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Literary Criticism

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الرموز المستخدمة

 نص للقراءة والدراسة.

 **رابط خارجي.**

 **أسئلة للتفكير والتقييم الذاتي.**

 **أنشطة ومهام.**

Classical Criticism

Time Line

Eighth century BC	*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* by Homer
540–527	Peisistratus, tyrant of Athens, founds festival of the Greater Dionysia
534	Thespis presents first tragedy in Athens and wins the first prize at the Great Dionysia
525	Aeschylus born
500	First satyr play, in Athens
497/96	Sophocles born
490	Battle of Marathon, invasion of Persia; beginning of Persian Wars
484	Aeschylus' first victory at the Great Dionysia
480/79	Euripides born. Battle of Thermopylae and Persian victory; battles of Salamis and Plataea and defeat of Persians
468	First play of Sophocles presented in Athens; Sophocles defeats Aeschylus at the Great Dionysia
467	Aeschylus writes trilogy about Oedipus
462/61	Pericles emerges as dominant leader of Athens
456	Aeschylus dies
449	Peace of Callias and end of Persian Wars
447	Parthenon, the temple of Athena, begun on the Acropolis of Athens
444–441?	*Antigone* produced
431	Beginning of Peloponnesian Wars, Sparta against Athens
431–425?	Herodotus writes *Histories,* describing the Persian Wars
429	Pericles dies

430–420?	*Oedipus the King* produced
409	Sophocles' *Philoctetes* produced
406	Sophocles dies; Euripides dies
404	End of Peloponnesian Wars; Athens defeated by Sparta and Thebes
401	*Oedipus of Colonus* produced by Sophocles' grandson
399	Trial and execution of Socrates
380s	Plato, in *Republic*, discusses Greek tragedy
330s	Aristotle, in *Poetics*, describes Greek tragedy and comedy
338–326	The Athenian orator Lycurgus' decree to make official copies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides
ca. 200	Aristophanes of Byzantium (ca. 257–180) writes edition of Sophocles' works
ca. 180	Aristarchus (ca. 216–144) writes commentary on Sophocles
End of first century BC	Didymus Chalcenterus (ca. 63 BC–AD 10) composes comprehensive edition of Sophocles

Ch.1: Plato

c.427–c. 347 B.C.

Student of Socrates and founder of the Academy in Athens, Plato is regarded as the first major figure in the history of Western philosophy. Among writers whose works are extant he is the earliest to discuss poetry at any length. Further, he is, as author of dialogues, an accomplished literary figure; and here is a paradox, given the criticism of poets that he puts into the mouth of the fictionalized Socrates in ***Republic***. The paradox may be extended, for in numerous places Socrates himself quotes the poets, professes his love for Homer, asserts that true poets are divinely inspired, and tells stories, to which he frequently has recourse when the dialectic stalls itself. Even further, Plato himself writes in a dramatic form, the same form that his Socrates criticizes as imitation. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine Plato if there had not been the poets who preceded him, for he owes so much to them in approach. There is, therefore, a deep irony in Socrates's dismissal of the poets from his ideal commonwealth.

It is Plato who bequeaths to the tradition of literary criticism the concept of imitation or ***mimesis,*** dominant in literary criticism well into the eighteenth century. Even after that, imitation had periods of revival. In ***Republic,*** imitation is given two meanings, a broadly philosophical one involving Plato's ontology and epistemology and one pertaining to literary technique, though the two are closely related. Plato has Socrates locate reality in what are called ideas or forms rather than in the world of appearances or phenomena experienced through the senses. He regards objects that we perceive as mere copies of their ideas. It is only our rational power exercised in dialectical search that can advance us toward truth. Nevertheless, Socrates declares in ***Phaedrus*** that there are various types of divine madness or possession, one of which is that of the true poet. On the other hand, it is difficult if not impossible to determine whether this madness is truly divinely inspired or demonic; and the poet and all artists are imitators, making copies of appearances, thus twice removed from reality. This removal is alleged also to be characteristic of the utterances of sophists and rhetoricians, who are more sinister than poets because they often deliberately delude and gain illicit power over their listeners. In ***Republic,*** Socrates speaks of acceptable and unacceptable stories and banishes the poets, except those who limit their compositions to hymns or praises of the state; but he allows for the possibility of their return if they can successfully defend themselves either in verse or in prose, thereby setting the stage and the terms for numerous defenses to come.

The second meaning of imitation is the technical one. Socrates speaks in ***Republic*** of pure imitative form (as in the drama), where the poet has others speak, pure narrative, where the poet speaks always in his own voice, and a mixture of the two (as in epic). In his view, imitation is the most deceptive of these because the author never speaks in his own voice. There is a huge irony here because in no dialogue does Plato ever speak for himself. In ***Sophist,*** the second form of imitation is described as of two types: icastic and phantastic, the former being imitation with the aim of making a likeness, the latter imitation of imagined things or the making of mere appearances.

Plato's, or at least the fictive Socrates's, view of critics (or the closest thing in Plato to them) appears in *Ion,* where Socrates converses with the successful though obtuse rhapsode Ion, a professional reciter of and commentator on epic poetry, specifically Homer. Socrates would demolish Ion's claim that as a rhapsode he is an expert on Homer's work by asking him whether he is an expert on everything or even anything mentioned in Homer's epics and driving him toward one final absurd claim. Socrates concludes that Ion's powers as a rhapsode must be irrationally inspired. For Socrates (at least in this dialogue), a poem is only the sum of its subject matter or content; he ignores its existence as something in itself, a formal structure. This emphasis and the argument in *Republic* give good reason to regard Plato as the founder of moralistic and didactic criticism, the separation of content from form, and the consequent privileging of the former.

Later Platonists maintained a similar theory of ideas, but many, including Plotinus (below, page 127), sought to defend poetry and fine art as an avenue to a grasp of intellectual beauty. Some found in Plato's own tendency to myth-making the establishment of a tradition of allegorical interpretation in which many works were read as arcane expressions of Platonic ideas. Even a criticism that regards poetry as antirational, as found in certain nineteenth-century critics, often claims support in Socrates's treatment of poetic madness in *Phaedrus.* Even when the critic is avowedly anti-Platonic, as for example John Crowe Ransom (below, page 953), or simply anti-poetic as in Stephen Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse,* which gave rise to a somewhat Platonic answer by Sir Philip Sidney (below, page 185), Plato's influence is present. More recently Plato's treatment of language in *Cratylus* and *Philebus* has caught the attention of poststructuralist theorists.

Among the numerous translations of Plato's works, a standard edition is that of Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato* (first edition, 1871, fourth edition, 1953, edited by others). The twelve-volume (1914–1930) Loeb Classical Library edition has Greek and English facing texts. A more recent collection of translations by many hands is *The Collected Dialogues of Plato,* edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (second printing with corrections, 1963). All standard histories of philosophy, aesthetics, and criticism devote substantial space to Plato. See J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity,* 2 vols. (1934); G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (1935); Rupert C. Lodge, *Plato's Theory of Art* (1953); G. M. A. Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics* (1965); Rosemary Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato* (1969); Gregory Vlastos, ed., *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays,* 2 vols. (1971); J. Moravczik and P. Temko, eds., *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts* (1982); Julius A. Elias, *Plato's Defense of Poetry* (1984); Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991); D. Thomas Benediktson, *Literature and the Visual Arts in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2000); Julia Annas and Christopher Rowe, eds., *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient* (2002); Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* (2002); Gregory Nagy, *Plato's Rhapsody and Homer's Music: The Aesthetics of the Panhellenic Festival in Classical Athens* (2002).

Plato—Kicking out the Poets

Scope: Ironically, Plato is both the first literary critic and the first critic of literature. Though himself a great literary talent, Plato, when fashioning his ideal state (in the *Republic*, c. 373 B.C.), decided it would be best if the poets not be allowed to remain. In this lecture, we shall consider *why* Plato kicked out the poets, why he should *not* have kicked them out, and what his enduring legacy has been to all those theorists who have followed him.

Outline

I. Why Plato kicked the poets out of his republic.

A. Plato's concept of mimesis branded poetry as an unreliable source of truth.

1. For Plato, our physical World of Becoming is but a shadowy reflection or imitation (mimesis) of the unseen World of Being.

2. Thus, everything in our world, from objects to ideas, is but a pale copy of the perfect, unchanging originals (or Forms) of these objects and ideas that dwell above in the unseen world.

3. When a poet describes a chair or writes a poem about love, he is not imitating the Form of the chair ("chairness") or of love (Love), but the earthly imitation of this ideal Chair/Love.

4. Poetry, therefore, because it imitates what is already an imitation, is twice removed from reality (the Forms); as such, it is an unreliable source of truth and can only lead astray those who study it.

B. Poetry appeals to the weaker, inferior side of our mind/soul (or psyche).

1. Unlike philosophy or math, which we apprehend by way of our rational (Apollonian) powers, poetry, being fanciful, engages that part of our psyche that is both illogical and irrational (the Dionysiac side).

2. This irrational part of the soul is not only unreliable in matters of truth but is unstable, inducing us to partake in public displays of emotion.

C. Poetry is a kind of madness or contagion.

1. In *Ion* (c. 390 B.C.), Plato asserts that poets do not write nor *rhapsodes* (public reciters of poetry) speak by art or skill, but by possession.

2. Neither poet nor *rhapsode* understands (rationally) what he creates; he is, rather, carried away (irrationally) by divine inspiration.

3. This inspiration (which is really a kind of madness) passes down from poet to *rhapsode* to audience in the same way that a series of three metal rings attached to a magnet are held together by the force of magnetism.

D. Plato concludes that only hymns to the gods and praises of state heroes will be allowed; all other forms of poetry must be censored.

II. Why Plato should not have kicked out the poets.

A. Mimesis does not have to pull us farther away from truth.

1. Perhaps the poet does not imitate an imitation but captures in the physical form of the poem the invisible essence of the Forms.

2. We will return to this in our study of Aristotelian mimesis (in Lecture Three).

B. Rather than arouse the irrational side, might poetry not purge it?

1. Since our emotions are an essential part of our psyche, might it not be best to release those emotions in a controlled, public setting; might art not serve a therapeutic function to cleanse us of excess emotion?

2. We will return to this in our study of Aristotelian catharsis (in Lecture Four).

C. If poets are indeed possessed, might not the gods be trying to speak to us?

1. Plato, in his dialogues, used a method of question and answer (known as the dialectic, or Socratic method) to help uncover truths not readily perceived; might the divine madness of poetry not be another way to rip away the veil of ignorance and misperception in order to reveal truth?

2. Might not the poet be as much a prophet as the philosopher? Romantic poets and critics would adopt this idea with great fervor.

D. Plato was himself one of the greatest of poets.
  1. His dialogues are themselves recognized as a unique literary genre.
  2. Indeed, he is much easier to understand than Aristotle, precisely because his dialogues are filled with imaginative metaphors.
  3. Often, he will consummate and concretize his philosophical points with a memorable myth or allegory: the myth of Er in *Republic*, the allegory of the horseman in *Phaedrus*, the personification of *eros* in *Symposium*, the creation narrative in *Timaeus*.
  4. In *Republic* IX, he makes political science come alive by describing the natural progression from timarchy to oligarchy to democracy to tyranny in terms of the "Tragic Fall of a Great House" (cf., the House of Oedipus or the House of Atreus).

E. Plato's "ideal republic" is itself a giant poetic construct.
  1. It does not exist nor was it ever meant to.
  2. It is merely a parable writ large: a way to uncover the nature of justice.

III. Plato's enduring challenge to literary theory.

A. At the close of *Republic* X, Plato issues a serious challenge: he will allow the poets back into the republic if they can prove by means of some formal defense (written either in verse or prose) that poetry:
  1. Has a useful function in a well-ordered state (i.e., that she can both delight *and* teach).
  2. That she does not deceive but rather enhances our knowledge of truth.

B. This challenge is the very *raison d'être* for literary theory.
  1. Nearly all critical theory mounts a defense, in one way or another, of the philosophical truth and/or moral status of poetry.
  2. Nearly all theorists construct themselves and their systems in such a way as to either counter Plato (by creating a separate sphere for poetry) or to co-opt Plato (by presenting poetry as, in fact, the highest form of philosophy).

C. By putting literary theory on the defensive, Plato made it better by injecting philosophical rigor.

Essential Reading:

Plato, *Republic* X and *Ion*, in Adams.

Supplementary Reading:

Gerald F. Else, *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*, Part 1.

G. M. A. Grube. *Plato's Thought*, (Chapter 6); *The Greek and Roman Critics* (Chapter 4).

Richard McKeon, "The Concept of Imitation in Antiquity."

Plato, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Symposium* (Penguin).

———, *Republic* (Penguin; Norton).

Questions to Consider:

1. Is Plato the great enemy of poetry, or one of the greatest poets of antiquity?
2. Do humanities departments in general and professors of English in particular still feel a need to defend the usefulness and morality of poetry? Why?

SELECTED READING BY PLATO

from REPUBLIC

(BOOK 2)

Republic
from
Book II

PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE:
Socrates, Adeimantus

Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour in story-telling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes.

By all means.

And what shall be their education? Can we find a better than the traditional sort?—and this has two divisions, gymnastic for the body, and music[1] for the soul.

True.

Shall we begin education with music, and go on to gymnastic afterwards?

By all means.

And when you speak of music, do you include literature or not?

I do.

And literature may be either true or false?[2]

Yes.

And the young should be trained in both kinds, and we begin with the false?

I do not understand your meaning, he said.

You know, I said, that we begin by telling children stories which though not wholly destitute of truth, are in the main fictitious; and these stories are told them when they are not of an age to learn gymnastics.

Very true.

That was my meaning when I said that we must teach music before gymnastics.

Quite right, he said.

You know also that the beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing; for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the desired impression is more readily taken.

Quite true.

And shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up?

We cannot.

Then the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad; and we will desire mothers and nurses to tell their children the authorised ones only. Let them fashion the mind with such tales, even more fondly than they mould the body with their hands; but most of those which are now in use must be discarded.

Of what tales are you speaking? he said.

You may find a model of the lesser in the greater, I said; for they are necessarily of the same type, and there is the same spirit in both of them.

Very likely, he replied; but I do not as yet know what you would term the greater.

Those, I said, which are narrated by Homer and Hesiod, and the rest of the poets, who have ever been the great story-tellers of mankind.

But which stories do you mean, he said; and what fault do you find with them?

A fault which is most serious, I said; the fault of telling a lie, and, what is more, a bad lie.[3]

But when is this fault committed?

Whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes,—as when a painter paints a portrait not having the shadow of a likeness to the original.

[1] *Republic* begins as a discussion of justice, set in motion by Thrasymachus's argument that justice is what is to the advantage of the powerful. The argument is opposed by Socrates, who raises the question of the relation of justice to the good and proceeds to develop his notion of the ideal state and the education of those who are to be its guardians. Music, for Socrates, includes poetry principally because by tradition poetry was spoken to music, usually of the lyre.

[2] This discussion dealing with the truth or falsity of poetry and a similar discussion in *Sophist* (below, page 38) begin a tradition in criticism. Defenders of poetry developed various arguments explaining why poetry could contain truth from Plotinus (below, page 127), through Sidney's argument for allegorical truth (below, page 191), to Mazzoni's distinction (page 220), borrowed directly from *Sophist*, between icastic and phantastic imitation, and finally to some modern theories suggesting that poetry provides a special kind of knowledge.

[3] Elsewhere in *Republic*, Socrates says that lies on behalf of the preservation of the state are acceptable. Presumably these are not "bad" lies.

Yes, he said, that sort of thing is certainly very blameable; but what are the stories which you mean?

First of all, I said, there was that greatest of all lies, in high places, which the poet told about Uranus, and which was a bad lie too,—I mean what Hesiod says that Uranus did, and how Cronus retaliated on him.[4] The doings of Cronus, and the sufferings which in turn his son inflicted upon him, even if they were true, ought certainly not to be lightly told to young and thoughtless persons; if possible, they had better be buried in silence. But if there is an absolute necessity for their mention, a chosen few might hear them in a mystery,[5] and they should sacrifice not a common [Eleusinian] pig, but some huge and unprocurable victim; and then the number of the hearers will be very few indeed.

Why, yes, said he, those stories are extremely objectionable.

Yes, Adeimantus, they are stories not to be repeated in our State; the young man should not be told that in committing the worse of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous; and that even if he chastises his father when he does wrong, in whatever manner, he will only be following the example of the first and greatest among the gods.[6]

I entirely agree with you, he said; in my opinion those stories are quite unfit to be repeated.

Neither, if we mean our future guardians to regard the habit of quarrelling among themselves as of all things the basest, should any word be said to them of the wars in heaven, and of the plots and fightings of the gods against one another, for they are not true. No, we shall never mention the battles of the giants, or let them be embroidered on garments; and we shall be silent about the innumerable other quarrels of gods and heroes with their friends and relatives. If they would only believe us we would tell them that quarrelling is unholy, and that never up to this time has there been any quarrel between citizens; this is what old men and old women should begin by telling children; and when they grow up, the poets also should be told to compose for them in a similar spirit. But the narrative of Hephaestus binding Hera his mother,[7] or how on another occasion Zeus sent him flying for taking her part when she was being beaten,[8] and all the battles of the gods in Homer—these tales must not be admitted into our State, whether they are supposed to have an allegorical meaning or not. For a young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal, anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts.

There you are right, he replied; but if any one asks where are such models to be found and of what tales are you speaking—how shall we answer him?

I said to him, You and I, Adeimantus, at this moment are not poets, but founders of a State: now the founders of a State ought to know the general forms in which poets should cast their tales and the limits which must be observed by them, but to make the tales is not their business.

Very true, he said; but what are these forms of theology which you mean?

Something of this kind, I replied:—God is always to be represented as he truly is, whatever be the sort of poetry, epic, lyric or tragic, in which the representation is given.

Right.

And is he not truly good? and must he not be represented as such?

Certainly.

And no good thing is hurtful?

No, indeed.

And that which is not hurtful hurts not?

Certainly not.

And that which hurts not does no evil?

No.

And can that which does no evil be a cause of evil?

Impossible.

And the good is advantageous?

Yes.

And therefore the cause of well-being?

Yes.

It follows therefore that the good is not the cause of all things, but of the good only?

Assuredly.

Then God, if he be good, is not the author of all things, as the many assert, but he is the cause of a few things only, and not of most things that occur to men. For few are the goods of human life, and many are the evils, and the good is to be attributed to God alone; of the evils the causes are to be sought elsewhere, and not in him.

That appears to me to be most true, he said.

Then we must not listen to Homer or to any other poet who is guilty of the folly of saying that two casks

> 'Lie at the threshold of Zeus, full of lots, one of good, the other of evil lots,'

[4] Uranus confined his children, whom he hated, in Tartarus. He was castrated and dethroned by the Titan Cronus, who later lost his throne to Zeus. This story is told by Hesiod (seventh century B.C.) in his *Theogony* (154, 459).

[5] A religious ritual.

[6] Zeus.

[7] Kept ignorant of his parentage, Hephaestus, son of Zeus and Hera, trapped Hera in a chair until she told him who his parents were.

[8] When Hephaestus took Hera's part in an argument with Zeus, Zeus hurled him from Olympus down to the island of Lemnos. Some writers attribute his lameness to this fall.

and that he to whom Zeus gives a mixture of the two

> 'Sometimes meets with evil fortune, at other times with good;'

but that he to whom is given the cup of unmingled ill,

> 'Him wild hunger drives o'er the beauteous earth.'

And again—

> 'Zeus, who is the dispenser of good and evil to us.'[9]

And if any one asserts that the violation of oaths and treaties, which was really the work of Pandarus,[10] was brought about by Athene and Zeus, or that the strife and contention of the gods was instigated by Themis and Zeus, he shall not have our approval; neither will we allow our young men to hear the words of Aeschylus, that

> 'God plants guilt among men when he desires utterly to destroy a house.'

And if a poet writes of the sufferings of Niobe—the subject of the tragedy in which these iambic verses occur—or of the house of Pelops, or of the Trojan war or on any similar theme, either we must not permit him to say that these are the works of God, or if they are of God, he must devise some explanation of them such as we are seeking; he must say that God did what was just and right, and they were the better for being punished: but that those who are punished are miserable, and that God is the author of their misery—the poet is not to be permitted to say; though he may say that the wicked are miserable because they require to be punished, and are benefited by receiving punishment from God; but that God being good is the author of evil to any one is to be strenuously denied, and not to be said or sung or heard in verse or prose by any one whether old or young in any well-ordered commonwealth. Such a fiction is suicidal, ruinous, impious.

I agree with you, he replied, and am ready to give my assent to the law.

Let this then be one of our rules and principles concerning the gods, to which our poets and reciters will be expected to conform—that God is not the author of all things, but of good only.

That will do, he said.

And what do you think of a second principle? Shall I ask you whether God is a magician, and of a nature to appear insidiously now in one shape, and now in another—sometimes himself changing and passing into many forms, sometimes deceiving us with the resemblance of such transformations; or is he one and the same inmutably fixed in his own proper image?

I cannot answer you, he said, without more thought.

Well, I said; but if we suppose a change in anything, that change must be effected either by the thing itself, or by some other things.

Most certainly.

And things which are at their best are also least liable to be altered or discomposed; for example, when healthiest and strongest, the human frame is least liable to be affected by meats and drinks, and the plant which is in the fullest vigour also suffers least from winds or the heat of the sun or any similar causes.

Of course.

And will not the bravest and wisest soul be least confused or deranged by any external influence?

True.

And the same principle, as I should suppose, applies to all composite things—furniture, houses, garments: when good and well made, they are least altered by time and circumstances.

Very true.

Then everything which is good, whether made by art or nature, or both, is least liable to suffer change from without?

True.

But surely God and the things of God are in every way perfect?

Of course they are.

Then he can hardly be compelled by external influence to take many shapes?

He cannot.

But may he not change and transform himself?

Clearly, he said, that must be the case if he is changed at all.

And will he then change himself for the better and fairer, or for the worse and more unsightly?

If he change at all he can only change for the worse, for we cannot suppose him to be deficient either in virtue or beauty.

Very true, Adeimantus; but then, would any one, whether God or man, desire to make himself worse?

Impossible.

Then it is impossible that God should ever be willing to change; being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is

[9][Jowett] *Iliad* XXIV, 527.
[10][Jowett] *Iliad* II, 69.

conceivable, every God remains absolutely and for ever in his own form.

That necessarily follows, he said, in my judgment.

Then, I said, my dear friend, let none of the poets tell us that

> 'The gods, taking the disguise of strangers from other lands, walk up and down cities in all sorts of forms;'[11]

and let no one slander Proteus and Thetis,[12] neither let any one, either in tragedy or in any other kind of poetry, introduce Hera disguised in the likeness of a priestess asking an alms

> 'For the life-giving daughters of Inachus the river of Argos;'

—let us have no more lies of that sort. Neither must we have mothers under the influence of the poets scaring their children with a bad version of these myths—telling how certain gods, as they say, 'Go about by night in the likeness of so many strangers and in divers forms:' but let them take heed lest they make cowards of their children, and at the same time speak blasphemy against the gods.

Heaven forbid, he said.

But although the gods are themselves unchangeable, still by witchcraft and deception they may make us think that they appear in various forms?

Perhaps, he replied.

Well, but can you imagine that God will be willing to lie, whether in word or deed, or to put forth a phantom of himself?

