Catharsis as a Dramatic Act

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Abstract

Because the term "catharsis" in Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* is too subjective for a formal definition, and because the interpretations of purging or purifying pity and fear vary widely, the author recommends discovering a type of catharsis that is independent of the feelings of audience members. Rather than purging pity and terror from the spectators, catharsis could be a way of delivering a tragedy's protagonists from their terror and suffering. The author read 32 tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and found that, in several plays, a god enters (the *deus ex machina*) and saves the characters. In a few plays, a human hero steps in to stop the villains, but the majority of plays have a fully tragic ending. A definition of catharsis as deliverance is also offered.

Key words: Catharsis, Tragedy, Aristotle, Poetics

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บทคัดย่อ

"Catharsis" ตามคำอธิบายของอริสโตเติลที่เชื่อมโยงกับโศกนาฏกรรมของตัวละครใน *Poetics* ก่อให้เกิดคำนิยามที่หลากหลาย ส่วนหนึ่งมาจากการตีความหมายของการชำระล้างจิตใจของผู้ชมที่ซึมซับสุนทรียของบทประพันธ์ผ่านความน่าสงสารและความกลัวของตัวละคร ผู้เขียนบทความนี้มุ่งเสนอมุมมองใหม่ของคำนิยาม "catharsis" ที่ไม่ควรผูกติดกับความรู้สึกของผู้ชมหากแต่คำจำกัดความอาจพิจารณาจากวิธีการปลดปล่อยตัวละครให้พ้นจากโศกนาฏกรรมของตน จากการอ่านบทโศกนาฏกรรมของ Aeschylus, Sophocles, และ Euripides ผู้เขียนพบว่าในบางบทของละคร เทพเจ้าปรากฏตัวลงมาเพื่อปกป้องตัวละคร หรือมีมนุษย์ผู้กล้าเป็นผู้กำจัดตัวร้ายในเรื่อง อย่างไรก็ตามบทละครส่วนมากมักปิดฉากลงด้วยโศกนาฏกรรม ในบทความนี้ผู้เขียนได้เสนอคำนิยาม "catharsis" ที่สะท้อนมุมมองใหม่ที่กล่าวไว้

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1. The legacy

When people use the word "cathartic," they seem to mean that they feel the release of a strong emotion, a feeling of victory or vindication that "purges" the tension they were feeling a moment before. "Closure" may be a quiet form of catharsis for some. The main use of "catharsis" in ancient Greece was the purging of someone's guilt in a religious ceremony for a crime against a god or another person. But when Aristotle used it in his definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*, it took on a new and less straightforward life. In the definition, he names two emotions that tragedy produces in us: fear and pity, often translated as terror and pity. But then, the closing phrase teases us with a means of removing them so that we will feel better: *catharsis*, which has come to mean more than simply purgation, but also purification, cleansing, and similar terms. This process has been the crux of countless disagreements and exercises in imagination. The definition is found in Book II, section 6:

> Tragedy is a representation of an action of a superior kind – grand, and complete in itself – presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of

such emotions. (Kenny, 2013, p. 23)

Up to "narrator," the definition is clear enough, and claiming that a tragedy should bring about the emotions of pity and fear is a defensible position. It is hard to imagine in the last part, however, how pity and fear can purify or remove pity and fear. Answers from the Delphic oracle or prints by M. C. Escher come to mind. And an irresistible challenge is born.

It is believed that the *Poetics* was written after the death of Plato (Aristotle's teacher in the Academy), and although he does not mention Plato or any of his objections against poetry, it is possible that he was defending drama and epic poetry (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) against Plato's accusation that poets corrupt the human spirit, making people follow their emotions instead of their reason. (His other criticism is that all art is only a copy of a copy of true reality, the Ideas and Forms; he also thought Homer, for one, portrayed the gods as too much like humans, so poetry debased religion [Kenny, p. xii].) Aristotle claims that tragedy is not a source of spiritual corruption but that it can remove unhealthy emotions from audience members' psyches. And that has been the position of commentators ever since.

Nearly all of the explanations of tragic catharsis describe it in terms of a transformation from the first state of pity and fear to a different and much better psychological condition (they are summarized in a section below). But this is the point at which the definition wanders over the line. Once the audience has experienced the initial pity and fear, directly from the action on the stage, it seems a step too far to expect them to then experience a transformational state within themselves, outside the world of the drama. We should imagine watching a tragedy before being taught about catharsis and ask if our experience matches any of the theories. Each interpretation might partially mirror something we may feel at different times, which makes discussions difficult. The generalizations create vagueness about how it can happen, as well, either a sudden enlightenment or a gradual enlightenment, in the theatre or on the walk home, or what kinds of scenes work best. And the play they refer to almost exclusively is *Oedipus Rex*, which is not a typical tragedy.

