Poetics

ARISTOTLE

384–322 BC

Poetics

Περὶ ποιητικῆς

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Poetics · Aristotle (384–322 BC)

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CONTENTS

Introduction vii

Poetics 1

Poetry as imitation 1
The objects of imitation 2
The manner of imitation 3
The origins of poetry 4
Comedy and epic 6
The definition of tragedy 7
Wholeness and magnitude 10
Unity of plot 11
Poetry and history 12
Simple and complex plots 13
Reversal, recognition and suffering 14
The sections of a tragedy 15
The best tragic plot 16
Pity and fear from the plot 17
Character 19
Kinds of recognition 20
Composing a plot 22
Complication and resolution 23
Thought and diction 25
The parts of language 26
Kinds of words and metaphor 27
The excellence of diction 29
Unity in epic 31
Epic compared with tragedy 32
Problems and solutions 35
Is epic or tragedy better? 38

INTRODUCTION

The *Poetics* is the first work of literary theory in the Western tradition, and still the most influential. Written around 335 BC, it asks what poetry is, how its kinds differ, and what makes a tragedy work.

Aristotle's answers became the vocabulary of criticism: art as *mimesis*, imitation; plot as the soul of tragedy, with a beginning, middle and end; reversal and recognition; the tragic error, *hamartia*; and the famous, much-disputed *catharsis* of pity and fear.

What survives looks like lecture notes, compressed and in places damaged; a second book, on comedy, is lost. Where the Greek is uncertain, the translation says so.

Poetics

Aristotle analyzes poetry as imitation, and tragedy above all.

POETRY AS IMITATION

Aristotle sets out his subject and sorts the arts of poetry by the means they use to imitate.

1447a Let us discuss the art of poetry itself and its kinds, the particular capacity each of them has, how plots must be structured if the poetry is to turn out well, and further how many parts it consists of and of what sort, and likewise whatever else belongs to the same inquiry. Let us begin, as is natural, with first things first. Epic, then, and the composition of tragedy, as well as comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most music for the pipe and the lyre, all happen to be, taken as a whole, imitations. But they differ from one another in three ways: they imitate either in different media, or different objects, or differently, that is, not in the same manner.[1] For just as some people imitate many things by making likenesses of them with colors and shapes (some through craft, others through habit), and others do so with the voice, so too with the arts just mentioned: all of them produce their imitation in rhythm, language and melody, using these either separately or in combination. Music for the pipe and the lyre, for example, uses melody and rhythm alone, as would any other arts that happen to have a similar capacity, such as music for the panpipes. The art of dancers uses rhythm by itself, without melody (for dancers too imitate character, feelings and

1 "Imitation" translates *mimēsis,* Aristotle's central term, which can also be rendered "representation."

actions through rhythms given shape in movement). The art that uses bare language alone, and the one that uses meters, whether 1447b mixing them with one another or employing a single kind of meter, happen to have gone without a name to this day. For we would have no common name to give to the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and to Socratic dialogues, nor to an imitation someone might produce in iambic trimeters or elegiacs or other such meters.[2] People do, of course, attach "poet" to the meter, calling some "elegiac poets" and others "epic poets," and so they name them poets not for their imitation but indiscriminately, by the meter. Indeed, if someone sets out something on medicine or natural science in verse, they customarily call him that. Yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the meter, so it is right to call the one a poet and the other a natural scientist rather than a poet. Similarly, even if someone were to produce his imitation by mixing all the meters, as Chaeremon composed his *Centaur*, a mixed rhapsody in all the meters, he too must be called a poet. On these matters, then, let our distinctions be drawn in this way.[3] There are also some arts that use all the media mentioned, I mean rhythm, song and meter: for instance, the composition of dithyrambs and of nomes, and tragedy and comedy. They differ in that the first two use them all together, the last two in different parts. These, then, are what I call the differences among the arts in the media in which they produce their imitation.[4]

THE OBJECTS OF IMITATION

Poets imitate people better than us, worse, or like us; tragedy and comedy differ in this way.

1448a Since those who imitate imitate people in action, and these must be either admirable or inferior (for character nearly

2 Sophron of Syracuse (fifth century BC) wrote prose mimes, short dramatic sketches of everyday life; Xenarchus was his son.
3 Empedocles (fifth century BC), a philosopher from Acragas in Sicily, set out his theory of nature in epic hexameters.

always follows these alone, since it is by vice and excellence that everyone differs in character), they imitate people either better than we are, or worse, or like us, just as painters do: Polygnotus depicted people as better, Pauson as worse, Dionysius as like us. It is clear that each of the imitations mentioned will also have these differences, and will be distinct by imitating distinct objects in this way.[5] For these dissimilarities can arise in dancing, pipe-playing and lyre-playing, and also in prose and in verse without music. Homer, for example, depicts people as better, Cleophon as like us, and Hegemon of Thasos, the first to compose parodies, and Nicochares, author of the *Deiliad*, as worse. The same holds for dithyrambs and nomes: one might imitate as Timotheus and Philoxenus did their Cyclopes. And this very difference also sets tragedy apart from comedy: comedy aims to imitate people worse than those of today, tragedy people better.[6]

THE MANNER OF IMITATION

Poets imitate by narrating or by presenting people in action, and Dorians claim to have invented drama.

There is also a third difference among these: the manner in which one might imitate each of these objects. For it is possible to imitate the same objects in the same media sometimes by narrating—either becoming someone else, as Homer does, or remaining oneself without change—or with all the imitators acting and doing things. Imitation, then, involves these three differences, as we said at the start: the media, the objects and the manner. So in one respect Sophocles would be the same kind of imitator as Homer, since both imitate admirable people, and in another the same as Aristophanes, since both imitate people act-

4 The dithyramb was a choral song in honor of Dionysus; the nome, a solo song, usually in honor of Apollo.

5 Polygnotus of Thasos was a celebrated painter of the mid-fifth century BC; little is known of Pauson and Dionysius.

6 Timotheus and Philoxenus, dithyrambic poets of around 400 BC, each composed a *Cyclops*; a word just before their names is corrupt in the Greek.

ing and doing. That, some say, is why these works are called "dramas": because they imitate people doing (*drōntes*). This is also why the Dorians lay claim to both tragedy and comedy—comedy by the Megarians, both those here, on the grounds that it arose in the time of their democracy, and those in Sicily, since the poet Epicharmus came from there, much earlier than Chionides and Magnes; and tragedy by some of those in the Peloponnese. They cite the words as evidence. They say that they call their outlying villages *kōmai*, whereas Athenians call them *dēmoi*, on the view that comic performers (*kōmōidoi*) got their name not from reveling (*kōmazein*) but from wandering from village to village when they were scorned in the city; 1448b and that for "doing" they themselves say *dran*, whereas Athenians say *prattein*. So much, then, for the differences of imitation: how many there are and what they are.[7]

THE ORIGINS OF POETRY

Poetry grows from the natural human delight in imitation, then splits into serious and comic kinds.

Two causes, it seems, gave rise to the art of poetry as a whole, and both are natural. Imitating is innate in human beings from childhood—they differ from the other animals in this, that they are the most imitative and do their first learning through imitation—and so is everyone's delight in imitations. Evidence of this is what happens in practice: things we find painful to see in themselves we enjoy contemplating in the most precisely rendered images, such as the forms of the lowliest animals and of corpses. The reason for this, too, is that learning is most pleasant not only to philosophers but to everyone else likewise, though their share in it is brief. That is why people enjoy seeing images: as they contemplate them, they find themselves learning and working out what each thing is, for example that this is that person. For if one happens not to have seen the thing

7 Megara, a Dorian city bordering Attica, founded Megara Hyblaea in Sicily; Epicharmus, an early comic poet, worked in Sicily around 500 BC.

