

Introduction: The Pleasure of Tragedy

Why do human beings enjoy tragedy? What is the appeal of a tear-jerker, a thriller, or for that matter any form of distressing entertainment? Is our pursuit of emotional distress in fact limited to traditional forms of entertainment, whose fictional status we never quite forget, or (as gladiators, rubbernecking, gossip, and teenage romance would suggest) do we seek out “drama” in real life? The pleasure of tragic experience remains a mystery. As one German romantic observed two centuries ago, the appeal of tragedy raises a question that “has often been asked, and seldom satisfactorily answered.”¹ The same could be said today. This book attempts an answer. It offers a resolution of the paradox posed by the pleasure of tragedy, broadly conceived, by returning to its earliest articulations in archaic Greek poetry and its subsequent emergence as a philosophical problem in Plato’s *Republic*. Socrates’ provocative claim that tragic poetry satisfies our “hunger for tears” (*R.* 606a) hearkens back, I argue, to archaic conceptions of both poetry and mourning that suggest a common source of pleasure in the human appetite for heightened forms of emotional distress. This continuity between Plato and the poetic tradition he denounces reveals something essential about the nature of Plato’s case against the arts, and, more importantly, about the appeal of Art in general. By unearthing a psychosomatic model of poetic engagement implicit in archaic poetry and philosophically elaborated by Plato, this book not only aims to shed new light on the *Republic*’s notorious indictment against poetry but also identifies and explores rationally and ethically disinterested sources of value in our pursuit of aesthetic states. Articulating and understanding these mysterious sources of value will hopefully resolve what has proven to be an intractable paradox in aesthetic theory and human psychology: the appeal of painful emotions.

¹ Schlegel (1889) 67.

I.1 A Case Study: The Veteran and the War Widow

After ten years of fighting abroad and ten more of wandering the seas, the Greek veteran Odysseus, utterly destitute, naked, and friendless, washes up on the shores of Scheria, the utopian land of the Phaeacians. This is where we find him in book 6 of Homer's *Odyssey*. There the forsaken hero supplicates the princess and is eventually received by the court. During the feast that the king has thrown to welcome his suppliant, a singer begins to sing the story of the Trojan War. Unbeknown to the Phaeacians, this is a story their mysterious guest has lived through, and Odysseus, unprepared perhaps for such a confrontation with his epic persona, can barely conceal his distress.² Only Alcinous the King, who happens to be sitting beside him, notices the stranger weeping beneath his mantle, and discreetly ends the performance. A gracious and considerate host, Alcinous does all he can to distract his guest from his troubles with athletic games and comic lays, but Odysseus, bafflingly, returns to the sore topic. He commends the bard Demodocus on his previous performance of the Trojan War, and requests to hear another part of the story. Only this time Odysseus solicits a particularly flattering episode that spotlights his crucial role in clinching the Argive victory. Demodocus faithfully recounts the tale of the Wooden Horse, but when he focuses on a heroic scene starring Odysseus himself, the hero breaks down completely (*Od.* 8.516–31):

And he sang of how they ravaged the lofty city here and there,
 then how Odysseus to the house of Deiphobus
 made his way like Ares, along with godlike Menelaos.
 There he sang that he [Odysseus] endured the grimdest battle of all,
 and was victorious there too, through the help of great-hearted Athena.
 So sang the famous bard. But Odysseus melted,
 and from his eyes the tears streamed down, drenching his cheeks.
 As a woman weeps embracing her dear husband,
 who has fallen before his city and people
 after trying to fight off the pitiless day from his home and children;
 when she sees him dying and gasping for breath
 she throws herself over him and cries out, while men behind her
 strike her back and shoulders with their spears
 and drag her into bondage to suffer labor and hardship,
 and her cheeks waste with the most pitiful weeping –
 so did Odysseus shed pitiful tears from under his brows.³

² As Halliwell (2011a) puts it, “he is caught emotionally off guard” (79).

