



SARAH J. ABLETT

# DRAMATIC DISGUST

AESTHETIC THEORY AND PRACTICE  
FROM SOPHOCLES TO SARAH KANE

[transcript] Lettre

## From:

*Sarah J. Ablett*

### **Dramatic Disgust**

Aesthetic Theory and Practice from Sophocles to Sarah Kane

August 2020, 204 p., pb., Klebebindung

38,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5210-9

E-Book:

PDF: 37,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5210-3

Aesthetic disgust is a key component of most classic works of drama because it has much more potential than to simply shock the audience. This first extensive study on dramatic disgust places this sensation among pity and fear as one of the core emotions that can achieve katharsis in drama. The book sets out in antiquity and traces the history of dramatic disgust through Kant, Freud, and Kristeva to Sarah Kane's in-her-face theatre. It establishes a framework to analyze forms and functions of disgust in drama by investigating its different cognates (miasma, abjection, etc.). Providing a concise argument against critics who have discredited aesthetic disgust as juvenile attention-grabbing, Sarah J. Ablett explains how this repulsive emotion allows theatre to dig deeper into what it means to be human.

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## Introduction

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“I’ve shat in better places than this” (3) is the opening line of British dramatist Sarah Kane’s debut play *Blasted*<sup>1</sup> which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London in January 1995. As the play progresses, recipients are confronted with a number of gruesome and appalling depictions such as rape, reports of war atrocities, and one man’s eyes being sucked out, before the events climax in a nightmarish *mise-en-scène* that can be viewed as a brutal realisation of the main character Ian’s initial statement. We witness Ian, raped, blinded, and alone, “shitting” (59) in the ‘worst place’ imaginable, among corpses in a room destroyed by war.

The performance of *Blasted* provoked a media outrage over the highly visceral content and the unusual plot developments of the play, with the overall feeling, as described in critical reviews, being the sentiment of disgust. Jack Tinker of the *Daily Mail* found *Blasted* to be a “disgusting feast of filth” (n.p.) and his colleagues John Gross of the *Sunday Telegraph* and Sheridan Morley of the *Spectator* likewise perceived it as a “gratuitous welter of carnage” (n.p.) and a “sordid little travesty of a play” (n.p.). Critics generally seemed to take their personal disgust reactions as a cue or even proof of the play’s supposed deficiency and its author’s lack of artistic skill. For them the elicitation of disgust solely disclosed the dramatist’s “adolescent desire to shock” the audience (Spencer n.p.; cf. also Curtis n.p., Taylor n.p., Tinker n.p., Hemming n.p., Morley n.p.). In contrast, through Aleks Sierz’ coinage of the term ‘*in-yer-face* theatre’ in his influential publication *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001), which was aimed at describing and conceptualising the particular properties of the confrontative and highly visceral theatrical works created by young artists like Kane in the last decade of the twentieth century, the shocking effect of taboo-breaking and disgusting aesthetic depictions came to be valued more positively. It arguably led to more favourable evaluations of these dramatists’ plays as well as to a plethora of academic articles and books discussing what Sierz describes as a particular phenomenon of the 1990s’ *zeitgeist*, which according to him resulted in a “new aesthetic sensibility” (“In-yer-face” n.p.).

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1 All references to Kane’s plays refer to the 2001 Methuen edition of her *Complete Plays*.

While I agree with Sierz that the shocking effect of Kane's and her contemporaries' artistic engagement with appalling topics is a fundamental property of their dramatic work, I find a focus on this effect limiting. Not least because Sierz' definition can in many ways be argued to support critical voices' claim that a 'will to shock' is the main agenda of *in-yer-face* plays. In this study, I instead argue that the lasting effect and popularity of Kane's work especially, is not so much caused by her aesthetic realisation of a particular 1990s' *zeitgeist* that breaks with conventions and taboos to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the political and social establishment of the time, but rather by her ability to aesthetically engage with appalling forms of physical, social, and moral transgression in order to (re)present universal patterns of human conflicts and crises, of suffering, love, abuse, and above all our having to come to terms with the fact of our own incomprehensible mortality. One of the arguments of this study thus is that it is not a "new aesthetic sensibility" that has made the work of Kane (and others) so alluring and thought-provoking, but rather her mastery in having found a modern voice to (re)connect drama to its origin.

## Thesis & Aim

My thesis is that aesthetic disgust is a vital ingredient in dramatic works that has animated the genre since its origin in ancient Greece, and is a key component of most classic works of drama because aesthetic engagement with this sensation offers much more potential than to simply shock the audience. Disgust has the ability to tap into some of the most difficult ambiguities and paradoxes we as humans have to face and come to terms with, such as our life being determined by death or our desires being caught up in-between animalistic urges and drives, and social and cultural rules and regulations.

The aim of this study is twofold: a) to delineate relevant stations of aesthetic practice and theory concerned with aesthetic manifestations of disgust in works of drama from the development of the genre in fifth-century BC to the onset of the twenty-first century, and thereby show the intrinsic link between ancient works of drama and contemporary aesthetic practice, and b) to use the historical concepts discussed in the theoretical chapters in order to develop a unique and applicable model of dramatic disgust that sheds light on its forms, functions, and effects and thus not only helps us to understand contemporary aesthetic works that cause feelings of repulsion, but also offers an interpretive key to approach some of the core conflicts encountered in seminal dramatic works throughout history.

## Disgust in Drama & Theory

The term 'disgust' only found its way into the English language in the sixteenth century (cf. Menninghaus 4), but disgust-evoking contents have featured promi-

nently in theatrical texts at all times, especially in works of tragedy. From ancient plays like Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (c. 409 BC), where the main character is sent into exile on an uninhabited island because a wound on his foot smells so appalling that its sufferer is perceived as a danger to public order, or Euripides' *Bacchae* (c. 410 BC), which features a mother brutally slaughtering her son and then walking through town parading his head on a stick and imagining the preparation of a festive meal from his remains, through the cannibalistic scenes in Seneca's *Thyestes* (62 AD) or William Shakespeare's Seneca-inspired *Titus Andronicus* (1623), to Kane's *Blasted*, where Ian "shit[s]" on the floor of a bombed hotel room and then rips a baby out of a grave and eats it – repulsive dramatic actions have fascinated and appalled audiences alike. Disgust is indisputably present in a number of canonised dramatic works throughout history. Also, there has been a recent "explosion of research on all aspects of disgust" in the natural sciences (Chapman and Anderson 62). Nonetheless, the sensation has received comparably little attention in literary and theatre studies to this day. To my knowledge only one article exists that directly addresses the particular relation between the dramatic genre and disgust, namely Robert Douglas Fairhurst's "Tragedy and Disgust" in Sarah A. Brown's and Catherine Silverstone's (eds.) *Tragedy in Transition* (58-77).

In the humanities in particular, the long-standing reluctance to treat disgust as an equal counterpart to other aesthetic emotions (e.g. pity and fear) may be partly grounded in the sensation's inherent function to keep contents or objects associated with it at bay (cf. Kolnai 15). Susan Miller argues that scholarly avoidance may be attributed to the contagious nature of disgust, with its "unsociable stink [threatening] to transfer to those who study it" (2). The fear of contagion from substances, actions, or people that are deemed polluted and polluting, can be considered to have played a relevant role in the systematic exclusion of disgust from aesthetic theory. It was first formulated by Plato in *The Republic*, where he urged the banning of the "tragic poets" from an 'ideal' state because of the allegedly contagious (*miarón*) nature of their works and the promotion of irrational emotions, which would pollute (*miaino*) the rational faculties of the recipient's soul (cf. 595a-608c).<sup>2</sup> In the eighteenth century Kant, among others, also declared repulsive contents to be not only unsuitable for the arts, but *per se* antithetical to them in his seminal *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790).<sup>3</sup> And despite an endorsement of disgusting contents and forms in early twentieth century, determinedly anti-aesthetic avantgarde movements like existentialism, the theoretical evaluation of disgust as an emotion that

2 All future references to Plato, unless indicated otherwise, refer to the second edition of Allan Bloom's translation of *The Republic* (1991).

3 All future references to Kant, unless indicated otherwise, refer to the Cambridge edition of *The Critique of the Powers of Judgment* (2002), edited by Paul Guyer and translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. German quotes are all taken from the Akademie-Ausgabe of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*, published by the Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (1900ff.).

is too 'base' for the 'fine arts' and thus of little worth for serious scholarly attention can still be observed in a number of contemporary approaches. In *Theatre and Mind* (2013), Bruce McConachie, for example, excludes disgust from his analysis of relevant aesthetic sensations because he conceives of it as a 'prime' emotion, a natural or physiological reflex which, as opposed to 'social' emotions, offers little prospective insight into the complex nature of human minds and conflicts, and their manifestation in works of art (cf. 18f.).

