

POETICS (*Peri poietikes*, “On the Art of Poetry”)

by ARISTOTLE

TRANSLATED BY INGRAM BYWATER (Oxford 1920)

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1

Our subject being Poetry, I propose to speak not only of the art in general but also of its various subcategories and their respective capacities: of the structure of plot (*muthos*)¹ required for a good poem; of the number and nature of the constituent parts of a poem; and likewise of any other matters in the same line of inquiry. Let us follow the natural order and begin with the primary facts.

10 *Epic poetry*² and *tragedy*, as also *comedy*,³ *dithyrambic poetry*,⁴ and most pipe-playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation (*mimesis*).⁵ But at the same time they differ from one another in three ways, either by a difference of kind in their means, or by differences in the objects, or in the manner of their imitations.

Just as form and color are used as means by some, who (whether by art or constant practice) imitate and portray many things by their aid, and the voice is used by others; so also in the above-mentioned group of arts, the means with them as a whole are *rhythm*, *language*, and *melody*—used, however, either singly or in certain combinations. A combination of rhythm and melody alone is the means in pipe-playing⁶ and lyre-playing, and any other arts there may be of the same description, for instance imitative piping. Rhythm alone, without melody, is the means in the dancer’s imitations; for even he, by the

¹ *muthos*: the word Aristotle uses for “plot.” Otherwise, “utterance,” “speech,” “story,” “myth.”

² *Epic poetry*: long poems recited, not sung, e.g., Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Epic was always in “epic” meter (the dactylic hexameter). Epics often, but not always, concern gods, heroes, wars, etc.; note Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (farming), the philosophical poems of Parmenides and Empedocles.

³ *Tragedy* and *comedy* are *dramatic* poetry, portraying action and using actors and chorus.

⁴ *Dithyramb*: choral lyric poetry, danced and sung to the *auloi* (see note 6); associated with the worship of Dionysus, god of wine, revelry, fertility, drama.

⁵ *mimesis*: “imitation.” According to Aristotle, all art is somehow representational. The ethics of poetic *mimesis* (imitation or representation) will come up in Plato’s *Republic*.

⁶ *auletike*, the art of playing the *auloi*, a reed instrument sort of like bagpipes, though air came directly from the player’s mouth, not an inflated bladder.

rhythms of his attitudes, may represent people's temperaments (*ethe*),⁷ as well as what they do and suffer. There is further an art which imitates by language alone, without melody, in prose or in verse, and if in verse, either in some one or in a plurality of meters.⁸ This form of imitation is to this day without a name.⁹

10 [You can skip this bracketed section. We have no common name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus or a Socratic Conversation; and we should still be without one even if the imitation in the two instances were in trimeters or elegiacs or some other kind of verse—though it is the way with people to tack on “poet” to the name of a meter, and talk of elegiac-poets and epic-poets, thinking that they call them poets not by reason of the imitative nature of their work, but indiscriminately by reason of the meter they write in. Even if a theory of medicine or physical philosophy be put forth in a metrical form, it is usual to describe the writer in this way; Homer and Empedocles, however, have really nothing in common apart from their meter; so that, if the one is to be called a poet, the other should be termed a physicist rather than a poet. We should be in the same position also, if the imitation in these instances were in all the meters, like the Centaur (a rhapsody in a medley of all meters) of Chaeremon; and Chaeremon one has to recognize as a poet. So much, then, as to these arts.]

20 There are, lastly, certain other arts, which combine all the means so far mentioned: rhythm, melody, and verse. Thus we have dithyrambic and nomic poetry,¹⁰ tragedy and comedy; with this difference, however, that the three kinds of means are in some of them all employed together, and in others brought in separately, one after the other. These elements of difference in the above arts I term the means of their imitation.

2

What the imitator [i.e., the poet] imitates are *actions*. These doers of the action are necessarily either good people or bad—the diversities of human temperament nearly always stemming from this primary distinction, since the line between virtue and vice is one dividing the whole of humanity. It follows, therefore, that the people being represented must be either above our own level of goodness, or beneath it, or just such as we are.¹¹

⁷ For the sake of clarity, “temperament” and “inner qualities” will translate *ethos*; “character” will mostly refer to persons represented in drama or literature, and only sometimes to inner nature or qualities.

⁸ *Meter*: measured rhythmic patterns in a poem; how rhythmic elements are grouped together into units—feet, lines, groups of lines (strophes). E.g., Shakespeare's iambic pentameter is a *meter* or *measure* consisting of five iambic “feet” (five ta-DÁHs) per line: “To bé | or nó | to bé | that is | the quéstion.” Greek poetry used *meter*; it did not use rhyme. Note that ancient drama was all in verse form, i.e., in *meter*.

⁹ Aristotle refers on the one hand to *prose* (i.e., non-metrical) discourse, on the other hand, to spoken (i.e., not sung) verse, including epic, elegiac, and iambic.

¹⁰ *Nome* (whence “nomic”): solo song honoring Apollo; sung to the lyre.

¹¹ There is some ambiguity about what Aristotle means by “good” (*spoudaios*) and “bad” (*phaulos*). I.e., it is hard to tell if he means superior/inferior/etc. *morally*, or in terms of *social class* or *status* (gods/kings/heroes versus slaves/lowlifes/etc.). *spoudaios*

Compare painting. The people painted by Polygnotus are better than we are, those of Pauson worse, and those of Dionysius just like ourselves. It is clear that each of the above-mentioned forms of imitation will admit of these differences, and that it will become a separate type of imitation by representing objects with this point of difference. Even in dancing, pipe-playing, and lyre-playing such diversities are possible; and they are also possible in the nameless art that uses language, prose or verse without melody, as its means; Homer's characters, for instance, are better than we are; Cleophon's are on our own level;¹² and those of Hegemon of Thasos, the first writer of parodies, and Nicochares, the author of the *Rascal's Epic*,¹³ are beneath it. The same is true of the dithyramb and the nome: the characters may be presented in them with the difference exemplified in the [lost text] of [lost text] and Argas, and in the *Cyclopes* of Timotheus and Philoxenus. This difference it is that distinguishes tragedy and comedy also; the one prefers to imitate worse people, and the other, better, than the people of the present day.

3

A third difference in these arts is in the manner in which each kind of object is represented. Given both the same means and the same kind of object for imitation, one may either (1) speak at one moment in narrative and at another in an assumed character, as Homer does; or (2) one may remain the same throughout, without any such change; or (3) the imitators may represent the whole story dramatically, as though they were actually doing the things described.¹⁴

As we said at the beginning, therefore, the differences in these various types of imitation come under three heads: their means, their objects, and their manner.

Thus as an imitator, Sophocles will be on one side akin to Homer, both portraying good people; and on another to Aristophanes, since both present their characters as acting and doing.¹⁵ This in fact, according to some, is the reason for plays being termed *dramas*, because in a play the characters *act the story*.¹⁶ Hence too both tragedy and comedy are

really means "serious," *phaulos*, "trivial" or "vulgar." In any case, we the audience always occupy the space in between the "dramatic" extremes.

¹² Cleophon wrote "epics" of every-day life.

¹³ The *Deliad*.

