

Aristotle's *Poetics*

- about 350 B.C.E.
- Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Euripides' *Medea* already 80 years old; Aristophanes' work 50-70 years old
- deals with drama, not theater
- good to read not only for analysts, but also for producers/creators

poet = literary artist

poetics = literary art

What is poetry? Aristotle's core answer:
imitation, an artificial representation of real life

- poetry grew out of imitation and harmony/rhythm, two innate human desires
- the first artists created comedy and drama, depending on personal inclination/character
- graver/serious people imitated the noble actions of good men, leading to tragedy
- more "trivial" people imitated "meaner" men
- an origin of the difficulty of comedy vs. drama

lampooners --> comedy writers

epic poets --> tragedians

epic structure = one with a multiplicity of plots
(not good for tragedy)

What is tragedy?

- **"an imitation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain magnitude (for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude)"**
- **"of events inspiring fear or pity [. . .] pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves"**
- **"an imitation of persons who are above the common level"**
- **ends in catharsis/wonder**
- **beautiful**

whole = having a beginning, middle, and end

"An end [. . .] is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity or as a rule, but has nothing following it."

"[Tragedy must revolve around] the character between two extremes - that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous - a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families."

"[. . .] when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another - if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother; a son his father; a mother her son; a son his mother; or any other deed of the kind is done - these are the situations to be looked for by the poet."

Qualitative Aspects of Tragedy

"Every Tragedy [. . .] must have six parts, which parts determine its quality – namely . . .

- 1 Plot
- 2 Character
- 3 Diction
- 4 Thought
- 5 Song
- 6 Spectacle

1. Plot

- the "arrangement of the incidents"
- including three parts, "the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy – *Peripeteia*, or Reversal of the Situation, and Recognition scenes," both of which surprise, and the Scene of Suffering

i) "Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite [. . .]. Thus in the *Oedipus*, the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect."

ii) "Recognition [. . .] is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the *Oedipus*."

Recognition types:

- 1 by signs
- 2 "invented at will" – just says it
- 3 memory when the sight of some object awakens a feeling
- 4 by reasoning

iii) "The Scene of Suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like."

plots are either *simple* or *complex*

- Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition
- Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or Recognition, or both

"A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse."

2. Character

(and relationships - number 1 for Shakespeare)

"qualities of the agents"

"reveals moral purpose [. . .] what a man chooses or avoids"

"there are four things to be aimed at" . . .

1 "and most important, it must be good." The character will be good if the moral purpose is good.

2 propriety: "a type of manly valor; but valor in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness, is inappropriate"

3 character must be true to life

4 consistency: "for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent."

"The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles."

3. Thought

(theme - like Shaw, Ibsen, Brecht - social ideas)

- **"is required wherever a statement is proved [. . .] or a general truth enunciated"**
- **"the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances"**
- **the logic/thinking behind the actions**

"Under Thought is included every effect which has to be produced by speech, the subdivisions being: proof and refutation; the excitation of the feelings, such as pity, fear, anger, and the like; the suggestion of importance or its opposite."

"[. . .] incidents should speak for themselves without verbal exposition; while effects aimed at should be produced by the speaker"

"what were the business of a speaker, if the Thought were revealed quite apart from what he says?"

4. Diction

- language, dialogue, style in writing
- occasionally the dominant element, for example in the poetic dramas of English romantic authors of the early 1800s, and in *high comedy* or *comedy of manners* dating from 1600s in England, emphasizing social class, behavior, wit, paronomasia

"expression of the meaning in words, and its essence is the same both in verse and prose"

"One branch of inquiry treats of the Modes of Utterance. But this province of knowledge belongs to the art of Delivery and to the masters of that science" – to theater, rather than drama

5. Song

"chief place among the embellishments" (too obvious to discuss)

6. Spectacle

- emphasized in some opera, musicals, 19th-century melodrama, and court spectacles ("masques") in England during 1500s

- **focus on costumes, sets, stage machinery, other elements which enhance the visual experience**

"has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry"

"the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet"

"Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the *Oedipus*. But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids."

Two Constituent Parts of Tragedy:

"Every tragedy falls into two parts" . . .

- 1 Complication**
- 2 Unraveling or Denouement**

Complication = "all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune"
Unraveling = "that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end"

Quantitative Parts of Tragedy (in XII)

- 1 Prologue**
- 2 Episode**
- 3 Exode (*exodos*)**
- 4 Choric songs contained within**
 - a Parode (*parodos*)**
 - b Stasimon**

Prologue precedes the Parode of the Chorus
Episodes come between complete choric songs
Exode has no choric song after it

Choric parts:

Parode is the first undivided utterance of the Chorus

Stasimon is a Choric ode without anapaests or trochaic tetrameters

(*Commos* is a joint lamentation of Chorus and actors)