

Medea and Othello:
subversions of Aristotle's archetypal tragic heroes

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I will explore what exactly makes the archetypal tragic hero, according to Aristotle's *Poetics*. The philosopher forms his guidelines with Sophocles' Oedipus as an example. My thesis examines how the poet forms subversions of this archetype in order to manifest the character's disadvantaged place in society. Euripides' *Medea* and Shakespeare's *Othello* are my examples of such subversions. I will then explore the inadequacies of Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero. In conclusion, I propose my own definition based on my analyses of *Medea* and *Othello* as outsiders of the ethical and political community as signified by the characters' gender or race.

Who exactly is the archetypal tragic hero? We must start with tragedy. Aristotle proposes that what defines a tragedy *as* tragedy is: "a change in the hero's fortunes takes place without reversal or discovery" (Aristotle 2324, X.1452a 15-16). So, in order for a story to be tragic, a hero must be cast down from a previously high place from which they cannot recover. But to repeat, how, exactly, do we define a hero? I propose that, in order to be a hero, a character must have a goal which they must go on a journey to obtain. The goal and the journey can be anything, but they must be in place. The specific tragedy of the hero, then, is that, once they have succeeded in obtaining their goal, there is an upset, preferably one that "arous[es] pity and fear" (Aristotle 2323, IX.1452a 2-3). So, not only must they fall from the high place of fulfillment, the audience must believe in the hero and believe that their fall was not a result of their own actions. This goes along with the four characteristics a tragic character must have, according to Aristotle, to be considered thus: good, appropriate, like the reality, and consistent in their personality and actions (Aristotle 2327 XV.1454a). The character must be good, so the

audience will want them to succeed and mourn them when they fall. The character must be appropriate, meaning that they have the traits that could reasonably be expected of them being who they are in their situation. They must be like the reality, or close enough to something the audience could recognize as being like themselves and thus relate to. They must be consistent in their personality and actions by maintaining their traits throughout the tragedy (basically, stay in character). It all comes down to believability and relatability.

One example of the archetypal tragic hero, the one whom Aristotle seems to base his definition around, is Oedipus. His goal was to flee his prophesied fate of killing his father and marrying his mother by leaving those he thought were his parents and going on a journey. This journey eventually leads him to kill a fellow traveler and later become king of Thebes by marrying the widowed queen, whom he has impressed with his cleverness. He thinks that he has avoided his prophesied fate and thus attained his goal. It is only later, when the truth comes out about his adoption, that Oedipus realizes that in trying to avoid his fate, he actually married his mother and killed his father. He is then removed from the throne and blinds himself.

Throughout the tragedy, Sophocles portrays Oedipus as good, given his demonstrable concern for his people and the well-being of his city above all. He is also appropriate and like the reality in that he is wise and commanding, suitable traits for a king who came to his position by defeating the sphinx at her own game and then ruled a powerful city for many years. In all this, he is consistent in his personality and actions, maintaining responsibility for what he does (no matter that he had no knowledge of the truth), even blinding himself in despair.

Oedipus thus fulfills the role of the archetypal tragic hero perfectly. He fits all the categories put forth by Aristotle. Despite his pitiful end, however, Oedipus was coming from a

rather advantaged place in society. He was the (unknowingly adopted) son of a king, so presumably was not badly off despite his self-imposed banishment from the town he grew up in. When he arrives at Thebes, he is welcomed with open arms for his part in cleverly defeating the sphinx that had plagued the town, despite the fact that he had killed someone on the road just because he had been rude to Oedipus. So, if Oedipus, who starts off in a high place in society is the archetype, then what, exactly, is a subversion?

A subversion, at least, in this particular category, is sneaky because it simultaneously fulfills conventions and turns them on their heads.

