

The "Poetics" by Aristotle

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written in the 4th century BC

"...the nobler ones imitate good actions and those of the good, but the ordinary ones those of the bad."

Background information:

At the age of 20 Aristotle came to Athens to become Plato's greatest pupil and later opponent. The difference between the sober, empirical and evidence-oriented scientist and his poetically inspired teacher, who was guided by beauty and ideals, could hardly be deeper. It may seem all the more astonishing that Aristotle, the founder of the "logos", wrote a treatise on poetics.

The roots of this project can be traced back to Plato's contempt for the reproductive arts, to which he counted painting and poetry. According to his theory of ideas, everything that exists is the image of an existing idea. To reproduce this image again, as is done in reproductive art, he saw as a disparagement of the original idea, because it was a copy of a copy. He also despised the fact that poetry addresses the inner driving forces and thereby arouses the passions of the spectator and consequently, in his view, destroys reason.

Although there are critical remarks by Plato that say something about the essence of poetics, it was Aristotle who, in his comprehensive study of poetics, established rules that are still important today. There is no known work of earlier date on the structure of a drama, and even this one was not actually intended for publication. It is an achronic writing, which was intended for internal school use only.

"The thorny read", as some say, seems sketchy, the second part of the book, the treatise on comedy, is missing. But due to some references one can assume that the author was convinced that the basic dramatic principles about the tragedy summarized under the headings "Dramatic Basic Principles" and "Creating a Drama" in the following part, apply to both drama forms. The train of thought shows "a strange mixture of discipline and arbitrariness," which is probably due to the fact that it is a copy of an oral lecture made by a student. But after getting used to it, the content is relatively easy to understand, since Aristotle explains each of his introduced terms clearly and in detail.

A summary of these extensive explanations has been omitted in order to maintain a comparable thematic structure with the other works on dramaturgy. For the same reason, the inclusion of the Chorus and Melody in the antique production is only mentioned in a footnote.

The significance of the work for the history of dramaturgy is beyond question. Here we can see which basic principles have survived the millennia. However, reading it is only recommended to those who wish to get the most authentic impression possible. In many of the works that followed Aristotle's poetics, the Aristotelian rules are formulated much more stringently and also more reader-friendly.

Definition of the drama:

Dramas imitate those who are active, whereby "all characters are defined as acting and being active". This is true of both comedy and tragedy. Tragedy and comedy, viewed as a whole, are imitations of reality composed of rhythm, melody and verse.

Structure of the drama:

"A whole is what has a beginning, middle and end. Furthermore, tragedy rests not only on the arrangement of these constituent parts, but also on the fact that it is of a certain size." Beauty is based on size and arrangement. This means that a certain size of the events is required, but it must always remain clearly structured, and, derived from this, a certain extension of the action is necessary so that what is shown is easily impressed in the memory.

The required limitation of the size results from the successive events according to probability or necessity, which bring about a transition from happiness to misfortune or from misfortune to happiness. The play's fable does not form a unity simply because it revolves around a single hero. Because an almost infinite number of events can happen to the hero, which in itself cannot result in any unity. "As an imitation of a unified act, the fable is based on a single, and indeed a complete act."

Furthermore, the parts of the events must be put together in such a way that if any part is rearranged or removed, the whole thing changes and is mixed up. Because what without visible consequences can either be present or missing, is not even a part of the Whole."

Every tragedy consists of connection and resolution. The connection usually includes the necessary preceding events up to the part of the action which immediately precedes the turning point into happiness or misfortune. The solution encompasses the portion of the plot from the beginning of this turning point to the end. Imitation not only has a self-contained act as its object, but it must also contain something terrifying and deplorable. These effects mainly come about when events occur contrary to expectations but nevertheless consistently emerging from each other. It makes a certain big difference whether one event occurs logically as a result of another or just follows another event. The turning points and

transition points are summarized under the term "Peripeteia and Recognition". "Peripeteia is the reversal of what is to be achieved into the opposite, according to probability or necessity. Recognition is a turn from ignorance to knowledge, with the result that friendship or enmity occurs, depending on whether those involved are determined to be good or bad. "

Peripeteia and recognition must result from the composition of the fable itself, i.e. they must emerge with necessity or probability from earlier events.

