

# *Between Athens and Jerusalem: King Lear and the Morality of Tragedy*

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*Aristodemus was only half awake, and he did not hear the beginning of the discourse; the chief thing which he remembered was Socrates compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also.*

Plato, *Symposium*<sup>1</sup>

Is classical tragedy contingent upon a Greco-Roman sense of morality? Or can tragedy exist within a Judeo-Christian universe as well? Literary critic Northrop Frye's theory of high-mimetic tragedy inherits distinctions that Aristotle draws between tragedy and comedy in the *Poetics*. As a brief philological excursion will demonstrate, the binary distinctions upon which Aristotle builds his tragic structure are inherently entangled with notions of a noble aristocracy, what Friedrich Nietzsche would call a *master morality*. With the introduction of Judeo-Christian morality—a framework that inverts the *master morality* latent in Aristotle's system—the tragic structure breaks down. As demonstrated in *King Lear*, when these two antithetical notions of morality are present within the same text, the binary oppositions that underlie the tragic structure collapse, undermining the genre distinctions that separate tragedy from comedy.

Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, introduces his theory of modes by recalling a passage in the *Poetics* in which Aristotle uses a character's elevation relative to the audience as criteria for distinguishing between types of poetry. The passage Frye seems to be recalling is as follows:

...since those who imitate choose as objects of imitation men in action and since those in action must be either good [*spoudaios*] or bad [*phaulos*] characters (inasmuch as character almost always falls into one of these two categories owing to the fact that distinctions in human character are all derived from the distinction between badness and goodness), *they portray them as either better, or worse, or such as we are.*<sup>2</sup>

As Frye keenly notes, translating the *spoudaios* as “good” and *phaulos* as “bad” seems “to indicate a somewhat narrowly moralistic view of literature.”<sup>3</sup> Frye softens the moral implications of the translation by expanding the terms to figuratively signify weighty and light action. He then moves into an explication of his modal system, never returning to the *spoudaios/phaulos* opposition or to the curious issue of translation-imposed morality.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 223d.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a, (emphasis mine).

<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), 33.

## Binary Opposition in the *Poetics*

While translating the *spoudaios/phaulos* binary as weighty/light may be sufficient for Frye's purposes of distinguishing between the high and low mimetic and preserving Aristotle's distinction between tragedy and comedy, this binary is central to Aristotle's *Poetics* and deserves a more nuanced reading. Shortly after the passage Frye cites, Aristotle repeats his distinction between types of poetry, now with the labels *tragedy* and *comedy*:

It is this difference in portrayal of character which distinguishes tragedy from comedy; for comedy strives to portray men as a worse and tragedy as better than men now are.<sup>4</sup>

However, instead of again using *spoudaios* and *phaulos* for worse and better, Aristotle associates tragedy with *agathos* (ἀγαθός) and comedy with *kakos* (κακός).<sup>5</sup> While *agathos/kakos* oppose each other sufficiently to allow for effortless substitution with *spoudaios/phaulos*, the words expand the dualities latent in tragedy and comedy beyond weighty vs. light. *Agathos*<sup>6</sup> is most often translated as noble, in reference to birth, with associations of wealth and power, and in direct opposition to *kakos*. *Kakos*<sup>7</sup> does not have a positive definition, and instead is best understood as the negation of *agathos*: as ignoble, cowardly, and poor. While Frye does not account for this expansion of meaning, it is necessary to place noble/ignoble alongside weighty/light and good/bad as the antithetical aspects of tragedy and comedy.

When recalling the history and development of poetry, Aristotle adds another connotation to the tragedy-comedy dichotomy by casting “cheap” as the antonym of “noble”:

The next step was a gradual division of poetry according to the inherent characters of the poets. The nobler poets portrayed *noble deeds and deeds of noble individuals*, while the cheaper ones portrayed *the deeds of cheap persons*...And so, when tragedy and comedy came into being, poets turned to one or the other of these, each according as his particular type of character urged him...<sup>8</sup>

By repeating the substitution procedure, this time associating comedy with the word *eutelés* (ευτελής), Aristotle adds a notion of value to comedy and tragedy. *Eutelés*<sup>9</sup>, in a non-figurative sense, is translated as cheap and easily paid for. When applied to persons it can mean worthlessness. This dichotomy of wealth is not accurately represented in our previous list of dualities. Thus, along with good/bad, weighty/light, and noble/ignoble, we must add noble/cheap to the antithetical characteristics of comedy and tragedy.

