

Selective Outline of Aristotle's Poetics (Περὶ ποιητικῆς)

Chapter I: Forms of poetry. Means of Imitation.

Begin from the beginning (ἀπὸ τῶν πρώτων): cf. Aristotelian *archai* ('first principles'). Amazing to apply this scientific approach to **poetry!**

Imitation (mimesis) categories: epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyramb, aulêtikê and lyre-playing.

Literature is a subcategory of the larger human activity of imitation; painting is offered as parallel, and **music** and **dance** may be others, though sometimes they are involved in literature (tragedy, comedy, dithyramb).

These imitations differ in:

1. means of imitation: words, music, rhythm
2. objects of imitation: action, character, thought
3. manner/mode of imitation (e.g. narration vs. acting)

In what sense does lyre music **imitate**? seems to apply only to its use in drama, though of course there is the controversial instrumental program music; but this is only a subcategory.

Means

rhythm

words

harmonia/music

Different genres use different combinations. e.g.

epic has no music

lyre/pipe music has no words

Meter alone is not a sufficient criterion of genre.

Chapter II: Objects of Imitation

Imitations must be of those who do something. These are either better, worse or equal to ourselves.

but what about objects, animals? Aristotle seems to have tacitly switched to the specific imitative form of drama.

better: Sophocles, Homer

worse: comedy

How does this accord with later statement that men of a base disposition incline towards comedy: then you have the base inclined to represent the base. When do you have someone purposefully representing men as worse than they are? Perhaps Homer and Thersites? But even then there is a comic response from Achaeans.

Chapter III: Manner / Mode of Imitation

Narration (third person)

Assumption of character within narration (first / second person)

Acting / imitating deeds (drama)

This unites Sophocles, Aristophanes, though they differ in kind of objects represented.

Homer and Sophocles united by objects represented, not in means or manner.

Dorian etymology of 'drama', and comedy from *kômai* rather than *kômos*. comedians expelled from the cities and having to wander through countryside.

δρᾶν = 'do'

Chapter IV: Causes and Progress of Poetry

Two physical causes produced poetry:

Cause I: Imitation natural to men from childhood onwards.

Man is most imitative animal

So others are too then (apes, birds, etc.)?

Men take pleasure/delight (ἡδονή) in imitations, even if object imitated is itself horrible (savage animals, dead bodies).

Cf. comedy as things we would not normally enjoy, base people, deformities.

Is this definition of pleasure connected with the pleasure proper to tragedy later (i.e. the catharsis of pity and fear)?

The delight is caused by process of learning (μανθάνειν), which is inherently delightful, and ultimately philosophical (i.e. wisdom-acquiring).

Why should learning be inherently pleasurable?

If one has not seen the object before, no 'identification' can take place, and there is no pleasure from the imitation per se, since no learning takes place, but only from aspects of the workmanship.

applied to poetry, this problem is circumvented by choice of universalizing subjects (see later)

Poetry developed gradually from improvisations due to the natural impulses of imitation, harmony and rhythm.

In what sense are harmony and rhythm natural? Pythagorean sense presumably. Are music and dance therefore imitations of natural orders?

Cause II: Men's characters incline them towards noble or lower forms of poetry. So a base man writing invective presumably is imitating someone of his own level! Cannot a noble man imitate base men? This seems to conflict with his definition of imitations in ch. II.

Brief sketch of development of tragedy w/ nod towards comedy.

comedy not taken seriously so origins lost. Cf. base men / *dēmos*

Chapter V: Origins of Comedy. Difference between Tragedy, Comedy and Epic

Comedy is imitation of bad characters, but is limited to the ridiculous, not the whole range of badness.

'The ridiculous is a certain **painless** and **non-destructive error**' (τὸ γὰρ γελοῖόν ἐστιν **ἀμάρτημά** τι καὶ αἴσχος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν).

Error = of character or action.

