



Aristotle Poetics

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I. THE VARIOUS KINDS OF POETRY

Introduction

1. What is poetry, how many kinds of it are there, and what are their specific effects? That is our topic, and we will inquire how stories are to be put together to make a good poetical work, and what is the number and nature of poetry's component parts, and raise other questions arising in the same area of inquiry. We shall make our start, as is natural, from first principles.

Poetry as a species of representation

Epic poetry and tragedy, as well as comedy and dithyramb,* and most music for flute and lyre are all, taken as a whole, forms of representation. They differ from each other in three ways, either in respect of the medium, the object, or the mode of their representation.

Differences of medium

People represent and portray objects by using colours and shapes to make visible images of them; some do this by skill, and others by practice. Others again make use of the voice. In like manner, all the literary genres mentioned make use of rhythm, language, and melody, whether separately or in combination. Music for flute and lyre and other instruments with similar effects, such as pipes, make use of melody and rhythm only. Dancers make use of rhythm alone: it is by rhythm expressed in bodily movement that they mime character, emotion, and action. There is an art that uses language unaccompanied, whether prose or verse, sometimes in a single metre and sometimes in combination: this so far remains unnamed. For there is no common name for us to give to the skits of Sophron and

- 10 Xenarchus* on the one hand and to the Socratic dialogues* on the other. Nor is there one for any other representation that one might produce in iambic trimeters or elegiac couplets or any other metre.* To be sure, people attach the name 'poetry' to the verse-form, and speak of elegiac poets and epic poets. But this classification has no regard to the representative aspect of their
- 15 poetry but only to the metre they share, so that writers are so described even if they publish medical or scientific treatises in metrical form. In fact Homer and Empedocles* have nothing in common except their metre; the former can be called a poet, but the latter should be termed a scientist. On the other hand,
- 20 if someone were to compose in the greatest possible variety of metres—as Chaereon did in his *Centaur*, a rhapsody containing every single metre—he would still deserve to be called a poet. That is how we should classify in this area. There are also arts that make use of all the media we have mentioned—
- 25 rhythm, melody, and metre. Examples are dithyramb, nomes,* tragedy, and comedy. They differ in that the first two make use of them all together, and the last two in specific parts. These different ways in which the arts effect representation are what I call differences of medium.

Differences of objects

- 1448a 2. The things that representative artists represent are the actions of people, and if people are represented they are necessarily either superior or inferior, better or worse, than we are. (Differences in character you see derive from these categories, since it is by virtue or vice that people are ethically distinct from
- 5 each other.) So too with painters: Polygnotus* portrayed better people, Pauson worse people, and Dionysius people just like us. Clearly, each of the kinds of representation so far mentioned will exhibit these differences, and will differ from the others by representing objects that are distinct in this way. These dissimilarities can occur even in ballet and in music for flute and lyre,
- 10 no less than in prose and unaccompanied verse. For instance,

Homer represents people better than us and Cleophon people similar to us, while people worse than us figure in the works of Hegemon of Thasos, the inventor of parodies, and Nicochares who wrote the *Deiliad*.* The same is the case with dithyrambs and nomos: one could represent Cyclopes in the manner of Timotheus and Philoxenus.* The very same difference makes the distinction between tragedy and comedy: the latter aims to represent people as worse, and the former as better, than people nowadays are. 15

Differences in mode

3. A third difference is in the mode of representation of each of these objects. Within the same medium it is possible to represent the same objects either by narrative or by dramatization. Narrative may be borne throughout by a single narrator, or with variation as in Homer. In dramatization all the personages play their parts as active agents. 20

So representation, as we said initially, can be differentiated in these three respects: medium, object, and mode. So, in respect of representation, Sophocles belongs in one way with Homer, since they both represent superior people, but in another way with Aristophanes, since they both represent people in dramatic activity. This is why, according to some people, drama got its name—for the word is derived from a Greek verb for doing, namely *dran*. This too is why the Dorians* claim ownership of both tragedy and comedy, offering the names as evidence. Comedy is claimed by the Megarians—both those on the mainland who date it to the time of their democracy, and those in Sicily which was the birthplace of the poet Epicharmus, who lived long before Chionides and Magnes.* Tragedy is claimed by some inhabitants of the Peloponnese. The Dorians point out that they call villages *komai* while the Athenians call them *demoi*; the assumption is that comedians got their name not because the Greek word for revelry is *komazein*, but because they strolled through villages having been ejected in 30 35

disgrace from the city. Again the Dorians say that their word
 1448b for doing is *dran*, while the Athenians say *prattein*.

So much, then, for the number of ways in which representation can be classified, and what they are.