¹⁴ Aristotle here divides story-telling poems into three types: (1) poetry mixing third-person narrative with direct quotation of characters (e.g., Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*); (2) poetry where the story-telling is handled throughout *either* by narrative without quotation of speakers, *or* by a role-playing voice (dramatic monologue); and (3) true drama, where actors and chorus members (the "imitators") role-play, without the aid of third-person narrative. All of this should be regarded as performance poetry.

¹⁵ Homer (epic poet, ca. 700 BCE) and Sophocles (dramatic poet, 496–406/5 BCE) both present characters of a superior sort in relation to us (gods, kings, heroes). Sophocles and Aristophanes are both *dramatic* poets. But Sophocles, as a tragedian, presents superior characters; Aristophanes, a comedian, inferior characters.

¹⁶ Greek *drama* means "action," "thing done." From *dran*: "to do," "to act."

claimed by the Dorians¹⁷ as their discoveries; comedy by the Megarians—by those in Greece as having arisen when Megara became a democracy, and by the Sicilian Megarians¹⁸ on the ground that the poet Epicharmus was of their country,¹⁹ and a good deal earlier than Chionides and Magnes;²⁰ even tragedy also is claimed by certain of the Peloponnesian Dorians.²¹ In support of this claim they point to the words “comedy” (*komoidia*) and “drama.” Their word for the outlying hamlets, they say, is *komai*, whereas Athenians call them “demes” (*demoi*)—thus assuming that comic poets got the name not from their *komoi*, or “revels,” but from their strolling from hamlet to hamlet, lack of appreciation keeping them out of the city.²² Their word also for “to act,” they say, is *dran*,
 10 whereas Athenians use *prattein*.²³

So much, then, as to the number and nature of the points of difference in the various types of imitation.

4

It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature.²⁴ Imitation is natural to human beings from childhood, one of our advantages over the lower animals being this: that we are the most imitative creatures in the world, and learn at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them
 20 in art—the forms, for example, of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures, not only to the philosopher, but also to the rest of humanity, however small our capacity for it. The reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meaning of things, for instance, that the man there is so-and-so. For if one has not seen the thing before, one’s pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or coloring or some similar cause. Imitation, then, being natural to us—as also the sense of melody and rhythm, the meters being obviously types

¹⁷ Greeks—not Athenians—living on the Peloponnese peninsula (southeast of Athens) and elsewhere.

¹⁸ There were two cities of Megara: one a Dorian city near Athens in Greece, the other a Greek colony on the island of Sicily.

¹⁹ Epicharmus, *ca.* 490 BCE, was a Sicilian comic poet.

²⁰ Chionides (*ca.* 488 BCE), Magnes (first victory in 473 BCE): early comic poets at Athens.

²¹ *Peloponnesian*: the Peloponnese peninsula more or less equals southern Greece.

²² It is fairly certain that the word “comedy” (*komoidia*) comes from *komos*, “drunken revel,” plus *oide*, “song”—“song performed at a drunken revel.” Tragedy (*tragoidia*) seems to mean something like “goat song” (*tragos*, “goat”).

²³ *prattein*: “act,” “accomplish.”

²⁴ Note that in this and the following paragraph, Aristotle derives poetry from human nature: we have poems because we are human; a poet’s inner nature is reflected in the kind—the *genre*—of poetry he or she writes. The next section will trace the *historical* development of different genres of (Greek) poetry.

of rhythms—it was through their original aptitude, and by a series of improvements for the most part gradual on their first efforts, that they created poetry out of their improvisations.

Poetry, however, soon broke up into two kinds according to the differences of temperament in the individual poets; for the graver among them would represent noble actions, and those of noble characters; and the meaner sort the actions of the ignoble. The latter class produced invectives at first, just as others did hymns and praise-poems. We know of no such poem by any of the pre-Homeric poets, though there were probably many such writers among them; instances, however, may be found from Homer downwards, for instance his *Margites*,²⁵ and the similar poems of others. In this poetry of invective its natural fitness brought an iambic meter into use; hence our present term “iambic,” because it was the meter of their “iambs” or invectives against one another.²⁶ The result was that the old poets became some of them writers of heroic²⁷ and others of iambic verse. Homer’s position, however, is peculiar: just as he was in the serious style the poet of poets, standing alone not only through the literary excellence, but also through the dramatic nature of his imitations, so too he was the first to outline for us the general forms of comedy by producing not a dramatic invective, but a dramatic picture of the ridiculous; his *Margites* in fact stands in the same relation to our comedies as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to our tragedies. As soon, however, as tragedy and comedy appeared in the field, those naturally drawn to the one line of poetry became writers of comedies instead of iambs, and those naturally drawn to the other, writers of tragedies instead of epics, because these new modes of art were grander and of more esteem than the old.

If it be asked whether tragedy is now all that it need be in its formative elements, to consider that, and decide it theoretically and in relation to the theaters, is a matter for another inquiry.²⁸

It certainly began in improvisations—as did also comedy, tragedy originating with the authors of the dithyramb, comedy with those of the phallic songs, which still survive as institutions in many of our cities.²⁹ And its advance after that was little by little, through their improving on whatever they had before them at each stage.³⁰ It was in fact only after

²⁵ *Margites*: a poem, of which only fragments survive, in mixed meters (hexameter, iambic), specializing in broad humor (an idiotic and sexually inept hero). Aristotle ascribes the poem to Homer, and regards it as a kind of proto-comedy. In a sense, then, Homer is the “father” of both tragedy and comedy.

²⁶ Iambic meter (i.e., using the repeating pattern ta-DAH; compare above, note 8) at first was mostly used for humorous or abusive poetry; later for more serious poetry.

²⁷ He means *epic*.

²⁸ Aristotle will now address the historical development of comedy and tragedy.

²⁹ *Phallic* songs were songs sung accompanying an oversized *phallos* (representation of the male member) carried in parades honoring Dionysus, god of fertility and revelry. Aristotle views phallic songs as the origin of comedy, just as he views tragedy as originating from primitive dithyramb (see above, note 4).

³⁰ Aristotle produces a *teleological* account, i.e., he views these changes over time as improvement upon improvement until a thing reaches its destined perfection.

10

a long series of changes that the movement of tragedy stopped on its attaining to its natural form.³¹ (1) The number of actors was first increased to two by Aeschylus,³² who curtailed the business of the chorus,³³ and made the dialogue, or spoken portion, take the leading part in the play.³⁴ (2) A third actor and scenery were due to Sophocles. (3) Tragedy acquired also its magnitude. Discarding short stories and a ludicrous diction, through its passing out of its satyric stage, it assumed, though only at a late point in its progress, a tone of dignity; and its meter changed then from trochaic to iambic.³⁵ The reason for their original use of the trochaic tetrameter was that their poetry was suited to Satyrs and more connected with dancing than it now is. As soon, however, as a spoken part came in, nature herself found the appropriate meter. The iambic [*ta-DAH*], we know, is the most speakable of meters, as is shown by the fact that we very often fall into it in conversation, whereas we rarely talk hexameters [*DAH-ta-ta*], and only when we depart from the speaking tone of voice. (4) Another change was a plurality of episodes.³⁶ As for the remaining matters, the superadded embellishments³⁷ and the account of their introduction, these must be taken as said, as it would probably be a long piece of work to go through the details.

