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**Citation for published version:**

Savettieri, C 2018, The agency of errors: Hamartia and its (mis)interpretations in the Italian Cinquecento. in S Kilian, J Küpper, T Bernhart, J Mosch & J Drnovšek (eds), *Poetics and Politics: Net Structures and Agencies in Early Modern Drama*. de Gruyter, pp. 149-168, Poetics and Politics. Net Structures and Agencies in Early Modern Drama, Berlin, Germany, 29/04/15. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110536690-008>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1515/9783110536690-008](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110536690-008)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Poetics and Politics

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Cristina Savettieri

# The Agency of Errors: *Hamartia* and its (Mis)interpretations in the Italian Cinquecento

In this article, I would like to address the concept of error and its relationship with agency in a twofold way: first, I shall explore some interpretations of Aristotle's concept of *hamartia*<sup>1</sup> as reworked by the first scholars and intellectuals to deal with the *Poetics* as translators, commentators, theoreticians, and playwrights in the context of sixteenth-century Italy.<sup>2</sup> On a second level, a theo-

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1 Aristotle refers to *hamartia* in Chapter 13 of the *Poetics* (1453a 7–10), which is devoted to plot-construction, as follows: “Since, then, the structure of the finest tragedy should be complex, not simple, and, moreover, should portray fearful and pitiful events (for this is the distinctive feature of this type of mimesis), it is to begin with clear that: (a) good men should not be shown passing from prosperity to affliction, for this is neither fearful nor pitiful but repulsive; (b) wicked men should not be shown passing from affliction to prosperity, for this is the most untragic of all possible cases and is entirely defective (it is neither moving nor pitiful nor fearful); (c) the extremely evil man should not fall from prosperity to affliction, for such a plot-structure might move us, but would not arouse pity or fear, since pity is felt towards one whose affliction is undeserved, fear towards one who is like ourselves (so what happens in such a case will be neither pitiful nor fearful). We are left, then, with the figure who falls between these types. Such a man is one who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility (*hamartia*). He will belong to the class of those who enjoy great esteem and prosperity, such as Oedipus, Thyestes, and outstanding men from such families.” I am quoting from the translation by Stephen Halliwell. *The Poetics of Aristotle. Translation and Commentary*. London: Duckworth, 1987, p. 44.

2 My article will not tackle Aristotelianism as a general cultural phenomenon of the Italian literary and philosophical culture of the Renaissance, since I am mainly interested in the seminal shaping of the theoretical discourse on tragedy, which does not coincide exclusively with re-elaborations of the *Poetics*, while certainly overlapping with an Aristotelian core. Bibliography on the circulation and reception of the *Poetics* includes: Bernard Weinberg. *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961, vol. 1, pp. 349–423; Martin Lowry. “Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the Rise of Vernacular Literary Theory.” *Viator*, no. 25, 1994, pp. 411–425; Daniel Javitch. “The assimilation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in Sixteenth Century Italy.” *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, edited by Glyn Norton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, vol. 3, pp. 53–65; Brigitte Kappl. *Die Poetik des Aristoteles in der Dichtungstheorie des Cinquecento*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2006; Enrica Zanin. “Les commentaires modernes de la *Poétique* d’Aristote.” *Études littéraires*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2012, pp. 55–83. The impact of the *Poetics* on early modern genre theory has been analyzed by, among others, Daniel Javitch. “The Emergence of Poetic Genre Theory in the Sixteenth Century.” *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1998, 139–169. The relationship between

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110536690-008>

retical one – perhaps a meta-theoretical one – I shall try to tackle “error” as a fundamental occurrence within processes of cultural circulation, one that can engender momentous movements and displacements and, thus, define long-term arrangements within a specific discursive field. By analyzing some of the unstable answers Renaissance scholars provided to the questions “What is an error? When and how does it engender catastrophic consequences? Who is the person who errs? To what extent do errors result from agency?”, I would like to claim that this intense scholarly debate revolving around the notion of “error” still resonates in some features of the modern discussion on tragedy and the tragic.<sup>3</sup> Despite being grounded upon interpretative mistakes, cultural syncretism, and hybridizations, and even intellectual rivalry and agonism, and thus apparently being incomprehensible outside the historical context in which it took place, this body of theory and criticism established the discussion on tragedy as a plural and unstable form of thinking. I would like to argue that the structural instability of this discursive field, made up of theoretical views inconsistent with each other and, in some cases, inconsistent *per se*, is the condition of possibility of the polymorphic modern debate on tragedy, which interestingly, despite being highly fragmented if not pulverized, is one of the very few areas of literary theory and criticism still haunted by normative impetuses:<sup>4</sup> a field of extensive relativism and legislative fantasies at once, in which the “anything goes” of postmodern approaches to tragedy coexists with a fierce tendency to reassess definitions, to enforce categories and boundaries, and ultimately to seek the ungraspable Grail of the essence of the tragic.

The concept of error is, among the many whose circulation was promoted by the refashioning of the *Poetics*,<sup>5</sup> one of the most prolific in terms of the

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the circulation of the *Poetics* and early modern theories of tragedy has been reassessed by, among others, Paola Mastrocola. *L'idea del tragico. Teorie della tragedia nel Cinquecento*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1998; Timothy Reiss. “Renaissance Theatre and the Theory of Tragedy”. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3, pp. 231–247.

3 Similarly, Michael Lurie, one of the few scholars who has been committed to bridging the gap between the early modern and the modern reception of tragedy, claims that the early modern discussions on tragedy “not only have shaped both the entire reception history of ancient drama and the history of dramatic theory in Europe, but have also deeply influenced all subsequent critical approaches and responses to Greek tragedy.” See Lurie. “Facing up to Tragedy. Toward an Intellectual History of Sophocles in Europe from Camerarius to Nietzsche.” *A Companion to Sophocles*, edited by Kirk Ormand. Oxford: Blackwell, 2012, p. 440–60, at p. 441.

4 See Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, p. 123: “the theory and criticism of tragedy is one area where vestiges of an older didacticism can still be traced, usually taking the form of a quest for the ‘essence’ of tragedy and a resolve narrowly to delimit its sphere.”

5 Renaissance interpretations of *hamartia* have been analyzed deeply in Michael Lurie. *Die Suche nach der Schuld. Sophokles’ Oedipus Rex, Aristoteles’ Poetik und das Tragödienverständnis*.

diverse interpretations it still produces. Scholarship on *hamartia* has developed massively in the last forty years,<sup>6</sup> and even outside the field of Aristotelian studies issues relating to the responsibility of the tragic hero have always been highly divisive. Disputes on the tragic quality of given literary works have often revolved around the extent to which an agent can be considered responsible for the misfortunes he undergoes. It is a gray zone, in which the limits of human agency and of its unmasterable outcomes are at stake, and as such it engenders clashing responses.