I cannot say, he replied.

Do you not know, I said, that the true lie, if such an expression may be allowed, is hated of gods and men?

What do you mean? he said.

I mean that no one is willingly deceived in that which is the truest and highest part of himself, or about the truest and highest matters; there, above all, he is most afraid of a lie having possession of him.

Still, he said, I do not comprehend you.

The reason is, I replied, that you attribute some profound meaning to my words: but I am only saying that deception, or being deceived or uninformed about the highest realities in the highest part of themselves, which is the soul, and in that part of them to have and to hold the lie, is what mankind least like;—that, I say, is what they utterly detest.

There is nothing more hateful to them.

And, as I was just now remarking, this ignorance in the soul of him who is deceived may be called the true lie; for the lie in words is only a kind of imitation and shadowy image of a previous affection[13] of the soul, not pure unadulterated falsehood. Am I not right?

Perfectly right.

The true lie is hated not only by the gods, but also by men?

Yes.

Whereas the lie in words is in certain cases useful and not harmful; in dealing with enemies—that would be an instance; or again, when those whom we call our friends in a fit of madness or illusion are going to do some harm, then it is useful and is a sort of medicine or preventive; also in the tales of mythology, of which we were just now speaking—because we do not know the truth about ancient times, we make falsehood as much like truth as we can, and to turn it to account.

Very true, he said.

But can any of these reasons apply to God? Can we suppose that he is ignorant of antiquity, and therefore has recourse to invention?

That would be ridiculous, he said.

Then the lying poet has no place in our idea of God?

I should say not.

Or perhaps he may tell a lie because he is afraid of enemies?

That is inconceivable.

But he may have friends who are senseless or mad?

But no mad or senseless person can be a friend of God.

Then no motive can be imagined why God should lie?

None whatever.

Then the superhuman and divine is absolutely incapable of falsehood?

Yes.

Then is God perfectly simple and true both in word and deed; he changes not; he deceives not, either by sign or word, by dream or waking vision.

Your thoughts, he said, are the reflection of my own.

You agree with me then, I said, that this is the second type or form in which we should write and speak about divine things. The gods are not magicians who transform themselves, neither do they deceive mankind in any way.

I grant that.

Then, although we are admirers of Homer, we do not admire the lying dream which Zeus sends to Agamemnon;

[11] [Jowett] *Odyssey* XVII, 485.

[12] Thetis was the wife of Peleus, by whom she became the mother of Achilles.

[13] State of being.

neither will we praise the verses of Aeschylus in which Thetis says that Apollo at her nuptials

> 'Was celebrating in song her fair progeny whose days were to be long, and to know no sickness. And when he had spoken of my lot as in all things blessed of heaven he raised a note of triumph and cheered my soul. And I thought that the word of Phoebus,[14] being divine and full of prophecy, would not fail. And now he himself who uttered the strain, he who was present at the banquet, and who said this—he it is who has slain my son.'[15]

These are the kind of sentiments about the gods which will arouse our anger; and he who utters them shall be refused a chorus; neither shall we allow teachers to make use of them in the instruction of the young, meaning, as we do, that our guardians, as far as men can be, should be true worshippers of the gods and like them.

I entirely agree, he said, in these principles, and promise to make them my laws.

from Book III

PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE:
Socrates, Adeimantus, Glaucon

Such then, I said, are our principles of theology—some tales are to be told, and others are not to be told to our disciples from their youth upwards, if we mean them to honour the gods and their parents, and to value friendship with one another.

Yes; and I think that our principles are right, he said.

But if they are to be courageous, must they not learn other lessons besides these, and lessons of such a kind as will take away the fear of death? Can any man be courageous who has the fear of death in him?

Certainly not, he said.

And can he be fearless of death, or will he choose death in battle rather than defeat and slavery, who believes the world below to be real and terrible?

Impossible.

Then we must assume a control over the narrators of this class of tales as well as over the others, and beg them not simply to revile, but rather to commend the world below, intimating to them that their descriptions are untrue, and will do harm to our future warriors.

That will be our duty, he said.

Then, I said, we shall have to obliterate many obnoxious passages, beginning with the verses,

> 'I would rather be a serf on the land of a poor and portionless man that rule over all the dead who have come to nought.'[1]

We must also expunge the verse, which tells us how Plùto feared,

> 'Lest the mansions grim and squalid which the gods abhor should be seen both of mortals and immortals.'[2]

And again:—

> 'O heavens! verily in the house of Hades there is soul and ghostly form but no mind at all!'[3]

Again of Tiresias:—

> '[To him even after death did Persephone[4] grant mind,] that he alone should be wise; but the other souls are fitting shades.'[5]

Again:—

> 'The soul flying from the limbs had gone to Hades, lamenting her fate, leaving manhood and youth.'[6]

Again:—

> 'And the soul, with shrilling cry, passed like smoke beneath the earth.'[7]

[14] Apollo as sun god.
[15] This play of Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.) is lost.

[1] [Jowett] *Odyssey* IX, 489.
[2] [Jowett] *Iliad* XX, 64.
[3] [Jowett] *Iliad* XXIII, 103.
[4] Goddess of the underworld.
[5] [Jowett] *Odyssey* X, 495.
[6] [Jowett] *Iliad* XVI, 856.
[7] [Jowett] *Iliad* XXIII, 100.

And,—

> 'As bats in hollow of mystic cavern, whenever any of them has dropped out of the string and falls from the rock, fly shrilling and cling to one another, so did they with shrilling cry hold together as they moved.'[8]

And we must beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we strike out these and similar passages, not because they are unpoetical, or unattractive to the popular ear, but because the greater the poetical charm of them, the less are they meet for the ears of boys and men who are meant to be free, and who should fear slavery more than death.

Undoubtedly.

Also we shall have to reject all the terrible and appalling names which describe the world below—Cocytus and Styx, ghosts under the earth, and sapless shades, and any similar words of which the very mention causes a shudder to pass through the inmost soul of him who hears them. I do not say that these horrible stories may not have a use of some kind; but there is a danger that the nerves of our guardians[9] may be rendered too excitable and effeminate by them.

There is a real danger, he said.

Then we must have no more of them.

True.

Another and a nobler strain must be composed and sung by us.

Clearly.

And shall we proceed to get rid of the weepings and wailings of famous men?

They will go with the rest.

But shall we be right in getting rid of them? Reflect: our principle is that the good man will not consider death terrible to any other good man who is his comrade.

Yes; that is our principle.

And therefore he will not sorrow for his departed friend as though he had suffered anything terrible?

He will not.

Such an one, as we further maintain, is sufficient for himself and his own happiness, and therefore is least in need of other men.

True, he said.

And for this reason the loss of a son or brother, or the deprivation of fortune, is to him of all men least terrible.

Assuredly.

And therefore he will be least likely to lament, and will bear with the greatest equanimity any misfortune of this sort which may befall him.

Yes, he will feel such a misfortune far less than another.

Then we shall be right in getting rid of the lamentations of famous men, and making them over to women (and not even to women who are good for anything), or to men of a baser sort, that those who are being educated by us to be the defenders of their country may scorn to do the like.

That will be very right.

Then we will once more entreat Homer and the other poets not to depict Achilles,[10] who is the son of a goddess, first lying on his side, then on his back, and then on his face; then starting up and sailing in a frenzy along the shores of the barren sea; now taking the sooty ashes in both his hands[11] and pouring them over his head, or weeping and wailing in the various modes which Homer has delineated. Nor should he describe Priam the kinsman of the gods as praying and beseeching,

> 'Rolling in the dirt, calling each man loudly by his name.'[12]

Still more earnestly will we beg of him at all events not to introduce the gods lamenting and saying,

> 'Alas! my misery! Alas! that I bore the bravest to my sorrow.'[13]

But if he must introduce the gods, at any rate let him not dare so completely to misrepresent the greatest of the gods, as to make him say—

> 'O heavens! with my eyes verily I behold a dear friend of mine chased round and round the city, and my heart is sorrowful.'[14]

Or again:—

> 'Woe is me that I am fated to have Sarpedon, dearest of men to me, subdued at the hands of Patroclus the son of Menoctius.'[15]

[8][Jowett] *Odyssey* XXIV, 6.
[9]They who are trained to become guardians of the state.

[10][Jowett] *Iliad* XXIV, 10.
[11][Jowett] *Iliad* XVIII, 23.
[12][Jowett] *Iliad* XXII, 414.
[13][Jowett] *Iliad* XVIII, 54.
[14][Jowett] *Iliad* XXII, 168.
[15][Jowett] *Iliad* XVI, 433.

For if, my sweet Adeimantus, our youth seriously listen to such unworthy representations of the gods, instead of laughing at them as they ought, hardly will any of them deem that he himself, being but a man, can be dishonoured by similar actions; neither will he rebuke any inclination which may arise in his mind to say and do the like. And instead of having any shame or self-control, he will be always whining and lamenting on slight occasions.

Yes, he said, that is most true.

Yes, I replied; but that surely is what ought not to be, as the argument has just proved to us; and by that proof we must abide until it is disproved by a better.

It ought not to be.

Neither ought our guardians to be given to laughter. For a fit of laughter which has been indulged to excess almost always produces a violent reaction.

So I believe.

Then persons of worth, even if only mortal men, must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less must such a representation of the gods be allowed.

Still less of the gods, as you say, he replied.

Then we shall not suffer such an expression to be used about the gods as that of Homer when he describes how

> 'Inextinguishable laughter arose among the blessed gods, when they saw Hephaestus bustling about the mansion.'[16]

On your views, we must not admit them.

On my views, if you like to father them on me;[17] that we must not admit them is certain.

Again, truth should be highly valued; if, as we were saying, a lie is useless to the gods, and useful only as a medicine to men, then the use of such medicines should be restricted to physicians; private individuals have no business with them.

Clearly not, he said.

Then if any one at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good. But nobody else should meddle with anything of the kind; and although the rulers have this privilege, for a private man to lie to them in return is to be deemed a more heinous fault than for the patient or the pupil of a gymnasium not to speak the truth about his own bodily illnesses to the physician or to the trainer, or for a sailor not to tell the captain what is happening about the ship and the rest of the crew, and how things are going with himself or his fellow sailors.

Most true, he said.

If, then, the ruler catches anybody beside himself lying in the State,

> 'Any of the craftsmen, whether he be priest or physician or carpenter,'[18]

he will punish him for introducing a practice which is equally subversive and destructive of ship or State.

Most certainly, he said, if our idea of the State is ever carried out.

In the next place our youth must be temperate?

Certainly.

Are not the chief elements of temperance, speaking generally, obedience to commanders and self-control in sensual pleasures?

True.

Then we shall approve such language as that of Diomede in Homer,

> 'Friend, sit still and obey my word,'[19]

and the verses which follow,

> 'The Greeks marched breathing prowess,[20] . . . . in silent awe of their leaders.'[21]

and other sentiments of the same kind.

We shall.

What of this line,

> 'O heavy with wine, who hast the eyes of a dog and the heart of a stag,'[22]

and of the words which follow? Would you say that these, or any similar impertinences which private individuals are supposed to address to their rulers, whether in verse or prose, are well or ill spoken?

They are ill spoken.

They may very possibly afford some amusement, but they do not conduce to temperance. And therefore they are likely to do harm to our young men—you would agree with me there?

[16][Jowett] *Iliad* I, 599.
[17]"To call me the author of them."
[18]*Odyssey* XVII, 383.
[19][Jowett] *Iliad* IV, 412.
[20][Jowett] *Odyssey* III, 8.
[21][Jowett] *Odyssey* IV, 431.
[22][Jowett] *Odyssey* I, 225.

Yes.

And then, again, to make the wisest of men say that nothing in his opinion is more glorious than

> 'When the tables are full of bread and meat,
> and the cup-bearer carries round wine which he
> draws from the bowl and pours into the cups;'[23]

is it fit or conducive to temperance for a young man to hear such words? Or the verse

> 'The saddest of fates is to die and meet destiny from
> hunger'?[24]

What would you say again to the tale of Zeus, who, while other gods and men were asleep and he the only person awake, lay devising plans, but forgot them all in a moment through his lust, and was so completely overcome at the sight of Hera that he would not even go into the hut, but wanted to lie with her on the ground, declaring that he had never been in such a state of rapture before, even when they first met one another

> 'Without the knowledge of their parents;'[25]

or that other tale of how Hephaestus, because of similar goings on, cast a chain around Ares and Aphrodite?[26]

Indeed, he said, I am strongly of opinion that they ought not to hear that sort of thing.

But any deeds of endurance which are done or told by famous men, these they ought to see and hear; as, for example, what is said in the verses,

> 'He smote his breast, and thus reproached his heart,
> Endure, my heart; far worse hast thou endured!'[27]

Certainly, he said.

In the next place, we must not let them be receivers of gifts or lovers of money.

Certainly not.

Neither must we sing to them of

> 'Gifts persuading gods, and persuading reverend kings.'[28]

Neither is Phoenix, the tutor of Achilles, to be approved or deemed to have given his pupil good counsel when he told him that he should take the gifts of the Greeks and assist them,[29] but that without a gift he should not lay aside his anger. Neither will we believe or acknowledge Achilles himself to have been such a lover of money that he took Agamemnon's gifts, or that when he had received payment he restored the dead body of Hector, but that without payment he was unwilling to do so.[30]

Undoubtedly, he said, these are not sentiments which can be approved.

Loving Homer as I do, I hardly like to say that in attributing these feelings to Achilles, or in believing that they are truly attributed to him, he is guilty of downright impiety. As little can I believe the narrative of his insolence to Apollo, where he says,

> 'Thou hast wronged me, O far-darter,[31] most
> abominable of deitics. Verily I would be even with
> thee, if I had only the power;'[32]

or his insubordination to the river-god,[33] on whose divinity he is ready to lay hands; or his offering to the dead Patroclus of his own hair,[34] which had been previously dedicated to the other river-god Spercheius, and that he actually performed this vow; or that he dragged Hector round the tomb of Patroclus,[35] and slaughtered the captives at the pyre;[36] of all this I cannot believe that he was guilty, any more than I can allow our citizens to believe that he, the wise Cheiron's pupil, the son of a goddess and of Peleus who was the gentlest of men and third in descent from Zeus, was so disordered in his wits as to be at one time the slave of two seemingly inconsistent passions, meanness, not untainted by avarice, combined with overweening contempt of gods and men.

You are quite right, he replied.

And let us equally refuse to believe, or allow to be repeated, the tale of Theseus son of Poseidon, or of Pirithous son of Zeus, going forth as they did to perpetrate a horrid rape,[37] or of any other hero or son of a god daring to do such

[23][Jowett] *Odyssey* IX, 8.
[24][Jowett] *Odyssey* XII, 342.
[25][Jowett] *Iliad* XIV, 281.
[26][Jowett] *Odyssey* VIII, 266.
[27][Jowett] *Odyssey* XX, 17.
[28][Jowett] Quoted by Suidas as attributed to Hesiod.

[29][Jowett] *Iliad* IX, 515.
[30][Jowett] *Iliad* XXIV, 175.
[31]"Far-darter" refers to Apollo, skilled as an archer.
[32][Jowett] *Iliad* XXII, 15sq.
[33][Jowett] *Iliad* XXI, 130, 223sq.
[34][Jowett] *Iliad* XXIII, 151.
[35][Jowett] *Iliad* XXII, 394.
[36][Jowett] *Iliad* XXIII, 175.
[37]Pirithous aided Theseus in carrying off Helen, then a child, to Aphidnae. Theseus then aided Pirithous in an attempt to carry off Persephone from the underworld.

impious and dreadful things as they falsely ascribe to them in our day: and let us further compel the poets to declare either that these acts were not done by them, or that they were not the sons of gods;—both in the same breath they shall not be permitted to affirm. We will not have them, trying to persuade our youth that the gods are the authors of evil, and that heroes are no better than men—sentiments which, as we were saying, are neither pious nor true, for we have already proved that evil cannot come from the gods.

Assuredly not.

And further they are likely to have a bad effect on those who hear them; for everybody will begin to excuse his own vices when he is convinced that similar wickednesses are always being perpetrated by—

> 'The kindred of the gods, the relatives of Zeus, whose ancestral altar, the altar of Zeus, is aloft in air on the peak of Ida,'

and who have

> 'the blood of deities yet flowing in their veins.'[38]

And therefore let us put an end to such tales, lest they engender laxity of morals among the young.

By all means, he replied.

But now that we are determining what classes of subjects are or are not to be spoken of, let us see whether any have been omitted by us. The manner in which gods and demigods and heroes and the world below should be treated has been already laid down.

Very true.

And what shall we say about men? That is clearly the remaining portion of our subject.

Clearly so.

But we are not in a condition to answer this question at present, my friend.

Why not?

Because, if I am not mistaken, we shall have to say that about men poets and story-tellers are guilty of making the gravest misstatements when they tell us that wicked men are often happy, and the good miserable; and that injustice is profitable when undetected, but that justice is a man's own loss and another's gain—these things we shall forbid them to utter, and command them to sing and say the opposite.

To be sure we shall, he replied.

But if you admit that I am right in this, then I shall maintain that you have implied the principle for which we have been all along contending.

I grant the truth of your inference.

That such things are or are not to be said about men is a question which we cannot determine until we have discovered what justice is, and how naturally advantageous to the possessor, whether he seems to be just or not.

Most true, he said.

Enough of the subjects of poetry: let us now speak of the style; and when this has been considered, both matter and manner will have been completely treated.

I do not understand what you mean, said Adeimantus.

Then I must make you understand; and perhaps I may be more intelligible if I put the matter in this way. You are aware, I suppose, that all mythology and poetry is a narration of events, either past, present, or to come?

Certainly, he replied.

And narration may be either simple narration, or imitation, or a union of the two?[39]

That again, he said, I do not quite understand.

I fear that I must be a ridiculous teacher when I have so much difficulty in making myself apprehended. Like a bad speaker, therefore, I will not take the whole of the subject, but will break a piece off in illustration of my meaning. You know the first lines of the Iliad, in which the poet says that Chryses prayed Agamemnon to release his daughter, and that Agamemnon flew into a passion with him; whereupon Chryses, failing of his object, invoked the anger of the God against the Achaeans. Now as far as these lines,

> 'And he prayed all the Greeks, but especially the two sons of Atreus, the chiefs of the people.'

the poet is speaking in his own person; he never leads us to suppose that he is any one else. But in what follows he takes the person of Chryses, and then he does all that he can to make us believe that the speaker is not Homer, but the aged priest himself. And in this double form he has cast the entire narrative of the events which occurred at Troy and in Ithaca and throughout the Odyssey.

Yes.

And a narrative it remains both in the speeches which the poet recites from time to time and in the intermediate passages?

Quite true.

[38][Jowett] From the *Niobe* of Aeschylus.

[39]Here Socrates employs "imitation" not in the sense of copying copies of the ideas but to distinguish from straight narration the poet's putting words in the mouth of a character, as in a play.

But when the poet speaks in the person of another, may we not say that he assimilates his style to that of the person who, as he informs you, is going to speak?

Certainly.

And this assimilation of himself to another, either by the use of voice or gesture, is the imitation of the person whose character he assumes?

Of course.

Then in this case the narrative of the poet may be said to proceed by way of imitation?

Very true.

Or, if the poet everywhere appears and never conceals himself, then again the imitation is dropped, and his poetry becomes simple narration. However, in order that I may make my meaning quite clear, and that you may no more say, 'I don't understand,' I will show how the change might be effected. If Homer had said, 'The priest came, having his daughter's ransom in his hands, supplicating the Achaeans, and above all the kings;' and then if instead of speaking in the person of Chryses, he had continued in his own person, the words would have been, not imitation, but simple narration. The passage would have run as follows (I am no poet, and therefore I drop the metre), 'The priest came and prayed the gods on behalf of the Greeks that they might capture Troy and return safely home, but begged that they would give him back his daughter, and take the ransom which he brought, and respect the God. Thus he spoke, and the other Greeks revered the priest and assented. But Agamemnon was wroth, and bade him depart and not come again, lest the staff and chaplets[40] of the God should be of no avail to him—the daughter of Chryses should not be released, he said—she should grow old with him in Argos. And then he told him to go away and not to provoke him, if he intended to get home unscathed. And the old man went away in fear and silence, and, when he had left the camp, he called upon Apollo by his many names, reminding him of everything which he had done pleasing to him, whether in building his temples, or in offering sacrifice, and praying that his good deeds might be returned to him, and that the Achaeans might expiate his tears by the arrows of the god,'—and so on. In this way the whole becomes simple narrative.

I understand, he said.

Or you may suppose the opposite case—that the intermediate passages are omitted, and the dialogue only left.

That also, he said, I understand; you mean, for example, as in tragedy.

You have conceived my meaning perfectly; and if I mistake not, what you failed to apprehend before is now made clear to you, that poetry and mythology are, in some cases, wholly imitative—instances of this are supplied by tragedy and comedy; there is likewise the opposite style, in which the poet is the only speaker—of this the dithyramb affords the best example; and the combination of both is found in epic, and in several other styles of poetry. Do I take you with me?

Yes, he said; I see now what you meant.

I will ask you to remember also what I began by saying, that we had done with the subject and might proceed to the style.

Yes, I remember.

In saying this, I intended to imply that we must come to an understanding about the mimetic art,—whether the poets, in narrating their stories, are to be allowed by us to imitate, and if so, whether in whole or in part, and if the latter, in what parts; or should all imitation be prohibited?

You mean, I suspect, to ask whether tragedy and comedy shall be admitted into our State?

Yes, I said; but there may be more than this in question: I really do not know as yet, but whither the argument may blow, thither we go.

And go we will, he said.

Then, Adeimantus, let me ask you whether our guardians ought to be imitators; or rather, has not this question been decided by the rule already laid down that one man can only do one thing well, and not many; and that if he attempt many, he will altogether fail of gaining much reputation in any?

Certainly.

And this is equally true of imitation; no one man can imitate many things as well as he would imitate a single one?

He cannot.

Then the same person will hardly be able to play a serious part in life, and at the same time to be an imitator and imitate many other parts as well; for even when two species of imitation are nearly allied, the same persons cannot succeed in both, as, for example, the writers of tragedy and comedy—did you not just now call them imitations?

Yes, I did: and you are right in thinking that the same persons cannot succeed in both.

Any more than they can be rhapsodists and actors at once?

True.

Neither are comic and tragic actors the same; yet all these things are but imitations.

They are so.

[40]Wreaths or garlands for the head.

And human nature, Adeimantus, appears to have been coined into yet smaller pieces, and to be as incapable of imitating many things well, as of performing well the actions of which the imitations are copies.

Quite true, he replied.

If then we adhere to our original notion and bear in mind that our guardians, setting aside every other business, are to dedicate themselves wholly to the maintenance of freedom in the State, making this their craft, and engaging in no work which does not bear on this end, they ought not to practise or imitate anything else; if they imitate at all, they should imitate from youth upward only those characters which are suitable to their profession—the courageous, temperate, holy, free, and the like; but they should not depict or be skilful at imitating any kind of illiberality or baseness, lest from imitation they should come to be what they imitate. Did you never observe how imitations, beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice, and mind?

Yes, certainly, he said.

Then, I said, we will not allow those for whom we profess a care and of whom we say that they ought to be good men, to imitate a woman, whether young or old, quarrelling with her husband, or striving and vaunting against the gods in conceit of her happiness, or when she is in affliction, or sorrow, or weeping; and certainly not one who is in sickness, love, or labour.

