

## Aristotle's *Poetics* and The Tragedies of Londo and G'Kar

According to Aristotle, tragedy has six constituent parts, the most important of which is the "plot", or "the arrangement of the incidents". He also writes, "The best constructed plot ... should come about as the result not of vice or depravity but through *hamartia*". Furthermore, "A perfect tragedy should be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan" one in which the action is accompanied by reversal (defined by Aristotle as a "change of the situation into the opposite"), discovery (what he defines as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing either friendship or hatred in those who are destined for good fortune or ill") and calamity (namely, "a destructive or painful occurrence, such as a death on the stage, acute suffering and wounding, and so on"). Aristotle sees the "character" as next in importance after plot, and the best character is "the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous or just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into misfortune, but rather through some *hamartia*." Clearly Aristotle was offering a critique of tragedies performed in his own day, but can we make his treatise relevant in a world filled with courses on film and cinema? This paper explores the realm of science fiction, specifically the television series *Babylon 5*, created and produced by J. Michael Straczinski who described it as having "always been conceived as, fundamentally, a five-year story, a novel for television" that ran from 1994 to 1998.

At crucial moments in Season 1, two characters, Londo Mollari (Centauri) and G'Kar (Narn), experience a reversal through *hamartia*. Because they are bitter enemies and their *hamartiai* spring from their animosity towards one another, their lives become so closely intertwined that one cannot tell the story of one without telling the story of the other.

Just as tensions between G'Kar and Mollari reach a fever pitch, a character named Morden (agent for an ancient race called "Shadows") appears and approaches each of them asking "What do you want?" G'Kar's reply is not grand enough for Morden. But Mollari's response is just what Morden is looking for. Here is Mollari's *hamartia*. His cynical political ambition, fueled by his decline in prestige and position at home as the Narn are successfully establishing their independence and power, together with his sincere desire to regain the pre-eminence of the Centauri Republic, make him the perfect target for Morden and the Shadows. Thus begins Mollari's reversal, from a seemingly bumbling buffoon with delusions of grandeur to becoming Emperor of the Centauri Republic.

Throughout the course of the series, Morden and his "associates" (the Shadows) give Mollari exactly what he asks for which, as turns out, is far from what he actually wants. It begins with mysterious attacks on Narn ships, then outposts and colonies as the Narn-Centauri war escalates; unwittingly, each time Mollari takes credit and gets his much-desired attention and power. But Morden's favors come with a price: he begins to request favors in kind from Mollari, who driven by pride and fear that Morden will turn elsewhere for help if he refuses, gives in.

While Mollari is on the rise, fueling the hatred of the Narn back home, G'Kar becomes desperate to get anyone to listen or help his people. He does not help his case by dealing on the black market for weapons and supplies. His frustration is palpable. For a time, the reversals of Mollari and G'Kar run parallel but in opposite directions: as Mollari is pulled deeper and deeper into the plan of Morden and the Shadows, his prestige and power grow; G'Kar is confronted by one calamity after another while his prestige and power plummet as he witnesses one attack after another against his people by the Centauri. He becomes a "Cassandra" figure who warns of the awakening Shadows and is eventually imprisoned and tortured by the Centauri.

Eventually, Mollari and G'Kar come to their "discovery" at the same time. And with their discovery, these two bitter enemies become staunch allies. But as G'Kar sees a reversal of his misfortunes, he rises in status and finds himself uncomfortably at the center of a messianic cult on the Babylon 5 space station. Mollari's discovery is accompanied by a downward spiral of one calamity after another as he realizes that the only way to escape from the Shadows is through his own death.

Although Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* in reaction to the tragedies performed in his day, this examination of characters from modern speculative fiction reveals that his critique is as fresh and relevant today as it was in the late Classical period.