

The passage below is extracted from  
the Norham Anthology of World Literature.

S. Halliwell calls this 'one of the richest  
sections of the treatise... comprising three  
closely related critical exercises: a definition  
of tragic drama; an analysis of the genre into  
its constituent parts or elements; and an evaluation  
ranking of these elements from the most to the least  
important.' [This excerpt largely skips the elements.]

### ARISTOTLE

384-322 B.C.

One member of Plato's Academy, Aristotle, was to become as celebrated and influential as his teacher. He was not, like Plato, a native Athenian; he was born in northern Greece, at Stagira, close to the kingdom of Macedonia, which was eventually to become the dominant power in the Greek world. Aristotle entered the Academy at the age of seventeen but left it when Plato died (347 B.C.). He carried on his researches (he was especially interested in zoology) at various places on the Aegean, served as tutor to the young Alexander, son of Philip II of Macedon, and returned to Athens in 335, to found his own philosophical school, the Lyceum, where he established the world's first research library. At the Lyceum he and his pupils carried on research in zoology, botany, biology, physics, political science, ethics, logic, music, and mathematics. He left Athens when Alexander died in Babylon (323 B.C.) and the Athenians, for a while, were able to demonstrate their hatred of Macedon and everything connected with it; he died a year later.

The scope of his written work, philosophical and scientific, is immense; he is represented here by some excerpts from the *Poetics*, the first systematic work of literary criticism in our tradition.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, translated by James Hutton (1982), is the best source for the student.

"J. Jones, on Aristotle and Greek Tragedy (Stanford, 1962).  
S. Halliwell, The Poetics of Aristotle (Clarendon Press, 1987).

Thus, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude; in embellished language, each kind of which is used separately in the different parts; in the mode of action and not narrated; and effecting through pity and fear [what we call] the *catharsis* of such emotions. By "embellished language" I mean language having rhythm and melody; and by "separately in different parts" I mean that some parts of a play are carried on solely in metrical speech while others again are sung.

The constituent parts of tragedy. Since the imitation is carried out in the dramatic mode by the personages themselves, it necessarily follows, first, that the arrangement of Spectacle will be a part of tragedy, and next, that Melody and Language will be parts; since these are the media in which they effect the imitation. By "language" I mean precisely the composition of the verses; by "melody" only that which is perfectly obvious. And since tragedy is the imitation of an action and is enacted by men in action, these persons must necessarily possess certain qualities of Character and Thought, since these are the basis for our ascribing qualities to the actions themselves—character and thought are two natural causes of actions—and it is in their actions that men universally meet with success or failure. The imitation of the action is the Plot. By plot I here mean the combination of the events; Character is that in virtue of which we say that the personages are of such and such a quality; and Thought is present in everything in their utterances that aims to prove a point or that expresses an opinion. Necessarily, therefore, there are in tragedy as a whole, considered as a special form, six constituent elements, viz. Plot, Character, Language, Thought, Spectacle, and Melody. Of these elements, two [Language and Melody] are the *media* in which they effect the imitation; one [Spectacle] is the *manner*, and three [Plot, Character, Thought] are the *objects* they imitate; and besides these there are no other parts. So then they employ these six forms, not just some of them so to speak; for every drama has spectacle, character, plot, language, melody, and thought in the same sense, but the most important of them is the organization of the events [the plot].

Plot and character. For tragedy is not an imitation of men but of actions and of life. It is in action that happiness and unhappiness are found, and the end we aim at is a kind of activity, not a quality; in accordance with their characters men are of such and such a quality, in accordance with their actions they are fortunate or the reverse. Consequently, it is not for the purpose of presenting their characters that the agents engage in action, but

[Translated by James Hutton. Bracketed text has been added for clarity. ② This is probably the most disputed passage in the Western critical tradition. There are two main schools of interpretation, which differ in their understanding of the metaphor implied in the word *catharsis*. Some critics take the word to mean "purification," implying a metaphor from the religious process of purification from guilt; the passions are "purified" by the tragic performance because the excitement of these passions by the performance weakens them and reduces them to just proportions in the individual. This theory was supported by the German critic Lessing. Others take the metaphor to be medical, reading the word as "purging" and interpreting the phrase to mean that the tragic performance excites the emotions only to allay them, thus ridding the spectator of the disquieting emotions from which he or she suffers in everyday life. Tragedy thus has a therapeutic effect. 3. Purpose.

Halliwell: The pathological view of *catharsis* was established by mid-nineteenth century German scholarship, and has been prevalent ever since. But the idea that pity and fear were considered in any way morbid by Aristotle is wholly without foundation. Nietzsche's criticisms of *catharsis* (e.g. *Antichrist* §7) are based on this misconception, and overlook the fact that Ar. links the emotional exp. of tragedy w/ pleasure. ①

"Chapter 6" = 1449b

...δὲ ἐλθεῖν καὶ φόβου  
τρεφίνοσα τὴν τῶν  
τοιοῦτων πᾶσιν  
κάθαρσιν.