5

As for comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of people worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one par-

³¹ See above note.

³² This discussion attributing various innovations to the great names of Athenian tragedy (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides) has to be treated carefully, as it reflects Aristotle's teleological approach: "great men" improving tragedy as it evolved into its perfect form (see note 30). Note too that Aristotle means *actors*, not *characters*. One actor could take on multiple roles; a single role could be shared between actors. Mask and costume, not the person inside, identified the character. Tragedies never needed more than three actors, however many the roles; Aristophanes introduces a fourth and even fifth actor. Comedy by Menander's time (late 300s and later) sticks to the three-actor rule. Note that everyone involved in producing drama was a man, including the men playing female characters.

³³ "Chorus" (*choros*) literally means "dance"; it refers to the dancer-singers of choral poetry, including dramatic poetry. Athenian drama featured a chorus where sometimes a "chorus leader" (the *koruphaios*) spoke for the group, while at other times, the chorus spoke/sang/danced as a unit. At still other times, choruses seem to have broken into half-choruses, and at other times, into separate speakers.

³⁴ Ancient Athenian tragedy and comedy were all in verse, but mixed speaking with singing with dancing—genuine musical theater.

³⁵ Aristotle seems to be saying that the earliest tragedies were the same as, or closely resembled, yet another type of drama: *satyr* drama (*not* satire), i.e., "funny" tragedy using choruses of *satyrs* (man-beast creatures). Aristotle supposes that at some point, a more serious type of drama, tragedy, split off from satyr drama.

³⁶ "Episodes" (*epeisodoi*, "character entries") are sort of like acts or scenes punctuated by choral-song "intermezzos" (*stasima*).

³⁷ Masks, costumes, etc., which Aristotle won't say much about.

ticular kind, the *ridiculous*, which is a species of the *ugly*.³⁸ The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.

Though the successive changes in tragedy and their authors are known, we cannot say the same of comedy; its early stages passed unnoticed, because it was not as yet taken up in a serious way. It was only at a late point in its progress that a chorus of comedians was officially granted by the archon; they used to be mere volunteers.³⁹ It had also already certain definite forms at the time when the record of those termed comic poets begins. Who it was who supplied it with masks, or prologues, or a plurality of actors and the like, has remained unknown. The invented plot, however, originated in Sicily, with Epicharmus and Phormis; of Athenian poets, Crates was the first to drop the comedy of personal abuse and frame stories of a general and non-personal nature, in other words, plots.⁴⁰

Epic poetry, then, has been seen to agree with tragedy to this extent, that of being an imitation of serious subjects in a grand kind of verse. It differs from it, however, (1) in that it is in one kind of verse and in narrative form; and (2) in its length—which is due to its action having no fixed limit of time, whereas tragedy endeavors to keep as far as possible within a single circuit of the sun, or something near that.⁴¹ This, I say, is another point of difference between them, though at first the practice in this respect was just the same in tragedies as epic poems. They differ also (3) in their constituents, some being common to both and others peculiar to tragedy—hence a judge of good and bad in tragedy is a judge of that in epic poetry also. All the parts of an epic are included in tragedy; but those of tragedy are not all of them to be found in the epic.⁴²

6

Reserving hexameter poetry [*epic*] and comedy for consideration hereafter, let us proceed now to the discussion of tragedy; before doing so, however, we must gather up the defini-

³⁸ “Ugly” translates *aiskhros*, which can mean either physically ugly or morally shameful—or both.

³⁹ At Athens, drama always used a *chorus*. The year 486 BCE saw the first *officially sponsored* productions of comedy at Athens (the assumption being that comedy was going on unofficially before that). Archons (city officials) would select which playwrights would be awarded a chorus by the city, i.e., which playwrights would be allowed to mount a public production. Official sponsorship of *tragedy* began in 536/533 BCE.

⁴⁰ Early comedy—i.e., the comedy of Aristophanes and others, what we call “Old Comedy”—often featured personal attacks against public figures: political satire. The story line could be somewhat loose compared to tragedy. Crates (earlier than Aristophanes) wrote myth-based comedies avoiding political satire. There is some evidence that politicians took measures to control the element of invective in comedy.

⁴¹ Aristotle means that the stories in epic can extend beyond a 24-hour period, whereas in tragedy, they tend not to.

⁴² Aristotle sees tragedy as arising from: (1) a poet’s individual inclination or character (serious poets for serious poetry; see note 24); (2) Homeric epic, (3) dithyramb, (4) satyr drama. Perhaps he is thinking of a convergence of multiple influences.

tion resulting from what has been said. *A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear; wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.*⁴³ Here by “language with pleasurable accessories” I mean that with rhythm and melody or song superadded; and by “the kinds separately” I mean that some portions are worked out with verse only, and others in turn with song.

10 As they act the stories, it follows that in the first place the *spectacle*⁴⁴ must be some part of the whole; and in the second *melody* and *diction*, these two being the means of their imitation. Here by “diction” I mean merely this, the metrical arrangement of the words; and by “melody,” what is too completely understood to require explanation. But further: the subject represented also is an action; and the action involves agents, who must necessarily have their distinctive qualities both of *temperament* (*ethos*) and *thought* (*dianoia*), since it is from these that we ascribe certain qualities to their actions. There are in the natural order of things, therefore, two causes, temperament and thought, of their actions, and consequently of their success or failure in their lives. Now the action (that which was done) is represented in the play by the *plot* (*muthos*). The plot, in our present sense of the term, is simply this, the combination of the incidents, or things done in the story; whereas temperament is what makes us ascribe certain moral qualities to the agents; and thought
20 is shown in all they say when proving a particular point or, it may be, enunciating a general truth. There are six parts consequently of every tragedy, as a whole, that is, of such or such quality, namely, a *plot*, *temperaments*, *diction*, *thought*, *spectacle* (*opsis*), and *melody*; two of them arising from the means, one from the manner, and three from the objects of the dramatic imitation; and there is nothing else besides these six. Of these, its formative elements, then, not a few of the dramatists have made due use, as every play, one may say, admits of spectacle, temperament, plot, diction, melody, and thought.

The most important of the six is the combination of the actions of the story.⁴⁵

30 Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Temperament gives us our personal qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray temperament; they include temperament for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, that is, its *plot*, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the purpose is everywhere the chief thing. Besides this, a tragedy is impossible without action, but tragedy does not have to represent the inner qualities of

⁴³ The term “catharsis” (*katharsis*) literally means “cleansing” or “purifying.” That *should* mean that watching tragedy “purges” the spectator’s system of emotional impurity—drama as therapy. Note that pity (*eleos*), like fear (*phobos*), could be regarded as an undesirable disturbance to the psyche. In Aristotle’s *Politics* (8.7 1341b32–1342a16), the philosopher remarks on ecstatic music that has the effect of cleansing (*katharsis*) the soul of emotions like pity, fear, and “a possessed state” (*enthousiasmos*).

⁴⁴ “Spectacle” = *ho tes opseos kosmos*, “the beauty of the visual impression.”