The origins of poetry and its early development

4. Two things, both of them natural, seem likely to have been
 5 the causes of the origin of poetry. Representation comes naturally to human beings from childhood,* and so does the universal pleasure in representations. Indeed, this marks off humans from other animals: man is prone to representation beyond all others, and learns his earliest lessons through representation. A
 10 common phenomenon is evidence of this: even when things are painful to look upon—corpses, for instance, or the shapes of the most revolting animals—we take pleasure in viewing highly realistic images of them. The further explanation of this is that learning is delightful not only to philosophers but to ordinary
 15 people as well, even though they have less capacity for it. That is why people like seeing images, because as they look at them they understand and work out what each item is, for example, ‘this is so-and-so’.* Whereas, if one is unacquainted with the subject, one’s pleasure will not be in the representation, but in the technique or the colour or some other element.

20 Representation, then, comes naturally to us, as do melody and rhythm (which obviously includes metre as a sub-class); and so it was that, from the beginning, those with the greatest natural gift for such things by a gradual process of improvement developed poetry out of improvisation.

25 This, however, took two different forms according to the characters of the authors: the more serious among them represented noble people and noble actions, and the more frivolous represented the actions of ignoble people. The latter began by composing invectives, while the former produced hymns and panegyrics. We cannot identify a poem of that kind by any poet earlier than Homer, though there are likely to have been many

such; but from Homer onwards we can do so, beginning with 30
 his own *Margites* and similar poems.* Because of its suitability
 the iambic metre came into use in these poems, and the reason
 why it is now called 'iambic' is because *iambizein* is the Greek
 word for 'lampoon'. So some of the ancient poets composed
 heroic epics and others iambic lampoons. Just as Homer was
 the greatest poet in the serious style, unsurpassed not only in
 composition but also in the dramatic power of his representa-
 tion, so too he was the first to put comedy into shape for us, 35
 no mere invective, but a dramatization of the ridiculous rather.
 Thus his *Margites* stands in the same relation to our comedies
 as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do to our tragedies. Once tragedy 1449a
 and comedy had made their appearance those who had an in-
 clination towards either kind of poetry followed their natural
 bent and either composed comedies in place of lampoons or
 composed tragedies in place of epics. This was because these 5
 new art forms were grander and more highly esteemed than
 the old.

Tragedy

This is not the place to inquire whether even now tragedy is all
 that it should be in respect of its constituent elements, whether
 in itself or in relation to its audiences. Certainly it originally
 took shape out of improvisations. (This is true of tragedy as
 well as of comedy: the former began with the leaders of the 10
 dithyramb, and the latter from the leaders of the phallic sing-
 ing* that is a tradition that still survives in many cities.) Then
 it developed gradually as people exploited new possibilities as
 they came to light. After undergoing many changes tragedy
 ceased to evolve, having achieved its natural condition. 15

The number of actors was first increased from one to two
 by Aeschylus, who also reduced the choral element and gave
 primacy to the spoken word. The third actor and the practice of
 scene-painting were introduced by Sophocles. Length was also
 a factor. Tragedy acquired its dignity only at a late stage, when,

- 20 after a satyric period of short stories and comic diction, it adopted the iambic trimeter instead of the trochaic tetrameter. Tetrameter had been used at first as suitable to satyric verse and easy to dance to, but when the spoken word prevailed nature itself found the appropriate metre, because the iambic trimeter
 25 is the metre closest to speech. Evidence of this is the fact that we very often use iambics in conversation, while we utter hexameters very rarely and only when departing from our normal tone. Another change took place in the number of episodes. Let
 30 us take as read a number of further embellishments: it would no doubt be laborious to discuss them individually.

Comedy

5. Comedy is, as we said, representation of people who are inferior but not wholly vicious: the ridiculous is one category of the embarrassing. What is ridiculous is some error or embarrassment
 35 that is neither painful nor life-threatening; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted but does not cause pain. The stages in the development of tragedy, and those responsible for them, have stayed in people's memory; but the early history of
 1449b comedy is unknown because no serious interest was taken in it. It was only relatively recently that a magistrate* made provision for a comic chorus; before that performers were volunteers. The first mention of people called comic poets dates from a time when comedy had already taken shape. It is not known who introduced masks, prologues, multiple actors, and the like.
 5 Comic stories, however, originated in Sicily; among Athenians, it was Crates* who first abandoned the iambic style and began to compose stories and plots of a general kind.

Epic

- 10 Epic poetry resembles tragedy in so far as it is a representation in verse of superior subjects; but the two differ in that epic uses only a single metre and is in narrative mode. They differ also in

length: tragedy tries so far as possible to keep within a period of twenty-four hours or thereabouts, while epic, in contrast, is unrestricted in time. (Initially, however, in this respect no distinction was made between tragedy and epic.) Epic and tragedy have some elements in common, while others are peculiar to tragedy. Hence, anyone who can tell what is good and what is bad in tragedy understands epic too, since all the elements of epic are present in tragedy even though not all the elements of tragedy are present in epic.