Very right, he said.

Neither must they represent slaves, male or female, performing the offices of slaves?

They must not.

And surely not bad men, whether cowards or any others, who do the reverse of what we have just been prescribing, who scold or mock or revile one another in drink or out of drink, or who in any other manner sin against themselves and their neighbours in word or deed, as the manner of such is. Neither should they be trained to imitate the action or speech of men or women who are mad or bad; for madness, like vice, is to be known but not to be practised or imitated.

Very true, he replied.

Neither may they imitate smiths or other artificers, or oarsmen, or boatswains, or the like?

How can they, he said, when they are not allowed to apply their minds to the callings of any of these?

Nor may they imitate the neighing of horses, the bellowing of bulls, the murmur of rivers and roll of the ocean, thunder, and all that sort of thing?

Nay, he said, if madness be forbidden, neither may they copy the behaviour of madmen.

You mean, I said, if I understand you aright, that there is one sort of narrative style which may be employed by a truly good man when he has anything to say, and that another sort will be used by a man of an opposite character and education.

And which are these two sorts? he asked.

Suppose, I answered, that a just and good man in the course of a narration comes on some saying or action of another good man,—I should imagine that he will like to personate him, and will not be ashamed of this sort of imitation: he will be most ready to play the part of the good man when he is acting firmly and wisely; in a less degree when he is overtaken by illness or love or drink, or has met with any other disaster. But when he comes to a character which is unworthy of him, he will not make a study of that; he will disdain such a person, and will assume his likeness, if at all, for a moment only when he is performing some good action; at other times he will be ashamed to play a part which he has never practised, nor will he like to fashion and frame himself after the baser models; he feels the employment of such an art, unless in jest, to be beneath him, and his mind revolts at it.

So I should expect, he replied.

Then he will adopt a mode of narration such as we have illustrated out of Homer, that is to say, his style will be both imitative and narrative: but there will be very little of the former, and a great deal of the latter. Do you agree?

Certainly, he said; that is the model which such a speaker must necessarily take.

But there is another sort of character who will narrate anything, and, the worse he is, the more unscrupulous he will be; nothing will be too bad for him: and he will be ready to imitate anything, not as a joke, but in right good earnest, and before a large company. As I was just now saying, he will attempt to represent the roll of thunder, the noise of wind and hail, or the creaking of wheels, and pulleys, and the various sounds of flutes, pipes, trumpets, and all sorts of instruments: he will bark like a dog, bleat like a sheep, or crow like a cock; his entire art will consist in imitation of voice and gesture, and there will be very little narration.

That, he said, will be his mode of speaking.

These, then, are the two kinds of style?

Yes.

And you would agree with me in saying that one of them is simple and has but slight changes; and if the harmony and rhythm are also chosen for their simplicity, the result is that the speaker, if he speaks correctly, is always pretty much the same in style, and he will keep within the limits of a single harmony (for the changes are not great), and in like manner he will make use of nearly the same rhythm?

That is quite true, he said.

Whereas the other requires all sorts of harmonies and all sorts of rhythms, if the music and the style are to correspond, because the style has all sorts of changes.

That is also perfectly true, he replied.

And do not the two styles, or the mixture of the two, comprehend all poetry, and every form of expression in words? No one can say anything except in one or other of them or in both together.

They include all, he said.

And shall we receive into our State all the three styles, or one only of the two unmixed styles? or would you include the mixed?

I should prefer only to admit the pure imitator of virtue.

Yes, I said, Adeimantus; but the mixed style is also very charming: and indeed the pantomimic, which is the opposite of the one chosen by you, is the most popular style with children and their attendants, and with the world in general.

I do not deny it.

But I suppose you would argue that such a style is unsuitable to our State, in which human nature is not twofold or manifold, for one man plays one part only?

Yes; quite unsuitable.

And this is the reason why in our State, and in our State only, we shall find a shoemaker to be a shoemaker and not a pilot also, and a husbandman to be a husbandman and not a dicast[41] also, and a soldier a soldier and not a trader also, and the same throughout?

True, he said.

And therefore when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist; the law will not allow them. And so when we have anointed him with myrrh, and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city. For we mean to employ for our souls' health the rougher and severer poet or storyteller, who will imitate the style of the virtuous only, and will follow those models which we prescribed at first when we began the education of our soldiers.

We certainly will, he said, if we have the power.

Then now, my friend, I said, that part of music or literary education which relates to the story or myth may be considered to be finished; for the matter and manner have both been discussed.

I think so too, he said.

Next in order will follow melody and song.

That is obvious.

Every one can see already what we ought to say about them, if we are to be consistent with ourselves.

I fear, said Glaucon, laughing, that the word 'every one' hardly includes me, for I cannot at the moment say what they should be; though I may guess.

At any rate you can tell that a song or ode has three parts—the words, the melody, and the rhythm; that degree of knowledge may presuppose?

Yes, he said; so much as that you may.

And as for the words, there will surely be no difference between words which are and which are not set to music; both will conform to the same laws, and these have been already determined by us?

Yes.

And the melody and rhythm will depend upon the words?

Certainly.

We were saying, when we spoke of the subject-matter, that we had no need of lamentations and strains of sorrow?

True.

And which are the harmonies expressive of sorrow? You are musical, and can tell me.

The harmonies which you mean are the mixed or tenor Lydian, and the full-toned or bass Lydian, and such like.

These then, I said, must be banished; even to women who have a character to maintain they are of no use, and much less to men.

Certainly.

In the next place, drunkenness and softness and indolence are utterly unbecoming the character of our guardians.

Utterly unbecoming.

And which are the soft or drinking harmonies?

The Ionian, he replied, and the Lydian; they are termed 'relaxed.'

Well, and are these of any military use?

Quite the reverse, he replied; and if so the Dorian and the Phrygian are the only ones which you have left.

I answered: Of the harmonies I know nothing, but I want to have one warlike, to sound the note or accent which a brave man utters in the hour of danger and stern resolve, or when his cause is failing, and he is going to wounds or death or is overtaken by some other evil, and at every such crisis meets the blows of fortune with firm step and a determination to endure; and another to be used by him in times of peace and freedom of action, when there is no pressure of necessity, and he is

[41] Juror.

seeking to persuade God by prayer, or man by instruction and admonition, or on the other hand, when he is expressing his willingness to yield to persuasion or entreaty or admonition, and which represents him when by prudent conduct he has attained his end, not carried away by his success, but acting moderately and wisely under the circumstances, and acquiescing in the event. These two harmonies I ask you to leave; the strain of necessity and the strain of freedom, the strain of the unfortunate and the strain of the fortunate, the strain of courage, and the strain of temperance; these, I say, leave.

And these, he replied, are the Dorian and Phrygian harmonies of which I was just now speaking.

Then, I said, if these and these only are to be used in our songs and melodies, we shall not want multiplicity of notes or a panharmonic scale?

I suppose not.

Then we shall not maintain the artificers of lyres with three corners and complex scales, or the makers of any other many-stringed curiously-harmonised instruments?

Certainly not.

But what do you say to flute-makers and flute-players? Would you admit them into our State when you reflect that in this composite use of harmony the flute is worse than all the stringed instruments put together; even the panharmonic music is only an imitation of the flute?

Clearly not.

There remain then only the lyre and the harp for use in the city, and the shepherds may have a pipe in the country.

That is surely the conclusion to be drawn from the argument.

The preferring of Apollo and his instruments to Marsyas and his instruments is not at all strange, I said.[42]

Not at all, he replied.

And so, by the dog of Egypt, we have been unconsciously purging the State, which not long ago we termed luxurious.

And we have done wisely, he replied.

Then let us now finish the purgation, I said. Next in order to harmonies, rhythms will naturally follow, and they should be subject to the same rules, for we ought not to seek out complex systems of metre, or metres of every kind, but rather to discover what rhythms are the expressions of a courageous and harmonious life; and when we have found them, we shall adapt the foot and the melody to words having a like spirit, not the words to the foot and melody. To say what these rhythms are will be your duty—you must teach me them, as you have already taught me the harmonies.

But, indeed, he replied, I cannot tell you. I only know that there are some three principles of rhythm out of which metrical systems are framed, just as in sounds there are four notes[43] out of which all the harmonies are composed; that is an observation which I have made. But of what sort of lives they are severally the imitations I am unable to say.

Then, I said, we must take Damon[44] into our counsels; and he will tell us what rhythms are expressive of meanness, or insolence, or fury, or other unworthiness, and what are to be reserved for the expression of opposite feelings. And I think that I have an indistinct recollection of his mentioning a complex Cretic rhythm; also a dactylic or heroic, and he arranged them in some manner which I do not quite understand, making the rhythms equal in the rise and fall of the foot, long and short alternating; and, unless I am mistaken, he spoke of an iambic as well as of a trochaic rhythm, and assigned to them short and long quantities.[45] Also in some cases he appeared to praise or censure the movement of the foot quite as much as the rhythm; or perhaps a combination of the two; for I am not certain what he meant. These matters, however, as I was saying, had better be referred to Damon himself, for the analysis of the subject would be difficult, you know?

Rather so, I should say.

But there is no difficulty in seeing that grace or the absence of grace is an effect of good or bad rhythm.

None at all.

And also that good and bad rhythm naturally assimilate to a good and bad style; and that harmony and discord in like manner follow style; for our principle is that rhythm and harmony are regulated by the words, and not the words by them.

Just so, he said, they should follow the words.

And will not the words and the character of the style depend on the temper of the soul?

Yes.

And everything else on the style?

Yes.

Then beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity,—I mean the true simplicity of a rightly and nobly ordered mind and character, not that other simplicity which is only an euphemism for folly?[46]

[42]In a contest with Apollo, which Marsyas lost, Marsyas played the flute, Apollo the lyre.

[43][Jowett] The four notes of the tetrachord.

[44]A celebrated musician and sophist.

[45][Jowett] Socrates expresses himself carelessly in accordance with his assumed ignorance of the details of the subject. In the first part of the sentence he appears to be speaking of paeonic rhythms which are in the ratio of 1/1; in the second part, of dactylic and anapestic rhythms, which are in the ratio of $^1/_2$ or 2/1.

[46]Socrates tends to identify beauty or the beautiful with mathematical proportion.

Very true, he replied.

And if our youth are to do their work in life, must they not make these graces and harmonies their perpetual aim?

They must.

And surely the art of the painter and every other creative and constructive art are full of them,—weaving, embroidery, architecture, and every kind of manufacture; also nature, animal and vegetable,—in all of them there is grace or the absence of grace. And ugliness and discord and inharmonious motion are nearly allied to ill words and ill nature, as grace and harmony are the twin sisters of goodness and virtue and bear their likeness.

That is quite true, he said.

But shall our superintendence go no further, and are the poets only to be required by us to express the image of the good in their works, on pain, if they do anything else, of expulsion from our State? Or is the same control to be extended to other artists, and are they also to be prohibited from exhibiting the opposite forms of vice and intemperance and meanness and indecency in sculpture and building and the other creative arts; and is he who cannot conform to this rule of ours to be prevented from practising his art in our State, lest the taste of our citizens be corrupted by him? We would not have our guardians grow up amid images of moral deformity, as in some noxious pasture, and there browse and feed upon many a baneful herb and flower day by day, little by little, until they silently gather a festering mass of corruption in their own soul. Let our artists rather be those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful; then will our youth dwell in a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good in everything; and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region, and insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason.

There can be no nobler training than that, he replied.

And therefore, I said, Glaucon, musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful; and also because he who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste, while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good, he will justly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; and when reason comes he will recognise and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar.

Yes, he said, I quite agree with you in thinking that our youth should be trained in music and on the grounds which you mention.

Just as in learning to read, I said, we were satisfied when we knew the letters of the alphabet, which are very few, in all their recurring sizes and combinations; not slighting them as unimportant whether they occupy a space large or small, but everywhere eager to make them out; and not thinking ourselves perfect in the art of reading until we recognise them wherever they are found:

True—

Or, as we recognise the reflection of letters in the water, or in a mirror, only when we know the letters themselves; the same art and study giving us the knowledge of both:

Exactly—

Even so, as I maintain, neither we nor our guardians, whom we have to educate, can ever become musical until we and they know the essential forms, in all their combinations, and can recognise them and their images wherever they are found, not slighting them either in small things or great, but believing them all to be within the sphere of one art and study.

Most assuredly.

And when a beautiful soul harmonizes with a beautiful form, and the two are cast in one mould, that will be the fairest of sights to him who has an eye to see it?

The fairest indeed.

from Book X

PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE:
Socrates, Glaucon

Of the many excellences which I perceive in the order of our State, there is none which upon reflection pleases me better than the rule about poetry.

To what do you refer?

To the rejection of imitative poetry, which certainly ought not to be received; as I see far more clearly now that the parts of the soul have been distinguished.

What do you mean?

Speaking in confidence, for I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe—but I do not mind saying to you, that all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them.

Explain the purport of your remark.

Well, I will tell you, although I have always from my earliest youth had an awe and love of Homer, which even now makes the words falter on my lips, for he is the great captain and teacher of the whole of that charming tragic company; but a man is not to be reverenced more than the truth, and therefore I will speak out.

Very good, he said.

Listen to me then, or rather, answer me.

Put your question.

Can you tell me what imitation[1] is? for I really do not know.

A likely thing, then, that I should know.

Why not? for the duller eye may often see a thing sooner than the keener.

Very true, he said; but in your presence, even if I had any faint notion, I could not muster courage to utter it. Will you enquire yourself?

Well then, shall we begin the enquiry in our usual manner: Whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume them to have also a corresponding idea or form:—do you understand me?

I do.

Let us take any common instance; there are beds and tables in the world—plenty of them, are there not?

Yes.

But there are only two ideas or forms of them—one the idea of a bed, the other of a table.

True.

And the maker of either of them makes a bed or he makes a table for our use, in accordance with the idea—that is our way of speaking in this and similar instances—but no artificer makes the ideas themselves: how could he?

Impossible.

And there is another artist,—I should like to know what you would say of him.

Who is he?

One who is the maker of all the works of all other workmen.

What an extraordinary man!

Wait a little, and there will be more reason for your saying so. For this is he who is able to make not only vessels of every kind, but plants and animals, himself and all other things—the earth and heaven, and the things which are in heaven or under the earth; he makes the gods also.

He must be a wizard and no mistake.

Oh! you are incredulous, are you? Do you mean that there is no such maker or creator, or that in one sense there might be a maker of all these things but in another not? Do you see that there is a way in which you could make them all yourself?

What way?

An easy way enough; or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round—you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror.

Yes, he said; but they would be appearances only.

Very good, I said, you are coming to the point now. And the painter too is, as I conceive, just such another—a creator of appearances, is he not?

Of course.

But then I suppose you will say that what he creates is untrue. And yet there is a sense in which the painter also creates a bed?

Yes, he said, but not a real bed.

And what of the maker of the bed? were you not saying that he too makes, not the idea which, according to our view, is the essence of the bed, but only a particular bed?

Yes, I did.

Then if he does not make that which exists he cannot make true existence, but only some semblance of existence; and if any one were to say that the work of the maker of the bed, or of any other workman, has real existence, he could hardly be supposed to be speaking the truth.

At any rate, he replied, philosophers would say that he was not speaking the truth.

No wonder, then, that his work too is an indistinct expression of truth.

No wonder.

Suppose now that by the light of the examples just offered we enquire who this imitator is?

If you please.

Well then, here are three beds: one existing in nature, which is made by God, as I think that we may say—for no one else can be the maker?

No.

There is another which is the work of the carpenter?

Yes.

And the work of the painter is a third?

Yes.

Beds, then, are of three kinds, and there are three artists who superintend them: God, the maker of the bed, and the painter?

[1]Socrates speaks of imitative poets, meaning dramatists and those others who do not speak in their own voices. However, in the larger sense of imitation to be developed here, all poets and other kinds of artists are imitators.

Yes, there are three of them.

God, whether from choice or from necessity, made one bed in nature and one only; two or more such ideal beds neither ever have been nor ever will be made by God.

Why is that?

Because even if He had made but two, a third would still appear behind them which both of them would have for their idea, and that would be the ideal bed and not the two others.

Very true, he said.

God knew this, and He desired to be the real maker of a real bed, not a particular maker of a particular bed, and therefore He created a bed which is essentially and by nature one only.

So we believe.

Shall we, then, speak of Him as the natural author or maker of the bed?

Yes, he replied: inasmuch as by the natural process of creation He is the author of this and of all other things.

And what shall we say of the carpenter—is not he also the maker of the bed?

Yes.

But would you call the painter a creator and maker?

Certainly not.

Yet if he is not the maker, what is he in relation to the bed?

I think, he said, that we may fairly designate him as the imitator of that which the others make.

Good, I said; then you call him who is third in the descent from nature an imitator?

Certainly, he said.

And the tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth?

That appears to be so.

Then about the imitator we are agreed. And what about the painter?—I would like to know whether he may be thought to imitate that which originally exists in nature, or only the creations of artists?

The latter.

As they are or as they appear? You have still to determine this.

What do you mean?

I mean, that you may look at a bed from different points of view, obliquely or directly or from any other point of view, and the bed will appear different, but there is no difference in reality. And the same of all things.

Yes, he said, the difference is only apparent.

Now let me ask you another question: Which is the art of painting designed to be—an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear—of appearance or of reality?

Of appearance.

Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.

Certainly.

And whenever any one informs us that he has found a man who knows all the arts, and all things else that anybody knows, and every single thing with a higher degree of accuracy than any other man—whoever tells us this, I think that we can only imagine him to be a simple creature who is likely to have been deceived by some wizard or actor whom he met, and whom he thought all-knowing, because he himself was unable to analyse the nature of knowledge and ignorance and imitation.

Most true.

And so, when we hear persons saying that the tragedians, and Homer, who is at their head, know all the arts and all things human, virtue as well as vice, and divine things too, that the good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject, and that he who has not this knowledge can never be a poet, we ought to consider whether here also there may not be a similar illusion. Perhaps they may have come across imitators and been deceived by them; they may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities? Or, after all, they may be in the right, and poets do really know the things about which they seem to the many to speak so well?

The question, he said, should by all means be considered.

Now do you suppose that if a person were able to make the original as well as the image, he would seriously devote himself to the image-making branch? Would he allow imitation to be the ruling principle of his life, as if he had nothing higher in him?

I should say not.

The real artist, who knew what he was imitating, would be interested in realities and not in imitations; and would desire to leave as memorials of himself works many and fair; and, instead of being the author of encomiums, he would prefer to be the theme of them.

Yes, he said, that would be to him a source of much greater honour and profit.

Then, I said, we must put a question to Homer; not about medicine, or any of the arts to which his poems only incidentally refer: we are not going to ask him, or any other poet, whether he has cured patients like Asclepius, or left behind him a school of medicine such as the Asclepiads were, or whether he only talks about medicine and other arts at second-hand; but we have a right to know respecting military tactics, politics, education, which are the chiefest and noblest subjects of his poems, and we may fairly ask him about them. 'Friend Homer,' then we say to him, 'if you are only in the second remove from truth in what you say of virtue, and not in the third—not an image maker or imitator—and if you are able to discern what pursuits make men better or worse in private or public life, tell us what State was ever better governed by your help? The good order of Lacedaemon is due to Lycurgus, and many other cities great and small have been similarly benefited by others; but who says that you have been a good legislator to them and have done them any good? Italy and Sicily boast of Charondas, and there is Solon who is renowned among us; but what city has anything to say about you?' Is there any city which he might name?

I think not, said Glaucon; not even the Homerids themselves pretend that he was a legislator.

Well, but is there any war on record which was carried on successfully by him, or aided by his counsels, when he was alive?

There is not.

Or is there any invention of his, applicable to the arts or to human life, such as Thales the Milesian or Anacharsis the Scythian, and other ingenious men have conceived, which is attributed to him?

There is absolutely nothing of the kind.

But, if Homer never did any public service, was he privately a guide or teacher of any? Had he in his lifetime friends who loved to associate with him, and who handed down to posterity an Homeric way of life, such as was established by Pythagoras who was so greatly beloved for his wisdom, and whose followers are to this day quite celebrated for the order which was named after him?

Nothing of the kind is recorded of him. For surely, Socrates, Creophylus, the companion of Homer, that child of flesh, whose name always makes us laugh, might be more justly ridiculed for his stupidity, if, as is said, Homer was greatly neglected by him and others in his own day when he was alive?

Yes, I replied, that is the tradition. But can you imagine, Glaucon, that if Homer had really been able to educate and improve mankind—if he had possessed knowledge and not been a mere imitator—can you imagine, I say, that he would not have had many followers, and been honoured and loved by them? Protagoras of Abdera, and Prodicus of Ceos, and a host of others, have only to whisper to their contemporaries; 'You will never be able to manage either your own house or your own State until you appoint us to be your ministers of education'—and this ingenious device of theirs has such an effect in making men love them that their companions all but carry them about on their shoulders. And is it conceivable that the contemporaries of Homer, or again of Hesiod, would have allowed either of them to go about as rhapsodists, if they had really been able to make mankind virtuous? Would they not have been as unwilling to part with them as with gold, and have compelled them to stay at home with them? Or, if the master would not stay, then the disciples would have followed him about everywhere, until they had got education enough?

Yes, Socrates, that, I think, is quite true.

Then must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colours and figures.

Quite so.

In like manner the poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colours of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in metre and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well—such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have. And I think that you must have observed again and again what a poor appearance the tales of poets make when stripped of the colours which music puts upon them, and recited in simple prose.

Yes, he said.

They are like faces which were never really beautiful, but only blooming, and now the bloom of youth has passed away from them?

Exactly.

Here is another point: The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearances only. Am I not right?

Yes.

Then let us have a clear understanding, and not be satisfied with half an explanation.

Proceed.

Of the painter we say that he will paint reins, and he will paint a bit?

Yes.

And the worker in leather and brass will make them?

Certainly.

But does the painter know the right form of the bit and reins? Nay, hardly even the workers in brass and leather who make them; only the horseman who knows how to use them—he knows their right form.

Most true.

And may we not say the same of all things?

What?

That there are three arts which are concerned with all things: one which uses, another which makes, a third which imitates them?

Yes.

And the excellence or beauty or truth of every structure, animate or inanimate, and of every action of man, is relative to the use for which nature or the artist has intended them.

True.

Then the user of them must have the greatest experience of them, and he must indicate to the maker the good or bad qualities which develop themselves in use; for example, the flute-player will tell the flute-maker which of his flutes is satisfactory to the performer; we will tell him how he ought to make them, and the other will attend to his instructions?

Of course.

The one knows and therefore speaks with authority about the goodness and badness of flutes, while the other, confiding in him, will do what he is told by him?

True.

The instrument is the same, but about the excellence or badness of it the maker will only attain to a correct belief; and this he will gain from him who knows, by talking to him and being compelled to hear what he has to say, whereas the user will have knowledge?

True.

But will the imitator have either? Will he know from use whether or no his drawing is correct or beautiful? or will he have right opinion from being compelled to associate with another who knows and gives him instructions about what he should draw?

Neither.

Then he will no more have true opinion than he will have knowledge about the goodness or badness of his imitations?

I suppose not.

The imitative artist will be in a brilliant state of intelligence about his own creations?

Nay, very much the reverse.