⁴⁵ Aristotle regards plot (*muthos*) as the most important element in tragedy.

characters—their respective temperaments (*ethe*). The tragedies of most of the moderns⁴⁶ fail to take account of these inner qualities—a defect common among poets of all kinds, and with its counterpart in painting in Zeuxis as compared with Polygnotus. For whereas the latter is strong in representing these inner qualities, the work of Zeuxis is devoid thereof. And again: one may string together a series of characteristic speeches of the utmost finish as regards diction and thought, and yet fail to produce the true tragic effect. But one will have much better success with a tragedy which, however inferior in these respects,⁴⁷ has a plot, a combination of incidents, in it. And again: the most powerful elements of attraction in tragedy, the *peripeteiai* (reversals of fortune) and *anagnoriseis* (recognition scenes), are parts of the plot.⁴⁸ A further proof is in the fact that beginners succeed earlier with the diction and inner qualities than with the construction of a story; and the same may be said of nearly all the early dramatists. We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of tragedy is the *plot*; and that the inner qualities come second—compare the parallel in painting, where the most beautiful colors laid on without order will not give one the same pleasure as a simple black-and-white sketch of a portrait. We maintain that tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents. Third comes the element of *thought* (*dianoia*), that is, the power of saying whatever can be said, or what is appropriate to the occasion. This is what, in the speeches in tragedy, falls under the arts of politics and rhetoric; for the older poets make their characters discourse like statesmen, and the moderns like rhetoricians. One must not confuse it with temperament (*ethos*). Temperament in a play is that which reveals the moral purpose of the agents, that is, the sort of thing they seek or avoid, where that is not obvious—hence there is no room for temperament in a speech on a purely indifferent subject. Thought, on the other hand, is shown in all they say when proving or disproving some particular point, or enunciating some universal proposition. Fourth among the literary elements is the *diction* (*lexis*) of the characters, that is, as before explained, the expression of their thoughts in words, which is practically the same thing with verse as with prose. As for the two remaining parts, *melody* is the greatest of the pleasurable accessories of tragedy. The *spectacle* (*opsis*), though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry.⁴⁹ The tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting-up of the spectacle is more a matter for the costumier than the poet.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ I.e., tragic poets of Aristotle's time (the late 300s BCE).

⁴⁷ I.e., in respect to the representation of *ethos*: temperament or inner qualities; “character” in the psychological sense.

⁴⁸ Tragic plots often feature reversals of fortune (*peripeteiai*): a powerful king deposed and powerless. We also find recognition scenes (*anagnoriseis*): a mother unwittingly plans to poison her son when she suddenly recognizes the amulet hanging from his neck.

⁴⁹ Spectacle would have involved scene painting, costumes and masks (the actors always wore masks), and special effects (gods lowered by crane), among other things.

⁵⁰ This reflects Aristotle's biases as a *reader*. Most Athenians, however, whether or not they could read, were not *readers*. Unlike Aristotle, they would not have approached

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Having thus distinguished the parts, let us now consider the proper construction of the plot, as that is at once the first and the most important thing in tragedy. We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude; for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described. Again: to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore impossible either (1) in a very minute creature, since our perception becomes indistinct as it approaches the instantaneous;⁵¹ or (2) in a creature of vast size—one, say, 1,000 miles long—as in that case, instead of the object being seen all at once, the unity and wholeness of it is lost to the beholder.

Just in the same way, then, as a beautiful whole made up of parts, or a beautiful living creature, must be of some size, a size to be taken in by the eye, so a story or plot must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by the memory. As for the limit of its length, so far as that is relative to public performances and spectators, it does not fall within the theory of poetry. If they had to perform a hundred tragedies, they would be timed by water-clocks, as they are said to have been at one period. The limit, however, set by the actual nature of the thing is this: the longer the story, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason of its magnitude. As a rough general formula, *a length which allows for a character to pass by a series of probable or necessary stages from misfortune to happiness, or from happiness to misfortune*, may suffice as a limit for the magnitude of the story.

8

The unity of a plot does not consist, as some suppose, in its having one person as its subject. An infinity of things befall that one person, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and in like manner there are many actions of one person which cannot be made to form one action. One sees, therefore, the mistake of all the poets who have written epics on the deeds of Heracles or Theseus, or similar poems. They suppose that, because Heracles was one man, the story also of Heracles must be one story.⁵² Homer, however, evidently understood this point quite well, whether by art or instinct, just in the same way

dramatic poetry as literature, but as *performance*. For them, spectacle was clearly quite important.

⁵¹ One views very small things all in one look: the naked eye cannot appreciate structure, etc.

⁵² I.e., Heracles' life and deeds encompass many stories—too many for one poem, no matter how long.

as he excels the rest in every other respect. In writing an *Odyssey*, he did not make the poem cover all that ever befell his hero—it befell him, for instance, to get wounded on Parnassus and also to feign madness at the time of the call to arms, but the two incidents had no probable or necessary connection with one another. Instead of doing that, Homer took an action with a unity of the kind we are describing as the subject of the *Odyssey*, as also of the *Iliad*.⁵³ The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which
 10 makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole.

9

From what we have said it will be seen that the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, that is, what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse—you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history. It consists really in this: that the one describes things that have actually happened, and the other the sorts of things that *might* happen. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements relate to things of *universal* import, whereas those of history relate to particulars.
 20 By "universal import" I mean what a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do, that being the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters. By "particulars" I mean what, for instance, Alcibiades did or had done to him.⁵⁴ In comedy this has become clear by this time. It is only when their plots have already been composed of probable incidents that they give it a basis of proper names, choosing for the purpose any names that may occur to them, instead of writing like the old iambic poets about particular persons.⁵⁵ In tragedy, however, they still adhere to the received names, and for the following reason: what convinces is the possible. For we are not yet sure as to the possibility of that which has *not* happened, whereas that which *has* happened is manifestly possible, else it would not have come to pass.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, even in tragedy there
 30 are some plays with but one or two known names in them, the rest being inventions; and

⁵³ Neither is the *Iliad* the story of the whole Trojan War, nor is the *Odyssey* the life story of Odysseus. The *Iliad* covers no more than an episode from the ninth year of the war, the *Odyssey*, the final homecoming of Odysseus, though with flash-backs.

⁵⁴ Alcibiades: Athenian politician and general from the late 400s BCE.

⁵⁵ Here Aristotle has in mind the later stages of the Middle Comedy of his own day (the later 300s). Unlike Aristophanes' Old Comedy, Middle Comedy had by then begun to focus on plot incident, with a reduction in the element of political satire. It could be (more or less) realistic without concerning real or familiar figures. (Menander's *Grouch*, which we'll read, follows this pattern.) By contrast, Old Comedy often mixed fantastic plot and invented characters with a lot of topical humor and characters unmistakably meant to evoke real-life figures.

⁵⁶ This later stage in comedy involved plausible, yet invented, plots and characters. The plots (the *muthoi*) of tragedy, though mostly based on what we would consider myth and legend, Aristotle treats as having some basis in *fact*.

there are some without a single known name, for instance Agathon's *Antheus*, in which both incidents and names are of the poet's invention; and it is no less delightful on that account. So that one must not aim at a rigid adherence to the traditional stories on which tragedies are based. It would be absurd, in fact, to do so, as even the known stories are only known to a few, though they are a delight none the less to all.