Anyone who is able to solve the controversy over catharsis deserves the Nobel Prize, and this paper will not make that attempt. But, taking on the irresistible challenge, the author would like to venture a "preliminary draft" of catharsis that avoids the complications of the theories. While watching a tragedy or while reading one, Aristotle may have felt a profound sympathy or an expanded sense of shared humanity, the fate we all share in death, which he might want to propose as an edifying, useful result of attending the theatre, and that would be a plausible answer to Plato. He could be trying to say that the events stirred so much pity and fear in him that it shook his spirit, made him feel hopeless, or emotionally drained him, which sometime later could have given way to a new appreciation for humanity or virtue, renewed hope, or any feeling in that vein, perhaps like a breaking fever, no more unhealthy feelings, or a good feeling after a bad one, something hard to put into words – so "catharsis," "purge," though not exactly the right word, would do for the time being and he could fix it in a later draft.

Such feelings when we watch a serious play are normal, but they are also subjective and undependable and go beyond what a definition of tragedy should cover. (Many people cry at the opera, but no one would put that into the definition of an opera.)

Although the author disagrees with the conventional interpretations of catharsis and its use in the definition of tragedy, it is a fascinating subject, so the task is to discover if catharsis could exist in some tangible form, possibly as an element of the drama itself, separate from purging any of our feelings. The view of catharsis in this article could be criticized for a lack of theoretical grounding in Aristotelian thought found in his other books or in the long philosophical tradition, but the grounding is in the tragedies themselves, and a theatrical understanding of terror, suffering, and deliverance.

2. Methodology

The method was to read the 32 extant tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (including the tragicomedy *Alcestis*, by Euripides, and *Rhesus*, author unknown, once attributed to Euripides) and ask two simple questions in each one: "Is there terror and suffering?" and "Is

there deliverance (catharsis)?" Deliverance is the moment in the play when the characters are freed from their suffering and the terror that causes it – not a moment when our feelings are transmuted. The word is found in Jocasta's prayer to Apollo, "Grant us deliverance and peace" (Kitto, 1962, p.78, line 894), which she offers not long before the truth about her husband/ son Oedipus is discovered and deliverance and peace abandon them.

Later sections explain more about this "non-Aristotelian" catharsis and give a definition, as well, and at the end, the 32 plays are categorized by the ways that catharsis (deliverance) is or is not presented. Before that, we will clear the path by looking at fear and pity in the *Poetics* and getting an overview of some interpretations of catharsis.

3. Fear and pity in the *Poetics*

This section looks at how Aristotle describes pity and fear, the catalyst for catharsis, and suggests a modification to his definition of tragedy that removes it. (Since we cannot literally remove it, we can discount or ignore it.) Aristotle mentions catharsis in relation to tragedy only here, except for a passage in section 17 that says Orestes has to be purified before he is nearly sacrificed in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, but it is for a religious rite in the play so it is not related. In contrast, fear and pity come up almost a dozen times in the *Poetics*, usually in connection with a well-constructed plot. The passages below are a sample:

> Tragedy is an imitation not just of a complete action, but of events that evoke pity and fear. These effects occur above all when things come about unexpectedly but at the same time consequentially. This will produce greater astonishment than if they come about spontaneously or by chance – for even chance events are found more astonishing when they seemed to have happened for a purpose. (Kenny, 2013, p. 29).
>
> Actually seeing a play performed may evoke fear and pity, but so too can the plot itself – this is more fundamental and the mark of a better poet. The story should be put together in such a way that even without seeing the play a person

> hearing the series of events should feel dread and pity. This is what someone would feel on hearing the story of Oedipus. Evoking this effect by a stage performance is less artistic and more dependent on the production. The effect that some producers try to achieve is not so much fear as horror; that has nothing at all to do with tragedy. One should not look to it [tragedy] for every kind of enjoyment, but only the appropriate one. The poet's job is to use representation to make us enjoy the tragic emotions of pity and fear, and this has to be built into his plots.
>
> Let us therefore ask what kinds of event strike us as terrible or pitiable. (Kenny, 2013, p. 33)

If catharsis were important, it should appear more often, especially after the sentence "Tragedy is an imitation not just of a complete action, but of events that evoke pity and fear" (Kenny, 2013, p. 29), as well as "The poet's job is to use representation to make us enjoy the tragic emotions of pity and fear, and this has to be built into his plots" (Kenny, 2013, p. 33). He does not say that the poet has to bring us to a state of catharsis and purge the pity and fear, which could imply that there is something special about enjoying pity and fear, without necessarily purging them. Granted, the omission could be taken to mean that catharsis was a given, that obviously the only way to "enjoy the tragic emotions" was to transform them through catharsis; once the poet had created certain emotions or "astonishment" with the reversals and discoveries, people would naturally experience it, so it was not necessary to say more about it. But even a given element should be explained, for the sake of thoroughness. (On the other hand, since it is believed that the lost second book of the *Poetics*, on comedy, would contain the definition, Aristotle might have thought catharsis would be easier to explain with comedies. We would have to look at the plays he could have worked with, both the Old and New Comedy.)

