Food for Thought: Text and Sense in Aristotle, *Poetics* 19

JOHN T. KIRBY

Perusal of the standard commentaries on the *Poetics* will show that the difficulties of chapter 19, which is concerned with διάνοια or “thought,” have led to various interpretations. I have supplied a portion of the text, from Kassel’s 1965 Oxford edition, and furnished my own apparatus.

The passage is in essence an exploration of the contours of διάνοια as it applies in the composition of a tragedy. According to his habit, Aristotle offers a dialectical διαίρεσις of the topic of discussion, breaking it down into component parts. In this instance, however, the very syntax makes discernment of the διαίρεσις difficult; and more than one construction is possible. Having cautioned my reader that there is no universally accepted schematization of the train of thought here, I would like to offer my own (Figure 1). From this diagram it will be clear that I understand διάνοια as operative on two levels within the performance of a play: in the words spoken by the characters (ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου) and in their actions (ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν).^1^ The markers τὰ μὲν and τὰ δὲ (b5) also reflect this major

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distinction. What cannot be made clear in the diagram, however, is the fact that over and above both the words and the actions of the dramatis personae is the planning and craft of the playwright, from which the text indeed takes its being. Aristotle conceives of this as well in terms of διάνοια, as will become clear from our examination of b3–4.

I would like to devote some scrutiny to several phrases in this most difficult passage.

καὶ ἐτι μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας: Else considers this phrase a gloss that intrudes upon and destroys an essentially binary construction. Without it, he is free to redistribute τὸ τε ἀποδεικνύοντα καὶ τὸ λύειν and τὸ πάθη παρασκευάζειν under the headings of λόγος and πράγματα respectively. This is a bold solution (as so many of Else’s are) and provides a synthetic understanding of our passage; but the adoption of such a solution has repercussions further on, as we shall see.

τὰ μὲν ... τὰ δὲ: Having disposed of καὶ ἐτι μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας, Else seeks to make τὰ μὲν and τὰ δὲ refer to ἐλεεινᾶ ἡ δεινᾶ and μεγάλα ἡ εἰκότα respectively: ἐλεεινᾶ ἡ δεινᾶ are to be “brought home (to the spectator) without (explicit) exposition”; μεγάλα ἡ εἰκότα are to be “deliberately produced in speech.” This, however, is unnecessarily restrictive: it limits ἐλεεινᾶ ἡ δεινᾶ to events, whereas things spoken may also be ἐλεεινᾶ ἡ δεινᾶ; and it does not acknowledge that of course events in the play, as well as points of argument, may be μεγάλα or εἰκότα. I think rather that τὰ δὲ should be read with the words that follow, i.e. τὰ δὲ ἐν τοῖς λόγοι, “things spoken” or “argumentation,” as opposed to πράγματα, “things done.” Else attempts to discredit this construction: he assumes that τὰ μὲν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν must mean “verbal effects gotten through action.” But I find it more sensible to understand τὰ μὲν (sc. ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν) as = τὰ πράγματα themselves, which may be ἡ ἐλεεινᾶ ἡ δεινᾶ ἡ μεγάλα ἡ εἰκότα. The actual phrase ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν is used in precisely the same way at 1454b6–7 as here at 1456b2; and it is important to keep in mind that Aristotle’s common term for the construction of the μῦθος is σύνθεσις πραγμάτων, the “assembling of πράγματα.” I have schematized the διαίρεσις according to this understanding; but I question the authenticity of the reading ἡ μεγάλα ἡ εἰκότα, and to that I now turn.

ἡ μεγάλα ἡ εἰκότα: ἡ ἐλεεινᾶ ἡ δεινᾶ (1456b3) make a pair here, and correspond (under the heading of πράγματα) to the mention of the πάθη at 1456a38–b1 (under the heading of effects provided ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου).

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3 Else (previous note) 561, 564–65.

4 As the ancients also recognized; cf. e.g. Eur. Hipp. 498 ὃ δεινὰ λέξασιν.

5 Or even ἀναγκαῖα—on which see below.

6 Else (above, note 2) 566 n. 12: “This is what has reduced the passage to the inanity we spoke of earlier.”
Vahlen in his Beiträge delineates three μέρη of διάνοια here: τὸ τε ἀποδεικνύοναι καὶ τὸ λύειν, τὸ πάθη παρασκευάζειν, and μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας. In coming to 1456b3–4, he seeks to preserve this tripartite concept, and holds that ἡ ἐλεεινά ἢ δεινά corresponds to τὸ πάθη παρασκευάζειν, μεγάλα το μέγεθος καὶ μικρότητας, and εἰκότα το τὸ τε ἀποδεικνύοναι καὶ τὸ λύειν.7 This provides a neat response, but it requires us to accept that μεγάλα and εἰκότα are each being used as a kind of shorthand for the longer phrases.8 In the interest of such a balance, I would have expected a simple παθητικά (or the equivalent) instead of the explicit pair ἡ ἐλεεινά ἢ δεινά in b3, which demands to be balanced with the pair ἡ μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα as another dyad.