Leaving aside representation in hexameters and comedy for later discussion, let us now treat of tragedy, gathering up from what has already been said a definition of its essence.

II. THE NATURE OF TRAGEDY

Definition

6. Tragedy is a representation of an action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself—presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification* of such emotions.

By 'embellished language' I mean language with rhythm and melody. When I say 'in distinct forms in different parts' I mean that some parts are in unaccompanied verse while others have melody as an extra.

Since the representation is performed by actors, a necessary part of tragedy must be the presentation on stage of the performance. In addition there is music-making and there is style, for these are the media of their representation. By 'style' I mean simply the composition of the verse; the meaning of 'music-making' is obvious to everyone.*

Now tragedy is the representation of action, and action involves

agents who will necessarily have certain qualities of both character and intellect. It is because of the qualities of the agents that we
 1450a classify their actions, and it is because of their actions that they
 succeed or fail in life. It is the story of the action that is the rep-
 5 resentation. By the 'story' I mean the plot of the events. 'Moral
 character' is what makes us evaluate agents in particular ways, while 'ideas' are what is expressed in the speeches used to prove a case or enunciate a truth.

Basic elements of tragedy

Hence, tragedy as a whole necessarily has six elements on the basis of which it is evaluated, namely, the story, the moral element,
 10 the style, the ideas, the staging, and the music. Two of these elements concern the means, one concerns the mode, and three concern the objects of the mimesis; and there is nothing else besides. Not a few tragedians can be said to have made use of these items, since every drama alike involves staging, a moral element, and a story, plus style and music and intellectual content.

The primacy of plot

15 The most important element is the construction of the plot. Tragedy is a representation not of persons but of action and life, and happiness and unhappiness consist in action. The point is action, not character: it is their moral status that gives people the character they have, but it is their actions that make
 20 them happy or unhappy. So it is not in order to portray moral character that the actors perform; rather, they include character for the sake of action. The events, the story, are the point of tragedy, and that is the most important thing of all.

Again, there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be one without moral character—indeed, the tragedies
 25 of most modern poets completely lack the moral element, and in general there are many such poets. Compare, in painting,

the relationship between Zeuxis and Polygnotus: Polygnotus is a good portrayer of character, while Zeuxis' painting is totally lacking in it.* Further, if someone sets out a series of speeches expressive of moral character, polished in style and rich in ideas, it will not achieve the effect of tragedy. A tragedy deficient in these elements, provided that it has a story and a structured plot, will do so much more effectively. Moreover, the most important devices that tragedy uses to affect the emotions are parts of the story—namely, reversals and discoveries. One other indication is that novice poets can master style and moral character before they can compose plots—the same goes for almost all the early poets.

So the story is the foundation and as it were the soul of tragedy, while moral character is secondary. (The like holds in painting: if someone were to apply the most beautiful colours to a surface at random, he would give less pleasure than if he had sketched a portrait in black and white.) Tragedy is representation of action, and it is chiefly for the sake of action that it represents people in action.

Third come the ideas, that is, the power of expressing what is involved in or appropriate to a situation—something that, in prose, is the function of the arts of statesmanship and rhetoric. Earlier poets made people speak like statesmen; contemporary poets make them speak like orators. Moral character is what reveals the nature of people's fundamental options; that is why there is no such thing in speeches in which the speaker reveals no choice or rejection. Intelligence, on the other hand, is expressed in what people say to show that something is or is not a fact, or to support some universal proposition.

The fourth element is style. By 'style', as I said, is meant the expression of thought in words, an effect that can be produced either in prose or in verse.

Of the remaining elements, music is the most important source of pleasure. Staging can be emotionally attractive, but is not a matter of art and is not integral to poetry. The power of tragedy can be exercised without actors and without

- 20 a performance. Staging belongs more to the scene-painter's art than to that of the poets.

Characteristics of a good plot

7. Given these definitions, let us next discuss the proper construction of the plot, since this is the first and most important element in tragedy.

COMPLETENESS

- We have laid it down that tragedy is a representation of an action that is whole and entire and on an appropriate scale.
- 25 (A thing may be a whole and yet be wanting in scale.) A whole is something that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is an item that does not itself follow necessarily upon something else, but which has some second item following necessarily upon it. Conversely, an end is an item that
- 30 naturally follows, either necessarily or commonly, upon something else, but has nothing following it. A middle is an item that both follows upon a preceding item and has another item following upon itself. Stories that are well constructed should not begin at some arbitrary point but should conform to the stated pattern.