As one explanation for the difficulty in interpreting the definition, Teddy Brunius (1974) proposes, "It is possible that the text is not a fragment of a book that Aristotle intended to publish, but a work that he had in progress under revision, and that was used as notes for teaching" (p.

266), which could mean that he lectured about catharsis but did not write it down. Brunius also unearthed an interesting analysis made in 1954 by M. D. Petrusevski, in the former Yugoslavia, asserting that "catharsis" is the wrong word in the first place, because of a possible mistake by copyists repairing a damaged copy: "The thesis is that the terminal words in the definition are not *pathematon katharsin* ('catharsis of feeling') but *pragmaton systasin* ('action brought together'). . . . [T]he tragedy has pity and fear in the actions that are brought together" (Brunius, 1974, pp. 269-270). As with other ancient texts, the possibility of miscopying is worth considering.

So we could remove catharsis from the definition and say that a tragedy merely "evokes" pity and fear (Kenny, 2013, p. 29), in this way:

> Tragedy is a representation of an action of a superior kind – grand, and complete in itself – presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, *evoking pity and fear*.

This would be perfectly adequate. Implicit in a definition is an "always" or at least "in most cases." Although it does not answer Plato's objections about poetry being a bad influence, this definition fits most of the plays, not just *Oedipus Rex*, still includes a function of tragedy (evoking common human emotions instead of a mysterious process), and would still allow everyone to have stimulating disagreements about the quality of the plays. Plato can be answered elsewhere.

4. Similarity in diversity

The theories below will not be discussed in detail, since they are well-known, but an overview will help make the distinctions clear when we get to the main part of this article and a new definition of catharsis.

Although it is not defined by Aristotle, Mahesh Ananth (2014, pp. 5-6, 12) claims that his use of the term in other works, especially *Politics*, in relation to music, can enable us to understand his intention. Ananth also provides useful descriptions of purgation, purification, and cognitive stimulation (also called intellectual clarification), the three most popular theories, which, along with others, "broadly fit into [the] cognitivist camp" (2014, p. 29, endnote 10):

> On the purgation view of tragic catharsis, observing a tragedy can assist in removing unhealthy emotions or pathological conditions. Specifically, it is the emotions of pity and fear that are purged. By way of the medical/ homeopathic analogy, pity and fear are used to remove pity-and-fear-type emotions and related pathological states in much the same way that illness-causing agents can be removed from a physically ill person by micro-doses of the same illness-causing agents. . . .
>
> In contrast to the purgation account, some scholars insist on a purification interpretation. According to this reading, tragic catharsis is the cleansing of the emotions of pity and fear such that the emotions of pity and fear are modified. Tragic pleasure, then, is the enjoyment of the cleansed emotions of pity and fear. . . .
>
> Distinct from both the purgation and purification renderings is the cognitive stimulation/ clarification interpretation of catharsis and tragic pleasure. According to this approach, Aristotle takes the cathartic experience to be that of improved understanding of the details of both a particular plot and the actions of the actors. Additionally, the universal aspects of the human condition are better understood by the unfolding of the pitiable and fearful events of a tragedy. (p.3)

The purpose of Ananth's paper is to refute another theory, the "anti-cognitive" view by Jonathan Lear (as cited in Ananth, 2014, pp. 4-5), which allows cognition as only a first step toward true tragic pleasure: "'For the anticognitivist, cognitive pleasure is a step that occurs en route to the production of the proper pleasure of tragedy. . . . We imaginatively live life to the full, but we risk nothing.'"

In contrast to the homeopathic view, Ananth brings in Elizabeth Belfiore, who claims that catharsis is allopathic, meaning that the pity and fear push out other harmful emotions and urges. So the goal is also purgative, but not homeopathic.

Despite the differences in terminology, one thing these five theories have in common is their transformative or transcendent urges, the ability to transmute pain into something useful or pleasurable, by means of "evaluative judgments and rational imagination" (Ananth, 2014, p. 28). So, in mainstream catharsis, the spirit is on a cognitive journey, somewhere beyond the events in the play.