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), “ἀγαθός.” Perseus Digital Library < <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> >

<sup>7</sup> Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, “κακός.”

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b, (emphasis mine).

<sup>9</sup> Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, “ευτελής.”

Aristotle's technique of maintaining rigid binary opposition between tragedy and comedy while layering on opposing characteristics creates a rich and nuanced distinction between these two types of poetry. By incorporating notions of nobility and wealth/value into this distinction, Aristotle makes the concepts of tragedy and comedy inseparable from a hierarchical aristocracy. For the "weightiness" of tragedy—the distinction of the characters being "better" than the audience—is entangled with notions of rank, class, and social position. Recast in Nietzschean terms, one might say that Aristotle builds his judgments of good, bad, better, and worse upon the framework of a *master morality*:

What pointed me in the *right* direction was...what the designations of 'good'...meant from an etymological perspective. I found that they all led back to the *same transformation of concepts*—that 'refined' or 'noble' in the sense of social standing is everywhere the fundamental concept, from which 'good' in the sense of 'having a refined soul' necessarily developed. This development always ran parallel with that other one by means of which 'common' or 'plebian' or 'low' ultimately slide over into the concept of 'bad'...<sup>10</sup>

Nietzsche goes on to show—as Aristotle's substitutions demonstrate—that *agathos* and *kakos*, used as good and bad, are inseparable from notions of nobility and commonness.<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche places Judeo-Christian morality—which he refers to as *slave morality*—in opposition to the *master morality* of the Greco-Roman world. For Nietzsche, Judeo-Christian morality is founded upon alterity and resentment. Whereas *master morality* is value creating, *slave morality* simply inverts the values of master morality, casting the noble as bad and the common as good. "[Slave morality] requires an outside stimulus in order to act at all; all its action is reaction. The opposite is true of aristocratic valuations: such values grow and act spontaneously, seeking out their contraries only in order to affirm themselves even more gratefully and delightedly."<sup>12</sup>

Read in light of Nietzsche's *master morality*, Aristotle avoids the moralizing that Frye attempted to soften. For, as Aristotle uses it, "better" means closer to nobility, while "worse" means closer to the common people. The "fall" which occurs in tragedy is a fall from nobility, from greatness, and has no connotations of the Edenic fall of Judeo-Christian morality. Tragedy occurs because of an action a character commits: not a "bad" action or an action undertaken by a "bad" character in the Christian sense of morality, but an action in which the consequences were not foreseen by the character. As Aristotle notes, if actions were independent from the constitution of a character, tragedy would still be successful: "Moreover, without action there could be no tragedy, but there could be tragedy without character."<sup>13</sup> Thus, it follows that tragedy is not a form based upon moralized judgments of character, but rather, the playing out of the consequences of action independent of ethos.

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals: a Polemic : by Way of Clarification and Supplement to My Last Book, Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Douglas Smith. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a.

## Frye's Aristotelian Inheritance

Northrop Frye builds his theory of modes upon an Aristotelian framework, inheriting the nuanced binaries of the *Poetics*. Adopting Aristotle's distinctions between tragedy and comedy, Frye distinguishes between *tragic fictional modes* and *comic fictional modes*. He also utilizes Aristotle's distinction between "better than us" and "worse than us" to identify between the high and low mimetic in both the tragic and the comic:

If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours... This is the hero of the *high mimetic* mode, of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero Aristotle had in mind.<sup>14</sup>

The three characteristics that Frye lists to demarcate a high mimetic hero—authority, passion, and power of expression—are worth closer examination. With these terms, and his designation of the high mimetic hero as a leader, Frye attempts to abstract the characteristics of nobility while effacing the necessity of an aristocratic social structure. "Authority" is a clever substitution for "nobility," carrying on the sense of power, influence, and supremacy inherent to a noble class while leaving behind notions of an external social hierarchy. The term "authority" grants influence on the basis of character and merit, while "nobility" grants influence on the basis of bloodline and social position. "Passion" and "power of expression" accomplish similar substitutions, relocating the tragic hero's locus of privilege from an external order to an internal quality. Whereas Aristotle's tragic hero was elevated in the sense that he was hierarchically above others in status and custom, Frye's high mimetic hero is elevated because of the relative force of his passions and potency of expression.

