

A co . . . ks is that by J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross (II vols., 1908–31). Translations of *Poetics* abound: one should consult Ingram Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (1909); G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (1957); and Leon Golden, *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature* (1968). Commentaries accompany these translations. That by O. B. Hardison, which accompanies Golden's translation, is of particular value to the student. See also F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics* (1928); Richard McKeon, "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity," R. S. Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism* (1952), 147–75; W. D. Ross, *Aristotle, A Complete Exposition of His Work and Thought*, 5th ed. (1953); Humphrey House, *Aristotle's Poetics* (1956); H. D. Goldstein, "Mimesis and Catharsis Reexamined," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXIV (1966), 567–77; Teddy Brunius, *Imagination and Katharsis* (1966); Richard Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy* (1984); and Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (1986).

POETICS

I

I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry. Following, then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first.

2. Epic poetry and tragedy, comedy also and dithyrambic poetry,¹ and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. 3. They differ, however, from one another in three respects—the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct.

4. For as there are persons who, by conscious art or mere habit, imitate and represent various objects through the medium of color and form, or again by the voice; so in the arts above mentioned, taken as a whole, the imitation is produced by rhythm, language, or "harmony," either singly or combined.

Thus in the music of the flute and of the lyre, "harmony" and rhythm alone are employed; also in other arts,

such as that of the shepherd's pipe, which are essentially similar to these. 5. In dancing, rhythm alone is used without "harmony"; for even dancing imitates character, emotion, and action, by rhythmical movement.

6. There is another art which imitates by means of language alone, and that either in prose or verse—which verse, again, may either combine different meters or consist of but one kind—but this has hitherto been without a name. 7. For there is no common term we could apply to the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and the Socratic dialogues on the one hand; and, on the other, to poetic imitations in iambic, elegiac, or any similar meter. People do, indeed, add the word *maker* or *poet* to the name of the meter, and speak of elegiac poets, or epic (that is, hexameter) poets, as if it were not the imitation that makes the poet, but the verse that entitles them all indiscriminately to the name. 8. Even when a treatise on medicine or natural science is brought out in verse, the name of poet is by custom given to the author; and yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common but the meter, so that it would be right to call the one poet, the other physicist rather than poet.² 9. On the same principle, even if a writer in his poetic imitation were to combine all meters, as Chaeremon³ did in his *Centaur*, which is a medley composed of meters of all kinds, we should bring

no overall term for literature yet

POETICS. Aristotle's *Poetics* was composed about 330 B.C. The text is from S. H. Butcher, tr., *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955). Reprinted through permission of the publisher. Passages sometimes considered additions by copyists are enclosed in brackets. The symbols < > enclose conjectural supplements to the text, and the double asterisk indicates a lacuna in the text.

¹Early Greek lyric poetry originating in songs sung at festivals of Dionysus.

²This matter of the importance of verse as a definitive element in the poem is discussed by a number of later critics including Scaliger.

³All but fragments of the plays of this fourth-century B.C. Athenian tragic poet have been lost. Of the other works Aristotle discusses in *Poetics*, all but the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* written between the sixth and the fourth centuries B.C. many have been completely lost: the plays of Cleophon and Hegemon, the poems of Timotheus and Philoxenus about the Cyclops, the burlesque poem *Margites* originally attributed to Homer, the plays of Agathon, Sophocles' *Lynceus*, Astrydamas' *Alcmaeon*, Telegonus' *Wounded Odysseus*, and the plays of Carcinus, Dicaeogenes, and Polyidus the Sophist.

him too under the general term poet. So much then for these distinctions.

10. There are, again, some arts which employ all the means above mentioned—namely, rhythm, tune and meter. Such are dithyrambic and nomic poetry,⁴ and also tragedy and comedy; but between them the difference is, that in the first two cases these means are all employed in combination, in the latter, now one means is employed, now another.

Such, then, are the differences of the arts with respect to the medium of imitation.

objects of imitation

II

Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. It is the same in painting. Polygnotus depicted men as nobler than they are, Pauson as less noble, Dionysius drew them true to life.

