



PENGUIN



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ARISTOTLE

Poetics

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Poetics

Translated with an introduction and notes by

MALCOLM HEATH

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...with imitate agents and people doing things." This is the reason we say – for the term 'drama': i.e. that the poets imitate people doing things. It is in consequence of this too that the Dorians lay claim to tragedy and comedy. The Megarians lay claim to comedy – both on the mainland (who allege that it arose in the period of their democracy), and those in Sicily (that being the birthplace of the poet Pindarus, who was much earlier than Chionides and Magnes); and some of the Peloponnesians lay claim to tragedy. They use the names accordingly. They say that they call outlying villages *kômai*, while Athenians call them *dêmoi*, the assumption being that comedians were so-called from the revel or *kômos*, but because they toured the villages were labelled from the town in disgrace. And they say that they use the verb *prattein* for 'do', the Athenians *prattein*.

So much, then, for the number of ways in which imitation is differentiated, and what they are.

3. THE ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY OF POETRY

3.1 *Origins*

- 4 In general, two causes seem likely to have given rise to the art of poetry, both of them natural.¹²

Imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood (and in this they differ from other animals, i.e. in having a strong propensity to imitation and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation); so does the universal pleasure in imitations. What happens in practice is evidence of this: we take delight in viewing the most accurate possible images of objects which in themselves cause distress when we see them (e.g. the shapes of the lowest species of

animal, and corpses). The reason for this is that understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it. This is the reason why people take delight in seeing images; what happens is that as they view them they come to understand and work out what each thing is (e.g. 'This is so-and-so'). If one happens not to have seen the thing before, it will not give pleasure as an imitation, but because of its execution or colour, or for some other reason.

Given, then, that imitation is natural to us, and also melody and rhythm (it being obvious that verse-forms are segments of rhythm),¹³ from the beginning those who had the strongest natural inclination towards these things generated poetry out of improvised activities by a process of gradual innovation.

3.2 *Early history*

Poetry bifurcated in accordance with the corresponding kinds of character: more serious-minded people imitated fine actions, i.e. those of fine persons; more trivial people imitated those of inferior persons (the latter at first composing invectives, while the others composed hymns and encomia). We are not in a position to identify a poem of the latter kind¹⁴ by any of the poets who preceded Homer, although they are likely to have been numerous; but beginning with Homer we can do so (e.g. his *Margites* and similar poems). Because of its suitability, the iambic verse-form developed in these poems; indeed, the reason it is now called 'iambic' is that they wrote lampoons or *iamboi* against each other in that verse-form. And so some of the ancients became composers of heroic poetry, others of lampoons. But just as Homer was the outstanding poet of the serious kind, since he did not just compose well but also made his imitations dramatic,¹⁵ so too he was the first to adumbrate the form of comedy; what he composed was not an invective, but a dramatization of the laughable. His *Margites* stands in the same relation to comedy as the

49a *Iliad* and *Odyssey* do to tragedy. When tragedy and comedy made their appearance those who inclined towards either kind of poetry became, in accordance with their nature, poets of comedy (instead of lampoons) or of tragedy (instead of epic), because these forms were greater and more highly esteemed than the others.

3.3 Tragedy

This is not the place for a detailed investigation of whether or not tragedy is now sufficiently developed with respect to its formal constituents (judged both in its own right and in relation to theatrical performances). But originally it developed from improvisations. (This is true of tragedy, and also of comedy: the former arose from the leaders of the dithyramb, the latter from the leaders of the phallic songs which are still customary even now in many cities.)¹⁶ Then tragedy was gradually enhanced as people developed each new aspect of it that came to light. After undergoing many transformations tragedy came to rest, because it had attained its natural state.