Frye's expansion of the sense of a tragic hero is both a redoubling of and a rupture from Aristotle's conception. While Frye does acknowledge that tragedy has only occurred during periods "of social history in which an aristocracy is fast losing its effective power but still retains a good deal of ideological prestige," he notes this as historical categorization rather than structural necessity.<sup>15</sup> Frye breaks from Aristotle by making the qualities and psychological makeup of a character inseparable from the tragedy of plot. In Frye's model, tragedy cannot exist without character, as it can for Aristotle, for the hierarchical elevation which makes a tragic fall possible is held internal to the character's "ideological prestige." In a sense, Frye is expanding the structure of tragedy to accommodate both Elizabethan and Athenian forms of tragedy.<sup>16</sup> And yet, Frye

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<sup>14</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> "...in Elizabethan tragedy and specifically in Shakespeare, the hero's character is depicted in greater and more varied detail than in antique tragedy, and participates more actively in shaping the individual's fate. But it is also possible to describe the difference in another way: one might say that the idea of destiny in Elizabethan tragedy is both more broadly conceived and more closely linked to the individual character than it is in antique tragedy. In the latter, fate means nothing but the given tragic complex, the present network of events in which a particular person is enmeshed at a particular moment. ... The essence of his personality is revealed and evolves exclusively within the particular tragic action; everything else is omitted. All this is based upon the way in which antique drama arose and

remains true to Aristotle in the sense that he adheres to a *master morality* and does not introduce moralizing judgments of “good” and “bad”— in the Judeo-Christian sense— into his tragic system:

The particular thing called tragedy that happens to the tragic hero does not depend on his moral status. If it is causally related to something he has done, as it generally is, the tragedy is in the inevitability of the consequences of the act, not in its moral significance as an act...Aristotle’s hamartia or “flaw,” therefore, is not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness...<sup>17</sup>

Thus, while Frye expands the agency and privilege of character in relation to action and attempts to soften the aristocratic structure essential to tragedy, he preserves the Aristotelian binaries within his notion of the high and low mimetic: noble/ignoble (leader/non-leader), weighty/light (sublime passion / common emotional faculty), and noble/cheap (high rhetorical skills / poor expression).

### The Collapse of Aristotelian Binaries in *King Lear*

While Frye’s Aristotelian distinctions of the high-mimetic tragic style adequately model literary universes based upon a *master morality*, the distinctions collapse when facing paradigmatic shifts and the advent of Christian morality. This tension, between *master morality* and *slave morality*, is especially visible in *King Lear* in which an explicit Christian morality is noticeably absent. The universe of *King Lear* is inherently unstable: characters rapidly rise and fall in social elevation, familial relations decay and turn poisonous overnight, and the distinctions between reason and madness become increasingly blurred. At the center of this chaos, both structurally and chronologically, is the storm scene.

Read through the lens of *master morality*, Lear enters the storm scene as a tragic, falling king— a remnant of a collapsing aristocracy— lapses in and out of madness, and hits bottom— can fall no more— with the following line: “Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings: come, unbutton here.”<sup>18</sup> While Lear remains “great” in the Aristotelian sense— for fallen nobility is not equivalent to an ignoble commoner—and “superior in degree” in Frye’s sense—for the passion expressed in his madness and his mastery of language are unparalleled— Lear has fallen as far as possible from the position of king: mad and near naked, Lear has lost his kingdom, his knights, and his sovereignty.

And yet, read through the lens of Christian morality, the storm scene constitutes the beginning of Lear’s salvation. Within this moral system, Lear, as an almost-naked, suffering outcast is now closer to the Christian king of kings than he has ever previously been. As if echoing this sentiment, Lear falls on his knees in a most out of character prayer. Praying for the

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on its technical requirements.” Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), 319.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 3.4.105-7.

“poor naked wretches” of the world, identifying with the meek, “unfed,” and “houseless,” Lear, in an apparent moment of clarity, recognizes the ubiquity of suffering which he had previously been blind to. He wishes to “shake the superflux to them,” that is, distribute wealth to the poor and “show the heavens more just.”<sup>19</sup> The notion of justice that Lear appeals to is *not* aligned with “noble” and “good” in the Aristotelian sense; that is, it is not an appeal to a *master morality*. Rather, it is an appeal to the “good” within a Christian morality, an appeal to the theological notion of *caritas*, and echoes New Testament passages such as Matthew 19:21.<sup>20</sup> Thus, into the tragic framework constituted upon an aristocratic hierarchy, enters a new sense of morality—a Christian sense of morality—that inverts the Aristotelian *master morality*: the poor, powerless, and meek have become the good.<sup>21</sup>