And still he will go on imitating without knowing what makes a thing good or bad, and may be expected therefore to imitate only that which appears to be good to the ignorant multitude?

Just so.

Thus far then we are pretty well agreed that the imitator has no knowledge worth mentioning of what he imitates. Imitation is only a kind of play or sport, and the tragic poets, whether they write in Iambic or in Heroic verse, are imitators in the highest degree?

Very true.

And now tell me, I conjure you, has not imitation been shown by us to be concerned with that which is thrice removed from the truth?

Certainly.

And what is the faculty in man to which imitation is addressed?

What do you mean?

I will explain: The body which is large when seen near, appears small when seen at a distance?

True.

And the same object appears straight when looked at out of the water, and crooked when in the water; and the concave becomes convex, owing to the illusion about colours to which the sight is liable. Thus every sort of confusion is revealed within us; and this is that weakness of the human mind on which the art of conjuring and of deceiving by light and shadow and other ingenious devices imposes, having an effect upon us like magic.

True.

And the arts of measuring and numbering and weighing come to the rescue of the human understanding—there is the beauty of them—and the apparent greater or less, or more or heavier, no longer have the mastery over us, but give way before calculation and measure and weight?

Most true.

And this, surely, must be the work of the calculating and rational principle in the soul?

To be sure.

And when this principle measures and certifies that some things are equal, or that some are greater or less than others, there occurs an apparent contradiction?

True.

But were we not saying that such a contradiction is impossible—the same faculty cannot have contrary opinions at the same time about the same thing?

Very true.

Then that part of the soul which has an opinion contrary to measure is not the same with that which has an opinion in accordance with measure?

True.

And the better part of the soul is likely to be that which trusts to measure and calculation?

Certainly.

And that which is opposed to them is one of the inferior principles of the soul?

No doubt.

This was the conclusion at which I was seeking to arrive when I said that painting or drawing, and imitation in general, when doing their own proper work, are far removed from truth, and the companions and friends and associates of a principle within us which is equally removed from reason, and that they have no true or healthy aim.

Exactly.

The imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior, and has inferior offspring.

Very true.

And is this confined to the sight only, or does it extend to the hearing also, relating in fact to what we term poetry?

Probably the same would be true of poetry.

Do not rely, I said, on a probability derived from the analogy of painting; but let us examine further and see whether the faculty with which poetical imitation is concerned is good or bad.

By all means.

We may state the question thus:—Imitation imitates the actions of men, whether voluntary or involuntary, on which, as they imagine, a good or bad result has ensued, and they rejoice or sorrow accordingly. Is there anything more?

No, there is nothing else.

But in all this variety of circumstances is the man at unity with himself—or rather, as in the instance of sight there was confusion and opposition in his opinions about the same things, so here also is there not strife and inconsistency in his life? Though I need hardly raise the question again, for I remember that all this has been already admitted; and the soul has been acknowledged by us to be full of these and ten thousand similar oppositions occurring at the same moment?

And we were right, he said.

Yes, I said, thus far we were right; but there was an omission which must now be supplied.

What was the omission?

Were we not saying that a good man, who has the misfortune to lose his son or anything else which is most dear to him, will bear the loss with more equanimity than another?

Yes.

But will he have no sorrow, or shall we say that although he cannot help sorrowing, he will moderate his sorrow?

The latter, he said, is the truer statement.

Tell me: will he be more likely to struggle and hold out against his sorrow when he is seen by his equals, or when he is alone?

It will make a great difference whether he is seen or not.

When he is by himself he will not mind saying or doing many things which he would be ashamed of any one hearing or seeing him do?

True.

There is a principle of law and reason in him which bids him resist, as well as a feeling of his misfortune which is forcing him to indulge his sorrow?

True.

But when a man is drawn in two opposite directions, to and from the same object, this, as we affirm, necessarily implies two distinct principles in him?

Certainly.

One of them is ready to follow the guidance of the law?

How do you mean?

The law would say that to be patient under suffering is best, and that we should not give way to impatience, as there is no knowing whether such things are good or evil; and nothing is gained by impatience; also, because no human thing is of serious importance, and grief stands in the way of that which at the moment is most required.

What is most required? he asked.

That we should take counsel about what has happened, and when the dice have been thrown order our affairs in the way which reason deems best; not, like children who have had a fall, keeping hold of the part struck and wasting time in setting up a howl, but always accustoming the soul forthwith to apply a remedy, raising up that which is sickly and fallen, banishing the cry of sorrow by the healing art.

Yes, he said, that is the true way of meeting the attacks of fortune.

Yes, I said; and the higher principle is ready to follow this suggestion of reason?

Clearly.

And the other principle, which inclines us to recollection of our troubles and to lamentation, and can never have enough of them, we may call irrational, useless, and cowardly?

Indeed, we may.

And does not the latter—I mean the rebellious principle—furnish a great variety of materials for imitation? Whereas the wise and calm temperament, being always nearly equable, is not easy to imitate or to appreciate when imitated, especially at a public festival when a promiscuous crowd is assembled in a theatre. For the feeling represented is one to which they are strangers.

Certainly.

Then the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated?

Clearly.

And now we may fairly take him and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth—in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul; and therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil are permitted to have authority and the good are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, as we maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small—he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth.

Exactly.

But we have not yet brought forward the heaviest count in our accusation:—the power which poetry has of harming even the good (and there are very few who are not harmed), is surely an awful thing?

Yes, certainly, if the effect is what you say.

Hear and judge: The best of us, as I conceive, when we listen to a passage of Homer, or one of the tragedians, in which he represents some pitiful hero who is drawling out his sorrows in a long oration, or weeping, and smiting his breast—the best of us, you know, delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most.

Yes, of course I know.

But when any sorrow of our own happens to us, then you may observe that we pride ourselves on the opposite quality—we would fain be quiet and patient; this is the manly part, and the other which delighted us in the recitation is now deemed to be the part of a woman.

Very true, he said.

Now can we be right in praising and admiring another who is doing that which any one of us would abominate and be ashamed of in his own person?

No, he said, that is certainly not reasonable.

Nay, I said, quite reasonable from one point of view.

What point of view?

If you consider, I said, that when in misfortune we feel a natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation, and that this feeling which is kept under control in our own calamities is satisfied and delighted by the poets;—the better nature in each of us, not having been sufficiently trained by reason or habit, allows the sympathetic element to break loose because the sorrow is another's; and the spectator fancies that there can be no disgrace to himself in praising and pitying any one who comes telling him what a good man he is, and making a fuss about his troubles; he thinks that the pleasure is a gain, and why should he be supercilious and lose this and the poem too? Few persons ever reflect, as I should imagine, that from the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves. And so the feeling of sorrow which has gathered strength at the sight of the misfortunes of others is with difficulty repressed in our own.

How very true!

And does not the same hold also of the ridiculous? There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet on the comic stage, or indeed in private, when you hear them, you are greatly amused by them, and are not at all disgusted at their unseemliness;—the case of pity is repeated;—there is a principle in human nature which is disposed to raise a laugh, and this which you once restrained by reason, because you were afraid of being thought a buffoon, is now let out again; and having stimulated the risible faculty at the theatre, you are betrayed unconsciously to yourself into playing the comic poet at home.

Quite true, he said.

And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action—in all of them poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.

I cannot deny it.

Therefore, Glaucon, I said, whenever you meet with any of the eulogists of Homer declaring that he has been the educator of Hellas, and that he is profitable for education and for the ordering of human things, and that you should take him up again and again and get to know him and regulate your whole life according to him, we may love and honour those who say these things—they are excellent people, as far as their lights extend; and we are ready to acknowledge that Homer is the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers; but we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State. For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State.

That is most true, he said.

And now since we have reverted to the subject of poetry, let this our defence serve to show the reasonableness of our former judgment in sending away out of our State an art having the tendencies which we have described; for reason constrained us. But that she may not impute to us any harshness or want of politeness, let us tell her that there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry; of which there are many proofs, such as the saying of 'the yelping hound howling at her lord,' or of one 'mighty in the vain talk of fools,' and 'the mob of sages circumventing Zeus,' and the 'subtle thinkers who are beggars after all'; and there are innumerable other signs of ancient enmity between them. Notwithstanding this, let us assure our sweet friend and the sister arts of imitation, that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered State we shall be delighted to receive her—we are very conscious of her charms; but we may not on that account betray the truth. I dare say, Glaucon, that you are as much charmed by her as I am, especially when she appears in Homer?

Yes, indeed, I am greatly charmed.

Shall I propose, then, that she be allowed to return from exile, but upon this condition only—that she make a defence of herself in lyrical or some other metre?

Certainly.

And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf: let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit; for if this can be proved we shall surely be the gainers—I mean, if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight?

Certainly, he said, we shall be the gainers.

If her defence fails, then, my dear friend, like other persons who are enamoured of something, but put a restraint upon themselves when they think their desires are opposed to their interests, so too must we after the manner of lovers give her up, though not without a struggle. We too are inspired by that love of poetry which the education of noble States has implanted in us, and therefore we would have her appear at her best and truest; but so long as she is unable to make good her defence, this argument of ours shall be a charm to us, which we will repeat to ourselves while we listen to her strains; that we may not fall away into the childish love of her which captivates the many. At all events we are well aware that poetry being such as we have described is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth: and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law.

Yes, he said, I quite agree with you.

Yes, I said, my dear Glaucon, for great is the issue at stake, greater than appears, whether a man is to be good or bad. And what will any one be profited if under the influence of honour or money or power, aye, or under the excitement of poetry, he neglect justice and virtue?

Yes, he said; I have been convinced by the argument, as I believe that any one else would have been.

A Summary of Plato’s Ion

Socrates meets Ion, an Ephesian man who is renowned for his ability to interpret and recite the poetry of Homer. He has just returned from a recital contest and placed first out of all the competitors. Socrates expresses his admiration of Ion's skill and notes that only a person who understands Homer's meaning could possibly be a good reciter, which statement Ion immediately agrees. Socrates then begins his investigation into whether Ion's proficiency in reciting Homer is an art by comparing Ion's knowledge to the knowledge of others who certainly possess arts, such as religious prophets or charioteers. Socrates concludes that Ion's ability comes not from an art, but from divine inspiration, much as the poets whom he interprets were inspired.

Plato’s dialogue Ion is brief and seems to address a rather: Do poets know what they’re talking about? trifling ques driving, -If Homer composed beautiful passages about

chariot does his art include technical knowledge of that skill? This is, to put it nicely, not what most of us consider to be a pressing concern matters though because the implications of this short It piece shed light on one of the most troubling ideas in Plato's corpus: that the ideal city would exile its poets. Living after the twentieth century, it's hard to accept the proposal that a make his citizens better people by banning art. leader could It's also hard to understand the idea given Socrates's deep admiration for poets, especially Homer. Although he expels the poets from his ideal city, it is also clear that he does so at exactly is the problem with poetry with great regret. So why?

Ion lets us come at the question from an oblique angle. men who gave -Here Socrates questions the art of rhapsodes dramatic recitations of the works of poets, particularly - iment, for money Homer, usually without musical accompanied not poets themselves. Also, it addresses technical knowledge, as opposed to moral knowledge. But the implications are clear enough that most scholars who write on Ion draw them out.

Ion is a rhapsode known for his knowledge of Homer, and the young Socrates wants to know what sort of knowledge this is; why, for instance, does it not extend to other poets, except when they discuss Homeric themes? What icted in the Iliad and Odyssey does Ion have? skills dep Should we allow poets and rhapsodes to lead our armies ?

Essentially, Ion believes that poetry involves a special knowledge and Socrates does not. Instead, he believes the inspired, by the Muse and poet is possessed, and not simply transmits that power to the audience. A rhapsode is farther in he compares this nicely to a -the chain from the source- but still performs his art in a non -magnet and iron fillingsy artists rational way requiring no special knowledge. Manwould describe the moment of creation as a sort of trance state, although very few would agree that artistry requires no technical knowledge.

This point matters because, if poets have no special l experts either. Technical knowledge, they likely aren't mora Indeed, many of his contemporaries took poets to be moral guides

and there are still those who'd like to believe that art makes us better people. In spite of the very obvious problem truth, that a god might act through an artist to deliver moral Socrates is making the case that seeing artists as moral experts is a dangerous delusion. They arouse our emotions and provide us with entertainment, but ultimately they can hardly be our moral guides, since they don't even know what re doing'they .

This is a central idea in Plato: Virtue is Knowledge. We would be good if only we had the moral knowledge to do so. Plato's elitism -But this knowledge is very hard to come bystems from the fact that very few people will ever achieve e, and even Socrates dies without ever moral knowledge reaching that knowledge. So the danger posed by poets is that they both fail to make us better, and they delude us into thinking their art is moral education. For Plato, everything gn of amateurs instead of comes back to education, and the reiprevents us from becoming the -democracy in short – experts noble species we might potentially be.

The Republic

The Republic (Greek: Πολιτεία, Politeia; Latin: Res Publica) is a Socratic dialogue, written by Plato around 380 BC, concerning justice (δικαιοσύνη), the order and character of the just city-state, and the just man .

The Republic is considered by many to be Plato's masterwork. It certainly is one of the most important texts of political theory. ... Plato opposed Greek Democracy and designed his vision of the ideal state on his theory of the human soul. One of the striking aspects of Plato's ideal state is the role of women .

Plato's Defense of Justice. In response to Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus, Socrates seeks to show that it is always in an individual's interest to be just, rather than unjust. Thus, one of the most pressing issues regarding the Republic is whether Socrates defends justice successfully or not

What are the 3 classes in Plato's Republic?

Auxiliary - Plato divides his just society into three classes: the producers, the auxiliaries, and the guardians. The auxiliaries are the warriors, responsible for defending the city from invaders, and for keeping the peace at home. They must enforce the convictions of the guardians, and ensure that the producers obey .

Why do men behave justly? Is it because they fear societal punishment? Are they trembling before notions of divine retribution? Do the stronger elements of society scare the weak into submission in the name of law? Or do men behave justly because it is good for them to do so? Is justice, regardless of its rewards and punishments, a good thing in and of itself? How do we define justice? Plato sets out to answer these questions in The Republic. He wants to define justice, and to define it in such a way as to show that justice is worthwhile in and of itself. He meets these two challenges with a single solution: a definition of justice that appeals to human psychology, rather than to perceived behavior.

Plato's strategy in The Republic is to first explicate the primary notion of societal, or political, justice, and then to derive an analogous concept of individual justice. In Books II, III, and IV, Plato identifies political justice as harmony in a structured political body. An ideal society consists of three main classes of people—producers (craftsmen, farmers, artisans, etc.), auxiliaries (warriors), and guardians (rulers); a society is just when relations between these three classes are right. Each group must perform its appropriate function, and only that function, and each must be in the right position of power in relation to the others. Rulers must rule, auxiliaries must uphold rulers' convictions, and producers must limit themselves to exercising whatever skills nature granted them (farming, blacksmithing, painting, etc.) Justice is a principle of specialization: a principle that requires that each person fulfill the societal role to which nature fitted him and not interfere in any other business.

At the end of Book IV, Plato tries to show that individual justice mirrors political justice. He claims that the soul of every individual has a three part structure analagous to the

three classes of a society. There is a rational part of the soul, which seeks after truth and is responsible for our philosophical inclinations; a spirited part of the soul, which desires honor and is responsible for our feelings of anger and indignation; and an appetitive part of the soul, which lusts after all sorts of things, but money most of all (since money must be used to fulfill any other base desire). The just individual can be defined in analogy with the just society; the three parts of his soul achieve the requisite relationships of power and influence in regard to one another. In a just individual, the rational part of the soul rules, the spirited part of the soul supports this rule, and the appetitive part of the soul submits and follows wherever reason leads. Put more plainly: in a just individual, the entire soul aims at fulfilling the desires of the rational part, much as in the just society the entire community aims at fulfilling whatever the rulers will.

The parallels between the just society and the just individual run deep. Each of the three classes of society, in fact, is dominated by one of the three parts of the soul. Producers

are dominated by their appetites—their urges for money, luxury, and pleasure. Warriors are dominated by their spirits, which make them courageous. Rulers are dominated by their rational faculties and strive for wisdom. Books V through VII focus on the rulers as the philosopher kings .

In a series of three analogies—the allegories of the sun, the line, and the cave—Plato explains who these individuals are while hammering out his theory of the Forms. Plato explains that the world is divided into two realms, the visible (which we grasp with our senses) and the intelligible (which we only grasp with our mind). The visible world is the universe we see around us. The intelligible world is comprised of the Forms—abstract, changeless absolutes such as Goodness, Beauty, Redness, and Sweetness that exist in permanent relation to the visible realm and make it possible. (An apple is red and sweet, the theory goes, because it participates in the Forms of Redness and Sweetness.) Only the Forms are objects of knowledge, because only they possess the eternal unchanging truth that the mind—not the senses—must apprehend .

Only those whose minds are trained to grasp the Forms—the philosophers—can know anything at all. In particular, what the philosophers must know in order to become able rulers is the Form of the Good—the source of all other Forms, and of knowledge, truth, and beauty. Plato cannot describe this Form directly, but he claims that it is to the intelligible realm what the sun is to the visible realm. Using the allegory of the cave, Plato paints an evocative portrait of the philosopher's soul moving through various stages of cognition (represented by the line) through the visible realm into the intelligible, and finally grasping the Form of the Good. The aim of education is not to put knowledge into the soul, but to put the right desires into the soul—to fill the soul with a lust for truth, so that it desires to move past the visible world, into the intelligible, ultimately to the Form of the Good .

Philosophers form the only class of men to possess knowledge and are also the most just men. Their souls, more than others, aim to fulfil the desires of the rational part. After comparing the philosopher king to the most unjust type of

man—represented by the tyrant, who is ruled entirely by his non-rational appetites—Plato claims that justice is worthwhile for its own sake. In Book IX he presents three arguments for the conclusion that it is desirable to be just. By sketching a psychological portrait of the tyrant, he attempts to prove that injustice tortures a man's psyche, whereas a just soul is a healthy, happy one, untroubled and calm. Next he argues that, though each of the three main character types—money-loving, honor-loving, and truth-loving—have their own conceptions of pleasure and of the corresponding good life—each choosing his own life as the most pleasant—only the philosopher can judge because only he has experienced all three types of pleasure. The others should accept the philosopher's judgement and conclude that the pleasures associated with the philosophical are most pleasant and thus that the just life is also most pleasant. He tries to demonstrate that only philosophical pleasure is really pleasure at all; all other pleasure is nothing more than cessation of pain.

One might notice that none of these arguments actually prove that justice is desirable apart from its consequences—instead, they establish that justice is always accompanied by true pleasure. In all probability, none of these is actually supposed to serve as the main reason why justice is desirable. Instead, the desirability of justice is likely connected to the intimate relationship between the just life and the Forms. The just life is good in and of itself because it involves grasping these ultimate goods, and imitating their order and harmony, thus incorporating them into one's own life. Justice is good, in other words, because it is connected to the greatest good, the Form of the Good .

Plato ends The Republic on a surprising note. Having defined justice and established it as the greatest good, he banishes poets from his city. Poets, he claims, appeal to the basest part of the soul by imitating unjust inclinations. By encouraging us to indulge ignoble emotions in sympathy with the characters we hear about, poetry encourages us to indulge these emotions in life. Poetry, in sum, makes us unjust. In closing, Plato relates the myth of Er, which

Ch.2: Aristotle

384–322 B.C.

The first extant and probably the most influential treatise on poetry in the Western world is Aristotle's *Poetics.* Earlier works by him, for example *Physics* and *Metaphysics,* contain important statements about art and nature that bear on literature; and *Rhetoric,* written after *Poetics,* distinguishes rhetoric as a practical art involving "doing" from productive arts, including poetic, that involve "making." Aristotle's *Rhetoric* has had a strong influence on criticism, for many later writers have blurred or obliterated the distinction even to the extent that in some cases poetic seems to have become a branch of rhetoric (or the art of persuasion). That *Poetics* was lost to European thought for many centuries may have contributed to the importance of rhetoric over poetic until the rediscovery of *Poetics* in the Renaissance. From that time, commentaries on *Poetics* abound, the most important of the earliest being Castelvetro's (below, page 177).

Aristotle was a student of Plato, though he came to disagree with his teacher particularly with respect to Plato's doctrine of ideas or forms. In *Poetics,* he approaches literature to some extent as if he were a classical biologist. He intends to classify and categorize systematically the kinds of literary art, beginning with epic and tragic drama. Unfortunately, not all of *Poetics* has survived, and it breaks off before the discussion of comedy. Nevertheless, our sense of Aristotle's method is established. He is the first critic to attempt a systematic discussion of literary genres.

It appears that Aristotle means to answer directly Plato's criticism of the poet as merely an imitator of appearances (phenomena). He disagrees with Plato about where to locate reality. He does not believe that the world of appearances is merely an ephemeral copy of changeless ideas (forms). Indeed, he denies the being of ideas (in Plato's sense) apart from things. He believes that change is a fundamental reality, a process of nature, which is a creative force with a teleological direction. In this respect, the argument of *Poetics* serves an important purpose in Aristotle's philosophy as a whole, since it provides a critical example in which form can be linked to *telos* or purpose directly, providing support for a teleological interpretation of nature. Reality is the process in which a form is manifested from matter by nature. The poet's imitation is an analogy of this process; the poet takes a form from nature and reshapes it in a different matter or medium. This medium, which the form does not inhabit in nature, is the source of each work's inward principle of order and consequently its independence from slavish copying. The poet is thus an imitator and a maker, and imitation is, in fact, a kind of making. In imitation the poet discovers the ultimate form of an action.

This is why, for Aristotle, the plot of a tragedy is of prime importance—over character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle, though these are all elements of tragic drama. The poet makes the meaning of events by making their structure as plot; he does this in a medium, which is principally words. Literary art, along with the fine arts (all the productive arts), is thus an improvement on nature in that the poet has brought to completion what nature, operating with its own principles, is still developing.

These ideas have heavily influenced criticism from the Renaissance to this day. Renaissance critics often sought to blend Aristotle with the dominant Platonism, especially where defense of poetry was the aim, but the two philosophers' disagreement about the location of the ideas always seemed to intervene. Then neoclassical critics, following Castelvetro, extended to extremes what appeared to them to be Aristotle's fixed rules about the so-called unities. Other followers of Aristotle emphasized either his theory of imitation or the analytic procedures exhibited in his discussion of tragedy.

Aristotle's attention to the poem as an object that can be discussed in terms of its formal nature is probably his greatest contribution to literary theory, though his treatment of tragedy as bringing about a catharsis or purgation of pity and fear has been of great interest and much debated.

The standard, complete translation of Aristotle's works is that edited by J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle,* 11 vols. (1908–1931). Translations of *Poetics* together with commentaries abound: for example, S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (1894); G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (1957); G. M. A. Grube, *Aristotle on Poetry and Style* (1958); L. Golden and O. B. Hardison, *Aristotle's* Poetics: *A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature.* See also C. S. Baldwin, *Ancient Rhetoric and Poetic* (1924); W. R. Roberts, *Greek Rhetoric and Literary Theory* (1928); F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's* Poetics (1928); J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity,* 2 vols. (1934); Richard McKeon, "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity" in R. S. Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism* (1952); Humphry House, *Aristotle's* Poetics (1956); G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (1963); Elder Olson, ed., *Aristotle's* Poetics *and English Literature* (1965); Harvey Goldstein, "Mimesis and Catharsis Reexamined," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* XXIV (1966); Teddy Brunius, *Imagination and Katharsis* (1966); K. V. Erickson, ed., *Aristotle: The Classical Heritage of Rhetoric* (1974); S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's* Poetics (1986); Eugene Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (1994); D. J. Farley and A. Nehemas, eds., *Aristotle's* Rhetoric: *Philosophical Essays* (1994).

