CHAPTER ONE
ANAGNORISIS IN A THEORETICAL
AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Anagnorisis in Aristotle’s Poetics

The recognition scene belongs to the category of literary devices that never seem to lose their grip on storytellers and their audiences alike. Archaic epics and myths, folk-literature, Shakespearean drama, and modern-day Hollywood cinema all bear witness to its enduring fame.¹ When, for instance, characters like the impostor, the trickster, the make-believer, the metamorph, the apparent stranger, the reflective observer, or the hero in disguise enter the stage, the plot inevitably becomes a masquerade where suspense centers on the cognitive play of semblance and truth. True identities hide behind the persona; and the situation evokes an unbearable tension of tremor and fascinans, which does not find release until the riddle is unmasked in front of the audience. In the Poetics, which forms the basis for any theorizing on the subject, as for many other aspects of narratology and theory of drama and literature in general, Aristotle gave a possible explanation for the popularity of anagnorisis by characterizing it as one of the strongest means of bringing about emotional affect in tragedy (ψυκτικαγωγεῖ; 1450a31–34). Recognition is not merely a reflection of the narrator’s attempt to excite the audience, however; it also serves as a vehicle for dealing with epistemological dilemmas that are principal elements in certain types of plot. Thus Aristotle, in his analysis of the tragedy, defines the phenomenon first and foremost as a motion from ignorance to knowledge (δὲ ἂγνωστε εἰς γνώσιν μεταβολῆ; 1452a29–30), the knowledge

relating to an object (a person, a fact, or a condition) of positive ("euphoric") or negative ("dysphoric") value to the recognizer.\(^2\)

Aristotle was probably not the first to use the concept of anagnorisis as a *terminus technicus* in poetics, but rather engaged in an existing debate on the nature of tragedy that included the type-scene in question. Nevertheless, the *Poetics* is practically the only surviving metaliterary discussion of anagnorisis from Antiquity.\(^3\) Aristotle expounds the notion with some detail, and it becomes one of the main topics in his discussion at the moment where he seeks to establish an analytical distinction between two types of plots (\(\mu\upsilon\theta\omicron\nu\iota\iota\omicron\)\(\omicron\iota\iota\iota\omicron\nu\iota\omicron\iota\): the simple (\(\acute{\alpha}πλ\omicron\nu\iota\iota\iota\)) and the complex (\(\pi\epsilon\pi\lambda\gamma\epsilon\mu\epsilon\nu\iota\omicron\iota\nu\). 1452a11–22). The distinction between two plot types relates to how they construct the turning point of fortunes (\(\delta\epsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\iota\iota\iota\iota\)) between the complication (\(\delta\epsilon\omicron\iota\iota\)) and the denouement (\(\lambda\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\iota\iota\)) in the narrative trajectory (1455b23–28). In tragedies of simple plot, the turning point appears devoid of anagnorisis and *peripeteia* (\(\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\pi\epsilon\tau\epsilon\iota\alpha\iota\alpha\iota\)) (lit., "reversal," see below), whereas the occurrence of one or both elements brings about a complex plot. Aristotle most values complex tragedies, especially when they contain both anagnorisis and *peripeteia*, and he mentions Sophocles' *Oedipus tyrannus* as his ideal model (1452a31–33).

Before going further into Aristotle's discussion of anagnorisis, we need to examine his concept of *peripeteia*, since it seems closely related to anagnorisis and gives us a more precise understanding of the character of the complex plot. First, it must be clear that *peripeteia* in the Aristotelian sense is not, as opposed to a most widely held understanding of the term, simply reversal in the sense that it designates the locus where prosperity is turned into misfortune or vice versa. As we have seen, Aristotle already reserved the term *metabasis* to designate the turning point in the story, and such change of fortune is not confined to...

\(^2\) The latter statement concerning the value of the recognition object more or less represents the standard interpretation of Aristotle's addition to his core definition, ἢ τὸς ὑπὸ καὶ ἔχον, τὸν πρὸς ἐπίστευεν ἢ διεισερχόμενον (1455a30–31). For an alternative understanding, see John MacFarlane, "Aristotle's Definition of Anagnorisis," *AJP* 121 (2000): 367–383. The terms "euphoric" and "dysphoric" are used in the Greimasian sense as so-called "thymic categories" describing two opposite modes of value relation between a subject and an object, the neutral term being "aphoric." See the relevant entries in Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courțé, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Langue, Linguistique, Communication; Paris: Hachette, 1979). The terms seem particularly applicable to the study of anagnorisis since they, besides their technical Greimasian meaning, quite precisely describe the reaction of the recognizer (euphoric or dysphoric, seldom aphoric).