A sixth theory of catharsis, from one of the most influential scholars, Gerald Else (1957), in *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, makes a very strong case for catharsis arising from a combination of elements in the plot, making it more than a psychological urge to expel bad feelings or refine them into better feelings. More so than other views, his thesis fits Aristotle's interest in the parts a tragedy is built from, such as "The poet's job is to use representation to make us enjoy the tragic emotions of pity and fear, and this has to be built into his plots" (Kenny, 2013, p.33) and "Reversal and discovery together will evoke either pity or fear" (Kenny, 2013, p.30):

> Thus the catharsis is not a change or end-product in the spectator's soul, or in the fear and pity (i.e. in their dispositions to them) in his soul, but a process carried forward in the emotional material of the play by its structural elements, above all by its recognition. (Else, 1957, p.439)
>
> Catharsis, as we have analyzed it, forms part of an extraordinarily tight and subtle nexus of ideas concerning the tragic plot. (1957, p.442)
>
> [*On Aristotle's preference for complex plots*] But it is not merely a question of limitation to complex plots. A complex play may have a peripety [reversal] but no *hamartia* [error or tragic flaw] and recognition; by the same token it will have no catharsis. The total nexus to which catharsis belongs is defined so tightly by the interlocking of its parts – *pathos*, *hamartia*, recognition, and catharsis – that it will actually fit only a few tragedies. (1957, p.445)

Else's theory is an improvement on the others, because it does not ask spectators to conceive a new state of mind, transcending the play. So it is not as vague as the others about where catharsis may get its spark from. He also admits that few tragedies would fit, which could strengthen the case for purging catharsis from the definition of tragedy.

When the author read in Brunius's article that Else had "introduced a learned and elaborated interpretation of Aristotle's text saying that catharsis is to be found in the actions of the drama, and in the plot . . . not in the audience" (1974, p.266), it appeared at first that he had reached the same conclusion: since terror and suffering are clearly visible in the action of the play, catharsis

could therefore also be some event in the play that would eliminate the fear and suffering the characters were undergoing and then give the audience relief from their vicarious fear and pity. Else writes that it should be "available" to us:

> If catharsis has anything to do with the emotional side of tragedy – and we cannot doubt that it has – then it, like the tragic emotions and the tragic pleasure, must be "built into" the plot and thus made available to a reader in the same way, on the same terms, as it is to the spectator in the theater. (1957, p.441)

Else is echoing Aristotle's belief that we can have an emotional reaction to a play even without seeing a performance (Kenny, 2013, p.33). And bringing up the reader reminds us that, before an audience watches a tragedy, the director and actors experience it first simply by reading it. So if a powerful emotional element exists, the performers have to see it in the script so that they can give it the full value when they are on stage, which makes catharsis less of a soul-altering or transcendental state if it is something the cast and crew supposedly experience at every rehearsal.

Be that as it may be, however, the passages above about the "nexus" of dramatic elements – Aristotle's recipe, we might say – reveals that Else did not have the same idea as the idea proposed here. He follows Aristotle more faithfully than most, but he is still describing an "ideal" tragedy, whereas this paper wants to go back to the plays and find the sources of fear, suffering, pity, and possibly catharsis that audiences might have seen long before Aristotle was born.

5. Neither nexus nor cognition, but an act

The type of catharsis that has the best chance of surviving outside the laboratory is neither nexus nor cognition, but an act. In this paper, catharsis is presented as an element within the play itself: not a mystery, not a conundrum, but simply a feature of some tragedies. It removes catharsis from the definition of tragedy and proposes a non-Aristotelian catharsis, a moment in the tragedy that ends the suffering and the cause of suffering, simultaneously bringing deliverance to the characters and relief to the spectators.

Something takes place on stage that can have a specific, not generalized, emotional effect on audience members who have been paying attention and who possess normal sympathetic faculties. It does not happen in every tragedy, but we can still experience fear and pity as the characters suffer and strive, and we may find wisdom and deeper significance, as well.

In a short passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by James Joyce (1916), young Dedalus defines pity and terror, while pitilessly ignoring the suffering of his badly hungover friend Lynch:

> Aristotle has not defined pity and terror. . . . Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause. (p.204)

"Terror" and "fear" are basically interchangeable and felt by spectators, vicariously, and by characters. "Pity," however, is reserved for the audience, and "suffering" is what the characters go through. The search for terror and suffering, for what is "grave and constant," forces us to look into the play and discover the fears of the characters and what is terrorizing them; the emphasis is on the events and what other characters are doing. It is natural, then, to look for catharsis in the action. The only part that would be changed in Joyce's definition of terror is the part about the cause being secret, because in most plays the terror is caused by a human enemy with no hidden agenda. On the other hand, in some cases a curse or a long-lost secret would certainly qualify as a secret cause, and *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy referred to most often by Aristotle and scholars, would again provide the ideal example.