## Defining Disgust

McConachie's evaluation of disgust as a simple reflexive response and hence 'non-social' emotion is interesting because it shows how seemingly hard-wired our intuitive grasp of disgust and all things we relate to disgust is. When we experience disgust, it feels like a very natural and instinctive reaction, which more or less automatically leads us to perceive of whatever gave rise to our feeling as naturally disgusting (polluted, foul, defiled, smelly, etc.), too. At first sight, disgust does in fact appear to be an unambiguous emotion, denoting, as its linguistic roots from the French *dégout* (*dis-taste*) suggest, "something that is offensive to the taste [...] readily excited by anything unusual in the appearance, order, or nature of our food" (255), as Charles Darwin defined it in *The Expressions of Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1872. In scientific research following Darwin, disgust has been commonly regarded as a physical reflex of the survival instinct – protecting humans from incorporation of unhealthy substances, such as rotten food, diseases, infection, etc. (cf. Chapman and Anderson 63f.). However, disgust proves to be a much more complex emotion than this straightforward definition suggests. Unlike the biological protective mechanism 'distaste' which scientists generally regard as disgust's evolutionary ancestor (cf. Rozin and Haidt, "Domains of Disgust" 367), disgust has been proven to be a sensation which is neither present in animals nor in young children. This indicates that disgust must be, at least partly, a learned and thus cultural or social emotion (*ibid.*). Furthermore, disgust can be evoked by a broad range of objects and actions, some of which cannot be so readily linked to the survival instinct, such as touching harmless slimy substances, hearing someone belch and burp at the dinner table, or being appalled by foreign rituals and customs (cf. S. Miller 15). And while it is still possible to argue that these different causes of disgust are more abstract derivatives of an instinct to survive (in that they warn against *potentially* health-threatening substances, creatures, and behaviours), the same cannot be said about another common facet of disgust experiences, namely the fascination with, and sometimes even attraction to objects, people, or thoughts that are deemed repulsive.

## Overview Chapters

The brief introduction into some historical and recent approaches dealing with the sensation of disgust and its cognates already indicates that there is no straightforward entry into the ubiquitous realm of disgust, more especially in regard to its aesthetic manifestation and function in the dramatic genre. Existing studies on disgust-related phenomena in works of art come from very different academic schools that often do not converge. In order to arrive at a conceptualisation of the dramatic forms, functions, and effects of aesthetic disgust and to show the suitability of using these as a tool for the analysis of drama, I will delineate four relevant stages in the history of dramatic disgust in aesthetic theory and practice in the theoretical part of this study. These can be roughly summarised using the following cognates of disgust, which will determine the structural layout and present the focal point of individual chapters.

- (I) *Miasma* and *dyschéreia*: ancient Greek concepts of pollution and breaches of social and cultural codes and their relation to the Greek god Dionysus and the dramatic genre with exemplary analyses of Euripides' *Bacchae* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and theoretical focus on Plato's wish to ban the 'tragic poets' in *The Republic* and Aristotle's 'defense' of the tragic genre through the introduction of *katharsis* in his *Poetics*
- (II) *Ekel*: German aesthetic approaches from the eighteenth century onwards with a focus on Immanuel Kant's concept of 'aesthetic ideas' and their relation to the sublime and *Ekel* in *Critique of the Powers of Judgement* and Friedrich Nietzsche's elaboration on the tragic genre's evolution from a 'Dionysian spirit' and its intrinsic relation to manifestations of existential disgust in *The Birth of Tragedy*
- (III) *Abjection*: Post World War I French psychoanalytical and existentialist tradition with a focus on the (anti-)aesthetic practices and theoretical reflections in Georges Bataille's 'Scatology', Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*, as well as Freud's introduction of disgust as the cultural feeling *per se*, and Julia Kristeva's elaboration on *abjection* and its aesthetic representation in *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, including its positive effect of producing pleasurable feelings of *jouissance*
- (IV) *Disgust*: theoretical and aesthetic approaches to disgust since around the time of the turn to the new millennium with a focus on insights into disgust from the natural sciences, psychology, and sociology, as well as an evaluation of recent general aesthetic approaches to disgust by Winfried Menninghaus in his influential book *Disgust. History and Theory of a Strong Sensation* and Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Savoring Disgust. The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*

Chapter V aims to synthesise the insights gained from the historical reflections in the first four chapters in order to develop a unique and applicable theoretical approach for the analysis of disgust in works of drama. This approach will provide a terminology and the hermeneutic tools to determine and evaluate the specific aesthetic properties of dramatic disgust.

In the final chapter (VI), the applicability and suitability of the outlined theoretical approach will be demonstrated in an exemplary analysis of the plays of *in-yer-face* dramatist Kane. The slim *oeuvre* of six plays, which Kane produced between 1995 and 1999, offers a unique possibility for the analysis of the multiple and complex forms and functions the sensation of disgust takes on in theatrical writing, ranging from the depiction of extremely graphical acts of violence and physical mutilation, which will be focused on in the first sub-chapter (VI.i) that is devoted to her early plays: *Blasted* (1995), *Phaedra's Love* (1996), *Skin* (1997), and *Cleansed* (1998), to more abstract engagements with the universal experience of disgust and its relation to our sense of order, our view of ourselves, our evaluation of social and cultural actions and encounters, and our relation to our own mortality, which will be discussed in the second part of the sub-chapter, the analyses of *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) (VI.ii).

# I. Greek Tragedy & Pollution

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In fifth-century BC Athens, two significant cultural developments coincided: the evolution of the dramatic genre, including tragedy, and Socrates' introduction of argumentative dialogues as a philosophical method. These events were intrinsically connected, as their shared etymological root in *'theorein'* demonstrates: "the act of seeing or contemplation" forms the base of both 'theatre' and 'theory' (Critchley and Webster 15).

Prominent philosophers of the time esteemed their theoretical mode of 'seeing' and 'contemplation' as much superior to the ways in which *insights* might be gained from 'contemplating' a theatrical production. In *The Republic*, Plato mentions a long-standing contest (*agon*; 607b) between philosophers and poets<sup>1</sup> and devotes a whole chapter to reasoning why the latter should be banished from an 'ideal' state. His fear was that tragedy would awaken the lowest parts of the soul (*miasmata*; 589e), which he deemed as both polluted and polluting. He proposed that in order to live a 'good' rational life "we shall not be polluted with regard to our psyche" (621c).

Plato's negative assessment of the dramatic genre can be directly linked to the genre's patron, the Greek god Dionysus, who represents much more than a joyful and musical spirit of wine drinking and women loving as he is still commonly portrayed today. Dionysus is also the god of paradoxes and in-betweens: life and death, human and beast, pleasure and pain (cf. Cancik and Schneider 655). In *nuce*, he represents all which defies rational thinking; he is the god of ambiguity and contradictions.

## The Origin of Tragedy & the Greek God Dionysus

According to Aristotle, the dramatic genre developed from ritualistic festivals in honour of Dionysus.<sup>2</sup> One founding myth tells the story of how the Dionysian fes-

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1 'Poetry' (*poiesis*) in this context needs to be understood as fiction in general, with Plato singling out the 'tragic poets' as particularly dangerous (cf. 595b).

2 Aristotle states that drama originates from "the leader of the dithyramb" (1449b) – the dithyramb being a processional hymn to the god. Evidence that it is Dionysus who is meant

tival, established in worship of the god, came into being. It is said to have been initiated when the Athenians failed to receive a statue of Dionysus with the according attitude of worship. Dionysus, “enraged, struck the male sexual organs with an incurable disease” (Sourvinou-Inwood 14f.), which could only be healed by an overt display of honour towards their god, which the Athenians enacted in a ceremonial procession equipped with “manufactured phalluses, penises made of wood and leather” to welcome their god back into the City of Dionysia (*ibid.*). The myth shows that Dionysus is not only associated with overt and animalistic sexuality, as the representation of phalluses illustrates, but also with the power to inflict disease. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood maintains that tragedy developed from so-called satyr plays performed at Dionysian festivals (cf. 15).<sup>3</sup> From these ritualistic celebrations for Dionysus developed the satyric drama, which then led to the genesis of tragedies *about* the Greek god and later evolved into an independent genre (cf. Seaford 25). However, the tragic performances were, as Richard Seaford explains, for a long time still followed by a short satyr play – “written by the author of the preceding tragedies”, which served as a “reminder of tragedy’s humble origins” (25). Paul Gordon argues that “the Dionysian ‘goat song’ [...] is the ritual marker of humanity’s connection to a lower world that it purports to deny” (62). Attic tragedies that developed from the Dionysian plays were still deeply indebted to their patron god and displayed an array of gruesome and repulsive contents like the incest motif in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* or the appalling wound that leads to the social exclusion of the tragic hero in *Philoctetes*.

### Disgust in the Attic Tragedy: *Miasma* & *Dyschéreia*

*Miasma* and *dyschéreia* are two of the ancient Greek words that are often used in disgust-eliciting contexts and Attic tragedies offer myriad examples of both concepts being employed for dramatic effect. Both notions are furthermore closely

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by “the leader of the dithyramb” can be found in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, where the Chorus refers to him with the name “Dithrambus” (526). The centrality of Dionysus for form and content of tragedy has only fairly recently become a topic of academic interest and is still highly disputed. For a long time, it was contended that the actions of Attic tragedy were largely unrelated to Dionysus (cf. Cancik and Schneider 655). However, as Richard Seaford (25-38) and others, especially members of the so-called ‘Cambridge-ritualists’ school, have shown, evidence points in the opposite direction: that tragedy is essentially determined by Dionysus and Dionysian topics, cults, aesthetics and functions (cf. Cancik and Schneider 655).

3 Etymologically, ‘tragedy’ is derived from ‘*tragodos*’ which refers to the members of a tragic chorus with ‘*tragos*’ meaning ‘goat’ – the animal that would typically be sacrificed to Dionysus (cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 15). The most generally accepted translation of *tragos* is “singer at the sacrifice of a billy goat,” or a “singer for the prize of a billy goat” (Burkert qtd. in *ibid.*).

linked to the Greek god Dionysus, as I will show in the analyses of their presence in Euripides' *Bacchae* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, which will follow after brief general definitions of each Greek term.

