



Aristotle, “Prizzi’s Honor” and Ghost of “Two Sicilies”

Tom Verso (December 25, 2009)



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Preface -Film criticism and technology

When I first saw the movie “Prizzi’s Honor” in 1985, I reacted much as other Italian Americans. It was a ridiculous and insulting representation of our culture. Typical responses:

“In Huston’s film Italian American stereotypes are reinforced”

Salvatore John LaGumina

“Fieri National and the New York State Commission for Social Justice/Order Sons of Italy in American are jointly calling on film and television producers to stop using stereotypically negative images and portrayals of Italian-Americans in their productions...”

The Italian Voice

“The over praised ‘Prizzi’s Honor’ is grotesquely bad, with all the ethnic verisimilitude of a minstrel show.

Camille Paglia

When it was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won the one for Best Supporting Actress (Anjelica Huston), I assumed it was just Hollywood’s way of acknowledging the legendary director



John Huston; then in the twilight of his brilliant filmmaking career.

Yet, for all of that, there was something about the film that resonated; something that touched upon my classical Greek aesthetic and philosophic disposition. For example:

1. Foreshadowing scenes - Foreshadowing was a very prominent part played by the chores in Greek tragedy. In ‘Prizzi’ the foreshadowing was nuanced; nevertheless dramatically effective. For example, in the Prizzi family wedding exposition scene there were rows of uniform police officers in the church pews, and a police officer chauffeured Charley Partannan of the Prizzi crime family to the wedding reception in a police car. Thus, establishing the relationship between the police and the Prizzi crime family that figured prominently later in the film.

Also, in the reception scene, when Maerose Prizzi, at her aunt’s behest, approaches her father who has disowned her, he calls her a whore. Maerose turns to her aunt and says: “He’ll get his someday.” And he does. Later in the movie he is the victim of a gangland style execution.

2. Plot - Reflecting on the plot, I couldn’t think of any of the characteristic deus ex machina events that typically drive melodramatic plots. On the contrary, the unit of the cause and effect plot structure was right out of Aristotle’s Poetics; such unity is thought by many to be a hallmark of great literature.

3. Family - Virtually all the great immortal Greek tragedies took place in family situations and dealt with the profound mortal choices characters had to make vis-a-vis family members (Antigone, Medea, Oedipus, Electra, etc). Similarly, “Prizzi’s Honor.”

4. Exile - In the ancient Greek world exile was seen as a fate worse than death. Socrates chose death over exile. Euripedes’ Medea referring to her exile in Corinth says: 'I, a desolate woman without a city... no relative at all'. Similarly, in the movie both Charlie and Maerose rejected exile from the Prizzi family “environment.”

Nevertheless, the overwhelming effect of the movie was negative and I soon forgot about it.

Recently, I revisited the film with the benefit of DVD technology. With DVD technology one can now study movie plots in miniscule detail by stopping and starting the film, rewinding, fast-forwarding, and stepping through scenes.

Like the biologist looking at a specimen first with a naked eye and then under microscope, I now saw the film in a much greater detail. It had classic Aristotelian dramatic characteristics, and a theme that meaningfully captures the cornerstone of both Greek high literature and historic southern Italian culture -family.

Below, in part one, I present my understanding of Aristotelian poetics. In part two, I discuss “Prizzi’s Honor” in terms of Aristotelian literary concepts and southern Italian culture.

I. Aristotle: Plot, Character and Thought

In his “Poetics” Aristotle argued that there are six component parts to a dramatic work: Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Spectacle, and Melody; with plot constituting the most important feature.

However, while one can analytically distinguish plot, character and thought, they are in fact inextricably bound into a unified dramatic experience. Just as a physiologist distinguishes between arteries, veins and capillaries, they nevertheless constitute a unified system for the circulation of blood. One has no meaning or purpose without the other.

