his contention that education is only for youths is doubtful.

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<sup>50</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 306.

Aristotle contends that youth is not the only factor when assessing the value of education, and that youth is not predicated in years of life, but in the perspective on life. In book one of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, he argues that,

Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on political science; for he is inexperienced in actions that occur in life, but its discussions start from these and are about these; and, further, since he tends to follow his passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable, because the end aimed at is not knowledge but action. And it makes no difference whether he is young in years or youthful in character; the defect does not depend on time, but on his living, and pursuing each successive object, as passion directs. For to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit; but to those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of great benefit.<sup>51</sup>

To study the political arts, whose end is practical wisdom (*phronesis*) of how to live, is predicated on the student understanding when to curb one's desires. This is the distinction between one who is properly habituated and one who is youthful. One that has become properly habituated understands that the inquiry into *phronesis* is inherently going to be more vague than the inquiry into the sciences and it is not going to produce prescriptive accounts of events<sup>52</sup> nor is it going to facilitate direct action when one is swelled to act. For example, a political activist would make a poor student of politics because their purpose for the inquiry is not to gain knowledge about the best way to live, but instead, is aimed at acquiring knowledge to advance a particular political position. They are incontinent. They have not developed the appropriate alignment with proper reason to understand that their behaviors are brutish, and thus, are not actually aimed at the best a human being can achieve. This, however, means that education is not just reserved for the young but also those that lack self-control; both will benefit from moral education.

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<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1095a 3-11

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 1094b 25-30.

Those that are young, both in age and in perspective, lack self-control and therefore benefit from moral education, but this does not answer the criticism of how katharsis affects those who are already virtuous. Lear's assertion that the virtuous person is going to enjoy the pleasures of poetry more is absolutely true because they are able to understand the appropriate way to respond to the emotional developments of the productions. However, this presumes the only thing one can gain from tragedy is the emotional experience. This is problematic, particularly given Aristotle's methodology which begins by assessing the particulars of his time and using them to understand the cause of actions. From the opening of the *Nichomachean Ethics* to his inquiry into regime forms in the *Politics*, Aristotle's methodology into phronesis begins with empirical observation, moves to compilation, and then to assessment. His methodology indicates that his arguments have their origins in an inquiry into the intellectual paradigm of his times, even if he goes on to provide a criticism of the opinions, customs, and values of that very paradigm. Thus, for Aristotle to argue that the only experience one receives at the theatre is an emotional one could not be drawn from the empirical arguments of his times, as established above. His argument would have to be derived from a non-empirical source. The only way that this would be possible is through a series of syllogisms that Aristotle does not spell out, and therefore, it would be difficult to assume that this is Aristotle's perspective. Also, this seemingly contradicts the way Aristotle handles the emotions in the *Rhetoric*.

Unless Aristotle is intending to disconnect his understanding of the emotions from the *Rhetoric* with his discussions of the emotions in the *Poetics* and *Nichomachean Ethics*, it is not possible that the kathartic experience of music is purely emotional. The virtuous person must benefit in a different way. Since they are already virtuous, it follows that their emotional reaction to the events will be done for the correct reason and with the correct magnitude, and therefore,

the kathartic release will not generate a useful clarification. If, however, that kathartic release was also connected to their intellectual capacities, which it must be since katharsis deals with emotions, then the virtuous person would benefit from the kathartic release through an intellectual reflection on the best actions for human being.

Therefore, Lear's assertion that education is limited only to the young is incorrect - those that lack self-control also will benefit from education, but so too will the virtuous human being gain from poetry because they have the moral foundation which allows for a higher level of inquiry into the way one should live. This kind of education, the intellectual education, is where Golden and Nussbaum do not extend their argument far enough; katharsis, as a form of clarification, serves to enhance moral education by forcing the individual to assess whether or not their emotional response to the events is appropriate, but it also allows the virtuous person to enjoy the mimetic art as an intellectual inquiry into the condition of man. I will speak on this again further in the essay, but it is critical to point out that Lear denies that katharsis plays a role in the moral education of people, and thus, must contend that katharsis exists purely as a pleasure with no other end. Given that Aristotle rejects this as a possibility for correct human action, his criticism is flawed.

The next criticism to address is Lear's assertion that there is a disconnect between events portrayed on the stage and events experienced in real life. This is predicated on Aristotle arguing that we receive pleasure from seeing the events of tragedy. Lear contends that if we were to view these mimetic events actually transpire, we would not derive any pleasure from the experience.<sup>53</sup> He argues that,

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<sup>53</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 306.

Thus there is a sense in which tragedy provides a poor training for the emotional responses of real life; first, we should not be trained to seek out tragedy in real life, as we do seek it in the theatre; second, we should not be trained to find any pleasure in real life tragic events, as we do find pleasure in the tragic portrayals of the poets.<sup>54</sup>

His assertion that we should not seek out tragic events is an inappropriate utilization of the word "tragedy." Elizabeth Vandiver contends that the Greek word *tragôidia* would be better understood as a reference to the form of the artwork, not to the content.<sup>55</sup> Thus, one could not seek out, in this sense, *tragôidia* in real life anymore than one could seek out 'play' or 'movie.' While Aristotle does argue that the content of tragedy, compared with comedy, is more serious and deals with more noble things<sup>56</sup>, these things do not need violence to actually be effective. Aristotle argues that *Iphigenia in Tauris* is reflective of the best kind of tragedy because the recognition of error does not require the use of violence.<sup>57</sup> Tragedy generates fear and pity through its form, which is not dependent on its content. The latter being a reflection of the kinds of characters the poets have chosen to write about, namely those who are noble,<sup>58</sup> whereas the former is a particular kind of artistic form that facilitates the poets to tell stories about noble characters.