SCALE

- Moreover, any beautiful object, whether a living organism or
- 35 any other thing made up of parts, must have those parts not only in proper order but also on an appropriate scale. Beauty consists in scale as well as order, which is why there could not be a beautiful organism that was either minuscule or gigantic. In the first case, a glimpse that is so brief as to be close to vanishing-point cannot be distinct. In the second case—say, of an animal a thousand miles long—the impossibility of taking all in
- 1451a at a single glance means that unity and wholeness is lost to the viewer. So, just as physical bodies and living organisms need to be on an appropriate scale that allows them to be taken in by the

eye, likewise stories should have an appropriate length, which is such as to enable them to be held in memory. 5

A limit of length determined by the rules of competitions and the capacity of audiences does not feature in the art of poetry. If you had to arrange a competition for a hundred tragedies you would time them by water-clocks. (On one occasion this is actually said to have taken place.)* The limit that is set by the nature of the subject is this: the longer the story, the grander the scale, provided it remains comprehensible as a whole. To give a general formula: an adequate limit of length is a size that permits a transformation from adversity to prosperity, or from prosperity to adversity, in a probable or necessary sequence of events. 10 15

UNITY

8. A story that is built around a single person is not, as some people think, thereby unified. An infinity of things happen to a single individual, not all of which constitute a unity; likewise, a single person performs many actions which do not add up to make a single action. So all those poets who compose a Heracleid or a Thesiad have clearly got things wrong, assuming that just because Heracles was one person his story too is sure to have a unity. Homer, here as elsewhere surpassing all others, grasped this point firmly, whether by art or instinct. When he composed the *Odyssey* he did not include just everything that happened to Odysseus, such as getting wounded on Parnassus, or pretending to be mad to avoid conscription, for these events had no necessary or probable connection with each other. Instead he constructed the *Odyssey*, and the *Iliad* too, around a single action of the kind we have been discussing. 20 25 30

In other representative arts a single representation has a single object. In just the same way a story, since it is the representation of an action, should concern an action that is single and entire, with its several incidents so structured that the displacement or removal of any one of them would disturb and dislocate the whole. If the presence or absence of

35 something makes no discernible difference, then it is no part of the whole.

UNIVERSALITY AND NECESSITY

9. From what has been said it is clear that the poet's job is not relating what actually happened, but rather the kind of thing that *would* happen—that is to say, what is possible in terms of probability and necessity. The difference between a historian and a poet is not a matter of using verse or prose: you might put the works of Herodotus into verse and it would be a history in verse no less than in prose. The difference is that the one relates what actually happened, and the other the kinds of events that would happen.

5 For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history; poetry utters universal truths, history particular statements. The universal truths concern what befits a person of a certain kind to say or do in accordance with probability and necessity—and that is the aim of poetry, even if it makes use of proper names.* A particular statement tells us what (for example) Alcibiades* did or what happened to him. In the case of comedy this is already manifest: the poets make up the story on the basis of probability and then attach names to the characters at random; they do not write about particular individuals as the lampoon-ists used to do. In the case of tragedy they retain the traditional names. The reason for this is that what is possible is credible. If something has not happened we are inclined to disbelieve that it is possible; but it is obvious that what has happened is possible, since if it were not it would never have happened. Nevertheless, even among tragedies there are some where only one or two of the names are familiar, while the rest are made up; and there are some plays without a single familiar name, for instance Agathon's *Antheus*.* In that play both the events and the names are inventions, but it gives no less pleasure on that account. So there is no need to adhere at all costs to the traditional stories of tragedy.

15 Indeed, it would be absurd to try, since even what is familiar is familiar only to a few, and yet it gives pleasure to everyone.

25

It is clear from all this that the poet must be a maker of stories rather than verses, in so far as it is representation that makes him a poet, and representation is of actions. Even if it turns out that he is writing about historical events he is no less a poet for that, since nothing prevents such events being the kind of thing that would happen. It is in that respect that he deals with them as a poet. 30

Of defective stories* and actions, the worst are those that are episodic. I call a story episodic when the sequence of episodes is neither necessary nor probable. Bad poets compose stories of this kind of their own accord, but even good ones do so under pressure from the actors. Writing pieces for competitions, they drag out the story and are often forced to distort the sequence of events. 35

Tragedy is an imitation not just of a complete action, but of events that evoke pity and fear.* These effects occur above all when things come about unexpectedly but at the same time consequentially. This will produce greater astonishment than if they come about spontaneously or by chance—for even chance events are found more astonishing when they seemed to have happened for a purpose. Think of the time in Argos when Mity's murderer was killed by Mity's statue falling onto him as he was looking up at it! Such things are not thought to occur randomly. So inevitably, stories of this kind will be better. 1452a 5 10

Types and elements of plot

10. Stories can be classified as simple or complex, since the actions of which they are the representations are similarly classified in the first instance. I call an action simple if it is, in the sense defined, continuous and unitary, and in which the change of fortune takes place without reversal or discovery; I call it complex if the change of fortune involves a reversal or a discovery or both.* These should grow naturally out of the plot of the story, so that they come about, with necessity or probability, from the preceding events. There is a great difference between 15 20

something happening *after* certain events and happening *because of* those events.