2. Now it is evident that each of the modes of imitation above mentioned will exhibit these differences, and become a distinct kind in imitating objects that are thus distinct. 3. Such diversities may be found even in dancing, flute-playing, and lyre playing. So again in language, whether prose or verse unaccompanied by music. Homer, for example, makes men better than they are; Cleophon as they are; Hegemon the Thasian, the inventor of parodies, and Nicochares, the author of the *Deiliad* worse than they are. 4. The same thing holds good of dithyrambs and nomos; here too one may portray different types, as Timotheus and Philoxenus differed in representing their Cyclopes. The same distinction marks off tragedy from comedy; for comedy aims at representing men as worse, tragedy as better than in actual life.

III

There is still a third difference—the manner in which each of these objects may be imitated. For the medium being the same, and the objects the same, the poet may imitate by narration—in which case he can either take another personality as Homer does, or speak in his own person, unchanged⁵—or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us.

⁴A type of Greek poetry written to be sung and accompanied by flute or lyre, usually addressed to Apollo.

⁵This distinction is made by Plato in *Republic* (see p. 26).

2. These, then, as we said at the beginning, are the three differences which distinguish artistic imitation—the medium, the objects and the manner. So that from one point of view, Sophocles⁶ is an imitator of the same kind as Homer—for both imitate higher types of character; from another point of view, of the same kind as Aristophanes—for both imitate persons acting and doing. 3. Hence, some say, the name of "drama" is given to such poems, as representing action. For the same reason the Dorians claim the invention both of tragedy and comedy. The claim to comedy is put forward by the Megarians—not only by those of Greece proper, who allege that it originated under their democracy, but also by the Megarians of Sicily, for the poet Epicharmus, who is much earlier than Chionides and Magnes, belonged to that country. Tragedy too is claimed by certain Dorians of the Peloponnese. In each case they appeal to the evidence of language. The outlying villages, they say, are by them called κῶμαι, by the Athenians δῆμοι; and they assume that comedians were so named not from κωμάειν, "to revel," but because they wandered from village to village (κατὰ κώμας), being excluded contemptuously from the city. They add also that the Dorian word for "doing" is δράν, and the Athenian, πράττειν.

4. This may suffice as to the number and nature of the various modes of imitation.

IV

imitation → knowledge

Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. 2. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation he learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. 3. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. 4. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. 5. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, "Ah, that is he." For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due

⁶The tragedies of Sophocles (496?–406 B.C.), author of the Oedipus trilogy, figure strongly as models in *Poetics*.

not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause.

6. Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature. Next, there is the instinct for "harmony" and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm. Persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special aptitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to poetry.

7. Poetry now diverged in two directions, according to the individual character of the writers. The graver spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men. The more trivial sort imitated the actions of meaner persons, at first composing satires, as the former did hymns to the gods and the praises of famous men. 8. A poem of the satirical kind cannot indeed be put down to any author earlier than Homer; though many such writers probably there were. But from Homer onward, instances can be cited—his own *Margites*, for example, and other similar compositions. The appropriate meter was also here introduced; hence the measure is still called the iambic or lampooning measure, being that in which people lampooned one another. 9. Thus the older poets were distinguished as writers of heroic or of lampooning verse.

As, in the serious style, Homer is preeminent among poets, for he alone combined dramatic form with excellence of imitation, so he too first laid down the main lines of comedy, by dramatizing the ludicrous instead of writing personal satire. His *Margites* bears the same relation to comedy that the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* do to tragedy. 10. But when tragedy and comedy came to light, the two classes of poets still followed their natural bent: the lampooners became writers of comedy, and the epic poets were succeeded by tragedians, since the drama was a larger and higher form of art.

11. Whether tragedy has as yet perfected its proper types or not; and whether it is to be judged in itself, or in relation also to the audience—this raises another question.

12. Be that as it may, tragedy—as also comedy—was at first mere improvisation. The one originated with the authors of the dithyramb, the other with those of the phallic songs, which are still in use in many of our cities. Tragedy advanced by slow degrees; each new element that showed itself was in turn developed. Having passed through many changes, it found its natural form, and there it stopped.

13. Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the chorus, and assigned the leading part to the dialogue. Sophocles raised the number of actors to three, and added scene-painting. 14. Moreover, it was not till late that the short plot was discarded for one of greater compass, and the grotesque diction of the earlier sa-

tyric form⁷ for the stately manner of tragedy. The iambic measure then replaced the trochaic tetrameter, which was originally employed when the poetry was of the satyric order, and had greater affinities with dancing. Once dialogue had come in, nature herself discovered the appropriate measure. For the iambic is, of all measures, the most colloquial; we see it in the fact that conversational speech runs into iambic form more frequently than into any other kind of verse; rarely into hexameters, and only when we drop the colloquial intonation. 15. The additions to the number of "episodes" or acts, and the other accessories of which tradition tells, must be taken as already described; for to discuss them in detail would, doubtless, be a large undertaking.

V

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word *bad*, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.

2. The successive changes through which tragedy passed, and the authors of these changes, are well known, whereas comedy has had no history, because it was not at first treated seriously. It was late before the Archon⁸ granted a comic chorus to a poet; the performers were till then voluntary. Comedy had already taken definite shape when comic poets, distinctively so called, are heard of. 3. Who introduced masks, or prologues, or increased the number of actors—these and other similar details remain unknown. As for the plot, it came originally from Sicily; but of Athenian writers Crates was the first who, abandoning the "iambic" or lampooning form, generalized his themes and plots.

4. Epic poetry agrees with tragedy insofar as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type. They differ, in that epic poetry admits but one kind of meter, and is narrative in form. They differ, again, in their length: for tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit; whereas the epic action has no limits of time.⁹ This, then, is

⁷Plays of Dorian invention, usually burlesques of mythological characters or events. Satyrs formed the chorus.

⁸One of the nine Athenian magistrates.

⁹Neoclassical theorists hardened this observation into a rule, the "unity of time."

a second point of difference was admitted in tragedy.

5. Of their constituent elements some peculiar to tragedy. Whether good or bad tragedy, know the elements of an epic poem. Elements of a tragedy are not.

Of the poetry which imitates comedy, we will speak hereafter, resuming its formal definition when already said.

2. Tragedy, then, is a serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, a kind of imitation in verse, in which kinds being found in separate parts of action, not of narrative; through the proper purgation of these emotions. I mean language intended to excite pitié and song-enter. By the several parts that some parts are rendered alone, others again with the

4. Now as tragic imitation necessarily follows, "in the equipment" will be a part of these are the medium of mere metrical arrangement of term whose sense everyone

5. Again, tragedy is the action implies personal agent. It has certain distinctive qualities both is by these that we qualify these—thought and character from which actions spring, or failure depends. 6. Hence action—for by plot I here mean

agents. By character I mean the certain qualities to the agent; a statement is proved, or it is acted. 7. Every tragedy, therefore, has parts determine its quality—

elements though
¹⁰This part of *Poetics* is lost. For an account of comedy, see Lane Cooper, *An Account of Comedy*.
¹¹By "spectacular equipment" Aristotle means the apparatus and machinery of the theater that pro-

Literary history

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dom was admitted in tragedy as in epic poetry.

5. Of their constituent parts some are common to both,
some peculiar to tragedy. Whoever, therefore, knows what is
good or bad tragedy, knows also about epic poetry. All the
elements of an epic poem are found in tragedy, but the ele-
ments of a tragedy are not all found in the epic poem.

Catharsis is great
Tragedy VI

Of the poetry which imitates in hexameter verse, and of comedy,
we will speak hereafter.¹⁰ Let us now discuss tragedy,
resuming its formal definition, as resulting from what has
been already said.

2. Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is se-
rious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language em-
bellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several
kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form
of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the
proper purgation of these emotions. 3. By language embel-
lished, I mean language into which rhythm, "harmony," and
song enter. By the several kinds in separate parts, I mean,
that some parts are rendered through the medium of verse
alone, others again with the aid of song.