This, however, does not answer the issue of the pleasure derived from tragedy, which is Lear's final criticism to address. Lear argues, from his third criticism, that tragedy generates pleasure even as it portrays others in events that would be horrifying if they took place in reality. This, however, is problematic. Aristotle defines tragedy as

A representation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pg. 306.

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Vandiver, "Tragedy Defined," The Great Courses *Greek Tragedy*.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 25-30.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 1454a 5-10.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 1448b 25.

parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.<sup>59</sup>

The purpose of the tragedy is to generate pity and fear since these two emotions are associated with those things that are serious, and noble, through a complete action of the characters. This allows for the katharsis of the emotions. The pleasure is gained through the katharsis experience. However, what provides the pleasure? Lear, again, inappropriately blends the form with the content. The form of tragedy is predicated on the plot,<sup>60</sup> which is a representation of a complete human action. It is through the mimesis that we receive the pleasure because it allows our intellect to be active.<sup>61</sup> Specifically regarding the case of tragedy, the audience is able to perceive the completeness of human action - the causes of the events are intelligible to us and not derived from chance.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the nobility that underlay the content of tragedy, namely those things that are serious in nature, generate fear and pity in the audience for the characters that endure serious events. The emotional generation is not connected to the pleasure derived from tragedy. The pleasure one experiences is being able to understand that the cause of a particular event is derived from human action, not from chance. Katharsis is experiencing the gravity of the events presented in tandem with understanding that they are caused by human action. The pleasure is not seeing suffering but understanding the cause of the suffering. Lear's criticism that understanding katharsis as an educative agent causes an inappropriate understanding of how to behave in real life situations is based in an incorrect assessment of what makes a tragedy tragic.

Lear does provide his own conception of katharsis and this must be assessed before returning back to the Golden/Nussbaum argument and seeing whether or not the educational

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 1449b 25-29.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 1449b35-1450a 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 1448b 5-10.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 1453b 10-15.

perspective is, in fact, a viable one. Lear contends that katharsis must meet a series of seven criteria that are predicated on his rejection of the previous understandings of katharsis. The criteria are:

- (1) There is reason for a virtuous man to experience the performance of a tragedy: he too will experience a katharsis of pity and fear.
- (2) Tragic katharsis cannot be a process that is essentially and crucially corrective: that is, it cannot be a purgation, insofar as purgation is of something pathological or noxious; it cannot be a purification of some pollution; it cannot be an education of the emotions.
- (3) What one feels at the performance of tragedy is not what one *would* or *should* feel in the real life counterpart.
- (4) A proper audience does not lose sight of the fact that it is enjoying the performance of a tragedy.
- (5) The mere expression or release of emotions is not in itself pleasurable.
- (6) Katharsis provides a relief: it is either itself pleasurable or it helps to explain the proper pleasure that is derived from tragedy.
- (7) The events which in a tragedy properly provoke the pity and fear from which tragic katharsis occurs must be such that the audience believes that such events could happen to them.<sup>63</sup>

His first two criteria are linked together because the second criterion is predicated on the validity of the first. Therefore, these two will be addressed in tandem. The third through seventh also work as a unit. This is because the third makes a distinction between the emotions one feels within the theatre compared to those felt outside of the theatre. The inquiry into this block of criteria, then, will be predicated on this distinction.

To the first criteria, it is clear that Aristotle sees katharsis as being a universal human experience.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Lear's criterion here is correct. Katharsis must be something that is a universal human response to the events of a tragedy, and must be able to affect both the virtuous and the vulgar in kind. This leads to the second criterion, which indicates that katharsis must not

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<sup>63</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg 314-16; 321.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1342a 12-16

be something that is corrective since it must apply to both the virtuous and vulgar - what does a virtuous person need to be corrected on? Here, Lear argues that,

The virtuous man is not a pathological condition, nor is he polluted with some impure element which needs to be removed. Nor is he in need of any further training of the emotions: indeed, it is because he is already disposed to respond appropriately to the situations of life, both in judgment, action and emotion, that he is virtuous.<sup>65</sup>

He is correct in his criticism of the assertion that katharsis is a purging or purification of the emotions as well as his claim that the virtuous man does not need further education in the emotions. This last point, however, does not preclude that katharsis can serve as an educative tool even for the virtuous man since the purpose of katharsis is not to educate the emotions directly, but instead, to facilitate a reflection within the individual as a self-clarification, either emotionally or intellectually.

This leads to the third criterion that the emotions generated by a tragedy are not the same emotions generated by seeing the same events transpire in one's own life. This however, is flawed, and thus, undermines the effectiveness of using the subsequent criteria as the foundation for a new understanding of katharsis. The point that the association between the events represented in the tragedy compared to the events that transpire in reality must generate a different kind of emotional response is flawed. The mimetic arts are designed to be reflective of reality, and it is in this reflection that we find the appropriate pleasure.<sup>66</sup> The pleasure is derived from acknowledging the relationship between the representation and the reality. This pleasure, in the case of tragedy, is found in the form of the play because the causes of the events are intelligible to the audience. The events are as horrifying if one observes them as a representation or in actuality; the pleasure is derived from understanding the causes of the events. Therefore,

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<sup>65</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 315.