Aristotle's *Physics* was probably an early work, written before *Poetics* and *Rhetoric.* The text is from the translation by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye in W. D. Ross, ed., *The Works of Aristotle,* Vol. II (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1930).

[1] [Hardie and Gaye] Empedocles [Greek philosopher, fifth century B.C.]
[2] [Hardie and Gaye] Anaxagoras [Greek philosopher, 500?–428 B.C.]

Chapter Three

Aristotle's *Poetics*—Mimesis and Plot

Scope: In this, the first of two lectures on Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 330 B.C.), we shall consider how Aristotle took Plato's negative understanding of mimesis and converted it into a powerful method for creating poetry (particularly tragedy) worthy of philosophical consideration. We shall analyze Aristotle's notion of plot as a unified whole that moves in accordance with necessity, probability, and inevitability and shall define and discuss the several elements that Aristotle believed worked together to form the perfect plot. Throughout our discussion, we shall illustrate the nature and elements of Aristotelian plot by reference to the play that is quoted most often in the *Poetics*, *Oedipus the King*.

Outline

I. A few prefatory remarks about Aristotle.

A. Aristotle was Plato's star pupil, as Plato was Socrates'. Aristotle was in turn the private tutor of Alexander the Great.

B. Aristotle brought philosophy back to earth: the essence and reality (the Form) of a thing now resides within, rather than above.

C. Aristotle was one of the most systematic thinkers who ever lived.

1. The western presupposition that all of knowledge can be broken up into discrete little packages called disciplines (college students call them "majors") comes directly from Aristotle.

2. Aristotle wrote a treatise on every facet of knowledge: from politics to astronomy, physics to ethics, rhetoric to poetry.

3. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle treats poetry as a separate discipline with its own specific laws, its own unique tools, and its own proper ends.

D. The works we have by Aristotle were not actually written by him; they are compilations of notes taken by his students (hence their "choppy" feel).

II. Aristotle radically redefined the Platonic notion of mimesis.

A. For Aristotle, mimesis is a positive and natural thing.

1. As children, we learn primarily from imitation.

2. Even as adults, we delight in recognizing and contemplating copies.

3. On a deeper level, we possess an instinctual desire for harmony.

B. In poetry in general and in the well-constructed plots of great tragedies in particular, Aristotle found the perfect food to feed our innate desire for order, balance, and unity.

C. It is precisely the imitative (or mimetic) process that allows the tragedian to construct a perfect, unified plot.

1. The mimetic process transforms an action or story (*praxis*) that is long, episodic, and haphazard into a plot (*muthos*) that is focused and unified.

2. That is to say: the mimesis of a *praxis* is a *muthos*.

3. The story (*praxis*) of a man begins with his birth and ends with his death and includes all the various incidents that occur in between.

4. But a plot (*muthos*) constructed around that biographical story would confine itself to a single day in that life span when all that is most essential to that life comes to a head.

5. Whereas the events in a story follow each other in simple chronological order, the events in a plot should move forward in accordance with necessity, probability, and inevitability.

6. The plot is life with all of life's contradictions purged out of it.

7. To imitate life is to present life not as it is, but as it should be, not as it manifests itself in an imperfect world, but how it would appear in a more perfect world where:

a. There is a necessary link between cause and effect.

b. The stable, meaningful laws of probability determine action.

c. A sense of inevitability, of a higher controlling fate, is felt.

D. How can one discern between an episodic play and an Aristotelian plot?

1. In an episodic play, there is no internal cohesion between the scenes; in an Aristotelian plot, there is a causal relationship between each scene that propels the reader forward toward the unstoppable conclusion.
2. That is to say, the scenes in an episodic play follow each other *post hoc* (Latin for "after this"), while those in an Aristotelian play follow *propter hoc* ("because of this").
3. When watching an episodic play, one feels he can leave the theater for 10 minutes and not miss anything; when watching an Aristotelian plot, one fears that if he steps out for even a minute, all will be lost.

E. Let us illustrate with examples from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

1. The story of Oedipus the man is filled with long, boring stretches during which the tragic pieces of Oedipus' life slowly coalesce; the plot of *Oedipus the King* is concentrated into an intense, dramatic period of less than a day (actually about six hours) during which all the secrets of his life are revealed.
2. The story of Oedipus is a despicable tale about a man who kills his father and marries his mother; the plot of *Oedipus* is about a man who discovers late in life that he has killed his father and married his mother.
3. That is to say, whereas the story of Oedipus is about the committing of a taboo sin, the plot of *Oedipus* is about the triumph of self-discovery.
4. In terms of his overall story, Oedipus is one of the most pathetic of all men, a man trapped by a cruel and evil fate that he cannot escape; in the confines of the plot, however, he is a noble, courageous man who chooses to seek out the truth about himself no matter the consequences.
5. The story of Oedipus is the raw material for a vulgar made-for-TV movie; the plot of *Oedipus* is one of the great and noble works of all time.

III. Having defined the nature of the unified, "mimeticized" plot, Aristotle goes on to enumerate the many elements that work together to create the perfect plot.

A. A unified plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

B. It is shaped like an inverted "V": a series of complications (the rising action) draws the plot "upward" to its climax (the point of the "V"); after the climax comes the unraveling or *denouement* (the falling action).

C. In the best plots, the climax is marked by a reversal and/or a recognition.

1. The use of a reversal/recognition is what renders a simple plot complex.

2. A reversal (in Greek, *peripeteia*) occurs when the fortune of the hero moves suddenly from good to bad or bad to good.

3. In *Oedipus*, the messenger thinks he brings news that will free Oedipus from fear, but that very news leads to his destruction. This is the *peripeteia*.

4. A recognition (in Greek, *anagnorisis*) occurs when the hero moves suddenly from a state of ignorance to enlightenment. This is the *anagnorisis*.

5. In *Oedipus*, the messenger reveals to Oedipus his true Theban origins.

6. The best kinds of recognitions are accompanied by reversals; this is the case with the scene from *Oedipus* mentioned in items III.C.3 and III.C.5.

D. The best plots do not end with *a deus ex machina* ("god from the machine").

1. The *deus ex machina* was a crane-like device that allowed an actor to descend onto the stage in the guise of a god or goddess.

2. It was used by dramatists as a way of resolving "from above" all manner of difficulties and misunderstandings in the play.

3. Aristotle considered the use of this device an artificial way to end a plot.

4. The plot, he felt, should be strong enough to resolve itself in a manner consistent with necessity, probability, and inevitability.

5. *Oedipus* is so well-constructed that the final tragic revelation of Oedipus' parentage does not seem contrived; it arises naturally out of the plot.

6. Aristotle's prejudice against the *deus ex machina* reveals his strong commitment to a balanced, rational universe in which all makes sense. Interestingly, Eurypides used the *deus ex machina* effectively and even Sophocles employed it from time to time. In later days, Moliere used a *deus ex machina* in *Tartuffe*.

E. Finally, it should be noted that Aristotle argues forcefully that the plot is the central, most important element of a tragedy.

1. The plot, he says, is both the end and the soul of a tragedy.
2. Most modern people would disagree with Aristotle: we tend to place the characters (and the actors who play them) at the center of drama.

Essential Reading:

Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Adams.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Supplementary Reading:

S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*.

Gerald F. Else, *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*, Part 2.

G. M. A. Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics*, Chapter 5.

Richard McKeon, "The Concept of Imitation in Antiquity."

Questions to Consider:

1. Do you, like Aristotle, favor plays/movies that are tightly constructed with no extraneous elements or contradictions, or do you prefer more realistic ones in which the plot rambles along in a looser, more natural way?
2. Do you, like Aristotle, hate plays/movies that end with a "miraculous" climax in which a sudden rescue or resolution comes from "out of the blue?" If, so, what does this reveal about your view of the universe?

Chapter Four

Aristotle's *Poetics*—Character and Catharsis

Scope: In this second of two lectures on Aristotle's *Poetics* we shall shift our focus from plot to character and catharsis. Continuing to illustrate with examples from *Oedipus*, we shall explore how the tragic character must be good, appropriate, consistent, and true to life and how he should be a moral man who yet possesses a flaw. We shall then explore the nature of Aristotelian catharsis and shall consider how this well-known word can be translated either as purgation, purification, or clarification. The lecture will conclude with a brief look at some other miscellaneous elements of Aristotle's *Poetics* that have continued to exert a marked influence on the history of literary theory.

Outline

I. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle carefully defines the proper nature of the tragic hero.

A. The Aristotelian tragic hero must possess four qualities.

1. He must be a *good* man: he should be neither immoral nor vicious.

2. His character must be *appropriate* to his station in life.

3. He must possess a *likeness to human nature*: though heroic, he is a man.

4. His character must be *consistent*: even if he is inconsistent, says Aristotle, he should be consistent in his inconsistency.

5. Aristotle also advises that the hero be taken from one of the great tragic houses of ancient Greece (i.e., he should not be a commoner).

B. The character of Oedipus possesses all four of these characteristics.

1. Though stubborn and a bit prideful, he is a good king who loves his people and is devoted to truth and justice.

2. His love and devotion, as well as his stubbornness and pride, are befitting the nature and role of a king.

3. Though "larger than life," Oedipus still possesses very human traits.

4. Both within the framework of the play and throughout his "off-stage life," Oedipus is supremely, and consistently, the solver of riddles.
5. Oedipus is a member of the royal house of Thebes.

C. This good hero should yet possess a flaw (in Greek, *hamartia*).
1. *Hamartia* is usually translated as tragic (or fatal) flaw, but it would be better to translate it merely as "error."
2. Aristotle clearly does not see this *hamartia* as a vice or moral flaw.
3. Though readers of *Oedipus*, generally blame the hero's misfortunes on his pride (in Greek, *hubris*), it is really his good qualities (his love of his people and his unswerving devotion to truth) that leads to the tragic revelation of his birth.
4. The full-blown concept of the tragic flaw as a single vice that leads the hero to his tragic downfall is really more indicative of Shakespearean tragedy (e.g., Hamlet's sloth, Lear's vanity, Othello's jealousy, Macbeth's avarice).
5. The desire on the part of so many readers (and English teachers) to identify tragic flaws in each of the heroes of Greek tragedy seems to mask an innate desire to "blame the victim," to gain control.

D. The best tragedies show a good man who, on account of this error, moves from good to bad fortune; such a movement elicits the proper pity and fear.
1. A bad man moving from good to bad fortune evokes neither pity nor fear: it merely makes us feel smugly satisfied.
2. A bad man moving from bad to good fortune merely arouses disgust.
3. A good man moving from bad to good fortune makes us feel happy, but it does not inspire either pity or fear.
4. Pity is evoked when we watch a good man suffer undeservedly; fear is evoked when we realize the same may happen to us.
5. Pity draws us toward the hero; fear drives us away.

II. The mention of pity and fear leads us to Aristotle's notion of the appropriate response to tragedy, what we might call the proper tragic pleasure.

A. According to Aristotle, the experience of a great tragedy so arouses in us the emotions of pity and fear as to lead to a catharsis of those emotions.

B. Catharsis may be translated in at least three different ways: as purgation, purification, or clarification. Each meaning has its own theory.

C. According to the purgation theory of catharsis, tragedy is a therapeutic experience that works on us like an enema or an emetic.

1. It cleanses us of our emotions of pity and fear and thus leaves us more fit and able to face the rigors of life.

2. This view of catharsis is one Plato *should* have adopted; it suggests tragedy can help wash away, on a group level, our baser emotions.

3. When viewing *Oedipus*, the tragic end of the hero is so pitiful and fearful, so emotionally overwhelming, that we leave the theater feeling drained, as if our emotions have been swept away on a tide.

D. According to the (more spiritual) purification theory of catharsis, tragedy does not so much purge our emotions as purify them.

1. Just as God uses suffering to strengthen our faith and resolve, so the hot furnace of tragedy tests and tries our emotions like gold in the fire.

2. To experience *Oedipus*, to see that a man can so rise above himself as to put self-discovery ahead of all else, is to have one's emotions raised to a higher level; in the end, we are left with a strange sense of calm, not purged, but spiritually purified.

E. According to the clarification theory of catharsis, tragedy sparks in us an intellectual response, a searing moment of perfect clarity.

1. In this almost mystical moment of enlightenment (this epiphany), our ill-defined emotions are carried up into a higher realm of balanced, harmonious rationality, a realm where the higher patterns and forces of the cosmos are made suddenly visible (the "aha!" experience).

2. This is how we feel at the end of *Oedipus*, when we realize that Oedipus must suffer, for if he does not, the prophecy will have been proven untrue, and fate will have been exposed as

arbitrary and chaotic. The story of the Crucifixion of Christ is another example.

3. Catharsis as clarification is still used today in a psychoanalytical setting, to signify that moment when the connections between a patient's past experiences and present neuroses are suddenly revealed.

III. In addition to his views on plot, character, and catharsis, Aristotle set down a number of other mandates that have become linchpins of critical theory.

A. From Aristotle comes the notion that a critic can inspire great art.

1. Aristotle was not a contemporary of Sophocles; by his time, Athens had left her Golden Age far behind and was producing mediocre tragedies.
2. It is clear that Aristotle hoped that by defining clearly the key qualities of Sophoclean tragedy, he might help usher in a new Golden Age.
3. That is to say, the role of the critic is, in part, twofold: to assess and adumbrate the elements that make art successful; to establish, on the basis of these elements, fixed criteria for what constitutes great art. The French Neoclassical period, exemplified by Racine and others, is an example of a more recent "Golden Age."

B. As we saw above, Aristotle advised that the hero be of kingly rank: from his day until the time of Ibsen (in Europe) and Miller (in America), tragedies have always revolved around heroes of noble rank.

C. As we also saw above, Aristotle preferred tragedies with unhappy endings; though we take this for granted now, in Aristotle's day there *were* tragedies that had happy endings.

D. Aristotle basically invented the notion of genre and genre studies.

1. He not only divided poetry into different forms (epic, tragedy, lyric) but granted each form its own special criteria and mode of imitation.
2. He believed there was a proper mode that was *natural* to each genre, a notion that is at the heart of all later theories of decorum (that is, of what is proper or is not proper for any given type of poem).

3. Indeed, he believed so strongly that each genre must follow its own natural, internal laws, that he (unplatonically) defended the presence in poetry of irrational elements if such were befitting the genre.
4. Coleridge would later call such criticism (i.e., criticism that judges a poem on it own internal merits) "genial" criticism. Ungenial criticism occurs when one judges a poem by standards outside its genre.
5. He initiated the aesthetic desire to rank genres in terms of refinement and based this ranking partly on the responses of a cultivated audience. This foreshadows pragmatic theory. The rankings were tragedy, epic, and lyric.

E. Aristotle initiated an organic theory of poetry later revived by Coleridge.
1. He treated tragedy as a living organism that must be true to its own laws.
2. He felt a perfect tragedy was one to which nothing could either be added or subtracted without affecting the work as a whole.
3. He privileged unified plots in which all parts were related organically.

F. Aristotle praises poetry as a synthesis of history and philosophy and held, in fact, that it was better than either one.
1. Like history, tragedy works with concrete particulars.
2. However, like philosophy, it expresses universal truths.
3. Tragedy is a concrete universal that fuses the general with the specific.
4. This notion profoundly influenced Kant, Coleridge, and the so-called new critics.

G. Aristotle includes a brief section on linguistics in his study of poetry.

H. Needless to say, critical theory would not have followed the same course had Aristotle never lived to write the *Poetics*.

Essential Reading:

Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Aristotle's Poetics

Aristotle

(384 BC – 322 BC)

Greek philosopher Aristotle, born 384 BC, was a student of Plato's for about 20 years at the Academy in Athens. After Plato's death, Aristotle was invited by Philip of Macedonia to tutor his 13 year old son Alexander—the future Alexander the Great. He remained there until 323 B.C.E., when he was forced to leave as a result of his associations with Alexander. Aristotle returned to Athens in 335 B.C. to set up his own school after Alexander became king on the steps of the Lyceum. He died a year later of natural causes. The Lyceum remained open until 525C.E., when it was closed by the emperor Justinian.

None of the works of Aristotle that we have today were actually published by Aristotle. He wrote a number of treatises and dialogues, but these have all been lost. What survives are collections of notes, possibly from lecture 110

courses Aristotle gave at the Lyceum, which are often unclear or incomplete.

The Poetics was probably completed around 330 BCE, preserved in the form of a student's lecture notes. The Poetics is a response to Plato, who argued that poetry is representation of mere appearances and is thus misleading and morally suspect. Aristotle argued that poetry (which includes drama) is mimesis, or mimicry. He believed that humans had a desire to recreate what they see in the world.

The Poetics, in true form, was likely a much longer work than the one we have today. Aristotle supposedly wrote a second book on comedy, which is now lost. The main focus of the Poetics is on Greek tragedy. Though there were thousands of tragedies and scores of playwrights, we only have thirty-three extant tragedies, written by the three great tragedians: Aeschylus (525–456B.C.E.), Sophocles (496–405 B.C.E.), and Euripides (485–406 B.C.E.). Tragedies were performed in Athens twice annually at festivals in

honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and excess. Though the tragedies likely evolved out of religious ceremonies celebrating the cycle of the seasons, they became increasingly secular. The dramatic festivals were immensely important events, and the winning playwrights achieved great fame. The Poetics also discusses epic poetry, using the example of Homer (eighth century B.C.E.) almost exclusively. Homer wrote two great epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, which deal with the fall of Troy and Odysseus's subsequent wanderings respectively. These epics are the source of a great number of Greek tragedies and are considered among the earliest great works of world literature.

Though the Poetics is not one of Aristotle's major works, it has exercised a great deal of influence on subsequent literary theory, particularly in the Renaissance. Later interpreters unfortunately turned many of Aristotle's suggestions into strict laws, restricting the flexibility of drama in ways that Aristotle would not have anticipated. The tragedies of Racine and Corneille in particular are formed according to

these demands. Even though such great playwrights as Shakespeare often went against these laws, they were held as the model for writing tragedy well into the nineteenth century . He lectured and wrote on the topics of natural history, logic, ethics, physics, and poetics. He died in 322 BCE.

The Poetics was most likely a series of notes that Aristotle would have used when he lectured. In the piece he identifies various forms (tragedy, comedy, epic) and their elements. He defines poetry as an art that imitates: “imitation . . . is one instinct of our nature” and “the objects of imitation are men in action.” He considers “Comedy . . . an imitation of characters of a lower type;” tragedy is “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude;” Aristotle spends the greater part of the Poetics elaborating on tragedy. In his analysis, Aristotle addresses the elements of plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song; he also discusses Deus ex Machina, dénouement, and metaphor. He categorizes plots as either “Simple” or “Complex”—“a Complex action is one in which the change

[of fortune] is accompanied by . . . Reversal, or by Recognition, or both,"—and states his preference: "a perfect tragedy should . . . be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan."

Aristotle's ideas about literature have a sense of timelessness about them; reading the Poetics, one recognizes some of the concerns of writers and readers today: what constitutes a good plot, and what makes a character's actions "necessary" or "probable ?

Plato (427–347 B.C.E.) is famous for attacking art in Book 10 of his Republic. According to Plato's Theory of Forms, objects in this world are imitations or approximations of ideal Forms that are the true reality. A chair in this world is just an imitation or instantiation of the Form of Chair. That being the case, art is twice removed from reality, as it is just an imitation of an imitation: a painting of a chair is an imitation of a chair which is in turn an imitation of the Form of Chair. Further, Plato argues that art serves to excite the emotions, which can detract from the balanced reasoning

that is essential to virtue. Aristotle's Poetics can be read as a response to Plato's attack on art.

Aristotle proposes to discuss poetry, which he defines as a means of mimesis, or imitation, by means of language ,rhythm, and harmony. As creatures who thrive on imitation, we are naturally drawn to poetry. In particular, Aristotle focuses his discussion on tragedy, which uses dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and deals with agents who are better than us ourselves. Tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and to effect a katharsis (catharsis) of these emotions. Aristotle divides tragedy into six different parts, ranking them in order from most important to least important as follows: (1) mythos, or plot, (2) character,(3) thought, (4) diction, (5) melody, and (6) spectacle. The first essential to creating a good tragedy is that it should maintain unity of plot. This means that the plot must move from beginning to end according to a tightly organized sequence of necessary or probable events. The beginning should not necessarily follow from any earlier events, and the end should tie up all loose ends and not produce any necessary

consequences. The plot can also been hanced by an intelligent use of peripeteia, or reversal, and anagnorisis, or recognition. These elements work best when they are made an integral part of the plot. A plot should consist of a hero going from happiness to misery. The hero should be portrayed consistently and in a good light, though the poet should also remain true to what we know of the character. The misery should be the result of some hamartia, or error, on the part of the hero. A tragic plot must always involve some sort of tragic deed, which can be done or left undone, and this deed can be approached either with full knowledge or in ignorance. Aristotle discusses thought and diction and then moves onto address epic poetry. Epic poetry is similar to tragedy in many ways, though it is generally longer, more fantastic, and deals with a greater scope of action .After addressing some problems of criticism, Aristotle argues that tragedy is superior to epic poetry.

“ The Poetics by Aristotle is considered by many to be the most important text related to writing in history. .

Oedipus the King

Cast of Characters in Order of Appearance
Oedipus, King of Thebes, son of Jocasta and King Laius
Priest of Zeus
Creon, brother of Jocasta
Chorus of fifteen Theban elders
Teiresias, a blind prophet
Jocasta, wife and mother of Oedipus
Corinthian Messenger, old man of Corinth, servant of King Polybus
Shepherd, slave of the royal house of Thebes
Second Messenger, servant within the house

Nonspeaking Parts
Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta
Ismene, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta
Guards and Attendants
Young Boy who leads Teiresias

SCENE: *In front of the palace of Thebes. Double doors on the stage are the entrance to the palace, and an altar of the god Apollo is in the middle of the orchestra. One entrance, on the left side of the stage, represents the road to Corinth and Delphi. The entrance on the right side of the stage is the direction of the city of Thebes.*

TIME: *Two generations before the Trojan War. Oedipus has been king for many years since solving the riddle of the Sphinx. A plague has struck the city.*

(A procession of citizens and priests, carrying the signs of suppliants, enters. The double doors open and OEDIPUS *comes forward.)*

OEDIPUS

My children, new stock of old Cadmus,
why are you seated here before me
crowned by suppliants' wreaths,
and the air of the city dense with incense,
groans, paeans, and prayers?
It is not enough to learn such things
from others, and so I come myself.
I, Oedipus, whose fame is known to all.

Tell me, old man, you are the one
who should speak for the people—why are you here,
what do you want, and fear? I will help
however I can. It would be heartless
not to pity such desperate pleas.

PRIEST

O Oedipus, ruler of our country,
you see us gathered at the altar—
some not yet strong enough to fly the nest,
others crippled by age. I am a priest of Zeus.
The best of our youth stand here with me.
All your people, garlanded, wait in the marketplace
at the double shrines of Pallas Athena,
the mantic fire on the banks of Ismenus.