4. Now as tragic imitation implies persons acting, it
necessarily follows, in the first place, that spectacular
equipment¹¹ will be a part of tragedy. Next, song and diction,
for these are the medium of imitation. By *diction* I mean the
mere metrical arrangement of the words: as for *song*, it is a
term whose sense everyone understands.

5. Again, tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an
action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess cer-
tain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it
is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and
these—thought and character—are the two natural causes
from which actions spring, and on actions again all success
or failure depends. 6. Hence, the plot is the imitation of the
action—for by plot I here mean the arrangement of the inci-
dents. By character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe
certain qualities to the agents. Thought is required wherever
a statement is proved, or, it may be, a general truth enunci-
ated. 7. Every tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which
parts determine its quality—namely, plot, character, diction,

plots thought

¹⁰This part of *Poetics* is lost. For an attempt to construct an Aristotelian theory
of comedy, see Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy* (1922).
¹¹By "spectacular equipment" Aristotle means the stage-setting and the vari-
ous machinery of the theater that produce what is seen.

thought, spectacle, song. Two of the parts constitute the me-
dium of imitation, one the manner, and three the objects of
imitation. And these complete the list. 8. These elements
have been employed, we may say, by the poets to a man; in
fact, every play contains spectacular elements as well as
character, plot, diction, song, and thought.

9. But most important of all is the structure of the in-
cidents. For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an
action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a
mode of action, not a quality. 10. Now character determines
men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy
or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view
to the representation of character; character comes in as sub-
sidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are
the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. 11.
Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may
be without character. The tragedies of most of our modern
poets fail in the rendering of character; and of poets in gen-
eral this is often true. It is the same in painting; and here lies
the difference between Zeuxis and Polygnotus. Polygnotus
delineates character well: the style of Zeuxis is devoid of
ethical quality. 12. Again, if you string together a set of
speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point
of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential
tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however
deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically con-
structed incidents. 13. Besides which, the most powerful el-
ements of emotional interest in tragedy—*peripeteia* or re-
versal of the situation, and recognition scenes—are parts of
the plot. 14. A further proof is, that novices in the art attain
to finish of diction and precision of portraiture before they
can construct the plot. It is the same with almost all the early
poets.

The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the
soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place. 15. A
similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colors,
laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the
chalk outline of a portrait. Thus tragedy is the imitation of
an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action.

16. Third in order is thought—that is, the faculty of
saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances.
In the case of oratory, this is the function of the political art
and of the art of rhetoric: and so indeed the older poets make
their characters speak the language of civic life; the poets of
our time, the language of the rhetoricians.

17. Character is that which reveals moral purpose,
showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids.
Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in
which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything

plot is imitation tragedy is never definition of tragedy
of action

the arch is his mode of by action
character important

say right thing @ right time

showing morals is important

whatever, are not expressive of character. Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.

18. Fourth among the elements enumerated comes diction; by which I mean, as has been already said, the expression of the meaning in words; and its essence is the same both in verse and prose.

19. Of the remaining elements song holds the chief place among the embellishments.

The spectacle 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. For the power of tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.

VII

These principles being established, let us now discuss the proper structure of the plot, since this is the first and most important thing in tragedy.

2. Now, according to our definition, tragedy is 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. 3. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.

4. Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a picture of a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence an exceedingly small picture cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long. 5. As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and organisms a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magnitude which may be easily embraced in one view; so in the plot, a certain

length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory.¹² 6. The limit of length in relation to dramatic competition and sensuous presentment, is no part of artistic theory. For had it been the rule for a hundred tragedies to compete together, the performance would have been regulated by the water-clock—as indeed we are told was formerly done. 7. But the limit as fixed by the nature of the drama itself is this: the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous. And to define the matter roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.

