

Poetics by Aristotle. Summary

Ch. 1-3

Aristotle proposes to approach poetry from a scientific viewpoint, examining the constituent parts of poetry and drawing conclusions from those observations. First, he lists the different kinds of poetry: epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and lyre-playing. Next, he remarks that all of these kinds of poetry are mimetic, or imitative, but that there are significant differences between them.

The first kind of distinction is the means they employ. Just as a painter employs paint and a sculptor employs stone, the poet employs language, rhythm, and harmony, either singly or in combinations. For instance, flute-playing and lyre-playing employ rhythm and harmony, while dance employs only rhythm. He also addresses the question of non-poetic language, arguing that poetry is essentially mimetic, whether it is in verse or in prose. Thus, Homer is a poet, while Empedocles, a philosopher who wrote in verse, is not. While Empedocles writes in verse, his writing is not mimetic, and so it is not poetry. In tragedy, comedy, and other kinds of poetry, rhythm, language, and harmony are all used. In some cases, as in lyric poetry, all three are used together, while in other cases, as in comedy or tragedy, the different parts come in to play at different times.

The second distinction is the objects that are imitated. All poetry represents actions with agents who are either better than us, worse than us, or quite like us. For instance, tragedy and epic poetry deal with characters who are better than us, while comedy and parody deal with characters who are worse than us.

The final distinction is with the manner of representation: the poet either speaks directly in narrative or assumes the characters of people in the narrative and speaks through them. For instance, many poets tell straight narratives while Homer alternates between narrative and accounts of speeches given by characters in his narrative. In tragedy and comedy, the poet speaks exclusively through assumed characters.

Ch. 4-5

Aristotle suggests that it is human nature to write and appreciate poetry. We are by nature imitative creatures that learn and excel by imitating others, and we naturally take delight in works of

imitation. As evidence of the claim that we delight in imitation, he points out that we are fascinated by representations of dead bodies or disgusting animals even though the things themselves would repel us. Aristotle suggests that we can also learn by examining representations and imitations of things and that learning is one of the greatest pleasures there is. Rhythm and harmony also come naturally to us, so that poetry gradually evolved out of our improvisations with these media.

As poetry evolved, a sharp division developed between serious writers who would write about noble characters in lofty hymns and panegyrics, and meaner writers who would write about ignoble characters in demeaning invectives. Tragedy and comedy are later developments that are the grandest representation of their respective traditions: tragedy of the lofty tradition and comedy of the mean tradition.

Aristotle stops short of saying that tragedy has achieved its complete and finished form. He lists four innovations in the development from improvised dithyrambs toward the tragedies of his day. Dithyrambs were sung in honor of Dionysus, god of wine, by a chorus of around fifty men and boys, often accompanied by a narrator. Aeschylus is responsible for the first innovation, reducing the number of the chorus and introducing a second actor on stage, which made dialogue the central focus of the poem. Second, Sophocles added a third actor and also introduced background scenery. Third, tragedy developed an air of seriousness, and the meter changed from a trochaic rhythm, which is more suitable for dancing, to an iambic rhythm, which is closer to the natural rhythms of conversational speech. Fourth, tragedy developed a plurality of episodes, or acts.

Next, Aristotle elaborates on what he means when he says that comedy deals with people worse than us ourselves, saying that comedy deals with the ridiculous. He defines the ridiculous as a kind of ugliness that does no harm to anybody else. Aristotle is able only to give a very sketchy account of the origins of comedy, because it was not generally treated with the same respect as tragedy and so there are fewer records of the innovations that led to its present form.

While both tragedy and epic poetry deal with lofty subjects in a grand style of verse, Aristotle notes three significant differences between the two genres. First, tragedy is told in a dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and employs several different kinds of verse while epic poetry employs only one. Second, the action of a tragedy is usually confined to a single day, and so the tragedy itself is usually much shorter than an epic poem. Third, while tragedy has all the elements that are characteristic of epic poetry, it also has some additional elements that are unique to it alone.