before, the image will give pleasure not as an imitation but through its workmanship, its color or some other such cause. Since imitation is natural to us, as are melody and rhythm (it is obvious that meters are sections of rhythms), those who from the beginning were most naturally gifted for these advanced little by little and gave birth to poetry out of their improvisations. Poetry then split according to the poets' own characters: the more dignified imitated fine actions and the actions of such people, the more ordinary those of inferior people, at first composing invectives, just as the others composed hymns and encomia. Now we can name no such poem by anyone before Homer, though there were probably many; but starting from Homer we can, for example his *Margites* and the like. In these the iambic meter also came in, as was fitting—which is why it is now called "iambic": because it was in this meter that people lampooned (*iambizein*) one another. And of the ancient poets some became poets of heroic verse, others of iambics. Just as Homer was the supreme poet of serious subjects (he alone composed not only well but also dramatic imitations), so too he was the first to sketch the form of comedy, dramatizing not invective but the laughable. For the *Margites* stands in the same relation to comedies as the *Iliad* [1449a] and the *Odyssey* do to tragedies.[8] When tragedy and comedy had appeared, those drawn to either kind of poetry by their own nature became, in the one case, writers of comedy instead of iambics, in the other, producers of tragedy instead of epic, because these forms were greater and more esteemed than those. Whether tragedy is by now sufficiently developed in its forms or not, judged both in itself and in relation to audiences, is another question. At any rate, it arose from an improvised beginning—both tragedy and comedy did, tragedy from those who led off the dithyramb, comedy from those who led the phallic songs that remain customary in many cities even now—and grew little by little as people developed whatever of it became apparent. After undergoing many

8 The *Margites*, a comic poem about a fool, was ascribed to Homer in antiquity; only fragments survive.

changes, tragedy stopped changing once it had attained its own nature.[9] Aeschylus was the first to raise the number of actors from one to two; he reduced the chorus's part and gave speech the leading role. Sophocles introduced three actors and scene-painting. Then there was magnitude: from slight plots and laughable diction, because it developed out of the satyric, tragedy only late acquired dignity, and its meter changed from tetrameter to iambic. At first they used the tetrameter because the poetry was satyric and more suited to dancing; but once speech came in, nature itself found the appropriate meter, for the iambic is the most speakable of meters. Evidence of this: in conversation with one another we speak iambics very often, but hexameters rarely, and only when departing from the cadence of speech. Then there was the number of episodes.[10] As for the other embellishments, and how each is said to have been added, let us take them as stated; for it would probably be a large task to go through them one by one.

COMEDY AND EPIC

Comedy imitates the laughable; epic shares tragedy's seriousness but differs in meter, narration and length.

Comedy is, as we said, an imitation of people who are worse—not, however, with respect to every kind of vice; rather, the laughable is one part of the ugly. For the laughable is a kind of mistake and ugliness that causes no pain and no destruction; the comic mask is an obvious example, something ugly and distorted without pain. Now the stages through which tragedy passed, and those responsible for them, are well known; but comedy, because it was not 1449b taken seriously at first, went unnoticed. It was only late that the archon granted a chorus of comic performers; before that they were volunteers. Its so-

9 Phallic songs were sung in processions for Dionysus in which a large model phallus was carried.

10 "Satyric" refers to satyr plays, boisterous dramas with a chorus of satyrs, the half-animal followers of Dionysus.

called poets are remembered only from when it already had certain forms. Who introduced masks, or prologues, or the number of actors, and all such things, is unknown.[11] Composing plots (Epicharmus and Phormis) originally came from Sicily; among the Athenians, Crates was the first to abandon the iambic form and compose stories and plots of general scope. Epic kept pace with tragedy to the extent of being an imitation of admirable people in verse; but they differ in that epic has a single meter and is narration. They differ also in length: tragedy tries as far as possible to keep within a single revolution of the sun, or to exceed it only a little, whereas epic is unlimited in time, and differs in this respect—although at first poets did the same in tragedies as in epics.[12] As for parts, some are the same, others peculiar to tragedy. That is why anyone who knows about good and bad tragedy also knows about epic: what epic has, tragedy has too, but not everything tragedy has is found in epic.

THE DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

Tragedy is defined, and its six parts are named, with plot the most important.

We shall speak later about imitation in hexameters and about comedy. Let us now discuss tragedy, picking up the definition of its essence that emerges from what has been said. Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete and has magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its kinds used separately in the different parts; performed by people acting, not through narration; accomplishing through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions. By "language made pleasurable" I mean language that has rhythm and melody and song; by "its kinds separately" I mean that some parts are accomplished through verse alone, and others in turn through song. Since it is people acting who produce the imitation, the first part of

11 The archon, a leading Athenian magistrate, assigned choruses, with wealthy sponsors to fund them, for the dramatic festivals.

12 Crates was an Athenian comic poet of the mid-fifth century BC.

tragedy must necessarily be the ordering of the spectacle; then song and diction, for these are the media in which they produce the imitation.[13] By diction I mean the actual composition of the verses; by song, that whose force is entirely obvious. Since tragedy is an imitation of an action, and the action is performed by certain agents, who must be of a certain kind in character and thought (for it is through these that we say actions 1450a too are of a certain kind—thought and character are by nature the two causes of actions—and it is by these that everyone succeeds or fails), the plot is the imitation of the action—by plot I mean here the arrangement of the incidents—while character is that in virtue of which we say the agents are of a certain kind, and thought is present wherever in speaking they demonstrate something or declare an opinion. Necessarily, then, every tragedy has six parts, which determine what kind of tragedy it is: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song. Two of these parts are the media in which they imitate, one the manner, and three the objects; and there is nothing beyond these. Not a few poets, so to speak, have made use of these forms; for every play has spectacle, character, plot, diction, song and thought alike. But the most important of them is the structure of the incidents.[14] For tragedy is an imitation not of human beings but of actions and of life. Happiness and unhappiness lie in action, and the end is a kind of action, not a quality; people are of a certain kind according to their characters, but happy or the opposite according to their actions. So the agents do not act in order to imitate character; rather, they take on character for the sake of the actions. Thus the incidents and the plot are the end of tragedy, and the end is the most important thing of all. Further, without action there could not be a tragedy, but without character there could. The tragedies of most recent poets lack character, and in general many poets are like that—as among

13 "Catharsis" (Greek *katharsis*) can mean "purgation" or "purification" of pity and fear; what Aristotle means by it here is much disputed.

14 The Greek of this sentence is corrupt in two places; "not a few poets" and "every play" are editors' likely sense.

painters Zeuxis is in comparison with Polygnotus: Polygnotus is a good painter of character, whereas Zeuxis's painting has no character at all.[15] Again, if someone strings together speeches full of character and well made in diction and thought, he will not achieve what we said was the function of tragedy; a tragedy that uses these less adequately but has a plot and a structure of incidents will do so much better. Besides, the most important means by which tragedy sways the soul are parts of the plot: reversals and recognitions. A further sign: those who try their hand at composing can get diction and character exactly right before they can structure the incidents, as was true of nearly all the early poets. The plot, then, is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of tragedy; character comes second. (It is much the same 1450b in painting: if someone smeared on the finest pigments at random, he would not give as much delight as by drawing an image in outline.) Tragedy is an imitation of action, and chiefly for the sake of the action an imitation of the agents. Third is thought: this is the ability to say what is pertinent and fitting, which in speeches is the task of politics and rhetoric; for the older poets made their characters speak like statesmen, present-day poets make them speak like rhetoricians. Character is what reveals decision, of what sort it is; hence speeches in which there is nothing at all that the speaker chooses or avoids have no character. Thought is found where people demonstrate that something is or is not, or make some general declaration. Fourth among the verbal parts is diction. I mean, as was said before, that diction is expression through words, which has the same force in verse and in prose.[16] Of the remaining parts, song is the most important of the sweetenings. Spectacle does sway the soul, but it is the least a matter of art and the least proper to poetry; for the power of tragedy exists even without a performance and actors, and besides, for producing spectacle the art of the costume-maker is more decisive than that of the poets.

15 Zeuxis of Heraclea was a famous painter of the late fifth century BC.
16 The words "among the verbal parts" render a corrupt phrase in the Greek.

WHOLENESS AND MAGNITUDE

A plot must be a whole, with beginning, middle and end, and a length that can be grasped.