Best is the Recognition, if it occurs at the same time as Peripeteia, as is the case with Oedipus. Besides Peripeteia and Recognition "heavy suffering" is an essential part of the tragedy. "Serious suffering results from painful events, such as death on open stage, severe pain, wounds and the like."

The ancient tragedy is divided into six sections: prologue, episode, exodus and choral part, which in turn can be a parodos or a stasimon.

Dramatic basic principles:

"Comedy tries to imitate people who are worse than they appear in reality. Tragedy seeks to imitate better people than they appear in reality."

"Comedy is the imitation of bad people, yet not with regard to every kind of badness, but only insofar as the ridiculous partakes in the ugly. The ridiculous is a mistake associated with ugliness, which, however, does not cause pain or destruction, just as the ridiculous mask is ugly and distorted, but without the expression of pain.

"Tragedy is the imitation of a good and self-contained action of a certain size, in attractively formed language, which, through the imitation of actors and not through report, evokes wailing and shuddering and thereby causes a purification of such states of excitement." It takes place within the course of the sun or goes only a little further.

"The imitation of action is what I call the myth. What I mean by myth here is the composition of the events. I understand by characters what allows us to attribute a certain quality to the actors. By cognitive ability I mean that with which they present something in their speeches or give a judgment. The most important part is the assembly of the events. Because tragedy is not an imitation of people, but of action and reality." Hence, the actors do not act to mimic characters, but only for the act's sake.

Therefore the events--today one would say the "subject"--are the fundamental theme of the story and myth is the real goal of tragedy. The goal is most important of all. "Without a plot, no tragedy can come about, but it can without characters", because the tragedy affects the

audience most of all with the components of myth, precisely those peripeteias and recognitions mentioned earlier. The foundation and, so to speak, the soul of tragedy lies in myth.

In second place are the characters who are characterized by the degree of wickedness and goodness. "So actors imitate those who are either better or worse than us, or who are just like us. Tragedy is an imitation of action, and therefore also an imitation of characters. The character is what he shows to be his inclinations and their quality, and expresses himself through his capacity for knowledge, with the ability to express what is appropriate. Those speeches show no character in which it is not at all clear what the speaker tends to do or what he rejects. The capacity for knowledge is shown in the speeches of the characters about whether something is or is not, or when they make general judgments. The staging can be impressive, but it is artless and has hardly anything to do with poetry, because the effect of the tragedy comes about without a performance and actors."

So tragedy is the imitation of actions and their effects. Recognition results in misfortune or luck. Recognition can occur in inanimate objects or in response to something that someone did or did not do. The best way to recognize people is in action or fable, because such recognition causes the intentional "wailing and shuddering".

Creation of a drama:

It is not the task of the poet to tell what has really happened, but rather what could happen, i.e. what is possible according to the rules of probability or necessity. In comedy, the poets put the fable together according to the rules of probability and only then give the characters any names. In tragedy, the poets stick to the names of people who have really lived. One need not, however, strive to adhere strictly to the traditional facts on which the tragedies are based. "Such an endeavor would also be ridiculous, since what is known is known only to a few and the action should nevertheless bring pleasure to everyone.

"It follows from this that the activity of the poet extends more to the fables, than to the verses: he is, after all, a poet with regard to imitation, and that which he imitates, are actions." While structuring the actions and during the linguistic elaboration, the poet is requested to imagine the action vividly. "For if one sees the action with the greatest clarity, just as if one were present at the events as they take place, one easily detects the right thing and overlooks which is least appropriate or which contradicts."

Necessity or probability should always be taken into consideration when it comes to the characters - as in the combination of events - i.e. that it is necessary or probable that such a person says or does such a thing, and that one action follows the other with necessity or probability. Here, too, it helps to imagine the gestures of the people as vividly as possible.

