

‘Logos’ and ‘episodion’ in Aristotle’s *Poetics*

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‘Logos’ and ‘episodion’ are central terms in the *Poetics* but their interpretation is highly controversial, although Aristotle offers a definition by contrast in chapter 17 (1455a34–b23).¹ Two recent translations of this chapter, which have strikingly little in common given that they are supposed to reproduce the same Greek text, may serve to illustrate the point:

(1) Stephen Halliwell²

... the poet should lay out the general structure of his story, and then proceed to work out episodes and enlarge it. What I mean by contemplating the general structure can be illustrated from *Iphigeneia*. A girl was sacrificed and mysteriously vanished from her sacrificers; she was planted in another land ... Subsequently, it happened that the priestess’s brother [i.e. the brother of the girl who had become priestess] came to the place (the fact that a god’s oracle sent him, and the reason for this are outside the plot).³ Captured on his arrival, he was on the point of being sacrificed when he caused his own recognition ... The upshot was his rescue. [Thus far the outline of the *Iphigeneia*]. The next stage is to supply names and work out the episodes. But care must be taken to make the episodes integral – as with the fit of madness which occasions Orestes’ capture ... Now, in drama the episodes are concise, while epic gains extra length from them. For the main story of the *Odyssey* is short: a man is abroad for many years ... [he] launches an attack, his own safety is restored, and he destroys his enemies. This much is essential; the rest consists of episodes.

(2) Arbogast Schmitt⁴

Die Geschichten (logoi) ... soll man in einer Grundskizze entwickeln, dann erst soll man sie so <wie eben beschrieben> in Szenen einteilen und <bis ins Detail> ausführen. Wie man sich die Anlage einer Grundskizze vorzustellen hat, kann man am Beispiel der Iphigenie-Handlung klarmachen: Ein Mädchen wird geopfert und, ohne dass den Opfernden klar ist, was geschieht, entrückt. Es wird in ein anderes Land versetzt ... Einige Zeit später geschieht es, dass der Bruder der Priesterin [i.e. des Mädchens] kommt. Dass er dies auf Weisung eines Gottes tut – der Grund für diese Weisung liegt außerhalb des Handlungsrahmens – und mit welcher Aufgabe, gehört nicht zum darzustellenden Handlungsverlauf.⁵ Er kommt

1 See Köhnken 1990, 129–49.

2 Halliwell 1987, 50–1.

3 Apparently Halliwell accepts, like Rudolf Kassel (1965), the variant ἐξω τοῦ μύθου as against the alternative ἐξω τοῦ καθόλου: however, the context demands ἐξω τοῦ καθόλου, which is the topic discussed in chapter 17 (see 1455b1–2 ἐκτίθεσθαι καθόλου and θεωρεῖσθαι τὸ καθόλου); see also Neschke-Hentschke 1975, 292 and Köhnken 1990, 138 n. 48, cp. 136 n. 40. Elizabeth Belfiore’s attempt (Belfiore 1992, 360 with n. 10) to keep both versions is not convincing. λόγος in 1455b17 is not to be identified with μῦθος (although Kassel maintains this in his index).

4 See Schmitt 2008, 24–5. See also Köhnken 2009 and Heath 2013.

5 The transmitted Greek text is disputed, see Kassel’s edition (1965) ad loc. It is not clear which version is presupposed by Schmitt (cf. above n. 3).

also, er wird gefangengenommen, und in dem Augenblick, in dem er geopfert werden soll, kommt es zur Wiedererkennung ... Das ist dann der Anfang der Rettung [thus far the ‘Grundskizze’]. ‘Der nächste Schritt ist bereits, den Figuren Namen zu geben und die einzelnen Szenen auszuarbeiten. Dabei muss man darauf achten, dass auch diese kleineren Handlungseinheiten charakteristisch sind, wie z.B. im Orest der Wahnsinnsanfall, der zu seiner Festnahme führt. Im Drama sind die Einzelszenen kurz, die epische Dichtung erreicht durch sie ihren großen Umfang. Die Odyssee-Geschichte ist ja nicht lang: Jemand ist viele Jahre von zu Hause weg ...’ [‘Grundskizze’ of the Odyssey, ending with] ‘er geht zum Angriff über, bleibt selbst unversehrt und vernichtet die Feinde.’ Das ist das, was zur Geschichte gehört, das andere gehört zur Ausgestaltung der einzelnen Szenen.