In analyzing some specific interpretations of *hamartia*, I do not aim to measure the distance between the Renaissance refashioning of the concept and its original meaning. That is a critical exercise that has already been accomplished, as in Brigitte Kappl's in-depth inquiry on the early modern Italian reception of the *Poetics*, which gives me the chance to point out what I do *not* aim to do. Kappl claims that relevant modern scholarship has failed to understand the critical work of Renaissance theoreticians and commentators outside the paradigm based on some keywords: *Moralisierung*, *Rhetorisierung*, *Systematisierung*, and *Rationalisierung*.<sup>7</sup> The aim of her study, in fact, is to acknowledge the extent to which this body of theory and criticism laid the foundation of modern literary theory beyond the threshold of the nineteenth century, supposedly marked, as Peter Szondi famously claimed, by a shift from normative to speculative poetics.<sup>8</sup> While fully agreeing on the need to overcome the narrative based on the opposition between heteronomous pre-modern norms and aesthetically autonomous modern concepts, I believe that the distance separating the *Poetics* from its first early modern readers should not be overshadowed: they indeed departed from Aristotle, not just because of moral concerns, but above all because they were committed to a massive process of cultural *translatio* and reinvention, in which the foundation of a modern theatrical practice

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*nis der Neuzeit*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004; Kappl, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles*, pp. 226–266; Rolf Lohse. *Renaissancedrama und humanistische Poetik in Italien*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2015, pp. 183–87.

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, Thomas C. W. Stinton. "Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy." *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 25, 1975, pp. 221–54; Martha C. Nussbaum. "Tragedy and Self-sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity." *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, edited by Amélie O. Rorty. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 261–290; Nancy Sherman. "Hamartia and Virtue." *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 177–196. A history of the interpretation of *hamartia* can be found in Lurie, *Die Suche nach der Schuld*, pp. 79–91 and 278–386.

<sup>7</sup> See Kappl, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Szondi. *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie II: Von der normativen zur spekulativen Gattungspoetik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974.

and ultimately of a modern critical discourse on poetic genres was at stake.<sup>9</sup> The approach to this fascinating and unprecedented process should, then, go beyond either appreciation or belittlement of how close it came to Aristotle.<sup>10</sup> In a sense, I take it for granted that these re-readings *are* misinterpretations of the Aristotelian concept: even when they are not thorough misinterpretations, they do diverge from their major *Auctor* as much because of their zealous orthodoxy as due to their bold independence. In other words, I am not specifically interested in singling out the interpreters who best grasped Aristotle's intentions between the lines; rather, I am interested in the conceptual instabilities that such readings embody and in the fluid theoretical space they open up.

My first example includes the writings – an apology and three lectures – that the playwright Sperone Speroni wrote in defense of his tragedy *Canace*, published in 1546, yet already read and known in 1542 in Padua within the Accademia degli Infiammati. The tragedy was harshly criticized in an anonymous *Giuditio* circulated right after the composition of the work and later published in 1550, the author of which has been identified as Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio, the first playwright to restore tragedy to the stage.<sup>11</sup> *Canace* is

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**9** See, for instance, the case of Giraldi Cinzio, a theoretician and playwright himself who, in his *Discorso intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie*, distorts Aristotelian concepts not only because of his didactic aims and Christian background, but also due to his need to justify his own dramatic practice. See Daniel Javitch. "Introduction to Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinthio's *Discourse or Letter on the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies*." *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 39, 2011, 197–206. In general, Javitch stresses how it was the production of modern tragedies that stirred theoreticians to discuss the genre, and not the other way around. See Javitch. "On the Rise of Genre-Specific Poetics in the Sixteenth Century." *Making Sense of Aristotle. Essays in Poetics*, edited by Øivind Andersen and John Haarberg. London: Duckworth, 2001, pp. 127–44 (p. 133). See also Salvatore Di Maria. *The Italian Tragedy in the Renaissance. Cultural Realities and Theatrical Innovations*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002.

**10** See Terence Cave. "The Afterlife of the Poetics." *Making Sense of Aristotle*, p. 200: "In practical terms, we can certainly say that some readings of the Poetics – for example, certain of the interpretations advanced by neo-Aristotelian theorists of the early modern period – are 'wrong', in the sense that they are incompatible with the linguistic, cultural and intellectual world which Aristotle and his treatise belonged. [...] Yet a certain unease begins to creep in at the point where we find earlier interpretations being dismissed on the assumption that scholarship, like technology, gets better and better all the time. [...] It follows that one should at least let the reception history of the *Poetics* have its full and independent value, rather than congratulating its approximations to what current scholarship regards as correct while deploring or mocking its aberrations and deformations."

**11** It was Christina Roaf who attributed the *Giuditio* to Giovan Battista Giraldi Cinzio in the article "A sixteenth-century 'Anonimo': the author of the *Giuditio sopra la tragedia di Canace et Macareo*." *Italian Studies*, vol. 14, 1959, 49–74. She then edited a book collecting the tragedy, the *Giuditio*, and the apology and three lectures that Speroni gave in Padua to respond to the harsh criticism of the anonymous writer: Sperone Speroni and Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio.

based on an epistle in Ovid's *Heroides* (XI), and represents the disastrous outcomes of the incestuous love between Canace and her brother Macareo (Macareus in Ovid), Aeolus' children, who fell in love with each other, compelled by Venus. The goddess was seeking revenge on Aeolus himself for the tempest he provoked against her son Aeneas leaving Troy after the sack of the city. When their father finds out about the incest, Canace is forced to kill herself; Macareo in turn commits suicide and their newborn child is left to die.<sup>12</sup>

The *Giuditio*, written in the form of a dialogue, tackles, among others, the issue of the moral quality of *Canace's* protagonists and, hence, of their atrocious moral error, with a clear reference to Chapter 13 of the *Poetics*. As Daniel Javitch points out, it is in the *Giuditio* that we find for the first time *persone mezzane*, that is middling characters, as a necessary requirement for tragic plots to arouse pity and fear.<sup>13</sup> While, on the one hand, this sounds like a precise retrieval of one of the *Poetics'* non-negotiable tenets, on the other, through the example of Orestes discussed by the anonymous critic, this quite soon proves to be a "creative" recovery: Orestes is middling to the extent that he is, at the same time, evil for having killed his wicked mother Clytemnestra, and virtuous for avenging his father Agamemnon. In other words, his being average results from both the extremes – virtue and wickedness – he covers.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Speroni's incestuous siblings are here considered definitely wicked and hence inappropriate tragic agents unable to arouse pity and fear, in that their deeds are classified as a voluntary crime and not as an error originating from ignorance. Complying with the didactic interpretation of catharsis

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*Canace e scritti in sua difesa – Scritti contro la Canace*, edited by Christina Roaf. Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1982. Javitch disputes this attribution in "On the Rise of Genre-Specific Poetics," p. 136 f.