You can see that the city is in turmoil,
everything in confusion. Bloody plague
crashes over our heads like a tide of death,
blighting the fruits of the earth,

blighting the wombs of cattle and women.
A fiery fever god stalks among us,
the city is emptied, the house of Cadmus
is mortally weakened, and black
Hades fattens on groans and tears.
No man can be the equal of the gods.
We do not compare you to them. But,
as first among men, tempered by life,
you know how to deal with whatever the gods bring.
You came to Cadmus' city and freed us
from the tribute payment the Sphinx demanded—
that cruel singer! We could not tell you what
to do or how to do it—but we are sure
that the gods must have helped you to save our lives.

O Oedipus, most powerful of all,
as humble suppliants we beg for help.
Strengthen us now—either
through the inspiration of a god or
by human wisdom. I know that
the man who has lived most gives the best advice.
Come, noblest of men, rescue our city.
Come—act—because the whole country calls you
its hero since you first saved us.
Let your reign not be remembered
as starting in triumph but ending in disaster.
Save us again and rescue our city.
You brought good luck then and good omens—
bring equal fortune now.
You have power over this land—surely
it is better to rule living men.
An abandoned ship or the broken walls and towers
of an empty city are nothing.

Oedipus
Pitiful children, you come to me
wanting answers I cannot always give.
I already know how sick you are—but you
must know that I am stricken most of all.
The misery of each is for himself alone, none other.
But my soul groans for the whole city,

for each of you as well as for myself.
Do not think you woke me from sleep.
Sleepless I pace and weep and my mind
wanders all the roads of thought
in search of remedy. The only one I found
was this: to send my kinsman Creon,
Menoeceus' son, my wife Jocasta's brother,
to the Pythia at the shrine of Phoebus Apollo,
to ask the god what I could do or say to save my city.
But too much time has passed, and now
I wonder, what is he doing?—
he has been away so long.
Whatever message he brings,
I shall obey the god's command.

PRIEST
These are gracious and timely words—and look,
your servants wave and call that he approaches.

OEDIPUS
O lord Apollo, let it be your favored blessing on us
that shines from his eyes.

PRIEST
And all seems well—why else would his head
be garlanded with full-berried bay leaves?

OEDIPUS
Soon we shall know. He is close enough to hear.
Creon, welcome, my kinsman, son of Menoeceus.
What word do you bring from the shrine of Apollo?

(Enter CREON *from direction of Delphi.)*
CREON
Good news, I say, because if it ends well,
even what seems the worst would be good fortune.

OEDIPUS
What do you mean? As yet
I do not know whether to hope or fear.

CREON
Do you want these others to hear,
or should we go inside?

OEDIPUS
Speak to us all. I bear the pain
of everyone, not merely my own.

CREON
I shall tell what I heard from the god.
Lord Phoebus commands
that to drive this plague from our land, nourished by our land,
we must root it out, or it will be past cure.

OEDIPUS
What rite will expiate this crime?

CREON
Banishment or death for death—blood unavenged
menaces the city like a storm.

OEDIPUS
Does Apollo reveal the man who was killed?

CREON
Laius, O lord, was the ruler
of this city, before you saved it.

OEDIPUS
I have heard about him. But I never saw him.

CREON
He was killed, and the god clearly commands
vengeance upon his murderers.

OEDIPUS
Where can they be? Where
can we find the traces of this ancient crime?

CREON
He says it lies in this land. What is sought
is found; the ignored will disappear.

OEDIPUS
Was it in another place, or here
in his own house or fields, that Laius died?

CREON
He was traveling abroad, so he said, on pilgrimage to Delphi,
but never returned home.

OEDIPUS
Did no one survive, was there no one else on the road
who saw what happened and could tell us something?

CREON
Everyone died, except one, who fled in fear
and could remember only one thing—

OEDIPUS
What did he say? From one clue
much can be deduced. This gives me hope.

CREON
He said it was a band of robbers
that attacked and killed him, not one, but many hands.

OEDIPUS
How could a single robber, unless bribed
by some vile man from here, dare to kill him?

CREON
That was thought of then. But with Laius' death,
we had no defender against the many evils.

OEDIPUS
The king overthrown,
what evil was enough to stop the search?

CREON
The Sphinx's riddling demands
kept our thoughts on what was at our feet.

OEDIPUS
I shall go back to the start of it all—
I know the god's and your concern
for the one who has died.
You will see me as a true ally
avenging this land and Phoebus Apollo.
Not only for old friends but also for myself
must I drive away this defilement.
Whoever killed Laius now might choose
to murder me. To solve that crime
is to protect myself.
Come, children, hasten
from the altar steps, and raise your olive wreaths.
Let someone call the people of Cadmus
to join us. I vow to do all that I can.
With the god's help, either we triumph or fail.

PRIEST
Rise to your feet.
We have heard what we want: Oedipus agrees.
And may the sacred power of Phoebus Apollo,
and the oracles he sent, defeat this plague.

(The PRIEST *and suppliants leave through the right side, toward Thebes.* OEDIPUS *exits through the double doors.* CREON *exits on the right.)*

(The CHORUS *of fifteen elders of Thebes enters the orchestra from the right and sings the opening ode, the* parodos.)

CHORAL ENTRY SONG *(parodos)*

CHORUS Strophe A (151–57)
Is that the sweet-sounding voice of Zeus
from the gold-decked Pythian shrine
come to glorious Thebes?
My mind shudders with fear.
In awe we invoke you, healer-god of Delos.
What price will you exact, now or in the future,

for what we ask?
Speak, immortal child of golden Hope,
we crave your words.

Antistrophe A (158–67)

First we call on you, daughter of Zeus,
deathless Athena, and your sister Artemis,
queen of our earth, on her throne in the marketplace,
and on Phoebus the far-shooting archer—
O you three, with your threefold power
to defend us now from death, appear!
As you have saved us before from destruction
racing toward our city,
save us again from these new flames of woe.
Come to us here.

Strophe B (168–78)

Alas, our troubles are endless.
All the people are sick—
no one knows how we can defend ourselves,
even the hardest thought cannot forge spear or sword.
Our richest fields are sterile now.
Our women labor in stillbirth.
Wherever you look, like winged birds
or forest fire, crowds flee toward
the darkening west, to Hades' land.

Antistrophe B (179–89)

The city dies through these unnumbered deaths.
Its unmourned children rot on the plain
in pitiless contagion,
its wives and faded mothers wander
from one altar to another
groaning their woes and prayers.
The voices blend with the flutes in a paean to you,
O bright-faced, golden daughter of Zeus.
Send us your aid.

Strophe C (190–202)

We hear no clash of brazen arms,
but Ares' threats and war cries ring through the city,
torment us night and day.
Oh, drive him from the borders of our fatherland
out to the furthest reaches of the western sea
and Amphitrite's chamber,

or toward the rocky northern shores of Thrace
beyond the Hellespont,
for what night leaves unfinished, day completes—
you who wield the power of lightning stroke
to blast, and thunderbolt to crush him,
Great Father Zeus.

Antistrophe C (203–15)

And you, shining wolf-god Apollo,
let the adamantine shafts, our defenders,
fly from your plaited golden bowstring
like Artemis' fiery torches
when she hunts on the Lycian hills.
Let the gold-crowned god
named for this land, wine-faced Bacchus,
come with his troop of maenads
brandishing their pitchy torches
and crying *Euoi*!
to drive off Ares our enemy—
that god despised by every other god.

*(*Oedipus *enters through the double doors.)*

Oedipus

I hear what you ask. And if you heed my words,
and tend the plague, much might be done
to overcome these evils.
I speak as a stranger to the story
and commission of this crime, with no idea
where to hunt for clues and signs.
But now I am one of you, a citizen
of Thebes—and announce to all Cadmeans
that whoever knows the name of the killer
of Laius, son of Labdacus,
I command him to reveal it to me.
Even if he must confess the crime
* * * * * *
himself, he has nothing to fear but banishment.
Unharmed he may depart this land.
If someone knows the murderer,
be he citizen or stranger, he should speak now.
He will be rewarded and thanked.
But if no one will speak, and shielding a friend

or himself, ignores my words,
let him hear the punishment.

This man, whoever he is, will be forbidden
in any part of my realm,
nor may anyone give him aid
or shelter or greeting,
nor with him share the rites, libations,
and sacrifice to the gods, but should
thrust him from their house—being one accursed—
as the Pythian Oracle revealed to me.
Thus I honor my duty to the god
and to the dead man.
I pray that whoever did this—even if he has,
alone or with his murderous accomplices, escaped—
may his life always be wretched.
And I pray that if he should be one of my household—
and I know it—then let me suffer
every punishment I call down on others.
I ask you to make sure these things are done—
not only for my sake and for the sake of the god
but for our barren, god-forsaken land.
Even if it were not god-urged,
it would be wrong to allow this foulness to survive.
A noble man, a king, has died.
We must seek out the cause and avenge it.
Now that I rule with the same power he held,
become his kin, his wife and bed now mine—
and if he had been blessed with children as I have,
their birth from the same mother
would have bound us even closer.
But evil fortune came to that man.
Now, as if he were my own father,
I shall do everything I can to find the murderer
of the son of Labdacus, son of Polydorus,
of Cadmus before him, and ancient Agenor.
And whoever does not help me, I pray the gods
may blight their land and the wombs
of their wives, that their fate will be
to die an even worse death than his.
But for all loyal Cadmeans,

may their ally Justice,
and all the gods, be gracious and kind.

CHORUS *(The coryphaeus, the leader of the* CHORUS*, speaks.)*
Because of your curse, my lord, I must speak,
for I did not kill him nor can I say who did.
Phoebus set the task—it is for the god to tell
who did the deed.

OEDIPUS
You are right. But no one can force
the gods to speak if they do not wish.

CHORUS
The second thing I'll say—

OEDIPUS
And if you have one, give me your third reason also!

CHORUS
I know that the seer Teiresias sees most like Phoebus.
If you can know what he sees,
you will come closest to the truth.

OEDIPUS
But I have not been idle and done nothing.
After hearing Creon talk of him, I sent two messengers,
and it is strange that he is not yet here.

CHORUS
All those old reports are dull and stale—

OEDIPUS
What reports? Is there something I have not looked into?

CHORUS
They say he was attacked by a gang of thieves and killed on the road.

OEDIPUS
That's what I heard. But no one saw who did it.

CHORUS
If he knows what fear is, that man,
he will not linger, after your curses.

OEDIPUS
If he did not fear murder, he will not fear curses.

CHORUS
But here comes the one to find him—
Teiresias. They lead him in, the divine seer—he who,
alone among men, always knows the truth.

(Enter TEIRESIAS*, a blind seer, led by a* YOUNG BOY*, from the direction of Thebes.)*
OEDIPUS
O Teiresias, you who know and teach
Olympian secrets and mysteries here on the earth!
Though sightless, you perceive everything.
You know what sickness gnaws at the city.
Like a soldier in the front row of the phalanx
who takes the first onslaught, you alone can save us.
You must already know Phoebus' message—
that the end to this plague will only come
when we track down Laius' murderers
and kill them, or drive them from this land.
Whatever method you have to read the future—
from the flight of birds, or other ways of augury—
use it now to save yourself, your city, and me
from the pollution of unavenged murder.
We are all in your hands. For a man to use
his gifts to help others is the most noble labor.

TEIRESIAS
Alas, how awful it is to have wisdom, when such knowledge
is useless. I knew this already, but ignored it—
or else I would have known better than to come.

OEDIPUS
How is it that you are so reluctant?

TEIRESIAS
Let me go home. It will be better.
We shall each bear our fate easier if you obey me.

OEDIPUS
It is neither right nor kind to the city that bred you
if you deny it your prophetic powers.

TEIRESIAS
I see your words fall wide of the mark and miss their aim.
I don't want mine to do the same.

OEDIPUS
With the knowledge you have from the gods,
we bow at your feet and implore you to speak, not turn away.

TEIRESIAS
You cannot imagine what evil I know already—
though I will not reveal it.

OEDIPUS
Do I hear right—that you will not tell what you know?
Do you want to betray us and destroy the city?

TEIRESIAS
I do not want to harm you—or myself.
Do not interrogate me. I will say nothing.

OEDIPUS
O wicked, heartless man—you would madden
even a stone. Why will you not speak out
but insolent, stay stubbornly mute?

TEIRESIAS
You attack my anger and blame me,
unconscious of your own.

OEDIPUS
Who would not be angry, hearing how
you deny me and dishonor our city?

TEIRESIAS
These things will come, though I muffle them in silence.

OEDIPUS
What will come? You must tell me!

TEIRESIAS
I shall say nothing else, but stay silent,
no matter how you rage and storm.

OEDIPUS
And I shall not hold back what I know, my anger
will not allow it. Know that I think you
were part of the plot, and even, I say,
that you alone would have done the evil deed
with your own hands, if you were not a blind man.

TEIRESIAS
Is this so? Let me tell you—
you must abide by your own decree.
From this day forth, you must not speak to me or any man.
You yourself are the sacrilegious curse of this land.

OEDIPUS
Shameless to say such things!
Where do you think to escape now?

TEIRESIAS
No need to escape. My words are true.

OEDIPUS
Who taught you this? Not your prophetic skill!

TEIRESIAS
It was you; and made me speak against my will.

OEDIPUS
What did I say? Tell me once more, so I can try to take it in.

TEIRESIAS
Have you not yet understood? Do you want to test me?

OEDIPUS
Perhaps I did not comprehend—explain it again.

TEIRESIAS
I repeat that you yourself are the murderer you seek.

OEDIPUS
You will be sorry if you say that again—

TEIRESIAS
I'll tell you something else, which will anger you even more.

OEDIPUS
Spew out whatever you like—it will mean nothing to me.

TEIRESIAS
All unaware, you have done shameless things with
your closest and dearest, and do not yet see the full horror of your deeds.

OEDIPUS
Do you think you can say that and go unpunished?

TEIRESIAS
There is strength in truth.

OEDIPUS
In truth, yes. But this is not truth,
but the ravings of a deaf, witless, blind man—blind in all his senses.

TEIRESIAS
And you, poor wretch, will soon be the butt
of every insult you now direct at me.

OEDIPUS
You are a creature of night, and cannot
harm me, nor any other who can see the light.

TEIRESIAS
It is not I who has made your fate.
That was Apollo's task—that is his care.

OEDIPUS
Is it Creon, or another, who set you to this?

TEIRESIAS
Creon is not your enemy—it is yourself.

OEDIPUS
Power and wealth, kingship and skill
surpassing skill in every art of life—
how they all produce only envy!
And is it because of this power—which the city
granted of its own free will, unasked for—
that Creon, whom I trusted as a friend,
now tries to undermine and depose me
by sending this trickster, this wizard
who can see nothing but his own gain,
being blind in his supposed art?
Give me an example of your vision.
How is it that when the dog-haunched singer squatted here
you said nothing to save the city and its people?
The riddle should not have waited for a stranger
to solve it. There was need of a prophet—
but neither from birds nor gods did you learn
the answer. It was I, Oedipus,
the ignorant, who stopped her, who triumphed
through my own intelligence, not the help of gods or birds—
I, whom you call the curse, and think to depose, hoping
it will bring you closer to power in Creon's court.
Believe me, the two of you, your plotting
will end in tears. If you were not so old
I would punish you for such disloyal thoughts.

CHORUS
It seems to us that the words of both—his
and yours—are spoken in anger. Oedipus,
this is pointless, and will get us no further
toward obeying the words of the oracle.

TEIRESIAS
Even though you are the king, I am your equal
in this—the right to reply.

I am no man's slave. I serve Loxias.
Creon has no power over me.
But I say to you, who have taunted me in my blindness,
that though you have sight, you cannot see your own evil
nor the truth of where you live and whom you live with.
Do you know your origin, know that you are the enemy
of all your line, those below the earth and those still on it,
and that your mother's and father's double-edged curse
with deadly step will drive you from this land—
like a light revealing all, before it blinds you.

Every cave and shelter in Cithaeron will echo
with your cries, when you realize
the full meaning of the marriage
you thought would be your safe harbor.
You cannot yet see the throng of other evils
which will reduce you to the level of your children.
Say the worst that you can about me and about Creon—
pelt us with mud—but there is no mortal
who will be more befouled than you.

OEDIPUS
I will not suffer this! I refuse to listen!
Damn you—get out—
why have you not gone, why are you still here?

TEIRESIAS
I would not have come if you had not summoned me.

OEDIPUS
If I had known you would say such foolish things
I would not have ordered you here.

TEIRESIAS
I might seem a fool to you—
but your parents thought me wise.

OEDIPUS
My parents? Wait—you knew those who bore me?

TEIRESIAS
This day bears your birth and destruction.

OEDIPUS
Riddling again!

TEIRESIAS
You are good at riddles.

OEDIPUS
You mock my talent.

TEIRESIAS
The same talent has destroyed you.

OEDIPUS
But if I saved the city—that is all I care about.

TEIRESIAS
Good. I shall go. You, boy, lead me away.

OEDIPUS
Yes, let him lead you away. Your presence disturbs me.
I shall be glad when you have gone.

TEIRESIAS
When I have said what I came to say, then I shall leave—
not because I fear you. You cannot do me harm.
I tell you—the man you have sought for so long,
threatened, and denounced as the murderer
of Laius—that man is here.
Now he is called a stranger, an alien, but soon
will be known as a native-born Theban—
which will bring him no joy.
A beggar not a rich man, blind who now has eyes,
hesitantly tapping his staff through a foreign land,
he will be exposed as brother and father
to his own children, son and husband
to the woman who bore him, sharer of the marriage bed
with the father he murdered.

You go inside, but think on this. If I have seen wrong,
then call me blind—a false prophet.

(Exit Teiresias*, led by the* Boy*, toward Thebes, stage right.* Oedipus *exits through the double doors into the palace. The* Chorus *sings the first* stasimon.)

First *Stasimon*

Chorus Strophe A (463–72)

Who is this man the oracular rocks of Delphi curse
for unspeakable deeds
too terrible to describe?
Whose blood-drenched hands have done such work?
The hour has come for him to flee
like a horse before the storm
from the wrath of leaping Apollo,
armed like his father Zeus with fire and lightning bolt,
and from the implacable Keres,
goddesses of death, who snap at his heels.

Antistrophe A (473–82)

See how the signal flashes
from snow-capped Parnassus
for all to hunt the fugitive
through the tangled forest
and the deepest caverns
where he lurks between boulders
like a mountain bull with a crippled foot,
wretched and solitary, desperate to hide
from the oracles of the Omphalos
who flutter and squeak around his head.

Strophe B (483–97)

What this wise old prophet reads
from the auguries, agitates me, agitates me.
I am torn, and cannot decide
if I should believe what he says, or deny it—
waver between hope and fear,
uncertain where to seek the truth.

Tell me, what was the quarrel
between the house of Labdacus
and Polybus' son?

I have never heard talk of one,
now or in the past,
which might serve as proof; without it
how can I go against the good name of Oedipus—
I who am defender of the house of Labdacus—
and blame him for this obscure death?

Antistrophe B (498–512)

Zeus and Apollo are wise,
see deep into the hearts of men.
But even the most famous seer
is only a man, in the end—
need be no wiser than me.
Until I am convinced
that what the auger says is true,
I shall not believe those who blame the king.
When he bested the Sphinx, the Winged Maiden,
and saved our city
everyone loved him—
that will be my touchstone.
Until his guilt is proved,
for me he will be innocent.

(Enter Creon *from the direction of Thebes, stage right.)*

Creon
Citizens, I am told
that King Oedipus makes vile accusations against me.
It is unbearable!
If in his present misfortunes
he thinks he has suffered at my hands,
his troubles caused by anything I've done
by word or deed, I would not want to live.
Such slander is not a simple thing to bear
but the worst of all—it taints me doubly
as an evil, both to my city and to my friends.

Chorus *(The coryphaeus speaks.)*
He says it, yes—but perhaps
he speaks without thinking, in anger.

CREON
Does he claim that I persuaded the seer
to make these accusations and say these lying words?

CHORUS
That is what he said, but I do not know the reason.

CREON
Were his eyes clear, did he seem calm
when he laid this charge against me?

CHORUS
I cannot tell you, I am not witness of my master's acts.
But he himself now comes out of the house.

(Enter OEDIPUS *through the double doors of the palace.)*
OEDIPUS
You—wretch—how dare you show your face? Or
are you so shameless that you come to my house
openly, as an acknowledged murderer,
who schemes to rob me of my kingdom?
By the gods—do you regard me
as such a fool and coward that you can do these things,
or think I would not guess your most secret
plans and then protect myself?
And what a stupid plan—without
the backing of party and fortune and friends—
to think that you could track and seize the crown.

CREON
Do you have a better idea? Listen to me,
I will speak calmly, and you can judge.

OEDIPUS
You are good at making excuses, but I am bad
at believing them. To me, they sound like threats.

CREON
At least, hear what I have to say.

OEDIPUS
As long as you do not claim you are not evil.

CREON
If you think this mindless bluster
is something to be proud of, you think wrong.

OEDIPUS
And if you think you can do evil against your kinsman
and not be punished, you think wrong.

CREON
I admit your words are just. But tell me,
what harm have I done you?

OEDIPUS
Did you, or did you not, insist I must
send for that man, that famous prophet?

CREON
And I would still give the same advice—

OEDIPUS
And how long is it since Laius—

CREON
Since Laius did what? What do you mean?

OEDIPUS
Vanished. Was murdered.

CREON
It was a very long time ago.

OEDIPUS
And was this seer as famous then?

CREON
Yes, and just as honored.

OEDIPUS
Did he mention my name then?

CREON
Not as far as I know.

OEDIPUS
But you searched for the killer?

CREON
Of course we did. But we discovered nothing.

OEDIPUS
And if he was so wise, why could he not find out these things?

CREON
I do not know, and so can give no answer.

OEDIPUS
You know very well—so say what you know.

CREON
What do I know? I would speak if I had something to say.

OEDIPUS
Because—if he were not in league with you,
he would never have said I killed Laius!

CREON
If he does say that, then you know why—
I am learning as much from you as you from me.

OEDIPUS
Learn then that I will not be named a murderer.

CREON
Yet, did you not take my sister for wife?

OEDIPUS
How can I deny it?

CREON
And rule with equal power, you and she, over this land?

OEDIPUS
She has an equal share in everything.

CREON
And therefore am I not also equal to you both, one third of three?

OEDIPUS
Now you show your true thoughts—treacherous friend!

CREON
Not if you think about it coolly, as I have.
Consider this first: would anyone
choose to rule with all the fear that brings, rather
than sleep in peace, yet with the same power?
It is not in my nature to crave
the name of king—I'd rather do what a king does,
like anyone with good judgment.

Now, I have everything—except the fear.
If I were king, I would be forced into actions I hated.
How much sweeter to have the power
but not the grief of being king.
I am not such a fool that I need
more than the privilege and profit.

Now, I greet everyone equally, and they all praise me.
Now, whoever wants a favor from you, shows favor to me,
hoping it will help them gain what they wish.
Why would I give up all this?
A man who sees the world clearly does not plot treason.
No, I would never think like that,
nor fraternize with those who did.
And for proof, to test my words, go to the Pythia at Delphi,
question the oracle whether what I say is true.
If you should catch me out, plotting
with the seer, then sentence and slay me, not only
with your one vote, but with two—both mine and yours.