Reversal and discovery

11. Reversal is a change of direction in the course of events, as already stated, taking place, as we insist, in accord with probability or necessity. For instance, in *Oedipus* a messenger comes
 25 to bring Oedipus good news and rid him of his fears about his mother; but by revealing his true identity he produces the opposite effect.* Again, in the *Lynceus* the hero is being led off to death, with Danaus* behind him as executioner, yet the upshot of events earlier in the story is that Danaus dies and the hero survives.

30 Discovery, as the term implies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, on the part of those destined for good or bad fortune. Discovery takes its finest form when it coincides with reversal, as in the *Oedipus*. There are, of course, other kinds of discovery, for what has been
 35 described can occur in reference to inanimate and chance objects; and there is also such a thing as discovering whether someone has or has not done something. But the one that has most to do with the story and most to do with the action is the one described. Reversal and discovery together will evoke either pity
 1452b or fear—just the kind of actions of which, according to our basic principle, tragedy offers an imitation—and will serve to bring about the happy or unhappy ending.

Since detection is something that takes place between people, it may be either the detection of one person by another
 5 (whose own identity is clear) or mutual recognition between a pair (for example, Iphigeneia was recognized by Orestes when she sent the letter, but something different was needed for her to recognize Orestes).*

10 These, then, are two components of the story: reversal and discovery; a third component is suffering, which is an action involving pain or destruction, such as murders on stage,

extreme agony, woundings, and so on. The other two elements have already been explained.

The sequence of scenes in tragedy

12. The parts of tragedy that should be considered as its formal elements were mentioned earlier. In sequential terms the separate sections into which it is divided are the following: prologue, episode, finale, and chorus parts (sung either on entry or while stationary). These items are common to all plays; some have in addition arias and dirges. 15

A prologue is everything in a tragedy that precedes the opening chorus; an episode is whatever comes between two complete choral songs; and the finale is everything that comes after the final chorus. Of the choral part, the opening chorus is the first complete utterance of the chorus; while a stationary ode is a choral song without anapaests or trochees. A dirge is a lament shared between the chorus and the actors. 20

We have already mentioned the parts of tragedy that should be regarded as its formal elements; the ones just mentioned are the separate sections in sequential terms. 25

III. EXCELLENCE IN TRAGEDY

13. What should one aim at, and what should one avoid, when putting together a story? What will enable tragedy to achieve its effect? This is the next topic after what has been said. 30

Guidelines for plot construction

For tragedy at its best the plot should be complex, not simple, and it should be representative of fearsome and pitiable events, for that is the specific feature of this kind of representation. Hence it is clear first of all that good men should not be shown

35 passing from good fortune to bad, for that evokes not fear or
 pity, but outrage. Nor should depraved men be shown pass-
 ing from bad fortune to good—this indeed is the least tragic
 of all: it has none of the appropriate features, evoking neither
 1453a pity nor fear nor even basic human sympathy. Finally, a very
 wicked man should not be shown passing from good fortune
 to bad: this may evoke basic human sympathy, but neither pity
 nor fear. One of those sentiments, namely pity, has to do with
 5 undeserved misfortune, and the other, namely fear, has to do
 with someone who is like ourselves. Accordingly, there will be
 nothing in the outcome to evoke either pity or fear.

We are left, then, with the person in between: a man not
 outstanding in virtue or justice, brought down through vice
 or depravity, who falls into adversity not through vice or
 10 depravity but because he errs in some way.* He is a personage
 enjoying renown and prosperity, such as Oedipus, Thyestes,*
 and eminent persons from families of that kind. A well-made
 story, then, will have a single rather than (as some argue) a
 double upshot, and it will involve a change not from bad for-
 tune to good, but from good fortune to bad. The cause of the
 15 change will not be depravity, but a serious error on the part
 of a character such as we have described (or someone better
 rather than worse). Evidence of this is provided by history. At
 first poets picked out stories at random, but nowadays the best
 tragedies are always constructed around a few families, for ex-
 20 ample, about Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes,
 Telephus,* and any others whose lot has been to do or suffer
 something terrible.