10 It is evident from the above that the poet (*poietes*) must be more the maker (*poietes*)⁵⁷ of his plots than of his verses, inasmuch as he is a poet by virtue of the imitative element in his work, and it is actions that he imitates. And if he should come to take a subject from actual history, he is none the less a poet for that; since some historic occurrences may
 10 very well be in the probable and possible order of things; and it is in that aspect of them that he is their poet.⁵⁸

Of simple plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot episodic when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of episodes. Actions of this sort bad poets construct through their own fault, and good ones on account of the players. His work being for public performance, a good poet often stretches out a plot beyond its capabilities, and is thus obliged to twist the sequence of incident.

20 Tragedy, however, is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another; there is more of the marvelous in them than if they happened of themselves or by mere chance. Even
 20 matters of chance seem most marvelous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them. So, for instance, the statue of Mity's at Argos killed the killer of Mity's by falling down on him when the latter was viewing it. For incidents like that we think to be not without a meaning.⁵⁹ A plot, therefore, of this sort is necessarily finer than others.

10

30 Plots are either simple or complex, since the actions they represent are naturally of this twofold description. The action, proceeding in the way defined, as one continuous whole, I call simple, when the change in the hero's fortunes takes place without *peripeteia* (reversal) or *anagnorisis* (recognition; see above, note 48); and complex, when it involves
 30 one or the other, or both. These should each of them arise out of the structure of the plot itself, so as to be the consequence, necessary or probable, of the antecedents. There is a great difference between a thing happening *after* something else, and *because of* something else.

11

⁵⁷ Greek *poietes* means "creator," "maker," "author," "poet."

⁵⁸ We know of at least three tragedies, all three early, on historical themes: Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus* and *Phoenician Women*, and Aeschylus' *Persians*.

⁵⁹ This Mity's seems to have been a real person from Aristotle's time, perhaps from the city of Argos; he may have fallen victim to political violence.

10 *A peripeteia* (reversal) is the change from one state of things within the play to its opposite of the kind described, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events. Take Oedipus. For him, the opposite state of things is produced by the Messenger, who, coming to gladden Oedipus and to remove his fears as to his mother, reveals the secret of his birth.⁶⁰ And in the *Lynceus*: just as Lynceus is being led off for execution, with Danaus at his side to put him to death, the incidents preceding this bring it about that he is saved and Danaus put to death.⁶¹ An *anagnorisis* (recognition) is, as the very word implies, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the characters marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form of recognition is one attended by reversals, like that which goes with the recognition in *Oedipus the King*.⁶² There are no doubt other forms of it; what we have said may happen in a way in reference to inanimate things, even things of a very casual kind; and it is also possible to discover whether some one has done or not done something. But the form most directly connected with the plot and the action of the piece is the first-mentioned.⁶³ This, with a reversal of fortune, will arouse either pity or fear—actions of that nature being what tragedy is supposed to represent. And it will also serve to bring about the happy or unhappy ending. The recognition, then, being of persons, it may be that of one person only to the other, the latter being already known; or both persons may have to discover each other. Iphigenia, for instance, was discovered to Orestes by sending the letter; and another recognition was required to reveal him to Iphigenia.⁶⁴

20

Two parts of the plot, then, the reversal and recognition, are on matters of this sort. A third part is suffering (*pathos*), which we may define as an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as murders on the stage, tortures, woundings, and the like. The other two have been already explained.⁶⁵

12

30 The parts of tragedy to be treated as formative elements in the whole were mentioned in a previous Chapter. From the point of view, however, of its quantity, that is, the separate sections into which it is divided, a tragedy has the following parts: prologue, episode, *exodos*, and a choral portion, this last divided into *parodos* and *stasimon*. These last two are common to all tragedies, whereas songs from the stage and *kommoi* are only found in some.⁶⁶ The prologue (*prologos*) is all that precedes the *parodos*⁶⁷ of the chorus; an epi-

⁶⁰ I.e., that Oedipus has killed his father; that leads to the realization that he has married his mother.

⁶¹ This is the now lost *Lynceus* of Theodectes.

⁶² I.e., Sophocles', which we shall read.

⁶³ I.e., recognitions like that in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

⁶⁴ Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. Orestes is about to be sacrificed by Iphigenia, his sister. But when each sibling comes to realize who the other is, the killing is averted.

⁶⁵ The tragic poets themselves, as we shall see, clearly regard this element, *pathos*, as very important. So the chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: "Through suffering, knowledge!" (*pathei mathos*).

⁶⁶ "Songs from the stage" are solo arias for actors.

sode (*epeisodos*) all that comes in between two whole choral songs;⁶⁷ the *exodos* all that follows after the last choral song. In the choral portion the *parodos* is the whole first statement of the chorus; a *stasimon*, a song of the chorus without anapests or trochees; a *kommos*, a lamentation sung by chorus and actor in concert.⁶⁹ The parts of tragedy to be used as formative elements in the whole we have already mentioned; the above are its parts from the point of view of its quantity, or the separate sections into which it is divided.⁷⁰

13

10 The next points after what we have said above will be these: (1) What is the poet to aim at, and what is he to avoid, in constructing his plots? and (2) What are the conditions on which the tragic effect depends?

We assume that, for the finest form of tragedy, the plot must be not simple but complex; and further, that it must imitate actions arousing pity and fear, since that is the distinctive function of this kind of imitation. It follows, therefore, that there are three forms of plot to be avoided. (1) A good person must not be seen passing from happiness to misery, or (2) a bad person from misery to happiness.

20 The first situation is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us. The second is the most untragic that can be; it has no one of the requisites of tragedy; it does not appeal either to the human feeling in us, or to our pity, or to our fears. Nor, on the other hand, should (3) an extremely bad person be seen falling from happiness into misery. Such a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear. For pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that there will be nothing either piteous or fear-inspiring in the situation. There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a person not pre-eminently virtuous or just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by

⁶⁷ *Parodos*: chorus entry number.

⁶⁸ I.e., between two *stasima*, or choral entr'actes.

⁶⁹ *kommoi* are the often frenzied lamentation songs (chorus plus actor[s]) at or near the end of tragedies.

⁷⁰ The structure of a tragedy was typically as follows:

- prologue
- *parodos* (chorus entry number)
- episode (a scene with actors)
- *stasimon* (choral song between episodes)
- additional episodes and *stasima*
- *kommos* (lament)
- *exodos* (finale, chorus exit)

Solo arias and other types of choral and combined choral-solo numbers could be added to the mix.

some form of *hamartia* (“error”).⁷¹ Such characters will enjoy good reputation and prosperity—for instance, Oedipus, Thyestes,⁷² and the people of note of similar families.

