# The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative

From Homer to Hollywood, the Western storytelling tradition has canonised a distinctive set of narrative values characterised by tight economy and closure. This book traces the formation of that classical paradigm in the development of ancient storytelling from Homer to Heliodorus. To tell this story, the book sets out to rehabilitate the idea of 'plot', notoriously disconnected from any recognised system of terminology in recent literary theory. The first part of the book draws on current developments in narratology and cognitive science to propose a new way of formally describing the way stories are structured and understood. This model is then used to write a history of the emergence of the classical plot type in the four ancient genres that shaped it – Homeric epic, fifth-century tragedy, New Comedy, and the Greek novel – with new insights into the fundamental narrative poetics of each.

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# The Classical Plot
## and the Invention of Western Narrative

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# Preface

'Plot' is an unloved word in narrative theory: no longer quite the four-letter vulgarity it was to critics a generation or two ago, but still not much used in polite conversation.[1] Largely bypassed by narratology, it remains for many theorists a suspect term, worryingly slippery to define, and tangled up with lines of theory that have not fared well in the history of postwar criticism. Part I of this book tries to soothe these suspicions, arguing for the rehabilitation of 'plot' as a central term of narrative theory, and putting forward a model that seeks to repair the difficulties felt in definitions and analyses from Aristotle on. With the help of ideas borrowed from narratology and cognitive science, I argue that the vernacular notion of plot is anything but a disposable and methodologically suspect abstraction – that, on the contrary, it marks an attempt to describe a fundamental component of the mental machinery we use in the construction and reading of fiction.

But this is not centrally a work of theory. Part II is historical and text-specific, and the theoretical model proposed in Chapters 1–4 is there chiefly to make such a history writable. Rather, however, than a 'history of plot' in general – something nobody, let alone a classicist, would be easily persuaded to take on – it seeks to track the emergence of one very particular kind of plotting, which has held a position of extraordinary dominance in the traditions of Western literature for close on three millennia. If it has been comparatively neglected by modern criticism, that is partly because it has tended to be associated since the Romantics with 'low' or 'popular' narrative forms – farce, detection, adventure. But with

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[1] 'What do we mean by the melodramatic phrase "heresy of plot"? Nothing very sensational; it is the notion that in a poem or a play or a novel there is an order of events that may be thought of in complete isolation from other structures and that "somehow" exists independent of the language of the work. So described, the idea is revolting; no self-respecting literary critic is guilty of this. Crude hypostasizing of plot and separation of plot from expression is a nineteenth-century error, left behind with character sketches and the well-made play' (Brower 1952: 48). 'Plot has no strong place in the pantheon of acceptable literary terms' (Dipple 1971: 1). 'In the great efflorescence of study of narrative in recent years, plot has been slighted as something apparently too old-fashioned to deserve prolonged attention' (Miner 1990: 147, and cf. Merrill 1999).

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postmodernism's dissolution of the boundaries between high and low art; with the sophisticated, ironic embrace of genre narrative traditions such as the mystery; and especially with the high cultural and critical status allowed to popular cinema, there is every sign that this system of narrative values is returning in esteem. It seems the right time to try writing the story of its roots.

What I here call *classical* plotting is, broadly, the idea of plot we associate with Aristotle (a quite different thing from Aristotle's own idea of plot, which is only glancingly addressed here).[2] Its principles were in fact well established in narrative practice by the time Aristotle tried to articulate them in the fourth century BC; and though, like Aristotle, we may not always find it easy as readers to make these principles explicit, we are all of us well trained in recognising their effects. 'Classical' plotting is felt to evoke, for example, an impression of elegance, economy, and efficiency in the deployment of narrative resources. There is a strong sense of unity and closure to the narrative structure, with particular importance attached to a firm and satisfying ending. At the same time, the audience or reader is teased with guessing-games over what is to happen: twists, surprises, mischievously thwarted expectations. And yet, classical plots play fair: they do not allow us to feel cheated by the turn of events taken or the means used to achieve them. This book sets out to explain how these impressions are achieved, and why this way of making stories, despite all fluctuations in fashion, has remained the most resilient narrative paradigm in Western storytelling to this day.

Clearly, I use the term 'classical' here in its historical as well as its cultural sense, because I want to argue that for the study of plot the two senses merge into one. Classical plotting is an invention of the classical world. By the third century AD, the classical plot paradigm had already been refined and adapted to the three narrative forms in which it was passed on to the Renaissance, and which remain the basis for subsequent developments: epic poetry, tragic and comic drama, and the novel or short story. Its applications since the Renaissance, which have brought into its domain narrative media unknown or unimaginable to antiquity, are nevertheless modifications and extensions to ancient patterns, rather than essential

2   The difference is well illustrated by the way Aristotle's name is widely taken in vain in creative-writing handbooks, often for concepts that bear only the most parodically distant relationship to anything Aristotle wrote. Screenwriting tutors, for example, invoke Aristotelian authority for the now-canonical three-act model (for which see e.g. Field 1979: 56) of Hollywood film structure: 'You have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In other words, you get your character up in a tree, you throw rocks at him for a while, and then you get him down. And that's your basic three-act structure in the Aristotelian terms' (Francis X. Feighan, co-author of the interactive screenwriting program Collaborator, on *Moving pictures*, BBC2 6/2/94).

departures from them. To understand the basic grammar of classical plot-
ting, it is necessary and sufficient to understand plotting in the classical
world – and, in practice, a surprisingly narrow canon of genres and works
within that world. That, at any rate, is the argument of this book.