Ch. 6

Aristotle now narrows his focus to examine tragedy exclusively. In order to do so, he provides a definition of tragedy that we can break up into seven parts: (1) it involves *mimesis*; (2) it is serious; (3) the action is complete and with magnitude; (4) it is made up of language with the "pleasurable accessories" of rhythm and harmony; (5) these "pleasurable accessories" are not used uniformly throughout, but are introduced in separate parts of the work, so that, for instance, some bits are spoken in verse and other bits are sung; (6) it is performed rather than narrated; and (7) it arouses the emotions of pity and fear and accomplishes a *katharsis* (purification or purgation) of these emotions.

Next, Aristotle asserts that any tragedy can be divided into six component parts, and that every tragedy is made up of these six parts with nothing else besides. There is (a) the spectacle, which is the overall visual appearance of the stage and the actors. The means of imitation (language, rhythm, and harmony) can be divided into (b) melody, and (c) diction, which has to do with the composition of the verses. The agents of the action can be understood in terms of (d) character and (e) thought. Thought seems to denote the intellectual qualities of an agent while character seems to denote the moral qualities of an agent. Finally, there is (f) the plot, or *mythos*, which is the combination of incidents and actions in the story.

Aristotle argues that, among these six, the plot is the most important. The characters serve to advance the action of the story, not vice versa. The ends we pursue in life, our happiness and our misery, all take the form of action. That is, according to Aristotle, happiness consists in a certain kind of activity rather than in a certain quality of character. Diction and thought are also less

significant than plot: a series of well-written speeches have nothing like the force of a well-structured tragedy. Further, Aristotle suggests, the most powerful elements in a tragedy, the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis*, are elements of the plot. Lastly, Aristotle notes that forming a solid plot is far more difficult than creating good characters or diction.

Having asserted that the plot is the most important of the six parts of tragedy, he ranks the remainder as follows, from most important to least: character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. Character reveals the individual motivations of the characters in the play, what they want or don't want, and how they react to certain situations, and this is more important to Aristotle than thought, which deals on a more universal level with reasoning and general truths. Melody and spectacle are simply pleasurable accessories, but melody is more important to the tragedy than spectacle: a pretty spectacle can be arranged without a play, and usually matters of set and costume aren't the occupation of the poet anyway.

Ch. 7-9

Aristotle elaborates on what he means when he says that the action of a tragedy is complete in itself and with magnitude. For a plot to be a complete whole, it must have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is a point that does not necessarily follow from anything else, which naturally has consequences following from it. The end is a point that naturally follows from preceding events but does not have any necessary consequences following it. The middle is a point that is naturally connected both to events before and after it.

The magnitude of a story is important, as it is in any art. Paintings are neither infinitesimally small nor monstrously big because they must be of such a size as to be taken in by the eye. Similarly, a tragedy must be of a moderate length so as to be taken in by the memory. Usually, time limits are set by the audience or other outside factors, but Aristotle suggests that the longer the play the greater the magnitude, provided the poet can hold the tragedy together as one coherent statement. As a general rule of thumb, he suggests the action should be long enough to allow the main character to pass through a number of necessary or probable steps that take him from fortune to misfortune or vice versa.

In insisting upon the unity of plot, Aristotle makes it clear that he does not mean that it is enough to focus the plot on the life of one individual. Our lives consist of all sorts of disconnected episodes, and the story of a man's life would rarely have the completeness necessary for a unified plot. Rather, the poet must select some series of events from a character's life—as Homer does in the *Odyssey*—and craft them into a coherent whole. Any part of a story that could be added or removed without any great effect on the rest of the story is superfluous and takes away from the unity of the piece.

Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and history, saying that while history deals with what has been, poetry deals with what might be: it presents the possible as probable or necessary. Poetry is superior to history because history always deals with particular cases while poetry can express universal and general truths. Tragedy gives a feeling of necessity—or at least probability—to the way certain characters behave in certain situations and thus gives us insight into general principles regarding fate, choice, and so on. The worst kind of plot is the episodic plot, where there is no seeming necessity or probability whatsoever between events.