## **Miasma**

In *Miasma. Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (1983), Robert Parker draws on the findings of anthropologist Mary Douglas<sup>4</sup> to define the basic sense of the *mia*-words (n. *miasma*, v. *miaino*, adj. *miaros*) as that of “defilement, the impairment of a thing’s form or integrity” (3). *Miasma* and its derivatives relate to defilement in two ways: (a) in a medical sense: Hippocrates employs the term to refer to diseases and wounds caused by impurity (cf. Parker 2), and (b) to incidents of ritual transgression or acts of desecration (even if these occur involuntarily; cf. 4). On an abstract level, the term ‘*miasma*’ and its derivatives are commonly employed to refer to problems or questions that defy clear rationalisation or categorisation: just like a physical wound ‘violates’ the integrity of the body, a moral digression, such as incest, violates the given rules of a society and thereby the integrity of its system. Parker finds the vast realm of *miasma*’s meaning best encompassed in the English word ‘pollution’ (1).

The physio-moral dimension incorporated in the concept of *miasma* can likewise be found in its direct linguistic opposite, the noun *katharmos*, with the verb *kathairo* denoting the physical cleansing of a wound (cf. 4; Gould, “Oedipus” 62), and other variations referring to ritual forms of cleansing, purging or purification. Aristotle’s student Theophrastus’ description of the “Superstitious Man” in his analysis of *Characters*<sup>5</sup> (c. 319) shows how freely the realms of body and mind overlap with respect to *miasma*: the superstitious man “refuses to step on a gravestone, view a corpse or visit a woman in childbirth<sup>6</sup> [classical cases of *miasma* in Greek antiquity] and says it’s the best policy for him not to incur pollution” (109).

As Theophrastus demonstrates in his assessment of the man’s behaviour as superstitious, the fear of contagion from one person or realm to another is not so much based on rational reasoning, but rather on some kind of ‘magical belief’.

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4 In her seminal work *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), Mary Douglas defines filth and dirt as phenomena that upset order. According to her theory, perceived pollutions are incidents where matter falls out of categories and are thus regarded as contaminating the ‘purity’ of a given system (cf. 44ff.).

5 All future references to Theophrastus refer to the 2003 Cambridge edition of *Characters*, edited and translated by James Diggle. The Loeb version of *Characters* (1993), translated and edited by Jeffrey Rusten et al., will be mentioned directly in case of varying translations.

6 Mireille M. Lee offers a detailed discussion on childbirth “Maternity and Miasma” in *Motherhood and Mothering in Ancient Greece and Rome* (23-42). She describes women’s pregnancy as a “liminal period”, “a rite of passage” (23).

According to Parker, fifth-century BC Greek society was highly engaged in questions of physical, moral and political purity, and dangers or fears of contamination (cf. 2ff.). *Miasma* was thus associated with regulations that ranged from smaller hygienic rules such as not cutting your nails at a festival to a condemnation of animalistic (i.e. uncivilised) behaviour and prohibitions against coming into contact with corpses (cf. *ibid.*). Deemed as *miarōn* were also: a murderer's reputation, dishonesty, injustice before the law, etc. (cf. *ibid.*). Parker argues that the concept of *miasma* is omnipresent in Greek tragedies; a claim that is supported by Fabian Meinel, who finds that in fact all but two of the surviving Greek tragedies address the issue explicitly.<sup>7</sup> According to Meinel's research, only Aeschylus' *Prometheus* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* fall out of this category (cf. 2), which, however, does not mean that they do not deal with disgust-eliciting issues similar to those caused by *miasma*, as I will show with the example of *Philoctetes* in the later discussion on *dyschêreia*.

### ***Miasma* in Euripides' *Bacchae***

The most famous (and only surviving) Dionysian tragedy is Euripides' *Bacchae* (c. 410 BC), with 'Bacchus' being an alternative name for Dionysus and the 'Bacchae' denoting the group of his worshipping followers. The play depicts another founding myth concerning the introduction of Dionysus to his town of birth, Thebes, where he arrives from Lydia in Asia, bringing his cult (13f.).

In the *Bacchae*, *miasma* plays a central role and relates to multiple semantic fields that are closely linked to disgust such as: disease, pollution, sexual aberration, contagion, animalistic behaviour, transgression of moral boundaries, and ambiguous states of in-between (animal/human, man/woman, life/death, etc). At the beginning of the play, the Chorus informs us about the historical (i.e. mythological) context of Bacchus' birth. They tell us that he is the child of Semele, princess of Thebes, and the god Zeus. According to their report, Dionysus was born prematurely when his mother was struck by lightning and saved by his father, who sewed him into his thigh and later 'gave birth' to him.

Zeus received him [...] and concealed him in his thigh, closing it up with golden pins [...]. Then, when fate brought him to term, he gave birth to the god with the horns of a bull and crowned him with garlands of serpents: that is why maenads catch beast-eating snakes and drape their tresses with them. (88-103)

Dionysus' godly/human parentage as well as his birth from a "male womb" (cf. 525-529) illustrate his essentially ambiguous and paradox nature. The gender transgression is reinforced by descriptions of his outer appearance, which is rendered

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<sup>7</sup> Meinel's *Pollution and Crisis in Greek Tragedy* (2015) is to date the only book-length study that discusses the central role of *miasma* in works of ancient Greek tragedy.

as both, highly sexually potent and phallic as well as “effeminate” (352). His animalistic features (“horns of a bull”) blur the boundaries between human/animal, which also applies to his companions, the *maenads* (female followers wearing animal skins, eating raw flesh, and allegedly practicing dark forms of sexuality) and the *satyrs* (men often depicted with permanent erections and goat-like features; cf. Cancik and Schneider 654ff.).

Like their leader, the *maenads* and *satyrs* are transgressors of civic norms that defy clear categorical identification and are thus conceived of as outsiders of the *polis*. Because of Dionysus’ ambiguous characteristics, alongside him being racially discriminated because he was brought up in Asia (i.e. the ‘inferior’ and ‘barbaric’ East), the god is perceived as an ultimate ‘foreigner’, ‘stranger’ (*xenos*, 1047), ‘Other’ (cf. Cancik and Schneider 658ff.; Mills 39) by the Greek citizens and met with suspicion and hostility.

Dionysus tells us that his aunts Agave, Ino, and Autonoe did not believe him to be the son of Zeus and had slandered his mother’s reputation by spreading rumours about her infidel character. As a punishment he turns them and other Theban women to frenzy and drives them to the mountains of Cithaeron to live as *maenads* (cf. 25-42). Dionysus’ cousin, Pentheus, who has recently become King of Thebes, is also more than unhappy to hear about “the strange mischief” going on in his city (cf. 215-225). For Pentheus all that is related to the ‘foreigner’ Dionysus and his ritual practices appears diseased, dangerous, and highly contagious. His fear of physiological contagion becomes most apparent when he aggressively rejects his grandfather Cadmus’ attempt to place an ivy crown on his head as a sign of Dionysian worship: “Keep your hands to yourself, don’t wipe your folly off on me!” (343-345), he replies.

Pentheus is determined to expel Dionysus, the “symbolical bearer of all the ills and pollutions”, from his city and threatens to have him stoned, a penalty that is “usually reserved for the bearer of pollution” as Charles Segal points out in his *Dionysiac Poetics* (42f.). Pentheus maintains that Dionysus “befouls’ (*lymainetai*) the beds of women (352-54)” (Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics* 50), and is “infecting the women with a new disease” (Euripides 352f.). He even believes that should they ever come in contact with the Dionysian drink of wine “in their feasts”, it would ultimately lead to “everything about their rites [becoming] diseased” (260-262). His fear with regard to Dionysian defilement is mainly focused on promiscuous and orgiastically aberrant sexual behaviour induced in women (cf. 216-223). A messenger who observed the women hunting in the mountains highlights another Dionysian feature, namely the animalistic and brutal nature of their activities:

You could have seen one of the women tearing asunder a bellowing fatted calf with her hands, while others tore heifers to pieces. You could have seen their

flanks and cloven hooves hurled this way and that: pieces, drenched with blood, hung dripping from the fir trees. (733-742)

This bleak vision concerning the practice of the Dionysian cult, however, only shows one side of the picture. Both the messenger and the Chorus also report in great detail on the cult's attraction. They describe the lives of the women in the mountains as peaceful, beautiful, awe-striking and even chaste:<sup>8</sup>

First they let their hair fall to their shoulders, and those whose fastenings had come undone adjusted their fawnskin garments, girdling the dappled skins with snakes that licked their cheeks. New mothers, their babies left behind and their breasts overfull with milk, cradled gazelles or wolf cubs in their arms and gave them to drink from their white milk. [...] All who desired a drink of milk dug with their fingertips in the ground and the white liquid bubbled up. From their ivy-covered thyrsos dripped streams of honey. If you had been there and seen this, you would have approached in prayer the god you now disparage. (695-713)

The women are not only described as caring and loving ("cradled gazelles or wolf cubs in their arms"), but also as highly attractive and arousing, as the use of rich sexually allusive language in this report demonstrates ("snakes that licked their cheeks"; "breasts overfull with milk"; "the white liquid bubbled up"; "dripped streams of honey").