When we look at the events in *Oedipus Rex*, there is a simple reason that it is not possible to accept most views of catharsis, not even the theory of Else. It is because the moment when the elements all come together is in fact the moment when Oedipus's life of suffering and horror truly begins. For us in the bleachers on the slope of the Acropolis, it is a scene filled with astonishment, without a doubt one of the best discovery scenes of its time, but for Oedipus, his fortunes are

plummeting. Even his reappearance with empty, bloodied eye sockets (on his mask) is not cathartic, by the author's simple criterion (catharsis must bring deliverance to the characters first), because the rest of his life holds only terror and suffering:

> Alas! alas! and woe for my misery!
>
> Where are my steps taking me?
>
> My random voice is lost in the air.
>
> O God! how thou hast crushed me! (Translation by Kitto, 1962, p.91)

It seems uncivilized of us to watch him walking off the stage, blinded, tortured deep in his soul for the rest of his life, and turn him into a human sacrifice to our wish to transcend pity and fear, when now that is all he has. Of course we feel pity, but as long as Oedipus suffers, we have to put off our personal cathartic moment. His agony pulls at something deep in us, and we should wonder what that feeling is and where it comes from, and when we realize that it is death, we should not distract our attention by dressing it up to suit us.

Catharsis then, if it exists, should be some moment in the play that brings the fear and suffering to an end, a "purge" in a more mundane, recognizable sense. It delivers the characters from their suffering and removes the cause of it, and then we can be relieved from our fear and pity.

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6. *Catharsis ex machina* – and a definition

Many of the plays conclude tragically, with no hope in sight for the protagonists, but in some, one of the gods enters to share their wisdom and enlighten both the characters and the audience on the right way to end the conflict. The gods do not merely fly in and offer a quick and easy, one-size-fits-all solution: "Peace. Love one another. Do no harm." The tragedians put into their mouths the moral, ethical, humane, divine principles that they think people should live by.

In some tragedies, a wise human is able to resolve the conflict, if they have the authority to match. These are not merely happy endings; they are moments when wisdom reigns and the tyrannical, closed-minded antagonists are told to mend their ways. And although we were not suffering, our vicarious fear can be eased, and our pity calmed.

So it would appear that it is the scorned *deus ex machina* that can purge the fear and suffering and pity from the theatre. Students in drama courses are told that it is a contrivance that makes for an easy ending. Aristotle says it should not be used, giving only the example of the serial killer Medea flying to a land without an extradition treaty: "Clearly, the explication of a story should issue from the story itself, and not from a *deus ex machina* as in the *Medea*" (Kenny, 2013, p. 35). No one would disagree that aiding the escape of a murdering demoness is a bad use of it, but he does not acknowledge the good that a god can do with it, which could be an effective defense of tragedy. Furthermore, the Dionysian festival was in honor of the gods, and people apparently still believed that gods influenced their lives, so it would not be "monstrous" (a criticism he often uses) to have a god enter and deal with the situation. It is surprising that Plato was not interested in the wisdom offered by the gods, or even the arguments the protagonists offered in their struggle against injustice. He may have been too blinded by his metaphysical bias to pay attention. Scholars and drama teachers should examine the root of their prejudice against the *deus ex machina*, especially if it is this single reference by Aristotle.

6.1 A definition of catharsis

With these few elements – terror, suffering, and relieving the suffering through power and wisdom – a new definition of catharsis can be proposed:

> Catharsis is a dramatic act that purges terror and suffering from the action of a tragedy by resolving the central conflict of the play through the wisdom and authority of a god or human character and delivering the characters from their terror and suffering.

A fuller version, to admit the emotional and pleasurable side for audiences, would read this way:

> Catharsis is a dramatic act that purges terror and suffering from the action of a tragedy by resolving the central conflict of the play through the wisdom and authority of a god or human character and replacing the terror and suffering or pity felt by the characters and audience members with deliverance and relief and the sense of being in the presence of wisdom, thus also briefly expanding our sense of how much wisdom and humanity we are ourselves capable of.

These definitions follow the traditional form and describe a function. To say that spectators would feel relief is a reasonable claim, not as problematic as saying their fear and pity would be transformed, because they have been feeling something similar to what the characters have been feeling, so the removal of terror would be a relief for them, as well. And they could (but no guarantees) find wisdom in the way the conflict is resolved. The antagonists might not like the decision and would not feel any catharsis, but they would have to accept it. The dual quality of "being in the presence of wisdom" and "expanding our sense of how much wisdom and humanity we are ourselves capable of" is a new and attainable tragic pleasure.

It does not depend on our intellectual sophistication, insight, or introspection, and it would be a feeling shared by anyone who cares about what they see happening to fellow human beings, legendary though they may be. It derives from the pleasure of understanding more than we had imagined before, and seeing wisdom accomplish something for the good of all, which we rarely see in the world or in popular films. The tragic pleasure we find in wisdom is something both the common person and "x-treme aesthetes" can appreciate.