<sup>66</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 5-10.

tragedy isn't designed to teach one a pleasure associated with watching horrifying events. Rather, tragedy is designed to be a mime of the potential real world. In light of this, the third criterion, which establishes a cleave between the world of tragedy and real life, is fundamentally flawed.

His fourth criterion, that the release of an emotion itself cannot be the pleasure from tragedy, is correct but his reasoning for this is flawed. It is predicated on the notion that the emotions are generated in real life differently than they are in the theatre; that to experience something fearful in the former is qualitatively different than experiencing it in the latter. This, however, seems to contradict Aristotle's notion<sup>67</sup>, and Lear's own seventh criteria, that one must believe that the events portrayed on stage can actually happen to the individual. The emotions that are generated, then, are paralleled inside or outside of the theatre. If one must believe that the events of *Medea* could happen to oneself, then the associated pity one has for the characters and the fear one has of the events is connected to the fact that one may endure the events themselves. The emotional response to the tragedy is predicated on the blurring of the lines between the representation and reality. If this is not the case, and the emotions that are aroused are not genuine to reality, then the kathartic effect only serves as a pleasure derived from entertainment, and it means that Aristotle is wrong in his assertion that we enjoy the mimetic arts for their representation of reality.

This notion, however, violates the idea that the emotions are not simply the feelings associated with the particular passion, but are also connected to a state of mind.<sup>68</sup> For the audience member to actually have their passions aroused, they have to believe that the events that they are seeing are believable, so much so that they believe they could happen to them.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 1453a 5-6.

<sup>68</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, 1378a 20-21

Therefore, the notion that the kind of emotional response that happens in the theatre is different from that outside of the theatre is fundamentally flawed, both from Aristotle's perspective but it also doesn't align with Lear's own seventh criterion. However, the fact that the audience member must always be aware of the fact that they are engaging with a work of mimesis is a correct one.

He contends that,

Tragic poetry provides an arena in which one can imaginatively experience the tragic emotions; the performance of a play 'captures our souls.' However, it is crucial to the pleasure we derive from tragedy, that we never lose sight of the fact that we are an audience, enjoying a work of art. Otherwise the pleasurable katharsis of pity and fear would collapse into the merely painful experience of those emotions.<sup>69</sup>

The emotions of pity and fear are painful emotions<sup>70</sup>, which affirms the correctness of his fifth criterion. If any pleasure is to be associated with their arousal, it is through the understanding that the audience is not, in actuality, enduring the events that are transpiring on the stage. The emotions the audience is feeling are not qualitatively different simply because they are derived from an artwork; the emotions that they are feeling are genuine. However, the fact that they are able to engage with them through observing another mired in a painful situation allows the audience to move beyond feeling the painful emotions, and experience something greater.

Therefore, in response to his sixth criterion, the pleasure comes from understanding that the mistakes (*hamartia*) made by the tragic hero have a discernible cause to the audience member.<sup>71</sup>

The pity one feels for the suffering of Oedipus is genuine, and the fear one feels is derived from the association between the character traits of the audience member and Oedipus's character traits; these are painful things to endure. The pleasure comes from understanding that Oedipus's *hamartia* is derived from his nature; it is intelligible to the audience member that Oedipus is the

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<sup>69</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 325.

<sup>70</sup> For fear, see Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, 1382a 20-21. For pity, see *ibid*, 1385b 12-15.

<sup>71</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a 16-17.

cause of his own downfall.<sup>72</sup> This does not take place in reality; suffering and hardship may affect anyone by chance.<sup>73</sup> This is why the audience must remember that they are watching a representative art - they are able to understand the causes of actions, which provides pleasure whereas in reality, there is no guarantee that suffering will ever be intelligible.

Lear, then, is correct when he asserts that, "The world of tragic events must, Aristotle repeatedly insists, be rational. The subject of tragedy may be a good man, but he must make a mistake which rationalizes his fall."<sup>74</sup> This intelligibility is derived from the form of tragedy because it is an account of a full human action. The cause and effect of the hamartia are presented in their entirety, and thus, are intelligible to the audience member. This intelligibility is the pleasure derived from the tragic form. Lear, however, contends that *Oedipus* is the "paradigm tragedy" which indicates that

In Aristotle's conception of tragedy, the individual actor takes on the burden of badness, the world as a whole is absolved...that even when they are responsible for their misfortunes, humans remain capable of conducting themselves with dignity and nobility.<sup>75</sup>

This assertion, however, is incorrectly founded. Aristotle argues that *Oedipus Rex* is the most effective at generating the tragic effect because of the sensational nature of the events, but not that is the best form of tragedy. For this, as already noted, is exemplified by plays such as *Iphigenia in Tauris*. It is better in its form because it does not require the vulgar sensationalism

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 1453a 8-17.