**12** On Speroni's *Canace* see Christina Roaf. "Retorica e poetica nella *Canace*." *Sperone Speroni*. Padua: Editoriale Programma, 1989, pp. 169–191; Richard A. McCabe. *Incest, Drama and Nature's Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 101–106; Maria Maslanka Soro. "Il mito di Eolo e il problema del tragico nella tragedia *Canace* di Sperone Speroni." *Rivista di letteratura italiana*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2010, pp. 35–44; Lohse, *Renaissancedrama und humanistische Poetik*, pp. 329–36. The play has been translated into English by Elio Brancaforte, Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2013.

**13** See Javitch, "On the Rise of Genre-Specific Poetics," p. 138.

**14** See Speroni/Cinzio. *Canace*, p. 101: "Né sono scelerati Oreste e Elettra, ma persone mezzane, cioè che sono tra il buono e il reo, e perciò (come dice Aristotile) atte alla compassione. Paiono bene scelerati per la morte della madre, ma sono buoni in far vendetta del padre." ("Nor are Orestes and Electra wicked, rather they are middling characters, who dwell between the good and the evil, and therefore, as Aristotle claims, they are suited to fostering compassion. They look wicked with regard to the death of their mother, but they are good in that they avenge their father." My translation).

that Cinzio elaborates in his *Discorso intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie* (published in 1554, but written in 1543),<sup>15</sup> such a plot cannot supply viewers with a palatable moral truth, since an evil action perpetrated willingly does not translate into any virtuous instruction.

Perché simili favole, quanto a' costumi, i quali sono di grandissima considerazione nelle Tragedie, sono pessime, e perciò da non essere ammesse nel cospetto de' popoli, ad esempio della vita de' quali si ritrovano le Tragedie da' più saggi poeti, come avete da Platone e da Aristotile e dalle stesse Tragedie che tuttavia si leggono.<sup>16</sup>

Moralism and didacticism prevail over moral reasoning: the circumstances under which the agency of the characters occurs are disregarded, and no case is made for the external compulsion they undergo, which could make such severe blame at least disputable. However, the starkness of the censure signals a sense of critical uneasiness in dealing with a case of reversal in which, in fact, no recognizable error occurs, except the failure to oppose dooming, insurmountable forces.

The apology in defense of *Canace* and the relevant lectures Speroni delivered in Padua follow, as Christina Roaf has stressed, a convoluted line of reasoning.<sup>17</sup> First, the argument relating to the wickedness of the characters is simply reversed: not only are Canace and Macareo considered the best middling characters to be found in a tragedy, but they are also justified by their age and their kind of error, which is a pitiful one in that it results from love:

Ma quai persone potea trovare il mio amico, la cui fortuna di felice in infelice tornata, tanto in sé ritenesse di quel terrifico e miserando che alla tragedia è richiesta, quanto già n'ebbero gli infortuni di Canace e di Macareo? E ecco che, perché meglio due tali affetti si commovessero, non contento il poeta che i due fratelli fosser mezzo tra buoni e rei [...] volle imitarli il poeta nella età lor giovenile, nella quale è men vergogna il fallire, e la compassione è maggiore. E volle insieme che quello errore che fu cagion della lor miseria, fosse errore amoroso, con esso il quale [...] rade volte adiviene che da pietade si discompagni.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See G. B. Giralaldi Cinzio. *Discorsi intorno al comporre*, edited by Susanna Villari. Messina: Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Umanistici, 2002. An English translation of the *Discorso* by Daniel Javitch has appeared in *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 39, 2011, pp. 207–255.

<sup>16</sup> Speroni/Cinzio, *Canace*, p. 111. (“Plots like this, with respect to their mores – which are of very great importance in tragedies – are the worst and therefore are not to be admitted to the view of the people; tragedies were invented by the wisest poets to instruct their lives by examples, as you learn from Plato and from Aristotle and from those same tragedies which are still read.” My translation).

<sup>17</sup> See her “Introduction” to the edition mentioned above.

<sup>18</sup> Speroni/Cinzio, *Canace*, p. 191. (“But what persons could my fellow find, whose reversed fortune held as much of that terror and pity tragedy requires as the misfortunes of Canace and Macareo had? Hence, in order to arouse those two emotions, the poet not only made them

This tautological statement, which restores the term “error” instead of “crime,” moves toward the apology of immoral love, a legitimate theme for literary works such as the Fourth Giornata of Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*, which tackles tragic stories of transgression.<sup>19</sup> A significant inconsistency arises here: Canace and Macareo are claimed to be middling and as such as complying with Aristotle’s criteria, but at the same time their error is considered immoral, the only reason to admit it in a tragedy being the examples provided by major literary works in which immoral love is considered able to arouse pity. Instead of keeping to his first point and demonstrating to what extent the siblings meet the standard of the middling character, Speroni embraces a different apologetic strategy, which discards moral concerns and concentrates on the emotional effects (public mourning at funerals) that tragic immoral love can engender. While apparently trying to hold to Aristotle, Speroni bypasses the relationship between the moral quality of the characters and the need for fear and pity to be elicited, and subordinates the former to the latter.

In the first lecture in defense of his *Canace*, Speroni seems keen to display once again Aristotelian orthodoxy by quoting and paraphrasing Vincenzo Maggi’s comment on chapter 13 of the *Poetics*:

Se adonque il terrore e la compassione nasce dalla similitudine che è tra l’uomo che patisce alcun male e colui che lo vede patire, perché vedendo io alcuno che a me sia simile oppresso da qualche infortunio, pensando io che sopra di me possi medesimamente cadere, son mosso a terrore e pietà di tal fatto; e avendosi la tragedia a rappresentare alla moltitudine, la quale è d’uomini posti tra buoni e malvaggi, però faceva bisogno che le persone tragiche fossero mezane, acciò che la somiglianza che era tra esse e il populo del teatro avesse a nascer la compassione e il terrore che la tragedia propone.<sup>20</sup>

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middling but imitated them in their youth, in which errors are less shameful and pity is greater. And he decided also that the error causing their misfortune should be an error of love, which rarely is not accompanied by pity.” My translation).

