The Beauty of Failure: Hamartia in Aristotle’s Poetics

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The best kind of tragedy concerns a person who neither is morally outstanding nor wicked, according to Aristotle in the Poetics: tragedy should rather imitate a person who falls between these two, and who comes to ruin through a «mistake» – in Greek: hamartia.

It is clear that hamartia is the cause of the downfall of the tragic hero. However, Aristotle does not explain what he means by «hamartia», and important questions about the tragic plot remain unanswered. What kind of «mistake» is Aristotle referring to? To what extent does the hero himself contribute to his downfall, if at all? In short: how are we to understand hamartia?

Most contemporary philologists and philosophers hold that hamartia is connected to a lack of important information, so that the mistake is better explained as «an error of judgement». By contrast, several earlier commentators understand hamartia as a «flaw of character», and consider hamartia a moral mistake. In this talk, I defend the latter interpretation, and argue that the tragic hero comes to ruin due to a weakness of character.

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at the premises of the Norwegian Institute at Athens
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