Even Pentheus himself, who consistently expresses aversion to all that Dionysus and his cult represent, displays signs of fascination and even attraction. His enchantment with the god and his worshippers shines through in his account of Bacchus' beauty, in his eagerness to hear about the women from the messenger, and in his fantasies concerning their sexual behaviour (cf. 222-225, 261-262, 354, 486). When Dionysus, in full awareness of Pentheus' (repressed) desires, offers him a sight of the women in action, Pentheus immediately swallows the bait, offering "much gold to do so" (812) – a decision which will ultimately lead to his tragic death. Once Pentheus arrives at the women's dwelling place and climbs up a tree to get a better view of the scene, Dionysus orders his aunts and their female comrades to attack the vicious intruder, whom they fail to recognise as their son, nephew, and king (taking him for a wild animal instead). The news about these deeds is brought to Pentheus' grandfather Cadmus by a messenger, who reports the gruesome events in painstaking detail:

[Pentheus'] mother was the priestess and began the killing [...]. Taking his right hand in her grip and planting her foot against the poor man's flank, she tore out

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8 It seems, however, that this peaceful life can only be maintained in the absence of men. As soon as male intruders come to disturb the women, their behaviour turns 'savage' and brutal (cf. 434, 712-713; 769-774).

his arm at the shoulder. [...] Ino was destroying the other side, tearing his flesh, and Autonoe and the rest of the bacchic throng attacked him. [...] One of them was carrying an arm, another a foot still in its boots, his flanks were stripped bare, the flesh torn from them, and every woman, hands red with blood, hurled Pentheus' flesh about like a ball. His body lies scattered, some of it under the rough cliffs, other parts in thick-growing woods, no easy thing to look for. (1110-1136)

Not only is the cruel action of ripping apart Pentheus' body and the difficulty of finding the scattered pieces described in vivid detail, but the lurid goriness of the event is heightened even further by the *maenads'* apparent pleasure in the slaughter as they are reported to have played "ball" with the King's blood-dripping remains. Also, the Chorus' evaluation of Agave's involuntary filicide is appallingly cheerful: "A fine endeavour it is to drench one's hand in the blood of a child!" (1163-1164).

But despite the gruesomeness of the event, Dionysus' revenge has not yet come to an end. Agave, who had shamed Dionysus' mother by spreading rumours about her alleged infidelity, has yet to learn her lesson of what it means to be a truly shameful mother. Still taking her butchered son for a wild animal, she proudly parades around her home town, carrying his head on a stick, joyfully suggesting a festive meal to be made from his young flesh, until she comes to her senses and realises her horrendous (*míaron*; 1383) deeds of filicide and threatened cannibalism. If we take Agave, who did not voluntarily join the *maenads*, as a representative of Theban morals, it can be argued that her case displays how the whole discourse on who or what is *míaron* is turned on its head in this tragedy. The ending of the play suggests that it is not so much Dionysus and his cult who are defiled and polluted, but rather the Theban citizens' attitudes and conducts. The Thebans are forced to realise their own dereliction from moral behaviour in the most painful manner: Instead of Pentheus violently destroying Dionysus as the polluting element by "separat[ing] his head from his body" (241); it is Pentheus whose body is torn to pieces for having proven to be an unsuitable and in fact *míaron* leader by not having shown his due worship to the god and by having overestimated his authoritarian powers in leading the city by means of tyranny and threats of violence.<sup>9</sup> He had threatened to shed the women's blood in the mountains: "[W]omen's blood! That's what they deserve, and I shall shed lots of it in the glens of Cithareon!" (796-797), but instead it is his blood which is shed at the women's hands. Pentheus' grandfather Cadmus, who had advised his grandson to "tell a wholesome lie: thus Semele will be thought to have given birth to a god and our whole family will win honor" (330-336), receives his punishment for having acted from false and selfish motives when he joined the

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9 The prophet Teiresias had warned Pentheus: "[T]hough you think yourself clever and have a ready tongue, there is no intelligence in what you say" (265-271); "don't think that kingly rule is the most powerful force in human life" (309-311); but Pentheus did not listen and instead ordered a violent attack on the prophet for having "taught" Dionysian "madness" (345).

Dionysian worship. Dionysus turns him into the “savage form” of a snake to match his ‘sly’ nature (cf. 1338, 1357).

Segal states that in the *Bacchae*, Euripides shows how “civilized order [is] cracking apart” (*Dionysiac Poetics* 55) under the corrupt actions of Thebes’ citizens in general and the tyrannical attitude of its ruler Pentheus in particular (cf. 215ff, 679f.). Through a reversal of what is deemed *miarón*, in the sense of polluting the *polis*, the play demonstrates that “savage” moral attitudes are much more dangerous to the well-being of a state than people who are perceived as animalistic ‘sub-humans’ because of their foreign heritage and instinct-driven behaviour.

### *Dyschéreia*

The meaning of the ancient Greek term ‘*dyschéreia*’ is as broad as that of ‘*miasma*’: It ranges from distaste or unpleasantness of food to bad smell, loathing, nausea, and difficult questions (cf. Liddell n.p.). A look into the word’s etymology reveals how, like *miasma*, *dyschéreia* relates to physical as well abstract forms of repulsion and their objects: the root ‘*chér*’ means ‘hand’, but also ‘touch’ (*ibid.*), which in its negation (‘*dys*’) can refer to both: (a) physical items that should not be touched and (b) arguments or questions that are “difficult to *handle*” (cf. Liebert 186; my emphasis).<sup>10</sup> *Dyschéreia* can be used to describe reactions to concrete physical items: “annoyance [and/or] disgust caused by things”, as well as appalling features, such as “harshness [and] offensiveness” of persons; and abstract problems, such as “troublesome questions” and reactions to these (Liddell n.p.). Associated with *dyschéreia* are thus all objects, activities, persons, and questions one should avoid close contact with (a feature which at least hints at a similar fear of contagion as the fear induced by encounters with *miasma*).

In Theophrastus’ work on *Characters* we find a lucid exemplary description of many of *dyschéreia*’s varied meanings and its physio-moral dimensions. Theophrastus describes “The Offensive Man” (*dyschéreia*)<sup>11</sup> as a person who lacks habits of hygiene and displays signs of physical neglect, which are unpleasant for other people. He has black nails, fouling feet, rotten teeth, and suffers from open wounds and diseases, which are exacerbated by his carelessness. He smells like a pigsty, is hairy like a wild animal, and his armpits are infested by lice. His behaviour is also overtly offensive: He blows his nose (with his fingers) while eating, he burps and spits while

10 Rana S. Liebert suggests a possible translation as “difficult to stomach” (186; claiming that the etymological root could refer to a now lost word for ‘stomach’). She also explains that the Greeks were generally more prone to “attribute [some]thing physical to an ethical stance” (190) than we are today.

11 Rusten et al. translate *dyschéreia* as “squalour” in the Loeb version of the text (cf. 117ff.).

speaking, scratches himself during sacrifice, and does not wash before sexual encounters with his wife. When he does wash, he uses rancid oil to bathe and he wears stained clothes to go to the market (cf. Diggle 119; Rusten et al. 117-121).

### *Dyschèreia* in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Sophocles' prize-winning tragedy *Philoctetes*, which centres around the protagonist's wounded foot, its causes, and its consequences, is a play that offers myriad and graphic examples of the use of *dyschèreia* in ancient drama. The main actions of the play take place during the Trojan War, where Philoctetes is sought out by Odysseus and Neoptolemus to persuade him to come back with them to Troy because his skills are needed in combat.

In the opening lines of the play, we learn that Philoctetes had been previously sent into exile on the deserted island of Lemnos because of his diseased foot which was caused by a snakebite as a result of him having accidentally trespassed on sacred grounds. The odious infection of his foot in turn rendered him so repulsive that the authorities of the city sought to have him banished from the city to maintain public order (cf. 1-12; cf. Pentheus' actions and his fate in Euripides' *Bacchae*). At the onset of the play, Philoctetes is thus, like Euripides' Bacchus and his followers, an outsider to the city, inhabiting a liminal space on the borders of civilisation.<sup>12</sup> Only after ten years of social exclusion, when Philoctetes' skills are needed in warfare, does Neoptolemus at the order of Odysseus travel to Lemnos to persuade Philoctetes to join him back to Troy. Odysseus, who had feared Philoctetes to be reluctant to this cause, instructed Neoptolemus to convince the latter by means of lies and deception.

When Neoptolemus and his men arrive on the island they find Philoctetes in an abysmal state. They are appalled, not only by the stench of his still pulsating wound, but also by his animalistic way of life: Philoctetes lives in a cage (16), describes himself as having "turned into something wild" (224-226) and "degraded" (229); he drinks "stained puddle-water" (718), and because of his ill foot sometimes even has to "crawl" (295, 701) to move forward, unable to uphold a 'human' upright walking position (cf. 820-821). Even in his description of the "*savage-ulcer wound*" (270; my emphasis) Philoctetes draws on the semantic field of animality.

In other passages, the loathsome nature of Philoctetes' wound is further stylistically aggravated through detailed references to various bodily fluids and compositional variations relating to food and consumption. Philoctetes' foot is de-

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12 Marina B. McCoy points out that the play opens with the Greek word for 'shore', "an appropriate beginning since Philoctetes himself belongs at the periphery, the edge, the space in between belonging to society – to which he naturally as a human being forms a part – and being an island to himself in his isolation on Lemnos" (64).

scribed as: “suppurating with a flesh-devouring ulcer” (7), a “greedy ulcer” (312; cf. also 795), a “blood-drunk, hungry sore” (684; my emphasis). In a near-death state Philoctetes exclaims: “what wretched thing I am. This is the *end*, my son [...] I’m being *eaten* through, my son” (744-745; my emphasis cf. also 1165). He addresses the parasites feeding on his decaying flesh: “This is your chance to *feast*, fix your teeth in vengeance upon my *mottled meat*” (1155; my emphasis). By combining decay and death with food and feasting, Sophocles here achieves the same stomach-turning effect as Euripides did in the scene of Agave expressing her cannibalistic phantasies in the *Bacchae* (cf. 1184-1329). What causes these descriptions to be so emotionally effective is their relation to the ultimate Dionysian paradox, the dichotomous pairing of life and death, which becomes most apparent in Philoctetes’ repeated descriptions of himself as “a living corpse” (Sophocles 1018; cf. also 945, 950ff., 1208ff.).