The number of actors was increased from one to two by Aeschylus, who also reduced the choral parts and made the spoken word play the leading role; the third actor and scene-painting were introduced by Sophocles. In addition, the magnitude increased from short plots; and in place of comic diction, as a consequence of a change from the satyric style,¹⁷ tragedy acquired dignity at a late stage, and the iambic verse-form was adopted instead of the trochaic tetrameter. (They used tetrameters at first because the composition was satyric in manner, and more akin to dance. But when speech was introduced nature itself found the appropriate form of verse, iambic being the verse-form closest to speech. There is evidence of this: we speak iambs in conversation with each other very often, but rarely dactylic hexameters – and only when we depart from the normal conversational tone.)¹⁸ As for the number of episodes and other such features, the way each of them is said to have been elab-

orated may be taken as read; it would probably be a major undertaking to go through them all individually.

3.4 Comedy

Comedy (as we have said) an imitation of inferior people – not, however, with regard to every kind of defect: the laughable is a species of what is disfigured. The laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain.¹⁹

The transformations which comedy has undergone, and those responsible for them, have not been written; but, because it was not taken seriously, little attention was paid to comedy at first. Indeed, it was relatively late that the archon first introduced a comic chorus;²⁰ before that the performers were volunteers. Comedy already had some of its features before there is any mention of those identified as comic poets, and it is not known who introduced the prologues, the number of actors and so forth. But plot-constructors were originally from Sicily; among Athenian poets it was Crates who first abandoned the form of a lampoon and began to construct unified stories and plots.²¹

3.5 Epic

Epic poetry corresponds to tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of actions of noble people. But they differ in that epic uses one verse-form alone, whereas tragedy uses many. They also differ in length, since tragedy tries so far as possible to keep within a single day, or not to exceed it by much, whereas epic is not restricted in time, and differs in this respect. (At first, however, people made no distinction between tragedy and epic in this respect.)

Some of the component parts are common to both, such as

peculiar to tragedy. Consequently anyone who understands what is good and bad in tragedy also understands about epic, since anything tragedy is not all in epic poetry.

4. TRAGEDY: DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Definition

- 6 We shall discuss the art of imitation in hexameter verse and comedy later;²² as for tragedy, let us resume the discussion by stating the definition of its essence on the basis of what has already been said.

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification²³ of such emotions.

(By 'language made pleasurable' I mean that which possesses rhythm and melody, i.e. song. By the separation of its species I mean that some parts are composed in verse alone; others by contrast make use of song.)

4.2 Component parts

Since the imitation is performed by actors, it follows first of all that the management of the *spectacle* must be a component part of tragedy. Then there is *lyric poetry* and *diction*, since these are the medium in which the actors perform the imitation. (By 'diction' I mean the

actual composition of the verse; what is meant by 'lyric poetry' is self-evident.)

Now, tragedy is an imitation of an action, and the action is performed by certain agents. These must be people of a certain kind with respect to their character and reasoning. (It is on the basis of people's character and reasoning that we say that their actions are of a certain kind, and in respect of their actions that people enjoy success or failure.) So *plot* is the imitation of the action (by 'plot' here I mean the organization of events); *character* is that in respect of which we say that the agent is of a certain kind; and *reasoning* is the speech which the agents use to argue a case or put forward an opinion.

So tragedy as a whole necessarily has six component parts, which determine the tragedy's quality: i.e. plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle and lyric poetry. The medium of imitation comprises two parts, the mode one, and the object three; and there is nothing apart from these.

4.3 The primacy of plot

Virtually all tragedians, one might say, use these formal elements; for in fact every drama alike has spectacle, character, plot, diction, song and reasoning.²⁴ But the most important of them is the structure of the events:

- (i) Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life. Well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality; people possess certain qualities in accordance with their character, but they achieve well-being or its opposite on the basis of how they fare. So the imitation of character is not the purpose of what the agents do; character is included along with and on account of the actions. So the events, i.e. the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all.

