

Aristotle's analysis of tragedy is by far the most well-known section of the Poetics. It remained influential for many centuries and was not seriously challenged until the eighteenth century. It is in this treatment of tragedy that the connections between the foregoing notions – imitation, action, character, morality, and plot – emerge most clearly. Here is Aristotle's famous definition of what he calls the "essence" (ousia) of tragedy: Tragedy is, then, an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions. (Poetics, VI.2–3) The Greek word used for "action" is praxis, which here refers not to a particular isolated action but to an entire course of action and events that includes not only what the protagonist does but also what happens to him. In qualifying this action Aristotle again uses the word spoudaios, which means "serious" or "weighty." As Aristotle's later comments will reveal, this seriousness is essentially a moral seriousness. The word Aristotle uses for "complete" is telaios, which refers to a situation which has reached its end or is finished. And the word megethos refers to greatness, stature, or magnitude. It seems, then, that the subject matter of tragedy is a course of action which is morally serious, presents a 11 completed unity, and occupies a certain magnitude not only in terms of importance but also, as will be seen, in terms of certain prescribed constraints of time, place, and complexity. Moreover, since a tragedy is essentially dramatic rather than narrative, it represents men in action, and a properly constructed tragedy will provide relief or katharsis for various emotions, primarily pity and fear. Hence the effect of tragedy on the audience is part of its very definition. The notion of action is central to Aristotle's view of tragedy because it underlies the other components and features, which include plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. These elements include the means of imitation (diction and song), the manner of imitation (spectacle), and the objects of imitation (actions as arranged in a plot, the character and thought of the actors). It will be remembered that Aristotle also prescribes other requirements such as completeness of action, artistic unity, and emotional impact. The element of tragedy which imitates human actions is not primarily the depiction of character but the plot, which Aristotle calls the "first principle" and "the soul of tragedy" (Poetics, VI. 19–20). Aristotle's explanation of the connection between character and plot is complex and somewhat confusing. It was already seen that, in the Nicomachean Ethics, he viewed action as arising from "choice," which in turn was generated by thought or intellect and a certain disposition of character. He also saw virtue as concerning both emotions and actions and as arising from a "fixed disposition of character." These statements seem to imply that a given character, exercising thought in a certain way, will generate a given action. And in 11 the Poetics he repeats this formula, saying that "thought and character are the natural causes of any action" (Poetics, VI.7–8). Yet, a little later in the Poetics, he accords priority to action in poetic representation. His reasoning seems to run as follows: tragedy is not a representation of men or of character; rather, it represents a sphere "of action, of life, of happiness and unhappiness, which come under the head of action" (Poetics, VI. 12). It would be a mistake here to think that Aristotle is somehow espousing an existentialist view whereby action precedes character and the latter is actually the cumulative effect or product of a series of actions. Aristotle has said quite clearly that a fixed disposition of character causes a given action, not vice versa. Why, then, does he insist that what

must be represented is action rather than character? Aristotle's subsequent comments in the Poetics help us to answer this question. It is not that he separates action from its causal basis in character. Rather, as mentioned earlier, the action represented by tragedy is not the action of a single character; it is action in a much broader sense, a sphere "of life" in which the protagonist both acts and is acted upon. This wider sense of action is given in Aristotle's definition of the plot as "the arrangement of the incidents" (Poetics, VI. 12). Because tragedy is essentially dramatic, its basis cannot be the depiction of character; as Aristotle points out, one cannot have a tragedy without action, but a tragedy without character study is quite feasible (Poetics, VI. 14–15). A tragedy must be based on a certain structure of events or incidents to which the specific actions of given characters contribute. 12 This overall dramatic structure, the plot, is "the end at which tragedy aims" (Poetics, VI. 13). This connection between action and character can be further clarified by Aristotle's subsequent comments on the kind of plot which is necessary for tragedy. For Aristotle, the most important feature of the plot is unity. This unity is not based on character: simply dealing with a single hero does not achieve such unity. Aristotle suggests that innumerable and diverse things can happen to a single individual, and this diversity cannot be unified with reference to that individual. Implied here is Aristotle's political disposition that individuals do not act in isolation but that their very nature is social, and that their actions occur within a complex network of human relationships and events which affect far more than a single individual. For Aristotle, then, unity is given by the representation not of an individual but of "a single object," a "single piece of action" (Poetics, VIII. 1–4). In other words, the entire complex of events or incidents depicted must be subjected to an organic unity whereby each incident has an indispensable place in the whole. As Aristotle puts it, "the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed" (Poetics, VIII.4). Aristotle sees the entire complex as one unified action. How is such organic unity achieved? Aristotle has already told us that the events must be connected by "probability or necessity." In section VII of the Poetics, he discusses in more detail the structure of the plot. Repeating his initial formulation that tragedy represents an action that is "whole and complete," Aristotle 13 offers the following definition: "A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end" (Poetics, VII.2– 3). A beginning, for Aristotle, is that which is not necessarily caused by anything else, but itself causes something else. A middle both follows from something else and results in something else. An end is what necessarily follows from something else but does not produce a further result. Clearly, the unity of the plot for Aristotle is based on a notion of causality. His point here seems to be that well-constructed plots do not "begin and end at random, but must embody the formulae we have stated" (Poetics, VII.7). It hardly needs stating here that Aristotle's formulae concerning beginning, middle, and end have been profoundly influential, extending far beyond the confines of tragedy or drama, and deeply infusing modes of thinking and writing even into our own times. Equally evident, however, is that the notion of causality underlying these formulae has been widely challenged, especially over the last two centuries. The notion of a "beginning" has been reformulated in much more complex ways, from Hegel to Derrida. In our own times, we are far more reluctant to acknowledge that any set of events can have the status of an absolute beginning or origin; or that an ending can be anything more than an arbitrarily imposed limit or closure upon the events we wish to fall