Plot

Aristotle makes a distinction between “the worst plots” which he calls “episodic” and “the best



plots". What Aristotle calls episodic plots; today we call melodramas. He writes:

"Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence...(Poetics IX emp+)

The "best plots" are those, which are based on "cause and effect", and "probable and necessary sequences". One cannot emphasize too much "cause and effect", and "probability". He writes:

"...effects are heightened when they follow as cause and effect...Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best..." (Poetics IX emp+)

There are two component parts of "well constructed" plots: Complication and Denouement. He writes:

"Every tragedy falls into two parts- Complication and Denouement...By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the [turning-point] to good or bad fortune. The Denouement is that which extends from the start of the change [turning-point] to the end...(Poetics XVIII emp +)

Character

"Character is that which reveals...what kind of things a [person] chooses or avoids." The leading character (protagonist) is "a [person] who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty (Poetics XIII). Note: frailty is a fault due to weakness of moral character but not "vice or depravity".

Thought (theme)

Choices made by the protagonist character are governed by his/her thought. Thought is "a general maxim" (Poetics VI). It is the criteria used by the character to make his or her choices. Thought is what we refer to today as a theme.

In sum:

The plot is essentially the sequence of events caused by the choices a protagonist makes based on what he/she thought was morally correct, but due to a moral weakness (frailty) are erroneous. The error in judgment (choices made) leads to his/her change in fortune [turning-point] and the denouement.

II. "PRIZZI'S HONOR"

The plot of "Prizzi's Honor" is the most perfect Aristotelian plot that I can recall in any movie. Every action in the film is determined causally or with high probability by the preceding action. It is completely devoid of melodramatic (episodic) deus ex machina contrived plot manipulations. And, the theme touches on a contemporary residual of primordial southern Italian culture.

Plot outline - Complication

"beginning"

The beginning of the plot's "complication" section occurs when Charlie Partannan, who is a happy self-confident ranking member of the Prizzi crime family and beloved godson of patriarch Don Corrado Prizzi meets and instantly falls in love with Irene Walker. From that point on thru the denouement and film ending, the plot is a perfect "highly probable" "cause and effect" sequence of events determined by Charley's love for Irene and "complications" resulting from his love leading to his misfortune.

"frailty"



Charlie's "frailty" is his passion for Irene. Passion that causes him to deny what he knows he should do. At one point he says to her:

"I can't change the way I feel about you. I look at you I see what I want to see. That's what love is. If you were anyone else I would blow you away!!! I can't! I have to believe you..."

He has to believe her even though she is not believable. And, by his oath and responsibility to the Prizzi family he should kill her for her role in the thief of Prizzi money and for killing a Prizzi operative.

"complications"

Instead of fulfilling his oath bound obligation to the Prizzi family; because of his passion and love (frailty), Charlie decides to marry Irene. Then he agrees, against his better judgment, to her suggestion to help him in a kidnapping caper that Don Corrado ordered. These two decisions driven by Charley's frailty lead to the "complications" that brings on Charlie's misfortune and the plots denouement.

During the kidnapping Irene shoots and kills a police captain's wife. This results in the police cracking down on crime that they use to overlook in return for payoffs. The other crime families blame the Prizzis for the problem with the police and leads to an inter crime family war.

Meanwhile Charley's ex-fiancé (Maerose) gets pictures of Irene and uses them to prove that Irene was involved with the Prizzi casino robbery and murder. She goes to the Don with this information.

"turning point"

The Don tells Charlie that because of Irene's role in the Casino robbery and killing, and all the troubles resulting from her killing a police captain's wife, he has to kill Irene. She represents a mortal threat to the family from the police and other crime families.

Charlie is shocked into disorientation. He loves Irene. He considers refusing. Irene had earlier tried to get him to leave the Prizzis and go to Hong Kong. He says that without her he would be alone. "I don't want to be alone."

The Don says: "Charlie my beloved man you will be even more alone if you turn your back on us. We are your blood". He also reminds Charley of the "scared oath" he took when he join the Prizzi crime family to protect the family.

"denouement /end"

Charley kills Irene. He stays with his 'blood' and 'family' and returns to Maerose, the girl he grew up with and had been engaged to.