With these distinctions made, let us next say what the structure of the incidents should be like, since this is both the first and the most important thing in tragedy. We have laid down that tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete and whole and has some magnitude—for a thing can be whole and have no magnitude. A whole is what has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself necessarily follow anything else, but after which something else naturally is or comes to be. An end, conversely, is that which itself naturally follows something else, either necessarily or for the most part, but has nothing else after it. A middle is that which both follows something else and has something else after it. Well-structured plots, then, must neither begin nor end at some random point, but must follow the patterns just described. Further, a beautiful thing, whether an animal or anything else composed of parts, must not only have these parts in order but also have a magnitude that is not arbitrary; for beauty lies in magnitude and order. So neither could a very tiny animal be beautiful (our view of it is blurred, taking place in an almost imperceptible time), nor a vast one (our view 1451a does not take it in all at once, and its unity and wholeness escape the viewers), as if there were an animal ten thousand stades long. So just as bodies and animals must have magnitude, but one that can easily be taken in at a glance, so plots must have length, but one that can easily be held in memory.[17] The limit of length set by the competitions and by what an audience can perceive is not a matter for the art. For if a hundred tragedies had to compete, they would be performed against water clocks, as they say happened at one time or another. But as for the limit set by the very nature of the thing, the longer the plot, provided it remains clear as a whole,

17 A stade was about 600 feet, so ten thousand stades is over a thousand miles.

the finer it is in magnitude. To define it simply: a sufficient limit of magnitude is whatever length allows a change from misfortune to good fortune, or from good fortune to misfortune, to come about through a sequence of events that follow one another in accordance with probability or necessity.[18]

UNITY OF PLOT

A plot is unified by a single action, not by a single hero, as Homer understood.

A plot is not unified, as some think, merely because it is about one person. For many, indeed countless, things happen to one person, and some of them make up no unity; likewise one person performs many actions from which no single action results. That is why all the poets who have composed a *Heracleid*, a *Theseid* and poems of that sort seem to have gone wrong: they think that because Heracles was one person, the plot too should be one. Homer, just as he excels in other respects, seems to have seen this clearly too, whether by art or by nature. In composing the *Odyssey* he did not include everything that happened to Odysseus—for instance his being wounded on Parnassus or his feigning madness at the mustering, events of which neither made the other necessary or probable. Instead he structured the *Odyssey* around a single action of the kind we mean, and the *Iliad* likewise. So just as in the other imitative arts a single imitation is of a single thing, the plot too, since it is an imitation of an action, must be of one action, and that a whole one; and its parts, the incidents, must be so structured that if any part is moved or removed the whole is disjointed and disturbed. For that which makes no noticeable difference whether it is present or not is no part of the whole.[19]

18 Water clocks were used to time speeches in the Athenian law courts; the words "as they say happened at one time or another" render a corrupt clause.

19 Odysseus was wounded by a boar on Mount Parnassus as a youth, and feigned madness to avoid joining the expedition against Troy.

POETRY AND HISTORY

The poet tells what would probably happen, so poetry is more philosophical than history.

It is also clear from what has been said that the poet's task is to say not what has happened but what sort of thing would happen, that is, what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. For the 1451b historian and the poet do not differ by speaking in verse or in prose (Herodotus's work could be put into verse and would be no less a history with meter than without it); they differ in this: the one says what has happened, the other what sort of thing would happen. That is why poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history: poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A universal is what sort of things a certain sort of person will say or do in accordance with probability or necessity; this is what poetry aims at, even though it attaches names. A particular is what Alcibiades did or what happened to him. In comedy this has already become clear: the poets structure the plot through probable events and only then supply whatever names occur to them, rather than writing about particular individuals as the iambic poets do. In tragedy, though, they cling to the names of people who actually existed. The reason is that what is possible is persuasive: what has not happened we do not yet believe to be possible, whereas what has happened is obviously possible, since it would not have happened if it were impossible.[20] Even so, in some tragedies only one or two of the names are familiar and the rest are invented, and in some none are, as in Agathon's *Antheus*: in it both incidents and names are invented alike, and it gives no less delight. So one should not seek at all costs to cling to the traditional plots on which tragedies are based. Indeed, it would be absurd to seek this, since even the familiar plots are familiar to few, yet they delight everyone. It is clear from this, then, that the poet must be a maker of plots rather than of

20 Alcibiades (c. 450–404 BC) was a flamboyant Athenian general and politician.

verses, inasmuch as he is a poet by virtue of imitation, and what he imitates are actions.[21] And even if he happens to compose about things that actually happened, he is no less a poet; for nothing prevents some actual events from being the sort of things that would probably happen, and could happen, and it is in that respect that he is their poet.

Of simple plots and actions, the episodic are the worst. By an episodic plot I mean one in which the episodes follow one another without probability or necessity. Such plots are composed by poor poets because of their own shortcomings, and by good ones because of the actors: writing showpieces for the competition and stretching the plot beyond its capacity, 1452a they are often forced to distort the sequence. The imitation is not only of a complete action but also of things that are fearful and pitiable, and these arise most of all when events happen contrary to expectation yet because of one another. They will be more astonishing this way than if they came about by themselves or by chance, since even among chance events the most astonishing seem to be those that appear to have happened as if on purpose—as when the statue of Mitys at Argos killed the man responsible for Mitys's death by falling on him while he was looking at it; for such things seem not to happen at random. So plots of this kind are necessarily finer.

SIMPLE AND COMPLEX PLOTS

Complex plots change fortune through reversal or recognition arising from what went before.

Some plots are simple, others complex; for the actions of which plots are imitations are themselves, from the outset, of these kinds. I call an action simple when, being continuous and unified in the way defined, its change of fortune comes about without reversal or recognition; complex, when the change involves recognition or reversal or both. These must arise from

21 Agathon was an Athenian tragic poet of the late fifth century BC, host of the party in Plato's *Symposium*.

the structure of the plot itself, so that they result from what has gone before, happening either necessarily or probably. For it makes a great difference whether things happen because of what preceded or merely after it.

REVERSAL, RECOGNITION AND SUFFERING

Aristotle defines reversal, recognition and suffering, the three parts of the plot.

Reversal is a change of what is being done to its opposite, as has been said, and this too, as we are saying, in accordance with probability or necessity. For example, in the *Oedipus* the man who comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his fear about his mother does the opposite by revealing who he was; and in the *Lynceus* one man is being led off to be put to death, with Danaus following to kill him, but as a result of what has happened it is Danaus who is killed and the other who is saved. Recognition, as the name itself indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or to enmity, among those marked out for good fortune or misfortune. The finest recognition is one that occurs together with a reversal, like the one in the *Oedipus*.[22] There are, of course, other kinds of recognition too: it can happen, as has been said, with regard to inanimate and random objects, and one can recognize whether someone has or has not done something. But the kind most integral to the plot and to the action is the one described. For such a recognition combined with a reversal will involve either pity 1452b or fear (and it is actions of this kind that tragedy is taken to imitate), since misfortune and good fortune too will turn on such events. Since recognition is recognition of persons, some recognitions are of one person by the other only, when it is already clear who the other is; but sometimes both must recognize each other. For example, Iphigenia was recognized by

22 The *Oedipus* is Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*; the *Lynceus*, by the fourth-century BC tragedian Theodectes, is lost.

Orestes through the sending of the letter, but another recognition was needed for him to be recognized by Iphigenia.[23]

These, then, are two parts of the plot, reversal and recognition; a third is suffering. Of these, reversal and recognition have been discussed. Suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as deaths in full view, agonies, woundings and the like.

THE SECTIONS OF A TRAGEDY

Tragedy is divided into prologue, episodes, exodos and choral songs.

The parts of tragedy that should be used as its constituent forms we have stated earlier. Its parts in terms of quantity, the separate sections into which it is divided, are these: prologue, episode, exodos and choral part, and of the choral part, the parodos and the stasimon. These are common to all tragedies; peculiar to some are songs from the stage and kommoi. The prologue is the whole part of a tragedy before the entrance of the chorus; an episode is the whole part of a tragedy between complete choral songs; the exodos is the whole part of a tragedy after which there is no choral song. Of the choral part, the parodos is the first complete utterance of the chorus; a stasimon is a choral song without anapaests and trochees; a kommos is a lament shared by the chorus and the actors on stage.[24]

The parts of tragedy that should be used as its constituent forms we stated earlier; its parts in terms of quantity, the separate sections into which it is divided, are the ones just listed.[25]

23 The example is from Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, where Orestes and his sister meet without knowing each other.

24 *Parodos* means the chorus's entrance, *exodos* the exit, and *stasimon* a song sung in place; *kommos* literally means a beating of the breast in mourning.