under our consideration. There are further dimensions, however, to Aristotle's view of the unity of the plot. One of these is an aesthetic dimension, regarding the beauty of representation; the other is an affective dimension, concerned with the emotions that tragedy will generate in an audience. Aristotle holds that for any entity to be beautiful, its parts not only must be arranged in an orderly fashion but also that the whole must have a certain magnitude (Poetics, VII.8–9). Aristotle defines this magnitude in terms of both space and time; and in both cases, the definition is referred not only to the beautiful object itself but also to the person who perceives its beauty. In terms of spatial representation, the beautiful object must have a magnitude which can be taken in by the eye "all at once" so as to produce "the effect of a single whole." If something is too small or too big for the eye to perceive, it cannot be beautiful. The same requirement of unity applies to time: whatever events are depicted must be accessible to our memory. As with beautiful objects, says Aristotle, "so too with plots: they must have length but must be easily taken in by the memory" (Poetics, VII.9–11). Aristotle holds that the longer the action is the better, provided it can "all be grasped at once." Aristotle now offers an important definition of the desirable magnitude of a plot, one which introduces another factor beyond causality and magnitude, namely, the qualitative progression or deterioration of events: "the magnitude which admits of a change from bad fortune to good or from good fortune to bad, in a sequence of events which follow one another either inevitably or according to probability, that is the proper limit" (Poetics, VII.12). This helps further to explain why a tragedy could not be based upon character: its essential purpose is the arrangement of events not only according to causality and necessity or probability but also according to their generation of a qualitative change in circumstances, a change which in the case of tragedy must be in the direction of good to bad fortune (Poetics, XIII.6–7). Though Aristotle does not explicitly state it, without this change in fortune all of the other elements combined could hardly result in a tragedy. Aristotle's recognition of this fact is embodied in his further explanation of the unity of the plot in terms of both the plot's formal structure and the emotions produced in an audience. While Aristotle divides the formal structure of the plot into prologue, episode, exode, parode, and stasimon, it is clear that for him the real structure of the plot consists in the movement of the action. He divides plots into simple plots, which exhibit a continuous action, and complex plots – as exemplified in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex – whose action is marked by a movement through reversal, recognition, and suffering. Much later in his text, he divides the action into two parts, the "complication" which includes all of the events until the change in fortune, and the "dénouement" or unraveling which proceeds from the change in fortune until the end of the play. In this way, the change in fortune is indeed placed at the center of the play: the action as divided both leads to it and flows from it; and it is in relation to it that reversal, recognition, and suffering take their significance. Aristotle prefers complex plots because it is through the processes of reversal, recognition, and suffering that the emotions of pity and fear are evoked, which themselves contribute to the plot's unity. The plot's unity, then, integrates not only causality, probability, and change of fortune but also the emotions of fear and pity which are generated in an audience. After repeating his formula that tragedy represents not only a complete action but also incidents that cause fear and pity, Aristotle adds an important qualification. Fear and pity are most effectively aroused when "the incidents are unexpected and yet one is a consequence of the other" (Poetics, IX.11–12). In other words, even the