6.2 To *deus* or not to *deus*?

One important question we have to ask, before moving into a discussion of the plays, is whether a tragedy with a *deus ex machina* could be made "better" – more tragic – by removing divine intervention, which Aristotle would seem to agree with. The plays have to be taken individually. Sometimes "more tragic" would be dishonest to the story. In *Philoctetes*, by Sophocles, he does not want to take his bow and arrows (a gift from the dying Heracles) to Troy and help defeat them, because he hates Odysseus, but the spirit of Heracles appears and tells him

he must go; no other characters are able to persuade him. In *Helen*, by Euripides, Helen and Menelaus want to escape from the island where the real Helen has been living (not the phantom in Troy), so Helen's demigod brothers,Castor and Pollux, arrive to stop Theoclymenus from pursuing them (he is the island's new ruler, who wants to take her as his wife); no one else would be able to stop him. Because in reality Helen and Menelaus have to return to Sparta, Euripides lets heaven intervene. These are only two examples of the proper use of the *deus ex machina*, in which it does "issue from the story itself" (Kenny, 2013, p.35).

The best cathartic ending would have a human character resolve the conflict and bring an end to the terror and suffering through human wisdom. One of the rare examples is in *Ajax*, by Sophocles, when Odysseus makes a moving defense of Ajax, so that he can be buried with full religious rites and honors. The threat he faces is the anger of Agamemnon, which is not as deadly a threat as what we see in most plays, but it is real and present. In many of the plays, wisdom, good sense, and moral truths are spoken by the characters we support or by the chorus, but there is usually no one with the authority to perform that kind of miracle, especially when the most powerful characters are the antagonists, as in *Helen*. So the gods have a valid role in some of the tragedies.

7. Discussion of plays

Among the tragedies left to us, there is almost nothing like *Oedipus Rex*. The "tragic arc," with its rising complication followed by reversal and explication, is not as obvious in most plays, and the suspense does not build so intensely. In many, there is nothing hidden from the audience, either; we know the situation will proceed only from bad to worse, which we can predict from the start, though we might not know how it will happen.

Most of the plays are based on a deep, deadly conflict that cannot be resolved. The protagonists are the suffering, oppressed parties. From the beginning, they tell us how much they are suffering, and why. When the oppressor enters, the two sides take turns accusing and blaming the other or trying to persuade the other, in formalized long and short speeches (*stichomythia*),

like a courtroom drama, or a slow-motion practice for a *ju-jitsu* match, interspersed with songs by the chorus and other action.

The authors are careful to make the reasoning on each side balance and cancel out the other side's claims, giving the audience a thorough review of their cases and much to think about; they should not be passively letting the events wash over them. Many facets of human nature, many stories are on display for the judgement of the audience, but it is often hard to decide who is right (the choruses, the voice of the people, often say as much). In *Agamemnon*, the chorus debates with Clytemnestra after the murder, but she argues her case well, so they have to admit, "Each charge meets counter-charge. / None can judge between them" (Fagles, 1977, p. 167, lines 1,588-1,589). Orestes and Electra have a perfect right to hate their mother and want her dead, but Clytemnestra feels perfectly justified in killing Agamemnon because he sacrificed their other daughter, Iphigenia, so that the Greeks would have a fair wind to Troy, to a war that Clytemnestra thought was wasted on the strumpet Helen (her sister), but Agamemnon had to honor the wishes of his brother, Menelaus, Helen's husband. (The original reason, which is found in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, is the pact agreed by all the princes and kings who wanted to marry Helen; her father, Tyndarus, had them swear that, if any man took her from the husband she chose, they would all join to get her back for him.)

The arguments in these cases go deep into the history of the family or the warring parties. Nothing is easy for us to decide. Eventually, if there is no deliverance, each play draws to its brutal conclusion, most often with the stronger, crueler side winning, rarely with the protagonists getting the justice or peace they desire. The terror and suffering have not ended, only the play.

Based on the definition of catharsis this paper recommends, there is one criterion we should look for in a dramatic act: deliverance from suffering and the cause of terror. First we will look for deliverance, and we expect the gods, from their *deus ex machina*, to rescue the protagonists. Fifteen out of 32 tragedies have a *deus ex machina* (Medea's does not count, since

she uses her contraption as a getaway car), but in only eight do the gods rescue the characters from a tragic end. In one of these, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the goddess Artemis does not appear but we hear from a messenger that she took Iphigenia from the sacrificial altar as the knife was about to fall, so deliverance happens, although we do not see it. *Oedipus at Colonus* qualifies as the eighth, although no gods appear and there is no terror to save him from, but they deliver him from his life of suffering with a miraculous burial, likewise reported by a messenger. The plays in this category are as follows:

Aeschylus – *The Eumenides*;

Sophocles – *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* (divine intervention offstage);

Euripides – *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, or *Iphigenia in Tauris*; *Ion*; *Helen*; *Orestes*; and *Iphigenia at Aulis* (divine intervention offstage).