Do any Aristophanic heroes exemplify this, and how? Strepsiades in Clouds?

How about Menandrian?

Ends by harking back to what two genres can have in common: epic and tragedy both deal with noble men, but differ in scope of time (tragedy set in a single day) and means of imitation (music and dance for tragedy). formerly tragedy used to be like epic in having a more rambling plot (not unified).

Chapter VI: The Form and Purpose of Tragedy. Its 6 parts.

Alludes to coming treatment of comedy.

Theory of lost second book on Comedy.

Definition of tragedy: “Tragedy is in **imitation** (*mimêsis*) of an **action** (*praxis*) which is serious and complete, having a (certain proper) **scope**, with each of the species of sweetened speech variously in its sections, with men **acting** it (the imitation) and not through narration, through **pity/compassion** (ἔλεος/*eleos*) and fear/anxiety (δέος/*deos*) effecting the purification/clarification (κάθαρσις/*catharsis*) of such like emotions/passions/experiences.”

6 parts of tragedy, in descending order of importance:

<i>mythos</i> / μῦθος	fable/story/plot (later: the <u>soul</u> of tragedy)
<i>êthê</i> / ἦθη	Manners / character
<i>dianoia</i> / διάνοια	sentiment / intention / thought
<i>lexis</i> / λέξις	diction
[<i>opsis</i> / ὄψις	spectacle]
[<i>melopoia</i> / μελοποιία	music]

Since tragedy is imitation of action/process (*praxis*), and actions are done by agents, and agents must have character and thought, therefore actions have two causes, growing logically out of **character** and **thought**.

Cf. William James: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the playing out of character?”

Cf. Theophrastus / Menander / New Comedy

Chapter VII: Length of Tragic Action

Imitation of a perfect and whole action.

Must have a certain magnitude, not too small or too big.

Cf. Johnson on definitions all being above or below our scope of perception).

The bigger the better provided it still be graspable. This gives grandeur.

To be complete it needs beginning and middle and end. These should follow each other logically/necessarily/probably (*to eikos*).

At least it must be long enough for a progress from bad to good or good to bad (= *peripeteia*), according to a necessary and probable order (i.e. the reversal must be plausibly motivated to be effective).

Here he reveals in advance his preference for a certain type of plot (the complex).

Chapter VIII: Unity of Tragic Plot

Unity resides not in one character, but in one ‘action’ of one character.

The different parts of the action must follow necessarily or probably from the last; each must be essential. This is **unity of theme/action**. Aristotle has already mentioned **unity of time**. In the Renaissance the doctrine of the **three unities** includes unity of place. That may also be inferred from Aristotle’s preference for dramas which, unlike epic, do not jump around too much.

Chapter IX: History vs. Poetry

Poetry relates not to what DID happen, but to what could or might have happened. Hence it is more universalizing, and so more **philosophic**. Presumably in the learning which results from seeing this sort of imitation there is more acquisition of knowledge? One learns about character types, not individuals, i.e. higher up the taxonomic scale.

But what about e.g. Thucydides who introduces strong philosophical elements?

Certain things which happen to man of a certain **character** either probably or necessarily. Even though names are given to characters, these are secondary.

Note that Comedy, not tragedy, is cited as the prime example of this. Comic character names are contrived **after** the action is worked out. Hence names will reflect the character that produces that action.

Tragedy clings to real names since these figures are regarded as having done the actions, and so these actions are obviously possible. Historical actions can also be poetic since they are probable/possible.

Simple plots/actions: episodic are worst. **episodes** do **not** follow each other probably or necessarily. Cf. **Aristophanes**. Often caused by need to stretch a plot for sake of filling time at a festival.

Tragedy deals in fearful and piteous actions, and these qualities are enhanced when the events happen contrary to expectation and yet still seemingly probable, not by chance. Note here the role of Tyche ('Fortune') in comedy. But he notes, Chance can be acceptable when it has a semblance of probability: this seems to be Tyche as we find it in Menander.

