

ELS 442: Studies in Drama: Introduction

Course Leader: Professor Amechi N. Akwanya (ORCID: 0000-0002-5331-6899)

A course entitled 'studies in drama' will usually select a small set from a vast archive, with or without explicit reasons to justify the selection. In the presentation here, the selection is made with an eye to reflecting a certain spread, while preserving the sense of dramatic tradition which is not culture-bound, and goes back to the very beginnings in the history of writing. But of still greater importance is to illustrate and at the same time interrogate theoretical and philosophical postulations concerning the nature of dramatic literature. What we must therefore exclude from the outset is enquiry into the kinds of things that are used in making a drama. These things may crop up of course in the discussion, but always in subordination to the question of nature.

Drama is known by many primarily in terms of performance. But there are at least two aspects to it; from the point of view of *literary studies*, it is first and foremost *literature*. The performance is the second aspect and is addressed by a group of disciplines making up theatre studies. In Aristotle's terms, the concern of literary studies is poetry, and performance or 'spectacle' 'falls quite outside the art and is not integral to poetry: tragedy's capacity is independent of performance and actors, and, besides, the costumier's art has more scope than the poet's for rendering effects of spectacle' (*Poetics* chapter 6). Most dramatic works can probably be performed; although there are many that have normally been treated purely as poetry and may never have been put on stage. Several nineteenth century poets like William Blake, P.B. Shelley, and Robert Browning have some of these. The staging of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Robert Brownings' *King Charles* is probably not going to feel satisfying as a theatre experience to most theatre goers. On the other hand, a work like T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, which is undoubtedly a play, has features which unfold difficulties in staging.

It is important for this course to be able to tell dramatic poetry which is not just a dramatic performance. Studying drama strictly as literature was to provide Aristotle the platform for working out his general rule for poetry: namely 'the construction of events' (*Poetics* chapter 6) into a *muthos* or a 'plot', insofar as it makes up a 'whole ... which has a beginning, middle, and end' (chapter 7). Therefore, 'just as ... in the other mimetic arts a unitary mimesis has a unitary object, so too the plot, since it is mimesis of an action, should be of a unitary and indeed whole action; and the component events should be so structured that if any is displaced or removed, the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated' (chapter 8). In this construction everything has a functional role and everything inessential for the *life* of the poem is excluded.

Aristotle is in these comments presenting what he considers to be the internal structure of a poem, this internal structure being a shared feature in all poetry - lyrical, dramatic, and narrative. He does not consider that the specific nature or origins of the incidents or events are important - whether they come from experience, from a dream world, from old books, from past history, from cultural or political activities, or from any other source whether human or extra-human. The focus is on incidents which are *arranged* in some order, but in such a way that they interconnect among themselves and make up a whole, one single *action*. Thus the poem 'is a mimesis of an action' (*praxeōs mimēsis estin*). Determining the action that the poem aims at is therefore of central importance in literary criticism, for according to Aristotle, *hê tôn pragmatôn sustasis* (literally, 'the synthesis of action', but translated variously as 'the incidents and the plot' (T.S. Dorsch 40), 'the structure of events' (Stephen Halliwell 51), 'the putting-together (? structuring) of the events' (George Whalley 21), is of the highest 'priority and the aim of a superior poet' (chapter 14). Whether the work succeeds in this aim or not is also important, because this action aimed at is

megiston de toutôn estin – ‘the most important of [the] things’ (Halliwell) that go into the making of a poetic mimesis. The others are character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle.

Roland Barthes explains that ‘action’ is of different kinds, but comprises a small set of ‘paradigmatic articulations’. Being strictly in line with Aristotle on the point that ‘it is not in order to provide mimesis of character that the agents act; rather, their characters are included for the sake of their actions’ (chapter 6), he tends to understand character through action. Accordingly, if action consists of a small set of ‘paradigmatic articulations’, so must character:

The most important, it must be stressed again, is the definition of the character according to participation in a sphere of actions, these spheres being few in number, typical and classifiable; which is why this second level of description, despite its being that of the characters, has here been called the level of Actions: the word *actions* is not to be understood in the sense of the trifling acts which form the tissue of the first level but in that of the major articulations of *praxis* (desire, communication, struggle). (107)

‘The trifling acts which form the tissue of the first level’ correspond to the individual incidents to their last details, and designated by Aristotle as ‘contingent matter’ (*Ethics*, Book VI: IV), which is acted upon by ‘right reason’ in making a poem, all the things that are put together and take their places in the chain beginning-middle-end – in G.W.F. Hegel’s terms, the poem’s ‘configuration in an external and phenomenal mode’ (613). These elements are analysed by Barthes at the functional level. At this level, there are actions that ‘open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story’ (94) on the one hand, and on the other, *indices* which ‘can only be saturated (completed) on the level of characters or on the level of narration’ (95). Two intersecting poles are thereby made out in a story, the vertical or indicial level where the subject of action is central, with the circumstances of time and space that fill it out, while at the horizontal level, there are functional units with one incident succeeding another, and the associated details that fill the space between one incident and another.