In *The Eumenides*, one could argue that, although Orestes is very apprehensive before the trial, he is in no danger from the Furies, the Erinyes, anymore, since Apollo "purged his bloody hands" (Fagles, 1977, p.256, line 583) before the play, and Athena told them that she would vote on his side, so there might not be a cathartic moment of deliverance. However, once the trial is over and Orestes leaves, the Furies deliver a very real threat to all Athenians. In the long scene in which Athena transforms them, using "the majesty of Persuasion" (Fagles, 1977, p.270, line 894), from a curse into a blessing for every home, Aeschylus gives us a vision of wisdom, mercy, and virtue that does more to transform lives than possibly any other scene in any other play. The gods in Homer and the tragedies have more human failings than divine virtues, being written by humans, but here, Aeschylus manages to come close to what we would hope our gods to be like.

In the seven other plays with a god making pronouncements, the worst is already over, so the god enters to explain what has happened, to give instructions on what must now be done, and to tell them what will happen in the future, most often a hopeful one – but without changing the situation they find themselves in, which may be good but is sometimes bad for the central characters. Such a scene should be considered only a denouement, not part of the tragic action. And in *The Bacchae*, by Euripides, when Dionysus reveals himself at the end, he is there to punish the

Thebans, not to right any wrongs. So we cannot say that deliverance takes place in the conclusions of these dramas. The plays that fit this description are listed below:

Another way to deliver characters from what is threatening their lives is for a fellow human to stand against the enemy or to use their morality and wisdom to relieve suffering. There are not many tragedies in which characters manage that, but here are the best candidates, with a brief defense:

Aeschylus – *Prometheus Bound* (authorship in question);

Euripides – *Hippolytus*; *Andromache*; *The Suppliants*; *Electra*; and

The Bacchae, or *The Bacchantes*;

Unknown – *Rhesus*.

Aeschylus – *Suppliants*, or *Suppliant Women*;

Sophocles – *Ajax*;

Euripides – *Alcestis* (also considered a tragicomedy) and *Heracles*,

or *The Madness of Heracles*.

In *Suppliants*, the chorus of young women, the daughters of Danaus, are going to be forced into marriage with the sons of Aegyptus, his brother. Pelasgus, king of Argos, stops the marauders with his threats and his arguments about respect for the gods and tells the herald that the city has voted to protect the women. Their relief and joy are real, but their safety may be only temporary. (In fact, they do later have to marry the men, and all but one of them murder their husbands on their wedding night.) *Alcestis* was performed as the fourth play in Euripides's group, so it is technically a comedy, yet there is a death (Alcestis, the wife of Admetus), and the question as to why Admetus would let his wife die in his place comes up, but it is not deeply delved into, because Heracles solves the problem in a pinch by striding forth into Hades and bringing her back. *Ajax* is a very different case. The sincerity and fierceness Odysseus shows in his argument with Agamemnon, to insist on the right of Ajax to a proper burial, even though Ajax had wanted to kill them, reveals how deeply Odysseus may have empathized with his suffering and recognized the honor in his decision to kill himself; here he is much wiser than he is usually shown to be. The most moving example of what a human savior can do is what Theseus does for Heracles, after he

is driven mad by Iris and Madness, on orders from Juno, and kills his first family, in *Heracles*. When he realizes what he has done, he vows revenge on Olympus, but, like Oedipus, he has no hope and knows that he will be an exile all his life. Theseus tells him not to despair, because he will take him to Athens for purification and will give him half of his wealth.

These four tragedies and the eight in the first group comprise the 12 plays that satisfy the "non-Aristotelian" or non-traditional definition of catharsis proposed in this paper.

A few plays have a moment or two in the middle that appear to be cathartic, when a character is saved from an enemy; though the conclusion is far off, they are moments of deliverance. In *Andromache*, by Euripides, she was once Hector's wife but is now the slave-mistress of Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. His wife, Hermione, who is childless, wants her and her son from Neoptolemus dead and sees an opportunity while he is away in Delphi. When the threat from Hermione and her father Menelaus is at its height, Peleus, the father of Achilles, saves her from them in a very dramatic debate with Menelaus. (She is now safe, but Hermione goes off with Orestes, who has conjured up a way to have Neoptolemus killed in Delphi.) Examples can be found in other plays, as well. The final 13 plays in which there is neither a god nor a savior hero make up a large and important group, because some of them are considered the models for a classical tragedy, particularly *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *Antigone*, *Medea*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *The Trojan Women*:

Aeschylus – *The Persians*; *Seven against Thebes*; *Agamemnon*;

and *The Libation Bearers*;

Sophocles – *Antigone*; *The Trachiniae*, or *The Women of Trachis*; *Oedipus Rex*;

and *Electra*;

Euripides – *Medea*; *Heracleidae*, or *The Children of Heracles*; *Hecuba*;

The Trojan Women; and *The Phoenissae*, or *The Phoenician Women*.