Chapter X: Simple and Complex Plots

Simple (*haploi*): no reversal (cf. *Ajax*, which simply tracks the Ajax in his misery: there is no earlier state of happiness dealt with)

Complex (*peplegmenoi*, 'folded'): discoveries and recognitions are two examples of events which are **unexpected** yet may be **probable**.

Unexpectedness enhances arousal of pity / fear, without effect being ruined by improbability.

Chapter XI: Reversal and Recognition

Reversal (*peripeteia*, 'fall around'): change from one state of fortune to another, either from bad to good or good to bad.

Should be plausibly motivated. Cites *Oedipus*: messenger brings news which effects change of fortunes, but it is plausibly motivated because he had been sent off to get the news.

Recognition (*anagnôrisis*, Lat. *cognitio* [coined by Frye]): change from ignorance to knowledge, with a corresponding change of alignment between the good and bad characters
Thus in comedy someone believed to be a prostitute (*meretrix*) and unmarried is discovered to be freeborn and can join the good crowd).

Tragic effect is most powerful when reversal and recognition coincide. Again *Oedipus*, since reversal of fortune is accompanied recognition of mother.

Presumably comic effect is equally so amplified by coincidence of reversal and recognition, but with generally good trend of fortune. But how does pity and fear work into it?

Chapter XII: Enumeration of sections (not components) of tragedy:

prologue: everything up to the parodos

parodos: choral entry song

episode: material connecting stasima

stasima: 'standing' choral songs, i.e. delivered on 'stage' (actually 'orchestra' in Greek)

kommos: dramatized lament

exodus: choral exit song

Chapter XIII: Essentials of Tragic Plot

Introduces idea of tragedy's **purpose** (*to ergon*): i.e. catharsis of pity and fear.

These emotions are best aroused when men who are not too good and not too bad—i.e. like ourselves—fall from fortune to misfortune through some error (*hamartia*): the fall arouses pity, their similarity to us arouses fear.

Possibilities:

1. good men falling (sc. without fault) is foul/disgusting (*miaros*)
2. depraved men achieving prosperity: most untragic of all
but cf. Aristophanes. *The Player*.
3. depraved men falling into trouble: only to be expected.
4. good men falling due to error (*hamartia*) of character (and hence action).

Idea of **error** (*hamartia*) must relate somehow to his definition of the comic as a certain painless and non-destructive **error** (*hamartêma*, see above)

Note that modern drama, including dark comedy, seems to explore the other three possibilities.

Double-plot mentioned, with good ending good and bad bad, as derived from comedy and due to weakness of spectators, who demand it (cf. ironically comic ending of John Gay's dark *Beggar's Opera*, conforming to 'the taste of the town'). Here

Here Aristotle seems to prefer the unhappy ending as being most able to arouse tragic emotions. But later he prefers crisis averted by recognitions / reversals.

Orestes and Aegisthus: depart as friends, presumably through recognition and reversal.

Chapter XIV: Pity and Fear

Arousing of pity and fear is the proper **pleasure** (!) of tragedy.

Most powerful when this is aroused from plot itself rather than spectacle, which is a cheap tactic. The general action as contained in the mythos and text should be able to do this on its own.

No pity or fear if enemy kills enemy, or stranger stranger. Only if friend/relative kills another.

3 modes:

1. Killing in knowledge (Medea)
2. Killing in ignorance, later discovering (Oedipus)

3. Intending to kill, but recognition hold one back (Iphigenia).

Aristotle prefers this third mode, which presumably causes reversal of fortunes at least for the party about to be killed. Yet it seems a **comedy**/happy ending mode, which he has stated is alien to tragedy. And Oedipus, as previously stated, also combines both reversal and recognition.

Hence tragedies are drawn from only a few mythological families, since by accident of 'history' only they provide appropriate plots.