25 This sentence repeats the chapter's opening almost word for word, as a closing summary; the repetition is in the Greek.

THE BEST TRAGIC PLOT

The finest tragedy shows a person, neither very good nor wicked, falling into misfortune through error.

What one should aim at and what one should avoid in structuring plots, and how tragedy will achieve its function, would be the next thing to discuss after what has just been said. Since the structure of the finest tragedy should be not simple but complex, and it should imitate fearful and pitiable events (this being the distinctive feature of this kind of imitation), it is clear, first, that decent men should not be shown passing from good fortune to misfortune, for that is neither fearful nor pitiable but repugnant; nor wicked people passing from misfortune to good fortune, for that is the most untragic of all: it has none of the required qualities, being neither appealing to human sympathy [1453a] nor pitiable nor fearful; nor again a thoroughly vicious man falling from good fortune into misfortune. Such a structure might appeal to human sympathy, but it would arouse neither pity nor fear. For pity concerns one who suffers undeservedly, fear one who is like us—pity for the undeserving, fear for someone like us—so that the outcome will be neither pitiable nor fearful. What remains is the person in between. This is someone who neither is outstanding in excellence and justice nor falls into misfortune through vice and wickedness, but through some error; one of those who enjoy great renown and good fortune, such as Oedipus, Thyestes and distinguished men from such families. The well-made plot, then, must be single rather than double, as some claim, and must change not from misfortune to good fortune but the opposite, from good fortune to misfortune, not through wickedness but through a great error, on the part of someone either as described or better rather than worse.[26] What actually happens is evidence of this. At first poets ran through any plots that came to hand, but now

26 "Error" translates *hamartia*, often rendered "tragic flaw," though Aristotle means a mistake or error.

the finest tragedies are composed about a few houses, for example about Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and any others who happened to suffer or do terrible things. The finest tragedy by the standards of the art, then, comes from this structure. That is why those who criticize Euripides make the same mistake, faulting him for doing this in his tragedies, many of which end in misfortune. This, as has been said, is correct. The greatest evidence is that on the stage and in the competitions such plays appear the most tragic, if they are successfully done; and Euripides, even if he does not manage other things well, at least appears the most tragic of the poets. Second is the structure that some call first: the one that has a double structure, like the *Odyssey*, and ends in opposite ways for the better and the worse characters. It seems to be first because of the weakness of audiences; for the poets follow the spectators, composing to suit their wishes. But this is not the pleasure that comes from tragedy; it is more proper to comedy. There, those who are the bitterest enemies in the plot, such as Orestes and Aegisthus, go off at the end as friends, and no one is killed by anyone.

PITY AND FEAR FROM THE PLOT

Pity and fear should come from the plot, especially from deeds between close relatives.

1453b Now, the fearful and pitiable can arise from the spectacle, but they can also arise from the structure of the incidents itself, which is preferable and the mark of a better poet. For the plot should be so structured that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the incidents unfold shudders and feels pity at what happens—which is what one would experience on hearing the plot of the *Oedipus*. To produce this effect through spectacle is less a matter of art and requires funding for the production. Those who use spectacle to produce not the fearful but only the monstrous have nothing in common with tragedy; for one should not seek every pleasure from tragedy, but the one proper to it. And

since the poet should produce the pleasure that comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is clear that this must be built into the incidents.[27] Let us consider, then, which sorts of events strike us as terrible or pitiable. Such actions must be between people who are close to one another, or enemies, or neither. If an enemy acts against an enemy, there is nothing pitiable either in his doing it or in his being about to, except for the suffering itself; nor if they are neither. But when sufferings occur within close relationships—when brother kills or is about to kill brother, or son father, or mother son, or son mother, or does something else of the kind—these are what one should look for. One cannot break up the traditional plots—I mean, for example, Clytemnestra being killed by Orestes, and Eriphyle by Alcmaeon—but the poet must discover for himself how to use the inherited material well. Let us say more clearly what we mean by "well."[28] The action can take place as the older poets made it, with the characters knowing and aware, as Euripides too made Medea kill her children. Or they can do the terrible deed, but in ignorance, and only later recognize the relationship, like Sophocles' Oedipus. There, it is true, the deed lies outside the drama, but it can also be within the tragedy itself, as with Astydamas's Alcmaeon, or Telegonus in the *Wounded Odysseus*. A third possibility besides these is for someone who is about to do something irreparable through ignorance to recognize the truth before doing it. There is no other way besides these; for one must either act or not, and either knowingly or unknowingly. Of these, to be about to act knowingly and then not do it is the worst: it is repugnant and not tragic, since there is no suffering.[29] That is why no one 1454a composes this way, except rarely, as with Haemon and Creon in the *Antigone*. Acting is second. It is better to act in ignorance and to recognize after

27 At Athens a wealthy citizen, the *chorēgos*, paid for a play's chorus and production as a public service.

28 Eriphyle, bribed with a necklace, sent her husband Amphiaraus to his death at Thebes; their son Alcmaeon killed her in revenge.

29 Telegonus, son of Odysseus and Circe, unknowingly killed his father; Astydamas was a fourth-century BC tragedian.

acting; for there is nothing repugnant in it, and the recognition is astonishing. Best is the last: I mean, for example, that in the *Cresphontes* Merope is about to kill her son, but does not, and recognizes him instead; and in the *Iphigenia* the sister recognizes the brother; and in the *Helle* the son recognizes his mother when about to hand her over. This is why, as was said long ago, tragedies are about only a few families. For in their search it was not by art but by chance that poets discovered how to produce this sort of thing in their plots; so they are compelled to turn to those houses in which such sufferings have occurred.[30] Concerning the structure of the incidents, then, and what sort the plots should be, enough has been said.

CHARACTER

Characters should be good, appropriate, lifelike and consistent, and resolutions should arise from the plot.

With regard to character there are four things to aim at. The first and foremost is that the characters be good. There will be character if, as was said, the speech or the action makes evident some decision, whatever it may be; and good character if the decision is good. Goodness is possible in every class of person: a woman can be good, and so can a slave, though perhaps of these the first is inferior and the second wholly base. Second is that the characters be appropriate: a character can be courageous, but it is not appropriate for a woman to be courageous or formidable in this way. Third is that they be lifelike, for this is different from making the character good and appropriate in the sense described. Fourth is that they be consistent: even if the person being imitated is inconsistent and that is the character assumed, he should still be consistently inconsistent. An example of unnecessary baseness of character is Menelaus in the *Orestes*; of the unseemly and inappropriate, Odysseus's lament in the *Scylla* and Melanippe's speech; of the inconsistent,

30 In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Haemon draws his sword on his father Creon but misses him.

Iphigenia at Aulis, for Iphigenia as a suppliant is nothing like her later self. In character, just as in the structure of the incidents, one should always seek either the necessary or the probable, so that it is either necessary or probable for a person of this kind to say or do things of this kind, and necessary or probable for this to happen after that. It is clear, then, that the resolutions of plots too should arise from the [1454b] plot itself, and not from the machine, as in the *Medea* and in the business of the departure in the *Iliad*.[31] The machine should be used for matters outside the drama: either things that happened before, which a human being cannot know, or things that happen later, which require foretelling and announcement; for we grant to the gods the power to see all things. There should be nothing irrational in the incidents, or if there is, it should be outside the tragedy, like the one in Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Since tragedy is an imitation of people better than we are, poets should imitate good portrait-painters. They too, while rendering a person's particular form and making a likeness, paint people as finer than they are. So too the poet, when imitating people who are irascible or easy-going or have other such traits of character, should make them decent while being such, as Homer made Achilles good, an example of harshness.[32] These things, then, must be carefully observed, and besides them the matters bearing on the perceptions that necessarily accompany the art of poetry; for here too one can often go wrong. But enough has been said about them in my published works.

KINDS OF RECOGNITION

Recognitions by signs, contrivance, memory and reasoning are ranked; the best arises from the incidents.