“The most convincing, with the same talent, are those who put themselves in the shoes of the passionate. The excited best represents excitement, the angry best represents anger.”

Since tragedy is the imitation of people who are better than us, individual traits must be reproduced, but at the same time they should be portrayed more ideally than the average person. A hero can be irascible and reckless, but righteous nonetheless.

The linguistic form of a tragedy should be clear and at the same time not banal. The linguistic form is clearest when it consists of nothing but common words; but then it is banal. The linguistic form is sublime when it uses a lot of foreign words. But using just such words, the result is either a mystery or barbarism. Extensions, shortenings and modifications of words contribute to the clarity as well as the unusualness of the linguistic form. If expressions are different from the usual expression and deviate from the usual, they bring about the unusual, if they are close to the usual, they bring about clarity.

A poet should speak as little as possible as a person himself, but should speak through his characters. The fables should not be composed of inconsistent parts, but rather contain nothing inconsistent. If you do it anyway, then the action should appear believable; weird or strange actions are also permissible under this condition: “The impossible, which is probable, deserves preference over the possible, which is implausible.” Since the poet is an imitator, he must always choose one of three modes of imitation: either he presents things as they are or as they were, or he puts them as they say they are and as they seem to be, or he puts them as they should be.

Since the composition of a good tragedy is supposed to imitate what is terrifying and pitiful, flawless men must not experience a transition from happiness to misery; for this is neither terrifying nor pathetic, but rather abhorrent.

Likewise, villains are not allowed to experience a transition from misfortune or misery to happiness; it is the most un-tragic of all possibilities: it is neither philanthropic, nor pitiful, nor terrifying. On the other hand, even the very bad may not experience a transition from happiness to misery. Such a combination would contain philanthropy, but neither wailing nor shuddering but only boredom. This leaves us with a hero standing between the possibilities mentioned. This is someone who, not in spite of his moral greatness and his outstanding sense of justice, but also not because of his wickedness and meanness, experiences a turn into bad luck, but because of a mistake he makes. The good fable must not turn from bad luck to good luck, but rather it must change from good luck to bad luck, not because of the meanness but because of a great mistake on the part of the hero. The dreadful and pitiful can be caused by the staging, but it can also be determined by the combination of the events themselves, which is better and shows the better poet.

Events that are terrible or lamentable, and the severe suffering almost always occur in close quarters, because the closeness is often what causes the lament. The effect of an action results from the tension between the plan and the execution, which offers the following possibilities: Someone knowingly performs a bad action. One acts without realizing the horror of the act. A person intends to do something incurable out of ignorance, but gains knowledge before doing the deed.

Recognition through signs such as scars or jewelry has least to do with poetry, but is often used out of embarrassment. It is better to create a recognition based on memory or by inference that the characters draw from the events.

The composition of the events must not resemble a history book, because then the plot will be too extensive, confusing and complicated. Although the war of Troy had a beginning and an end, Homer has only focused only on a detail while he covered the other events in numerous episodes.

It is evident that the solution of the action must result from the action itself and not through the intervention of a god. The intervention of a god may only be used in what is outside the stage action, or what has happened before it and what a person cannot know, or what will happen after it and what needs prediction or announcement.

Chinatown according to the rules of Aristotle

Aristotle's definition of a drama as an imitation of reality by people in action is fulfilled in Chinatown. All characters involved are defined by their activities. The resulting actions are part of a whole and each action unit is essential for the whole: The actions of all secondary characters such as the gardener or the servant Kahn also contribute significantly to the course of the action: the gardener gives Gittes the decisive indication that the pond contains salt water, the residence of the servant Kahn provides the decisive reason why the final part of the plot moves to Chinatown.

The plot is told from Gittes' perspective, the composition of the events is logical and straightforward, from Gittes' acceptance of the job to the dissolution.