10 The perfect plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double outcome. The change in the hero’s fortunes must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery. And the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some extraordinary instance of *hamartia* on his or her part. This person will be either such as we have described or of superior station; he or she should not be of the inferior sort. Fact also confirms our theory. The poets began by accepting any tragic story that came to hand. But nowadays, the finest tragedies are always on the story of some few families—on that of Alemeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, or any others that may have been involved, as either agents or sufferers, in some deed of horror.⁷³ The theoretically best tragedy, then, has a plot of this description. The critics, therefore, are wrong who blame Euripides for taking this line in his tragedies, and giving many of them an unhappy ending. It is, as we have said, the right line to take. The best proof is this: on the stage, and in the public performances, such plays, properly worked out, are seen to be the most truly tragic. And Euripides, even if his execution be faulty in every other point, is seen to be nevertheless the most tragic certainly of the dramatists.

20 After this comes the construction of plot which some rank first, one with a double story (like the *Odyssey*) and an opposite issue for the good and the bad characters.⁷⁴ It is ranked as first only through the weakness of the audiences; the poets merely follow their public, writing as its wishes dictate. But the pleasure here is not that of tragedy. It belongs rather to comedy, where the bitterest enemies in the piece (for instance Orestes and Aegisthus) walk off good friends at the end, with no slaying of any one by any one.⁷⁵

14

⁷¹ *hamartia*. Much ink has been spilled over *hamartia*. The Greek is often translated “tragic flaw,” but it really means the process of “missing the mark” (literally and figuratively), of committing a “mistake” or “error,” even a “sin” or “crime.” A tragic character suffers misfortune by reason of some misstep on his or her part. A personality trait (a “flaw”) may be involved or it may not. At all events, it is the “false step,” the *hamartia*, that leads to misfortune for that character. One of the ironies that ancient Athenian tragedy explores is the possibility of committing a monstrous crime without possessing a monstrous personality.

⁷² Thyestes unwittingly ate his sons.

⁷³ I.e., some families of myth and legend supply rich material for tragedy, some do not. The criteria: if the character has far to fall (potentially), and if that fall can result from a misstep or misdeed (*hamartia*) worthy of pity.

⁷⁴ In the *Odyssey* (an epic, not tragedy *per se*), Odysseus comes home (happy ending), but the men trying to marry his wife all get killed (not happy for them).

⁷⁵ Aristotle seems to regard as untragic—indeed, as comic—plays (including nominal tragedies) where there are “bad guys” punished in the end. Misfortune should come about via *hamartia*, not because of an evil or criminal nature.

The tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the spectacle (*opsis*); but they may also be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play—which is the better way and shows the better poet. The plot in fact should be so framed that, even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them shall be filled with horror and pity at the incidents; which is just the effect that the mere recital of the story in *Oedipus* would have on one. To produce this same effect by means of what the eye sees (the *opsis*) is less artistic, and requires extraneous aid. Those, however, who make use of the spectacle to put before us that which is merely monstrous and not productive of fear, are wholly out of touch with tragedy; not every kind of pleasure should be required of a tragedy, but only its own proper pleasure.

The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation; it is clear, therefore, that the causes should be included in the incidents of his story. Let us see, then, what kinds of incident strike one as horrible, or rather as piteous. In a deed of this description the parties must necessarily be either friends, or enemies, or indifferent to one another. Now when enemy does it on enemy, there is nothing to move us to pity either in his doing or in his meditating the deed, except so far as the actual pain of the sufferer is concerned; and the same is true when the parties are indifferent to one another. Whenever the tragic deed, however, is done within the family—when murder or the like is done or meditated by brother on brother, by son on father, by mother on son, or son on mother—these are the situations the poet should seek after.⁷⁶ The traditional stories, accordingly, must be kept as they are, for instance, the murder of Clytaemnestra by Orestes and of Eriphyle by Alcmeon.

At the same time, even with these there is something left to the poet himself: it is for him to devise the right way of telling the stories handed down to him. Let me explain more clearly what I mean by “the right way.” The deed of horror may be done by the doer knowingly and consciously, as in the old poets, and in Medea’s murder of her children in Euripides. Or he may do it, but in ignorance of his relationship, and discover that afterwards, as does Sophocles’ *Oedipus*. Here the deed is outside the play;⁷⁷ but it may be within it, like the act of the Alcmeon in *Astydamas*, or that of the Telegonus in *Odysseus Wounded*. A third possibility is for one meditating some deadly injury to another, in ignorance of his relationship, to make the discovery in time to draw back. These exhaust the possibilities, since the deed must necessarily be either done or not done, and either knowingly or unknowingly.

The worst situation is when the personage is with full knowledge on the point of doing the deed, and leaves it undone. It is odious and also (through the absence of suffering) untragic; hence it is that no one is made to act thus except in some few instances, for in-

⁷⁶ The Greeks constantly affirmed one’s moral responsibility “to help friends, harm enemies.” To violate that dictum (to harm friends) makes for good tragedy; to obey it does not.

⁷⁷ In Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother before the play even begins. We await only recognition and reversal.

stance Haemon and Creon in *Antigone*.⁷⁸ Next after this comes the actual perpetration of the deed meditated. A better situation than that, however, is for the deed to be done in ignorance, and the relationship discovered afterwards, since there is nothing odious in it, and the recognition will serve to astound us. But the best of all is the last; what we have in *Cresphontes*, for example, where Merope, on the point of slaying her son, recognizes him in time; in *Iphigenia*,⁷⁹ where sister and brother are in a like position; and in *Helle*, where the son recognizes his mother, when on the point of giving her up to her enemy.

10 This will explain why our tragedies are restricted (as we said just now) to such a small number of families. It was accident rather than art that led the poets in quest of subjects to embody this kind of incident in their plots. They are still obliged, accordingly, to have recourse to the families in which such horrors have occurred.

On the construction of the plot, and the kind of plot required for tragedy, enough has now been said.

15

Concerning *temperament* (*ethos*), there are four points to aim at. First and foremost, that they shall be good. There will be an element of temperament in the play, if (as has been observed) what a personage says or does reveals a certain moral purpose; and a good element of temperament, if the purpose so revealed is good. Such goodness is possible in every type of personage, even in a woman or a slave, though the one is perhaps an inferior, and the other a wholly worthless being.

20

The second point is to make them appropriate. The temperament before us may be, say, manly; but it is not appropriate in a female temperament to be manly, or clever.

The third is to make them like the reality, which is not the same as their being good and appropriate, in our sense of the term.

The fourth is to make them consistent and the same throughout; even if inconsistency be part of the person before one for imitation as presenting that form of temperament, he should still be consistently inconsistent. We have an instance of baseness of character, not required for the story, in Menelaus in Euripides' *Orestes*; of the incongruous and unbefitting in the lamentation of Odysseus in *Scylla*, and in the speech of Melanippe; and of inconsistency in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, where Iphigenia the suppliant is utterly unlike the later Iphigenia.

30

The right thing, however, is in the character-portrayals, just as in the incidents of the play, to endeavor always after the necessary or the probable; so that whenever such-and-such a personage says or does such-and-such a thing, it shall be the probable or necessary outcome of his or her temperament. And whenever this incident follows on that, it shall be either the necessary or the probable consequence of it. From this one sees (to digress for a

⁷⁸ In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Haemon, Creon's son, nearly, but does not quite, kill his father.