**19** Ibid., p. 192: “Mai il Boccaccio, in quella quarta giornata che tutta è tragica, non fa morire uno innamorato che con le lagrime di tutto ’l popolo del suo paese non l’accompagni alla sepoltura: e pur ne muoiono alcuni da’ cui amori malamente fu violata or la ubidienza paterna or la familiarità del signore, or l’amistà degli eguali, or la ragione delle genti, e or la fede de’ collegati.” (“In the fourth Giornata, which is entirely tragic, never has Boccaccio made a lover die without the sorrow of all the people of his town accompanying him to the burial: yet the loves of those who die violated the obedience towards the fathers, the familiarity of the lord, the friendship of the peers, the common sense of the people, and the trust of the allies.” My translation).

**20** Ibid., p. 211. (“If then terror and commiseration arise from the similarity existing between the man who suffers some evil and the one who sees him suffer [for if I see one who is like myself oppressed by some misfortune and if I think that this could fall upon me in the same way, I am moved to terror and pity of such an event] and since tragedy is to be presented to the multitude, which is made up of men placed in an intermediate position between the good

Given this theoretical premise, the line of reasoning turns baffling. While Speroni appropriately starts setting out an argument on the circumstances under which the incest occurs, that is, an external compulsion whose responsibility lies with Venus,<sup>21</sup> he develops further the legitimacy of incestuous love, permitted among ancient peoples as natural and prohibited only by specific laws in given contexts.<sup>22</sup> Rather than reflecting on the disempowerment that, according to the plot he provided, undermines the characters' agency, Speroni persists in defending the legitimacy of incest by means of a bizarre comparison with the gods' habits. If one turns back to the tragedy, the motive of the unjust external compulsion exerted by Venus on Canace and Macareo is indeed emphasized,<sup>23</sup> and so there would be room to argue against the inherent wickedness of the siblings. Nonetheless, Speroni shifts the focus towards the difference between sins of incontinence and those caused by boldness and disregard of the laws, and thus he implicitly reassesses the nature of the siblings' error:

Io dico, Signori, che si debbe fare differenza grande fra coloro che peccano per forza d'amor soverchio e tirati da grandissimo affetto, e quelli che per presunzione e temerità e per dispregio delle leggi commettino simili eccessi.<sup>24</sup>

Instead of entering the gray zone of the characters' agency and discussing the conundrum of the external compulsion, Speroni resorts to Dante's literary

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and the wicked, it was therefore necessary that the tragic characters had to be middling, so that from the similarity between them and the people in the audience there might arise compassion and terror." My translation).

**21** See *ibid.*, p. 213: "Dice Deiopea che i suoi figliuoli non meritano morte dal padre perché essi hanno per forza commesso quello che i dei fanno per volontà in cielo. [...] E come sforzati siano incorsi in questo errore, è da sé chiaro e dalle parole molte volte dette in molte parti della tragedia, cioè che Venere, per prender vendetta di Eolo dell'ingiuria fatta da lui ad Enea suo figliuolo, aveva loro indotto e fatto forza a peccare." ("Deiopea says that her children do not deserve the death from their father because they committed, under compulsion, what the gods in heaven do by choice. [...] And how they were forced to fault is clear in itself and in the words frequently repeated in many parts of the tragedy – that is, that Venus, wishing to take revenge on Aeolus for his abuse done to her son Aeneas, had misled and forced them to sin." My translation).

**22** See *ibid.*, p. 215: "Nel vero non è dalla natura vietato la congionzion del fratello e della sorella, ma dalle leggi e non già da tutte" ("Indeed laws, and not even all, forbid the sexual union between brother and sister, while nature does not." My translation).

**23** The old servant as well as Macareo himself and his mother Deiopeia refer to the insurmountable power of Venus by using metaphors signifying coercion and passivity.

**24** Speroni/Cinzio. *Canace*, p. 218. ("I believe, gentlemen, that one should mark a sharp distinction between those who fault because of the power of an excessive love and stirred by a great passion and those who commit such excesses because of their boldness and audacity and contempt of the laws." My translation).

authority to ennoble his work and neutralize any criticism against the moral quality of his characters, who would be comparable to the lovers of *Inferno* V.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, then, by means of the reference to incontinence, a key Aristotelian concept that marks a fundamental distinction within the moral geography of Dante's *Inferno*, Speroni can turn back to the *Poetics*, reaffirm his orthodoxy by quoting the passage of Chapter 13 on *hamartia*, and relocate Canace and Macareo under the label of middling characters committing human errors:

Per queste ragioni gli errori de gli amanti non sono sceleratezze, ma si debbano chiamar umani, perché l'uomo ama come ragionevole e perciò umanamente pecca; e se così è che l'error de gli innamorati sia umano, adonque noi semo nella particola di Aristotele dove dice che persone tragiche sono quelle che *non per dedecus et pravitatem sed humano quodam errore in infelicitatem lapsi sunt*.<sup>26</sup>

In a way, incontinence would be a good solution for reading *Canace* in the light of the requirements of the *Poetics* as illustrated in Maggi's comment, but it does not apply to what happens in the tragedy, where the protagonists are in fact doomed to fall in love with each other, unless one gives an interpretation of Venus' intervention as an allegory of the power of love and the human inability to control passions. This would be an interesting ex-post self-reading by Speroni, which, however, is not allowed by the tragedy itself, since the motifs of vengeance and external compulsion, rather than incontinence and lack of self-command, re-emerge throughout the work as justification of the incest.

This complex layering of different arguments is overturned by a sudden interpretative twist, which engages Speroni in demonstrating that even evil agents can arouse pity and consequently suit tragic plots. This means that, even if Canace and Macareo, as incestuous lovers, were considered wicked, this would not prevent their story from being the subject of a good tragedy. As frequently happens when commentaries on the *Poetics* depart from its theoretical framework, Speroni claims that Aristotle was wrong in prescribing middling characters as a requirement for tragedy to arouse pity, and suggests that the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 225: "S'innamorò dunque Francesca di Paolo perché Amore non perdona amare a nullo amato ma vuole e sforza che chi è amato riami." ("So Francesca fell in love with Paolo because Love does not pardon anyone loved from loving in return but wants and forces the beloved to love in turn." My translation).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 228. ("For these reasons, lovers' errors are not crimes and should be deemed human, because the human being loves as a reasonable creature and hence faults as human; and if it is true that lovers' error is human, then we fall in the scope of that paragraph in which Aristotle says that tragic characters are those who *non per dedecus et pravitatem sed humano quodam errore in infelicitatem lapsi sunt*." My translation).

ancient tragedians mastered the tragic art much better than the philosopher did. Within Speroni's apologetic writings, this is the point that most sharpens the clash between theoretical demands and literary practices.

