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# Aristotle's 'poetics', chapter 6: a commentary

## Commentary

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The chapter defining tragedy and its component parts in Aristotle's *Poetics*[1] (ch.6, 1449b21-1450b20) poses some problems to the students who approach it for the first time. The definition[2] runs as follows:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable [*spoudaios*, serious], complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.

This definition has two keywords: *action* and *language*. Action (*praxis*) refers to the sequence of incidents or events in a play, the way in which the story is told from a certain point of beginning through the middle to the end. The prologue is the beginning and the exode, the end; the intervening episodes and stasimons (choric songs) make the middle. Language (*lexis*), which includes dialogue and songs, stands opposed to *praxis*.

The next section (6.4) introduces (a) spectacle, which is related to action in 6.2, and reiterates (b) lyric poetry and (c) diction, which are related to language in 6.2. We thus have three component parts enumerated: (a) the masks worn by the actors and their costumes, (b) choric odes, and (c) dialogue (exchanges of conversation) between the actors as well as the songs sung by the chorus. Two further components are introduced in 6.5: (d) character (*ethos*) and (e) reasoning (*dianoia*). Character is related to the moral aspects of the agents in a play, reasoning, to the intellectual aspects of the agents.[1]

Thus we have five component parts enumerated in Aristotle's definition of tragedy. In 6.6 action is replaced by (f) plot (*muthos*), which, along with character and reasoning, is defined. Now the enumeration of the six component parts of tragedy is complete. In 6.7 they are named in the following order: plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle and lyric poetry. In the same section Aristotle erects a hurdle by saying: "The medium of imitation comprises two parts, the mode one, and the object three" (6.7). He also declares that there is nothing besides these six. Some eminent classical scholars were misguided by the different arrangements of the components given earlier. Robertello and Maggi, two sixteenth-century Italian commentators, took diction, character and reasoning to be the object of imitation. Vettori (1560) was the first to explain rightly that the medium of imitation is diction and lyric poetry, the mode is spectacle, and the object is plot, character and reasoning.[2]

In 6.8 Aristotle rearranges the order. Now it is: spectacle, character, plot, diction, song and reasoning. The text and interpretation of this sentence (1450a15-16), we are told, are extremely uncertain.[3] It is not clear why Aristotle repeats the six elements in a different order. Apparently no ranking in order of importance is intended; for that we have to wait till 6.14-19. The hierarchy of the parts given then is as follows: plot, character, reasoning, diction, song, and spectacle. Before establishing the final order in terms of their relative importance, Aristotle has argued why plot is the most important of all the components of tragedy. So, we have several different arrangements of the component parts of tragedy. The last one (6.14-19) is in accordance with the relative importance of each part. What about the earlier arrangements? Is there any method or system behind them? Before going into this question we should note that the *Poetics* "is almost entirely concerned with the group of *tria* [three]", i.e., the object of imitation: viz. plot, character and reasoning.[4] Second, as DW Lucas[3] says, "[T]he order in which the six parts are given [in 6.7] bears no relation to the division which follows". Lucas, however, suggests, "With the transposition of *lexis* [diction] and *dianoia* [reasoning], the order would be that in which the parts are discussed, which is more or less the order of importance." Is there any way to reconcile the two chief orders, the first (6.2-6, 8) and the second (6.14-19)? Stephen Halliwell[4] believes that "[t]here is an ineliminable equivocation in [Aristotle's] statements on the importance of performance for the realization of dramatic tragedy's effect," but believes that "Aristotle's views certainly deserve not to suffer reductive paraphrase."[5] Keeping this warning in mind, I would like to suggest that there is no essential anomaly in the two sequences. The first sequence (in which spectacle and song are mentioned at the beginning) and the second sequence (in which these two are relegated to the fifth and sixth places) represent two points of view. The first sequence is arranged from the audience's viewpoint: the second, the critic's. Let me explain why I think so. With the entrance of the actors and/or the chorus, the performance of the tragedy begins. So it is the spectacle that the audience views first. It should be remembered that the Greek word, *opsis*, which is conventionally and unsatisfactorily translated as spectacle, "refers to everything that is visible on stage, and is not limited simply to striking effects."[6] Then the audience listens to the songs and dialogues. By following the words of the agents, the viewers comprehend the moral and intellectual natures of the agents and at the same time recreate in their mind the storyline of the play. By following "the organization of events" (that is what plot means) the audience feels both pity and fear. However, the same viewer might have been affected in the same way by reading the tragedy without ever witnessing it on the stage. The effect of tragedy is in this case achieved by the story of the play, not by the mask-makers, costume-designers and actors contributing to any substantial degree to the arousal of pity and fear. This is why the final ranking of the components, I believe, projects a different point of view. It is that of a literary critic, not of a viewer.

In support of this interpretation, I would refer to Aristotle's discussion of epic. Tragedy and epic share some common properties; like tragedy, epic too may have a simple or complex plot or it may be based on character or suffering (ch.1). The major distinction lies in the fact that epic is in the narrative mode, not in the dramatic. Hence epic has only four component parts: plot, character, reasoning

 

and diction; spectacle and song are missing. Homer is praised by Aristotle, especially for composing quasi-dramatic epics, i.e., Homer does not indulge in saying too much in person; he lets the characters speak for themselves (24.7). Yet Aristotle ranks tragedy over epic, for it has spectacle and melody. Here too we find a link between epic and tragedy in so far as both of them are treated as reading matters. Epic is not meant to be performed; it is to be heard or read. Tragedy in Aristotle's time was not merely seen on the stage; it was read as well. Yet the fact remains that tragedy originated as a stage-play, to be seen and heard. Only in later times tragedies came to be read. By providing two sequences of the component parts of tragedy Aristotle also records this development from epic to tragedy.[5]

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## Conflicts of interest

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[1]This is why Margaret Hubbard translates *ethos* as '[the *mimesis* of] the moral characters of the personages namely that [in the play] which makes us say that the agent have certain moral qualities' and *dianoia* as '[the *mimesis* of] their intellect, namely those parts [of the play] in which they demonstrate something in speech or deliver themselves of some general maxim' (58).

Gerald F. Else, however, notes that 'Aristotle appears to be guilty of some wavering in his view of "thought." Previously (50a6) and just below (50b11) it is defined "topologically," as a certain kind of passage in a play; here it is a certain faculty or ability (*to ... dynasthai*). A similar wobbling between inner and outer criteria appears in the definitions of "character(s)." One cardinal point seems clear, however: "thought" does not exist in a play unless the characters express it in speech' (91).

[2]Lucas,101.

[3]Heath, 51.

[4]Lucas,101.

[5]Halliwell (1986),342.

[6]Heath,xix.