Although these are important works, they do not need to be discussed here. A few have characters who heroically rise above their suffering, even briefly, with dramatic and powerful speeches, while some deserve attention for displaying a different kind of catharsis, a "blood catharsis," how

we feel when we see villains getting their bottoms booted at the climax of an action movie. It can be viscerally satisfying and may feel like justice, but at its heart it is empty, because anyone with a big enough weapon can accomplish it. It is possible, for example, to imagine Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killing Agamemnon, and hearing her say, "Ye gods, that was so cathartic." And when Orestes and Pylades kill them in retribution, they might say, "OMG, dude, that was, like, so cathartic." Physiologically speaking, they are correct, but the cathartic moment is about as meaningful as an "adrenaline rush."

In conclusion, this discussion of the plays that fit or do not fit the notion of catharsis as an act of deliverance within the drama has not gone into detail on individual plays, both for reasons of space and because it is obvious that in the main group, the first eight, the gods intervene at a crucial moment to save the main characters, and there is a clear case for the four in which a human performs the same deed. With about a third of the plays presenting us with a situation that we can say is cathartic (for the characters, not for the audience, we must remember), the search for a specific type of catharsis looks on solid ground.

8. Conclusion

To paraphrase Voltaire, "If Aristotle had not sprung catharsis upon us, would it be necessary for us to invent it?" We do not have his explanation, so we have had to think of something. Most commentators are doing their best to make a virtue out of the mystery appendage stuck on the end of the definition, but it may be much simpler than what we have been taught to think it is. (The mystery suggests that it may have its own "tragic flaw" – a definition should not be as inscrutable as a Zen *koan*.) The intention of this article, however, was not to leap into the philosophical or psychological fray, but to approach the plays as performances of stories, and discover whether we can find any kind of catharsis and deliverance, in the same way that we can find terror and suffering. Deliverance can be simply one element of the plot that playwrights may employ or leave out, as they choose. The definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* and most of the subsequent theories imply that experiencing a purge or purification is basic to experiencing a tragedy. In contrast, the author has not been trying to prove that catharsis, in any form, is an essential component of Greek drama. The only interest has been to see what type of catharsis could realistically exist in the tragedies we have. Hence, the concept of a dramatic act.

So the answer would be "No, not the transformative kind," because it is enough to be deeply moved by a tragedy, without a further transformation of our feelings or thoughts. This view is suggested by Aristotle – "The poet's job is to use representation to make us enjoy the tragic emotions of pity and fear" (Kenny, 2013, p. 33) – as well as by the lack of other references to catharsis in the *Poetics*. Normal people would still feel pity for the sufferers, and those with a strongly introspective imagination would see how they might share share a similar fate, an ultimate death, when they are inspired by the emotional impact of the suffering and the poetry. Their fear of a tragic fate could extend to all humanity as potential sufferers. Those are thoughts that are moral and humane and could be expressed by some of the characters, but they do not need to be in a definition of tragedy, and "catharsis" may be the wrong word for what Aristotle felt.

If we want to look for something that removes terror and suffering, it would be no crime to put Aristotle's definition to one side and look at the plays as they are, because they were written decades before he was born, some more than a century, so the playwrights had their own particular interests and audiences in mind. Discovery and recognition, reversal, tragic flaw, hubris, and the other features, although they exist in some plays and fit *Oedipus Rex* very well, may not be the best criteria for appreciating the rest of the tragedies.

If we find only terror, suffering, and pity at the final curtain, we would not be losing anything vital. The ending of *The Eumenides*, though, stands out as a brilliant exception, because Athena, the wisest of the gods, is rescuing civilization. And a few plays, such as *Helen*, as explained above, need a god to ensure that the characters survive into the next phase of their lives. But those aside, a tragedy with a wholly tragic ending has its own particular good. The primary good is that we may develop a strong sense of justice and virtue, a feeling that is even stronger when we see them fail, so we may become better at recognizing evil and less willing to put up with it.

Another good is that we become familiar with death, as long as the writers do not make it self-pitying and sentimental, or brutal and sensationalized, which are the main tendencies today. We also see the protagonists put up a spirited fight, despite their knowing that no argument, no virtue, no heroism can save them – a situation that more people find themselves in than we might realize. So plays with a fully tragic, honest ending may show us how to face an enemy and leave this world with our spirit intact. Even when there is no deliverance, arresting the mind "in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings" and uniting with the sufferer

and the cause is enough to stretch the soul, at least until life forces it to step back in line.

Coleridge's (1798) Wedding-Guest, after hearing the Ancient Mariner's tale, woke the next day "A sadder and a wiser man," with his old view of life's goodness swept away and with no redeeming grace or "tragic pleasure" to raise him. And those who would still insist that catharsis is central to the experience of tragedy may consider this paraphrase from the film *Love and Death* (Allen, 1975):

"Tragedy without catharsis is an empty experience."

"Yes, but as empty experiences go, it's one of the best."

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