"Unfortunately, *catharsis*  
continues to provoke various  
forms of fantasy..."  
Halliwell.

cf. Plato *Republic* 10, 603-5:  
"Tragedy arouses emotions  
which ought, for the sake  
of general psychological  
and moral well-being, to  
be kept in check."

either it is for the sake of their actions that they take on the characters they have. Thus, what happens—that is, the plot—is the end for which a tragedy exists, and the end or purpose is the most important thing of all. What is more, without action there could not be a tragedy, but there could be without characterization. \* \* \*

Now that the parts are established, let us next discuss what qualities the plot should have, since plot is the primary and most important part of tragedy. I have posited that tragedy is an imitation of an action that is a whole and complete in itself and of a certain magnitude—for a thing may be a whole, and yet have no magnitude to speak of. Now a thing is a whole if it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not come necessarily after something else, but after which it is natural for another thing to exist or come to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which naturally comes after something else, either as its necessary sequel or as its usual [and hence probable] sequel, but itself has nothing after it. A middle is that which both comes after something else and has another thing following it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, will neither begin at some chance point nor end at some chance point, but will observe the principles here stated. \* \* \*

Contrary to what some people think, a plot is not ipso facto a unity if it revolves about one man. Many things, indeed an endless number of things, happen to any one man some of which do not go together to form a unity, and similarly among the actions one man performs there are many that do not go together to produce a single unified action. Those poets seem all to have erred, therefore, who have composed a *Heracleid*, a *Theseid*, and other such poems, it being their idea evidently that since Heracles was one man, their plot was bound to be unified. \* \* \*

From what has already been said, it will be evident that the poet's function is not to report things that have happened, but rather to tell of such things as might happen, things that are possibilities by virtue of being in themselves inevitable or probable. Thus the difference between the historian and the poet is not that the historian employs prose and the poet verse—the work of Herodotus<sup>4</sup> could be put into verse, and it would be no less a history with verses than without them; rather the difference is that the one tells of things that have been and the other of such things as might be. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history, in that poetry tends rather to express the universal, history rather the particular fact. A universal is: The sort of thing that (in the circumstances) a certain kind of person will say or do either probably or necessarily, which in fact is the universal that poetry aims for (with the addition of names for the persons); a particular, on the other hand is: What Alcibiades<sup>5</sup> did or had done to him. \* \* \*

Among plots and actions of the simple type, the episodic form is the worst. I call episodic a plot in which the episodes follow one another in no probable or inevitable sequence. Plots of this kind are constructed by bad poets on their own account, and by good poets on account of the actors; since they are composing entries for a competitive exhibition, they stretch the plot beyond what it can bear and are often compelled, therefore, to dislocate the natural order. \* \* \*

4. Historian of the Persian Wars, a contemporary of Sophocles.

5. A brilliant but unscrupulous Athenian statesman (fifth century B.C.).

Some plots are simple, others complex; indeed the actions of which the plots are imitation are at once so differentiated to begin with. Assuming the action to be continuous and unified, as already defined, I call that action simple in which the change of fortune takes place without a reversal or recognition, and that action complex in which the change of fortune involves a recognition or a reversal or both. These events [recognitions and reversals] ought to be so rooted in the very structure of the plot that they follow from the preceding events as their inevitable or probable outcome; for there is a vast difference between following from and merely following after. \* \* \*

**Reversal (Peripety)** is, as aforesaid, a change from one state of affairs to its exact opposite, and this, too, as I say, should be in conformance with probability or necessity. For example, in *Oedipus*, the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus by relieving him of fear with regard to his mother, but by revealing his true identity, does just the opposite of this. \* \* \*

**Recognition**, as the word itself indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading either to friendship or to hostility on the part of those persons who are marked for good fortune or bad. The best form of recognition is that which is accompanied by a reversal, as in the example from *Oedipus*. \* \* \*

Next in order after the points I have just dealt with, it would seem necessary to specify what one should aim at and what avoid in the construction of plots, and what it is that will produce the effect proper to tragedy.

