

Aristotle on Karkinos' Amphiaraus: The Uncanny Feedback Loop of Action

Aristotle is usually taken as saying, in the *Poetics*, that performance is not important to the overall effect of drama. This paper argues that Aristotle shows, by the way he reenacts the dramatic processes, the uncanniness of dramatic composition—the strange importance of performing as we compose.

The example I discuss is Aristotle's brief (four-sentence) discussion of Karkinos's failure to visualize a scene involving Amphiaraus and a temple (1455a21–34). Recent research on the passage (well discussed by Davidson 2003) has focused on the exact nature of Karkinos's mistake. This paper, then, uses these suggestions made about the nature of the mistake but shifts the focus to what Aristotle is doing with this example.

Aristotle brings up Karkinos to illustrate the importance of constructing plots and “work them out with diction as much as possible setting them before the eyes”. Why? Because that way one would discover what is “fitting”. But through his choice of diction, his framing, choice, pregnant use of his example, and abrupt shifts in topic, Aristotle conveys something else: he reenacts the *thaumaston* (to-be-wondered-at) quality of dramatic composition. It is as though one gets thoughts and words from one's gestures, rather than vice versa. Importantly, gestures do feed back into thinking and speech in everyday life (McNeill 2005). But here Aristotle draws out the strangeness of that everyday phenomenon, as well as of composition and of acting. One gets one's thoughts by trying on the gestures of someone else; the physical gesture at the extremities backs up into the thought and emotion at one's core. Projecting outward one's thinking into gestures and visualizations, one's core is transformed by what is happening in one's hands and before one's eyes, even though it is oneself that has put that out there.

Aristotle's shifts in topic, rather than merely laconic, are also artful. First he produces an example where the audience is annoyed by the dramatist's clutzy handling of the staging. Then he moves to the use of gestures in composition in order to place oneself "in the emotions"—and here, the emotions he adduces are causing distress, being distressed, and getting angry. He moves from a scenario where the spectators became angry to a situation where distress is desirable, where the dramatist needs to take on these emotions as his own. And why? To cause these emotions in his audience: but we have just been faced with an audience who was so annoyed. We enter a Möbius strip of emotions, circulating between audience and poet, mediated by the poet as an actor, imagining and embodying the character.

Looking back at Karkinos from the discussion of gesture gives a strange result. Karkinos was a failure, his crabbed (cf. his name), un-dexterous staging, ironically, successfully conveyed the proper emotion to his spectators, who didn't want to handle the scene, thus putting themselves behind the hands of their dramatist as they had his ill-visualized production before their eyes. It is a strange feedback loop. And this is of a piece with the theme of the play and its supposedly botched staging: the unexpected reappearance of a seemingly undead character.

Aside from newly appreciating the richness of the passage, what are other implications? The possibility of such a reading should carry weight in discussions of textual issues in this passage: for instance, the proposed emendation of ἦ in διὸ εὐφροῦς ἢ ποιητικὴ ἐστὶν ἢ μανικοῦ to μάλλον ἦ, to absolve Aristotle of advocating madness (Halliwell 1987, 1995). But more importantly, 1) it adds to the evidence that in the *Poetics* Aristotle writes artistically (Kretler 2018; Davis 1999); these are no sloppy lecture notes; 2) we therefore need to slow down before rushing to the "view" conveyed in a passage of the *Poetics*; and 3) the feedback loop is of a piece with Aristotle's (notoriously) circular notion of causation in action (useful review in Peterson

1992). Aristotle found dramatic composition and performance a fitting other stage upon which to display these strange workings of action.

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