<sup>73</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1110a 5-9. Here, Aristotle is talking about the fragility of happiness because of the randomness of some events in life. In particular he speaks of Priam and the way in which his fortunes were destroyed, not of his own hamartia but because of unforeseen chance. See also ibid, 1099b 1-8 and 1101a 8-11. In both cases, Aristotle is again talking about the relationship between happiness and chance. Happiness is dependent upon a certain level of material and physical well-being which can be destroyed by chance, and thus, mar one's ability to engage in noble acts, such as the case, again, with Priam. This is unintelligible to us because we cannot understand the causes which perpetuate chance.

<sup>74</sup> Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 325.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pg. 325-26.

that the violence of the Oedipus story does; rather, it ends with both tragic heroes being able to continue to live their lives.<sup>76</sup> Instead, the tragic effect is generated by the form of the play. Lear's assertion that the tragic hero bears the 'burden of badness' inappropriately conflates the content of tragedy with the form. The form generates the tragic experience, not the content. What Aristotle indicates is that the plot of Oedipus is capable of generating much more pity and fear than other tragedies, but that it is not the best in form which means that katharsis is not predicated on the onus of the events but in the cohesiveness of the plot.

Ultimately, Lear rightly points out that the virtuous person is going to also benefit from the kathartic experience and that katharsis is not the same moral education. He is incorrect in that katharsis cannot serve a educative function, for it does. Also, he does not provide an adequate new definition of what katharsis is because his perspective is predicated on a flawed foundation. Thus, Lear fails to provide a sufficient rebuttal to the moral education perspective. However, his criticisms do provide insights into where the Golden/Nussbaum perspective can be, and should be, enhanced.

Katharsis, then, is understood as the pleasure the audience feels after a particular emotion has been aroused and released in a intelligible way that is derived from the form of the mimetic art. In the case of both music and tragedy, katharsis is derived not from the creation of the art but from the reception of it - for music, in listening to a performance; for tragedy, in observing the events of the play. This means that katharsis is produced when one is passively receiving the product of another's actions, and therefore, is inherently more vulgar than producing the art for its own sake. Katharsis must serve a particular purpose that is outside of *praxis* but still within the realm of education broadly since katharsis is included as one of the benefits from music

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<sup>76</sup> See note 67.

education. The purpose cannot be to purge or purify the emotions since, for Aristotle, the emotions are not just feelings but states of mind. It, however, is not a purely rational experience because the emotions must be aroused as a prerequisite.

Katharsis, then, is an experience that comes from interacting with the mimetic arts, built upon the emotional arousal from them, and is connected to our delight in seeing those things that are mimetic. It is a combination of the intellectual enjoyment of seeing a representation of life in art and the pacification of the aroused emotions through an understanding of the connection between the particular piece of art and the universal condition of man that the art is reflecting. Therefore, katharsis should be understood as a kind of clarification, both emotionally and intellectually, that one experiences when interacting with the mimetic arts. It is aligned with education, but not education in itself. Instead, katharsis is the natural human reaction to mimesis that is able to serve as a bridge between the vulgar experience of receiving the poesis of another and self-reflection. This self-reflection serves either as the foundation to pursue moral education or the beginning of an intellectual inquiry into the universal condition of man that the poesis is representing.

## EQUITY AND THE PURPOSE OF POEISIS

Even establishing the political condition of poetry and a working definition of katharsis, the fundamental question still remains: what is the purpose of poetry? The use of katharsis as one of the purposes of the mimetic arts indicates that Aristotle saw the performance of a tragedy to be a fully aesthetic experience since katharsis serves both an emotional and intellectual function. He argues that the emotional outpouring is the more vulgar tragic experience because the virtuous individual will utilize katharsis as a foundation for reflection on the human condition. What purpose, however, would this reflection serve other than pure intellectual pleasure? Aristotle explicitly does not allow the end of virtuous activity to be only pleasure<sup>1</sup> and therefore, the function of this self-reflection must be aimed at a different end. One potential purpose could be causing the virtuous person to look beyond their political conventions and toward what is best for a human being in an unqualified sense. This establishes a tension between the particular political reality and the universal human condition. This tension is the foundation for the subsequent exploration of why Aristotle argues that history is less philosophic than poetry, on the role of justice regarding the moral and intellectual virtues, and on the relationship between equity and poeisis. This exploration's purpose is to explore why this tension is so prevalent in Aristotle's thought, and how that tension shapes Aristotle's understanding of the purpose of poeisis, and how that purpose is illuminative regarding the moral and intellectual virtues.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b 20

Aristotle contends that history is less philosophic than poetry because it only accounts for particular human actions, and therefore, lacks an insight into the universal human condition. He argues

[history] describes the thing that has been, and [poetry] a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of a graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.<sup>2</sup>

The particularized nature of history means that it is unable to look beyond the specific toward the universal. Poetry, on the other hand, is able to speak about universal conditions through particular character's actions, and thus, in this way, is more philosophic. History is an amalgamation of particulars without regard to a guiding principle (*arche*) whereas poetry is predicated on the *arche*.

For poetry to be more philosophical than history, it is critical for the *arche* to be consistent throughout the work. Malcolm Heath argues that the universal is understood as, "the sense that what happens in accordance with necessity or probability (or in other words, always for the most part) instantiates general principles."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the *arche* here are not eternal truths, but, instead, are consistent actions of the characters within the work which portray some specific facet of the human condition. In this way, poetry represents the beginning, middle, and end of an action because we are able to see the *arche* through the episodic interaction of the characters.