³ All translations of Greek and Latin are my own unless otherwise noted.

Many commentators have remarked on the poignancy of this simile, which ironically figures Odysseus as one of the many Trojan women he himself has widowed.⁴ The widow in the simile – clinging to the expiring body of her fallen husband as the invaders drag her into a life of servitude – suffers the horrific fate of those whose city, like Troy, has been besieged.⁵ The narrator's Trojan sympathies, then, seem to rupture the objective surface of his narrative and undermine his protagonist's heroism with an implicit condemnation of war. When the image is focalized through Odysseus, however, who is now comparably bereaved and in a better position to pity his victims just as he pities himself, we find that it is the hero's sympathies and not the poet's that are divided. We realize, in other words, that Demodocus' song is an impartial one; it does not necessarily take sides in the Trojan War. The song is about a calamity – a *pêma* – that befell “Trojans and Danaans alike” (*Od.* 8.82) who have an equal claim on the audience's sympathy, not least of all the widows.

Demodocus' song, then, is a testament to the power of tragic narrative – understood, for now, as a story of human suffering (we will expand on this in the next section). Odysseus, a ruthless Greek warrior whom we would expect to relish the thought of widowing and enslaving the wife of his enemy, here as a listener rather than a participant of the story, identifies with one of his victims so completely that he experiences her fate with the same emotional intensity.⁶ The song is also a

⁴ See Lord (1954) 422–3; Mattes (1958) 115–22; Foley (1978) 7; Nagy (1979) 101; Clay (1983) 102; Macleod (1983) 10–11; Rutherford (1986) 155; Murnaghan (1987) 101–2; Heubeck et al. (1988) 381; Dimock (1989) 104; Roisman (1990) 223–4; Goldhill (1991) 53–4; Segal (1994) 120–1; Buxton (2004) 149; Rinon (2006) 219–20; Halliwell (2011a) 88–90; and Peponi (2012) 57–8. Though my interpretation of the widow-simile focuses on its immediate context, one should note that it also plays a role in a broader poetic agenda; the simile is one of a few prominently placed and interlinked “reverse-similes” that, as Foley has argued, form “a larger pattern of social disruption and restoration in the epic” ([1978] 8).

⁵ The woman in the simile thus evokes the plight of Andromache, as Hector painfully imagines it in *Il.* 6.450–65 (noted by Macleod [1983] 11 and Nagy [1979] 101); see *Il.* 9.590–4 for a classic depiction of the captured city in ancient literature and Paul (1982) for a history of the *urbs capta* as a literary *topos* in ancient literature. On the brutal treatment of conquered people in ancient Greek warfare, see Lanni (2008) 481–2, who begins her discussion by noting that “[f]or a modern, the most striking lacuna in the Greek law of war is the absence of protection for noncombatants” (481); see Schaps (1982) 202–6 on the treatment of women in particular, who were customarily raped and enslaved, but rarely killed.

⁶ Iliadic heroes eagerly anticipate the acquisition of a war bride, in no small part because of the poetic justice this would render on the Trojans, who initiated the conflict with an act of rape; so Nestor: “Therefore let no one hasten his way homeward / before he has slept with the wife of a Trojan / to avenge Helen's longing and lamentation” (*Il.* 2.354–6; cf. 3.301, 4.238–9, 11.393, 18.121–5, 20.191–4). Segal (1994) observes in his discussion of the simile above that “[t]he Odysseus of the *Iliad* never so identifies with the victims of the Trojan side; and ... there is little in the heroic code that would encourage him to identify with his conquered enemy, especially one of the opposite sex” (121). Rutherford (1986) goes so far as to suggest that the simile “borders on the improbable or