Accordingly, the best tragedy, technically, follows this plot.
 Critics who find fault with Euripides for doing this in his tra-
 gedies, most of which have an unhappy ending, are making the
 25 mistake that I mentioned earlier. For this, as has been said, is
 the right thing to do. The best evidence for this is the fact that
 on the stage, and in competitions, such plays, if well performed,
 are the most tragic. Euripides, even if he mismanages some
 other matters, is at all events the most tragic of the poets.

Second best is the kind of plot which some people like most: 30
 a double plot like the *Odyssey*, with a different ending for the
 better and worse characters. It is regarded as best only because
 of the weaknesses of the audience; the poets follow the lead of
 their public and pander to its taste. But this is not the pleas-
 ure proper to tragedy, but is more characteristic of comedy. 35
 In comedy even those who are bitter enemies in the story, like
 Orestes and Aegisthus,* make friends and go off together at the
 end, and nobody gets killed by anybody.

The source of the tragic effect

14. Actually seeing a play performed may evoke fear and pity, 1453a
 but so too can the plot itself—this is more fundamental and
 the mark of a better poet. The story should be put together in
 such a way that even without seeing the play a person hearing
 the series of events should feel dread and pity. This is what 5
 someone would feel on hearing the story of Oedipus. Evok-
 ing this effect by a stage performance is less artistic and more
 dependent on the production. The effect that some producers
 try to achieve is not so much fear as horror: that has nothing at
 all to do with tragedy. One should not look to it for every kind 10
 of enjoyment, but only the appropriate one. The poet's job is to
 use representation to make us enjoy the tragic emotions of pity
 and fear, and this has to be built into his plots.

Let us therefore ask what kinds of event strike us as ter-
 rible or pitiable. The interactions in question must necessarily 15
 occur either between friends and relations, or between enemies,
 or strangers. If an enemy takes on an enemy, there is nothing
 in his acting or planning to arouse pity, only the actual suf-
 fering of the victim. So too when the characters are strangers.
 What should be looked for are cases where the sufferings occur
 within relationships, as between brother and brother, son and 20
 father, mother and son, son and mother—where one kills, or
 is on the point of killing, the other, or is doing something else
 horrible.

The traditional stories should not be tampered with—
 Clytemnestra must be killed by Orestes, and Eriphyle by
 Alcmaeon, and so on—but the poet needs to be inventive and
 25 make the best use of the traditional material. Let me explain
 what I mean by ‘the best use’. The deed may be perpetrated
 in full knowledge and awareness, which is the way the old
 poets showed things, and as Euripides too made Medea kill her
 30 children.* It is also possible for the terrible deed to be done
 in ignorance, and the relationship be discovered only later, as
 with Sophocles’ Oedipus. Here the deed is outside the play;
 examples within the tragedy itself are Astydamos’ *Alcmaeon* or
 Telegonus in the *Odysseus Wounded*. A third possibility in ad-
 35 dition to these two is when a person is on the point of unwit-
 tingly doing some irreparable deed, but realizes the situation
 in time to desist. There is no further possibility, since the deed
 is either done or not done, and the agents must either know or
 not know.

Of these, the worst is being on the point of doing the deed
 knowingly, and then not doing it. This is monstrous without
 being tragic, since no one suffers. That is why poets never, or
 1454a only very rarely, compose in this way (one example is Haemon
 and Creon in *Antigone*).* Second worst is the actual perform-
 ance of the deed. This is best if the deed is one that is done
 in ignorance, with the relationship discovered only later—here
 there is nothing monstrous, and the discovery will make a great
 impression. Best of all is the last case: I mean, for example,
 5 when in *Cresphontes* Merope is on the point of killing her son,
 and recognizes him in time.* The same happens with sister and
 brother in the *Iphigenia*, and in *Helle* when the son recognizes
 his mother when about to hand her over to the enemy.*

This is why, as I said earlier, not many families provide ma-
 10 terial for tragedy. It was chance, not art, that guided poets in
 their search for stories in which to produce their effects, so they
 are obliged to turn to the families who have suffered such woes.

Enough has now been said about the construction of plots
 15 and the kinds of stories that are appropriate.

Character in tragedy

15. We turn to moral character.* Here there are four things to aim at. The first and foremost is that the characters should be good.* As was said earlier, moral character will be shown if a speech or action reveals the nature of a person's fundamental choice,* and the character will be good if the choice is good. This is possible in every class of person: there is such a thing as a good woman and a good slave, even if one of these is perhaps 20 inferior, and the other base. The second point is appropriateness: it is no good for a character to be courageous if the courage or intelligence is expressed in a way that is not appropriate for a woman. The third aim is plausibility, which is something 25 different from making the character good and appropriate in the manner described. The fourth item is consistency: even if the character portrayed is someone inconsistent, and that is the whole point of the representation, he should nevertheless be consistently inconsistent.