Let us consider Medea, as Euripides first portrays her. A foreign woman who had helped Jason win the golden fleece, she is cast aside so that he might marry a princess. Medea and her children must fend for themselves, especially since Jason's future father-in-law banishes them for fear that Medea will retaliate against his daughter for marrying Jason. From her place as the wife of hero and mother of his sons to an exile who has no home for herself or her children, Medea thus forms the goal that she will pursue for the course of the play: to obtain vengeance against Jason and make him pay for all the wrongs he has done her. With a goal and a journey to obtain it, Medea fulfills the necessary checkboxes to be an archetypal hero.

Her fall from grace makes Medea a hero by motivating her to pursue her journey. This also marks the "change in the hero's fortunes [that] takes place without reversal or discovery" (Aristotle 2324, X.1452a 15-16). The play is unusual as this change of fortune takes place prior to and at the beginning of the drama. But it takes place nonetheless, thus fulfilling Aristotle's definitions neatly to make the play a tragedy. Medea loses her husband, home, and safety in one fell swoop. She knows exactly who is to blame for her bad fortune.

So, Euripides establishes Medea as a hero who is in a tragedy. But does she fit Aristotle's role of the tragic hero? She may not exactly be conventionally "good," but, from the very first monologue, given by the character of the Nurse, it is established that:

And poor Medea is slighted, and cries aloud on the
 Vows they made to each other, the right hands clasped
 In eternal promise. She calls upon the gods to witness
 What sort of return Jason has made to her love ...
 She listens when she is given friendly advice.
 Except that sometimes she twists back her white neck and
 Moans to herself, calling out on her father's name,
 And her land, and her home betrayed when she came away with
 A man who now is determined to dishonor her (Euripides 20-26...29-33).

She is clearly set up as the one who has been wronged in this conflict from the beginning. Jason swore a sacred oath to her, which he has now broken in favor of a wife who can provide him with political ties. This broken promise is all the worse for the fact that she had given up everything for him: her family, her country, and her home. Without Jason and all he offered her, she has nothing and no one left to turn to. Thus she is "good" in that she is the one in the narrative who is in the right.

But does she act appropriately? In sacrificing her children to the altar of her personal vengeance, she certainly goes against the expectations of a woman in the role of a mother. A mother, regardless the time period, is expected to birth and nurture--not kill--her offspring. It should not matter what extenuating circumstances arise. However, Medea is a foreign woman,

and one with a history of powers that go beyond the normal human. As a woman who has been thoroughly rejected and scorned, she uses traits appropriate for her background and circumstances. The Chorus even warns Jason, “It is a strange form of anger, difficult to cure, / When two friends turn upon each other in hatred” (Euripides 520-521). Medea sets herself on a decision and follows through no matter the personal cost, first demonstrated when she goes with Jason and helps him even though it means losing her family and country. When Jason disregards all she has done on his behalf, her new goal becomes his downfall. She wreaks vengeance upon him even if it means the loss of her children, whom she loves dearly and whose loss will cause pain to her as well.

The revenge that she enacts upon Jason also makes her “like the reality.” She is a wronged woman, abandoned by the man for whom she gave up everything. To add insult to injury, she must flee her new home, banished by the King, the father of Jason’s new bride. Her actions are appropriate for a wronged woman. She is consistent in her personality and actions. She says she will have her retribution against those who have wronged her. Every step she takes afterwards is geared toward taking her pound of flesh. Medea, when agonizing over her decision even asks the audience “Ah, what is wrong with me? Do I want to let go / My enemies unhurt and be laughed at for it? I must face this thing... (Euripides 1049-1051). She sets a course for herself. To sway from it even a little bit would mean the loss of her dignity and a risk of leaving an opening for possible enemies. So, she poisons Jason’s wife and, unwittingly yet serendipitously, his father-in-law, the one who had decreed her banished. She then kills her sons off-stage, and after rubbing the loss of everything Jason had once held dear in his face, rides off

with her children's bodies on a chariot pulled by dragons, denying him even the chance to bury his sons in mourning.