What recognition is was stated earlier. As for the kinds of recognition, the first is the least artistic and the one most used for

31 The machine was a stage crane that could bring gods on high into view; Medea escapes in a chariot sent by the Sun, and in *Iliad* 2 Athena stops the Greeks from sailing home.

lack of resources: recognition through signs. Of these, some are congenital, such as "the spear the Earth-born bear" or stars like those Carcinus uses in his *Thyestes*; others are acquired, and of these some are on the body, such as scars, others external, such as necklaces, or the little boat in the *Tyro*. These too can be used better or worse: Odysseus, for instance, was recognized through his scar in one way by his nurse and in another by the swineherds. Recognitions made for the sake of proof, and all such, are less artistic; those that arise from a reversal, like the one in the Bathing Scene, are better. Second are those contrived by the poet, and therefore inartistic.[33] For example, Orestes in the *Iphigenia* makes himself known as Orestes. She is recognized through the letter, but he says what the poet wants, not what the plot requires. So this comes close to the fault mentioned above: he might just as well have brought some tokens with him. Another example is the "voice of the shuttle" in Sophocles' *Tereus*. The third kind comes through memory, when seeing something makes a person 1455a aware of something. So in the *Cyprians* of Dicaeogenes, he sees the painting and weeps; and in the story told to Alcinous, he hears the lyre-player, is reminded, and sheds tears; and from this they were recognized. The fourth is recognition by reasoning, as in the *Libation Bearers*: someone like me has come; no one is like me except Orestes; so Orestes has come.[34] There is also the one in Polyidus the sophist's version of *Iphigenia*: it was natural, he said, for Orestes to reason that his sister had been sacrificed and that now he too was to be sacrificed. And in Theodectes' *Tydeus*: that he came expecting to find his son and is himself being put to death. And the one in the *Daughters of Phineus*: when they saw the place, they reasoned out their fate—that they were fated to die there, since that was where they had been exposed as infants. There is also a composite kind, which comes from a false inference on the part of the

32 The Greek of the final clause, about Achilles, is corrupt.

33 The Bathing Scene is *Odyssey* 19, where the old nurse recognizes Odysseus by his scar while washing his feet.

34 In Sophocles' lost *Tereus*, Philomela, whose tongue had been cut out, revealed her story by weaving it into a cloth.

audience, as in *Odysseus the False Messenger*. That he alone, and no one else, can string the bow is the poet's invention and a premise, as is his saying that he would recognize the bow he had never seen; but to make the recognition come about through this, as though he would be recognized through that, is a false inference. Best of all is the recognition that arises from the incidents themselves, where the astonishment comes about through probable events, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and in the *Iphigenia*: it is probable that she would want to send a letter. Only recognitions of this kind do without contrived tokens and necklaces. Second best are those that come from reasoning.

COMPOSING A PLOT

The poet should visualize the action, sketch the plot in outline, and then add episodes.

When constructing plots and working them out in diction, the poet should put things before his eyes as much as possible. Seeing them most vividly this way, as if he were present at the actions themselves, he will find what is fitting, and inconsistencies will be least likely to escape him. A sign of this is the fault found with Carcinus. His Amphiaraus was coming back up from the shrine; this went unnoticed by anyone who did not see it, but on stage the play failed, because the audience was annoyed by it. As far as possible, the poet should also work things out with gestures. Given the same natural gifts, those who are actually in the grip of emotions are the most convincing: the one who is in turmoil conveys turmoil, and the one who is angry conveys anger, most truly. That is why the art of poetry belongs to a naturally gifted person or to a mad one: the first are adaptable, the second are carried out of themselves. As for stories, whether already made up or invented by the poet [1455b] himself, he should first set them out in general terms, and only then add episodes and extend them. By considering the general outline I mean something like this, taking the *Iphigenia* as an example. A girl was sacrificed and vanished without her sacrificers know-

ing how. She was settled in another country, where it was the custom to sacrifice strangers to the goddess, and she came to hold this priesthood. Some time later the priestess's brother happened to arrive. That the god ordered him, for some reason outside the general outline, to go there, and what he went for, lie outside the plot. He arrived, was seized, and when he was about to be sacrificed he made himself known—whether as Euripides made it happen or as Polyidus did, by saying, as was probable, that it was not only his sister, it seemed, who was fated to be sacrificed, but he himself too; and from this came his rescue. After this, once the names have been assigned, the poet should work in the episodes, and see to it that the episodes belong to the story: for instance, in the case of Orestes, the madness through which he was captured, and his rescue by means of the purification. In plays, then, the episodes are short, while epic is lengthened by them. The story of the *Odyssey* is not long. A man is away from home for many years, watched closely by Poseidon, and alone. Meanwhile affairs at home are such that his property is being squandered by suitors and his son is the target of plots. He himself arrives home, storm-tossed, makes himself known to certain people, and attacks; he himself is saved, and he destroys his enemies. This is what is essential; the rest is episodes.[35]

COMPLICATION AND RESOLUTION

Every tragedy has a complication and resolution; the chorus should share in the action.

Every tragedy has a complication and a resolution. The complication consists of events outside the play and often some of those within it; the rest is the resolution. By complication I mean everything from the beginning up to the last point before the change to good or bad fortune; by resolution, everything from

35 "Purification" here is *katharsis* in its ritual sense: in Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians,* the escape is managed under the pretext of purifying the goddess's statue in the sea.

the beginning of the change to the end. So in Theodectes' *Lynceus*, the complication is the events that happened beforehand, the seizure of the child, and then in turn their own ...; the resolution runs from the accusation of murder to the end. There are four kinds of tragedy (for that is also the number of parts that were mentioned): the complex, whose whole consists of reversal and recognition; the tragedy of suffering, such as the [1456a] *Ajax* and *Ixion* plays; the tragedy of character, such as the *Women of Phthia* and the *Peleus*; and the fourth, ..., such as the *Daughters of Phorcys*, the *Prometheus*, and plays set in Hades. Ideally, then, a poet should try to have all these elements, or failing that the most important and as many as possible, especially given the way people now carp at poets: since there have been good poets for each kind, they expect one poet to surpass each of them in his particular strength. It is right to call a tragedy different from another, or the same, on no basis so much as the plot—that is, when they have the same complication and resolution.[36] Many poets handle the complication well and the resolution badly; but both must always be mastered. And one must remember what has often been said, and not make a tragedy out of an epic structure—by epic I mean one with many plots—as if someone were to make a tragedy of the whole plot of the *Iliad*. There, because of the length, the parts take on their appropriate magnitude, but in plays the result falls far short of expectations. A sign of this: those who have dramatized the whole sack of Troy, and not part by part as Euripides did, or the whole of Niobe's story, and not as Aeschylus did, either fail on stage or do badly in the competition; even Agathon failed in this one respect alone. In reversals and in simple actions, though, poets hit what they aim at with astonishing skill; for this is tragic and satisfies our human sympathy. This happens when a clever but wicked man is deceived, like Sisyphus, or a brave but unjust man is defeated. This is also probable, as Agathon says: it is probable that many things happen even contrary to probability. The chorus, too, should be

36 The name of the fourth kind is corrupt in the Greek; editors often restore "spectacle."

treated as one of the actors: it should be a part of the whole and share in the action, not as in Euripides but as in Sophocles. In the other poets the songs have no more to do with the plot than with any other tragedy; that is why they sing interludes, a practice Agathon started. Yet what difference is there between singing interludes and fitting a speech, or a whole episode, from one play into another?

THOUGHT AND DICTION

Thought is left to rhetoric; the study of delivery is set aside as not part of poetry.

The other elements have now been discussed; it remains to speak of diction and thought. What concerns thought may be left to my works on rhetoric, since it belongs more properly to that inquiry. Under thought falls everything that has to be produced by speech. Its parts are proving, refuting, arousing emotions (such as [1456b] pity, fear, anger, and the like), and also making things seem great or small. Clearly the incidents, too, must draw on the same kinds of means whenever they need to make things seem pitiable, terrible, important, or probable. The only difference is that the incidents must make their impression without explanation, whereas in speech it must be produced by the speaker and arise through the speech. For what would be the speaker's function if things appeared as they should without his speech? Of the matters concerning diction, one field of study is the modes of expression. Knowing these belongs to the art of delivery and to whoever has mastery of that art: for instance, what a command is, what a prayer is, a narration, a threat, a question, an answer, and anything else of this kind. Knowing or not knowing these things brings no criticism against the art of poetry that is worth taking seriously. For who would regard as a mistake what Protagoras criticizes—that the poet, thinking he is praying, gives a command when he says "Sing, goddess, of the wrath"? To tell someone to do something or not, he says, is a

command. So let this be set aside as belonging to another study, not to poetry.[37]

THE PARTS OF LANGUAGE

Aristotle lists the elements of speech, from letter and syllable to noun, verb and utterance.