As a medium that arouses pity and fear, tragedy is most effective when events occur unexpectedly and yet in a logical order. The ideal is to have the audience see the final outcome of a tragedy as the necessary consequence of all the action that preceded it, and yet have that outcome be totally unexpected.

Ch. 10-12

Aristotle introduces the concepts of *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) and *anagnorisis* (discovery or recognition) in his discussion of simple and complex plots. All plots lead from beginning to end in a probable or necessary sequence of events, but a simple plot does so without *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis* while a complex plot may have one or both of these elements. The *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis* of a complex plot should themselves be necessary or probable consequences of what came before so that they are a part of the plot and not unnecessary add-ons.

Peripeteia is the reversal from one state of affairs to its opposite. Some element in the plot effects a reversal, so that the hero who thought he was in good shape suddenly finds that all is lost, or vice versa.

It happens to characters who learn of good fortune, and hatred and misery to those who discover unhappy truths. The best kind of *anagnorisis* accompanies *peripeteia*. That is, a reversal of fortune effects a discovery or vice versa. For instance, Oedipus' discovery of who his mother is effects a reversal of fortune from proud king to horrible disgrace. Aristotle suggests that *anagnorisis* is possible by a number of other means as well, but it is most intimately connected to the plot when it accompanies *peripeteia*. The two together will help to arouse pity and fear and will also help to draw the play to its conclusion.

In addition to *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, Aristotle defines a third part of the plot—suffering—as actions of destructive or painful nature, such as murders, torture, and woundings.

In Chapter 12, Aristotle discusses the quantitative elements of tragedy—the different parts of the performance. These are the Prologue, Episode, Exode, and a choral portion consisting of Parode and Stasimon. In addition, some tragedies have songs from the stage and a *Commos*, a lamentation sung by both actor and chorus. The Parode is the first full statement of the chorus; everything that precedes it is Prologue. The Stasimon is a choral song in a certain meter, while action that takes place between choral songs is Episode. Everything that follows the last choral song is Exode.

Ch. 13-14

Aristotle suggests that the best kinds of plot are complex plots that arouse fear and pity. He thus concludes that three kinds of plot should be avoided. First, we should avoid plots that show a good man going from happiness to misery, since such events seem more odious than fearful or pitiable. Second, we should avoid plots that show a bad man going from misery to happiness, since this arouses neither pity nor fear and appeals to none of our emotions. Third, we should avoid plots that show a bad man going from happiness to misery, since it will also not arouse the feelings of pity or fear. We feel pity for undeserved misfortune (and a bad man deserves his misfortune), and we feel fear if the person we pity is something like ourselves.

Aristotle concludes that the best kind of plot involves the misfortune of someone who is neither particularly good nor particularly bad and whose downfall does not result from some unpleasantness or vice, but rather from *hamartia*—an error in judgment. A good plot, then, consists of the following four elements: (1) It must focus around one single issue; (2) the hero must go from fortune to misfortune, rather than vice versa; (3) the misfortune must result from *hamartia*; and (4) the hero should be at least of intermediate worth, and if not, he must be better—never worse—than the average person. This explains why tragedies tend to focus around a few families (there are many tragedies about the families of Oedipus and Orestes among others): they must be upstanding families that suffer great misfortune from an error in judgment rather than a vice. Only second-rate plots that pander too much to public taste focus on a double issue where the good fare well and the bad fare poorly.

Pity and fear—which Aristotle calls the "pleasures" of tragedy—are better if they result from the plot itself rather than the spectacle. A story like that of Oedipus should be able to arouse pity and fear even if it is told without any acting at all. The poet who relies on spectacle is relying on outside help, whereas the poet who relies only on his own plot is fully responsible for his creation.

We feel pity most when friends or family harm one another, rather than when unpleasantness takes place between enemies or those who are indifferent to one another. The deed may be done knowingly—as when Medea kills her children—or unknowingly—as when Oedipus kills his father. A third alternative is that one character plans to kill another, but then discovers the family connection between them in time to refrain from the killing.