Heath continues that Aristotle

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; so for Aristotle, too, the action of tragedy or epic is an interaction.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b 5-8.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Heath, "The Universality of Poetry in Aristotle's *Poetics*," *Classical Quarterly* 41 (1991), pg. 389.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 389.

Actions require interactions, which is the foundation of why Aristotle argues that plots are more essential to tragedy than character.<sup>5</sup> The causes of actions are only made intelligible when they are placed within the natural context of human life.

An example of this comes from Sophocles' account of Antigone. It displays her as a character driven by an extreme religiosity so her subsequent actions should be aligned with the form of someone who is extremely religious. Therefore, when she violates the decree of her uncle that prohibits her from burying her brother, her actions are connected back to the driving principle. Her actions, as standalone events devoid of interaction, are unintelligible. However, once they are placed within the context of her uncle's actions, her *arche* is clarified. Her *hamartia* is derived from the *arche*, which is made intelligible to the audience through the progression of the plot. History lacks this account of the *arche* and the intelligibility of why certain actors engage with one another, either through necessity or probability, because it lacks a guiding structure for the interaction of the characters.

Poetry's superiority to history, then, is due to the plot. Aristotle argues that the plot is, in essence, the *arche* of tragedy. He says

We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is the Plot; and that the Characters come second - compare the parallel in painting where the most beautiful colors laid on without order will not give one the same pleasure as a simple black-and-white sketch of a portrait. We maintain that Tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it [represents] the personal agents.<sup>6</sup>

Characters, in a sense, are parallel to the particulars of history. They provide meaning to the plot's development of tragedy, but in isolation, they are devoid of purpose. The plot, which shows the actions and interactions of the characters, is what provides tragedy its meaning and

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a 26-29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 1449b 38-1450a 5.

facilitates its overall purpose of tragedy. Without the structure provided by plot, the characters' interactions would be as chaotic and purposeless as those interactions in history, and therefore, would provide no insight into the universals of the human condition. Poetry would become an artificial history, and thus, would no longer be more philosophic than history. It would also mean that human interaction is inherently unintelligible since even the creative representations of our actions are devoid of intelligible purpose.

Poetry and history, however, are not completely disconnected from one another. B.L. Ullman argues that poetry and history are both aimed at providing an insight into the true nature of human life. The distinction between history and poetry is that poetry is able to provide an account for the foundations of the actions and therefore is superior.<sup>7</sup> History serves the purpose of giving an account of events that did take place, poetry gives an account of things that could have taken place. This is why Aristotle argues Homer was so effective with his account of the Trojan War. He says

We have a further proof of Homer's marvelous superiority to the rest. He did not attempt to deal even with the Trojan war in its entirety, thought it was a whole with a definite beginning and end...he has singled out one section of the whole...<sup>8</sup>

The Homeric epics are successful because they do not attempt to provide an accurate, historical account of the myriad events that took place over the decade long war. Instead, they focus on the actions of a few, in a narrowed space of time, because they are attempting to highlight something specific about the human condition.

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<sup>7</sup> See B.L Ullman, "History and Tragedy," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 73 (1942), pg. 27-32 for a discussion on Isocrates and the way that history and tragedy became meshed in Greece. Ullman contends that this meshing undermines the effect of tragedy, and the accuracy of history, by trying to fuse the two together into a tragic history. This, he argues, undermines the universal nature of tragedy and the particular account necessary for history. This, therefore, then destroys the educational value of both mediums because it confuses their distinct purposes.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a 31-36.

This desire to understand the causes of the human condition, Aristotle argues, is latent in our nature,<sup>9</sup> and is also what makes human beings distinct from other animals.<sup>10</sup> Contemplation is what makes us more divine.<sup>11</sup> To utilize this contemplative capacity and seek out arche, then, is the purpose of philosophy. Since history only provides an account, no matter how thorough, of particular events and does not look toward the arche, history is less contemplative, and therefore, is less philosophical than poetry. Poetry, a representation of a complete human action, starts with the arche and is developed episodically after that.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the creation of poetry begins from a more philosophical foundation and is also more philosophic in its form. The arche is intelligible because tragedy contains an identifiable cause and effect structure where the events of the play are derived from human action and not from chance.

However, it is critical to establish that poetry is not philosophy, nor is it aimed at the same purpose as philosophy. It is clear from the discussion of katharsis that the mimetic arts are not aimed at providing explanations of arche. The purpose of tragedy is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and release them in a way that brings clarity.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of music is to educate, clarify, and bring intellectual enjoyment.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of painting is to enjoy the association between the particular of the work and the form that it represents.<sup>15</sup> None of these things are the

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<sup>9</sup> W.D. Ross, trans., *Aristotle Metaphysica*, found in in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), pg. 689, line 980a . Unless otherwise noted, all citations will come from the Ross translation. All future citations will provide the name of the text and the line number only.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, line 980b 25-981a 5.