⁷⁹ Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.

moment) that the final resolution also should arise out of the plot itself, and not depend on a stage-artifice, as in *Medea*, or in the story of the (arrested) departure of the Greeks in the *Iliad*. The artifice must be reserved for matters outside the play—for past events beyond human knowledge, or events yet to come, which require to be foretold or announced; since it is the privilege of the gods to know everything. There should be nothing improbable among the actual incidents. If it be unavoidable, however, it should be outside the tragedy, like the improbability in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

10 But to return to the element of a characters temperament or nature, as tragedy is an imitation of characters better than the ordinary person, we in our way should follow the example of good portrait-painters, who reproduce the distinctive features of a person, and at the same time, without losing the likeness, make him handsomer than he is. The poet in like manner, in portraying people quick or slow to anger, or with similar infirmities of character, must know how to represent them as such, and at the same time as good men, as Agathon and Homer have represented Achilles.

All these rules one must keep in mind throughout, and further, those also for such points of stage-effect as directly depend on the art of the poet, since in these too one may often make mistakes. Enough, however, has been said on that subject in my published writings.⁸⁰

16

20 *Recognition (anagnorisis)* in general has been explained already. As for the species of recognition, the first to be noted is (1) the least artistic form of it, of which the poets make most use through mere lack of invention, recognition by signs or marks. Of these signs some are congenital, like the “lance-head which the Earth-born have on them,” or “stars,” such as Carcinus brings in in his *Thyestes*; others acquired after birth—these latter being either marks on the body, for instance scars, or external tokens, like necklaces, or to take another sort of instance, the ark in the recognition in *Tyro*. Even these, however, admit of two uses, a better and a worse; the scar of Odysseus is an instance; the recognition of him through it is made in one way by the nurse and in another by the swineherds. A recognition using signs as a means of assurance is less artistic, as indeed are all
30 such as imply reflection; whereas one bringing them in all of a sudden, as in the Bath-story, is of a better order.

Next after these are (2) recognitions made directly by the poet. These are inartistic for that very reason; for instance, Orestes' recognition of himself in Iphigenia: whereas his sister reveals who she is by the letter, Orestes is made to say himself what the poet rather than the story demands. This, therefore, is not far removed from the first-mentioned fault, since he might have presented certain tokens as well. Another instance is the “shuttle's voice” in the *Tereus* of Sophocles.

⁸⁰ The *Poetics* comes from lecture notes published only after Aristotle's death. Most of Aristotle's work published during his life-time has been lost.

(3) A third species is recognition through memory, from a person's consciousness being awakened by something seen or heard. Thus in *The Cypriote* of Dicaeogenes, the sight of the picture makes the man burst into tears; and in the "Tale of Alcinous," by hearing the harper, Odysseus is reminded of the past and weeps;⁸¹ the recognition of them being the result.

(4) A fourth kind is recognition through reasoning; for instance in *The Libation Bearers*: "One like me is here; there is no one like me but Orestes; he, therefore, must be here." Or that which Polyidus the Sophist suggested for Iphigenia, since it was natural for Orestes to reflect: "My sister was sacrificed, and I am to be sacrificed like her." Or that in the *Tydeus* of Theodectes: "I came to find a son, and am to die myself." Or that in *The Phinidae*: on seeing the place the women inferred their fate, that they were to die there, since they had also been exposed there.

(5) There is, too, a composite recognition arising from bad reasoning on the side of the other party. An instance of it is in *Odysseus the False Messenger*: he said he should know the bow—which he had not seen; but to suppose from that that he would know it again (as though he had once seen it) was bad reasoning. (6) The best of all recognitions, however, is that arising from the incidents themselves, when the great surprise comes about through a probable incident, like that in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles; and also in *Iphigenia*; for it was not improbable that she should wish to have a letter taken home. These last are the only recognitions independent of the artifice of signs and necklaces. Next after them come recognitions through reasoning.

17

At the time when he is constructing his plots, and engaged on the diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember (1) to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook incongruities. This is shown by what was censured in Carcinus, the return of Amphiaraus from the sanctuary; it would have passed unnoticed, if it had not been actually seen by the audience; but on the stage his play failed, the incongruity of the incident offending the spectators. (2) As far as may be, too, the poet should even act his story with the very gestures of his characters. Given the same natural qualifications, he who feels the emotions to be described will be the most convincing; distress and anger, for instance, are portrayed most truthfully by one who is feeling them at the moment. Hence it is that poetry demands a man with special gift for it, or else one with a touch of madness in him; the former can easily assume the required mood, and the latter may be actually beside himself with emotion. (3) His story, again, whether already made or of his own making, he should first simplify and reduce to a universal form, before proceeding to lengthen it out by the insertion of episodes. The following will show how the universal element in *Iphigenia*, for instance, may be viewed: A certain maiden having been offered in sacrifice, and spirited away from her sacrificers into another land, where the custom was to sacrifice all strang-

⁸¹ In the *Odyssey* (books 8–9), Odysseus, when he hears the Trojan War (in which he took part) sung about, weeps and thus discloses his connection to those events.

ers to the goddess, she was made there the priestess of this rite. Long after that the brother of the priestess happened to come; the fact, however, of the oracle having for a certain reason bidden him go thither, and his object in going, are outside the Plot of the play. On his coming he was arrested, and about to be sacrificed, when he revealed who he was—either as Euripides puts it, or (as suggested by Polyidus) by the not improbable exclamation, “So I too am doomed to be sacrificed, as my sister was”; and the disclosure led to his salvation. This done, the next thing, after the proper names have been fixed as a basis for the story, is to work in episodes or accessory incidents. One must mind, however, that the episodes are appropriate, like the fit of madness in Orestes, which led to his arrest, and the purifying, which brought about his salvation. In plays, then, the episodes are short; in epic poetry they serve to lengthen out the poem. The argument of the *Odyssey* is not a long one.

A certain man has been abroad many years; Poseidon is ever on the watch for him, and he is all alone. Matters at home too have come to this, that his substance is being wasted and his son’s death plotted by suitors to his wife. Then he arrives there himself after his grievous sufferings; reveals himself, and falls on his enemies; and the end is his salvation and their death. This being all that is proper to the *Odyssey*, everything else in it is episode.

18

(4) There is a further point to be borne in mind. Every tragedy is in part *complication* (*desis*, “tying up”) and in part *resolution* (*lusis*, “untying”). The incidents before the opening scene, and often certain also of those within the play, form the complication, and the rest, the resolution. By complication I mean all from the beginning of the story to the point just before the change in the hero’s fortunes; by resolution, all from the beginning of the change to the end. In the *Lynceus* of Theodectes, for instance, the complication includes, together with the presupposed incidents, the seizure of the child and that in turn of the parents; and the resolution all from the indictment for the murder to the end. Now it is right, when one speaks of a tragedy as the same or not the same as another, to do so on the ground before all else of their plots, that is, as having the same or not the same complication and resolution. Yet there are many dramatists who, after a good complication, fail in the resolution. But it is necessary for both points of construction to be always duly mastered. (5) There are four distinct species of tragedy—that being the number of the constituents also that have been mentioned: first, the complex tragedy, which is all *reversal* and *recognition*; second, the tragedy of *suffering* (*pathos*), for instance the *Ajaxes* and *Ixions*; third, the tragedy of *temperament* (*ethos*), for instance the *Phthiotides* and *Peleus*. The fourth constituent is that of *spectacle* (*opsis*), exemplified in the *Phorcides*, in *Prometheus*, and in all plays with the scene laid in the underworld. The poet’s aim, then, should be to combine every element of interest, if possible, or else the more important and the major part of them. This is now especially necessary owing to the unfair criticism to which the poet is subjected these days. Just because there have been poets before him strong in the several types of tragedy, the critics now expect the one man to surpass that which was the strong point of each one of his predecessors.