testament to the irresistible force of grief. Rather than try to run and save herself, the widow in the simile sobs helplessly while suffering the blows of her assailants, and succumbs to her grim fate. Odysseus, too, rather than preserve his dignity and prudently conceal his identity in a strange and potentially hostile land, wails like a hysterical woman in the serene Phaeacian court.⁷ Most important, for my purposes, is the fact that Odysseus could have anticipated this reaction.⁸ He had already wept repeatedly, albeit more discreetly, in response to Demodocus' first account of the Trojan War, and was ashamed of his emotional display, which he attempted to conceal in vain (αἴδετο, *Od.* 8.86). Why, knowing his vulnerability to this sensitive topic, does Odysseus invite another opportunity to relive his painful past, lose emotional control, incur the shame of his hosts, and betray his identity prematurely? What does he want and what does he expect from hearing his upsetting history recounted in song?⁹

What Odysseus wants, I suggest, is to indulge his desire to grieve – for himself in his destitute state as well as the destitution of his victims, for his elusive homecoming as well as the homecoming denied to his lost comrades at sea, for the countless miseries that the Trojan War has brought into the world, in which he was in many cases complicit – and that is why, when hearing the story of his crowning achievement at Troy, Odysseus does not celebrate his heroic feat, but rather laments the human suffering

unbelievable,” given Odysseus' characteristic self-control in far more emotionally trying situations, such as maintaining his disguise before his grieving wife (223); Halliwell (2011a) likewise finds it remarkable that “the remorselessly self-disciplined hero appears practically to lose control over his own emotions” (38).

⁷ The feminization of Odysseus in this scene is discussed by Rinon (2006) 220–1. That Odysseus could be reduced to such displays of feminine emotionalism lends credence, we will see, to Plato's charge in the *Republic* that tragic poetry emasculates its listeners (605c–606b).

⁸ I agree with Halliwell (2011a) that to deny this anticipation, as some scholars do, would be to render Odysseus “grossly self-ignorant about his own emotions” given his previous reactions to Demodocus' Trojan song (82).

⁹ Scholars rarely pose this question directly, with the notable exceptions of Goldhill (1991) 51–4, who denies the question a definitive answer, and Halliwell (2011a) 79–92, who sees in Odysseus' choice the redemptive power of song to clarify and give meaning to human suffering (see esp. 83 and 91). Halliwell's reading is a sensitive and sophisticated one, but it limits the pleasure of tragic song to extraordinary figures of epic who confront or anticipate their own aesthetic transformation (Achilles, Helen, Odysseus), while I prefer to pose and answer the question in more universal terms – that is to say, to see in the case of Odysseus' attraction to his tragic narrative a commentary on the appeal of tragic narratives in general, to us no less than to Odysseus. Halliwell himself suggests this when he takes Odysseus to be “emblematic, in highly peculiar circumstances, of the irresistible longing or desire (ἵμερος) which ... song is characteristically thought to arouse” (82), but his explanation of this longing as a desire to contemplate one's own life objectified in song (83) is only applicable to those in Odysseus' “highly peculiar circumstances.”

that surrounds it.¹⁰ This is all the more surprising in light of the fact that Odysseus is afforded a rare opportunity for Homeric heroes; whereas most must sacrifice their lives for a glory they will never live to enjoy, Odysseus is in a unique position to hear his own *kleos* circulated within the human community during his lifetime.¹¹ Surely he should enjoy his celebrity and take pride in his military feats. But such expectations would be naïve. First, epic *kleos* is always mired in human suffering, always emerges from tragedy – that is the paradoxical condition of its coveted acquisition. In the zero-sum game of Homeric warfare (of warfare generally, really), there is no winning glory without robbing the enemy of his, no combat without death, no victory without defeat.¹² The human cost of *kleos* will always shadow its reception, and this is one reason why a hero who gets a taste of his posthumous fame should not be expected to delight in it simply.¹³ But to say that Odysseus laments the conditions of his glory is not necessarily to say that he has regret, or that he has grown compassionate in his humility, though the impulse to redeem him this way is hard to resist, but that lamentation and sorrow are indeed *part* of the satisfaction he seeks. For another, more crucial, reason why Odysseus reacts the way he does to the story of Troy's fall is that he is not only a hero listening to his own epic song, with all the posttraumatic anxiety such an experience is bound to trigger, but also an audience member listening to a tragic narrative, as we, too, listen to the tragic narrative of the *Odyssey*, or the *Iliad*.¹⁴ And we do not expect or seek to experience unalloyed joy. What we seek is to experience tragedy. What Odysseus seeks is to relive his own, in part, and in part to live another's. The question I pose in this book is why.