The most thought-provoking aspect of Sophocles’ usage of *dyschéreia* in *Philoctetes*, however, does not concern the appalling state of its hero’s physical condition, but the moral dimension of self-disgust, which Neoptolemus, who was sent to bring Philoctetes back to Troy, experiences as a result of having let himself be persuaded to do so by means of deceit. Philoctetes’ putrid disease thus functions above all as contrasting mirror to unveil what is ‘really’ revolting, namely: lies, corruption, and deceit. Whereas Winfried Menninghaus and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst in their analyses of *dyschéreia*’s role in *Philoctetes* both suggest that the vivid description of Philoctetes’ hideous wound functions above all to test and testify Neoptolemus’ noble character in being able to overcome his physical repulsion (cf. Menninghaus 12, Douglas-Fairhurst 6), Emily Allen-Hornblower instead argues that it is the moral dimension of *dyschéreia* expressed in Neoptolemus’ feeling of self-disgust that lies at the heart of the play. I agree with Allen-Hornblower’s reading as I shall show in a close reading of the scene that marks the reversal from a focus on Philoctetes’ physical affliction to Neoptolemus’ inner turmoil. The dialogue that discloses this turn takes place after Philoctetes’ suffering reaches a climax, during which course he deliriously expresses his trust, gratefulness, and affection towards Neoptolemus, before falling unconscious. When he wakes up, he finds Neoptolemus in a state utter confusion and despair and fears that this may have been caused by his disease. He tries to calm him down by suggesting that “the force of habit will set [him] upright” (i.e. make him ‘human’) again, but Neoptolemus is not to be consoled since his disgust stems from a different source:

PHILOCTETES: *It is not disgust [dyschéreia] with my disease that has come upon you and made you give up on the idea of taking me on board as a shipmate, is it?*

NEOPTOLEMUS: *All is disgust [dyschéreia] when one leaves one’s own nature and does what is out of keeping with it!*

PHILOCTETES: *But you have not been doing or saying anything that is not in keeping with the one who sired you, by helping an honorable man such as I.*

NEOPTOLEMUS: *I shall be revealed as shameful: that is what has been painning me for a long while now.*

PHILOCTETES: *Not in your actions, you won't; that's for certain. But your words do worry me. (900-910)*

Neoptolemus' statement that "All is disgust when one leaves one's own nature and does what is out of keeping with it!" can be interpreted in three ways. First, as a reference to the animalistic, inhumane and thus repulsive state Philoctetes has reached because of his wound, which he assumes causes Neoptolemus to be physically disgusted. Second, as a form of self-reproach that Neoptolemus experiences due to stepping out of character (as in cultivated human 'nature') by associating with an animalistic 'sub-human'. And finally, as a form of self-loathing on Neoptolemus' behalf for having 'left his nature' as a good and honest man when he agreed to Odysseus' plan to use lies and deceit to bring Philoctetes to Troy. Whereas the first reading links Neoptolemus' exclamation back to Philoctetes' self-assessment as a base and barely human creature, the second reading marks the transition from disgust at a physically repugnant person to a form of self-loathing caused by engaging with someone disgusting. The second reading is how Philoctetes initially interprets Neoptolemus statement' since it has by now become clear that Neoptolemus' problem is one that does not primarily concern the 'other' (Philoctetes) but himself. It is, however, the third reading that is most crucial for an understanding of this scene, since Neoptolemus' moral self-disgust marks "a key moment in Neoptolemus' evolution, and a turning point in the drama as a whole" (Allen-Hornblower 72).

Similarly to Euripides' *Bacchae* in its negotiation of the polyvalent dimensions of *miasma*, *Philoctetes* too demonstrates by means of inversion that it is not the decaying body or animal-like behaviour that are most repulsive, but 'rotten' moral convictions instead. According to Allen-Hornblower, Sophocles' usage of *dyschéreia* poses fundamental questions of who or what we consider or should consider disgusting, in the sense of being harmful to society: a pressing concern for the citizens of the Greek *polis* at the time, "when conspiracies, lies, and mutual suspicion were threatening the city and the democratic regime's very survival" (85).

### I.i Plato's Banishment of the Poets in *The Republic*

In *The Republic*, Plato (c.428-c.348 BC) conceptualises an ideal state mediated in a fictional dialogue between his teacher Socrates and various interlocutors. In Book

X (595a-608c), Socrates discusses the political and social status of poets (cf. also Book II 337b-383c and III 386a-403c). Aiming for a republic that is governed by rational thinking, Socrates condemns the so-called *mimetic* (i.e. representational) arts<sup>13</sup> on grounds of their occupation with forms of representation that he considers to be of low ontological value. For Plato the artistic depictions of characters and actions in works of drama and similar art forms, are mere ‘copies’ of real-life people and events and reality itself is only a particular manifestation, or ‘copy’ of metaphysical ideas (596e-602c). From art’s purported inferior ontological status, Plato’s Socrates deduces various points of ideological and moral critique.

The arguments that will be of main interest for our discussion on aesthetic disgust are Socrates’ disapproval of the affective potential of dramatic productions and their effects on recipients, as well as *mimetic* arts’ supposed indisposition to provide audiences with ‘real’ knowledge or understanding. According to Socrates, the strong emotions that can be aroused by engaging with *mimetic* works of art (he uses the specific example of witnessing a theatrical performance) endanger the harmony of the soul (602c-608b). His fear is that audiences may imitate or become ‘polluted’ by irrational behaviour (*miarón*), which would impair their ability to think rationally: “Between us – and you all won’t denounce me to the tragic poets and all the other imitators – all such things seem to maim the thought of those who hear them and do not as a remedy have the knowledge of how they really are” (595b).

## Spirited Disgust & the Pollution of *Logos*

Plato’s concern regarding the potential of ‘tragic poetry’ to damage recipients’ intellectual faculties is intrinsically linked to the previously discussed concepts of (1) *dyschéreia* and (2) *miasma*, therefore Plato’s discussion of these terms shall be presented in some detail in the following sections.

### *Dyschéreia*

In *The Republic*, we find the most important discussion relating to *dyschéreia* in Socrates’ conversation with Glaucon on the ‘just’ state of the soul, which he professes to mirror the functioning principle of an ideal state. Socrates tells the story

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13 The most common translation of ‘*mimêsis*’ is ‘imitation’. Nickolas Pappas, however, points out that “[a]lternatives include ‘representation’ and ‘emulation’” and that the “transliterated Greek word sans diacritical mark [...], the English ‘mimesis’” is most often simply used as a synonym for ‘imitation’, which does not capture all of the nuances of the original Greek term” (n.p.). As ‘representation’ offers a broader and potentially creatively more open translation of ‘*mimesis*’, I opt to use this term when talking about the dramatic (=representational) arts, as well as maintaining the anglicised version ‘*mimetic*’ to mark its broader (Greek) meaning.

of a man called Leontius to demonstrate how the soul is composed of three different, potentially conflicting, parts (cf. 435c).

[He] was going up from the Piraeus [...] when he noticed corpses lying by the public executioner. He *desired to look*, but at the same time he was *disgusted* [*dyschéreia*] and made himself *turn away*; and for a while he struggled and covered his face. But finally, overpowered by the desire, he opened his eyes wide, ran toward the corpses and said: ‘Look, you damned wretches, take your fill of the fair sight.’ (439e-440a; my emphasis)

On passing the corpses by the roadside, Leontius experiences strong and contradictory emotional sensations. Like Pentheus in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, who, at the same time as being appalled by all that Dionysus represents, is also attracted to him, Leontius simultaneously feels the desire to look at the recently deceased bodies (attraction) as well as an urge to turn away from them (aversion). Socrates concludes from the co-presence of Leontius’ conflicting affective responses that the human soul cannot be composed of only two parts, as he had previously assumed: one being rational (*logos*) and the other desiring or appetitive (*epithumia*);<sup>14</sup> but that there must be a third part at work in the human soul to account for Leontius’ paradox reaction, which he calls the ‘spirited’ part (*thumos*) (439e). He comes to this conclusion because in his view the two contradictory urges (attraction/aversion) can neither both belong to the desirous or appetitive part of the soul (‘law of non-contradiction’), nor can one of them be allocated to the rational part since both sensations are highly affectively charged. Socrates thus locates Leontius’ desire to look at the corpses in the appetitive part and his aversion in the newly established third, the ‘spirited’ part of the soul.

Glaucon initially assumes that the ‘spirited’ part bears similarity to the appetitive part, but Socrates disagrees, claiming that it instead “take[s] up arms on the side of the calculating part” in the “civil war of the soul” (440e).<sup>15</sup> He argues that the spirited part functions as an ally of the rational part with the goal to rule over the desires coming from the lower appetitive part of the soul.<sup>16</sup> The spirited part

14 Plato’s previous dual structure of the soul was set up as follows: “[W]e claim they are two and different from one another, naming that in the soul with which it reasons the rational and that with which it lusts, hungers, thirsts, and feels the flutter of other appetites, the irrational and appetitive – companion of certain replenishments and pleasures” (439d-e).