Thus, the deed can either be done or not done, and it can take place in either ignorance or knowledge. Aristotle suggests that the best kind of plot is of the third alternative, where *anagnorisis* allows a harmful deed to be avoided. The second best case is where the deed is done in ignorance. And the third best is the case where the deed is done with full knowledge. Worst is the case where there is full knowledge throughout, and the premeditated deed is only refrained

from at the moment of action. This scenario is not tragic because of the absence of suffering, and it is odious besides. Still, Aristotle acknowledges that it has been used to good effect, as with the case of Haemon and Creon in *Antigone*.

Ch. 15

Aristotle turns his attention toward the character of the tragic hero and lays out four requirements. First, the hero must be good. The character of the hero denotes the hero's moral purpose in the play, and a good character will have a good moral purpose. Second, the good qualities of the hero must be appropriate to the character. For instance, warlike qualities can be good, but they would be inappropriate in a woman. Third, the hero must be realistic. In other words, if he is drawn from myth, he should be a reasonable semblance of the character portrayed in myths. Fourth, the hero must be consistent (by which Aristotle means the hero must be written consistently, not that the hero must behave consistently). He accepts that some characters are inconsistent but that they should be written so as to be consistent in their inconsistency. Like the plot itself, the behavior of the characters should be seen as necessary or probable, in accordance with the internal logic of their personality. Thus, a character may behave inconsistently so long as we can perceive this inconsistency as stemming from a personality that is internally consistent.

From these requirements, Aristotle thinks it clear that the *lusis*, or denouement, should arise out of the plot and not depend upon stage artifice. Both the characters and the plot ought to follow a probable or necessary sequence, so that the *lusis* should be a part of this sequence. Improbable events, or the intervention of the gods, should be reserved for events outside the action of the play or events beyond human knowledge. The actual incidents themselves should not rely on miracles but on probability and necessity.

In order to reconcile the first requirement—that the hero be good—with the third requirement—that the hero be realistic—Aristotle recommends that the poet should keep all the distinctive characteristics of the person being portrayed but touch them up a little to make the hero appear better than he is. For instance, in the *Iliad*, Homer repeatedly describes Achilles' hot temper and yet makes him seem exceedingly good and heroic nonetheless.

Ch. 16-18

Aristotle distinguishes between six different kinds of *anagnorisis*. First, there is recognition by means of signs or marks, such as when Odysseus's nurse recognizes him by virtue of a characteristic scar. Aristotle considers this the least artistic kind of *anagnorisis*, usually reflecting a lack of imagination on the part of the poet. Second, also distasteful to Aristotle, is a recognition contrived by the author. In such a case, the poet is unable to fit the *anagnorisis* into the logical sequence of the plot, and so it seems extraneous. Third is recognition prompted by memory. A disguised character may be prompted to weep or otherwise betray himself when presented with some memory from the past. Fourth, the second best kind of *anagnorisis*, is recognition through deductive reasoning, where the *anagnorisis* is the only reasonable conclusion of an agent's thought. Fifth, there is recognition through faulty reasoning on the part of a disguised character. The disguised character might unmask himself by exhibiting knowledge that only he could know. Sixth, the best kind of *anagnorisis*, is the kind of recognition that is naturally a part of the logical sequence of events in the play, such as we find in *Oedipus Rex*.

Aristotle makes seven final remarks about how a poet should go about constructing a plot: (1) The poet should be sure to visualize the action of his drama as vividly as possible. This will help him spot and avoid inconsistencies. (2) The poet should even try acting out the events as he writes them. If he can himself experience the emotions he is writing about, he will be able to express them more vividly. (3) The poet should first outline the overall plot of the play and only afterward flesh it out with episodes. These episodes are generally quite brief in tragedy but can be very long in epic poetry. As an example, Aristotle reduces the entire plot of the *Odyssey* to three sentences, suggesting that everything else in the poem is episode. (4) Every play consists of *desis*, or complication, and *lusis*, or denouement. *Desis* is everything leading up to the moment of *peripeteia*, and *lusis* is everything from the *peripeteia* onward. (5) There are four distinct kinds of tragedy, and the poet should aim at bringing out all the important parts of the kind he chooses. First, there is the complex tragedy, made up of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*; second, the tragedy of suffering; third, the tragedy of character; and fourth, the tragedy of spectacle. (6) The poet should write about focused incidents, and not about a whole epic story. For instance, a tragedy could not possibly tell the entire story of the *Iliad* in any kind of satisfying detail, but it can pick out and