Diction as a whole has the following parts: letter, syllable, connective, noun, verb, article, inflection, utterance. A letter is an indivisible sound—not every such sound, but one from which a compound sound can naturally be formed. Animals too utter indivisible sounds, but I call none of these a letter. Its kinds are the vowel, the semivowel, and the mute. A vowel is a letter that has an audible sound without contact of tongue or lips; a semivowel has an audible sound with such contact, such as S and R; a mute, with such contact, has no sound by itself but becomes audible together with letters that have some sound, such as G and D. These differ according to the shapes of the mouth and the places where they are made, in aspiration and its absence, in length and shortness, and also in high, low, and intermediate pitch. The detailed study of these belongs to works on meter. A syllable is a sound without meaning, composed of a mute and a letter that has sound: GR without A is a syllable, and so is GRA, with A. But the study of the differences among these too belongs to the science of meter. A connective is a sound without meaning which neither 1457a prevents nor produces a single meaningful sound out of several sounds, which can naturally be placed both at the ends and in the middle, but which it is not proper to put by itself at the beginning of an utterance: for instance, *men*, *ētoi*, *de*. Or: a sound without meaning which can naturally make one meaningful sound out of several sounds that each have meaning. An article is a sound without meaning which marks the beginning or end of an utterance, or a division within it: for instance, *amphi*, *peri*, and the others. Or: a sound

37 Protagoras was a fifth-century BC sophist; "Sing, goddess, of the wrath" is the opening of the *Iliad*.

without meaning which neither prevents nor produces a single meaningful sound out of several sounds, and which can naturally be placed both at the ends and in the middle. A noun is a compound sound with meaning, without time, no part of which has meaning by itself; for in double nouns we do not use a part as if it had meaning by itself—in *Theodōros*, for instance, *dōros* ("gift") has no meaning.[38] A verb is a compound sound with meaning, with time, no part of which has meaning by itself, just as with nouns. "Man" or "white" does not signify when, but "walks" or "has walked" signifies in addition the present time in the one case and the past in the other. Inflection belongs to a noun or verb: one kind signifies "of this" or "to this" and the like; another signifies one or many, such as "men" or "man"; another concerns modes of delivery, such as question or command—"Did he walk?" and "Walk!" are inflections of a verb according to these kinds. An utterance is a compound sound with meaning, some parts of which have meaning by themselves. (Not every utterance is composed of verbs and nouns—the definition of man, for instance—but there can be an utterance without verbs; still, it will always have some part with meaning.) For example, "Cleon" in "Cleon walks." An utterance is one in two ways: either it signifies one thing, or it is made one out of several by a connective. So the *Iliad* is one by connection, the definition of man by signifying one thing.

KINDS OF WORDS AND METAPHOR

Nouns are classified, and metaphor is defined with its four types.

Nouns are of two kinds. One is simple—by simple I mean not composed of meaningful parts, such as *gē* ("earth"). The other is double. Of double nouns, some are made of a meaningful and a meaningless part (though not meaningful and meaningless within the noun), others of meaningful parts. There could also be triple, quadruple, and multiple nouns, like many of the Mas-

38 The text of the definitions of connective and article is badly preserved, which is why it repeats itself.

saliots' words, [1457b] *Hermocaïcoxanthus*... Every noun is either a standard word, a foreign word, a metaphor, an ornament, a coined word, a lengthened word, a shortened word, or an altered word. By a standard word I mean one that a given people uses; by a foreign word, one that others use. So clearly the same word can be both foreign and standard, but not for the same people: *sigynon* ("spear") is standard for Cypriots but foreign for us.[39] Metaphor is the application to something of a word that belongs to something else, either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy. By "from genus to species" I mean, for instance, "Here stands my ship": lying at anchor is a kind of standing. From species to genus: "Truly ten thousand noble deeds has Odysseus done": ten thousand is a large number, and it is used here instead of "many." From species to species: for instance, "drawing off the life with bronze" and "cutting with the long-edged bronze": here he has said "draw off" for "cut" and "cut" for "draw off," since both are kinds of taking away. By analogy I mean when the second term stands to the first as the fourth does to the third: the poet will then say the fourth instead of the second, or the second instead of the fourth. And sometimes poets add the term to which the replaced word is related. I mean, for instance: the cup stands to Dionysus as the shield does to Ares; so he will call the cup "the shield of Dionysus" and the shield "the cup of Ares." Or: old age stands to life as evening does to day; so he will call evening "the old age of day," or as Empedocles does, and old age "the evening of life" or "the sunset of life." Some of the terms in an analogy have no established name, but the metaphor can be expressed just the same. For instance, casting seed is called "sowing," but the sun's casting of its flame has no name. Yet this stands to the sun as sowing does to the seed; hence the phrase "sowing the god-created flame." This kind of metaphor can also be used in another way: after applying the borrowed term, one denies it one of its proper attributes—as if one were to call the

39 The Massaliots were the people of Massalia (Marseille); the example strings together the names of three rivers, the Hermus, Caicus and Xanthus.

shield not "the cup of Ares" but "the wineless cup"... A coined word is one not used by anyone at all but introduced by the poet himself; some words seem to be of this kind, such as *ernyges* ("sprouters") for horns and *arētēr* ("one who prays") for priest.[40] A lengthened word 1458a or a shortened one is, in the first case, one that uses a longer vowel than its own or has a syllable inserted, and in the second, one from which something has been removed. Lengthened: *polēos* for *poleōs*, and *Pēlēïadeō* for *Pēleidou*. Shortened: *kri*, *dō*, and "*ops* comes to be one from both." An altered word is one in which part of the name is kept and part is made up, as in "on the *dexiteron* breast" instead of *dexion* ("right").[41]

Nouns themselves are masculine, feminine, or in between. Masculine are those ending in N, R and S, and in the letters compounded with S (there are two of these, Ps and X). Feminine are those ending in the vowels that are always long, such as Ē and Ō, and, among the vowels that can be lengthened, in A. So the number of endings for masculine and feminine turns out to be equal, since Ps and X are compounds. No noun ends in a mute, nor in a short vowel. Only three end in I: *meli* (honey), *kommi* (gum), and *peperi* (pepper). Five end in U. Those in between end in these, and in N and S.

THE EXCELLENCE OF DICTION

Good diction is clear but not commonplace, mixing standard words with metaphors and rarer words.

The excellence of diction is to be clear and not commonplace. The clearest diction consists of standard words, but it is commonplace; the poetry of Cleophon and of Sthenelus is an example. Diction that uses unfamiliar words is dignified and gets away from the ordinary; by unfamiliar I mean foreign words, metaphor, lengthening, and everything that departs from standard usage. But if someone composes entirely in such

40 There is a gap in the text here: Aristotle's account of "ornament" has been lost.
41 *Kri* stands for *krithē* (barley), *dō* for *dōma* (house), *ops* for *opsis* (sight).

words, the result will be either a riddle or gibberish: a riddle if it is made of metaphors, gibberish if made of foreign words. The essence of a riddle is to describe things that are actually the case by joining together impossibilities. This cannot be done by combining other words, but it can with metaphors—for instance, "I saw a man who with fire welded bronze onto a man," and the like. Composition made of foreign words is gibberish.[42] So there must be some kind of mixture of these. The one sort—the foreign word, the metaphor, the ornament, and the other kinds mentioned—will keep the diction from being ordinary or commonplace, while the standard word will give it clarity. Not the least contribution 1458b to diction that is both clear and not ordinary is made by lengthenings, shortenings, and alterations of words. Because they differ from the standard form and depart from the usual, they will make it not ordinary; and because they share in the usual, it will be clear. So those who find fault with this way of speaking, and make fun of the poet for it, are wrong—like Euclides the elder, who claimed it was easy to write poetry if one were allowed to lengthen syllables as much as one liked, and who lampooned it in that very diction: "I saw Epichares walking to Marathon," and "not ... his hellebore." Now, to be seen using this device in an obvious way is ridiculous; but moderation applies to all the parts alike. Someone using metaphors, foreign words, and the other kinds inappropriately, and deliberately for comic effect, would achieve the same result. How much difference appropriate use makes should be observed in epic verse, by inserting standard words into the meter.[43] With foreign words, metaphors, and the other kinds too, anyone who substituted standard words would see that what we say is true. For instance, Aeschylus and Euripides wrote the same iambic line, but Euripides changed just one word, putting a foreign word in place of a standard, customary one; and the one line seems