Medea thus fulfills all of Aristotle's categories for a tragic hero. However, there is an essential aspect of the tragedy that makes Medea a twist on the archetypal tragic hero. According to Aristotle, once the hero (in this case, Medea) has succeeded in obtaining her goal, there must be an upset, preferably one that "arous[es] pity and fear" (Aristotle 2323, IX.1452a 2-3). What should move the audience, according to the archetype, is an upset on the character's behalf. But this is not so for Medea. The upset of Euripides's drama is that Medea obtains her goal. The horror comes from a woman so driven by vengeance that she resolves, even at the cost of pain to herself, to kill her own children. The subversion of the trope is that the audience's pity and fear is aroused by the titular character, who leaves at the end of the play in a state of triumph, without any visible consequences to her unnatural act. The audience stops pitying Medea, the victor. Instead, pity transfers to the victims of her act - her children and even her erstwhile husband who has lost everything. Instead of being the fallen figure glorified in tragedy, she leaves the stage triumphant. Euripides thus portrays Medea as accomplishing all her goals and vanquishing her enemies, to the audience's terror.

Medea is not the only character who simultaneously fulfills and subverts Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the titular character is a Moor who has secretly wed Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator. Before he even appears on the stage, his character is derided because of his status as a common black man, particularly in regards to his relationship with Desdemona, a noble white woman. When Iago tells Desdemona's father, Brabantio, about the marriage, he says, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / is

tupping your white ewe” (Shakespeare I.i.86-87). This vivid imagery makes it clear that Iago sees Othello as bestial, taking advantage of Brabantio’s daughter. He expects the other man to view the marriage in the same way. As a Moor who is only acceptable in society because of his military prowess, Othello barely escapes censure from the Senate for his marriage (which took place without Desdemona’s father’s permission). As they tell Othello, “Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you / Against the general enemy Ottoman” (Shakespeare I.iii.48-49). He and Desdemona leave Venice together for the war front, secure in their affection for each other despite their very different backgrounds. However, tragedy strikes through Iago, an ensign under Othello who feels his superior has unfairly passed him over for a promotion that he believes is his due.

But is Othello a hero? There is a false trail of a journey laid out in the beginning of the play when Othello is sent, along with his wife, to fight a war. However, this is obviously not the hero’s journey because the war is already won before his arrival. Despite this, I believe that he does undergo his journey, though it is not a physical one. It starts when, believing his honor has been impugned because of his wife’s supposed infidelity, Othello attempts to regain his lost honor because of his wife’s alleged actions. The only solution he finds to the problem is to kill her, “Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (Shakespeare V.ii.6). He must make sure that she is unable to bring further dishonor to him or anyone else. He accomplishes the grim deed, finishing his hero’s journey, which, by our previous definition, makes him a hero.

Iago’s spite causes him to undermine Othello’s marriage to Desdemona, sowing seeds of mistrust and jealousy. Through his actions come the “change in the hero’s fortunes [that] takes place without reversal or discovery” (Aristotle 2324, X.1452a 15-16). Othello unintentionally

changes from a well-spoken gentleman to a violent brute, especially in regards to his assurance of love with Desdemona. When pleading his case before the senate in defense of his marriage, he says, “She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them” (I.iii.167-168). He is willing to stand before the highest power of the land and proclaim that they, two people whom society tried to keep apart, have been brought together by love. His tale is elegant enough that the Duke replies, “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (I.iii.171). After the couple leaves Venice and has been torn about by Othello’s jealousy and doubt, his loving words are turned to savagery. His fall from grace is evident. Another character even remarks after witnessing his actions after this transformation, “Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate / Call all-in sufficient? Is this the nature / Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue / The shot of accident nor dart of chance / Could neither graze nor pierce?” (Shakespeare IV.i.265-269). This change in personality is such that even an outsider to what is really going on clearly sees the change in Othello. It also shows how his civilized and well-spoken disposition was well-known enough that the change, which happens because of the prompting of Iago, is stark. He goes from loving his wife to being suspicious, and even abusive, of her. This marks an even greater change in Othello’s circumstances. After his marriage he is pushed away by society’s prejudice, but because of this outsider status, he eventually gives way to jealousy and pushes away the one who loves him most. This eventually leads to him killing Desdemona for unjust reasons before he takes his own life, giving *Othello* the genre of tragedy. Thus, Othello is a hero in a tragedy. But, is he a tragic hero according to Aristotle’s definition?