I have, admittedly, bracketed some complicating factors in this and related episodes from the *Odyssey*. For one, the Phaeacians do not react

¹⁰ Walsh (1984) more hesitantly remarks that Odysseus “seems almost to welcome the sensation of grief” (1), but then proceeds to find less paradoxical explanations for his behavior. Redfield (1973) also observes, all too briefly, that “for Odysseus the poem is good in that it revives his sorrows. Poetry is a kind of mourning” (153).

¹¹ On this point, see in particular Murnaghan (1987) 153.

¹² For the clearest articulation of this view in Homer, see Sarpedon's speech in *Il.* 12.322–8 and Martin (2011) 19–20 on this passage.

¹³ Another, related reason is that, because epic *kleos* typically signifies a hero's death, hearing his own in circulation may suggest to Odysseus that the tradition has prematurely killed him off and consigned him to the past; for a compelling version of this argument, see Biles (2003) 199–206; see also Murnaghan (1987) 150–5.

¹⁴ Segal (1994) similarly extends the model of aesthetic involvement represented by Odysseus to a general audience, arguing that “[t]he comparison of Odysseus' tearful response to a weeping captive woman suggests the possibility that this identification with the subject matter of the song applies not just to the memory of an actual participant but also to vicarious, imaginary participation” (121).

to Demodocus' song as Odysseus does, and are in fact mortified by his excessive emotionalism. Some have taken this to suggest that their composed response to epic narrative is the model one, and that Odysseus, like Penelope in book 1 when she begs the Ithacan bard to stop reminding her of her lost husband with his song (337–44), is singular for his proximity to the subject of song.¹⁵ On this reading, aesthetic distance is required to experience the pleasure of tragic poetry, and neither Penelope nor Odysseus has it. I contest this view for a number of reasons. To begin with, Odysseus clearly derives some kind of satisfaction from Demodocus' tragic song, for otherwise he would not praise him and ask for another. Second, as others have argued, the Phaeacians are not exactly typical of a human audience; they are virtually unacquainted with tragedy, blessed and protected as they are by the gods and utterly isolated from other, more vulnerable civilizations and cultures.¹⁶ Even insisting on the singularity of Phaeacian spectatorship may skew the matter, moreover, for in the end they too have the same taste for tragedy as Odysseus does, only less experience living it.¹⁷ As for Penelope, she is in a state of perpetual mourning, and does not need the space of song to air her grief as a typical audience member might. As Telemachus sharply reminds her, others less consumed by their losses at Troy – not least of all himself – still want to hear the latest Trojan song (1.351–5).

These and related arguments against the claim that aesthetic pleasure requires distance are ones I merely suggest here, but will unfold in greater detail in the course of my study.¹⁸ I begin with this episode from the *Odyssey* because it conflates, in the figure of the hero who enjoys weeping over his own aesthetically rendered tragedy, the desire to hear tragic narrative with the desire to grieve, and it suggests a disabling quality to this desire in its stubborn resistance to rational control. This view of tragic pleasure as the satisfaction of a subrational appetite for grief is, I argue, one inherited and

¹⁵ See, for example, Nagy (1979) 97–102; Macleod (1983) 8; Murnaghan (1987) 153–6; Scodel (1998) 183; and Rinon (2006) 214. For a more nuanced picture of audience response in Homer, see Walsh (1984) 1–21; Doherty (1995) 90–1; Halliwell (2011a) 44, 77–9; and Peponi (2012) 33–69.