Emerging from the storm scene, there is a sense of a shift in the structure of morality in the universe of *King Lear*. The moral ambiguity—in the Christian sense—that filled the pre-storm sections of the play is gone and characters are either wholly good or terrifyingly evil. As Frye aptly notes: “...from then on we have something unique in Shakespeare: a dramatic world in which the characters are, like chess pieces, definitely black or white.”<sup>22</sup> This is exemplified in the scene of Gloucester’s blinding. Having servants bind Gloucester to a chair, Cornwall proceeds to put out one of Gloucester’s eyes with his foot. Suddenly, Cornwall’s servant intervenes with the following justification:

Hold your hand, my lord.  
I have served you ever since I was a child,  
But better service have I never done you  
Than now to bid you hold.<sup>23</sup>

The servant intervenes because he morally objects to the behavior of his master. If the universe of *King Lear* were still operating within a paradigm of *master morality*, the behavior of Cornwall, the noble, would be aligned with the good by default, as long as he was acting in the spirit of nobility. However, the servant’s objection does not seem to be an implication that Cornwall is acting in the spirit of a commoner rather than a nobleman. After all, as far as the servant knows, Gloucester really *is* a traitor. Instead, the servant seems to be objecting to the *wrongness*, the evil nature, of the violence committed against Gloucester. This sense of right/wrong (good/evil)

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<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4.27-36.

<sup>20</sup> “Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.” Mathew 19:21, KJV.

<sup>21</sup> Frye offers insightful commentary on this scene, but does not seem able—or willing—to label Lear’s transformation as Christian: “What is happening is that he has lost his identity as a king in the body peculiar to a king, but is beginning to recover his royal nature in his other body, his individual and physical one; not just the body that is cold and wet, but the mind that realizes how many others are cold and wet, starting with the Fool and Poor Tom. To use religious terms, his relation to his kingdom was transcendent at the beginning of the play; now it is immanent. Whatever his actual size, Lear is a giant figure, but his gigantic dimensions are now not those of a king or hero; they are those of a human being who suffers but understands his affinity with others who suffer.” Northrop Frye, “King Lear,” in *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Sandler (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 116.

<sup>22</sup> Frye, “King Lear,” 104.

<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.7.69-73.

independent of notions of nobility and aristocracy is indicative of a Christian moral framework; and who more fitting to act nobly—in the Christian sense of noble—than the lowest, least powerful, and most common character in the scene. It is this sense of *wrongness* that makes Gloucester's blinding so universally un stomachable: he is subject to a violence that, as A.C Bradley notes, threatens to overpower and transcend the emotions—fear and pity—upon which the very structure of tragedy depends.<sup>24</sup>

This advent of a Christian morality begins to undermine the Aristotelian binaries upon which the tragic structure of *King Lear* depends. Because of the latent clash between the *master morality* of the Greco-tragic form and the Christian morality that inverts this form, *King Lear* fails—refuses—to reconcile as either a tragedy—in the sense of Aristotle and Frye—or a Christian comedy, in the sense of being a story of salvation. This collapse of the binary distinctions undermining the tragic form is best demonstrated in the scene of Cordelia's death. If read within a tragic framework Cordelia's death is not the death of a tragic, high-mimetic character. While “superior in degree”<sup>25</sup> to others in the Aristotelian sense, unless the act which engenders the “inevitability of consequences”<sup>26</sup> is traced back to her early utterance of “Nothing, my lord,”<sup>27</sup> Cordelia's death is not a tragic consequence of some *hamartia*<sup>28</sup>. Even if one was inclined to associate Cordelia's death with her refusal to praise her father in the opening scene, Cordelia exhibits no *anagnorisis*<sup>29</sup> or *catharsis*<sup>30</sup>: her death is off stage, she is absent from the majority of the play, and she has no recognition that she is going to die or that an unforeseen consequence of an action leads to her death.

For Cordelia's death to be related to the tragic structure of *King Lear* her death must be a consequence of Lear's actions. Cordelia gestures towards this interpretation close to the death scene: “We are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred the worse. For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down.”<sup>31</sup> Technically, Lear's treatment of Cordelia in the opening scene did, causally, engender the events that led to Cordelia's imprisonment and death. Furthermore, Lear has a moment of *anagnorisis* in which he realizes the consequences of his actions towards Cordelia: “If you have poison for me, I will drink it. / I know you do not love me, for your sisters / Have, as I do remember, do me wrong. You have some cause, they have not.”<sup>32</sup> And yet, Lear is forgiven by Cordelia: “No cause, no cause.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, he lucidly

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<sup>24</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), 251.