Shakespeare shows Othello to be good (Aristotle 2327 XV.1454a) at the start of the play. He is well-spoken and honorable when confronting the Senate, even addressing them as “Most

potent, grave, and reverend signors, / My very noble and approved good masters” (Shakespeare I.iii.76-77). He knows how he is viewed. He is willing to play to the vanity of those in a position of power above him to ensure his happiness in marriage. He is also obviously in love with Desdemona, his new wife. His goodness can also be seen in the way everyone talks about how great he is. The exceptions are Iago, who has a grudge against him, and Roderigo, who is a man in the same social class with the same skin color as Desdemona who loves her and thus sees him as a competitor. Othello also seems to have an enormous capacity for trust, including for the untrustworthy Iago. These characteristics make the audience believe that he is a well intentioned character whom they want to succeed.

Othello also shows characteristics appropriate (Aristotle 2327 XV.1454a) to a man of his position. He is a military man who has several people working underneath him, whom he treats well. He is methodical and clever, appropriate traits for a military man, especially for one who is good at what he does. This also shows in the way that he executes plans like the reality (Aristotle 2327 XV.1454a). As a military man, whose honor was gained through violence, it makes sense that he would see violence as the only way to gain a restitution for his honor. Othello is consistent in his personality and actions (Aristotle 2327 XV.1454a), though a gradual change occurs over the course of the play, which is part of the tragedy - that he is unaware of the change that results from the false information Iago feeds him. He values honor, and ultimately believes that killing Desdemona is necessary to maintain his own honor. He also continues to trusts Iago, who leads him astray and, ultimately, to his doom. Having fulfilled all of Aristotle’s categories, we can definitively state that Othello is a tragic hero.

The subversion, therefore, in the case of Othello, is that what arouses fear and pity in the audience: the attainment of his heroic goal, since we know that he was misled by Iago. The upset that happens is, having obtained his goal, he discovers the truth that the audience has known all along. His wife was not unfaithful and Iago lied to him the whole time. Iago gets away with his trickery because he is the only one Othello can turn to once Iago gives him reason to doubt those few that are on his side. Othello does not have anyone to go to about the perceived infidelity of his wife. The ones who would be an authority on this matter did not entirely approve of his marriage to begin with, and are unlikely to take the word of a provisionally accepted black man when it is against a noble white lady. So, he is forced to take action himself. His faith in people (especially those unworthy of his trust) is not only his fatal flaw, but also not really his choice, considering his place in society. This proves to be his undoing, as Iago isolates him from any who would counteract his harmful influence over Othello. The fulfillment of this false journey, creates pity within the audience. With no one to turn to after his horrid actions and knowing there is no way to redeem himself with the deaths of those who truly did want the best for him, the play ends in tragedy. Othello takes his own life: the only redemption he has left to him.

Aristotle set the standard by which tragic heroes are measured. However his definition is inadequate because it is concerned on a systemic scale, not about the individuals that make up the system. He only touches on the parts so much as they contribute to the whole, including the inclusion of the emotions that are stirred up within an audience only to encourage a “catharsis of such emotions” (Aristotle 2320, 1449b28). He wants people to purge themselves and strive for good based on the assumption they are acting within society. The good is defined by what will

keep society stable. A stable society ultimately is what people need to strive for, because a stable society can offer those within it protection. In contrast, plays are not necessarily concerned with the “good” but with the ethics of how people treat each other. This is particularly clear through the characters who represent those outside of society, and thus who are not protected by it. These outsiders are treated as objects by those within society because there is nothing to protect them from being treated otherwise.

