

Aristotle, from *Poetics*:

Tragedy is **mimesis** [representation] of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing profound implications, in embellished **lexis** [speech or diction], each kind of which is used separately in the different parts, in the mode of action and not narrated, and bringing about through pity and fear the **catharsis**¹ of such emotions. By *embellished*, I mean having rhythm and melody, and *by separately in different parts* I mean that some parts of a play are carried on solely in meter while others are sung.

The Constituent Parts of Tragedy

Since the mimesis is carried out in the dramatic mode² by the personages themselves, it necessarily follows, first, that the arrangement of **opsis** [spectacle] will be a part of tragedy, and next, that **melos** [melody] and **lexis** will be parts, since these are the media in which they bring about the imitation. By **lexis** I mean precisely the composition of the verses, by **melos** only that which is perfectly obvious. And since tragedy is mimesis of an action and is enacted by men in action, these persons must necessarily possess certain qualities of **ethos** [character³] and **dianoia** [thought or theme], since these are the basis for our ascribing qualities to the actions themselves — **ethos** and **dianoia** 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 **mythos** [plot]. By **mythos** I mean the sequence of events. **Ethos** is what allows us to say that people are of a particular quality. And **dianoia** is present in everything in their utterances that aims to prove a point or that expresses an opinion. Necessarily, therefore, tragedy as a whole, considered as a special form, consists of six constituent elements, namely **mythos**, **ethos**, **lexis**, **dianoia**, **opsis**, and **melos**. Of these elements, **lexis** and **melos** are the *media* through which they stimulate the imagination, **opsis** is the manner, and **mythos**, **ethos**, and **dianoia** are the objects they imitate.

¹ *Catharsis* — The term *catharsis* originated well before Aristotle and referred to a literal or symbolic washing away of the blood from a murder. Aristotle is using it metaphorically, and his usage of the word has been translated multiple ways. One tradition translates it as *purgation*, meaning that something harmful is physically purged (eliminated), making the situation better. Other critics translate *catharsis* as *purification*, which suggests a more spiritual process. (Both are obviously relevant to the original meaning.) The word has also been translated more neutrally as *clarification*, suggesting that the moment of *catharsis* is when every confusion is resolved.

Aristotle here is responding to Plato's argument that watching mimesis of extreme emotions was unhealthy. Aristotle argues that instead of being harmful, a tragedy allows the audience to see the *catharsis* of whatever in the play that is preventing life from proceeding as it should. This in turn allows the *catharsis* of harmful emotions in the audience and their submission to rational control. Today, the term is most often used today in the psychological sense. Freud borrowed it from Aristotle to help explain the function of therapy: it was to purge the psyche of the harmful effects of experience, most often childhood trauma.

² *dramatic mode* — a work performed on a stage for an audience (a play, in other words) rather than read by an individual or recited to an audience

³ *character* — in the sense of the sum of one's characteristics. The word gets confusing in English, where we use it to refer both to a person's inherent attributes and to the person himself or herself (especially one in a literary work). For the latter meaning, some translators use *subject* while others use *agent*, but here I will use the more common word *character*, while continuing to use *ethos* for the internal sense of character.

These are the only parts. So then drama employs these six forms, not just some of them, for every play has each of these elements. But of all of these, the most important is mythos.

The Relationship between Mythos and Ethos

Tragedy is mimesis not of men but of actions and of life. Happiness and unhappiness are found in action, and the end we aim at is a kind of activity, not a quality. In accordance with their ethos men are of a particular quality, while in accordance with their actions they are fortunate or unfortunate. Consequently, a play's characters do not engage in action for the purpose of displaying their ethos; rather, they take on their ethos for the sake of their actions. Thus, what happens — that is, mythos — is the end or purpose for which a tragedy exists, and that purpose is the most important thing of all. What is more, tragedy could not exist without action, but it could without characterization.

Essential Qualities of Mythos

Now that the parts are established and we have determined that mythos is the most important element of tragedy, let's next discuss what qualities are essential to mythos. I have argued that tragedy is mimesis of an action that is complete in itself and possessing serious implications, for a thing may be a whole yet result in no implications worth mentioning. 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 another thing naturally exists or comes 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 likely sequel — but has nothing after it. A middle is that which both comes after something else and has another thing following it. A well-constructed mythos, 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 mythos that centers on one man is not necessarily unified. 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 are many that do not go together to produce a single, unified action. Those poets who have composed a *Heracleid*, a *Theseid*, and other such poems⁴ all have erred, therefore, by evidently assuming that since Heracles was one man, their plot was bound to be unified. . . .

The poet's function is not to report things that have happened, but rather to tell of things that 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 Herodotus⁵ could be put into verse, and it would be no less a history with verses than without them. Rather, the difference is that 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 to express universals, while history conveys particulars. A universal is what a certain kind of person will say or do either probably or necessarily in a particular set of circumstances; this is the universal that poetry aims for (with the

⁴ A *Heracleid* would be a play or play-cycle focuses on the adventures of Heracles (known as Hercules to the Romans), while a *Theseid* would be one based on those of Theseus.

⁵ Known as *the father of history*, Herodotus was a Greek who wrote a highly biased account of the war between Greece and Persia.

addition of names for the persons). On the other hand, an example of a particular is what Alcibiades⁶ did or had done to him. . . .