¹⁶ See Halliwell (2011a) 44, 77–8 for a summary of this view.

¹⁷ The Phaeacians are captivated by Odysseus' own tragedy, and insist that he stay on Scheria until he finishes his "tale of woe" (*Od.* 11.362–84).

¹⁸ See also Peponi (2012), who argues that aesthetic pleasure in the *Odyssey* "is progressively conceptualized as achievable *in spite of* one's lack of psychical distance" (34) and who uses this model of aesthetic engagement to argue against the Kantian condition of disinterestedness in aesthetic judgement (63–9). I am in many ways sympathetic to Peponi's reading, but go further in the present study by insisting, along with Plato, that under-distanced and interested attitudes are indeed necessary conditions – and consequences – of the kind of aesthetic pleasure derived from tragic poetry; see my review of her book in Liebert (2013b).

developed by Plato. The particular expression of Odysseus' response to Demodocus' Trojan song vividly manifests the symptoms of Plato's tragic audience in book 10 of the *Republic*; there, "even the best of us" praise the poet – as Odysseus praises Demodocus (*Od.* 8.487–91) – who most effectively reduces us to tears, and indulge in feminine displays of grief that would normally be shameful and abhorrent to us (*R.* 605c–606b). In both scenes of spectatorship, then, the appropriation of a character's distressed emotional state leads to the emasculation of the spectator, who willingly relinquishes self-control to experience a form of acute emotional pain. The paradox this poses is the subject of this book, which attempts to explain the appeal of tragedy, both real and poetic, and the reasons why Plato rejects tragic forms of mimesis, the first and greatest of which were the epics of Homer.

1.2 A Problem: The Tragic Paradox

This book is a response to Socrates' provocative claim in Plato's *Republic* that tragic poetry satisfies our "hunger for tears" (τὸ ... πεπεινηκὸς τοῦ δακρῦσαι, 606a). Socrates' observation and its striking metaphorical articulation raise a number of fundamental questions lying at the intersection of psychology, philosophy, and aesthetic theory that have yet to be settled. What follows is an attempt, if not to settle them, at least to offer possible answers by returning to the literary and philosophical traditions in which they were first posed.

Before proceeding to the questions raised by Socrates' formulation of the appeal of tragedy, it is worth stating at the outset what I mean – and what I take Plato to mean – by the terms "tragic" and "tragedy" in the context of such an inquiry. As my usage has already suggested, these terms point beyond the founding literary genre from which they emerged in fifth-century BCE Athens, and have come to mean – through a complex history of conceptualization – much more than ancient authors could have anticipated or modern authors (and speakers) necessarily intend.¹⁹ To complicate matters, tragedy and the tragic are not always simple grammatical variations on the same concept, but in many cases convey distinct concepts: as a normative category of aesthetic, moral, or meta-physical evaluation grounded in the meaning and value of human suffering, the idea of "the tragic" often bears a tenuous connection to any

¹⁹ On the history of conceptualizing tragedy, formed crucially by German Idealism and Romanticism, see in particular Most (2000); Felksi (2008); Leonard (2012); and Billings (2014).

particular literary “tragedy” it is in principle meant to reflect.²⁰ These literary productions themselves vary in time and place, and do not exhaust the scope of “tragedy” as experienced in the unscripted suffering of real life; events as well as plays, stories as well as poetry can be identified as tragedies. Such events, stories, and artistic productions can qualify as “tragic” – especially if one seeks to ennoble them – but they can also fail to qualify if certain conditions are not met.²¹ What we mean by the terms “tragic” and “tragedy,” then, is by no means self-evident.