Consider how Euripides starts the play with Medea discarded by her husband once her usefulness to him is over. This is also why Medea starts the sequence of events only after securing the protection of Theseus in a land far away from the one that has already rejected her. She has already learned too well that she needs society’s political protection, which she did not first attain when discarding her homeland for that of her erstwhile husband. Othello is protected to an extent by society. The protection is conditional on his usefulness as a military leader. He loses that usefulness upon arriving at the island. Given that the war he was supposed to fight is already over, he finds himself alone. Dealing with the apparent infidelity of his beloved wife, he can appeal to no one. Because of his isolation, he has no protection or defense from Iago’s lies and their tragic consequences.

Even the tragedy that Aristotle bases his whole definition around reveals the vulnerability of those without protection. The tragedy of that drama is that, ultimately, Oedipus loses the protection of society because of what he does, even though he takes action without full knowledge. He arrives in Thebes as an outsider but gains immediate insider status by saving the city and marrying the queen. In fact, he is unknowingly already an insider, considering he is heir to the throne, even if he is ignorant of the fact. He was meant to be an insider, which means he

never experiences outsider status until the end, when he finally has to face the results of his actions. In sharp contrast, insider status is never even offered to Medea and Othello. They are outsiders from the beginning. There is nothing they can do that will change that, no matter how hard they tried, and they do try. Medea should have (like Oedipus) been given that insider status based on her action with Jason and the Golden Fleece. Othello should have been an insider because of his military leadership. However, society denies this status to them based on factors out of their control. Medea's actions in securing the golden fleece ultimately did not help her, even though they secured Jason's future. Othello's actions in helping his adopted country win wars ultimately did not give him any safe haven either.

Even Aristotle's choice of play to base his definition of tragic hero shows this bias of defining good by society. Sophocles creates a man who, ultimately, has no control over his life. The fact that Oedipus was condemned by fate to commit such atrocities absolves him of responsibility from the greater results. Euripides subverts this idea. Euripides's Medea has power, and uses that power to take control of her life and fate. She even takes the roles that had previously only been allowed to the divine. Society has tried to take control from her, but she grasps the aspects of her life that she can control and takes advantage of them. This is all the more meaningful because, since she is knowingly in control the entire play, this puts the responsibility for all consequences on her. Her moment of triumph is also her lament, and she tells herself:

Oh, arm yourself in steel, my heart! Do not hang back

From doing this fearful and necessary wrong.

Oh, come, my hand, poor wretched hand, and take the sword,

Take it, step forward to this bitter starting point,
 And do not be a coward, do not think of them,
 How sweet they are, and how you are their mother. Just for
 This one short day be forgetful of your children,
 Afterward weep; for even though you will kill them,
 They were very dear—Oh, I am an unhappy woman! (Euripides 1242-1250)

Medea agonizes over the deaths of her children and the resulting pain it will cause her. But she kills them anyway, in complete control of her faculties because she decided that it is the only way to grasp power once again. She views their deaths as necessary, even if it is a terrible, almost unnatural thing to do. Despite her personal feelings, she forces herself to strongarm her emotions aside for necessity's sake, even if the task is agonizing. She knows the pain that will consequently come upon their deaths, but she stays with her resolved course. She also knows that she has to be the one to kill them. The act is a burden that she can pass off to no one else, as she refuses to give anyone else the power to take the lives that she had personally created. Medea does not assign blame to anyone else for their deaths, except maybe Jason for putting her in a position where this was the only course she could take.

Shakespeare's Othello likewise takes complete blame for the aftermath of his actions. His last words lament what he put into action and the consequences he wrought, saying:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;

Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
 Perplexed the extreme, of one whose hand,
 Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe... (Shakespeare V.ii.334-341)

Othello, in the same room as the corpse of his wife whose death he caused, proclaims his guilt to those left to witness it. He stresses her innocence and purity. Desdemona exemplifies a precious jewel while he is a fool, who blasphemed in throwing her and the love she offered him away. He warns those around him not to give way to falsehood or speak maliciously, considering that the results of similar talk had been what caused him to take the actions that lead to the tragic end of his love. This is all concluded when, as an ultimate recompense, he stabs himself, knowing that there is nowhere that he can turn to for redemption but in death.