Let me briefly recapitulate the elements collected up to this point: according to their defender, Canace and Macareo are middling, their love being, however, immoral. Incest, in any case, is a legitimate theme for tragic plots, and furthermore it is also socially acceptable, given that many cultures allow it. Canace and Macareo, moreover, are incontinent and, thus, as the sinners punished in the first zone of Dante's *Inferno*, they are not evil – they have just been unable to dominate their passions. Consequently, they fall within the theoretical spectrum outlined in the *Poetics*. This standpoint proves to be unsteady, as it is suddenly overcome by the argument defending the appropriateness of evil agents within literary works. It is not Speroni's tragedy that does not comply with the rule of the middling character: it is the rule itself that has no correspondence with the ancient tragic corpus. Beside the bold claim of independence from theoretical constraints, what is striking is the abrupt change in the argumentation, which ends up spanning one extreme to the other.

What follows is not consistently linked to this new stance – evil agents can be tragic – because Speroni argues that the harsh remarks against his work depend on the identification of Canace and Macareo as tragic characters, which would prove to be an incorrect assumption. For also the ghost of the siblings' child, l'Ombra, could awake pity and hence act as the tragic character of the drama.<sup>27</sup> What does this new twist have to do with the idea, set out just beforehand, that wicked persons can arouse pity? Of course, there is no logical connection between these two arguments, and the lack of logic at this point of the lectures makes Speroni's defense sound desperate. Following this new line of reasoning, he claims that also Deiopeia, the siblings' mother, could be eligible as a tragic character, in that she mourns pitifully the death of her children. Not content with this hypothesis, Speroni closes his lecture by reversing his position once again and singling out Aeolus as the real tragic figure in the tragedy.

One could simply argue that not only is Speroni a poor apologist, but this hectic gathering of opposite justifications implicitly also expresses his uneasiness in defending his own work as much as his critical blindness in reading it.

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27 Ibid., p. 240: “io non so perché non si potesse più tosto dire che questa compassione avesse a cadere sopra l'Ombra, poichè dalle sue proprie parole si po' traggerne miglior argomento che non ha fatto costui” (“I don't know why it could not rather be argued that this pity should be directed toward the Ombra, since from his words a better case can be made than the one [the anonymous critic] made.” My translation).

If we were to observe from above, looking down on the conceptual schema underlying his arguments, we would see a fluid space devoid of a center, within which critical discourse turns nomadic – as the triple identification of the tragic character shows – and drifts in different directions, while concepts and cultural references multiply and overlap to the extent that Aristotle is at the same time recognized as the authority providing the perfect tragic pattern, and dismissed as a restrictive theoretician unable to master tragedy. Rules and transgression coexist in an unstable, undecidable set, which fails to grasp the crucial question the tragedy raises: What is the error of Canace and Macareo? What is an error committed under an external compulsion?

Between the composition of the *Canace* in 1542 and the apologetic lectures delivered by Speroni in 1558, new Latin commentaries on the *Poetics*, such as those by Robortello or Maggi, raised the benchmark of Aristotelian scholarship, while expanding the theoretical discussion on *hamartia* and, consequently, the floating of unstable concepts relating to it. In his remarks on Chapter 13 of the treatise, Robortello refers quite aptly to the third book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1–5) in order to explain *hamartia* under the light of involuntary deeds committed *di'agnoian*, that is, through ignorance (*per imprudentiam*), an interpretation much praised by modern scholars.<sup>28</sup> Yet, when dealing with the relationship between the error through ignorance and the requirement of the middling character, the scholar has to admit that this pattern applies only to a few tragedies of the ancient corpus or, better, only to *Oedipus the King*.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Robortello claims, one can find in ancient tragedies virtuous characters who suffer undeserved harms. This is the case of Hercules, Electra, and even Orestes, whose stories would be repulsive according to Aristotle's conceptual framework.<sup>30</sup>

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**28** See Francesco Robortello. *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1968, pp. 129–33. On Robortello's commentary see Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 388–399. The most complete survey of Robortello's analysis of *hamartia* is in Lurie, *Die Suche nach der Schuld*. See also Kappl, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles*, pp. 230–33.

**29** See Robortello, *In librum Aristotelis explicationes*, p. 133: “Non debent igitur omnes veterum tragoediae perpendi hoc examine, aut redigi ad hanc normam; nam praeter actionem, personamque Oedipodis, qualem expressit Sophocles, nescio, an aliam reperias apud ullum ex veteribus.” (“Hence, not all the tragedies of the ancients should undergo this scrutiny, or be composed according to this criterion; in fact, beside Oedipus' action and character, as Sophocles gave shape to them, I do not know whether you could find another tragedy [of this kind] in any of the ancients.” My translation).

**30** See *Ibid.*, p. 133: “Quod si redigas ad hanc normam Aristotelis, erit nefarium scelus, id est μᾶρὸν, Electram bonam immerentem infelicem esse, et incommoda pati tam magna.” (“For if you conformed to this rule by Aristotle, it would be repulsive – that is μᾶρὸν – that Electra, who is good, is unhappy without deserving it, and endures such great misfortunes.”)

Rather than exploring the moral features of this alternative plot, Robortello departs from the question, and sets about explaining why, notwithstanding the scarcity of tragedies complying with the requirement of the middling character combined with the error *per imprudentiam*, Aristotle concentrated almost exclusively on this rather rare plot. In the following paragraph, the commentator turns back again to the requirement of the middling character, which seems a necessary tenet in order to prevent human beings from being disgusted by misfortunes that hit virtuous agents, and from feeling alienated from the gods, who would be supposed to disregard human destinies:

Atque sic patet, noluisse Aristotelem omnino bonum virum concedere in actione tragica; sed aliquid tamen detraxisse ab ea persona, quam mediam constituebat inter bonum et malum. [...] Nam malus commiserationem non excitat, si infelix fuerit, tantum abest, ut excitet terrorem et metum. Bonus commiserationem quidem excitat, si quid adversi patiat; at non terrorem, sed potius  $\mu\alpha\rho\delta\nu$ . Ac sicuti terror inducit in animos religionem, obstringitque eos magis cultu quodam, ac pietate erga deos, quorum potentia extimescunt; sic  $\tau\omicron$   $\mu\alpha\rho\delta\nu$  animos abalienat prorsus a Diis, qui quasi mortalia negligant, probitatemque hominum non intueantur, foveantque eos, qui virtute fuerint praediti, malis multis bonos viros conflictari permittant; ex qua re indignatio gravis oritur in animis hominum in Deos ipsos et opinio ipsos securum (ut ille ait) agere aevum, ac ociose dormire in regendis mortalibus, maximum enim providentiae Deorum signum esse iudicant homines, si viros bonos praemiis afficiant, improbos autem ulciscantur, maleque perant.<sup>31</sup>

An inconsistency marks this paragraph: while on the one hand Robortello explains why undeserved misfortunes potentially undermine religious devotion and nurture a feeling of alienation from the gods, on the other he does not connect this remark with the abovementioned reassessment of the requirement of the middling character, which, according to him, would suit only *Oedipus the King*. What happens, then, in the majority of the tragic corpus that, accord-

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31 Ibid., p. 134. (“Thus it is evident that Aristotle did not want to allow an entirely good character into the tragic action, but took something away from that person whom he established as middling between good and evil. [...] In fact, the evil person does not arouse pity, whenever unfortunate, not to mention arousing horror and fear. The virtuous person does arouse pity, if he or she suffers a misfortune; but [this case does not provoke] fear, rather repulsion. And fear elicits a sense of reverence in [human] souls and binds them with a certain worship and devotion towards the gods, whose power they are afraid of. Accordingly, repulsion alienates [human] souls from the gods, who would allow good men to undergo great harms, as if they neglected mortal matters and did not care about men’s virtue and [did not] support the virtuous. And hence a grave indignation against the gods themselves originates in human souls, and the idea even arises that they live a safe life and are idly sleepy in ruling human things; in fact, men consider it to be the highest sign of divine providence when gods reward virtuous men and punish and badly destroy the evil.” My translation).

ing to Robortello himself, encompasses stories of good characters suffering undeserved misfortunes? Where will one relocate their error? If Electra and Hercules are virtuous, either their stories are repulsive – and this is not the case, as Robortello points out – or there is, in his line of reasoning, a conceptual blank that fails to tackle this alternative configuration and urges a rethinking of the bond that connects errors and agency. What follows is even more remarkable: instead of developing further the example of a tragedy that revolves around a virtuous agent without eliciting repulsion, Robortello refers to Ajax as the character who, disdaining the gods, deserves their punishment. It is not simply an odd and crudely moralistic interpretation of Sophocles' *Ajax*: it contradicts at once both the requirement of the middling person – no blasphemer could be deemed middling – and the interpretation of *hamartia* as error *per imprudenciam*, since a direct link seems to connect Ajax's blasphemy with the punishment Athena inflicts upon him.<sup>32</sup>

A double movement occurs in Robortello's remarks on Chapter 13: on the one hand, he attempts to explore different plot configurations beside the Aristotelian; on the other, a sense of uneasiness and theoretical anxiety prevents him from inquiring how the agency of a virtuous character can engender errors, or to what extent a tragic plot can be developed in the absence of errors or human fallacy.

Even though in Robortello's commentary no room is left for such an inquiry, the hypothesis of a tragic plot revolving around a virtuous agent who suffers a drastic reversal of fortune was widely discussed in the Italian Renaissance. Late antique and medieval scholarship that allowed an interpretation of tragedy as a lament upon undeserved misfortunes striking virtuous persons was still influential and, as some scholars claim, affected the circulation and interpretation of Aristotelian concepts.<sup>33</sup> What is striking is that theoreticians with radically different ideological and religious backgrounds converge on this alternative pattern. In Antonio Minturno's theoretical dialogue *De poeta*, published in 1559, a case is made for the death of Christ, the most innocent of men, to be considered a tragedy:

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<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 134: "Sic scilicet discimus, omnes deorum contemptores, atque obrectatores male mulctari a Diis, pelli que in amentiam." ("Thus, with no doubts we learn that all despisers and detractors of the gods are punished by the gods and driven to madness." My translation).

<sup>33</sup> See Enrica Zanin. *Les fins tragiques. Poétique et éthique du dénouement dans la tragédie de la première modernité (Italie, France, Espagne, Allemagne)*. Geneva: Droz, 2014, pp. 109–122; Lohse, *Renaissancedrama und humanistische Poetik*. On tragedy as a lament in late antique and medieval theoretical writings see Henry Ansgar Kelly. *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Mors enim illa salutaris, quam Christus, ut vitam mortalibus restitueret, non invitus, at libenter sane appetivit, non esset profecto tragice deploranda, si minus in Theatrum afferri deberent quae viro probo accidissent, ac ferenda indigne potius, quam miseranda esse viderentur.<sup>34</sup>

The role of *hamartia* as well as of agency is drastically neutralized, while the goodness of the character and the violence of his reversal become central.<sup>35</sup> A catholic bishop participating in the Council of Trent, Minturno provided an influential theoretical ground for martyr tragedy, as Pierre Corneille points out in his *Examen de Polyeucte*.<sup>36</sup>

In his monumental vernacular translation of and commentary on the *Poetics*, published in Vienna in 1570, Lodovico Castelvetro, sentenced to death as a heretic and hence having fled from Italy,<sup>37</sup> claims that the plot of the virtuous undergoing misfortunes best suits the eliciting of pity and fear:

Io non posso comprendere come la persona di santissima vita, trapassando da felicità a miseria, non generi spavento e compassione, e molto maggiori ancora che non fa la mezzana. Conciosia cosa che coloro li quali menano una vita così santa, come generalmente fa la moltitudine popolare, prendano maggiore spavento e più si sgomentino veggendo la persona migliore di loro patire, che non farebbono se vedessono uno simile a loro, dubitando che a loro non incontri simile disavventura; e si presenta loro davanti alla

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**34** Antonio Sebastiano Minturno. *De Poeta* [1559]. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1970, p. 182. (“That saving death of Christ, which he willingly and freely sought in order to restore life to mortals, should certainly not be deplored as tragic, even if events striking the just man were to be brought on stage and seemed to be endured ignominiously rather than deserving pity.” My translation). See also p. 183: “De Christo autem Servatore eodemque Deo nostro ac Domino, an tragoedia confici possit, qui fecit, ipse viderit. Mihi vero videtur genus illud mortis tam acerbum fuisse, ac tam inhumanum, ut quisque praeclarum illi ipsi et gloriosum, nobis autem fuerit salutareque in summam tamen miserationem adducat.”