Simple and Complex Forms of Mythos

Mythos can be simple or complex; indeed, the actions depicted on stage can be differentiated in this way to begin with. Assuming the action to be continuous and unified, as already defined, I call that action simple in which a change of fortune takes place without *peripeteia* [reversal] or *anagnorisis* [recognition], and that action complex in which the change of fortune involves one or both. These events ought to be so rooted in the mythos that they follow from the preceding events as their inevitable or at least most likely outcome; for the difference between following *from* and merely following *after* is vast. . . .

*Peripeteia*⁷ refers to a change from one state of affairs to its opposite, and this too should happen in accord with probability or necessity. For example, in *Oedipus*, the messenger attempts 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. . . .

Anagnorisis is a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading either to good will or hostility on the part of those persons who are marked for good fortune or bad.⁸ The best form of *anagnorisis* is that which is accompanied by *peripeteia*, as in the example from *Oedipus*. . . .

Among simple types of mythos, the episodic form is the worst. I call any episodic any mythos in which the episodes follow one another in a sequence divorced from inevitability or probability. Mythos of this kind is constructed by bad poets on their own account, and by good poets on account of the actors. Because they are composing entries for a competitive exhibition, they stretch the plot beyond what it can bear and are compelled to dislocate the natural order. . . .

Next in order after the points I have just dealt with, we must specify what one should aim at and what avoid in the construction of mythos, and what produces the effect appropriate to tragedy.

Because in the finest kind of tragedy the structure should be complex and not simple, and because it should also be mimesis of terrible and piteous events (that being the special mark of this type of mimesis), the first rule is that good men should not be shown passing from prosperity to misfortune, for this does not inspire either pity or fear, but only revulsion. Nor should evil men be shown rising from misfortune to prosperity, for this is the least tragic mythos of all — it lacks every requirement, in that it neither elicits sympathy nor stirs pity or fear. And again, neither should an extremely wicked man be seen falling from prosperity into misfortune, for although such a plot might indeed call forth human sympathy, it would not elicit pity or fear, since we feel the first for a person whose misfortune is undeserved and the second for someone like ourselves. We are left with the man whose place is between these extremes. He is not pre-eminent in virtue and justice but does not fall into misfortune through vice or depravity. He falls because of *hamartia*⁹, like Oedipus and Thyestes and other renowned and prosperous men from similar families.

⁶ A fifth century B.C. Athenian politician and general.

⁷ We often talk today about the moment of reversal as a *turning point*.

⁸ Although Aristotle did not acknowledge this, *anagnorisis* is clearly a form of *peripeteia*, as the change from ignorance to knowledge is a type of reversal.

⁹ As with *catharsis*, people have argued about *hamartia*. For a long time, English-language translators

Therefore, the mythos that achieves excellence will necessarily be single in outcome and not, as some contend, double¹⁰, and will consist of a change of fortune, not from misfortune to prosperity, but the opposite from prosperity to misfortune, occasioned not by depravity, but by hamartia on the part of one who is either such as I have described or better than this. (What actually has taken place confirms this, for though at first the poets accepted whatever myths came to hand, today the finest tragedies are founded upon the stories of only a few houses, for example, those of Alcmeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and such others who have chanced to suffer terrible things — or to do them.) So, then, tragedy employing this construction is the finest kind from an artistic point of view. And consequently, people who charge that this is what Euripides does in his tragedies and that most of his plays have unhappy endings are wrong. 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 well done, and Euripides, even if in everything else his management is faulty, is the most tragic of the poets. . . .

In the characters and the mythos 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 would certainly or most likely say or do, and the events depicted may follow one after another either inevitably or almost so. Obviously, then, the tragedy's resolution should arise from the mythos itself and not be brought about *from the machine*¹¹, as it is in *Medea* and in the embarkation scene in the *Iliad* 8. 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 that the gods see everything. Within the events of the plot itself, however, nothing must be unreasonable, or if it is, it should be kept outside the play proper, as is done in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles.

rendered it as *flaw*. When people talk about a *tragic flaw* in a character, they mean a characteristic that results in an otherwise great man's (this idea was not traditionally applied to women) downfall. Now, scholars agree that *hamartia* is more accurately translated as *error* or *miscalculation*, a mistake — a single, terrible mistake — that makes someone's destruction inevitable. Before we get too worked up about this controversy, however, we should note that Aristotle also says that characters should act consistently. If a tragic hero makes a mistake in a certain situation, he would *always* make the same mistake in that situation, and thus that mistake reflects an essential truth about his ethos. This idea reflects Heraclitus's axiom that character is destiny. Thus, *flaw* and *error* for practical purposes amount to the same thing.

¹⁰ A single plot is one that focuses on a single character. A double plot will usually have a main plot and a subplot. A double plot allows a playwright to offer the audiences some compensation for the tragedy of the main plot. For example, the main character dies, but as a result his friend or son or daughter escapes and has a chance at happiness. Aristotle believed that a double plot undercuts a tragedy's power.

¹¹ In classical Greek theatre, a machine something like a winch or crane was used to hoist actors up in the air to simulate flying (think *Peter Pan*), which was an activity usually reserved for the gods. Something brought about *from the machine* means something brought about only by divine intervention. In *Medea*, the title character escapes on a flying chariot of the sun god after murdering her own children and her husband's mistress, for whom he plans to leave her. (The mistress's father also dies as a result of Medea's actions, though she did not specifically intend that.) In Book 8 of *The Iliad* (not a play but an epic poem), the goddess Pallas Athena prevents the Argives from abandoning the siege of Troy. Aristotle's point is that any kind of miraculous ending in drama as a kind of cheap trick. Note that *deus ex machina* is Horace's familiar Latin translation of Aristotle's original phrase.