- (ii) Furthermore, there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be one without character. The tragedies of most modern poets lack character, and in general there are many such poets. Compare, among painters, the relation between Zeuxis and Polygnotus: the latter is good at depicting character, but Zeuxis' painting has no character.²⁵
- (iii) Also, if one were to compose a series of speeches expressive of character, however successful they are in terms of diction and reasoning, it will not achieve the stated function of tragedy; a tragedy which, though it uses these elements less adequately, has a plot and a structure of events will do so much more effectively.
- (iv) Additionally, the most important devices by which tragedy sways emotion are parts of the plot, i.e. reversals and recognitions.²⁶
- (v) A further indication is that those who are trying to write poetry are capable of accuracy in diction and character before they can construct the events; compare too almost all the early poets.

4.4 *The ranking completed*

So the plot is the source and (as it were) the soul of tragedy; character is second. (It is much the same in the case of painting: if someone were to apply exquisitely beautiful colours at random he would give less pleasure than if he had outlined an image in black and white.) Tragedy is an imitation of an action, and on account above all of the action it is an imitation of agents.

Third is reasoning. This is the ability to say what is implicit in a situation and appropriate to it, which in prose is the function of the arts of statesmanship and of rhetoric. Older poets used to make people speak like statesmen; contemporary poets make them speak rhetorically.²⁷ Character is the kind of thing which discloses the nature of a choice; for this reason speeches in which there is nothing at all which the speaker chooses or avoids do not possess character. Reasoning refers to the means by which people argue that

something is or is not the case, or put forward some universal proposition.

Fourth is diction. By 'diction' I mean, as was said before, verbal expression; this has the same effect both in verse and in prose speeches.

Of the remaining parts, song is the most important of the sources of pleasure. Spectacle is attractive, but is very inartistic and is least germane to the art of poetry. For the effect of tragedy is not dependent on performance and actors; also, the art of the property-manager has more relevance to the production of visual effects than does that of the poets.

5. PLOT: BASIC CONCEPTS

Given these definitions, let us discuss next what qualities the structure of the events should have, since this is the first and most important part of tragedy.

5.1 *Completeness*

We have laid down that tragedy is an imitation of a complete, i.e. whole, action, possessing a certain magnitude. (There is such a thing as a whole which possesses no magnitude.) A *whole* is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A *beginning* is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an *end* is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it. A *middle* is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes

after it. Well-constructed plots should therefore not begin or end at any arbitrary point, but should employ the stated forms.

5.2 *Magnitude*

Any beautiful object, whether a living organism or any other entity composed of parts, must not only possess those parts in proper order, but its *magnitude* also should not be arbitrary; beauty consists in magnitude as well as order. For this reason no organism could be beautiful if it is excessively small (since observation becomes confused as it comes close to having no perceptible duration in time) or
51a excessively large (since the observation is then not simultaneous, and the observers find that the sense of unity and wholeness is lost from their observation, e.g. if there were an animal a thousand miles long). So just as in the case of physical objects and living organisms, they should possess a certain magnitude, and this should be such as can readily be taken in at one view, so in the case of plots: they should have a certain length, and this should be such as can readily be held in memory.

The definition of length which is determined by theatrical performances and perception is not relevant to the art of poetry; if it were necessary to perform a hundred tragedies they would time the performances by the clock, as they say used to be done on other occasions.²⁸ But the definition which agrees with the actual nature of the matter is that invariably the greater the plot is (up to the limits of simultaneous perspicuity) the more beautiful it is with respect to magnitude; or, to state a straightforward definition, 'the magnitude in which a series of events occurring sequentially in accordance with probability or necessity gives rise to a change from good fortune to bad fortune, or from bad fortune to good fortune', is an adequate definition of magnitude.