Just because the protagonists of the play take responsibility for their actions does not mean that there are no other characters in their respective dramas to blame. The strength of the main character, after all, can only be showcased by placing them opposite a worthy antagonist. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, actually does not have a real antagonist to stand opposite the titular character. Instead, he battles against fate and the decisions he made that took him to his tragic end. Medea, on the other hand, has Jason, and even he ultimately proves to be no match for her personally. The only reason he exercises any power over her at all is because society gave him the means to do so. The play ends with a clear comeuppance for the weak man's presumption that his privilege meant that he was worth more than Medea. Iago, however, is the antagonist par excellence, a clear match for Othello's role. He is cowardly and sly where Othello is brave and trustworthy. Iago represent the parts of society that empower him to take

advantage of and ruin a good man, just because he does not fit. Unlike the fate that doomed Oedipus or Jason's setting aside of Medea, though, Iago intentionally manipulates Othello with the goal of his destruction in mind. Iago's horrifying behavior makes Othello's fall all the more tragic.

Perhaps the difference in where the characters end up is the author's purpose in writing. Aristotle wanted to shape humanity into what a better functioning society *ought* to be, stressing the areas he thinks are the most worthwhile. Shakespeare and Euripides were both reflecting what humanity already *is* within society, while simultaneously pushing them as individuals to do better and think of things that they might not necessarily want to. Medea takes the actions she does because the lack of protection society offers her. She then takes full responsibility for those actions and their consequences, which sharply contrasts with the lack of responsibility society takes for putting her in such a position in the first place. Othello takes action because he puts his faith in the wrong man. Isolated from the few who whole-heartedly accepted him into their society, he is forced into desperate violent action. When he realizes his mistakes, however, he makes up for them in the only way within his power - with death. This end is all the more powerful for the fact that Iago, the true cause of all the anguish in the play, leaves the stage alive, albeit in custody. This shows the audience that the individual, even when scorned and hated, is able to rise above society and its attempts to make them feel inferior for factors that they cannot change. This inspires the audience to do what they can to rise above the more problematic parts of society, having seen that those whom society rejects are able to do so.

The way Euripides and Shakespeare inspire the audience is through the pity and fear dramatically forced into the hearts. Medea's circumstances are easy to identify and empathize

with, making her actions understandable. It is easy to dismiss her actions as a madwoman, since she completely turns expectations of the role of women and their actions, particularly in their role and actions as mothers, on their heads by committing filicide. Thus, Euripides does not portray Medea as crazy, which would undermine his triumphant portrayal of her in the final image of her in his drama. Her triumph even becomes part of the tragedy, since the audience is then able to see the consequences of Medea's actions - no matter if the audience agrees with her reasoning for killing her children, the final scene with her leaving Jason behind with nothing, not even the bodies of his children is a horrible one, and one that reminds the audience what a refusal to grant insider status can bring about. On the other hand, Othello does not have the promise of political protection from Theseus, so he is truly an outsider in that, by the end, he has no one to truly rely on but himself. As a result, he loses everything, including the woman he was originally willing to risk everything to be with. The plays give the two outsider characters two distinct ends. Medea gives us her horrifically fantastic triumph, Othello gives us his sadly realistic tragedy.