elaborate upon individual episodes within the *Iliad*. (7) The chorus should be treated like an actor, and the choral songs should be an integral part of the story. Too often, Aristotle laments, the choral songs have little to do with the action at all.

Ch. 19-22

Having discussed plot and character, Aristotle turns his attention toward thought and then diction (he never specifically addresses melody or spectacle). Aristotle defines thought as everything that is effected by means of language. Thus, when agents try to prove or disprove a point, to arouse emotion, or to inflate or deflate a matter, they are exhibiting thought. Thought is closely linked to rhetoric, and Aristotle points to the more thorough discussion to be found in his writings on that latter subject.

Aristotle divides the subject of diction into eight parts: letter, syllable, conjunction, article, noun, verb, case, and speech. Though many of these terms are identical to our modern uses of them, we should note that Aristotle is concerned less with written language and more with spoken language. As a result, Aristotle treats the letter—the fundamental building block of language—as a unit of sound rather than as a single written character. The concept of case, unfamiliar to English speakers, deals with the different uses of a word. For instance, "with the dog" and "for the dogs" are different cases of "dog," and "walked?" and "walk!" are different cases of "walk." Speech is more like what we would call a clause than a sentence. It does not have to contain a verb, but it must be made up of significant parts.

Chapter 21 is concerned with the structure and uses of the noun, though it is concerned primarily with the uses of metaphor. Aristotle distinguishes four ways metaphor can be used. (1) The genus to species relationship, where a more general term is used instead of a specific term. Aristotle uses the example of "Here stands my ship," where "stand" is a more general way of saying "is anchored." (2) The species to genus relationship, where a more specific term is used in place of a general term. Aristotle's example is "Truly ten thousand good deeds has Ulysses wrought," where "ten thousand" is a specific term representing the more general "a large number." (3) The species

to species relationship, where one specific term replaces another. (4) Metaphor from analogy, which consists of substitutions between "x is to y"-type relationships. For instance, old age is to life as evening is to day, so we can speak metaphorically about the "old age of the day" or the "evening of life."

Aristotle concludes his discussion of diction with a few remarks on style. A poet should aim for a middle ground, expressing himself with clarity but without meanness. Aristotle suggests that the use of ordinary words and ordinary language is mean and prosaic. Poetry can be spiced up by the use of foreign or strange terms, metaphor, or compounded words. However, an overenthusiastic use of such devices will render poetry unintelligible. Too many foreign words will make the poetry barbaric and too much metaphor will turn it into a big riddle. The key is to apply these devices in moderation. Of these different devices, Aristotle most values the metaphor, as it cannot be taught but only grasped intuitively. There is a certain level of genius in being able to identify similarities between dissimilar things.

Ch. 23-24

Aristotle turns his attention to epic poetry. While the *mimesis* of tragedy is in actions told in a dramatic form, the *mimesis* of epic poetry is in verse told in a narrative form. Aristotle notes that there are a number of similarities between tragedy and epic poetry.

First, epic poetry must maintain the unity of plot. In this it is allied with tragedy against history. History tells us all that happened during a certain time period or to certain people, and as such it is often somewhat disconnected. Epic poetry should focus on one particular story that remains an organic whole. Homer is an excellent example of such an epic poet, as he tells a particular, connected story in the *Iliad* rather than trying to narrate everything that happened during the Trojan War.

Second, epic poetry must share many of the elements of tragedy. Like tragedy, it should be either simple or complex, and it should deal primarily either with a character or with suffering. Aside from spectacle and melody, the six parts of tragedy are all present in epic poetry, and epic poetry can also feature *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*.