What seems unnatural is the pair μεγάλα/εἰκότα, for several reasons: (1) When Aristotle pairs μέγας with another concept, it is regularly (as might be expected) with μικρός. In fact he has just done so at 1456b1–2.9 (2) “Probabilities” or “the probable,” on the other hand, typically go in tandem with “necessary consequences” or “necessity,” so that εἰκότα would typically be paired with ἀναγκαῖος; cf. 1451a38, Rh. 1357a22–b25, APr. 70a. (3) Aristotle has just remarked, at 1456a34–36, that διάνοια has an

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7 J. Vahlen, Beiträge zu Aristoteles Poetik (Leipzig 1914) 281.
8 Assumed by I. Bywater, Aristotle on the Art of Poetry (Oxford 1909) 257 (ad b4). A. Gudeman, Aristoteles ΠΕΡΙ ΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΗΣ (Berlin 1934) 332 (ad loc.) quibbles with Bywater’s wording, but also assumes the tripartition.
9 Though, as we have seen, the authenticity of the phrase there has been questioned.
especially close connection with rhetoric. Now both pairs, μέγας/μικρός
and εἰκότα/ἀναγκαῖα, have close connections with rhetorical invention:

(a) μέγας/μικρός embodies the rhetorical motif of size or degree. We are
told at Rhetoric 1403a17–25 that τὸ σὐζεῖν καὶ μειοῦν is πρὸς τὸ
δείξαι ὅτι μέγα ἢ μικρόν. Furthermore, it is a concern of all three species
of oratory (Rh. 1391b31–92a1), though σὺζησις is especially suited to
epideictic (Rh. 1368a22–27). Related, though distinct, is the line of
argument known as the τόπος τοῦ μᾶλλον καὶ ἦττον (Rh. 1358a14,
1397b12–27).10 Castelvetro, in his 16th-century commentary on the
Poetics, was to my knowledge the first to suggest the possibility of
repeating the μέγας/μικρός pair from b1–2 here at b4. He, however, prints
εἰκότα in his text. Else (the “gloss” notwithstanding) also perceives the
binary structure of the sentence; but he too prints εἰκότα at b4.

(b) εἰκότα and ἀναγκαῖα are the materials for the προτάσεις or
premises of syllogism. We see this treated extensively at Rhetoric 1357a–b,
Prior Analytics 70a–b, Posterior Analytics 74b–75a, and Topics 112b. On
the verbal level this is the way a speaker will reason and offer rationale for
assertions; but at Poetics 1451a36–38 Aristotle has stipulated that in
composing a μόθος, the author should take care to see that the events of the
story flow one from another κατὰ τὸ εἰκός ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. This is crucial
for our understanding of 1456b4, because (as I understand the διάφρασις
there) it is presented as of fundamental importance that the plot-structure be
organized syllogistically—i.e. in such a way that the audience can make
sense of why one event occurs as the result of another.

I submit, then, that ἡ μεγάλα ἢ εἰκότα at b4 is corrupt. But while
either substantive could be replaced to make a dyad that is relevant in a
rhetorical framework, the topic more germane to the discussion of what is
needed ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν is that of rationale in plot-structure—διάνοια
par excellence on the part of the author. Thus it is more likely that Aristotle
originally wrote ἡ ἀναγκαῖα ἢ εἰκότα here.

ἀνευ διδασκαλίας: διδασκαλία is commonly taken as equivalent to
ἀπόδειξις, i.e. the giving of information (whether to a dramatic character
or to the audience). D. W. Lucas maintains that it has “nothing to do with
production,”11 but it may possibly be a technical theater-term referring to
the words of a play-script, the actors’ “lines”: LSJ s.v. διδασκαλία II.1

10 ὁ σὺζεῖν καὶ μειοῦν is said at 1403a to be, not a τόπος, but rather the subject-matter
(πρι ἂ) of a certain kind of enthymeme. The μᾶλλον καὶ ἦττον is a general line of argument
used to shape enthymemes, while σὺζεῖν καὶ μειοῦν are applications of particular
enthymemes. They differ further in that σὺζησις and μειώσις are each capable of independent
formulation, while an argument a fortiori consists in the very connection drawn between the
μᾶλλον and ἦττον. However, Aristotle recognized the kinship of these concepts: at Rh.
1359a23 we find μέγεθος and μικρότης mentioned in conjunction with τὸ μεῖζον καὶ τὸ
ἐλαττον. The reader should mark that Aristotle uses the word τόπος in more than one sense;
see G. Kennedy, The Art of Persuasion in Greece (Princeton 1963) 100–01.

11 Lucas (above, note 1) 196.
shows that by the time of the epigrammatist Dioscorides, whose floruit was only a century or so after Aristotle’s own, the word could be metonymic for the plays produced; and even before Aristotle’s time, χοροδιδάσκαλος was the term for the person who taught the chorus their lines. So it is simplest and clearest to understand ἀνευ διδασκαλίας as = “without dialogue.”

The gist of the passage as I understand it, then, is as follows. (1) διάνοια in drama functions on two levels: in the playwright’s mind, as the work is being composed, and in the characters’ minds, as the μῦθος unfolds onstage. (2) As regards the characters, dramatic dialogue has three μέρη: (a) proof and refutation, (b) stimulation of the emotions, and (c) degrees of importance. (3) As regards the playwright, in putting together the events of the story—ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν—διάνοια should be used in the same way—ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν ἰδεῶν δεῖ χρήσθαι (sc. τὴν διάνοιαν)—as when deciding about dialogue, except that πράγματα must achieve their effect without the vehicle of language (ἀνευ διδασκαλίας): “Events, on the one hand (τὰ μὲν), must be perceived independent of verbal explanation, while argumentation, on the other (τὰ δὲ ἐν τοῖς λόγοι), must (by definition) be provided orally by the speaker, and must come into being as a result of speech.” Thus (a) the piteous or fearful events themselves elicit pity and fear from the audience, and (b) the flow of causality in the plot must be recognizably clear as coming from connections that are either necessary or probable.12

Purdue University

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