15 Glaucon’s interpretation is in many ways more intuitively comprehensible. The etymological relation between *thymoeides/thumos* and *epithumetikon/epithumia* would also point in this direction. For further discussion cf. Liebert (190f.).

16 There is some contradiction in this set-up. Socrates agrees with Glaucon’s observation that the spirited part of the soul can already be found in children. He also mentions its presence in animals, which indicates an instinctive nature, rather than a *logos*-informed feature. For further discussion cf. Darren Sheppard (65) and Liebert (186).

of the soul thus aids to protect the just state of the soul (442a) from “injustice, licentiousness, cowardice, lack of learning, and, in sum, vice entire” (444a-b). This dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon demonstrates that Plato views *dyschéreia* as an internalised aversion against what is morally repugnant, which functions as an almost instinctive safeguard against the dangerous appetites of the lower part of the soul. Liebert interprets Plato’s *dyschéreia* to denote an “embodied ethical attitude” which “suggests that aversions to wrongdoings are, at least ideally, the product of deep internalization” (182). For Plato these characteristics of *dyschéreia* turn it into a valuable tool for educational training, aimed at the ‘cultivation of the rational mind’:

[O]ne who was properly trained [...] would perceive with the greatest acuity the deficiencies of things made or grown without beauty, and so, feeling disgust rightly, he would praise beautiful things and, by taking pleasure in them and receiving them into his soul, he would nourish it by these means and become himself beautiful and good. The ugly, on the other hand, he would rightly blame and hate while still young and yet unable to grasp the reason, but when reason came the man trained in this manner would welcome it most of all, for through their kinship he would already know it. (401d-e)

This passage highlights how Plato conceives of disgust as a kind of acquired moral compass that helps to distinguish between what is ‘good’ (rational/harmonious), moral, and therefore beautiful, and what ought to be despised as the ‘other’, the irrational and ugly. It also shows the transference from physical aversion to more abstract concepts of beauty and ugliness, which for Plato mirror concepts of justice and morality. Plato thus conceives of physical health as a manifestation of beauty, and sickness or disease as a manifestation of ugliness, which in turn mirror the just and unjust actions of the soul: “Virtue, then, as it seems, would be a certain health, beauty and good condition of a soul, and vice a sickness, ugliness and weakness” (444c-e). What is most thought-provoking about Plato’s evaluation of the sensation of *dyschéreia* is the conclusion he draws and the loophole he leaves regarding further elaboration on the topic. Socrates’ discussion with Glaucon on the topic of the spirited part of the soul and *dyschéreia* comes to an end with the former’s concession that a complete understanding of the nature of the soul cannot be accomplished by means of logical reasoning via language. He warns: “But know well, Glaucon, that in my opinion, we’ll never get a precise grasp of it [the soul] on the basis of procedures such as we’re now using in the argument” (435d). Socrates continues with opening up the possibility of “another longer and further road” to reach a conclusion on how to understand the mechanisms of the soul – an offer that is never redeemed.

## *Miasma*

Plato uses the term *miasma* to describe physiological as well as moral forms of pollution. He regards the lowest part of the psyche to be *miarōn* “to an extreme degree” (589e), or as Thomas Gould puts it: “entirely without good” (“Oedipus” 65). In an argument that anticipates the Freudian theory of the unconscious, Plato refers to dreams as instances where humans’ most *miarōn* desires are freely unleashed: “What we wish to recognize is the following: surely some terrible, savage, and lawless form of desire is in every man, even in some of us who seem to be so very measured. And surely this becomes plain in dreams” (571d). Plato’s enumeration of possible dream contents shows us which actions and features he associates with *miasma*:

[While] the calculating, tame, and ruling part [...] slumbers, [...] the beastly and wild part, gorged with food or drink, is skittish and, pushing sleep away, seeks to go and satisfy its dispositions. You know that in such a state it dares to do everything as though it were released from, and rid of all shame and prudence. And it doesn’t shrink from attempting intercourse, as it supposes, with a mother or with anyone else at all – human beings, gods, and beasts; or attempting any foul murder at all, and there is no food from which it abstains. (571b-d)

Many of the actions and characteristics of *miarōn* deeds Plato here enumerates are closely related to the god of border transgressions and in-betweens Dionysus and thus unsurprisingly also feature prominently in Attic tragedies of the time. In *Phaedrus* Plato directly mentions the Greek god in relation to the dangers of art, claiming that poetic inspiration is a “form of madness bestowed by the Muses” (in Murray xxviii) which takes a “tender and virgin soul” and “rouses and excites it to Bacchic frenzy” (*ibid.*). For Plato the nature of these kind of base Bacchic frenzies stands in direct opposition to humans’ rational faculties and derives from the lowest place in the appetitive part of the soul. Plato thus associates *miasma* with animalistic instinct-driven behaviour: “savage”, “beastly”, and “wild”, actions that defy all rules of etiquette and social order (“rid of all shame and prudence”) and transgress the most sacred taboos of human societies: incest, intercourse with “gods, and beasts”, as well as murders of the worst kind like patricide or filicide (Gould “Oedipus” 65; cf. also Liebert 190). By placing *miasma* in the appetitive part of the soul Plato furthermore directly connects the notion to manifestations and modes of excessive and improper food consumption: “gorged with food and drink”, “there is no food from which it abstains”, which could even include cannibalism (cf. Liebert 190; Gould “Oedipus” 65). Plato’s usage of the term *miasma*, with meanings ranging from improper food to immoral behaviour, highlights the physio-moral nature of the sensation which also becomes apparent in his ‘somatic’ rendering of tragedy’s supposed aesthetic effect. He describes this effect in terms of excessive food con-

sumption such as “filling”, “stuffing”, and “satisfying” the lowest part of the psyche (606a; cf. also 576c).

For Plato the tragic hero of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* is a prime example of a *miaros* character, since he brings the plague to his town, sleeps with his mother, and kills his father (regardless of the fact that Oedipus unknowingly commits these crimes). Plato’s assumption is that any kind of contact with *miasma*, even in the form of artistic representation like the performance of the *Oedipus* play, is highly dangerous and contagious. As Gould puts it: “anyone who allowed himself to get sympathetically excited by this crime was risking that most dangerous *miasmata*, the surrender to the part of his psyche that is just as *miaros* as Oedipus” (“Oedipus” 66). In his fear of *miasma*’s contagious nature Plato goes so far as to claim that an infection with *miasma* lasts even into afterlife (cf. 621c).

### I.ii Aristotle’s *Poetics*: *Miasma* & *Katharsis*

For Aristotle, like Plato, *miasma* is central to his reflection on the dramatic genre, and like his teacher he discusses the concept in relation to the specific characteristics of the *mimetic* arts. In his *Poetics* Aristotle agrees with his teacher’s assumption concerning the ‘infectious’ nature of the theatre, meaning that dramatic works can have a strong emotional impact on their recipients. But for him this kind of emotional affliction does not pollute (*miaino*) the soul, but can instead induce a cleansing of undesirable emotional states, a *katharsis* (1449b).

Even though Aristotle never directly refers to his teacher, the *Poetics* is generally regarded as a defence of the *mimetic* arts against Plato’s critique. Thomas Gould points out that there are only five occurrences of the word *miasma* in Aristotle’s entire *oeuvre*, of which three can be found in the *Poetics* (cf. “Oedipus” 65). He sees this as an indication for Aristotle directly reacting to Plato’s accusations against *mimetic* arts’ supposed *miaros* nature with an attempt to answer “the question why we should enjoy [tragedy]” (*ibid.*) and what can be gained from engagement with this form of art through his concept of *katharsis*. By introducing the notion of *katharsis*, Aristotle offers an effective antidote to Plato’s contention that dramatic works are ultimately of a *miaros* and thus potentially *logos*-harming nature. He points to the valuable lessons that can be learned from encounters with the *mimetic* arts as well as to the pleasure provided from gaining knowledge in this way.<sup>17</sup> Together these arguments present a possible solution to the so-called ‘para-

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17 For Aristotle, *mimesis* and learning are intrinsically linked, since, in his view, children first learn through *mimesis* by imitating grown-ups’ behaviour and actions. He thus believes that engagement with the *mimetic* arts encourages our natural desire for knowledge and learning (cf. 1448b).

dox of aversion' – the question of why and how we can derive pleasure from artistic presentation of objects and actions which we would avoid contact with in real life (cf. Korsmeyer 44).

Aristotle's argumentation on why pleasure can be derived from tragic forms of art is grounded on the premise that humans take pleasure in learning. He claims that when "a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like" (1452b) is encountered in forms of artistic presentation, pleasure results from the fact that we learn something about the specific nature of the items or actions on display. Additionally, he claims that we delight in acknowledging the particular craftsmanship the creator employed in producing the work of art (1448b). According to Aristotle these positive experiences outbalance the negative emotions that real-life encounters with objects such as "contemptible insects or dead bodies" could provoke:

[W]e delight in contemplating the most accurately made images of the very things that are painful for us to see, such as the forms of the most contemptible insects and of dead bodies. What is responsible even for this is that understanding [*manthanein*] is most pleasant [*hediston*] not only for philosophers but in a similar way for everyone else, though they share in it to a short extent. They delight in seeing images for this reason: because understanding and reasoning of what each thing is results when they contemplate them, for instance "that's who this is," since if one happens not to have seen him before, the image will not produce pleasure as an imitation, but only on account of its workmanship or coloring or for some other such reason. (1448b)

The solution Aristotle offers to the 'paradox of aversion' is that repulsive depictions are not so much pleasant for perception (*aisthesis*), but rather for our intellect with regard to (a) acknowledgement of skilful craftsmanship (*poiesis, technē*),<sup>18</sup> and (b) enhanced understanding (*manthanein*) of the nature of things on display. What this quote nevertheless illustrates is that Aristotle's solution to the 'paradox of aversion', as well as his view on the function of art is, like his teacher Plato's, to a large degree *logos*-based.