**35** It is worth noting that Minturno maintains a medieval framework, according to which tragedy is the genre that expresses the instability of all human matters (p. 179): “ut videmus non esse rebus prospere fluentibus fidendum, nihil infra esse tam diuturnum tamque stabile, quod caducum non sit et mortale, nihil tam firmum ac validum, quod demum nequeat everti, nihil tam felix, quod miserum, nihil ita summum, quod infimum effici non possit.” (“We see that all things occurring happily should not be trusted, that among them there is nothing so lasting and steady that it is not transitory and mortal, nothing so firm and solid that it cannot be eventually overthrown, nothing so happy and outstanding that it cannot become miserable and of lowest grade.” My translation).

**36** See Kappl, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles*, p. 249; Zanin, *Les fins tragiques*, pp. 171–180.

**37** See Ludovico Castelvetro. *Letterati e grammatici nella crisi religiosa del Cinquecento*, edited by Massimo Firpo and Guido Mongini. Florence: Olschki, 2008, in particular Cesare Vasoli’s chapter “Ludovico Castelvetro e la fortuna cinquecentesca della *Poetica* di Aristotele,” pp. 1–24. On Castelvetro’s translation and commentary see Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, pp. 302–311.

mente l'argomento evangelico: "Se queste cose sono avvenute in legno verde, quanto maggiormente avverranno in secco?". E a cui s'avrà compassione, se non s'ha compassione all'uomo santissimo caduto in miseria? Certo niuno. Adunque la persona di singolare santità trapassando da felicità a miseria non era da rifiutare perché non potesse generare spavento e compassione. Ma dice Aristotele che non genera né spavento né compassione, ma sdegno contra Dio, il che è cosa abominevole. E io dico che non seguita, posto che sia vero che simile trapassamento di simile persona generi sdegno contra Dio, che non generi ancora spavento e compassione; né lo sdegno contra Dio annulla lo spavento e la compassione, sì come quando una persona mezzana riceve danno ingiustamente da alcuno prendiamo sdegno contra il dannificante ingiustamente, e non per tanto siamo senza spavento e senza compassione per l'accidente avvenuto senza sua colpa al dannificato.<sup>38</sup>

Overtuning Robortello's argument, Castelvetro argues that such a configuration would in any case be repulsive, since common people still believe in God's justice and care in human matters. In a very subtle and oblique way, Castelvetro questions the connection between undeserved misfortunes striking eminent characters and the feeling of indignation against God that this plot could elicit: by referring to the *communis opinio*, his reasoning eschews the discussion of the moral boundaries of tragedy's subject matter, while it contents itself with exploring the mentality and beliefs of a hypothetical common audience. In

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38 Ludovico Castelvetro. *Poetica di Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta*. 2 vols., edited by Werther Romani. Bari: Laterza, 1978, pp. 361–362: "I am unable to understand why the fall of a man of very holy life from happiness to misery should not arouse pity and fear; why it should not, in fact, arouse greater pity and fear than the fall of a man of ordinary virtue, for those whose lives are not of holiness comparable to his, as the lives of common people generally are not, are more terrified and dismayed by the sufferings of one better than themselves than by those of one of their own kind. The experience of such a fall would fill them with the fear that they may well be visited by a similar misfortune, bringing before their minds the Gospel text (Luke 23:31), 'For if they do these things in a green tree, what should be done in the dry?' And who shall be pitied if not the saintly man who falls into misfortune? For if we are moved to pity by those who suffer unjustly, who deserves misfortune less than a man of most saintly life? None assuredly, and the representation of a supremely saintly man falling from happiness to misery should not therefore have been rejected as incapable of moving audiences to pity and fear. Yet Aristotle asserts that the fall of such a man does not fill us with pity and fear but with indignation against God, which is a blasphemous state of mind. To which I reply that if we are filled with indignation against God it does not follow that we are not also filled with pity and fear. The indignation does not extinguish the pity and fear. When, for example, a person of ordinary virtue is unjustly injured by someone, we feel indignation against the latter, but do not for that reason fail to be moved to pity and fear by the undeserved suffering of the injured man." Translation taken from Andrew Bongiorno. *Castelvetro on the Art of Poetry. An Abridged Translation of Lodovico Castelvetro's Poetica d'Aristotele Vulgarizzata et Sposta*. New York: Binghamton, 1984, p. 162. With reference to this passage, interestingly Enrica Zanin claims that Castelvetro makes room for tragedy as a genre tackling ambiguous or even immoral cases. See Zanin, "Les commentaires modernes de la *Poétique* d'Aristotele," p. 80.

other words, Castelvetro does not contest the potential immorality of the reversal hitting a virtuous character on the basis of God's inherent justness, but rather on the basis of what common people believe and imagine.<sup>39</sup> A tragedy can indeed develop without apparent errors and clear retribution mechanisms.

Up to the last part of the century, moralistic interpretations of *hamartia* multiply along with its reductive reassessment: both delimit a fragmented theoretical space where retribution in the form of a seminal poetic justice cohabits with innocent suffering, the control of passions, and an idea of agency as detached from will and intentions. In a treatise published in 1586, some thirty years after Speroni's lectures, Giason Denores, a former student of philosophy in Padua, recalls the quarrel about *Canace* and proposes again some of the arguments Speroni himself elaborated, such as the comparison between the siblings and Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Inferno*, along with incontinence as the error in which their tragic fate originated.<sup>40</sup> The theoretical framework of Denores's treatise is, in a way, even more fluid than Speroni's: the requirement of the middling character falls together with an unequivocal moralistic scheme requiring punishment as retribution for sins and evil deeds, while the scope of the concept of error widens to the point that it includes ignorance, incontinence, impatience, rage, and fear, which could engender inadvertency, vengeance, and excesses of love and hate:

Tra buone e cattive poi sono quelle altre le quali, per qualche errore umano d'ignoranza, d'incontinenza, di intolleranza, di temenza, d'ira, commettono alcuna volta casi atrocis-

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**39** Castelvetro uses expressions such as “assolve nella sua mente Iddio da ogni peccato” (“in his mind absolves God from all guilt”), “s’immagina” (“imagines”), “s’induce a credere” (“leads himself to believe”).