Now since in the finest kind of tragedy the structure should be complex and not simple, and since it should also be a representation of terrible and piteous events (that being the special mark of this type of imitation), in the first place, it is evident that good men ought not to be shown passing from prosperity to misfortune, for this does not inspire either pity or fear, but only revulsion; nor evil men rising from ill fortune to prosperity, for this is the most untragic plot of all—it lacks every requirement, in that it neither elicits human sympathy nor stirs pity or fear. And again, neither should an extremely wicked man be seen falling from prosperity into misfortune, for a plot so constructed might indeed call forth human sympathy, but would not excite pity or fear, since the first is felt for a person whose misfortune is undeserved and the second for someone like ourselves—pity for the man suffering undeservedly, fear for the man like ourselves—and hence neither pity nor fear would be aroused in this case. We are left with the man whose place is between these extremes. Such is the man who on the one hand is not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, and yet on the other hand does not fall into misfortune through vice or depravity, but falls because of some mistake;<sup>6</sup> one among the number of the highly renowned and prosperous, such as Oedipus and Thyestes and other famous men from families like theirs.

It follows that the plot which achieves excellence will necessarily be single in outcome and not, as some contend, double, and will consist in a change of fortune, not from misfortune to prosperity, but the opposite from prosperity to misfortune, occasioned not by depravity, but by some great mistake on the part of one who is either such as I have described or better than this rather than worse. (What actually has taken place confirms this; for though

6. The Corinthian herdsman. <sup>7</sup> The Greek word is *hamartia*. It has sometimes been translated as "flaw" (hence the expression "tragic flaw") and thought of as a moral defect, but comparison with Aristotle's use of the word in other contexts suggests strongly that he means by it "mistake" or "error" (of judgment).

Chapter 7 = 1450 b Pl.

Chapter 10 = 1452 b Pl.

Chapter 11 = 1452 b Pl.

peripetēia  
περιπέτεια

anagnōrisis  
ἀναγνώρισις

Chapter 8 = 1451 a Pl.

Chapter 13 = 1452 b

Chapter 5 = 1451 a Pl.

NB: The term "tragic hero" is not Aristotelian

Jones: "There is no evidence—not a shred—that Aristotle entertained the concept of the tragic hero."

Wm de Moerbeke (d. 1215) = peccatum  
Twining (1789) = frailty

\* ἀμαρτία = great error in judgement

Jones: "The strenuous efforts which were made during the nineteenth century, and occasionally since, to lend moral emphasis to *hamartia* must be reckoned unavailing. Although it is important to bear in mind that the Greeks did not distinguish wickedness and stupidity with anything like Christian definiteness. But the motive behind these efforts is easy to discover. If we let Oedipus command interest like—even remotely like—Hamlet, and if our Chyrenmester is a resolute, machine-minded murderer (like Lady Macbeth), then... we resist the conclusion that A. wanted tragic downfall to result from mere miscalculation."<sup>2</sup>

at first the poets accepted whatever myths came to hand, today the finest tragedies are founded upon the stories of only a few houses, being concerned, for example, with Alcmeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and such others as have chanced to suffer terrible things or to do them.) So, then, tragedy having this construction is the finest kind of tragedy from an artistic point of view. And consequently, those persons fall into the same error who bring it as a charge against Euripides that this is what he does in his tragedies and that most of his plays have unhappy endings. For this is in fact the right procedure, as I have said; and the best proof is that on the stage and in the dramatic contests, plays of this kind seem the most tragic, provided they are successfully worked out, and Euripides, even if in everything else his management is faulty, seems at any rate the most tragic of the poets. \* \* \*

In the characters and the plot construction alike, one must strive for that which is either necessary or probable, so that whatever a character of any kind says or does may be the sort of thing such a character will inevitably or probably say or do and the events of the plot may follow one after another either inevitably or with probability. (Obviously, then, the denouement of the plot should arise from the plot itself and not be brought about "from the machine," as it is in *Medea* and in the embarkation scene in the *Iliad*.<sup>8</sup> The machine is to be used for matters lying outside the drama, either antecedents of the action which a human being cannot know, or things subsequent to the action that have to be prophesied and announced; for we accept it that the gods see everything. Within the events of the plot itself, however, there should be nothing unreasonable, or if there is, it should be kept outside the play proper, as is done in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles.) \* \* \*

*The chorus in tragedy.* The chorus ought to be regarded as one of the actors, and as being part of the whole and integrated into performance, not in Euripides' way but in that of Sophocles. In the other poets, the choral songs have no more relevance to the plot than if they belonged to some other play. And so nowadays, following the practice introduced by Agathon,<sup>9</sup> the chorus merely sings interludes. But what difference is there between the singing of interludes and taking a speech or even an entire episode from one play and inserting it into another?

8. The reference is to an incident in the second book of the *Iliad*: an attempt of the Greek rank and file to return home and abandon the siege is arrested by the intervention of Athena. If it were a drama she would appear *on the machine*, literally the machine that was employed in the theater to show the gods flying in space. It has come to mean any implausible way of solving complications of the plot. *Medea* escapes from Corinth "on the machine" in her magic chariot. 9. A younger contemporary of Euripides; most of his plays were produced in the fourth century B.C.