Chapter XV Character

Character (*êthê*) will be manifested by any speech or action that has choice connected to it.

'What is character but determination of incident, what is incident but the playing out of character?'

Character should be

1. Good/virtuous according to relevant virtues (man vs woman vs slave). Cites Menelaus in Orestes as unbecomingly debased.
2. Appropriate to men, women, slaves. Odysseus inappropriately laments in *Scylla*.
3. Realistic
4. Consistent. Iphigenia in Aulis, she is inconsistent first as suppliant later as defiant

Character also tied to probable and necessary, so that probable/necessary events emerge from probable/necessary character choices.

Anything that must be known but cannot be effected through logical plot must be consigned to the realm of machinery: here he seems to mean prologues

Chapter XVI: Species of Recognition

1. Through signs (gnorismata). most common, least artistic. Poets use them for want of invention. They can be better or worse employed. Nurse recognizing Odysseus is better because it happens in a logical sequence of actions (Penelope has ordered the washing, nurse has already sensed a similarity), and happens precisely **DESPITE** Odysseus trying to hide it. When he shows the scar to Eumaeus it is more mechanical, less logically motivated.
2. Manipulated entirely by poet. Orestes reveals himself to Iphigenia before being sacrificed, just because this is where the poet wants him to. Iphigenia had previously revealed herself unintentionally through letter, that is better motivated.
3. Through memory. Odysseus weeping at song is discovered by Alcinoos. Plausibly motivated by incident and character.
4. Through reasoning / syllogism: Electra reasons that Orestes has come since no one else has hair or footprints like her. But this example too has its mechanical dimension in the signs, as Euripides pointed out.
5. false reasoning. corrupt passage
6. best is recognition arising out of incidents themselves, e.g. Oedipus, Iphigenia's letter. No gnorismata required, logically driven.

Chapter XVII:

Poet should visualize action / staging as he composes.

Should also exploit gestures of characters. An impassioned character has more effect on the audience. Idea of audience **sympathy**. Conveying emotional states **to** the audience.

Composition should begin from a general/**universal** view of plot, then being fleshed out by episodes.

Compare famous anecdote of Menander composing his comedy. It is **universal** because it deals with probable/necessary sequences of actions, and so exemplifies the universalizing/philosophizing quality of poetry described before.

Chapter XVIII: Complication and Development/Species of Tragedy/Epic vs Tragedy/Chorus

This is a problematic chapter because it seems to contradict a number of previous principles. *dêsis/lysis* has not previously been mentioned, and the fourfold types of tragedy are different from previous definition. Some people think this chapter is an incomplete revision or even an interpolation by another hand.

dêsis/lysis (complication/resolution, or intrigue/unraveling). *Dêsis* is all material in backstory before play begins, and sometimes brief material at start of play to set it out (prologues): anything which account for the predicament which the bulk of the play will resolve (for better or worse). *Lysis* is this latter process.

4 types of tragedy:

- complex (with reversals/recognitions)
- pathetic (Ajax, one trajectory)
- character
- spectacle? (textual problem)

Problem here is 'crossing' of previous lists:

1. Reversal, recognition, pathos, where *epathos* reappears here.
2. Six elements of tragedy from Ch. VI, of which character and spectacle reappear here not as elements but as types.

Evanescence of the chorus (Euripides. Aristotle approves older Sophoclean mode). This will be complete by time of Menander, where chorus has no role in the drama.

Chapter XIX: Thought and Diction

Character is an abstract type (e.g. brave soldier).

Thought is the various reasonings that such a character will apply in various situations

Diction is how these will be expressed in action in the play, since a play is entirely dialogue.

Therefore **diction** must be carefully composed to express **thoughts** which reveal/enact the **character**. Because the thought/speech can excite the passions such as pity, it is closely tied to the tragic effect. Just as plot should be probable, enhancing those emotions, so too thought/expression should also be plausible, proceeding naturally from character.