5.3 *Unity*

A plot is not (as some think) unified because it is concerned with a
8 single person. An indeterminately large number of things happen to any one person, not all of which constitute a unity; likewise a single individual performs many actions, and they do not make up a single action. So it is clear that a mistake has been made by all those poets who have composed a *Heracleid* or *Theseid*, or poems of that kind, on the assumption that, just because Heracles was one person, the plot too is bound to be unified. Just as Homer excels in other respects, he seems to have seen this point clearly as well, whether through art or instinct. When he composed the *Odyssey* he did not include everything which happened to Odysseus (e.g. the wounding on Parnassus and the pretence of madness during the mobilization: the occurrence of either of these events did not make the occurrence of the other necessary or probable);²⁹ instead, he constructed the *Odyssey* about a single action of the kind we are discussing. The same is true of the *Iliad*.

5.4 *Determinate structure*

Just as in other imitative arts the imitation is unified if it imitates a single object, so too the plot, as the imitation of an action, should imitate a single, unified action – and one that is also a whole. So the structure of the various sections of the events must be such that the transposition or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole. If the presence or absence of something has no discernible effect, it is not a part of the whole.

5.5 *Universality*

9 It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or
 51b necessity. The historian and the poet are not distinguished by their use of verse or prose; it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would be a history in verse just as much as in prose. The distinction is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen.³⁰

For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars. The *universal* is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity; this is what poetry aims at, even though it applies individual names. The particular is the actions or experiences of (e.g.) Alcibiades.

In the case of comedy this is in fact clear. The poets construct the plot on the basis of probabilities, and then supply names of their own choosing; they do not write about a particular individual, as the lampoonists do. In the case of tragedy they do keep to actual names. The reason for this is that what is possible is plausible; we are disinclined to believe that what has not happened is possible, but it is obvious that what has happened is possible – because it would not have happened if it were not. To be sure, even in tragedy in some cases only one or two of the names are familiar, while the rest are invented, and in some none at all, e.g. in Agathon's *Antheus*;³¹ in this play both the events and the names are invented, but it gives no less pleasure. So one need not try at all costs to keep to the traditional stories which are the subjects of tragedy; in fact, it would be absurd to do so, since even what is familiar is familiar only to a few, and yet gives pleasure to everyone.

So it is clear from these points that the poet must be a maker³² of

plots rather than of verses, insofar as he is a poet with respect to imitation, and the object of his imitation is action. Even if in fact he writes about what has happened, he is none the less a poet; there is nothing to prevent some of the things which have happened from being the kind of thing which probably would happen, and it is in that respect that he is concerned with them as a poet.

5.6 *Defective plots*

Of simple plots³³ and actions, the episodic ones are the worst. By an *episodic* plot I mean one in which the sequence of episodes is neither necessary nor probable. Second-rate poets compose plots of this kind of their own accord; good poets do so on account of the actors – in writing pieces for competitive display³⁴ they draw out the plot beyond its potential, and are often forced to distort the sequence. 52a

6. PLOT: SPECIES AND COMPONENTS

6.1 *Astonishment*

The imitation is not just of a complete action, but also of events that evoke fear and pity. These effects occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another. This will be more astonishing than if they come about spontaneously or by chance, since even chance events are found most astonishing when they appear to have happened as if for a purpose – as, for example, the statue of Mitys in Argos killed the man who was responsible for Mitys' death by falling on top of him as he was looking at it.³⁵ Things like that are not thought to occur at random. So inevitably plots of this kind will be better.

6.2 Simple and complex plots

- 10 Some plots are simple, others complex, since the actions of which the plots are imitations are themselves also of these two kinds. By a *simple* action I mean one which is, in the sense defined, continuous and unified, and in which the change of fortune comes about without reversal or recognition. By *complex*, I mean one in which the change of fortune involves reversal or recognition or both. These must arise from the actual structure of the plot, so that they come about as a result of what has happened before, out of necessity or in accordance with probability. There is an important difference between a set of events happening *because* of certain other events and *after* certain other events.