Contingent matter, that is, ‘matter which may exist otherwise than it actually does in any given case’ is not to be confused with ‘things which exist or come into being necessarily, [or] things in the way of nature’ which do not ‘come under the province of Art’ (*Ethics*, Book VI: IV). Contingent matter comes ‘under the province of Art’ in that it can be made into one thing or another. It becomes something specific, something *formed* by right of emergence of the poem – or whatever else it is made into. For Aristotle, the incidents that comprise the surface configuration of a poem are like building blocks, none of which is self-contained, or exists for itself, but for each and every one of the other incidents it interconnects with to make the whole which he identifies as *action*. In other words, the totality *amounts* to one or another ‘of the major articulations of *praxis* (desire, communication, struggle)’.

Where *representation* is accepted as an adequate translation of the Greek word *mimesis*, as in Julia Kristeva, there is an object which precedes that act of representation, whether as a mental existent or an extra-mental. Such objects may be universals, like *loyalty* and *betrayal*, where the relationship between the symbolizer and the symbolized is asymmetrical, or they may be ‘entities both of lesser scope and more *concretized* than those of the symbol’ and are therefore ‘*reified* universals become *objects* in the strongest sense of the word’ (*Desire in Language* 40). On this basis literature is conceptualized as serving a major cultural and social function, and a literary work may only be understood as an ideologue:

The concept of text as ideologue determines the very procedure of a semiotics that, by studying the text as intertextuality, considers it as such within (the text of) society and history.

The ideologue of a text is the focus where knowing rationality grasps the transformation of

utterances (to which the text is irreducible) into a totality (the text) as well as the insertions of this totality into the historical and social text. (37)

Outside of symbolic representation where values are universally shared, the specific ideologeme which establishes the character of the given text is reconstructed by referring it to history and social practice. With texts, therefore, in which representation is of 'entities both of lesser scope and more *concretized* than those of the symbol', the critical focus inevitably falls on the elements themselves configured, according to Hegel, 'in an external and phenomenal mode'. In some critical practices, these are not only the focus of discussion, but also are cited as the factors of distinction of traditions of dramatic or other literature one from another. Analysis centres on the kinds of incident, their sources and varieties, and the stories behind them as a focus of interest and identified as the poem's 'content'. For example, Martha Hussain refers to these as 'the objects it imitates, which form its representational content' (71).

In this manner of text handling, drama is apt to be seen merely as a performance, and the *muthos* merely a story. But Aristotle insists that there is a difference in that a poetic *muthos* by constructing 'the kinds of things that might occur ... is more philosophical and more elevated than [say,] history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars' (*Poetics*, chapter 9). The 'articulations of *praxis* (desire, communication, struggle)' are themselves universals and are not tied to time and place or person.

Universals as the goal of mimesis are however not seen in a philosophical format as definable concepts. Dramatic literature can only make mimesis of men doing things, or in Whalley's translation 'of men-of-action in action' (21). It is therefore the making of mimesis 'of men-of-action in action' that constitutes dramatic literature as a distinctive literary form. In this drama comes close to epic. Both deal with 'men-of-action in action', but while in epic this is seen in the report of a narrator, dramas 'deal with men acting and doing' (Whalley 55). The involvement of persons acting and doing in mimesis entails that at no point in poetry are we dealing with *praxis* as an abstraction, unless by directly – and ironically – playing it. We can think of such an ironical play in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, although not of *praxis*, but of an ethical value, namely *loyalty*. The 'human abstract', as it is called in Blake's poetry, 'grows [] in the human Brain', not in the world of *probable* action, which is the environment of poetry. Rather there are persons immersed in actions which in drawing them in partly determine how they respond and the nature of the decisions they take. But they are still individuals with personality traits which interplay in their decision making. *King Lear* is an example, with the hero moved to restructure and try and reorder his heritage as a last act of sovereign power does so in a way that reflects his own individual psychological reality. *King Lear*'s act over-produces in a way that Greek tragedies often do, unfolding a sequence in which struggle, communication, and desire interplay and clash.

Kristeva, however, speaks of representation of 'reified universals', which means that there is more to the poem than the surface configurations. Reading needs to be able to explore the 'vertical dimension' of representation whereby '*restriction* in relation to the symbolized universals ("heroism," "courage," "nobility," "virtue," "fear," "treason," etc.)' is at work (38). An example of surface configurations being consistently kept in touch with the symbol is in Mario DiGangi's *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*, where homoerotics mapped at the level of incident is related to 'favouritism', 'masculinity' and so forth, which are symbolic forms.

Mimesis of struggle seems to be the most readily recognizable dramatic fable; and several of the plays to be covered in this course are *mimeseis* of struggle. Such are Aeschylus's *The Persians*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides' *The Bacchae*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. There are also false struggles, though seriously meant, like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, where communication is also

at play. In John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, communication is unveiled to be much more than conveying information from one mind to another. This conveying of information is readily happening, but Maura's fear remains incommunicable; and yet her whole world is in its grip. She is alone with it in what is otherwise a small and intimate family group. Similarly, the mimesis of communication is at work in T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*. There are *mimeseis* of desire in William Congreve's *Love for Love*, George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, where struggle is also simultaneously enacted, while in *The Glass Menagerie* there is mimesis of a mother's machination to bring about a movement of desire to advantage her slightly impaired child. Thus it almost goes without saying that the mimesis is rarely clean cut and straightforward.