VIII

Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life, which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action.¹³ 2. Hence the error, as it appears, of all poets who have composed a *Heracleid*, a *Theseid*, or other poems of the kind. They imagine that as *Heracles* was one man, the story of *Heracles* must also be a unity. 3. But *Homer*, as in all else he is of surpassing merit, here too—whether from art or natural genius—seems to have happily discerned the truth. In composing the *Odyssey* he did not include all the adventures of *Odysseus*—such as his wound on *Parnassus*, or his feigned madness at the mustering of the host—incidents between which there was no necessary or probable connection: but he made the *Odyssey*, and likewise the *Iliad*, to center round an action that in our sense of the word is one. 4. As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole.

¹²Theories of the beautiful and sublime in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Addison, Burke, Kant, Schopenhauer) may be considered with Aristotle's conception of magnitude in mind.

¹³Romantic theories emphasizing organicism and expressivism seem often to imply that the unity of the hero's life provides the unity of the poem.

It is, moreover, evident from what the function of the poet to re what may happen—what is probability or necessity. 2. The not by writing in verse or in might be put into verse, and history, with meter no less than prose, is that one relates what may happen. 3. Poetry, therefore, is a higher thing than history, and a higher thing than history, the universal, history the particular. mean how a person of a certain or act, according to the law of it is this universality at which attaches to the personages. 1. ple—what *Alcibiades* did or said already apparent: for here the plot the lines of probability, and names—unlike the lampooner individuals. 6. But tragedians reason being that what is possible happened we do not at once feel has happened is manifestly possible have happened. 7. Still there there are only one or two well fictitious. In others, none are *Antheus*, where incidents and yet they give none the less pleasure, at all costs keep to the regular usual subjects of tragedy. Ind tempt it; for even subjects that a few, and yet give pleasure to the poet or "maker" should be of verses; since he is a poet he imitates are actions. And even ical subject, he is none the less why some events that have conform to the law of the probability of that quality in them he

10. Of all plots and actions I call a plot "episodic" in which

¹⁴The matter of universals and particulars in the eighteenth century and later, which expresses the particular, and see Cassirer, *Art*, pp. 928–30.

¹⁵Traditionally accepted.

Poetry tells what could happen

unity of plot (not character)

structure important

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IX
It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not
the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but
what may happen—what is possible according to the law of
probability or necessity. 2. The poet and the historian differ
not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus
might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of
history, with meter no less than without it. The true differ-
ence is that one relates what has happened, the other what
may happen. 3. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical
and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express
the universal, history the particular.¹⁴ 4. By the universal I
mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak
or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and
it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she
attaches to the personages. The particular is—for exam-
ple—what Alcibiades did or suffered. 5. In comedy this is
already apparent: for here the poet first constructs the plot on
the lines of probability, and then inserts characteristic
names—unlike the lampooners who write about particular
individuals. 6. But tragedians still keep to real names, the
reason being that what is possible is credible: what has not
happened we do not at once feel sure to be possible: but what
has happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not
have happened. 7. Still there are some tragedies in which
there are only one or two well-known names, the rest being
fictitious. In others, none are well known—as in Agathon's
Antheus, where incidents and names alike are fictitious, and
yet they give none the less pleasure. 8. We must not, there-
fore, at all costs keep to the received¹⁵ legends, which are the
usual subjects of tragedy. Indeed, it would be absurd to at-
tempt it: for even subjects that are known are known only to
a few, and yet give pleasure to all. 9. It clearly follows that
the poet or "maker" should be the maker of plots rather than
of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he
imitates are actions. And even if he chances to take a histor-
ical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason
why some events that have actually happened should not
conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in vir-
tue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker.

10. Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst.
I call a plot "episodic" in which the episodes or acts succeed

¹⁴The matter of universals and particulars becomes of special importance in the eighteenth century and later, when the distinction is made between art, which expresses the particular, and science, which expresses the general. See Cassirer, *Art*, pp. 928-30.
¹⁵Traditionally accepted.

one another without probable or necessary sequence. Bad poets compose such pieces by their own fault, good poets, to please the players; for, as they write show pieces for competition, they stretch the plot beyond its capacity, and are often forced to break the natural continuity.

11. But again, tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. 12. The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design. We may instance the statue of Mitys at Argos, which fell upon his murderer while he was a spectator at a festival, and killed him. Such events seem not to be due to mere chance. Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best.