42 The answer to the riddle is cupping, a medical treatment in which a heated bronze cup was applied to the skin.

43 The lines Euclides quotes scan as verse only if ordinary short syllables are treated as long; the second line is corrupt in the Greek.

beautiful, the other cheap. Aeschylus in his *Philoctetes* wrote, "the ulcer that eats the flesh of my foot," and Euripides replaced "eats" with "feasts on." Again, take "and now one who is puny and of no account and unseemly"; suppose someone substituted standard words and said, "and now one who is small and weak and ugly." Or "setting down an unseemly stool and a puny table" as "setting down a poor stool and a small table"; or "the shores bellow" as "the shores shout." Again, Ariphrades used to ridicule the tragedians for using expressions no one would use in conversation, such as *dōmatōn apo* ("the house from") instead of *apo dōmatōn* ("from the house"), and *sethen*, and *egō de nin*, and 1459a *Achilleōs peri* ("Achilles about") instead of *peri Achilleōs* ("about Achilles"), and so on. But precisely because they are not among the standard expressions, all such things make the diction not ordinary; and he did not realize this. It is a great thing to use each of the kinds mentioned appropriately, including double words and foreign words, but by far the greatest is to be good at metaphor. This alone cannot be learned from anyone else, and it is a sign of natural gifts: to make good metaphors is to see resemblances. Of the kinds of words, double words suit dithyrambs best, foreign words suit heroic verse, and metaphors suit iambic verse. In heroic verse all the kinds mentioned are useful. But in iambic verse, since it imitates speech as closely as possible, the fitting words are those one would also use in conversation: that is, the standard word, metaphor, and ornament. Let this be enough, then, about tragedy and imitation through action.

UNITY IN EPIC

Epic, like tragedy, needs a single unified action, which Homer alone fully achieved.

As for the art of imitation that narrates in verse, it is clear that its plots, as in tragedies, should be constructed dramatically, around a single action that is whole and complete, with a beginning, middle and end, so that, like a single whole living

creature, it may produce its proper pleasure. Its structures should not be like histories, which must set out not one action but one period of time, with everything that happened in it to one person or more, each of these events related to the others only by chance. Just as the sea battle at Salamis and the battle against the Carthaginians in Sicily took place at the same time without tending toward the same end, so too in successive periods one thing sometimes follows another without any single end resulting from them. Yet most poets, one might say, do this.[44] That is why, as we have already said, Homer would seem marvelous compared with the others in this respect too: he did not try to make the war as a whole his subject, even though it had a beginning and an end. The plot would have been too large and not easy to take in at one view—or, if kept to a moderate length, too tangled by its variety. As it is, he has taken a single part, and used many of the others as episodes, such as the Catalogue of Ships and other episodes with which he diversifies the poem. The others compose about one person, [1459b] one period, or one action with many parts, like the author of the *Cypria* and the *Little Iliad*. As a result, only one tragedy can be made from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, or two at most, but many from the *Cypria*, and more than eight from the *Little Iliad*: *The Judgment of the Arms*, *Philoctetes*, *Neoptolemus*, *Eurypylus*, *The Beggar's Mission*, *The Spartan Women*, *The Sack of Troy*, *The Departure*, *Sinon* and *The Trojan Women*.[45]

EPIC COMPARED WITH TRAGEDY

Epic shares tragedy's kinds and parts but differs in length and meter, and allows more of the wondrous.

Further, epic must have the same kinds as tragedy: it must be simple or complex, a work of character or of suffering. It has the

44 Both battles were fought in 480 BC, at Salamis against the Persians and at Himera in Sicily.

45 The *Cypria* and the *Little Iliad* were lost epics telling other parts of the Trojan War story.

same parts too, apart from song and spectacle: it needs reversals, recognitions and sufferings, and its thought and diction must be good. Homer used all of these, both first and adequately. Of his two poems, the *Iliad* is structured as simple and a work of suffering, the *Odyssey* as complex (there is recognition throughout) and a work of character. On top of this, he surpassed everyone in diction and thought.

Epic differs in the length of its structure and in its meter. As for length, the limit already stated is adequate: one must be able to take in the beginning and the end in one view. This would be so if the structures were shorter than those of the old epics, and came to about the length of the tragedies presented at a single hearing. Epic has a great advantage when it comes to extending its magnitude. In tragedy it is not possible to imitate many parts of the action as they happen at the same time, but only the part on stage performed by the actors; whereas in epic, because it is narrative, one can present many parts being carried out simultaneously, and these, if they are relevant, add to the poem's bulk.[46] So this is an advantage that makes for grandeur, for giving the listener variety, and for diversifying with dissimilar episodes; for sameness quickly sates the audience and makes tragedies fail. The heroic meter proved fitting through experience. If someone were to compose a narrative imitation in any other meter, or in several, it would seem inappropriate. The heroic is the most stately and weighty of the meters—which is why it admits foreign words and metaphors most readily, since narrative imitation too is more elaborate than the others—while the iambic and the tetrameter 1460a are meters of movement, the one suited to dancing, the other to action. It would be stranger still if someone mixed them, as Chaeremon did. That is why no one has composed a long structure in any meter other than the heroic; rather, as we said, nature itself teaches us to choose what fits it.[47] Homer deserves praise for many other things, and espe-

46 At the Athenian festivals a poet's tragedies were performed in a set of three on a single day.

47 The heroic meter is the dactylic hexameter of Homer's epics.

cially because he alone among poets is not ignorant of what he himself should do. The poet himself should say as little as possible, since it is not in this that he is an imitator. The others take part in person throughout and imitate little, and seldom; but Homer, after a brief preface, at once brings on a man or a woman or some other character—none without character, but each with a character of their own. Now, the wondrous must be created in tragedies, but epic has more room for the irrational, the chief source of the wondrous, because we do not see the person acting. The pursuit of Hector, if it were on stage, would seem ridiculous—the others standing still and not pursuing, and Achilles shaking his head to hold them back—but in epic it goes unnoticed. The wondrous is pleasant. A sign of this: everyone adds something when they tell a story, assuming it will please. It is Homer above all who has taught the others how to tell falsehoods as they should. This is a matter of false inference. When one thing's being or happening entails another thing's being or happening, people think that if the later thing is the case, the earlier one also is or happens. But this is false. So if the first thing is false, but there is something else that would necessarily be or happen if it were true, the poet should add this second thing. Because we know it is true, our soul falsely infers that the first is true as well. An example of this is the Bathing Scene.[48] One should prefer impossibilities that are probable to possibilities that are unconvincing. Stories should not be built out of irrational parts. Ideally they should contain nothing irrational at all; failing that, it should lie outside the plot—like Oedipus not knowing how Laius died—and not inside the play, like the people reporting the Pythian games in the *Electra*, or the man in the *Mysians* who comes from Tegea to Mysia without speaking. So to say that the plot would otherwise have been ruined is ridiculous: one should not construct such plots in the first place. If a poet does include something irrational and it seems it could be made more reasonable, even an absurdity may be admitted.

48 In the Bathing Scene (*Odyssey* 19), Penelope trusts the disguised Odysseus because he accurately describes the clothes Odysseus once wore.

Even the irrational elements in the *Odyssey* about his being put ashore would clearly 1460b be intolerable if a poor poet had handled them; as it is, the poet makes the absurdity disappear by sweetening it with his other merits.[49] The diction should be worked up elaborately in the slack parts, those that express neither character nor thought; for, conversely, overly brilliant diction obscures character and thought.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Aristotle shows how to answer critics' objections to poets, especially Homer.