While Plato dismisses the *mimetic* arts because he maintains that dramatists have no real knowledge about the contents they depict and are thus 'bad' teachers, Aristotle argues that it is a different kind of knowledge that dramatic works convey. Against Plato's accusation that the *mimetic* arts do no more than depict 'lies' about the world, Aristotle counters that the events displayed by tragedy are not, and are in fact not meant to be, 'copies' of particular real-life events, but are instead representative of "universal" principles of actions (cf. 1451b). He compares the artist's task

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18 For further elaboration on the idea of art as a product of special craftsmanship (*technē*) cf., for example, Jonathan Lear (322) or Karel Thein (218).

to that of the historian, claiming that unlike the latter, dramatists do not “speak [...] of things that have happened but of the sort of things that might happen and possibilities that come from what is likely or necessary” (1451a). Tragedy’s capability to represent “things that are universal” makes it a highly relevant genre for enhancing human understanding in Aristotle’s point of view. He esteems tragedy as “more philosophical (*philosophoteron*) and more serious (*spoudaioteron*)” than other academic disciplines like history, which can only gain insight from “things that are particular” (1451b). This argument is Aristotle’s strongest point against his teacher’s condemnation of the ‘tragic poets’ on the basis of them allegedly presenting copies of copies of particular actions of which they do not have the required ‘expert knowledge’ (cf. Plato 597a-602a). The case Aristotle makes for *mimetic* art’s superiority over other academic disciplines in its potential to depict universal human conflicts is also a crucial element of the aesthetic discourse that was to follow the ancient Greek reflections on art. Aristotle’s standpoint highlights the unique aesthetic, social and educational values that engagement with *mimetic* works of art are able to offer: insight into human conduct and motivation, as well as a simulated ‘training’ of the emotional states involved in basic human conflicts.

## Tragedy & Emotions

Overall, Aristotle’s view on emotions is not as exclusive as that of his teacher Plato: for Aristotle all emotions are essential components of human development. In his *Rhetoric* he postulates that “emotions are those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgments” (in Eden 48). For Aristotle emotions are also integral to the lessons to be learned from encounters with art. Out of the different literary genres existent at his time, Aristotle selects tragedy as the highest form of art with regard to the desired strong emotional impact on its recipients. He argues that tragedy presents the events in greater unity and compression than other genres (e.g. the epic) and is therefore more intense. Because of drama’s representation of direct speech, it is, according to Aristotle, also more vivid (*enarges*) than other genres (*Poetics* 1461a-1462b).

Aristotle singles out the sensations of pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) as those affectionate states that are fitting to the genre and suited to offer insight to the essential nature of human existence. He suggests that the evocation of pity and fear through tragedy not only enhances intellectual understanding (*manathanein*, 1448b), but that these particular emotional states are furthermore capable of inducing a *katharsis*, a cleansing of these undesirable negative feelings from the recipients’ souls (cf.

1449b). What Aristotle seems to mean by *katharsis* in this context<sup>19</sup> is that an experience of pity and fear within the realm of the theatre can free audience members from being highly affected by these emotions when confronted with tragic events in real life. In a nutshell one could say that audiences become acquainted with unpleasant feelings like pity and fear and are thereby strengthened and equipped for future events where the same feeling could be evoked; or to put it in modern terms: recipients of tragic plays receive a simulated crisis-training, teaching them to control their emotions, while at the same time offering a safe space to 'let go' of negative feelings which they may be harbouring in their souls.

By introducing the term '*katharsis*' to the theoretical reflections on the dramatic genre, Aristotle in many ways manages to turn the tables in the discussion about the polluting nature of tragedy by suggesting that the activation of *katharsis* offers a direct cure for *miaros* infection (cf. Gould, "Oedipus" 66f.). The experience of *katharsis* through the evocation of pity and fear can be viewed as a remedy against the sensually oversaturating 'dangers' that Plato saw in the reception of the *mimetic* arts; a kind of 'vomitive' which alleviates audiences from the 'filling' and 'stuffing' effects of *miaros* aesthetic representations.

It is important to note that in his discussion of the potential of tragedy, Aristotle distinctly addresses the generic advantages of the dramatic text and not the theatrical performance or spectacle as responsible for inducing the desired emotional effect on its recipients. Aristotle markedly dismisses overtly spectacular stagings of dramatic plays, claiming that tragedy's emotional effectiveness lies primarily in the content and not in its staging. Thus he states that "it is possible for what is frightening and pitiable to arise out of the spectacle, but it is also possible for it to arise from the very organization of actions, and it is exactly that which takes precedence and is the mark of a better poet" (1453b). Aristotle sharply distinguishes between

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19 Penelope Murray points to the fact that Aristotle nowhere offers a detailed definition of *katharsis*. According to Murray, the closest to an explanation of the term can be found in *Politics*, where Aristotle discusses the use of music: "The emotions which violently affect some minds exist in all, but in different degrees, for example pity and fear, and 'enthusiasms' too, for some people are subject to this disturbance. We can see the effect of sacred music on such people when they make use of melodies that arouse the mind to frenzy, and are restored to health and attain, as it were, healing and catharsis. The same effect will necessarily be experienced in the case of those prone to pity or fear, or any other emotion, in the proportion appropriate to each individual; all experience a catharsis and pleasurable relief" (1342a4-15 in Murray xxxiii). Murray proposes that this means that *katharsis* is brought about by dint of being immersed in emotions, which are unpleasurable at first, in order to eventually feel pleasure from their relief: "Aristotle here observes that people who are morbidly prone to 'enthusiasm' (that is, ecstatic frenzy of the kind associated with the orgiastic religious cults like that of Dionysus), can be relieved from their symptoms by the same kind of music as that which induces their frenzy. In other words, catharsis is a kind of homeopathic therapy that can be used in the treatment of neurotics" (xxxiii).

shocking spectacular effects caused by performative means and the emotional impact that results from the plot structure. For him the “grotesque [*to teratodes*]”<sup>20</sup> or monstrous effects of the spectacle do in fact “present not something frightening [*to phoberon*]”, and thus have “nothing in common with tragedy” (1453b). And while he attests that the monstrous spectacle can indeed be a source of pleasure, he regards this kind of pleasure as unsuitable to the genre, arguing that it is not “the sort of pleasure appropriate to [tragedy]” (1453b).

It is difficult to decipher which pleasures and emotional effects would in fact be considered to be ‘appropriate’ by Aristotle. Whereas the above-cited passage from the *Poetics* seems to indicate that Aristotle condemns the utilisation of shocking effects as something too base for the noble genre of tragedy, his comparison of playwrights’ writing style is not so clearly dismissive of shock-enhancing tactics. Aristotle’s elaboration on the different versions of *Philoctetes* by Aeschylus and Euripides demonstrates a clear support of the latter’s more visceral and ‘shocking’ phrasing:

For example, the same iambic line was made by Aeschylus and Euripides with only one word replaced, a foreign one in place of the customary prevalent one, and while one appears beautiful, the other is of a dime-a-dozen sort. For Aeschylus in his *Philoctetes* made the line “The cancer that eats the flesh of my foot” but the other poet, in place of “eats” substituted “feasts on.” (1458b)

The content-wise already repulsive depiction of a crawling animal feeding on Philoctetes’ opened wound is further enhanced by Euripides’ substitution of the neutral term “eat[ing]” with “feast[ing] on” (*ibid.*). The nauseating combination of one creature feeding on the other’s decaying body parts, which already incorporates the disgust-evoking dichotomous pairing of life and death, is heightened by the rich associative potential of the word “feast on” in this context. The cancer “feasting on” the rotting wound implies not only the excessiveness of the action, but also links one creature’s suffering to the other’s festive joy, and what is more: all power relations and hierarchical structures seem to have been turned around in this description. Instead of man feeding on animals, the animal here feeds on the man, and whereas the cancer is attributed with typical human characteristics of feasting, Philoctetes has become reduced to a waste-product, a part of a parasite’s ‘dinner’.

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20 We can assume a relation between *teratodes* and disgust here, because not only does Aristotle associate the monstrous with some kind of pleasure, but also because, like *dyschéreia* and *miasma*, the term is related to forms of taboos, crossings of social and sacred norms and borders. It is variously described as: “religious shock”, “spectacular violence”, “sensation”, “strangeness”, etc. (cf. Gould’s *The Ancient Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy*; Bernd Seidensticker’s and Vöhler’s “Gewalt und Ästhetik”; Eric Caspo’s and William J. Slater’s *The Context of Ancient Drama*).

Aristotle's reasoning of why he prefers Euripides' style of writing over Aeschylus' not only demonstrates his acknowledgement of the affective power of poetic language, but also restates his contention that mastery in craftsmanship can turn the representation of something appalling into a product of beauty (thereby contributing to solving the paradox of aversion). Yet the emotions evoked by the image of a cancer feasting on Philoctetes' foot are not likely to be the sensations of pity and fear, but more probably feelings of horror and disgust. Paradoxically, this aesthetic effect seems to be out of line with the affective impact Aristotle esteems 'appropriate' for the tragic genre.