An example of unnecessary badness of character is Menelaus in *Orestes*,* of inapt and inappropriate character the dirge 30 of Odysseus in *Scylla* and the speech of Melanippe;* of inconsistency in the *Iphigenia in Aulis*—the girl who pleads to be spared is not at all like her later self.* In the case of moral character no less than in plot, we should always look for what is necessary or probable: it should be necessary or probable for 35 this kind of person to say or do this kind of thing, and it should be necessary or probable for one kind of event to follow another kind of event.

Clearly, the explication* of a story should issue from the story itself, and not from a *deus ex machina* as in the *Medea*,* or in the 1454b departure scene in the *Iliad*.* A *deus ex machina* may be used for events outside the play—for past events beyond human ken, or subsequent events that can only be described in prophecy—since we believe that the gods are all-seeing. But there should 5 not be anything implausible in the events themselves; or if there is, it should be outside the play, as with Sophocles' *Oedipus*.

Since tragedy is a representation of people who are better
 10 than we are, poets should copy good portrait-painters, who
 portray a person's features and offer a good likeness but none-
 theless make him look handsomer than he is. In the same way,
 a poet exhibiting people who are irascible and indolent should
 show them as they are, and yet portray them as good men—in
 the way that Homer made Achilles both a good man and a para-
 15 digm of stubbornness.*

These points are to be kept in mind throughout, and also
 the features of stage production that are essential to the art of
 poetry. Many mistakes are possible in this area. But they have
 been discussed in detail in my published works.

Further thoughts on discovery

16. Discovery has already been explained. It comes in six
 kinds.

20 The first is identification by signs and tokens—this is the
 least artistic form, though because of writers' lack of ingenuity
 it is the one most used. Some of these are congenital marks, like
 'the spear the earth-born bear' or stars like the ones Carcinus
 uses in *Thyestes*, while others are acquired. Marks of this sec-
 ond kind may be bodily, such as scars, or external tokens, such
 25 as necklaces or the boat that leads to the discovery in *Tyro*.*
 Even these can be put to better or worse use: the way in which
 Odysseus' scar leads to his recognition by his nurse is different
 from the way in which it leads to his recognition by the swine-
 herds. Recognitions that are merely to add plausibility—and all
 others of a similar kind—are less artistic; far superior are those
 linked to the reversal, as in the bath scene.*

30 Second are identifications that are made by the poet him-
 self, which for that reason are inartistic. For example: Orestes
 in *Iphigeneia* reveals his own identity. Iphigeneia's identity is
 revealed by the letter, whereas Orestes is made to say in his own
 person what the poet, and not the story, demands. This makes
 35 it close to the error just discussed: he might well have brought

some tokens with him. Another case is 'the voice of the shuttle' in Sophocles' *Tereus*.*

Third there is identification through memory, when the matter is brought to mind by something seen or heard. A case in point is Dicaeogenes' *Cyprians*, where the hero bursts into tears at the sight of the painting; another is the moment when Odysseus, telling his tale to Alcinous, weeps at the memories brought back by the sound of the harp. In each case recognition ensues. 1455a

Fourth there is identification by inference. The *Choephorae* provides an example: 'Someone resembling me has come; no one resembles me except Orestes; therefore Orestes has come.'* 5 Polyides the Sophist suggested another in connection with *Iphigeneia*; he said it was natural for Orestes to infer: 'My sister was sacrificed, and so I will be too.' Another case is in Theodectes' *Tydeus*: 'I came to find a son, so I am doomed myself.' Again, in *Phinaeadae*, when the women see the place: 'This is 10 where we were exposed, so this is where we are to die.'

There is also a complicated kind of identification based on fallacious reasoning by the audience. For instance, in *Odysseus the False Messenger*: the premise that the poet offers is that Odysseus, and he alone, can bend the bow. Odysseus himself says that he will recognize the bow which he had never seen. The identification actually takes place on the former basis, when the audience thinks fallaciously that it takes place on the latter.* 15

The best discovery of all is one that ensues from the actual course of events, where the emotional impact is achieved through a probable sequence, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and in *Iphigeneia* (her desire to send a letter is entirely probable). Only this kind of identification can make do without artificial marks and necklaces. Second best are those that involve inference. 20

Advice to playwrights

17. When plotting stories and putting them into words one should do one's best to visualize the events. By envisaging

things while they happen, as if one were an eyewitness, one will
 25 discover what is appropriate and one will be less likely to over-
 look inconsistencies. Evidence of this is offered by the criticism
 that was made of Carcinus. At the crucial moment Amphiarus
 was returning from the temple—this would not be noticed by
 someone who did not see it, but on the stage it irritated the
 audience and the play was a failure.