As for problems and their solutions—how many kinds there are and of what sort—this would become clear if we consider it as follows. Since the poet is an imitator, like a painter or any other image-maker, he must always imitate one of three things: things as they were or are, things as people say or think they are, or things as they ought to be. These are conveyed in diction that includes foreign words, metaphors, and many modifications of language; for we allow poets these. Besides, correctness is not the same in politics as in poetry, nor in any other art as in poetry. Within the art of poetry itself there are two kinds of error: one belongs to the art itself, the other is incidental. If the poet chose to imitate… …through lack of ability, the error belongs to the art itself. But if the error lies in choosing something incorrectly—a horse, say, with both right legs thrown forward at once—or is a mistake belonging to some particular art, such as medicine or any other, it does not belong to the art itself. So one must examine the criticisms raised in the problems in the light of these points, and resolve them. First, those that concern the art itself. If impossibilities have been composed, it is an error; but it is justified if it achieves the end of the art itself (the end has been stated), that is, if in this way it makes that part or

49 In Sophocles' *Electra* a false report of Orestes' death at the Pythian games is anachronistic; in *Odyssey* 13 the Phaeacians put Odysseus ashore on Ithaca without his waking. The sentence beginning "If a poet does include" is corrupt in the Greek.

some other part more astonishing. An example is the pursuit of Hector. If, however, the end could have been achieved as well or better also in accordance with the art concerned with these things, the error is not justified; for, if possible, there should be no error at all. Further, which kind of thing is the error in: matters of the art, or something else, incidental to it? It is less serious not to know that a female deer has no horns than to paint one unrecognizably. Besides, if the criticism is that something is not true, perhaps it is as it ought to be—as Sophocles, too, said that he portrayed people as they ought to be, and Euripides as they are; this is the way to resolve it. If it is neither, then say that this is what people say—for example, the stories about the gods. Perhaps it is neither better nor true to speak of them so, but, as it may be, 1461a as Xenophanes thought; still, that is what people say. Other things are perhaps not better, but that is how they were—for example, what is said about the weapons: "their spears stood upright on their butt-spikes"; for that was the custom then, as it still is now among the Illyrians.[50] As to whether something has been said or done well or not well by someone, one must look not only at the thing itself that was done or said, to see whether it is excellent or base, but also at the person doing or saying it, to whom, when, by what means, or for what purpose: for instance, to bring about a greater good, or to avert a greater evil. Other objections must be resolved by looking at the diction: for instance, by a foreign word in "first against the *ourēas*," since perhaps he means not the mules but the sentries. And of Dolon, "who was bad in *eidos*," not that his body was ill-proportioned but that his face was ugly, for the Cretans call someone with a handsome face *eueidēs*. And "mix it *zōroteron*" means not "undiluted," as for drunkards, but "quicker."[51] Other things are said by metaphor, for instance: "All the gods and men were sleeping through the night," while at the same time he

50 Xenophanes, a sixth-century BC poet and philosopher, attacked the way Homer and Hesiod portray the gods.

51 *Ourēas* normally means "mules" (*Iliad* 1.50), and *eidos* normally means "form" or "appearance."

says: "Whenever he gazed toward the Trojan plain, the din of pipes and flutes." "All" is said metaphorically instead of "many," since "all" is a kind of "many." And "alone without a share" is metaphorical, since what is best known is "alone." Some are resolved by accentuation, as Hippias of Thasos resolved "we grant him to win his prayer" and "the part of which is rotted by rain." Some by punctuation, as in Empedocles: "At once things became mortal that before had learned to be immortal, and unmixed things before were mixed." Some by ambiguity: "more of the night has passed," for "more" is ambiguous. Others by the customary use of language.[52] People call wine mixed with water "wine"; hence "a greave of new-wrought tin." And workers in iron are called "bronzesmiths"; hence Ganymede is said to "pour wine" for Zeus, although the gods do not drink wine. This, though, could also be metaphor. Whenever a word seems to imply some contradiction, one should consider how many senses it could have in the passage: for instance, in "there the bronze spear was stopped," in how many ways it could have been stopped there—this way or that—taking it as one best can. This is the opposite of what 1461b Glaucon describes: some people make an unreasonable assumption in advance, pass judgment themselves, and then reason from it; and as though the poet had said whatever they believe, they criticize him if something contradicts their own notion. This is what has happened with the matter of Icarius. People think he was a Spartan, and so it seems absurd that Telemachus did not meet him when he went to Sparta.[53] But perhaps it is as the Cephallenians say: they claim that Odysseus married one of their own, and that her father was Icadius, not Icarius. So the problem probably arises from a mistake. In general, the impossible must be justified by reference to poetry, to what is better, or to common opinion. With respect to poetry, a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility. … people such as Zeuxis painted; but it is better

52 Changing an accent or breathing changes the sense: read as *ou* ("not") instead of *hou* ("of which"), the second line says the wood is not rotted by rain.
53 Icarius was the father of Penelope, Odysseus' wife.

so, for the model should surpass reality. Irrational things are to be justified by reference to what people say; and also on the ground that sometimes they are not irrational, since it is probable that things also happen contrary to probability.[54] Things said in apparent contradiction should be examined as refutations are in arguments: whether it is the same thing, in relation to the same thing, and in the same way; so that the poet contradicts himself either with respect to what he himself says or to what a practically wise person would assume. Criticism for irrationality and for depravity is correct when there is no necessity and the poet makes no use of the irrational element, as Euripides with Aegeus, or of the wickedness, as with Menelaus in the *Orestes*. So critics bring objections of five kinds: that things are impossible, or irrational, or harmful, or contradictory, or contrary to correctness in the art. The solutions should be sought from the points listed; and there are twelve of them.[55]

IS EPIC OR TRAGEDY BETTER?

Aristotle argues that tragedy is superior to epic.

One might raise the question whether epic or tragic imitation is better. If the less vulgar is better, and the less vulgar is always the one addressed to a better audience, it is quite clear that the one that imitates everything is vulgar. For the performers, as though the audience will not notice unless they add something themselves, go through a great deal of movement—like poor pipe-players rolling around when they have to imitate a discus, and dragging the chorus leader about when they play the *Scylla*. Tragedy, then, is like this, in the way earlier actors regarded their successors: Mynniscus used to call Callippides an "ape" for overdoing things, and the same view was held of [1462a] Pindarus. As these actors stand to their predecessors, so the art of tragedy

54 Some words are lost after "unconvincing possibility."
55 In Euripides' *Medea*, Aegeus arrives unexplained just when Medea needs a refuge.

as a whole stands to epic.[56] Epic, then, they say, is for decent audiences who have no need of gestures, while tragedy is for inferior ones; so if it is vulgar, clearly it would be the worse. But first, this charge is against the art of acting, not poetry, since one can overdo the gestures in epic recitation too, as Sosistratus did, and in singing, as Mnasitheus of Opus used to do. Second, not all movement is to be rejected—any more than all dancing—but only that of inferior people, which was the criticism made of Callippides and is now made of others: that they imitate women who are not free. Further, tragedy achieves its effect even without movement, just as epic does, for its quality is evident from reading. So if it is superior in other respects, this fault at least need not belong to it. Next, tragedy has everything epic has (it can even use its meter), and in addition, no small part of it, music and spectacle, through which pleasures are produced most vividly. Then, too, it has vividness both in reading and in performance. Also, the end of the imitation is achieved in a shorter length; [1462b] for what is more concentrated is more pleasing than what is diluted over a long time—I mean, for instance, if someone were to put Sophocles' *Oedipus* into as many lines as the *Iliad*. Again, the imitation of the epic poets is less unified (a sign of this: several tragedies come from any one of their imitations), so that if they compose a single plot, it either seems cut short if briefly presented, or watery if it keeps to the length that suits the meter. I mean, for instance, if it is composed of several actions, just as the *Iliad* has many such parts, and the *Odyssey*, which also have magnitude in their own right. And yet these poems are constructed as well as they could be, and are, as far as possible, the imitation of a single action. If, then, tragedy is superior in all these respects, and also in achieving the function of the art (for these arts should produce not just any pleasure but the one we have described), it is clear that it would be better than epic, since it achieves its end more fully. About tragedy and epic, then—both themselves and their kinds and parts, how

56 Mynniscus, Callippides and Pindarus were actors; Mynniscus acted in Aeschylus' plays.

many there are and how they differ, the causes of their being good or not, and about criticisms and their solutions—let this much be said...[57]

57 The *Poetics* breaks off here; a second book, on comedy, has been lost.