<sup>25</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.87.

<sup>28</sup> Tragic Flaw. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453A9-10.

<sup>29</sup> Recognition. Aristotle defines *anagnorisis* as “a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune.” See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a30-32.

<sup>30</sup> A difficult to translate word that means emotional purgation or climactic feeling of pity and sorrow. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b21-28.

<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3.3-5

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.7.72-6

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.7.77

reconciles with her: “When thou dost ask me blessing I’ll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness.”<sup>34</sup> It is precisely at this moment of reconciliation that Lear and Cordelia are imprisoned, and shortly after, Cordelia is murdered. The reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia diffuses any emotional inertia that could have led to catharsis. Within this context, Cordelia’s death—a hanging arranged by Edmund—does not register as the tragic inevitability of an action undertaken in ignorance, rather, her death registers as unnecessary and unwarranted murder.

If read within a Christian framework, Cordelia’s death must be intertwined with a sense of salvation. As an innocent, dutiful<sup>35</sup>, and forgiving daughter, Cordelia is exquisitely “good” in the Christian sense of the word. And yet, her death is not tragic, for her death is not the end. Rather than dying meaninglessly and pointlessly, Cordelia nobly transcends into the kingdom of heaven and continues to live: “[the advent of Christianity implies] a transposition of the center of gravity from life on earth into a life beyond, with the result that no tragedy ever reached its conclusion here below.”<sup>36</sup> Cordelia’s death is not an ending, but the beginning of an assumption into heaven; thus, *King Lear* qualifies as a mythical Christian comedy in Frye’s system: “The mythical comedy...is Apollonian, the story of how a hero is accepted by a society of gods...in Christian literature it is the theme of salvation, or, in a more concentrated form, of assumption.”<sup>37</sup> And yet, the violence of the death of Gloucester, the promptness and cruelty of Cordelia’s death, and the questionable moral outcome at the end of the play, all undermine a Christian reading of *King Lear*: “Christianity has prompt and confident answers, but the more emotionally convincing the tragedy, the more we may feel that the answers sometimes are a bit too pat.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the two moral systems present within *King Lear* mutually undermine and bleed into each other, making a choice between either reading of the text impossible.

Built upon the chaotic structure of two opposing moralities—the *master morality* and the Judeo-Christian *slave morality*—*King Lear* simultaneously contains two antithetical notions of “good,” “bad,” “noble,” and “common.” For what is great in the sense of classical nobility is resented in Christianity, and what is ignoble and common is revered:

That the King of Kings was treated as a low criminal, that he was mocked, spat upon, whipped, and nailed to the cross—that story no sooner comes to dominate the consciousness of the people than it completely destroys the aesthetics of the separation of styles...a new *sermo humilis* is born, a low style, such as would properly only be applicable to comedy, but which now reaches out far beyond its

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<sup>34</sup>Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3.10-11

<sup>35</sup> I am thankful for a footnote in my Arden edition of *King Lear* pointing out the similarity between Cordelia’s “O dear father, It is thy business that I go about (4.4.23-4)” and Christ’s “I must go about my father’s business (Luke 2:49, KJV).”

<sup>36</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 317.

<sup>37</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> Frye, “King Lear,” 102.



original domain, and encroaches upon the deepest and the highest, the sublime and the eternal.<sup>39</sup>

Since the Aristotelian distinctions that form the basis of tragedy are contingent upon aristocratic notions of morality, when two opposing notions of morality are present within a text, the binary oppositions that underlie the tragic structure collapse. *King Lear* is neither tragedy nor comedy, and in some senses it is both: the richness and depth created by its intersecting, antithetical frameworks of morality overwhelm genre distinctions. Thus, while Aristotle's— and by inheritance— Frye's distinction of the tragic are useful for categorizing tropes, aspects, and structural plot elements of literature, great works like *King Lear*— which contain conflicting and unstable moral frameworks— overwhelm, collapse, and transcend distinctions of the tragic. For great works, like *Lear* himself, sit within the center of a storm of meaning: too large to play within a role, too complex to neatly fit within the structure of a mode, forever overflowing and transcending distinctions, with sublimity seeping through all seams.

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<sup>39</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 72.