<sup>11</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b 22-24. Here, Aristotle contends that the gods would be contemplative because it is the thing connected most closely to the form. See also Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 1072b 14-28. Here, Aristotle contends that thinking "in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thinking in the fullest sense which that which is best in the fullest sense." From here, he concludes that God is a being which is contemplative in nature, a nature with which we are able to sometimes participate.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1455b 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 1449b 25-28.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341b 35-1342a 1.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b 10-15.

purpose of philosophy, which is to seek out first principles. The contemplative life, which is necessary for philosophy, is predicated on one being morally virtuous. The life of a poet does not have to be morally virtuous nor is the creation of poetry a product of the contemplative life.

Aristotle is clear that the virtues, both moral and intellectual, are superior to the mimetic arts because the virtues are actions and poetry is a product of an action.<sup>16</sup> This, however, is somewhat problematic. Given that poetry is derived from using contemplative virtue to construct plots, thus making both the creative act and the creative product aligned, in a sense, with philosophy, it is curious why Aristotle places the mimetic arts below the contemplative and moral virtues. It is beneficial to examine Aristotle's argument and see the nature of this tension and what it can tell us about the purpose poetry.

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is clear that the arts are inferior to the virtues because the former are done to produce something else whereas the later are done for their own sake. He says

Again, the case of the arts and that of their virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately.<sup>17</sup>

If one were to create a piece of art that is excellent, it would be identified as having an excellent representation of the source, excellent color, excellent line, etc. The excellence of the art is not found in the creation (*poesis*) of the art (*techne*) but in the art itself. The virtues, however, are virtuous because they make one excellent by doing them. The virtues, therefore, are sought out for their own sake because their excellence exists within the practice of the virtue whereas the productive arts are aimed at creating something that has an excellence in the product. This is due

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1105a 26 - 1105b 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 1105a 26-26-30.

to the fact that self-sufficiency is the most important evaluative standard for assessing the nobility of an activity. For example, he argues in the *Metaphysics* that God is going to seek out the most self-sufficient activity, contemplation, because it is the highest thing that can be done for its own sake.<sup>18</sup> He also establishes self-sufficiency as one of the defining characteristics for happiness and why it is the telos of human action.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, because mimesis is not done for its own sake but for the sake of the product, it is more vulgar than seeking out virtue for its own sake. Mimesis, then, cannot be the highest activity for human beings, nor can its aim be the highest for human beings. The productive arts are those which are necessary to human life, but are not those which allow for the highest excellence unique to human life.

One difficulty arises, however, when presented with the question of how one should live their life. Aristotle argues that politics serve as the best form of action (*praxis*) of a human being but also that the contemplative life is the best life a human being can lead. If one is a politician, their aspiration is to create laws that are aligned with virtue, which is drawn from having practical wisdom (*phronesis*).<sup>20</sup> Phronesis is the utilization of the correct action at the correct time for the correct reason, and, as it relates to the practical sciences, is essential for virtue.<sup>21</sup> If one is engaging in the contemplative life, one is aiming at the knowledge (*episteme*) of arche. The contemplative life is disconnected from the practical facets of political life. Both are referred to as the best lives a human being can live, but the two are in conflict with one another. A life predicated on phronesis is going to give one wisdom for utilizing virtue to lead an excellent life whereas the contemplative life is going to give one wisdom of arche for its own sake. This

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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b 23-29.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b 1-10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 1103b 4-6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 1144a 7-9.

tension, between politics and philosophy, again mirrors the tension between the particular and the form. Aristotle's hierarchy of knowledge is predicated on this tension, with *techne* being the lowest, *poiesis* being the next highest, *phronesis* being the next, and *episteme* being the highest. However, this knowledge hierarchy becomes even more problematic when attempting to assess the purpose of poetry since it seems to be derived from the second lowest rung but associated with the highest.

This hierarchy is also present in Aristotle's distinction between the moral virtues and the intellectual virtues. Aristotle's ethics are concerned with evaluating the excellence of a particular action (moral virtue) and in knowing the universal principle (intellectual virtue) that is to be applied. The intellectual hierarchy, then, is predicated on this distinction between what is best for the nonrational and rational parts of the soul.<sup>22</sup> The appetitive part of the nonrational soul is what is educated in regard to the moral virtues, and thus, is going to be more vulgar than intellectual virtue. Human beings are excellent in their intellectual capacities since this is what is divine.<sup>23</sup> The moral virtues, being more base than the intellectual virtues, still serve a vital role in human life, and, in some ways, are more essential to it, but fall into the *phronesis* rung and not the *episteme*. Aristotle, however, seems use to equity as a bridge to address this tension.

He contends that equity exists to fill in the gap between universal justice and the particular just act. Equity is defined as, "a correction of law where it is defective owing to its

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<sup>22</sup> See Jess Moss, "'Virtue Makes the Goal Right': Virtue and *Phronesis* in Aristotle's Ethics," *Phronesis* 56 (2011), 204-261. I agree in large part with her assertion that the moral virtues are not contemplative, and thus, require an intervening cognitive action in order to aim them at the mean. This indicates *phronesis* is a critical component for to have virtuous action. The moral virtues are found in the non-rational part of the soul that responds to reason but does not command over it. Thus, in order to utilize virtue in correct action, one needs a facilitator, and this, she argues, is the role of *phronesis*.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a 13-18.

universality."<sup>24</sup> Equity negotiates the tension between the universal and the particular. Equity, however, does not exist as a flaw within justice but in the application of justice.<sup>25</sup> Kathy Eden argues that