generation of these emotions must result from the sequence of cause and effect represented in the play. Though the effect of pity and fear may come as a surprise, it must nonetheless be perceived as resulting inevitably from previous events. The arousal of pity and fear, then, is an integral aspect of the unity of the plot. Aristotle does concede later that these emotions could be inspired by spectacular means (i.e., visual elements of the play on stage), but he still maintains that a better poet will produce them from the inner structure of the plot (Poetics, XIV. 1–2). Aristotle's explanations of the effects of fear and pity provide a further insight into the connection between character and action, as given in his renowned statement of what later came to be termed the "tragic flaw" of the protagonist. Pity, says Aristotle, is aroused by undeserved misfortune; fear is aroused when we realize that the man who suffers such misfortune is "like ourselves" (Poetics, XIII.4). Hence, these emotions cannot be inspired by a wicked man prospering; nor can they issue from seeing the misfortune suffered by either an entirely worthy man or a thoroughly bad man (Poetics, XIII.2–4). Rather, the character in question must occupy a mean between these extremes: he must be a man "who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him" (Poetics, XIII.5–6). These statements clarify considerably why a tragedy represents action rather than character. For the "flaw" which results in misfortune is not necessarily an outcome of a person's "fixed disposition of character." Rather, it is an oversight, an error, into which the protagonist falls, through lack of judgment or knowledge, and it flows from his character only in an accidental and contingent manner. Hence, it is the sequence of actions, and not character, on which tragedy must focus since a given action might be uncharacteristic and might occupy a position in the sequence of cause and effect beyond the knowledge or control of any given character and beyond the status of mere expression of character. Aristotle's comments on the portrayal of character in tragedy raise some further problematic issues. He suggests four points. The first is that the character must be "good." What reveals character, above all, whether through dialogue or the actions, is "choice" (Poetics, XV. 1). Earlier, in section VI, Aristotle had explained that this choice must occur "in circumstances where the choice is not obvious" (Poetics, VI.24). What Aristotle is referring to here is moral choice: the word he uses is *proairesis*, which can also be translated as "will," and refers to the deliberate choice of a given course of conduct. Again, this places the relation between action and character in a problematic light. Aristotle had said in his *Ethics*, we recall, that action arises from choice. Hence, it is in the choice of a given action that character is revealed. Yet the emphasis still seems to be on the particular, morally significant, action rather than on character. The revelation of character is not an end in itself; it merely coincides with the generation of morally significant action. Nor is it plausible to assume that the entire character is expressed in a given sequence of choice and action. It is rather character as concentrated into expression through that particular action. Two other features of Aristotle's foregoing comments need to be considered. What does he mean by saying that the character portrayed must be "good"? The word Aristotle uses for "good" is *chrestos*, which can mean morally good, honest, or worthy; but it can also mean useful, valuable, or serviceable. We can infer from the immediate context that Aristotle is talking about the value or propriety of using certain personages in tragedy. He states that the goodness of character "is relative to each class of people." He concedes that women and slaves can be "good" even

though “a woman is an inferior thing and a slave beneath consideration” (Poetics, XV. 1–3). The implication is that the most appropriate personages for tragedy must not only be male and free citizens, but also that these citizens must come from the upper ranks of society. In section XIV he had claimed that the appropriate material for tragedy would be found by perpetual recourse to “a few families” which were beset by frightening calamities. Aristotle thus reserves the province of literature for the cultural expression of a male social elite; the dilemmas and experience of women and slaves are relegated to secondary importance. While there are of course exceptions to such exclusiveness in Greek tragedy and elsewhere, these tendencies have dominated most of Western literature. The other, more general, point which emerges from Aristotle’s foregoing comments on character is that not just any action is suitable for imitation, but only action which entails a moral dilemma. There are many actions which are contingent in that they do not necessarily follow from or cause anything; and, more importantly, there are many actions which do not involve moral choice. Again, we see here an implicit distinction between the substantial or essential and the accidental, a distinction central to Aristotle’s metaphysics. Aristotle’s second prescription is that the characters depicted should be “appropriate.” A man, for example, should not act like a woman, or vice versa. This is related to the fourth prescription, that a character should be “consistent” (Poetics, XV.4, 6). Aristotle allows some flexibility here: a character may well be “consistently inconsistent”; hence, the connection between action and a “fixed disposition of character” is not always one of causal necessity or probability. Having said this, Aristotle does lay down that in the depiction of character the poet must seek what is inevitable or probable (Poetics, XV. 10). Again, in contrast with Plato, Aristotle seems to make allowance for the actual complexity of action, which cannot always be predicted or accurately quantified in its effects. Even a character acting uncharacteristically could fall within the realm of the probable. Aristotle’s third prescription is more problematic. He urges that a character should be “like”; some translations interpret this as saying that the character should be “like reality.” The word Aristotle uses is *homoios*, which can mean not only “like” or “resembling” but also “of the same rank or station.” What did Aristotle have in mind here? It seems implausible, given the entire movement of Aristotle’s aesthetic ideas²¹ away from Plato’s, that Aristotle is advocating an ethical realism in the sense that the character portrayed should be somehow “true to life” except in a universal sense as described earlier. The notions of probability and necessity have been invoked often in Aristotle’s text so as not to forego any connection between artistic representation and reality. Those notions, however, ensure that this connection is formalized and idealized: simply imitating the random course of actual events will produce neither unity nor true realism. The latter is achieved by the discernment and presentation of what is universal in the actual flux of particular events. Another translator of Aristotle suggests that by “like” Aristotle means “like the traditional person,” inasmuch as Achilles should not be portrayed as soft or Odysseus as stupid (Poetics, p. 54 n. C). This seems a more fruitful approach toward understanding Aristotle’s meaning: Aristotle explicitly says that this third requirement is distinct from the appropriateness or consistency of character, hence the “like” may well refer to the need for characters to be drawn in accordance with traditional portrayals and to be based on universal characteristics.