In his description of the different fates that can befall tragic heroes, Aristotle distinctly places the evocation of repulsion in opposition to pity and fear: "it is clear first that decent men ought not to be shown changing from good to bad fortune (since this is neither frightening nor pitiable but repellent [*miarōn*])" (1452b). Aristotle's differentiation of the aesthetic effects to be induced by 'proper' works of tragedy illustrates that despite his promotion of audiences' emotional involvement with tragic plays and his favouring of visceral stylistic devices (*poiesis*), from close up he seems to be just as dismissive of *miarōn*, illogical and thus disgust-eliciting dramatic effects (*aisthesis*) as Plato. This becomes evident in Aristotle's further line of argumentation, where he tries to rebut Plato's contention that Sophocles' Oedipus is a thoroughly *miarōn* character (cf. 1453a). His argument runs as follows: Had a character like Oedipus intentionally and in full knowledge performed incest and patricide, both intention and action would have "something repellent [*miarōn*] about it and [would not be] tragic, since there is no suffering" (1543b, *phatos tragikon*). But because the character acts in ignorance "and once having acted make[s] the discovery, [...] there is nothing repellent (*miarōn*) connected with it, and the discovery is awe-striking" (1454a; cf. also 1453b for a more detailed discussion of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*).<sup>21</sup> Aristotle thus posits the desirable "awe-striking" effect<sup>22</sup> in direct opposition to a *miarōn* effect. The latter is construed as an unambiguous reaction to witnessing evidently and intentionally 'bad' (i.e. illogical, unnatural) forms of behaviour. In order to account for a tragic (i.e. the hero needs to do something wrong, if he is to suffer) but logical and non-*miarōn* chain of events in plays such as *Oedipus the King*, Aristotle then introduces the notion of *hamartia* (imperfection; 1453a) in the character to justify his 'tragic' (but non-*miarōn*) deeds.

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21 What is interesting is that Aristotle here argues that the best tragic plot would be one where the protagonist has no 'bad' intention, and, after realisation (*anagnōrisis*), does not perform the deed (1454a). This scenario, however, is not reconcilable with Aristotle's previously mentioned preference for an unhappy ending. Gould regards this contradiction as yet another indication that Aristotle's ultimate aim was to keep tragedy as "free of *miaria* as a story of such violation could be" ("Oedipus" 62; my emphasis).

22 This effect is conceptualised as the so-called '*sublime*' in later theoretical approaches, which will be discussed in the ensuing chapter (cf. II; cf. also IV and V).

According to this approach, the fault (*hamartia*) thus lies in Oedipus not knowing whom he was sleeping with and who he was killing and not in his actions, which are tragic but nevertheless logical consequences of his former ignorance.

The problem that arises from this 'solution' is not only that if Oedipus were to remain a decent man, his downfall would not induce the desired emotions of pity and fear, but would need to be considered as *miarón* instead (according to Aristotle's own argument; cf. 1543b), but also that this scenario would make the whole *manoeuvre* of introducing *katharsis* as *miasma's* counterpart and remedy somehow obsolete since there would be nothing left to the tragic plot that would be in any need of cleansing.

### I.iii Summary

The preceding overview on the genesis of the dramatic genre from the cult of the Greek god Dionysus, its close link to the two disgust-related notions of *dyschéreia* and *miasma*, their presence in Attic drama, and Plato's and Aristotle's reflections on the topic show that the sensation of disgust already played an eminent role in artistic and theoretical approaches of the Greek *polis*. The ancient Greek concepts of *dyschéreia* and *miasma* cover a broad range of what we would today refer to as disgust or disgusting. Both are related to bad smells, categories of food and improper ways of eating; diseases and wounds linked to impurity and lack of hygiene, animalistic behaviour and features, and disregard or transgression of social and especially sacred rules. Their abstract manifestations furthermore both denote instances of, or reactions to, situations of logical paradoxes that cannot be solved by means of rational reasoning. In terms of family resemblance *dyschéreia* and *miasma* thus share a large amount of defining features; but the concept of *dyschéreia* seems to be slightly broader than the physio-moral dimensions of *miasma*, in that it does not necessarily contain the idea of pollution, filth, or dirt.<sup>23</sup> *Dyschéreia* can theoretically be caused by any kind of contradiction to what is logical.

However, despite similar domains of application for *miasma* and *dyschéreia*, there is one crucial difference (at least in Plato's theory): Whereas *miasma* is construed exclusively in negative terms as something utterly base, low, and part of humans' instinct-driven appetitive part of the soul, *dyschéreia* is conceptualised as a sensation that can also take on an important protective and thus positive role in society. According to Plato, the feeling of *dyschéreia* can work as a kind of embodied

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23 Even though this seems to be *dyschéreia's* main domain of application (cf. Theophrastus). Also, the linguistic root of the word (*dys*=not, *chér*=hand/touch) points to a close relation to the notion of *miasma*, since the washing of hands played an important role in ancient Greek rituals of cleansing (cf. Parker 289ff.).

moral compass. Plato comes to this conclusion through his important observation that things which cause repulsion can also have an alluring or attracting effect. Since, in his view, these two simultaneous yet contradictory affective impulses can be neither regarded as products of *logos*, nor both be expressions of the appetitive part of the soul (law of non-contradiction), he establishes a tripartite structure of the soul and places the feeling of repulsion (*dyschéreia*) in the space in-between humans' natural drives (appetitive part of the soul) and their rational faculties (*logos*). This theoretical construction in many ways anticipates the Freudian understanding of disgust as a cultural emotion that keeps animalistic drives at bay (cf. III), as well as contemporary scientific research into the field of disgust, which finds that disgust developed "biologically *and* culturally" (Rozin and Haidt, "Domains of Disgust" 1; my emphasis; cf. IV.i).

Because of the emotion's protective properties, Plato advocated a sensitisation of *dyschéreia* as part of his educational programme to reinforce students' ability to distinguish between items that are "good" and "beautiful" and those that are disagreeable, "ugly", and "other" (401d-e). Theoretically, Plato could have transferred his insights regarding the educational merits of a disgust-training to the *mimetic* arts and argued that representations of appalling actions and persons could be used as a basis for teaching students to internalise the ability to discriminate between 'good' and 'bad' actions in characters. But Plato discusses the *mimetic* arts exclusively negatively in terms of *miasma*. He draws on the semantic field of excessive consumption to describe tragedy as "filling" and "stuffing" the lowest part of the psyche (606a). Plato's observation that tragedies commonly depict *miarón* characters and actions seems accurate. This becomes evident in the discussion of some exemplary ancient tragedies, where many of the examples Plato lists as cases of *miasma* feature prominently (e.g. incest, animalistic behaviour, excess). Since Plato believed the depiction of *miarón* persons and actions to be highly contagious and able to render infected recipients *miarón* themselves even into afterlife (cf. 621c), his banning of the tragic poets from an ideal state follows only naturally.

Plato's student Aristotle goes a long way to defend the emotional impact of tragic plays against Plato's accusation of their *logos*-polluting nature by introducing *miasma*'s linguistic opposite *katharsis* into the debate. He welcomes recipients' emotional 'infection', because in his understanding of the *mimetic* arts, tragedy basically functions as a medium for universal crisis-simulation which not only provides recipients with the material for training their emotional responses, but also with a safe space to 'let go' of negative feelings in a *cathartic* process. As useful as Aristotle's move of turning the tables in the debate about the ratio-affective effects of tragedy on recipients appears at first sight, at second sight, his theoretical approach turns out to be just as *logos*-based as his teacher Plato's and therefore incapable of incorporating anything that relates to *miasma* or *dyschéreia*, since these concepts essentially denote ambiguous states. Jonathan Lear argues that Aristotle's

distinction between what is pitiable and frightening, and what is repellent (*miarón*), does in fact help us to understand what we today generally refer to as disgust or disgusting. He claims: "Disgust is something we feel in response to what we take to be a total absence of rationality" (329).

In summary, both Plato and Aristotle agree that *miarón* contents and effects need to be excluded from the dramatic genre, because they conceive of these as unexplainable by means of rational reasoning. But whereas Plato, who fears recipients' contagion with *mimetic miasma*, at least acknowledges *miarón* contents to be part of the psyche as well as of artistic practices, Aristotle tries to eliminate the irrationality that *miasma* encapsulates from existence within 'good people' and the 'noble' genre of tragedy altogether. Aristotle's 'defence of tragedy' against Plato's views of the *mimetic arts'* *miarón* nature here thus comes to bite its own tail, since once tragedy has been purged from anything *miarón*, the whole manoeuvre of introducing *katharsis* as *miasma's* counterpart and remedy becomes obsolete; there would be simply nothing left in need of any such cleansing.

A *miasma*-free version of tragedy is also very far from reflecting the reality in fifth-century BC Greece, where *miarón* elements and ideas are employed ubiquitously by dramatists at the time (cf. Parker 13). As the brief discussions of *miasma* and *dyschéreia* in Euripides' *Bacchae* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* demonstrated, even the slightest glance at ancient drama shows that the kind of "rationalizing filters" (Sourvinou-Inwood 18) that Plato and Aristotle would like to see applied to the *mimetic arts* are ill-suited to do justice to the tragic genre. This is not surprising, since tragedy in fifth-century BC Greece was still deeply indebted to the god of illogical mess, Dionysus. In this way, Dionysus seems to serve as a much better patron to the dramatic genre than its 'theoretical' father Aristotle. If we were for instance to imagine the actions of the stock character of a classical tragedy, King Oedipus, how he learns that it was his father he killed and his mother he had sexual intercourse with: how likely would it be that our emotional response would be dominated by feelings of pity and fear? Would we not much more likely feel strongly disgusted?