As far as possible, the poet should act the story as he writes
 30 it. People of the same temperament are more persuasive if they
 actually feel the emotions they enact: someone actually in dis-
 tress best acts out distress, someone really angry best acts out
 rage. This is why, in order to write tragic poetry, you must be
 either a genius who can adapt himself to anything, or a madman
 who lets himself get carried away.

1455b The poet should first lay out the general structure and only
 then elaborate it into episodes: this is true whether the story is
 a ready-made one or a fresh composition. As an example
 of what I call laying out the general structure, take *Iphigenia*.
 'A girl has been sacrificed and then vanishes without trace.
 Unbeknownst to her sacrificers she is set down in another
 5 country where it is the custom to sacrifice strangers to the
 local goddess. She becomes the priestess of this rite. Much later
 her brother happens to arrive, and on arrival is taken prisoner.
 (His being sent by an oracle, and for what purpose, does not
 belong to the story.) On the point of being sacrificed, he dis-
 closes his identity—either as Euripides makes him do, or as
 10 Polyidus suggested, by saying, not improbably: 'As my sister
 was sacrificed, so must I be too'—and so he is saved. After that,
 names are to be supplied and episodes worked out—but the
 episodes should be appropriate, as are the fit of madness that
 led to Orestes' arrest and the purification that led to his being
 saved.

15 In plays the episodes are short; in epic they lengthen out the
 poem. A summary of the *Odyssey* is not at all long. 'A man is
 away from home for many years; he is kept under surveillance by
 Poseidon and isolated. Meanwhile affairs at home are in such a

state that his property is being squandered by his wife's suitors, who are plotting against his son. After being shipwrecked he returns home, identifies himself to several people, and launches an attack in which his enemies are destroyed and he survives.' That is the core of the story; the rest is episodes. 20

18. Every tragedy has both a complication and an explication. What goes before the opening, and often some of the events inside the play, make up the complication; the rest is the explication. What I call complication is everything from the beginning up to the point that immediately precedes the change to good or bad fortune; everything from the beginning of the change to the end I call explication. Thus, in Theodectes' *Lynceus* the complication includes events before the play, the kidnapping of the child, and the [...] of the parents; the explication is everything from the accusation of murder until the end.* 25 30

Different kinds of tragedy

There are four kinds of tragedy—the same number as that of the component parts mentioned. There is the complex kind, constituted by reversal and discovery (for example, plays about Ajax or Ixion); there is the morality tragedy (for example, *Women of Phthia* and *Peleus*); finally there is [...] (e.g. *Daughters of Phorcys*, *Prometheus*, and plays set in the underworld).* 1456a

Preferably one should try to have all four, but if not all then the most important and as many as possible, especially given the way people criticize poets these days. Because in the past there have been good poets in each genre, people expect a present-day poet to surpass each of them in his own particular excellence. 5

If we are to compare and contrast tragedies, we must do so principally in respect of the story, that is, whether they share the same complication and explication. Many poets complicate well but explicate badly, but the two need to be matched to each other. 10

Final advice on plot construction

You must call to mind what I have said several times: one should never build a tragedy with an epic structure, that is to say, one containing more than one story. Suppose one were to make the entire story of the *Iliad* into one play! Epic is long enough for every episode to appear on an appropriate scale, but in a drama
 15 the result is very disappointing. There is evidence of this. Consider those who have treated the sack of Troy as a whole, like Euripides, rather than piecemeal, or the whole story of Niobe, rather than what Aeschylus did. These people's plays were either complete failures or fared badly in the competition. There was even a play of Agathon's which was a flop simply because of this.

In reversals and in simple plots poets like to astonish us, in
 20 order to produce a desired effect that is both tragic and humane. This happens when someone who is both clever and wicked (like Sisyphus*) is taken in, or when someone who is brave but unjust is worsted. This is not improbable, since, as Agathon remarks, it is probable that many improbable things should happen.

25 The chorus should be treated as one of the actors; it should be part of the whole and should take part in the action. Sophocles, not Euripides, should be the model here. With other poets the songs have no more to do with the story than with any other tragedy. That is why they sing interludes—a practice
 30 commenced by Agathon. But what difference is there between singing interludes and transferring a speech or an episode from one play into another?

Style and intellectual content

19. Now that the other elements have been discussed it is time to speak about style and ideas. The topic of ideas, however,
 35 can be left for my *Rhetoric*, the subject to which it more properly belongs. Under the head of ideas come all the effects that can be produced by reason: proof, refutation, the evocation of