"thought"/"general maxim" (theme) - Art and Reality

In his treatise "Politics", Aristotle posits a hierarchy of social entities: family, clans, tribe and state. Clans understood as aggregations of families based on some unifying principle such as kinship. Tribes, in turn, were geographic aggregations of clans. People in pre-state societies often organize themselves into clans and tribes. As the states evolved, clans and tribes ceased to have purpose and pass from their history.

In as much as a very large part of what was Greece in Aristotle's day included Sicily and southern Italy (i.e. Magna Graecia), it is reasonable to assume that ancient Sicilians and southern Italians organized themselves into extended family units such as clans as Aristotle suggested.

Interestingly, to my mind, American fiction seems to reflect this historic anthropological reality. Both "The Godfather" and "Prizzi's Honor" present "organized crime" structure analogous to the ancient family/clan/tribe structure.



For example, the biological families of the Prizzis and the Partannnas are aggregated into a clan-like 'Prizzi crime family' based on the godfather/godson kinship. In turn, the various crime family clans aggregate into a tribe-like crime federations or commissions based on urban geography. Maerose, for example, was not only exiled from the Prizzi family. Charlie tells Irene: "Maerose can't even go to Brooklyn unless it's a special occasion." Also, in the film there is tribal like meeting scene where the heads of the various crime families (clans) meet to discuss inter-family (clan) problems. Similarly, the "Godfather."

Seemingly, there is some historic reality to this fictional representation of Italian American (family/clan/tribe) crime structure in the 20th century. See for example Peter Maas' book "The Valaci Papers". Recall, the famous 1957 Apalachin N.Y. national mafia meeting. But, the power of the American state was such that these organizations have passed.

Failure of the Italian State

Unlike the US, today in the geographic area of the ancient Magna Graecia (Sicily, Naples, Calabria, Apulia) crime organizations (Mafia, Cammora, Ndrangheta, Corona Unita) are resisting the very formable efforts of the Italian state to destroy them. Perhaps the theme of "Prizzi's Honor" points to an explanation of the Italian state's failure to defeat organized crime.

In the dialogue there are two references to "the environment" (social not ecological).

In the wedding reception exposition scene, Charlie tries to console Maerose about her estrangement from her father. He tells her:

"Forget about your father, forget about the environment they ain't never going to take you back...find someone who has nothing to do with the families." But, Maerose wants to get back into the environment. She encourages Charlie to marry Irene. She says: "Marry her Charlie and I'll get something out of it. I'll be able to go back in the family."

Second, in the turning point scene, while Charley struggles with the decision to kill Irene, his father says to him:

"You should never have married a women who wasn't from the environment - it wasn't smart." Charlie reluctantly agrees. He says: **"The family is the only place I can be. I know that."**

The concept of an extended family "environment", to my mind, is the Aristotelian thought/theme "general maxim" of "Prizzi's Honor". For all the troubles Charley and Maerose have because of the 'environment', they cannot get themselves to leave the family/clan/tribe. Like the ancient Greeks, exile was not an option for them. As the Italians say: "Don't go farther than the village bell."

Security and a sense of being apart of a community is a necessary human condition and can only be attained in some sort of social entity ("environment"). If the nation-state does not provide that sense of security and community, then some other sub-state 'environments' will.

This "environment" theme of "Prizzi's Honor" may function as a sociological/anthropological hypothesis to explain 'organized crime.' Perhaps during the early 20th century, the American nation-state did not provide southern-Italian/American immigrants with a sense of security and community; whereas so called 'organized crime' families did. Justice, for example, metered out by the crime families was judged to be more equitable than that of the state.

One may hypothesize a similar failure of the Italian nation-state to provide a sense of national community for the people southern Italy today; thus, facilitating so-called organization crime "environments"

In short, I wonder:

Is "organized crime" a nation-state pejorative denoting alienated internal exiled citizens of the state?



Is “organized crime” in southern Italy and Sicily the third form of rejection of the 1860 Piedmont invasion, subjugation and exploitation (AKA Risorgimento):

first	brigandage;
second	emigration;
third	organized crime (metamorphosed brigandage)?

Is "organized crime" the ghost of the “Two Sicilies” haunting the Piedmontese?

Just a thought!

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