Medea's triumphant end is a tragic warning that, just because one can treat an outsider badly, does not mean that those actions will be without consequences. Jason, as an insider of society, has every right to abandon the woman who has given everything to him when she stops being a means to an end, especially since he is leaving her behind in favor of a princess, another social insider. However, by beginning the play with Medea's lamentations, Euripides shows the audience that, just because Jason is societally justified in his treatment of Medea, his actions are still cowardly and horrid. The audience can side with Medea and believe in her righteous, knowing her story and feeling her pain. The playwright does not end it there, however. Instead

of leaving Medea weeping, he lets her sadness make way for indignation. As a result, the member of the audience can feel their sympathy become horror, as she focuses on obtaining justice on Jason by giving back the hurt he inflicted on her tenfold. In her journey to avenge Jason's treatment of her, Medea destroys the society that betrayed and wronged her as a whole by siding with the man who had used her. This even includes demolishing its ruling class, since they played a key role in trying to oust her from her position as Jason's wife by replacing her with a princess and then having the king banish her from the land.

Othello's tragedy is that he is 'the other' placed in the protagonist role of 'hero' within a medium that does not treat the outsider well. He is Oedipus, but, unlike that hero's warm welcome, he is treated with tenuously conditional insider status. Othello doesn't get his father-in-law's approval, so his marriage is isolated and without familial or societal support. He is not accepted as Desdemona's husband; the sole reason why the Duke conditionally accepts Othello is because his utility as a military general but not because he believes him to be a suitable husband to a noble woman. The private life of society as a husband and as a potential father of the society's citizens is denied Othello. His conditional acceptance as an insider proves fleeting. Othello will always be the outsider. Shakespeare highlights this social isolation when the play sends Othello and Desdemona to an island, apart from society's laws and protection, in further isolation. That conditional aspect bites him when Iago, who never accepted him, betrays and destroys Othello by parting him from the parts of society that truly did unflinchingly accept him. In sharp contrast to Medea, Othello has no place to go. He is already isolated geographically. Iago further isolates him psychologically—from his loving wife and best friend and second-in-command, Cassio, and does so by demonizing the only people the audience knows

to be fully on Othello's side. There is no one is left to trust or turn to but Iago. As a result of Iago's manipulation, he ends up killing Desdemona, only to realize that, instead of fulfilling his role as an avenging husband, he has killed his faithful, loving wife. His actions, which he had thought were justified turn out to be monstrous. As a result, Othello cannot return to the society of Venice, which he had previously tried so hard to become a part of. Unlike Medea, Othello is an honestly good human being whose outsider status results in his annihilation. There is nothing else he can do but take his own life after his actions.

Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero is inadequate. He tells poets how to write tragic heroes, but my essay argues that, compared to the actual portrayal of the characters by Euripides and Shakespeare, there comes a problem with how should a tragic hero be defined. A hero can still be someone who goes on a journey of attainment. But how shall we decide if their journey is worthy? By "the Good" of Aristotle or simply by how humans should treat each other, as seen by Euripides and Shakespeare? Oftentimes these might line up. Nonetheless, it is difficult to settle on one ethical standard, since ethics are decided by contemporary society. Aristotle tells poets what a tragic hero is, but that does not mean that is the tragic hero poets actually write about. Instead, writers like Euripides and Shakespeare are able to check the philosopher's tragic hero boxes and then twist those rules. They may seem to follow the formula, but they then subvert it. The poets are creators rather than imitators. It becomes apparent, then, that they know the human soul in a way that the philosopher does not or possibly even cannot.

One overarching ethic that does appear is that people should avoid bringing harm to others. This is ultimately the best and most universal code of ethics. All human beings can understand pain, having unavoidably experienced it themselves, even if laws and customs are not

translatable. With the understanding of pain comes the understanding of why other people would want to avoid circumstances that cause pain. Furthermore comes the understanding that one should not inflict pain. Though this seems a simple doctrine, it is actually quite difficult. Is this because of society? Aristotle's failing? Setting up "us" (insider) and "them" (outsider) scenarios? Is it a simple interpretation of humanity's tendency to look out for the self only, unless consequences are imposed upon us? No matter the specifics, it is the reason why those kept from attaining insider status are largely left behind because there are no consequences should a wrong be done against an outsider. The playwright forces the audience to look at ethics not as an individual within a great whole, but simply as individuals with other individuals. By putting the outsider in the starring role on stage, the audience has to confront those whom they would never pay attention to and, instead, sympathize and empathize with them. They no longer are the "other." Rather, audience members internalize and feel sadness and pity when these characters cannot find the acceptance and safe haven they crave. The playwright reminds the audience of pity and fear. But he also reminds the audience to treat others well, regardless of their place in society. This is not because the audience wants to feel catharsis (like Aristotle thinks), but it is in order to hold a mirror up to society and force individuals to take a long hard look at themselves. How do they treat others? And, ultimately, how do they treat the entire world around themselves?