The law is simple, general, and precise; the actions of men are infinite and individual. As a corrective, flexible measure, equity negotiates between the universality of the law and the randomness of particular circumstance to produce a judgment more appropriate to the specific case.<sup>26</sup>

Equity, then, also highlights the deficiency in the application of the law. It serves the function of identifying the mean between the political universal - law - and the political particular - the case. Equity, then, is not simply a correction for the overly generalized law, but actually is a way to address the tension between episteme and techne - a judicial phronesis. However, this does not address the problematic issue of how one learns of the gap between the universal and the particular. Aristotle contends that the law is how most people learn to act virtuously. He says that, "the majority of the acts commanded by the law are those which are prescribed from the point of view of virtue taken as a whole; for the law bids us practise every virtue and forbids us to practise any vice."<sup>27</sup> Thus, if the law is an educative agent for the masses, not in that it teaches them to be virtuous people but teaches them to act in a virtuous way, how is one to learn the deficiencies in the application of the law?

Here, it is beneficial to look at Eden's argument concerning the relationship between equity and poetry.<sup>28</sup> She points out that, "the law is to human actions which fall under its

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<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 1137b 20-24.

<sup>26</sup> Kathy Eden, "Poetry and Equity: Aristotle's Defense of Fiction," *Traditio* 38 (1982), pg. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1130b 22-24

<sup>28</sup> See Eden, "Poetry and Equity", 21-27. The connections she establishes between legal rhetoric, law, and poetry are particularly insightful. She contends that each of them share in the same enthymeme foundation, and

jurisdiction as the universal is to the particular."<sup>29</sup> Law, in this account, serves the same function as universal truths do in ethics, or as the universal human condition does in poetry. Equity, being a corrective agent in the application of the universal to the particular, is similar to poetry. She argues that, "described in this way....equity in ethical and legal sciences corresponds to fiction in the literary arts."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, both serve a corrective function since they both are aiming at understanding the actions of a particular in relation to the universal. She says, "Like equity, poetry undertakes to reveal the causes of action in the form of the agents' intentions."<sup>31</sup> Poetry, being derived from the arche, is aimed at showing how a universal may be actualized in a specific human action. The law is the universal principle which guides action in a political society, and its application is interpreted through equity. Therefore, both serve as a way to make the tension between the particular and the universal intelligible.

Thus, Eden asserts that that equity and poetry are, in a sense, parallels. She claims that

Equity is superior to absolute justice for the same reason that poetry is superior to history. Unlike absolute justice, which embodies only universals, and history, which is enslaved to particulars, equity and poetry approach the relative mean.<sup>32</sup>

Her assertion, however, is flawed. Poetry does not really serve as a means between two actions in the same way equity does. Poetry is a product of *techne* and therefore it is not an action whereas equity is an action. Given the primacy of action for Aristotle, equity would be superior to poetry, and thus, they cannot be paralleled in this way. Equity is something one does; poetry is something one receives. She fails to make this distinction, and therefore, the association she

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therefore, are logically related in their construction. Therefore, the standard which applies to one would also apply to the other.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, pg. 21.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, pg. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pg. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pg. 34.

makes between the two is fundamentally flawed. This, however, does not mean that poetry cannot serve a vital function nor that equity cannot provide an insight into the purpose of poetry, but poetry cannot be equated with equity.

Where equity can help provide some insight into the purpose of poetry is in its role as *phronesis*. Eden contends that

Aristotle upholds fiction over history as the more scientific and consequently as the worthier discipline because it embodies the universal in a set of circumstances made credibly by their specificity...fiction mediates between universal propositions and particular instances, making the individuality of experience demonstrable and therefore comprehensible.<sup>33</sup>

Her assertion that poetry is better because it is able to display the universal through the particulars, and thus, make the universal intelligible, is correct. Understanding poetry as a mean indicates that either poetry is a virtue itself, which it cannot be since it is a product of the mimetic arts, or that the poet has a representative practical wisdom, or a mimetic *phronesis*. Mimetic *phronesis* would mean that the poet is able to create something in way that utilizes the universal in the best way while being aimed at the *telos*. The *telos* of tragedy means that mimetic *phronesis* would be in crafting a story that is noble in character, serious in action, and a catalyst for the *kathartic* experience with pity and fear. However, since *phronesis* is necessary for the correct utilization of the virtues toward the correct end, would the same be true of this mimetic *phronesis*? Is tragedy only aimed at generating pity and fear and then providing the *kathartic* release of such emotions? Or could Aristotle be agreeing with the notion that the poet is *didaskalos*, and therefore, poetry would have an epistemological function? In order to assess this, we must first look at the relationship, if any, between poetry and virtue.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

If any relationship were to exist between poetry and virtue, it would have to be predicated on the emotions. Tragedy, specifically, arouses fear and pity. Courage, specifically, is predicated on overcoming fear, and perhaps, most specifically, fear of death.<sup>34</sup> Since the fear that one feels within the theatre has to be the same fear one would feel outside of the theatre,<sup>35</sup> the fear one must overcome to be courageous is also the same. Therefore, as one is watching the episodes of a play unfold and one's fear is triggered by the events, does courage play a role? It would be incorrect to assert that by watching tragedy, one would become courageous, for the passivity in watching a play inherently means one cannot become habituated to the action of courage. What is possible, however, is to see a courageous act take place within the plot of the story. Therefore, the fear that the audience feels is, in actuality, a representation of the fear that the characters are enduring within the events of the tragedy. Thus, when the characters in the play act in a courageous way, the audience is able to observe an example of a courageous act. The poet, here, is able to teach the audience about the nature of a courageous act, and the way in which the universal being examined in the play is demonstrative of the tension between the virtue and the vice; how events that generate great fear can result in either courage or cowardice.