There are also two notable dissimilarities between epic poetry and tragedy. The first is the length: an epic poem can reasonably last as long as a whole series of tragedies, provided it can be presented in one hearing. The plot of an epic poem can be far more expansive because it is not limited by the stage. Epic poetry can jump back and forth between events happening at the same time in different places in a way that would be impossible on stage. Second, epic poetry should be narrated in heroic meter, while tragedy is normally spoken in iambic meter.

Aristotle is clearly an admirer of Homer's, as almost all his examples of good epic poetry are drawn from Homer. He praises Homer for reducing his own voice in the narrative and letting the actions and the characters tell the story themselves. He uses Homer to show how epic poetry can recount exaggerated events in a believable manner. A tragedy could never get away with such marvels, since they are less credible when we see them performed. Having said this, he remarks that no plot should ever hinge on improbable events but praises Homer for managing through his art to make this flaw in the *Odyssey* seem insignificant. He also praises Homer as a master of using paralogsms (conclusions resulting from faulty or illogical arguments) to make lies seem believable.

Aristotle cautions against an overenthusiastic use of elaborate diction. While it is pleasing when there is no action to recount, and no character or thought to reveal, ornate diction can often obscure these more important elements when they are found together.

Ch. 25-26

Aristotle addresses a number of the criticisms that can be leveled against poetry. First among these is the accusation that the events depicted are impossible. This criticism can fall under two categories. Less grave describes the event if the impossibility arises from a lack of technical knowledge on the part of the poet. For instance, he may describe a horse galloping with both front legs thrown forward, not realizing that horses do not move like this. More grave describes the situation if the impossibility arises from the poet's inability to give an accurate description of something he knows quite well.

Aristotle answers that, often, impossible events—such as Homer's description of Achilles' pursuit of Hector in the *Iliad*—serve to heighten the astonishment and excitement of the story. When the poet can achieve similar effects while staying within the realm of possibility, however, this route should be preferred. Aristotle lays out the general principle that a poet should always aim for a convincing impossibility in favor of an unconvincing possibility.

Further, not all poetry is meant to describe things as they are. Some poets describe things as they ought to be, and others write to accord themselves with popular opinion rather than realism. For instance, Sophocles claimed that while Euripides portrayed people as they are, he portrayed them as they ought to be. Other poets stay true to popular myths rather than realism when depicting the gods.

As for events that are not impossible but merely improbable, the poet must show either that they accord with opinion or that the events are not as improbable as they may seem.

Aristotle also discusses contradictions the poet might make in language, but this discussion is very difficult to follow without a knowledge of ancient Greek. Basically, Aristotle suggests that what may at first seem to be a contradiction in language may result from a metaphorical usage or some other poetic device.

While many errors are excusable or explainable, Aristotle asserts that the only excuse for an improbable plot or unattractive characterization is if they are necessary or are put to good use. Otherwise, they should be avoided at all costs.

In Chapter 26, Aristotle addresses the question of which is the higher form, tragedy or epic poetry. The argument in favor of epic poetry is based on the principle that the higher art form is less vulgar and addressed toward a refined audience. Tragedy is performed before large audiences, which results in melodramatic performances or overacting to please the crowds. Epic poetry is more cultivated than tragedy because it does not rely on gesture at all to convey its message.

Aristotle answers this argument by noting that the melodrama and overacting are faults of the performance and not of the tragic poet himself. The recital of epic poetry could similarly be overdone without reflecting poorly on the poet. Further, not all movement is bad—take dance, for instance—but only poorly executed movement. Also, tragedy does not need to be performed; it can be read, just like epic poetry, and all its merits will still be evident.

Further, he advances several reasons for considering tragedy superior. First, it has all the elements of an epic poem and has also music and spectacle, which the epic lacks. Second, simply reading the play without performing it is already very potent. Third, tragedy is shorter, suggesting that it is more compact and will have a more concentrated effect. Fourth, there is more unity in tragedy, as evidenced by the fact that a number of tragedies can be extracted from one epic poem.