Based on the preceding analysis, I propose that a tragic hero should, therefore, be a character who goes on a journey to obtain a goal. In trying to attain that goal, they showcase the consequences of their actions, which they must take responsibility for in such a way that forces the audience to feel pity and fear. These emotions make the audience reflect on their own

shortcomings and on those of society. With this definition, it is obvious that the playwright or poet is more qualified to depict ethics and emotion than the philosopher. The former reaches out to an audience and addresses the members on an individual level. The latter addresses his audience on a societal or universal level. Since it is easier to understand and empathize with a particular individual dramatized on a stage by the poet, this method of communication is ultimately more universal and sustainable.

While she fulfills all the traits explored about the archetypal tragic hero, Medea's subversion is a clear indication of her place as an outsider in society. Medea loves her sons, and agonizes over the pain their deaths will cause her. She is driven to kill them anyway because society has put her in a place where she believes there is no other choice. She has no husband and no home to return to, as well as no one to help in her current place because of her status as a foreign woman. All she has to look forward to is a life of exile. With nothing to lose, she burns her bridges in a spectacular fashion, grabbing power in the only way that is possible to her and leaving Jason behind. Othello also is a tragic hero, doomed from the beginning because he had the audacity to act as a man in a position of authority and marry the woman he loved when one particular person, Iago, believed that he did not deserve to be happy because he is a Moor. The subversion for Othello comes in that his entire journey is false, and the audience does not want him to accomplish his ultimate goal. When, under Iago's manipulation, he tears his world apart only to be faced with the fact that it was all done based on a lie, he kills himself as penitence for his misinformed actions. Medea leaves the stage only after she is, by all accounts, victorious, since she is able to get revenge for the wrongs done against her, but Othello ends his play as a epitomized tragic hero—paying for his actions, even if they only took place because Iago

misguided him, to the point of his death. Both of these endings, however, are only possible because of the situation society has boxed the characters into; societies that are enough “like the reality” that audiences are able to recognize those unsavory elements from the society they live in, in real life.

The philosopher tries to inspire people only so far as they are a part of society. According to him, people ought to aspire to conform to the whole and improve themselves with only that aim in mind. However, the playwrights take the opposite approach, since their medium communicates with people as individuals and making them see the outsider’s struggles and emotions as valid, even if they are contradictory to what society deems acceptable. They do not dictate to their audience what ethics ought to be, only show them how things are and let them decide if this is how things should be. This way allows society to grow and be more inclusive, since it challenges individuals to improve society by first bettering themselves through questioning the status quo, whereas the philosopher’s approach might result in a stable society, but it’s exclusive nature will be isolated and stagnant.

In conclusion, the poets Euripides and Shakespeare confront ethics in the individual’s suffering which results from outsider status with greater complexity and nuance than Aristotle’s philosophic definition of a tragic hero in the *Poetics*.. As my analyses of *Medea* and *Othello* have demonstrated, just as the heroes take responsibility for their actions so too must the audience. How does the tragic state in which the outsider characters end up in mirror the society inhabited by the audience? Aristotle writes about “inspir[ing] pity and fear” as a way for the audience to purge their emotions. But Euripides gives Medea her anger and Shakespeare gives Othello his sadness and grief. The playwrights’ captive audiences cannot turn away from the tragic

circumstances their outsider status forces the characters into , and likewise forces the audience to confront the individuals, whom, in their own time, they had discounted as outsiders.

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