This, however, cannot be educative toward the moral virtues because one becomes virtuous by doing virtuous acts, not observing them.<sup>36</sup> Watching a tragedy is inherently a passive activity, as is observing or hearing any other mimetic art, and thus, they cannot be understood as habituating the audience. Could this passivity be the reason that Aristotle is so critical of *teche*, including the mimetic arts? Virtue is inherently better than art because it is an action for itself, not for something greater. But the form of poetry seems to indicate that, while being inferior to

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<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pg. 1115b 19-21.

<sup>35</sup> See the above critique of Lear's seventh criterion, pg. 31-33.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104a 26-30.

virtue, it is not cleaved from those higher things. Carli argues that form, "is both the driving force that guides the orderly development of natural things towards their full realization, and the actualization of their nature, that is to say, their final cause, or *telos*."<sup>37</sup> Tragedy's form is found through its plot and through its arousing of fear and pity and the kathartic release of those emotions. The audience is passive as they observe the progression of the events in the tragedy, but the clarification provided by the plot transforms the passivity into an activity because while the emotional arousal is involuntary (or perhaps nonvoluntary),<sup>38</sup> the kathartic effect of self-reflection is a catalyst to contemplation, and thus, is the cause of an action.

The purpose of poeisis, then, is a particularly odd one in political life. It is both a passive experience and a cause for action. Thus, tragedy, as the highest form of the mimetic arts, in this sense, becomes dual phronesis - one between the vulgar and the virtuous, and another between the moral and the intellectual. Katharsis, by causing a self-reflection in the audience member, transforms the passive experience of watching a tragedy into an active self-reflection. For the vulgar, it is aimed toward a particular moral act, namely courage, and the way in which the courageous act exemplifies the best in human action. For the virtuous, it is aimed at understanding a specific facet of human excellence, namely the noble or serious actions displayed through the tragedy. That facet illuminates a truth about the human condition. The

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<sup>37</sup> Carli, "Poetry is More Philosophical than History," pg. 307.

<sup>38</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3 Chapter 1. Here, it is difficult to distinguish these two since the emotional arousal, in and of itself, is not a voluntary act. No one is able to deliberate and choose to feel an emotion; it is aroused by an external cause, and thus, is simply felt. However, one does choose to attend the festival where the play is being performed, and thus, allows one's emotions to be aroused. It would be odd, though, to say that one is responsible for the arousal of the emotions by observing a play or that one would feel shame for feeling those feelings. Thus, the emotional arousal of the audience because of poetry cannot be identified as voluntary, nor nonvoluntary. However, by placing oneself in the audience, one is voluntarily choosing to engage in the material but cannot know how the emotions will be effected. Thus, it could be rendered nonvoluntary since the emotional arousal cannot be identified as something one would feel shame for (involuntary) or that one is responsible for (voluntary). How one acts after the arousal would be voluntary, but the arousal itself cannot be understood in this way.

active self-reflection, then, is both moral and intellectual and, in a way, a bridge between both the vulgar and the virtuous. Both are able to enjoy the release of the emotions generated by the tragedy, and both are able to transcend their particular condition and understand something higher than themselves. Therefore, the poet is a *didaskalos* in the sense that through the form of his art, he is able to generate a reflection on the excellence of human action and the nature of man.

## CONCLUSION

Poeisis is the art of producing something artificial, be it a piece of technology, a weapon, or a work of art. Poeisis is translated as poetry so to understand Aristotle's perspective on the purpose of poeisis, one must look at his complicated account in the *Poetics*. There, he identifies tragedy as the best form of poetry, and thus, all subsequent discussion of poetry must be about its highest form, namely tragedy. But poeisis could also be translated as artificial stories, or, in the modern vernacular, as fiction. Therefore, by looking into Aristotle's perspective on the purpose of poetry, one is able to see a framework for understanding fiction more broadly. This perspective, however, cannot be utilized to assess all works of fiction since we lack his account of the vulgar, namely comedies. It can, however, be utilized to assess works of fiction that are tragic. This means that they are exploring the most noble things for a human being, namely, in overcoming fear and enduring great hardship for the sake of human excellence. This is perhaps the most vital thing Aristotle brings to the inquiry of the relationship between fiction and politics - the later is aimed at facilitating people to live well where the former is aimed at providing an account of human excellence in action.

Tragedies, in their form, are quite different from modern fiction, however, and therefore it is important to not create a false equivalency. Aristotle's account of tragedy provides insight into form of fiction that deals with the best human actions, but the performance elements of an ancient tragedy are anachronistic to a modern audience. This, however, does not mean that his insight into the role that katharsis plays for an audience, the intellectual opportunity fiction

provides to an audience, or the importance for understanding the balance between moral and intellectual virtue in our creative accounts of human excellence, are not still as valid today in our inquiries into our fiction as it was for his inquiry into his fiction in the 4th century BCE.

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