To put this case, I have had to wade further into the mainstream of the-
oretical debate than classicists are normally expected to go, though it will
be all too evident that I have managed to keep my amateurism intact. It
remains impenitently a classicist's book, mired in what will seem to some
a crudely archaeocentric view of the Western narrative inheritance –
according to which all literature is crumbs from Homer's banquet, and all
criticism footnotes to the *Poetics*. Nevertheless, my approach sits with the
small but swelling number of literary studies that see implications, not
just for the redemption of narratology but for the future of their entire dis-
cipline, in the methods of cognitive science[3] – in the empirical study of
how the human mind organises information in the operations of percep-
tion, memory, and thinking, and the structures or 'schemas' of mental
representation we use as frameworks for knowledge, inference, and
understanding. At the same time, I have tried to make the text sufficiently
modular, and the theoretical model sufficiently accessible, for a reader
innocent of any interest in these issues still to be able to make sense of the
discussions in Part II.

Readers in a hurry are welcome to peek at the ending, but in outline the
story is this. Chapter 1 reviews some main lines of approach to the theory
and definition of 'plot', and the complex of questions such attempts have
tried to address. Chapters 2–3 then describe the model proposed here to
deal with those questions, beginning with a general consideration of the
different mental operations involved in the reading of fictional narrative,
and moving on to a detailed discussion of the descriptive mapping pro-
posed between the representation of narrative universes and certain kinds
of structure in games. Chapter 4 then uses this model to try to explain the
distinctive qualities of *classical* plotting; and Chapter 5 looks briefly at
each of the principal genres of Greek narrative excluded from the histori-
cal survey that follows, and at the rival possibilities they propose to the
classical paradigm. Part II then deals in turn with the use and evolution of

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[3] An ambitious manifesto in Turner 1991, who notes that the cognitivist project is that with
which Western literary theory begins; see also Spolsky 1993 (on the cognitive underpin-
nings of poststructuralism), and good narrative casebooks in Britton and Pellegrini 1990,
Ryan 1991 (with a valuable emphasis on work in artificial intelligence), Branigan 1992,
Gerrig 1993, Emmott 1997, and a useful introduction in Semino 1997 (esp. 117–224). The
term 'cognitivism' is mainly bandied in film studies; see e.g. Andrew 1989, Bordwell and
Carroll 1996 (index s.v.). In literary studies the cognitivist trend is most evident in stylis-
tics, humorology, metaphor theory, and *Lesengeschichte*; a wide range of applications regu-
larly appears in *Poetics*. I reserve my misgivings for the Conclusion (below, pp. 261–2).

that paradigm in the four successive narrative traditions of antiquity that I argue embody its historical development: the Homeric epics (Chapters 6–7), fifth-century tragedy (8), Greek and Roman New Comedy (9), and the Greek love-novels of the Empire (10). It is largely a Greek history: aside from translated New Comedy, Latin literature remains marginal to this narrative, for reasons sketched at the end of Chapter 5.

It will be all too apparent from this summary that the very attempt to tell this story has wound up espousing the values of its subject: a totalising, teleological narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. 'It is not yet clear', says a recent textbook of narratology, 'what a history of narrative as such would look like';[4] this book is one attempt to imagine an answer, but some nettle-grasping is required. To come clean, I do not think that narratology can survive its postmodern critiques[5] without embracing the full implications of its (often tacit) cognitivist underpinnings. But the new cognitivism itself is an unabashedly positivistic, neo-Aristotelian response to the poststructuralist stance,[6] which has tended (for example) to minimise the closural, systemic elements in storytelling; to stress the anthropological otherness and distance of the ancient cultures which produced and consumed it; to mistrust the dehistoricising tendency of formalist approaches; and to recoil with alarm from any notion of confronting literary works as products of compositional processes, something that cannot be entirely evaded in a survey of writing on plot. These are embarrassments that need to be left at the door. It is a weary truism that *fin de millénium* aesthetics is caught between the classical values of order and closure still privileged in popular narrative culture, especially in cinema, and the postmodern values of polysemy and pluralism that our information- and irony-saturated world celebrates. One of the themes of this book is the centrality of that tension to all human narrative – including, obviously, attempts to tell the story of narrative itself.

I have done my best to keep jargon to a minimum, but a good deal has slipped through; the worst is collected for reference in a glossary at the back. Bibliographic references have been brutally compacted: wherever possible, I have made do with a single reference to a recent discussion through which the full literature and debate on a subject can be accessed. Most Greek words are translated or transliterated; Greek names other than Menandrean titles have been Latinised as severely as I could bear ('Posidon', but '*Oresteia*'), and other words transcribed for visual intelligibility rather than phonetic puritanism (*tyche* rather than *tukhē*). Unattributed translations are my own.

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[4] Onega and Garcia Landa 1996: 12.       [5] See below, p. 21 n. 17
[6] But not necessarily at odds with it: Spolsky 1993 argues attractively that the poststructuralist model is itself cognitively well-grounded.

This book owes so much to so many colleagues in London and else-where that I blush to elide most of their names. But Chris Carey, Pat Easterling, Barbara Goward, Vassiliki Kampourelli, Andreas Markan-tonatos, and John Morgan read parts or all of the text at a variety of stages; Michael Silk, David Wiles, and especially Malcolm Willcock planted early seeds whose fruit they will not easily recognise; and Pauline Hire and the Press's readers surpassed all duty in helping to knock a ten-thousand-stade text into eusynoptic shape. My deepest debts are to students and colleagues in the Classics Departments of Westfield College and Royal Holloway; and to Margaret Welbank, who has shaped this project from the start, and will be glad to see the back of it.