**40** Giason Denores. *Discorso intorno a que' principii, cause et accrescimenti che la comedia, la tragedia et il poema eroico ricevono dalla filosofia morale e civile e da' governatori delle repubbliche; onde si raccoglie la diffinitione e distinzione della poesia nelle predette tre sue parti e la descrizione particolare di ciascheduna* [1586]. *Trattati di poetica e retorica del Cinquecento*, 4 vols., edited by Bernard Weinberg. Bari: Laterza, 1970–1974, vol. 3, p. 387: “Non è in tutto cattiva Canace e Macareo, perché hanno peccato per incontinenza. Non è in tutto cattiva Francesca appresso Dante.” (“Canace and Macareo are not entirely wicked, since they have sinned because of incontinence. Francesca is not entirely wicked according to Dante.” My translation). A few lines below, Denores continues as follows: “Questo avvertimento di Aristotele se avessero molto ben inteso e considerato coloro che hanno ripresa la tragedia del signor Sperone, non sarebbero stati tanto arditi nel ragionar così copiosamente delle persone mezzane e scelerate che intravengono nelle tragedie.” (“If those who have criticized the tragedy of master Sperone had fully understood and weighed this prescription by Aristotle, they would have never been so bold in discussing so copiously the middling and the wicked characters who appear in tragedies.” My translation). On Denores's treatise see Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, pp. 621–26.

simi, come per inavvertenza, per vendetta delle ingiurie ricevute, per odio, per inimicizie, per amore o per qualche altra cagione somigliante. [...] atrocità commesse per un certo errore umano intende Aristotele tutte quelle che fanno gli uomini per ignoranza, per impeto e per furor di odio, di lussuria, di vendetta, di timore, le quali passioni sono a noi comuni naturalmente con gli altri animali senza ragione, e si dicono commesse per un certo errore umano.<sup>41</sup>

Even virtuous agents are allowed in tragic plots, in that their resilience against suffering, which does not result from errors, demonstrates their moral excellence. The polymorphic character of this all-encompassing passage is all but exceptional, and seems to embody and crystallize the typical instability marking the whole field of discourses on tragedy in the Italian Cinquecento: similar or even analogous concepts generate opposite interpretations, and different sources overlap in an attempt to grasp the opacities of human errors and suffering as shaped by the *Poetics*.

A clear-cut watershed supposedly split the history of tragedy and tragic theories into two stories inconsistent with each other: the first, running up to the second half of the eighteenth century, tends to be characterized as one haunted by strict poetic norms and suffocating moralistic concerns that affected the production as much as the reception of literary works; the second, whose beginning coincides with the birth of aesthetic autonomy and a drastic philosophical turn, allegedly dismissed old-fashioned prescriptive poetic theories, rooted in wrong, heteronomous interpretations of classical sources. While scholars in modern literature either tend to neglect early modern theoretical writings on tragedy as erratic and unoriginal views, or else commit to amending their distortions and freeing tragedy from a thick web of heteronomous interpretative habits, scholars in classics and of the early modern period are concerned with pinpointing the errors that the modern philosophical drift has engendered, leaving our cultural furniture unable to comprehend ancient and early modern tragic works.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Denores, *Discorso*, p. 385: “Between the good and the wicked are those others who, because of a certain human error caused by ignorance, incontinence, impatience, fear, or rage, commit atrocious deeds, such as for inadvertency, revenge for insults received, hatred, hostility, love, or for some similar reasons. [...] By atrocities committed because of a certain human error Aristotle means all those that men perpetrate because of ignorance, impulse, and outburst of hatred, lust, revenge, and fear, all passions that we humans share with other animals with no intellect, and which are said to be performed because of a certain human error.” My translation. See Kappl, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles*, p. 254.

<sup>42</sup> Two recent examples are William Marx. *Le tombeau d’Édipe: Pour une tragédie sans tragique*. Paris: Minuit, 2012; Blair Hoxby. *What was Tragedy? Theory and the Early Modern Canon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 3–56.

Yet, our contemporary theory in ruin, as Terry Eagleton termed it,<sup>43</sup> would be inconceivable without the conflicting energies that allowed a prismatic expansion of the *Poetics* in the Renaissance and the foundation of a polymorphic theoretical space. The quest for the essence of the tragic, which is indeed a typical modern phenomenon, only apparently replaced early modern moral didacticism, for new forms of post-religious heteronomy, expressed in radical or conservative ideologies, still haunt the battlefield of the tragic. The unprecedented and unsystematic body of theory that developed in the sixteenth century scattered its conceptual materials through different cultural contexts and epochs, with long-term effects. Two of its main strands, respectively emphasizing individual responsibility and innocent suffering, still occupy the deepest layers of the modern debate. Issues relating to the moral and emotional responses to literary works or the literary elaboration of human agency did not simply fade out at the turn of the nineteenth century. In his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, for instance, Hegel tackles the issue of innocent suffering with a strongly prescriptive stance, which very much reprises old arguments about the indignation it engenders in the spectator: “Ein unvernünftiger Zwang aber, eine Schuldlosigkeit des Leidens müßte statt sittlicher Beruhigung nur Indignation in der Seele des Zuschauers hervorbringen.”<sup>44</sup>

Innocence, responsibility, and empathy, albeit interspersed with metaphysical radicalism, are indeed principal concerns in the brave new world of the dead-and-still-alive tragedy, a field in which critical gestures of exclusion, bounding, and prescription<sup>45</sup> coexist with a rhizomatic body of monadic theoretical discourses and narratives. The genre that has given aesthetic shape to the oscillations of human imperfection, vulnerability, and suffering is the subject of a most divided history, which developed across the centuries in disparate cultural contexts thanks to errors, hybrids, and misappropriations, and

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<sup>43</sup> See Terry Eagleton. *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

<sup>44</sup> George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 3, p. 548. (“An irrational compulsion and innocent suffering would inevitably produce in the soul of the spectator mere indignation instead of ethical peace and satisfaction.” Translation taken from Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by Thomas Malcolm Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, vol. 2, p. 1216.) It is in this context that Hegel categorically bars innocent heroes from tragedy: “Solch einem Heros könnte man nichts Schlimmeres nachsagen, als daß er unschuldig gehandelt habe. Es ist die Ehre der großen Charaktere, schuldig zu sein” (p. 546). (“No worse insult could be given to such a hero than to say that he had acted innocently. It is the honour of these great characters to be culpable” p. 1215).

<sup>45</sup> A good example of this kind is George Steiner’s essay “A Note on Absolute Tragedy.” *Journal of Literature and Theology*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1990, pp. 147–156.

still, strangely, has been haunted by an overpowering fear of those errors so vital to its expansion. Apparently inconclusive and centrifugal discussions on *hamartia* in the Renaissance are indeed a synecdoche of the whole history of tragedy. Nothing resembles the theory of tragedy more closely than its own history.