6.3 Reversal

- 11 A *reversal* is a change to the opposite in the actions being performed, as stated – and this, as we have been saying, in accordance with probability or necessity. For example, in the *Oedipus* someone came to give Oedipus good news and free him from his fear with regard to his mother, but by disclosing Oedipus' identity he brought about the opposite result;³⁶ and in the *Lynceus*, Lynceus himself was being led off to be killed, with Danaus following to kill him, but it came about as a consequence of preceding events that the latter was killed and Lynceus was saved.³⁷

6.4 Recognition

Recognition, as in fact the term indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship³⁸ or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune. Recognition

is best when it occurs simultaneously with a reversal, like the one in the *Oedipus*.

There are indeed other kinds of recognition. Recognition can come about in the manner stated with respect to inanimate and chance objects; and it is also possible to recognize whether someone has or has not performed some action. But the one that has most to do with the plot and most to do with the action is the one I have mentioned. For a recognition and reversal of that kind will involve pity or fear, and it is a basic premise that tragedy is an imitation of actions of this kind. Moreover, bad fortune or good fortune will be the outcome in such cases.

Since the recognition is a recognition of some person or persons, some involve the recognition of one person only on the part of the other, when it is clear who the other is; but sometimes there must be a recognition on both sides (e.g. Iphigeneia is recognized by Orestes from the sending of the letter, but the recognition of Orestes by Iphigeneia had to be different).³⁹

6.5 Suffering

So there are these two parts of the plot – reversal and recognition; a third is suffering. Of these, reversal and recognition have already been discussed; *suffering* is an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on).

6.6 Quantitative parts of tragedy

We have already mentioned the quantitative parts of tragedy which should be regarded as its formal elements. In quantitative terms, the separate parts into which it is divided are as follows: prologue; episode; finale; choral parts, comprising entry-song and ode.

10.6 *Diction*

Diction should be given particular care in those parts in which little is happening, and with regard to the quality of character nor of reasoning; excessively brilliant diction detracts from character and reasoning.

II. PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

II.1 *Principles*

25 As for problems and their solutions, their number and the classes into which they fall should become clear if considered in this way:

- (i) The poet is engaged in imitation, just like a painter or anyone else who produces visual images, and the object of his imitation must in every case be one of three things: either the kind of thing that was or is the case; or the kind of thing that is said or thought to be the case; or the kind of thing that ought to be the case.
- (ii) The diction in which these things are expressed includes non-standard words, metaphors and many modifications of diction; these licences are allowed to poets.
- (iii) In addition, correctness is not the same thing in ethics and poetry, nor in any other art and poetry. Error in poetry is of two kinds, one intrinsic, the other incidental. If someone has chosen to imitate accurately but failed to do so because of incompetence, the fault is intrinsic; but if he has chosen not to do so correctly (e.g. to show a horse with both right legs thrown forward) the error is in respect to the particular art (e.g. in respect to medicine or some other art), not in respect to the art of poetry itself.¹²⁷

II.2 *Applications*

So one should solve the objections posed in problems by considering them on the basis of these principles.

- (i) First, those with regard to the art of poetry itself. If impossibilities have been included in a poem, that is an error; but it is correct if it attains the end of the art itself (the end has been stated above): i.e. if it makes either this or some other part have greater impact. An example is the pursuit of Hector.¹²⁸ If, however, it is possible for the end to be achieved as well or better without contravening the art concerned with those matters, then the error is not correct; there should if possible be no error at all.
- (ii) Also, which class does the error belong to: those in respect of the art, or those in respect of some other incidental? It is less serious if the artist was unaware of the fact that a female deer does not have antlers than if he painted a poor imitation.
- (iii) Furthermore, if the objection is that something is not true, perhaps it is as it ought to be; e.g. Sophocles said that he portrayed people as they should be, Euripides as they are. That is the solution to use.
- (iv) If it is neither true nor as it ought to be, one might reply that this is what people say; e.g. stories about the gods: it may be that talking like that is neither an idealization nor the truth, and perhaps Xenophanes was right;¹²⁹ but at any rate, that is what people say.
- (v) Other things, though not idealizations, may perhaps reflect the way things used to be; e.g. the passage about the weapons, 'their spears stood upright on the butt-end' – that was the norm then (as it is even now among the Illyrians).¹³⁰
- (vi) In evaluating any utterance or action, one must take into account not just the moral qualities of what is actually done or said, but also the identity of the agent or speaker, the addressee, the

occasion, the means, and the motive (e.g. whether it is to bring about a greater good or avert a greater evil).

