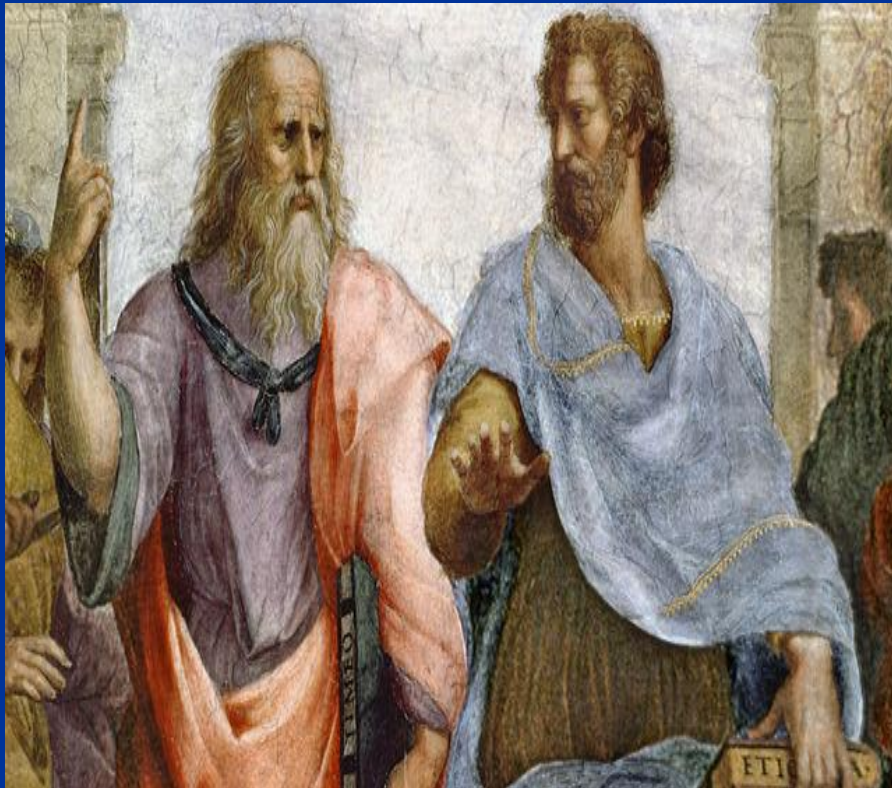


CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY
OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 17:
Aristotle's
Poetics:
Philosophical
Reflection on
Literature and
Literary Genres

ANNOUNCEMENT

Please make a note and remember:

**NO LECTURE ON THURSDAY 17
NOVEMBER (THIS WEEK; WEEK 8) AT
12.15pm.**

**The Lectures on Friday (18 November) at
1.15pm and 3.15pm will run as normal.**

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

- Contributions to logic, metaphysics, mathematics, physics, biology, botany, ethics, politics, agriculture and theatre.
- A famous philosopher. He studied under Plato (for 20 years) but is famous for rejecting Plato's theory of Forms.
- He set up his own school in the Lyceum. Because of his habit of walking around while conversing, his followers became known as *peripatetics*.
- He wrote approx. 200 treatises; only 31 survive, in the form of lecture notes and draft manuscripts.
- Tutor to Alexander the Great (from 13-18 years).

Aristotle's *Poetics*

- The *Poetics*: an incomplete version, lecture notes rather than literary composition. Composed around 335 B.C.
- The only extended critical record of Greek drama to survive from the contemporary society.
- Reflections on literary genres: epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry and their relationship to one another.
- “All human beings by nature desire knowledge” (opening of the *Metaphysics* 980a1).

Comparing Poetry and History

The distinction [between the historian and the poet] is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen.

For this reason poetry is more philosophical and serious than history. **Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars.** The universal is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity: this is what poetry aims at, even though it applies individual names. The particular is the actions or experiences of (for example) Alcibiades [i.e. Historical figures] 31b-c

Poetry as a species of imitation (*mimesis*)

Epic poetry and the composition of tragedy, as well as comedy and the arts of dithyrambic poetry and (for the most part) of music for pipe or lyre, are all (taken together) imitations (*Poetics* 47a).

- Dithyramb = a kind of lyric poetry performed by a chorus.
- Pipe (*aulos*) and lyre (*kithara*) – two most common forms of Greek wind and string instruments.

Genres: Influences and Cultural Transmission

But just as Homer was the outstanding poet of the serious kind, since he did not just compose well but also made his imitations dramatic, so too he was the first to adumbrate the form of the comedy; what he was composed was not an invective, but a dramatization of the laughable. **His *Megares* stands in the same relation to comedy as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* do to tragedy.** When tragedy and comedy made their appearance, those who inclined towards either kind of poetry became, in accordance with their nature, poets of comedy (instead of lampoons) or of tragedy (instead of epic), because these forms were greater and more highly esteemed than the others. *Poetics* 48e-49a

Epic and Tragedy

Epic poetry corresponds to tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of admirable people. But they differ in that epic uses one verse-form alone, and is narrative. They also differ in length, since tragedy tries so far as possible to keep within a single day, or not to exceed it by much, whereas epic is unrestricted in time, and differs in this respect. (49c)

Epic and Tragedy

Some of the component parts are common to both, others are peculiar to tragedy.

