**COM507 European Tragedy**

**Week 2: Aristotle and Classical Greek Tragedy**

Aristotle (1996), *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

**Key terms from Aristotle’s *Poetics***

*Mythos* (‘plot’): an ‘ordered sequence of events’ (Aristotle 1996: xviii)

*Ethos* (‘character’): the kind of person the agent is

*Dianoia* (‘reasoning’ – sometimes translated as ‘thought’, or in 17th-century France as ‘sentiments’): how the agent interprets and reacts to situations, the attitudes s/he expresses, and the arguments s/he uses to express them

*Peripeteia* (‘reversal’): a change in situation that overturns expectations. Must be astonishing, yet integrated into a coherent plot, ‘out of necessity or in accordance with probability’ (Aristotle 1996: 18)

*Anagnorisis* (‘recognition’): a change from ignorance to knowledge, which affects a character’s good or bad fortune. This is often a literal matter of recognizing something, e.g. somebody’s true identity or parentage.

*Hamartia* (‘error’): a mistake made by the agent. (*Not a psychological ‘flaw’, contrary to some interpretations and translations*) This may be an error of fact, but may also be a bad or imprudent decision. *Hamartia* was also used in New Testament Greek to denote the Judaeo-Christian concept of ‘sin’: this probably influenced how the term was understood in the 16th and 17th centuries

*Catharsis* (‘purification’): a controversial term, most likely to mean purging excessive feelings of pity and fear, i.e. stimulating these feelings so that the audience gets them out of its collective system

**Seminar activity 1: Reflecting on the *Poetics***

Read the extracts from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Then, in small groups, try to answer one or more of the following questions (these will be allocated):

1. Why should plot be more important than character? (You will find part of Aristotle’s own answer at the bottom of p. 11)
2. Why should the protagonists in tragedy be ‘distinguished’ (p. 21), i.e. of high social rank?
3. When discussing *hamartia*, Aristotle refers to ‘a *serious* error’ (p. 21; my italics). This implies that an agent can make mistakes without necessarily falling into *hamartia*. What do you think makes the difference between *hamartia* and a more trivial kind of mistake?
4. Aristotle claims that a complex plot (i.e. one that involves *peripeteia* and/or *anagnorisis*) makes for a better tragedy than a simple plot. Why might this be the case?
5. From a dramatist’s perspective, what are the benefits of taking subject-matter from mythology, rather than inventing something original?
6. Why should an audience find a tragedy pleasurable?

**Seminar activity 2: Storyboarding**

In small groups, identify a famous public figure, either from history or from the present, who could be the protagonist of a tragedy. Then think about how a tragedy based on this figure’s career could be made to comply with Aristotle’s principles. You may well find that you have to:

* locate information about your chosen protagonist (feel free to search online information sources during this phase of the seminar);
* select and/or distort the historical facts quite significantly.

Write brief notes or bullet points under each of the following headings:

1. *Mythos*: you can’t tell the whole life story of your protagonist. So, where would you choose to begin and end the action?
2. *Ethos*: what kind of a person is your protagonist? (This means her/his fundamental, permanent character traits – not temporary phases that s/he goes through)
3. *Dianoia*: how does your protagonist respond to situations, challenges, etc.?
4. *Peripeteia*: is there a surprising reversal in your protagonist’s situation? A reversal of this kind can’t come out of thin air – it has to be logically connected with the rest of the plot. How could this connection be made?
5. *Anagnorisis* (‘recognition’): does your protagonist gain knowledge in a way that affects her/his downfall, e.g. realizing that s/he has done something that s/he wouldn’t have done if s/he’d been in full possession of the facts?
6. *Hamartia* (‘error’): what crucial error(s) does your protagonist make, and how do these cause her/his fortune to change?