But if you are not sure, do not accuse me.
It is not justice to believe without proof
in the virtue of bad men, or that good men are evil.
To reject a true friend
is like casting away your own life.
In time you will understand such things,
for time alone reveals the just man—
but the evil-doer is recognized at once.

CHORUS
What he says makes sense—safer to heed it
than to act in haste, stumble, and fall.

OEDIPUS
If he plots swift and secret
I must be as quick.
Otherwise, he will act while I wait
and all my aims miss their targets.

CREON
What do you want? To banish me?

OEDIPUS
Exile is not enough. I want your death.
* * * * * * *

CREON
That's what envy leads to!
* * * * *

OEDIPUS
Stubborn wretch! Why don't you believe me?

CREON: Because it's clear your mind is in chaos.
OEDIPUS: —about myself?

CREON: Certainly about me.
OEDIPUS: You are treacherous!

CREON: And you understand nothing—
OEDIPUS: Except that I am king, and rule.

CREON: —rule badly.
OEDIPUS: O city, my city!

CREON
My city also, not only yours!

CHORUS
Stop, lords! Here, just in time
I see Jocasta come from the house.
She will make peace between you.

(Enter JOCASTA, *through the double doors.)*
JOCASTA
You foolish men, why have you begun
to quarrel? Aren't you ashamed,
the whole land sick, to flaunt your petty discontents?
Go home, the two of you. You—and you also, Creon.
You are making much of nothing.

CREON
Sister, your husband thinks he can do
what he likes to me—either drive me
out of my home and land, or kill me.

OEDIPUS
Yes wife, it's true, exactly that—for I caught him
plotting evil against me.

CREON
May I never prosper and let me die accursed
if I have done any of this!

JOCASTA
If he swears by the gods it is true,
then by the gods, trust him, Oedipus—
do this for me, and all these others.

FIRST *KOMMOS*

CHORUS Strophe (649–78)
Think carefully, then yield,
I beg you, my lord.

OEDIPUS
What exactly do you want me to do?

CHORUS
Accept his word. He is no fool,
and swears before the gods.

OEDIPUS
Do you know what you are asking?

CHORUS *(The coryphaeus speaks):* I know—
OEDIPUS: Say it again—make it absolutely clear.

CHORUS
That you should not believe an unproved charge
against a friend who swears his innocence.

OEDIPUS
Can you not understand that what you ask
signifies my banishment and destruction?

CHORUS
Never! not even by the greatest of the gods,
Helios. Let me die godless,
friendless and desperate,
before I think such things.
My grief is the fate of this blighted land,
and my heart will be torn in two
if to this evil is added
such hatred between you both.

OEDIPUS
Let him go, then—even if it means I must die,
or be forced into exile, dishonored.
It is not his words that move me, but yours.
Wherever he is, I shall always hate him.

CREON
How hard it is for you to yield!
The weight of your own nature
is heavier for you to bear than any other.

OEDIPUS
Get away from me—leave me alone!

CREON
I am going. You are vicious—
but these others have saved me.

(Exit CREON *toward Thebes, stage right.)*

CHORUS Antistrophe (679–96)
Why so slow, O wife of Oedipus,
to lead this man into the house?

JOCASTA
When I know what's happened—

CHORUS
Unjust suspicions, ignorant accusations
gnaw at the heart.

JOCASTA
From each of them?

CHORUS: Yes.
JOCASTA: But what was said?

CHORUS
Already we suffer enough through our land's misfortunes.
We need no other cause of grief.

OEDIPUS
Good man that you are—yet
you see what it leads to, your effort to soothe my anger.

CHORUS
Dear lord, I say it again—
that I would be quite mad, an idiot,
to turn from you now, you
who carried our land to safety,
like a ship before a fair wind,

from its time of woes.
Now once again may you be our good pilot.

JOCASTA
By the gods, tell me the truth,
my lord—what it was
that caused such anger?

OEDIPUS
Wife whom I respect more than these men,
I say it is Creon who has plotted against me.

JOCASTA
But can you tell me clearly the cause of the quarrel?

OEDIPUS
He dares to say that it was I who murdered Laius.

JOCASTA
Is this his own accusation, or is he repeating another's?

OEDIPUS
He sent his charlatan-wizard to speak for him,
so he is free of blame.

JOCASTA
My dear, forget all that.
Listen to what I have to say, and learn
that no mortal can prophesy the future—
and I can prove it.
Long ago, an oracle came here to Laius—
I will not claim from Phoebus himself, but one of his priests—
who told him it was his fate to die by the hand
of any child born to me and him.
But you know the story—it was foreign robbers
who killed him at the crossroad where three roads meet.
And three days after the birth of our boy
Laius pinned the infant's feet together
and gave the order to expose him on the pathless mountainside.
So Apollo's prophecy was not accomplished:
that child could never murder his father,

nor Laius suffer the fate he feared.
Such predictions can be ignored;
they mean nothing. Whatever a god wants,
he can tell us himself.

OEDIPUS
What agitation grips my mind and spirit
as I hear you, wife.

JOCASTA
But why does this make you so anxious?

OEDIPUS
I seemed to hear you say that Laius
was butchered where three roads meet.

JOCASTA
That was the story then, and still is now.

OEDIPUS
Where did this awful thing happen?

JOCASTA
Phocis the place is called,
where the roads from Daulis and Delphi join.

OEDIPUS
And how long ago was it?

JOCASTA
It was just before you appeared and took power in this land,
that the news came to the city.

OEDIPUS
O Zeus, what are your plans for me?

JOCASTA
Tell me what troubles your heart, Oedipus.

OEDIPUS
Don't ask yet. Just say—what did he look like,
how old was Laius then?

JOCASTA
Tall enough, and beginning to go grey.
Very much as you look now.

OEDIPUS
Woe is me! How wretched I am, self-cursed
through my own ignorance.

JOCASTA
I don't want to understand what you mean.

OEDIPUS
I dread that seer saw right.
But you will help me most if you can tell me one more thing.

JOCASTA
I shrink with dread also, but if I can, I'll answer your question.

OEDIPUS
Was he alone, or did he have armed men with him,
the proper escort of a leader?

JOCASTA
There were five of them, including a herald,
and Laius rode in the carriage.

OEDIPUS
Alas, it all comes clear. Who was it
who told this to you, wife?

JOCASTA
A servant who returned alone, the only survivor.

OEDIPUS
Is he still here in the house now?

JOCASTA
No. Because when he arrived from that place and saw
that you were lord now Laius had perished,
he knelt, taking my hand, and begged me
to send him away to the fields to be my shepherd,
far from all sight of this city.
And I agreed. He was the sort, though a slave,
who deserved even greater favor.

OEDIPUS
Can he be brought here, quickly?

JOCASTA
Yes, it can be done. But why do you ask?

OEDIPUS
I am afraid, Jocasta. I have said too much already.
That is why I must see him.

JOCASTA
Then he will come. But surely I deserve to be told
what is tormenting you, lord.

OEDIPUS
I shall not hold back from telling you
my worst fears. Who else is dearer to me, or better
to share these things than you?

My father was Polybus of Corinth,
my mother, Merope, a Dorian. And I
was thought the first among our citizens
until, one night, something unexpected happened—
which I would have done better to ignore.
A drunken guest at a banquet called out
that I was a bastard, not my father's son.
I managed to hold my tongue then, but it rankled,
and the next day went to my parents, repeated
what he had said and demanded the truth.
They were furious and denied it absolutely.
I believed them, but was still angry.
And the story spread—the way they always do.

Not saying a word to my parents,
I presented myself to the Pythian oracle,
but Phoebus refused my question—
instead, made terrible forecasts
that I was doomed to sleep with my mother
and engender a monstrous brood; become
the murderer of my own father.
Hearing such awful things, I fled,
using the stars as guides to make sure
I always moved away from Corinth,
so the evil oracle would never be accomplished,
and at last arrived at the place
where you say your old king died.

Wife, to you I can tell the truth.
As I came near to where the three roads join
I met a herald, and a horse-drawn carriage
like those you describe—
and the herald, and the man in the carriage,
forced me off the road.
It was the driver, as he tried to turn me aside,
I struck out at first in my anger.
Then, as I pushed past, the old man
jabbed from above at my head with his double goad.
But he paid for this—for now,
with the staff in my hand, I tumbled him out of the cart
and onto his back in the road
and slaughtered them all. If that stranger
had any connection with Laius,
what man is more wretched than I?
Who could be more hated by the gods than he
whom no stranger or citizen must allow into their house
nor speak to, but must cast out
and turn away—and it is I alone
who laid these curses on myself!
The very bed of the murdered man
is polluted by the same hands that killed him.
O awful! Totally evil, I must seek even further
exile, to make sure I'll never meet one of my own kin
nor tread the soil of my birth, or else I am doomed
to mate with my own mother and slay Polybus,

the father who begot and raised me.
How could someone, judging such a fate,
not think me the plaything of a savage god?
No, let me vanish and die first,
before my name is stained forever by such shame.
Never, never, believe me, shall I allow
such things to happen, or commit such acts.

CHORUS
We shrink from such knowledge, O lord,
but until he has spoken, you can have hope.

OEDIPUS
Indeed, this is my only hope—
to wait for the shepherd.

JOCASTA
And when he comes, what is it you want to hear?

OEDIPUS
I shall tell you. If his story confirms yours,
my suffering will be over.

JOCASTA
What did I say that seemed so important?

OEDIPUS
You insisted he said that robber men
had killed him. Men—not a man. If he still
says that, I could not have done it,
because one is not the same as many.
But if he is sure it was one man alone,
then the scales of justice tilt and make me guilty.

JOCASTA
That is what he said at first
and he cannot deny it.
Everyone heard, not only me.
And even if he should say something different now
it still will prove nothing
about the murder of Laius, whom Loxias said

would be killed by my son.
That wretched child could never
have done it—he was already dead.
I pay no heed to prophecies—look neither
to right nor left, but on the road ahead.

OEDIPUS
That may be so. Still, do not neglect
to send someone to bring that man here.

JOCASTA
It shall be done at once. Now come into the house.
I wish only to please you.

(Exit OEDIPUS *and* JOCASTA *into the palace, through the double doors.)*

Second *STASIMON*

CHORUS Strophe A (863–72)
Let me fulfill my fate
through the holy purity
of all my words and deeds
and follow the heavenly laws,
engendered in the bright ether
by their father Olympus,
laws we humans could not have framed;
they will never be forgotten
nor blotted out by sleep—the god lives
in them, eternal and mighty.

Antistrophe A (873–82)
Pride breeds tyrants, arrogant,
glutted on folly.
Pride blindly mounts the heights
then tumbles down the precipice
to the utmost depths,
losing its footing.
I pray the god will not revoke the need
for that healthy rivalry
which strengthens the city,
that he will always be our champion.

Strophe B (883–896)

The man who struts through life
vicious and arrogant in word and act,
who does not fear Justice
nor honors the gods—
may evil befall him
for such insolent impiety.
But if he profits fairly, shuns all outrage
nor lays profaning hands on holy things,
and still is punished,
then how can any mortal man evade
the angry arrows aimed from Olympus,
or the threat of heavenly vengeance?
If evil deeds like his are honored,
who would dance before god's altar?

Antistrophe B (897–910)

No longer shall I go
in reverence to Delphi,
Omphalos of Earth.
I shall not visit the oracle at Abae
nor that of Olympia
because their words
no longer ring true,
though every mortal still wants to believe them.
O Zeus, as you are indeed called, ruler of all,
do not be unaware of this.
For the old prophecies about Laius
are already dismissed, and Apollo's glory dimmed;
the gods grow weak and feeble. 910

(Enter JOCASTA *from the palace, through the double doors. She is carrying wreaths and incense.)*

JOCASTA

Lords of the land, I have decided to go
on pilgrimage to the temples,
bearing wreathes and incense-offerings to the gods,
for Oedipus torments himself with fear of the future
as much as dread of the past. 915
Whatever he's told he believes.
He pays no heed to what I say.
I can do no more, but turn to you,

*(*Jocasta *makes an offering at the altar.)*
shining wolf-god Apollo, closest and dearest of all gods,
entreating your aid with these prayers—
that you release us from this curse.
For now we are all dismayed, to see
the pilot of our vessel himself disoriented.

(Enter Corinthian Messenger *from the direction of Corinth, stage left. He is elderly.)*
Corinthian Messenger
Strangers, can you tell me where
Is the house of King Oedipus?
Better still—tell me if you know where he is?

Chorus
Here is his house, stranger, and he himself inside,
and this his fruitful wife, mother of his children.

Corinthian Messenger
May she be blessed, and all her kind—
the legitimate wife.

Jocasta
And blessings on you, stranger. You deserve them,
for your good words. But tell me,
why have you come, what news do you bring?

Corinthian Messenger
Good news for your house and your husband, woman.

Jocasta
What is it—and who sent you?

Corinthian Messenger
I come from Corinth, and what I have to say
will surely give you pleasure—how not?—yet will grieve you as much.

Jocasta
Tell me—how can it have this double power?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
The people of Isthmian Corinth
want him for king—that is what they say.

JOCASTA
Why? Isn't old Polybus still king?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
No—not since Death took him to his kingdom.

JOCASTA
You say that Oedipus' father is dead?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
May I die, if I'm not telling the truth.

JOCASTA
Maid, hurry, go to your master, and tell him
at once. So much for prophecies!

(Maid exits through the double doors into the palace.)
Where are they now? How many years is it
since Oedipus fled his land, fearing he must kill his father—
who now has died quite naturally, not by a son's hand!

(Enter OEDIPUS *from the palace, through the double doors.)*
OEDIPUS
Jocasta, my dearest,
why did you send for me to come from the house?

JOCASTA
Hear what this man says—then tell me
where they have gone, those prophecies of the gods?

OEDIPUS
Who is he, and what does he have to tell me?

JOCASTA
He's from Corinth, come to inform you
that your father Polybus has died.

OEDIPUS
What! Stranger, let me hear it from you.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
If you want to hear it clearly again,
then know that he is dead and gone.

OEDIPUS
How did he die? Was it treachery? Sickness?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
The least tilt of the scales puts an old man to rest—

OEDIPUS
Poor man, to die of sickness.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
—and the many years he'd lived.

OEDIPUS
Ah, wife, why would anyone go
to the shrine of the Pythian seer, or look for auguries
from the screeching birds above, who prophesied
that I would kill my father. Now he is dead,
rests beneath the earth, and I am here, innocent,
with sword untouched—unless you could say
that it was longing for me that killed him.
Those useless oracles now rot in Hades,
taken there by Polybus.

JOCASTA
Isn't that just what I always said?

OEDIPUS
Yes, but I was frightened and did not believe you.

JOCASTA
Now you know not to take any of it to heart.

OEDIPUS
But surely I must still fear the bed of my mother—

JOCASTA
Why be afraid?
Chance rules us all.
No one can foresee the future.
Best to live in the present, making no plans.
And why should you fear the bed of your mother?
Many a man has slept with his mother in dreams.
He who dismisses such thoughts lives easiest.

OEDIPUS
All that you say might be true,
if she who bore me were not still alive. But she is,
and so I have every reason to fear.

JOCASTA
Yet your father's funeral is a cause to rejoice.

OEDIPUS
Yes—but she is still alive.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
Who is this woman you fear?

OEDIPUS
Merope, old man—who lived with Polybus.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
Why be frightened of her?

OEDIPUS
A dreadful prophecy from a god.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
Can you tell it to me, or is that forbidden?

OEDIPUS
It was Loxias who said
I was doomed to couple with my mother
and kill my father with my own hands.
Because of this dreadful prophecy, many years ago

I quit Corinth. Since then, my life has been fortunate—yet
to look into the eyes of one's parents is the greatest joy.

Corinthian Messenger
And this is the reason you fled the city?

Oedipus
I had no wish to be my father's murderer!

Corinthian Messenger
I can so easily free you of these fears, my lord,
since I am well-disposed toward you.

Oedipus
What a favor you would grant me!

Corinthian Messenger
And I came especially for this—
to bring you home, and reap the benefit.

Oedipus
I can never go near there.

Corinthian Messenger
My child, you don't know what you are doing.

Oedipus
How, old man? For the gods' sake, tell me!

Corinthian Messenger
So you won't go back because of this story?

Oedipus
I dread that Phoebus' curse will come true.

Corinthian Messenger
Or that pollution would come from your parents?

Oedipus
Exactly that is what most terrifies me.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
Well, you can be sure that you have nothing to fear.

OEDIPUS
How could that be, if they begot me?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
There is no kinship of blood between you and Polybus.

OEDIPUS
What do you say? Polybus not my father?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
No more than I am. In that we were equal.

OEDIPUS
A nothing like you the equal of he who sired me!

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
He did not sire you, neither he nor I.

OEDIPUS
Then why did he name me his child?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
I gave you to him as a gift—he received you from my hands.

OEDIPUS
Yet strange, that from another's hands, he loved me dearly.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
It was the years of childlessness won him over.

OEDIPUS
Had you bought me somewhere, or did you find me?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
I found you on the wooded slopes of Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS
Did you have some reason to be there?

Corinthian Messenger
It was on that mountain I kept my flocks.

Oedipus
Ah—a wandering shepherd—

Corinthian Messenger
—and your savior, then.

Oedipus
Was I crying, when you took me up?

Corinthian Messenger
Crying with pain—your ankles still bear witness.

Oedipus
Why must I be reminded of that old story?

Corinthian Messenger
Your feet were pierced and pinned together, and I freed them.

Oedipus
This fearful scar I've borne since my cradle.

Corinthian Messenger
And so you are called "swollen foot."

Oedipus
But tell me, for the gods' sake, was this done by my mother or my father?

Corinthian Messenger
That I cannot. The one who gave you to me knows better than I.

Oedipus
So you did not find me yourself?

Corinthian Messenger
No, another shepherd handed you over.

OEDIPUS
But who was he? Can you tell me?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
They said he was one of Laius' men.

OEDIPUS
You mean the old king of this land?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
Yes, a shepherd of Laius.

OEDIPUS
And is he still alive? Can I see him?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
Your local people can answer that best.

OEDIPUS *(addressing the* CHORUS)
Do any of you know if he is still alive,
the shepherd of whom he speaks,
or has seen him out in the fields or here in the city?
Speak at once!—the time has come to learn these things.

CHORUS *(The coryphaeus speaks.)*
I think he must be the countryman
you wanted to see. But here's Jocasta—
she can tell you better than I.

OEDIPUS
Wife, do you know if the man we sent for
is the same person this shepherd mentions?

JOCASTA
Why even try to find out? Pay no attention
to all that nonsense.

OEDIPUS
Having come so far, do you think I can hold myself back
from trying to learn the truth of my birth?

JOCASTA
Stop, in the name of the gods—if you value your life—
from going further. I have been plagued enough!

OEDIPUS
Be brave, woman! Even if I am proved three times a slave,
from three generations of slaves, that will not make you base-born.

JOCASTA
I beg you to heed me. Do not do this.

OEDIPUS
You cannot stop me from learning the truth.

JOCASTA
Believe me, I only want the best for you.

OEDIPUS
Your "best," it seems, is what can grieve me most.

JOCASTA
Unlucky man, may you never learn who you are.

OEDIPUS
Someone go—bring her shepherd to me—
And leave her to gloat over her own noble birth!

JOCASTA
Oh, poor doomed man! That is all I can say—
my final words.

*(*JOCASTA *rushes off stage through the double doors.)*

CHORUS
Why has she fled, your wife,
in such wild pain? Oedipus, I fear this silence
will be torn apart by evil.

OEDIPUS
Whatever may come, let it burst forth! Even
if I spring from lowly stock, I must know.

Being a woman, she might have grand ideas
and feel ashamed of my base birth.
But I am a child of Fortune—
who has treated me well—and cannot be dishonored.
She is my mother, and the months, my brothers,
have marked me out to wax and wane like them from slave to king.
Such is my nature, I have no wish
to change it—nor not seek out the truth of my birth.

(OEDIPUS *and* CORINTHIAN MESSENGER *remain on stage.)*

THIRD *STASIMON*

CHORUS Strophe A (1086–97)

If I am a seer,
gifted by Olympus to speak the truth,
I prophesy, Mount Cithaeron, that you will know,
at tomorrow's full moon,
how Oedipus exalts you as his native land,
his nurse and mother.
And we shall praise you
with wild cries, song and dance,
because you honor our king,
and make him glad.
Phoebus Apollo,
may these things please you!

Antistrophe A (1098–1109)

Oedipus, who was your mother?
Was she a long-lived nymph,
consort of goat-legged father Pan,
roamer of mountains,
or some mistress of Loxias,
who loves the empty pastures?
Maybe the Lord of Cyllene, or Bacchus himself,
god of the stormy peaks,
found you—a present left there
by one of his favorite playmates,
those almost-immortal
Helicon girls!

(Enter elderly Shepherd *with* Oedipus*' men from Thebes, stage right.)*

Oedipus

Though I have never met him,
yet, Elders, I can guess this is the shepherd
we have looked for—he is old enough
to be that man.
I also recognize the ones who lead him as servants of mine.
But having seen the shepherd before,
you must know better than I.

Chorus

I know him well—he was Laius' man,
one of his trusty shepherds.

Oedipus

Tell me, Corinthian stranger,
is this the one you mean?

Corinthian Messenger

The very man before your eyes.

Oedipus *(addressing the* Shepherd)

You there, old fellow—look at me, answer
my questions. Were you one of Laius' men?

Shepherd

Yes, a slave—not bought though, but born into the household.

Oedipus

What sort of work did you do?

Shepherd

I followed the flocks for most of my life.

Oedipus

Where did you usually camp when you were out with the flocks?

Shepherd

Sometimes in Cithaeron, or else nearby.

OEDIPUS
Then you must know this man—maybe you met him there?

SHEPHERD
What has he done—who do you mean?

OEDIPUS
This man here. Have you ever had anything to do with him?

SHEPHERD
I can't remember just like that!

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
And no wonder, my master! But
I'll jog his memory—then I'm sure
he'll remember when we both were at Cithaeron.
He with his two flocks, I with my one,
* * * * * * *
three seasons we stayed together up there,
the six months from spring to the rising of Arcturus.
When winter came, I would drive
my herd to its fold, and he went back to Laius' barns.
He can't deny that all this happened.

SHEPHERD
It's true—though it was long ago.

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
And do you remember that child you gave me
to rear as my own?

SHEPHERD
What's it to you—why do you talk of it?

CORINTHIAN MESSENGER
And here, my friend, is the one who was that child.

SHEPHERD
May you be cursed! Why won't you be quiet?

OEDIPUS
Do not attack him, old man. It is you
who should be punished.

SHEPHERD
What have I done wrong, O best of masters?

OEDIPUS
You would not describe the child he asks about.

SHEPHERD
He doesn't know what he's saying—he wastes his breath.

OEDIPUS
If you won't speak willingly, I'll make you talk.

SHEPHERD
For the gods' sake, don't put an old man to the torture.

OEDIPUS
Quickly, someone, twist back his arms.

*(*OEDIPUS*' men grab the* SHEPHERD *and twist back his arms.)*

SHEPHERD
Wretched me! What do you want to know?

OEDIPUS
Did you give the child he asks about to this very man?

SHEPHERD
I did. I wish I had died on that day.

OEDIPUS
You'll come to it now, if you don't speak the truth.

SHEPHERD
It will be worse for me, if I do speak.

OEDIPUS
This man, it seems, is determined to waste my time.