Consequently anyone who understands what is good and bad in tragedy also understands about epic, since anything that epic poetry has is also present in tragedy, but what is present in tragedy is not all in epic poetry. (49c)

Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy

Tragedy, then, is a *mimesis* of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) effecting the *katharsis* of these emotions. ... Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality-namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. ... These elements have been employed, we may say, by the poets to a man ... But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. [1449b-50a]

The Importance of Plot

For Tragedy is a *mimesis*, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. The tragedies of most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character; and of poets in general this is often true. It is the same in painting; and here lies the difference between Zeuxis and Polygnotus. Polygnotus delineates character well; the style of Zeuxis is devoid of ethical quality

Plot: the Soul of Tragedy

Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents. Besides which, the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy- *Peripeteia* or Reversal of the Situation, and Recognition scenes-are parts of the plot. A further proof is, that novices in the art attain to finish of diction and precision of portraiture before they can construct the plot. It is the same with almost all the early poets. The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place. A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colours, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the *mimesis* of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action. [1450a-b]

Qualities of Plot

- Magnitude (not too great or too small subject matter): we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.
[1450b-51a]
- Unity (this does not mean unity of the hero)
- Probable and Necessary connection

Probable and Necessary Connection

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen-what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages. The particular is-for example-what Alcibiades did or suffered. ... But tragedians still keep to real names, the reason being that what is possible is credible: what has not happened we do not at once feel sure to be possible; but what has happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not have happened. Still there are even some tragedies in which there are only one or two well-known names, the rest being fictitious. In others, none are well known-as in Agathon's *Antheus*, where incidents and names alike are fictitious, and yet they give none the less pleasure. ... even if he chanced to take a historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker. [1450a-b]

Features of Tragic Plots

■ Simple vs. Complex Plots

- Plots are either Simple or Complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are a *mimesis*, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition. A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of *propter hoc* or *post hoc*. [1452a]

■ Reversal (*peripeteia*)

- Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. Thus in the *Oedipus*, *the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect.*

■ Recognition (*anagnorisis*)

- Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the *Oedipus*.

■ Suffering (*pathos*)

- Two parts, then, of the Plot-Reversal of the Situation and Recognition-turn upon surprises. A third part is the Scene of Suffering. The Scene of Suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like. [1452ab]

Features of the Best Plots

■ Complexity, Fear and Pity

- A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, represent actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic *mimesis*.

■ Changes of Fortune

- It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. [1452b-53a]

Evocation of Pity and Fear

■ Importance of Plot Structure

- Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the Oedipus.

■ Violation of *Philia*

- Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another (*philoï*). If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention-except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another-if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind is done-these are the situations to be looked for by the poet. [1453b]

Evocation of Pity and Fear

■ Deeds done in knowledge or ignorance

- The action may be done consciously and with knowledge of the persons, in the manner of the older poets. It is thus too that Euripides makes Medea slay her children. Or, again, the deed of horror may be done, but done in ignorance, and the tie of kinship or friendship be discovered afterwards. The *Oedipus* of Sophocles is an example. ... Again, there is a third case-to be about to act with knowledge of the persons and then not to act. The fourth case is when some one is about to do an irreparable deed through ignorance, and makes the discovery before it is done. These are the only possible ways. For the deed must either be done or not done-and that wittingly or unwittingly. But of all these ways, to be about to act knowing the persons, and then not to act, is the worst. It is shocking without being tragic, for no disaster follows. It is, therefore, never, or very rarely, found in poetry. [1453b-54a]

■ Character

- As for character, there are four things to aim at: first and foremost, *goodness*; ... secondly, *appropriateness*; ... thirdly, *likeness*; ... fourthly, *consistency*. [1454ab]

How useful is Aristotle's *Poetics*?

What is important to Aristotle?

- Plot;
- Character;
- Intellectual-logical interpretations;
- Ethics;
- 'Universal' truth

What does Aristotle miss out?

- Staging and Acting;
- The Chorus;
- The political and social element;
- Religion and ritual;

BUT: Proximity and Intelligence



Questions?

Follow up Reading

- Aristotle, *Poetics*. Tr. M. Heath, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1996 (the introduction and commentary of this edition is useful).
- Halliwell, S. *Aristotle's Poetics*. London, Duckworth: 1986 (note this is different to his translation and commentary of 1987).
- Note that Halliwell and Heath disagree in almost every respect when it comes to the *Poetics* so it may be useful to look at both of them in order to get a broader view so that you can make up your own mind.