(vii) Other problems should be solved with an eye to diction. For example a non-standard word may provide the solution to 'first the mules' (perhaps he does not mean mules but sentinels),¹³¹ Dolon being 'ugly in appearance' (not physically deformed but facially disfigured, since Cretans call facial beauty 'beauty of appearance'),¹³² and 'mix the wine stronger' (not undiluted, as for drunkards, but faster).¹³³ Other things are said metaphorically, e.g. 'all the gods and men slept through the night', while at the same time he says 'when he looked out over the Trojan plain . . . the sound of pipes and pan-pipes'; 'all' is said metaphorically for 'many', since all is a lot.¹³⁴ Also 'alone with no share' is metaphorical, the best known instance being unique.¹³⁵

(viii) With reference to pronunciation, as in Hippias of Thasos' solution to 'we grant him achievement of glory' and 'part is rotted by rain'.¹³⁶

(ix) Punctuation provides the solution to some problems; e.g. Empedocles: 'at once mortal things were born that before were immortal, and things unmixed formerly mixed'.¹³⁷

(x) So does ambiguity; e.g. 'more of the night has passed' – 'more' is ambiguous.¹³⁸

(xi) Other problems can be solved with reference to linguistic usage. We call diluted wine 'wine'; hence the phrase 'greaves of new-forged tin'. We call people who work iron 'bronze-smiths'; hence Ganymede is said to pour wine for Zeus, although the gods do not drink wine (this could also be metaphorical).¹³⁹

(xii) Whenever a word seems to imply a contradiction, one should consider the number of meanings it could bear in the context; e.g. in 'by it was the bronze spear stayed' – how many different possible ways are there for it to be stopped there, in one way or another, however one might best take it?¹⁴⁰ (This is the exact opposite of what Glaucon describes,¹⁴¹ when he says that some people make unreasonable prior assumptions and then, although

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the adverse verdict is one they have reached by themselves, they make inferences from it and if anything contradicts their own ideas they criticize the poet as if he had expressed *their* opinion. This is what has occurred in the case of Icarius.¹⁴² People assume that he is a Spartan, and that Telemachus' not meeting him when he went to Sparta is therefore odd. But perhaps the Cephallenians are right when they say that Odysseus married from among them, and that his name is Icadius not Icarius. So probably the problem is based on a misconception.)

II.3 Conclusion

In general:

- (i) Impossible things should be referred to poetic effect, or idealization of the poet's opinion. With regard to poetic effect, a plausible impossible is preferable to what is implausible but possible. Again, it is impossible for people to be as Zeuxis painted them, but that is an idealization of the truth; one should surpass the model.¹⁴³
- (ii) Irrationalities should be referred to what people say: that is one solution, and also sometimes that it is not irrational, since it is probable that improbable things will happen.¹⁴⁴
- (iii) Contradictory utterances should be subjected to the same scrutiny as refutations in arguments (i.e. the same thing said, with reference to the same thing, and in the same sense?), to establish whether the poet contradicts either what he says himself or what a reasonable person would assume.¹⁴⁵
- (iv) An objection, either to irrationality or to contradiction, is correct when there is no necessity and the poet makes none of the irrationality (as Euripides fails to use Aegeus) or of the contradiction (as that of Menelaus in the *Orestes*).¹⁴⁶

So the objections people make are of five kinds, i.e.