Is Aristotle talking here about the essential ‘general structure’ of a story as against (inessential) ‘episodes’ (Halliwell) or about the ‘Grundskizze’ von ‘Geschichten’ and their ‘Ausgestaltung’ (‘distribution’) into ‘einzelne Szenen’ (Schmitt)?

The meaning given to λόγος (λόγοι) and ἐπεισόδιον (ἐπεισόδια) in the two translations quoted is evidently different. Is the wording of the original τοὺς τε λόγους ... δεῖ ... ἐκτίθεσθαι καθόλου, to be understood as ‘lay out the general structure of a (specific) story’ (Halliwell) or as ‘(gegebene) Geschichten in einer Grundskizze entwickeln’ (Schmitt)? Does εἶθ’ οὕτως ἐπεισοδιοῦν καὶ παρατείνειν suggest ‘then proceed to work out episodes and enlarge’, sc. the story (Halliwell) or rather ‘dann erst sie’, sc. die Geschichten, ‘so wie eben beschrieben, in Szenen einteilen und bis ins Detail ausführen’ (Schmitt)?⁶ Does Aristotle say ‘The next stage is to supply names and work out the episodes’ (Halliwell) or rather ‘Der nächste Schritt ist bereits, den Figuren Namen zu geben und die einzelnen Szenen auszuarbeiten’ (Schmitt). Does he call for ‘care ... to make the episodes integral’ (Halliwell) or ‘darauf (zu) achten, dass auch diese kleineren Handlungseinheiten charakteristisch sind’ (Schmitt)?

Schmitt rightly accepts Klaus Nickau’s demonstration⁷ that the term ‘episodion’ means ‘Szene’ (‘Einzelszene mit Handlungsfunktion’). To translate it by ‘episodes’, as Halliwell consistently does, is certainly misleading because it suggests ‘mere (i.e. inessential) episodes’, which is hardly what is meant by Aristotle, as the context shows. Halliwell himself makes this clear

6 I chose the two translations quoted because they show the main problems more clearly than others; but see also Manfred Fuhrmann’s translation of chapter 17 (Fuhrmann 1994, 54–7): ‘Die Stoffe ... soll man ... zunächst im allgemeinen skizzieren und dann erst szenisch ausarbeiten und zur vollen Länge entwickeln ...’ (where e.g. ‘Stoffe’ for λόγοι is strikingly against Aristotelian usage) or Malcolm Heath’s paraphrase (Heath 1991, 390–1 on ch. 17): ‘... in approaching a story one should set it out in universal terms ... It is important to realise that ... [Aristotle] is not talking ... about the plot of Euripides’ play ... he is talking about a preliminary outline ... it is only when Aristotle sketches the way in which this outline has been “episodised” in Euripides’ play that causal connections are indicated’ – a strange claim that is incompatible with the text and also ignores essential scholarship on ‘episodion’ (see next note).

7 Nickau 1966. See also Fuhrmann 1994, 54–7 ‘Szenisch ausarbeiten’, ‘Szenen’ and Köhnken 1990, 136ff.

by his understanding of ὅπως δὲ ἔσται οἰκειὰ τὰ ἐπεισόδια. Here, his 'integral' for οἰκειὰ is much more to the point than Schmitt's strange 'charakteristisch'. The latter's translation of this phrase, by 'man muß darauf achten, daß diese kleineren Handlungseinheiten charakteristisch sind' is hardly correct (nor is Fuhrmann's 'die Szenen müssen auf die Personen zugeschnitten sein'); οἰκειός cannot have this meaning.⁸ Thus, these translations fall short of doing justice to the meaning of the components of chapter 17 within their immediate context and also in terms of their relationship to other parts of the *Poetics*.