And yet, such polysemy notwithstanding, designations of tragedy and evocations of the tragic reach out across time and place to elicit our sympathy and recognition, suggesting some constant in the historical variability of thinking about tragedy. This essentializing impulse cannot be simply dismissed as naive presentism, because it can be detected in Greek tragedy’s immediate reception. Plato is arguably the first to abstract “the tragic” from fifth-century Greek tragedies and isolate the quality of experience they aimed to produce, as well as the first to link this quality to an implicit, pessimistic worldview.²² Plato’s critique of poetry in the *Republic*, while clearly responding to the performances of tragic drama that flourished in his day, primarily targets Homer as “the first of the tragedians” (πρῶτον τῶν τραγωδοποιῶν, 607a), and freely abstracts from the genre of Athenian tragedy a property of poetry that can be found in “epic, lyric, or tragic verse” (379a) – indeed, a property that need not be confined to verse at all, but begins with story-telling in its most prosaic form (377b), and in principle extends to the visual as well as the aural.²³

²⁰ As Most (2000) puts it, “we expect a ‘tragedy’ to be ‘tragic.’ This expectation may sound self-evident, but in fact this ‘tragic’ ethos is a modern construction, one whose links to the ancient genre of Greek ‘tragedy’ are far more tenuous than its connections to philosophical and social developments over the last two centuries” (20). Problematic applications of the tragic to particular tragedies are not only limited to modern anachronistic practices but extend as far back as Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which notoriously excludes or distorts pervasive features of Greek tragedy (such as the role of the gods, the chorus, and the polis) in developing a notional ideal; see Halliwell (1986) 202–52; Hall (1996); Goldhill (2008) 49–55; and Leonard (2012) 151–3.

²¹ What qualifies as “tragic” is, unsurprisingly, the subject of much disagreement; for a useful and amusing summary of rival definitions, see Egelton (2003) 1–22.

²² Halliwell (1996) makes a compelling case for attributing the first theoretical formulation of the tragic as a metaphysical perspective to Plato.

²³ Socrates’ initial censorship of poetry in the context of primary education leads to far more extensive regulation than is often appreciated. The scope of ethical influence goes beyond depictions of character and patterns of behavior to include every aspect of the young guardian’s environment; manners of speech, modes of music and rhythm, forms of movement, works of painting and crafts such as weaving, embroidery, carpentry and architecture, and finally even plants and animals must be carefully contrived with a view to fostering the right disposition of soul – what Socrates calls “good form” or grace (εὐσχημοσύνη, 400e–402a). The tragic would here be configured as “bad

It is this abstracted concept of tragic narrative that concerns me here, understood as an account which elicits grief and anguish, satisfies a childish impulse to explore the depths of suffering, while speciously dignifying its emotional expression. Socrates intimates the paradox at the heart of tragedy when he pointedly calls it “beautiful” (595c) and exposes this paradox outright when he identifies the allure of tragedy as the allure of grief.

And this brings us back to the formulation with which we began: the “hunger for tears” that tragedy satisfies – and the questions it raises. Why, in the first place, do human beings desire to experience the pain of grief, and desire it (according to Socrates) proactively as well as reactively – that is, prior to any occasion for grieving and thus without necessary orientation towards any particular object? Socrates suggests that we have as a permanent feature of our human condition an ache for the tragic; we actively seek out occasions for grieving, and we relish the pain when such occasions eventually arise. When we use somatic terms like “ache” and “relish” to describe an emotional impulse, we echo and affirm Socrates’ appetitive characterization of the desire to grieve as a form of “hunger” that arises from the embodied state of the soul. He configures a psychic drive biologically, and the state of mind that it pursues has, in point of fact, an unmistakable physiological symptom: tears. The appetitive part of the soul remains a part of *soul*, however, not limited to strictly biological imperatives such as thirst for water and hunger for food – though these serve as the most “palpable” or conspicuous cases (ἐναργεστάτας, 437d) – but extending to emotional desires that involve the body, of which *erôs* is paradigmatic.²⁴ The psychosomatic nature of the peculiar satisfaction of grieving harkens back to archaic conceptions of both mourning and