Universals are not things that are directly experienced, hence Kristeva accounts for them as productions of mythical thought. By indirectly representing these universals, the work of art plays up significance: the story is not just a story, no more is drama merely a set of speeches accompanied by appropriate gestures. The work brings into play a significance that links this individual work to 'a self-contained literary universe'. Far from 'an endless series of free associations', Frye's mythical analysis leads to the understanding of 'literature [as] a total form' (*Anatomy of Criticism* 118). In Frye then 'the mythical view of literature as leading to the conception of an order of nature as a whole being imitated by a corresponding order of words' (118) is what endows drama the poetic quality.

'Imitation', is of course the word traditionally used to translate *mimesis*. But it falls far short in the view of some philosophers like Martin Heidegger. It would appear that there is so much more in question when we are faced by a work of art. According to Heidegger, 'the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force.... To be a work means to set up a world' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 43). The first and most basic aspect of this world is its self-sufficiency. So the work of art in its self-sufficiency mirrors the world of literature itself, 'a self-contained literary universe'. Hence Kristeva's idea of *representation*, which presupposes something outside, either the universal or reality itself, also falls short. In *representation*, it is obvious that the point of interest is the represented. Self-sufficiency rather entails that:

In the tragedy nothing is staged or displayed theatrically, but the battle of the new gods against the old is being fought. The linguistic work, originating in the speech of the people, does not refer to this battle; it transforms the people's saying so that now every living word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and what unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly, what lofty and what flighty, what master and what slave. (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 42)

To Heidegger, it would appear, therefore, that analyzing the work in terms of the articulations of praxis is yet a step in the way. Mimesis is rather an enactment. Hence comedy is characterized by Frye as 'usually a movement from one kind of society to another the final society reached [being] the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs' (*Anatomy of Criticism* 163, 164).

Enactment is a word frequently encountered in Wole Soyinka precisely in this sense of 'a multi-level experience of the mystical and the mundane' (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 2). In this multi-level experience, it is the presence of the *mystical* in the *mundane* that produces significance. But we may see in Heidegger's presentation above that this enactment is serious (*spoudaias*) - Heidegger would probably say, of utmost seriousness, for it is the founding movements and relationships that are in question; and tragedy is the fight of the gods, and 'transforms the people's saying so that now every living word fights the battle', a battle that does not so much solve a dispute as *put* 'up for decision' the great enigmas that the search for truth

engenders, in which the search is re-begun. The 'world' of this battle is primarily the work's, but that is not to say that 'it stands outside all relations' (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 40). Those gods are knowable in a new tragedy precisely because they are always already known.

Aristotle of course holds the priority of action over character in poetic *mimeseis*, but it should be mentioned that there is something of a competition. Aristotle himself recognizes this where he identifies four kinds of tragedies, one of which is 'tragedy of character'. Friedrich Nietzsche has paid a great deal of attention to mythological figures, *heroes* in the strict sense of the word, whose existence is endlessly resumed in *displaced* forms. A frequently occurring pair is Apollo and Dionysus:

The Apolline Greek, too, felt the effect aroused by the *Dionysiac* to be 'Titanic' and 'barbaric'; at the same time he could not conceal from himself the fact that he too was related inwardly to those overthrown Titans and heroes. Indeed he was bound to feel more than this: his entire existence, with all its beauty and moderation, rested on a hidden ground of suffering and knowledge which was exposed to his gaze once more by the *Dionysiac*. And behold! Apollo could not live without Dionysos. The 'Titanic' and 'barbaric' was ultimately just as much of a necessity as the Apolline! (*The Death of Tragedy and Other Writings* 26)

Heidegger's battling gods resonates here, as well as Frye's mythical entities, ranging from cosmic forces and the ancient gods to Biblical characters like Adam, Eve, and Moses and figures like scapegoat and the slain god, to such obviously human entities as the impostor, the *picaro*, and the old wise man. In these terms Aristotle's dictum that 'it is not in order to provide mimesis of character that the agents act; rather, their characters are included for the sake of their actions' may need to be rethought, provided that it be recognized that mimesis of character will not take place, except at the same time as a mimesis of action. In plays like Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, the characters strongly taking up the space is as if in virtue of the action being included for their sake.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Ethics*. Translated by J. A. Smith. A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2004.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by George Whalley. McGill-Queen's UP, 1997.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Stephen Halliwell. Harvard UP, 1995.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by T.S. Dorsch. Penguin, 1965.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image – Music – Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. Fontana Press, 1977.
- Blake, William. *Collected Poems*. Edited by W.B. Yeats. Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005.
- DiGangi, Mario. *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*. Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Athlone Publishers, 1970.
- Hegel, Gottfried W. F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols. Translated by T. M. Knox. The Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1971.
- Husain, Martha. *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle's 'Poetics'*. State U of New York P, 2002.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and other Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge UP, 1976.