SHEPHERD
No, no, I've already said I gave him the child.

OEDIPUS
Where did he come from? Your own house, or somewhere else?

SHEPHERD
Not mine. Someone gave him to me.

OEDIPUS
Which of the citizens here—which house?

SHEPHERD
For the gods' sake, do not ask me more, master!

OEDIPUS
You're dead already if I have to ask again.

SHEPHERD
Then—if I must speak—it was someone from the house of Laius.

OEDIPUS
Slave—or kin?

SHEPHERD
Now it comes—the terrible thing I must say—

OEDIPUS
—and I to hear. Whatever must be heard.

SHEPHERD
They said the child was his. She—she, the one inside—
your wife—she can best tell it all.

OEDIPUS: It was she who gave the child to you?
SHEPHERD: Yes, master.

OEDIPUS: Why?
SHEPHERD: So I would kill it.

OEDIPUS The poor woman—her own child. Why? Why? 1175
SHEPHERD Because of the evil prophecies.

OEDIPUS: What prophecies?
SHEPHERD: That he would kill his parents.

OEDIPUS
Then why did you not obey—but give him to this man?

SHEPHERD
I felt so sorry for him, master, and thought
he would take the child away to his own land.
But instead, he saved him for an awful fate. 1180
For if you are who he says you are, you were doomed from birth.

OEDIPUS
Alas, alas, it all comes clear!
O light of day, this is the last time I see you!
I am exposed as cursed—in my birth
and my marriage bed, and by those I should never have slain. 1185

*(*OEDIPUS *rushes off through the double doors.* SHEPHERD *and* ATTENDANTS *exit toward Thebes, stage right, and the* CORINTHIAN MESSENGER *toward Corinth, stage left.)*

FOURTH *STASIMON*

CHORUS Strophe A (1186–96)
O mortal generations,
lives passing so quickly and
equaling nothing. Show me
a man who thinks he is happy
and I will show you a man deluded—
his life means nothing.
Your fate, O wretched Oedipus,
is the example I take,
to prove the gods bless nothing.

Antistrophe A (1197–1203)
You it was who drew back your bow
beyond mortal limit, and gained the blessing of wealth.
By Zeus, it was you who destroyed the Sphinx,
the oracle singer, with her crooked-taloned claws,

and stood like a tower
against the death that threatened our land.
Since then, we have called you our king
and crowned you with grand honors,
ruler of mighty Thebes.

Strophe B (1204–12)

And now, whose story is more wretched?
Who has suffered a worse agony or more painful
fate than you, your life in chaos.
O famous Oedipus, how could the same deep harbor
serve for son and father,
sharing the same marriage bed and chamber;
how could the furrows your father ploughed first
be strong enough to bear you in silence?

Antistrophe B (1213–22)

Against your will, all-seeing Time has found you out
and judged your marriage an abomination
of begetting and begotten,
parent and child as one.
O son of Laius,
would I never had seen you.
Lamentations pour from my mouth.
I must say this—for it was you
who gave me the courage to live,
but now bring darkness down into my eyes.

(Enter Second Messenger *from the palace, through the double doors.)*

Second Messenger

Honored nobles of this land
what dreadful thing you are about to hear, and see
with your minds' eye; what great woe will overcome you,
if you feel kinship to the house of Labdacus!
Not even the mighty rivers, not Ister nor Phasis,
could scour this house clean from pollution.
So much hidden evil exposed,
will it or no. The worst woes
seem those we bring upon ourselves.

CHORUS
What we know already
is bad enough. What more will you say?

SECOND MESSENGER
The shortest tale to tell and to hear—
our royal lady, Jocasta, is dead.

CHORUS
Poor wretched woman—how?

SECOND MESSENGER
By her own hand.
But you are spared the worst—you did not see it all.
I'll tell you, though, what I can drag from my mind—
where it's already buried—of her pitiful end.

Frantic, she rushed into her rooms,
to the marriage chamber, slammed the door behind her,
and threw herself onto the bed,
tearing her hair with desperate fingers
and calling on Laius as if he were not dead
to remember the night they lay together
and made the one who would kill him—
and then left her to be a mother to polluted children.
Weeping, she cursed her evil double fate:
to bear a husband from a husband,
and children from her own son.

I cannot tell you more about her death,
for then, Oedipus, roaring with grief,
burst into the hall and I could only watch him,
raging around the walls, begging one after another
to give him a sword—and tell him where
to find it, that double-ploughed field:
his wife not a wife, his mother the mother to his children.
One of the gods must have shown him the way—
it was none of us who were near—we were too frightened,
because shouting in frenzy, he threw himself
at the great double doors,
tore the hinges from their sockets, and fell into her room—

and we saw, O horrid spectacle, the woman hanging,
her neck entangled in a noose of coiled rope.

Then, with what a ghastly roar he leapt
to loosen the cord and lay her gently on the ground.
Poor suffering man—and the horror,
to watch him tear away the beaten golden brooches
from each shoulder of her robe, lift them high
and plunge them into the sockets of his eyes,
crying out that they should never see him again,
nor what he suffered nor the evil he did,
nor look on those they should not—
but only darkness, forever.
Like a dirge, over and over he chanted,
lifting the pins, striking through his eyelids
until bloody matter spurted down his cheeks and beard—
not drops, but a gush like black rain
or hail drenching him.

All this was their doom,
husband and wife—evils doubled between them.
The old happiness was finished,
but it had been real. Now,
anguish and despair, madness, dishonor and death—
every evil assailed them; no curse forgotten.

CHORUS
And has he no relief from this agony?

SECOND MESSENGER
Hear how he shouts for someone to swing back the doors
and let all the people of Cadmus see the father-killer,
the mother–. . . ;—no, I will not speak that sinful word!—
that he will banish himself from his house and land,
the curse invoked by his own mouth.
But he is feeble now, and needs a guide.
The shock and pain are more than he can bear.
Look—he is showing us—the gates are opening.
Soon you will see such a sight
that would move to pity even those who hate him.
(Exit SECOND MESSENGER *toward Thebes, stage right.)*

(Enter Oedipus *from the palace, through the double doors, wearing a mask that shows he is blind.)*

Chorus

Terrible, to witness how men suffer.
I have never seen worse suffering.
What frenzy possessed you,
O ill-fated one? What god, leaping
from the furthest peaks, forced you
to the depths of ill-fortune?
Poor wretch!
I can hardly bear to watch you, though
there is so much I want to ask,
so many things I want to learn and understand—
but even the sight of you makes me shudder.

Oedipus

Woe, woe, wretched I am indeed.
To what place am I being driven?
Where is my voice flying, carried before me?
O fates, where are you rushing?

Chorus

To a terrible place—silent, invisible.

Second *Kommos*

Oedipus — Strophe A (1313–20)

A cloud of darkness
overwhelms me—nameless
it conquers, driven
by a resistless wind.
Ah woe is me—the gadfly-goads
of memory torment me cruelly!

Chorus

Who can wonder that you suffer doubly
these present evils and remembered ones.

Oedipus — Antistrophe A (1321–28)

Friends—
you are still here for me,
stay to take care of me

though I am blind—still loyal.
I sense you there and recognize your voices
though I am in darkness.

CHORUS
How could you dare such a dreadful thing—
to blind yourself? Which god drove you to it?

OEDIPUS Strophe B (1329–49)
Apollo, my friends, it was Apollo
who made me do these acts which caused such suffering.
But it was my own hands, no one else's, that blinded me.
What need for eyes
when there was nothing I could see that gave me joy?

CHORUS
That is what happened—just as you say.

OEDIPUS
There was nothing worth seeing
or loving or hearing. Friends,
are there still joyful sounds to hear?
Take me away from this place
as fast as you can.
O friends, lead away this evil,
murderous man,
the most accursed,
the most hated of mortals—
even to the gods.

CHORUS
Equally wretched in your thoughts and fate—
better never to have known you!

OEDIPUS Antistrophe B (1349–69)
Let him die, whoever he was, the one
who cut the fetters from my ankles
and saved me from death.
That was no favor.
If I had died then,

how much pain would have been kept
from my dear ones, and me.

CHORUS
If only it had been that way!

OEDIPUS
Then I would not have become the murderer
of my father nor be called
the defiler of the mother who bore me.
Now I am rejected by the gods—an unholy child—
the one who shared the bed of his engenderer.
If there are worse things yet
to be said or done,
be sure they are the lot of Oedipus.

CHORUS
You have not planned this well—better,
it seems to me, to be a dead man than a blind one.

OEDIPUS
Do not tell me how things are best done nor try to give
me advice.
What sort of eyes would I need, to look
at my father when I meet him in Hades,
and at my poor mother? What I have done
to the two of them deserves worse than hanging.
And the sight of my children, conceived
as they were, should I want to see them?
Far better not to have eyes.
And the city with its high towers, sacred statues, and temples
of the gods, from all of this—
Thebes, the city that nourished me—
I, wretched creature, have banished myself, I myself insisting
that the impious one should be thrust out. Now, I am
the one revealed by the gods as defiled—of Laius' lineage.
My sinfulness exposed,
how could I face the people with open eyes?
Never. And if it were possible
to block the stream of sound from entering my ears,
I would not have held back from sealing off my wretched body,

not only blind but able to hear nothing.
It would be good to be beyond the reach of dreadful thoughts.

O Cithaeron, why did you accept me—why
did you not kill me at once, so that I could never
reveal my origins to any human?
O Polybus, and Corinth—my so-called
ancestor and home, what sort of creature,
beautiful to see but foul underneath, you nurtured.
Now evil I am revealed, evil from birth.

Those three roads, the deep valley
and woods, the narrow place where they crossed
which drank my father's blood
spilled by my hands—how can I forget,
having done this, how I arrived here, and what I did next?
Oh, marriages, marriages,
one after another: first to give me life
and then for me to sow my own seed in the same field
and bring forth confusion of fathers, brothers, sons,
sisters, daughters, mothers, and wives—every
atrocious thing a human can do, I have done.

But it is wrong to talk of wrongful acts.
Quickly, for the gods' sake, hide me somewhere
far from this land; kill me or throw me
into the sea so you will never have to look at me again.
Come, don't be frightened to touch such a wretched creature.
Don't flinch away—my sins are not contagious.
No mortal can bear them but me.

CHORUS
For that which you ask, Creon is here
and will do whatever is necessary.
He alone remains to be the guardian of this land.

OEDIPUS
What can I say to him?
How can he trust me? Everything
I've said and done to him was wrong.

(Enter Creon *from Thebes, stage right.)*

Creon

I do not come to mock you, Oedipus,
nor to reproach you for past crimes.
And you—*(he turns to* Chorus *and* Attendants)
—if you have no regard
for human feelings, still you should respect
the sun, Lord Helios, whose fire feeds all life, and not display
such an ill-fated being, which neither the earth,
the rain, nor the light of day can bear to see,
but hurry him into the house.
Only the closest kin should witness
the shame of one of their own.

Oedipus

This is not what I expected, that you, the best of men,
would be so generous to the worst of men; so with the gods' help,
let me persuade you, for your sake more than mine—

Creon

What is it you wish to persuade me to do?

Oedipus

Expel me from this land, as soon as you can, to some place
far from the sight of man, where I cannot hear another human voice.

Creon

I would already have done it—but first
I must learn if that is the god's will.

Oedipus

Everything cries out in his voice
that I, the parricide and sinner, must die!

Creon

So it is said. Nevertheless, when unsure,
better to ask for a clear message.

Oedipus

You would consult the god for such a miserable creature?

CREON
And you must trust what he says.

OEDIPUS
I charge you, I implore you,
to arrange her burial—she inside the house—
however you think fit. It is your right as her kin.
And as for me—never let this city
of my fathers be cursed by my presence again.
I'll go to the peak of Cithaeron—
that is the name of the place my mother
and father chose for me to die—
so that I can fulfill their wish at last.
Yet I am sure that nothing can destroy me, neither sickness
nor anything else. I have been saved for another fate—
strange and terrible.
I must let what is destined happen.
As for my sons, Creon,
no need to worry about them. They are grown men,
and can look after themselves, wherever they go.
But my two daughters—pity the poor young creatures
who always were close to me, ate at my table,
shared all that I touched.
Take care of them—even let me
touch them with these hands
and for a moment break the evil spell.
Please, my lord,
noble one—if I could feel them with my hands,
it would be as it was before, when I could see.

*(*ANTIGONE *and* ISMENE*, weeping, enter with* ATTENDANT *from the palace, through the double doors.)*
What am I saying?
By the gods—can I really hear my two darlings
weeping; has Creon, taking pity,
sent for my two dear children?
Am I right?

CREON
You are right—I did arrange it, remembering
the joy they gave you in the past.

OEDIPUS
I wish you all good fortune—that a god
will guard you and guide you along a better road than mine.
Children, where are you? Come,
come to these brotherly hands
which destroyed the shining eyes
of one who never saw nor learned nor understood
that he fathered you, O sister-children,
in the same furrow where he himself was sown.
All I can do is weep for you both—I cannot bear to contemplate
the bitterness of the rest of your lives
and all you will suffer at the hands of men.
If you ever should dare to join the people's celebrations
you will go back home in tears
long before seeing the festival's ending.
When the time for marriage comes,
what sort of man would risk
the scorn and reproaches, the insults
and hints about your lineage,
yours and mine alike.
Such an evil heritage: your father his father's killer,
who ploughed where he was sown—the mother of his children—
and you two come from the same place.
Taunted with this, who would marry you?
No one, dear children—it is clear
you must die virgin and barren.

O son of Menoeceus, you are the only father
left to them—their natural parents
no longer exist. Now, their only kin,
do not let them wander like beggars,
husbandless, punished for my evils.
Have pity on them, so young
and vulnerable except for your protection.
Noble Creon, I'll know you'll do it, by the touch of your hand.
And daughters, if you were old enough to understand
I would give you much advice. But promise me this,
wherever your future—to live a better life
than the father who sired you.

CREON
Enough of weeping. Go now into the house.

OEDIPUS: Though it's hard, I shall obey.
CREON: What must be done, in time will seem good.

OEDIPUS: You know my terms?
CREON: State them and I shall hear and know.

OEDIPUS: That you banish me from Thebes into exile.
CREON: You ask of me what only the gods can give.

OEDIPUS: But the gods hate me.
CREON: Then your wish will soon be granted.

OEDIPUS: Does that mean you consent?
CREON: I don't equivocate, I only say what I mean.

OEDIPUS: I am ready, lead me inside.
CREON: The time has come—let go of the children.

OEDIPUS: Oh no, no—do not take them from me as well!
CREON: You cannot control everything.
All your former power is ended.

(Exit CREON, ANTIGONE, *and* ISMENE *to the palace, through the double doors. Exit* OEDIPUS *through the double doors into the palace.)*

CHORUS
Fellow Thebans, look on Oedipus—
he who solved the famous riddles, the man of power
whom every citizen envied. See
what a wave of terrible misfortune has submerged him.

Before that final day when one can say
his life has reached its end with no distress or grief,
no man should be called happy.
(Exit CHORUS *toward Thebes, stage right.)*

Tragedy and the Common Man by Arthur Miller

In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy-or tragedy above us. The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied.

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

More simply, when the question of tragedy in art is not at issue, we never hesitate to attribute to the well-placed and the exalted the very same mental processes as the lowly. And finally, if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing--his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggles that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society.

Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is indignation. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his tragic flaw," a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing--and need be nothing, but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are "flawless." Most of us are in that category. But there are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us--from this total examination of the "unchangeable" environment--comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy.

More important, from this total questioning of what has previously been unquestioned, we learn. And such a process is not beyond the common man. In revolutions around the world, these past thirty years, he has demonstrated again and again this inner dynamic of all tragedy.

Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character, is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy. If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king.

The quality in such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what or who we are in this world. Among us today this fear is as strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best.

Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson. The discovery of the moral law, which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of, is not the discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity.

The tragic night is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies. In no way is the common man debarred from such thoughts or such actions.

Seen in this light, our lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological. If all our miseries, our indignities, are born and bred within our minds, then all action, let alone the heroic action, is obviously impossible.

And if society alone is responsible for the cramping of our lives, then the protagonist must needs be so pure and faultless as to force us to deny his validity as a character. From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither represents a balanced concept of life. Above all else, tragedy requires the finest appreciation by the writer of cause and effect.

No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything, when he regards any institution, habit or custom as being either everlasting, immutable or inevitable. In the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star, and whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attack and examination. Which is not to say that tragedy must preach revolution.

The Greeks could probe the very heavenly origin of their ways and return to confirm the rightness of laws. And Job could face God in anger, demanding his right and end in submission. But for a moment everything is in suspension, nothing is accepted, and in this stretching and tearing apart of the cosmos, in the very action of so doing, the character gains "size," the tragic stature which is spuriously attached to the royal or the high born in our minds. The commonest of men may take on that stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in his world.

There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than that it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal.

For, if it is true to say that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality, and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity. The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy. Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force. Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist. But tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief--optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man. It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possible lead in our time--the heart and spirit of the average man.

from Robert W. Corrigan. Tragedy: Vision and Form. 2nd ed. New York: Harper, 1981.

Outline of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy in the *Poetics*

Definition of Tragedy: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody." (translation by S. H. Butcher; click on the context links to consult the full online text)

The treatise we call the *Poetics* was composed at least 50 years after the death of Sophocles. Aristotle was a great admirer of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, considering it the perfect tragedy, and not surprisingly, his analysis fits that play most perfectly. I shall therefore use this play to illustrate the following major parts of Aristotle's analysis of tragedy as a literary genre.

Tragedy is the "imitation of an action" (*mimesis*) according to "the law of probability or necessity." Aristotle indicates that the medium of tragedy is drama, not narrative; tragedy "shows" rather than "tells." According to Aristotle, tragedy is higher and more philosophical than history because history simply relates what *has* happened while tragedy dramatizes what *may* happen, "what is possibile according to the law of probability or necessity." History thus deals with the

particular, and tragedy with the universal. Events that have happened may be due to accident or coincidence; they may be particular to a specific situation and not be part of a clear cause-and-effect chain. Therefore they have little relevance for others. Tragedy, however, is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it creates a cause-and-effect chain that clearly reveals what *may* happen at any time or place because that is the way the world operates. Tragedy therefore arouses not only pity but also fear, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and-effect chain (context).

Plot is the "first principle," the most important feature of tragedy. Aristotle defines plot as "the arrangement of the incidents": i.e., not the story itself but the way the incidents are presented to the audience, the structure of the play. According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the protagonist. Plots that meet this criterion will have the following qualities (context). See Freytag's Triangle for a diagram that illustrates Aristotle's ideal plot structure, and Plot of *Oedipus the King* for an application of this diagram to Sophocles' play.

1. The plot must be "a whole," with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning, called by modern critics the **incentive moment**, must start the cause-and-effect chain but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are downplayed but its effects are stressed). The middle, or **climax**, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it (i.e., its causes and effects are stressed). The end, or **resolution**, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are stressed but its effects downplayed); the end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment (context). Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the "tying up" (*desis*), in modern terminology the **complication**. He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the "unravelling" (*lusis*), in modern terminology the **dénouement** (context).
2. The plot must be "complete," having "unity of action." By this Aristotle means that the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents bound together by internal necessity, each action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention, no *deus ex machina* (context). According to Aristotle, the worst kinds of plots are "'episodic,' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence"; the only thing that ties together the events in such a plot is the fact that they happen to the same person. Playwrights should exclude coincidences from their plots; if some coincidence is required, it should "have an air of design," i.e., seem to have a fated connection to the events of the play (context). Similarly, the poet should exclude the irrational or at least keep it "outside the scope of the tragedy," i.e., reported rather than dramatized (context). While the poet cannot change the myths that are the basis of his plots, he "ought to show invention of his own and skillfully handle the traditional materials" to create unity of action in his plot (context). Application to *Oedipus the King*.
3. The plot must be "of a certain magnitude," both quantitatively (length, complexity) and qualitatively ("seriousness" and universal significance). Aristotle argues that plots should not be too brief; the more incidents and themes that the playwright can bring together in an organic unity, the greater the artistic value and richness of the play. Also, the more universal and significant the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience, the better the play will be (context).

4. The plot may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a "change of fortune" (*catastrophe*). Complex plots have both "reversal of intention" (*peripeteia*) and "recognition" (*anagnorisis*) connected with the catastrophe. Both *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* turn upon surprise. Aristotle explains that a *peripeteia* occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to that which he intended to produce, while an *anagnorisis* "is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune." He argues that the best plots combine these two as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., the *peripeteia* leads directly to the *anagnorisis*); this in turns creates the *catastrophe*, leading to the final "scene of suffering" (context). Application to *Oedipus the King*.

Character has the second place in importance. In a perfect tragedy, character will support plot, i.e., personal motivations will be intricately connected parts of the cause-and-effect chain of actions producing pity and fear in the audience. The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so his change of fortune can be from good to bad. This change "should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character." Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience, for "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves." The term Aristotle uses here, *hamartia*, often translated "tragic flaw," has been the subject of much debate. The meaning of the Greek word is closer to "mistake" than to "flaw," and I believe it is best interpreted in the context of what Aristotle has to say about plot and "the law or probability or necessity." In the ideal tragedy, claims Aristotle, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or morally weak, but because he does not know enough. The role of the *hamartia* in tragedy comes not from its moral status but from the inevitability of its consequences. Hence the *peripeteia* is really one or more self-destructive actions taken in blindness, leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were intended (often termed **tragic irony**), and the *anagnorisis* is the gaining of the essential knowledge that was previously lacking (context). Application to *Oedipus the King*.

Characters in tragedy should have the following qualities (context):

1. "good or fine." Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: "Even a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless."
2. "fitness of character" (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.
3. "true to life" (realistic)
4. "consistency" (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are established, these should continue throughout the play.
5. "necessary or probable." Characters must be logically constructed according to "the law of probability or necessity" that governs the actions of the play.
6. "true to life and yet more beautiful" (idealized, ennobled).

Thought is third in importance, and is found "where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated." Aristotle says little about thought, and most of what he has to say is associated with how speeches should reveal character (context 1; context 2). However, we may assume that this category would also include what we call the **themes** of a play.

Diction is fourth, and is "the expression of the meaning in words" which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. In this category, Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in metaphors: "But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; . . . it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances" (context). Application to *Oedipus the King*.

Song, or melody, is fifth, and is the musical element of the chorus. Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be "mere interludes," but should contribute to the unity of the plot (context).

Spectacle is last, for it is least connected with literature; "the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet." Although Aristotle recognizes the emotional attraction of spectacle, he argues that superior poets rely on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear; those who rely heavily on spectacle "create a sense, not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous" (context 1; context 2).

The end of the tragedy is a *katharsis* (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. *Katharsis* is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means "purging," and Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor—tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion. Aristotle also talks of the "pleasure" that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art (context).

We might profitably compare this view of Aristotle with that expressed by Susanne Langer in our first reading ("Expressiveness in Art," excerpt from *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*, New York, Scribner, 1957):

A work of art presents feeling (in the broad sense I mentioned before, as everything that can be felt) for our contemplation, making it visible or audible or in some way perceivable through a symbol, not inferable from a symptom. Artistic form is congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental, and emotional life; works of art . . . are images of feeling, that formulate it for our cognition. What is artistically good is whatever articulates and presents feeling for our understanding. (661-62)

November, 1999
Barbara F. McManus
CLS 267 Topics Page

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