(6) One should also remember what has been said more than once, and not write a tragedy on an epic body of incident (that is, one with a plurality of stories in it), by attempting to dramatize, for instance, the entire story of the *Iliad*. In the epic owing to its scale every part is treated at proper length. With a drama, however, on the same story the result is very disappointing. This is shown by the fact that all who have dramatized the fall of Troy in its entirety, and not part by part, like Euripides, or the whole of the Niobe story, instead of a portion, like Aeschylus, either fail utterly or have but ill success on the stage. For that and that alone was enough to ruin even a play by Agathon. Yet in their reversals, as also in their simple plots, the poets I mean show wonderful skill in aiming at the kind of effect they desire—a tragic situation that arouses the human feeling in one, like the clever villain (for instance Sisyphus) deceived, or the brave wrongdoer worsted. This is probable, however, only in Agathon's sense, when he speaks of the probability of even improbabilities coming to pass.

(7) The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and take a share in the action—that which it has in Sophocles rather than in Euripides. With the later poets, however, the songs in a play of theirs have no more to do with the plot of that than of any other tragedy. Hence it is that they are now singing substitutable intermezzos, a practice first introduced by Agathon.⁸² And yet what real difference is there between singing such interpolated pieces, and attempting to fit in a speech, or even a whole act, from one play into another?

19

The other elements having been discussed, it remains to consider the *diction* (*lexis*, the “language”) and *thought* (*dianoia*). As for the thought, we may assume what is said of it in my *Art of Rhetoric*, as it belongs more properly to that department of inquiry. The thought of the characters is shown in everything to be effected by their language—in every effort to prove or disprove, to arouse emotion (pity, fear, anger, and the like), or to maximize or minimize things. It is clear, also, that their mental procedure must be on the same lines in their actions likewise, whenever they wish them to arouse pity or horror, or have a look of importance or probability. The only difference is that with the act the impression has to be made without explanation, whereas with the spoken word it has to be produced by the speaker, and result from his language. What, indeed, would be the good of the speaker, if things appeared in the required light even apart from anything he says?

As regards the diction, one subject for inquiry under this head is the turns given to the language when spoken, for instance, the difference between command and prayer, simple statement and threat, question and answer, and so forth. The theory of such matters, however, belongs to *delivery* and the art that governs that.⁸³ Whether the poet knows these

⁸² At first, tragedy centered around the chorus; the actor and the action was secondary. Gradually, though, the center of gravity shifted so far in the direction of actors and action that choruses began merely to play the role of an entertaining diversion unrelated to plot. Agathon (late 400s BCE) is credited with being the first to compose “generic” choruses that could be inserted wherever needed (*embolia*).

⁸³ “Delivery” is the province of rhetoric, the art “governing” it.

things or not, his art as a poet is never seriously criticized on that account. What fault can one see in Homer's "Sing of the wrath, Goddess"?—which Protagoras has criticized as being a command where a prayer was meant, since to bid one do or not do, he tells us, is a command. Let us pass over this, then, as appertaining to another art, and not to that of poetry.

[Sections 20–25 we shall not be reading.]

26

10 The question may be raised whether the epic or the tragic is the higher form of imitation. It may be argued that, if the less vulgar is the higher, and the less vulgar is always that which addresses the better public, an art addressing any and every one is of a very vulgar order.⁸⁴ It is a belief that their public cannot see the meaning, unless they add something themselves, that causes the perpetual movements of the performers—bad pipe-players, for instance, rolling about, if discus-throwing is to be represented, or mauling the chorus leader (*koruphaios*), if Scylla is the subject of the piece.⁸⁵ Tragedy, then, is said to be an art of this order—to be in fact just what the later actors were in the eyes of their predecessors. For Myrmiscus used to call Callippides "the ape" because (he thought) Callippides overacted his parts; and a similar view was taken of Pindar also. All tragedy, however, is said to stand to the epic as the newer to the older school of actors. The former, accordingly, is said to address a cultivated audience, which does not need the accompaniment of
20 gesture; the latter, an uncultivated one. If, therefore, tragedy is a vulgar art, it must clearly be lower than the epic.⁸⁶

The answer to this is twofold. In the first place, one may urge (1) that the censure does not touch the art of the dramatic poet, but only that of his interpreter. For it is quite possible to overdo the gesturing even in an epic recital, as did Sosistratus, and in a singing contest, as did Mnasiheus of Opus. (2) That one should not condemn all movement, unless one means to condemn even the dance, but only that of ignoble people—which is the point of the criticism passed on Callippides and in the present day on others, that their women do not resemble *reputable* women. (3) That tragedy may produce its effect even without movement or action in just the same way as Epic poetry. For from the mere reading
30 of a play its quality may be seen. So that, if it be superior in all other respects, this element of inferiority is not a necessary part of it.

In the second place, one must remember (1) that tragedy has everything that the epic has (even the epic meter being admissible), together with a not inconsiderable addition in the shape of the music (a very real factor in the pleasure of the drama) and the spectacle. (2)

⁸⁴ Aristotle defends tragedy against the charge that it is more vulgar than epic. Athenian tragedy could be open to that charge because it was designed for performance before a mass audience. Epic too was performed before mass audiences at Athens, though less often than drama.

⁸⁵ Timotheus' *Scylla* is a dithyramb (above note 4) concerning the monster Scylla, who devoured some of Odysseus' crew.

⁸⁶ It was typical in ancient Greece to regard the older as better than the newer.

That its reality of presentation is felt in the play as read, as well as in the play as acted. (3) That the tragic imitation requires less time to attain its end, which is a great advantage, since the more concentrated effect is more pleasurable than one with a large admixture of time to dilute it—consider the *Oedipus* of Sophocles, for instance, and the effect of expanding it into the number of lines of the *Iliad*. (4) That there is less unity in the imitation of the epic poets, as is proved by the fact that any one work of theirs supplies matter for several tragedies, the result being that, if they take what is really a single story, it seems curt when briefly told, and thin and waterish when on the scale of length usual with their verse. In saying that there is less unity in an epic, I mean an epic made up of a plurality of actions, in the same way as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have many such parts, each one of them in itself of some magnitude; yet the structure of the two Homeric poems is as perfect as can be, and the action in them is as nearly as possible one action. If, then, tragedy is superior in these respects, and also besides these, in its poetic effect (since the two forms of poetry should give us, not any or every pleasure, but the very special kind we have mentioned), it is clear that, as attaining the poetic effect better than the epic, it will be the higher form of art.

So much for tragedy and epic poetry—for these two arts in general and their species; the number and nature of their constituent parts; the causes of success and failure in them; the objections of the critics, and the solutions in answer to them.

20 [The rest of the *Poetics*, now lost, seems to have mostly concerned comedy.]