In the context of chapter 17 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses how a poet should proceed when composing his poem, and he takes as his examples the *Iphigeneia* and the *Odyssey*. In both cases he distinguishes between the 'logos' and the 'episodia' of the dramatic and epic poems respectively. In both cases the meaning of 'logos' is defined by a quotation of the basic facts of the stories of the *Iphigeneia* and *Odyssey* in anonymous form (first stage: consider τὸ καθόλου) and contrasted with the detailed plots of the *Iphigeneia* and the *Odyssey* as we have them (second stage: adding the names and developing the ἐπεισόδια). To develop the basic constituent facts of a story (τὸ καθόλου) into a specific tragedy or epic is called ἐπεισοδιοῦν καὶ παρατείνειν in Aristotle's terminology. Consequently, the scenes or parts of a developed drama or epic poem are called 'episodia' (see 1455b13, for the *Iphigeneia* plays; 1455b16 and 23 for epic poetry/the *Odyssey*). What Aristotle calls 'logos' in 1455b17 is replaced by 'idion' in 1455b23, the characteristic outline (τὸ μὲν οὖν ἴδιον τοῦτο) as against the actual developed scenes (τὰ δ' ἄλλα ἐπεισόδια). Aristotle's two examples (the 'logos' of the *Iphigeneia* and the 'logos' of the *Odyssey*) are framed by corresponding sentences. On the one hand, 'the "logoi" should be set out in general form and subsequently be developed into episodion ...' (preceding the '*Iphigeneia*-logos'),⁹ and 'after that specific names should be added and the episodion be composed, while, most importantly, care should be taken that the episodion are integral parts' (closing the '*Iphigeneia*-logos').¹⁰ On the other hand, 'in dramatic poetry the episodion are short, while the epic poetry finds its length by them' (preceding the '*Odyssey*-logos'),¹¹ and 'this is the essential outline, everything else is scenic elaboration (episodia)', (the closing sentence of the '*Odyssey*-logos').¹²

The sense and implications of λόγος and ἐπεισόδια become even clearer when these terms are compared to the terminology in other passages of the

8 See Bonitz 1870 s.v. and *LSJ*⁹1940, 1202 s.v.

9 1455a34-b2 τούς τε λόγους ... δεῖ ... ἐκτίθεσθαι καθόλου, εἴθ' οὕτως ἐπεισοδιοῦν καὶ παρατείνειν.

10 1455b12-13 μετὰ ταῦτα δὲ ἤδη ὑποθέντα τὰ ὀνόματα ἐπεισοδιοῦν ὅπως δὲ ἔσται οἰκειὰ τὰ ἐπεισόδια.

11 1455b15-16 ἐν μὲν οὖν τοῖς δράμασιν τὰ ἐπεισόδια σύντομα, ἢ δ' ἐποποιία τούτοις μηκύνεται.

12 1455b23 τὸ μὲν οὖν ἴδιον τοῦτο, τὰ δ' ἄλλα ἐπεισόδια.

Poetics. In chapter 9 when comparing ‘poiesis’ (its subject is τὰ καθόλου, ‘the universals’) and ‘history’ (its subject is τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστον, ‘the particulars’) Aristotle gives a definition of καθόλου which adds to our understanding of chapter 17: ‘universal is what a certain type of character will probably or necessarily say or do which is what poetry aims at by adding names only afterwards;¹³ the particular, on the other hand, is what Alcibiades did or experienced’ (i.e. the name has priority; primary is a particular person). Likewise, in chapter 17, there are no names in the general outline of the *Iphigeneia* and the *Odyssey* (their ‘logos’ is equivalent with τὸ καθόλου and τὸ ἴδιον), the names only come in with the scenic elaboration (ἐπεισοδιοῦν) of a specific play or epic (Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Tauris* or the *Odyssey*). Thus, the position of ‘history’ in chapter 9 is, in chapter 17, taken by the established plots (μῦθοι) of Euripides’ *Iphigeneia* and Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Of the terms used by Aristotle in chapter 17 (‘mythoi’, ‘logoi’/‘logos’, τὸ καθόλου, ἐπεισόδιον/-α, τὸ ἴδιον) ‘mythos’ is applied to a developed and finalized plot. ‘Logos’ is applied to the starting outline of such a plot (one which is set out in general form: specific names are avoided). It is equivalent to τὸ καθόλου and τὸ ἴδιον (the essential characteristic subject-matter) and contrasted with τὰ ἐπεισόδια, the specific scenes of the completed work.

¹³ This is sometimes misunderstood, see e.g. Halliwell 1987, 41: ‘... which poetry aims at despite its addition of particular names’.

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