X

Plots are either simple or complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. 2. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call simple, when the change of fortune takes place without reversal of the situation and without recognition.

A complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such reversal, or by recognition, or by both. 3. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of *propter hoc* or *post hoc*.¹⁶

XI recognition

Reversal of the situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. 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. Again in the *Lynceus*, Lynceus is being led away to his death, and Danaus goes with him, meaning to

¹⁶"Because of this" or "after this."

slay him; but the outcome of the action is, that Danaus is killed and Lynceus saved.

2. Recognition, as the name indicates, 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*. 3. There are indeed other forms. Even inanimate things of the most trivial kind may sometimes be objects of recognition. Again, we may recognize or discover whether a person has done a thing or not. But the recognition which is most intimately connected with the plot and action is, as we have said, the recognition of persons.

4. This recognition, combined with reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, tragedy represents. Moreover, it is upon such situations that the issues of good or bad fortune will depend. 5. Recognition, then, being between persons, it may happen that one person only is recognized by the other—when the latter is already known—or it may be necessary that the recognition should be on both sides. Thus Iphigenia is revealed to Orestes by the sending of the letter; but another act of recognition is required to make Orestes known to Iphigenia.

6. Two parts, then, of the plot—reversal of the situation and recognition—turn upon surprises. A third part is the scene of suffering. The scene of suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like.

XII

[The parts of tragedy which must be treated as elements of the whole, have been already mentioned. We now come to the quantitative parts—the separate parts into which tragedy is divided—namely, prologue, episode, exode, choric song; this last being divided into parode and stasimon. These are common to all plays: peculiar to some are the songs of actors from the stage and the commoi.]

2. The prologue is that entire part of a tragedy which precedes the parode of the chorus. The episode is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric songs. The exode is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it. Of the choric part the parode is the first undivided utterance of the chorus: the stasimon is a choric ode without anapests or trochaic tetrameters: the commos is a joint lamentation of chorus and actors. 3. The parts of tragedy which must be treated as elements of the whole have been already mentioned. The quantitative parts—the separate parts into which it is divided—are here enumerated.]

downfall of character should be from interest
 quality should be of main nature

XIII
 As the sequel to what has already been said, we must proceed to consider what the poet should aim at, and what he should avoid, in constructing his plots; and by what means the specific effect of tragedy will be produced.

2. A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls forth pity or fear.¹⁷ Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. 3. There remains, then, the character between these 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.

4. 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.

5. The practice of the stage bears out our view. At first the poets recounted any legend that came in their way. Now, the best tragedies are founded on the story of a few houses—on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered something terrible. A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction. 6. Hence they are in error who censure Euripides just because he follows this principle in his plays, many of which

¹⁷Later arguments, beginning with Horace (see *Art of Poetry*, p. 72), that poetry delights and teaches, are related to this statement but seem increasingly rigid in respect to what may be thought truly didactic or delightful.

end unhappily. It is, as we best proof is that on the st such plays, if well worked and Euripides, faulty thoug agement of his subject, yet poets.

7. In the second rank some place first. Like the plot, and also an opposite the bad. It is accounted the the spectators; for the poet wishes of his audience. 8. rived is not the true tragic p edy, where those who, in mies—like Orestes and Ae at the close, and no one sla

Odysee
 Fear should
 Fear and pity may be aroused may also result from the in is the better way, and indic ought to be so constructed eye, he who hears the tale to pity at what takes place. receive from hearing the sto duce this effect by the n method, and dependent on ploy spectacular means to but only of the monstrous, tragedy; for we must not de kind of pleasure, but only t since the pleasure which the comes from pity and fear th this quality must be impress

Let us then determine v strike us as terrible or pitiful

4. Actions capable of f persons who are either frie one another. If an enemy ki excite pity either in the act o the suffering in itself is pitif sons. But when the tragic inc are near or dear to one ano kills, or intends to kill, a br her son, a son his mother, c done—these are the situatio

5. He may not indeed destro legends—the fact, for instan

good to bad

should excite fear/pity

should excite people related/close

unhappy