

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
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1/26/05  
Aristotle, "Poetics" (Parts I-XI)

\*Aristotle's *Poetics* mainly concerns poetry, but at points he also extends his discussion to music, dancing, and painting. Aristotle, like Plato, endorses an imitation theory:

"Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation."

--Aristotle differentiates the arts according to their medium, objects, and manner or mode of imitation.

--Aristotle expands the concept of imitation a bit. For example:

"In dancing, rhythm alone is used without 'harmony'; for even dancing imitates character, emotion, and action, by rhythmical movement."

\*Aristotle offers an explanation for why we imitate. He claims that imitation is a way of learning (plus, it is instinctive and pleasurable). This also suggests an answer to one paradox of fiction (which Aristotle develops as *catharsis*):

"First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated... Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'"

--Poetry divides into two according to the temperament of the writer: those with a serious temperament became epic poets or tragedians, those who took themselves (or others) less seriously became lampooners or wrote comedies.

\*Aristotle offers a 6-part account of tragedy: plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle. This is also their order of importance. (The plot is most important because the tragic poet imitates *actions*.)

"But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, 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."

"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 very important to Aristotle that the plot unfolds as it does by necessity (or high probability). He does not tolerate randomness in the plot. (But surprises are also very important, and this makes the writing all the more difficult.) The plot should also be such as to be held in memory.

“A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.”

“Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot ‘episodic’ in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence.”

“...for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design.”

--Tragedies arouse fear or pity.

Q: Can we extend Aristotle’s points about tragedy and its plots to, say, painting?