The division of the story into the essential two parts, linkage/connection and solution, can also be clearly outlined. Gittes accepts a job of discovery, overcomes obstacles to solve it, until a turnaround is announced, when Gittes recognizes the connection Cross / Mulwray and establishes an emotional connection with Evelyn Mulwray himself, which is a typical heroic mistake. The solution is closely linked to recognition, especially the recognition of Noah Cross' brutal claim of limitless power and Evelyn Mulwray's confession of incest. The end, the resolution of the events, makes the viewer shudder, as it leaves the hero mentally

wounded in Chinatown. The audience comes to know that Gittes, in the past, has already made the same mistake. Every event is here the logical consequence of another event, the inner logic is preserved.

Aristotle demands that the frame of the story should be temporally probable and comprehensible, and finds the duration of a day to be appropriate. The backstory, the elements of which are combined in the first part of the tragedy to prepare for the peripeteia, began years ago. The chain of events in told Chinatown (on the stage) is probable and comprehensible.

Gittes' previous experiences in Chinatown and Evelyn Mulwray's incestuous relationship are essential elements, but performing them would be beyond the scope. The tragedy begins when both strands join together (Mulwray hires Gittes) and thus a few days before the solution. This also fulfills the requirement that the fable is the imitation of a single complete plot: the plot portrayed depicts Gittes' 'uncovering of Noah Cross' crimes and his simultaneous fatal involvement in the events.

Aristotle demands that action is being given a prevalence before character. This is in part fulfilled, in another part it is not. One part of the backstory serves to lay the foundation for Gittes' fatal ambition to this time go to the bottom of things. It is thus dedicated to character description much more than to depict a character's actions. All the rest of the events that lead up to and are being told in Chinatown, including Evelyn Mulwray's fatal relation to her father and the resulting birth of her sister/daughter are action or plot in the purest sense of the word.

Aristotle's higher estimation of the course of the plot is probably based on the fact that the antique tragedies had a limited set of "fixed" characters with fixed characteristics. Aristotle emphasized furthermore that a tragedy was the depiction of "better" people than in reality. This demand is also met in Chinatown. The hero, Gittes, and Evelyn Mulwray are 'larger than life' characters. Gittes is obsessed with loyalty and truth finding, ever since he failed a client and caused their death, to an extent that makes him a "better" person than the average sleuth. Evelyn Mulwray is also obsessed with loyalty (to her family) and with keeping a secret, even if it risks destroying her very life. Again, we are confronted with a level of commitment that makes her a "better" or larger than life character.

Aristotle also stated that the hero should combine both good and bad character traits to make it easier for the spectator to relate. Both Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray, fulfil this demand. Also Aristotle's demand to balance the language between the banal and the sophisticated is fulfilled. The different linguistic styles, the distinguished Evelyn Mulwray, Gittes' often raw and obscene tone, down to the gardener's broken English, are neither too lofty nor too banal.

The decisive recognition turns the course of history considerably and, as Aristoteles demanded, contains something terrifying and deplorable.

Gittes recognizes from photos that Mulwray and Cross had a very tense relationship. The water scandal is established as a decisive motive for murder for Cross. This recognition provides a crucial clue, but not yet the climax. Only Evelyn's confession, which Gittes knocks out of her because he thinks she is guilty when he discovers her with the supposed lover of Hollis Mulwray, brings the truth and the whole horror to light: here suffering, shudder and a decisive insight come together through the confession of incest, which also confirms Aristotle's rule that the terrible always takes place in close relationships.

Here is the decisive turning point of the course of action into disaster. Behind the truth that Gittes was looking for, there is another, more terrible truth. Gittes' tragic mistake as a hero lies in overconfidence, or more classically, in pride. He believes he is able to deal with Cross alone and frame him of murder, but Cross overpowers him. This seals the fate, the final change from happiness to misfortune has taken place: Evelyn Mulwray finds death, her daughter / sister is in the hands of her perverted father / grandfather, Gittes, as in the past, guilty of pride, has destroyed his own and other people's lives. He is an utterly failed man.