form” – a kind of gracelessness and disorder – but one that conceals itself with an alluring exterior that must be stripped away. Hence later he refers to the tyrant’s ostentatious display of power as a “vesture of tragedy” that conceals his true wretchedness (τῆς τραγικῆς σκευῆς, 577b), just as mimetic poetry uses the embellishments of language and music to “color” and conceal its false content (ἐπιχρωματίζειν, 601a–b); see Chapter 3, Section 3.2, notes 43 and 79. The tragic, then, is not just a matter of content but also of form – a way of dressing up a destructive habit, state of being or worldview.

²⁴ Socrates calls “that with which [the soul] loves [ἐρᾷ], hungers, thirsts, and feels the flutter [ἐπτόηται] of other desires the irrational and appetitive part [τὸ ... ἀλόγιστόν τε καὶ ἐπιθυμητικόν], companion of certain replenishments and pleasures” (*R.* 439d). It should be noted that *erôs* is a problematic concept for Plato both within the *Republic*, where it is identified as the characteristic desire of both the tyrant (472e–573d) and the philosopher (485b, 499c–d, 501d), and within the larger Platonic corpus, where it is alternately praised and maligned. On Plato’s ambivalent treatment of *erôs*, with particular emphasis on the *Republic*, see Rosen (1965), Ludwig (2007), and Scott (2007).

poetry that similarly conflate body and mind, forming the background, I will argue, to this Platonic picture of the appetite.²⁵

Relishing the pain of grief leads to a subsidiary, though no less central, question about the nature of object-oriented, reactive grief: Why and how is it satisfying, when it must renew and exacerbate pain in the process? The paradoxical pleasure of grieving is, according to Socrates, a larger genus of pleasure of which the paradoxical pleasure of tragic representations is a species; to examine the nature of one necessarily implicates the other. When we turn to literature and the arts, we must not merely ask why mimetic representations of painful objects manage to give pleasure. Focusing on this question alone only displaces the question of why painful objects themselves can give pleasure in real life, the answer to which entails understanding the origins of the self-destructive impulse that Socrates posits in the human soul. We must also ask whether the satisfaction we experience in mimetic contexts differs from that which we experience in real life.

The widely accepted answer to the primary question about the relationship between “life” and “art” can be traced back to a passage from Aristotle’s *Poetics* describing our natural inclination to engage in mimetic activity. In his prefatory remarks, Aristotle briefly identifies and apparently resolves the tragic paradox, which, though central to his topic (tragic poetry), remains otherwise unacknowledged in the rest of the treatise (1448b3–18):²⁶

Poetry on the whole seems to owe its origin to two particular causes, both of them natural. For it is an instinct of human beings to engage in mimesis from childhood, and in this respect they differ from the other animals; man is by far the most mimetic and learns his first lessons from mimesis. Everyone also enjoys mimetic objects. Proof of this comes from a common occurrence: for we enjoy contemplating the most precise images of objects which are themselves painful to look at: the forms of the basest animals, for instance, and of corpses. The reason is this: learning gives the greatest

²⁵ The background I will be investigating is primarily conceptual in nature, and focuses on models of tragic pleasure and experiences of mourning in archaic poetry and early classical aesthetic theory; for studies that emphasize the connection between Greek tragic drama as a social institution and actual rituals of mourning, see, for example, Easterling (1993), Segal (1996), and Foley (2001) 19–56. These and related studies are indebted to Alexiou’s groundbreaking work, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (1974), which remains the first and only diachronic survey of Greek literary laments in their sociocultural contexts.

²⁶ On Aristotle’s indifference to the paradox of tragic pleasure, see Munteanu (2012) 118–31, who suggests a number of solutions along Aristotelian lines, none of which prove satisfactory in the end (131).