Aristotle

Poetics

A new translation by Anthony Kenny

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

ARISTOTLE

Poetics

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
ANTHONY KENNY

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First published as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 2013

Impression: 1

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978–0–19–960836–2

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION

The Literary Legacy of Greece

Of all the treasures that ancient Greece has bequeathed to us, its literature is the one that is best preserved. Greek architecture survives in ruins, Greek sculptures have suffered amputations, Greek paintings have almost vanished, and no one really knows how Greek music sounded. However, many masterpieces of literature have survived intact to be read and enjoyed across the centuries. We possess fine specimens of epic and lyric, of tragedy and comedy, of history and philosophy, and of rhetorical and political oratory. Moreover, Greece provided us not only with the earliest European literature, but also with the very earliest literary criticism, to which the present volume bears witness.

Epic was the first genre to be perfected in Greece. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer purport to recount events of the Trojan war of the thirteenth century BC, but they were probably put together in their present form in the eighth century. Perhaps at the end of that century, the poet Hesiod wrote epic texts on agriculture and on the gods of the Greek pantheon. In the late seventh century the poetess Sappho of Lesbos wrote enchanting love lyrics. The most famous Greek lyric poet was Pindar (518–446), who wrote odes in honour of the victors in panhellenic contests such as the Olympic Games.

The most glorious days of ancient Greece fell in the fifth century BC, during fifty years of peace between two periods of warfare. The century began with wars between Greece and Persia, and ended with a war between the city states of Greece itself. In the middle period flowered the great civilization of the city of Athens.

In 499 BC Greeks living in Ionia (now part of Turkey) rose in unsuccessful revolt against the Persian King Darius who ruled over them. Darius invaded Greece to punish those who had assisted the rebels; he was defeated by a mainly Athenian army

at Marathon in 490. His son Xerxes launched a more massive expedition in 484, defeated a gallant band of Spartans at Thermopylae, and forced the Athenians to evacuate their city. By 479, however, he had been defeated both at sea (the battle of Salamis) and on land (the battle of Platea). At this point democratic Athens assumed the leadership of the Greek allies and built up a powerful empire of mainland and island communities

The Athenian leader Pericles rebuilt the city's temples which had been destroyed by Xerxes. To this day visitors travel across the world to see the ruins of the buildings he erected on the Acropolis, and the sculptures with which these temples were adorned are among the most treasured possessions of the museums in which they are now scattered. When Pericles' programme was complete, Athens was unrivalled anywhere in the world for architecture and sculpture.

Athens held the primacy too in drama and literature. Aeschylus (525–456), who had fought in the Persian wars, was the first great writer of tragedy: he brought onto the stage the heroes and heroines of Homeric epic, and his re-enactment of the homecoming and murder of Agamemnon can still fascinate and horrify. Aeschylus also represented the more recent catastrophes that had afflicted King Xerxes in his play *Persians*. Younger dramatists, the pious conservative Sophocles (496–406) and the more radical and sceptical Euripides (485–406), set the classical pattern of tragic drama. Sophocles' plays about King Oedipus, killer of his father and husband of his mother, and Euripides' portrayal of the child-murderer Medea not only figure in the twenty-first-century repertoire but also strike disturbing chords in the twenty-first-century psyche. The serious writing of history also began in the fifth century, with chronicles of the Persian wars written by Herodotus (484–425) at the beginning of the century, and Thucydides' (455–400) narrative of the war between the Greeks as the century came to an end.

Philosophy, too, was practised in Periclean Athens, by Anaxagoras (500–428), an early proponent of Big Bang cosmology.

But its golden days were still in the future, with the great trio of Socrates (469–399), Plato (429–347), and Aristotle (385–322). In the Peloponnesian war between Athens and the other Greek cities which brought to an end the Athenian Empire, Socrates served in the Athenian heavy infantry. During the war he displayed conspicuous physical courage, and after it remarkable moral courage in resisting political pressure to carry out illegal acts. This made him unpopular with successive Athenian governments, and he was executed, on trumped-up charges, by the democratic rulers in 399.

Socrates left no writings, and the only portrayal of him in his lifetime was made by Aristophanes (448–380), the greatest writer of Greek comedy, who represents him (in the play *Clouds*) as presiding over a school of chicanery and an academy of bogus research. However, Socrates' philosophical views were preserved and adorned in the dialogues of his pupil Plato, and it is Plato's Socrates who has been the patron saint of philosophy ever since.

Socrates' own interests focused on moral philosophy: what was the nature of virtue, and could it be taught in the way that a craft can be taught? Plato presented a system of moral philosophy with an elaborate metaphysical underpinning, the theory of Forms or Ideas. In his best-known writings he used this theory to solve problems in logic and epistemology as well as in ethics; but in later life he began to see flaws in his system, and to reform it in fundamental ways. Some of the criticisms he set out to answer may have been derived from Aristotle, who was a member of Plato's philosophical school, the Academy, for twenty years.

Aristotle was a polymath: a logician, biologist, zoologist, economist, and political theorist as well as a metaphysician and philosopher of mind. As a moral philosopher, he followed Plato's structuring of the virtues and Plato's emphasis on the close connection between virtue and happiness. But he rejected the theory of Ideas, the metaphysical substructure of Platonic ethics, and developed his own moral theory, presented

in magisterial form in two different treatises, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*.

In place of the Idea of the Good which was central for Plato, Aristotle offers happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the supreme good with which ethics is concerned, for, like Plato, he sees an intimate connection between living virtuously and living happily. In both ethical treatises a happy life is a life of virtuous activity, and each of them offers an analysis of the concept of virtue and a classification of virtues of different types. One class is that of the moral virtues, such as courage, temperance, and liberality, that constantly appeared in Plato's ethical discussions. The other class is that of intellectual virtues: here Aristotle, unlike Plato, makes a sharp distinction between the intellectual virtue of wisdom, which governs ethical behaviour, and the intellectual virtue of understanding, which is expressed in scientific endeavour and contemplation. The principal difference between Aristotle's two ethical treatises is that one of them regards perfect happiness as constituted solely by the activity of philosophical contemplation, whereas for the other it consists in the harmonious exercise of all the virtues, intellectual and moral.

Philosophy was the last form of literature to reach maturity in classical Greece, but with its arrival literature became for the first time reflective, and conscious of itself. Both Plato's and Aristotle's works contain reflections on the purpose and value of literature. Both philosophers are keenly interested in the relationship between literature and morality, and because they have different conceptions of morality they have different attitudes to literature. In Plato's writings the discussions of literature are scattered, the most interesting of them occurring in his dialogue the *Republic*, which is principally devoted to moral and political philosophy. (These reflections are reprinted in translation in this volume.) Aristotle, however, devoted a self-standing work, the *Poetics*, to the issues that Plato had discussed in fragmented fashion. His brief treatise stands out, therefore, as the first surviving work devoted to literary criticism, and indeed the first essay in the broader field of aesthetics.

Aristotle's Poetics

It is many centuries too late to change the title of this treatise of Aristotle's, but 'Poetics' gives a misleading impression of the contents of the treatise. The Greek word *poiesis* (literally 'making'), as used by Aristotle, has both a narrower and a wider scope than the English word 'poetry'. The *Poetics* treats at length of Greek epic and tragedy, both of which were written in verse; but there were many forms of Greek poetry in which Aristotle shows no interest: didactic treatises like Hesiod's, for instance, or love-lyrics like Sappho's. He was indeed well aware of the distinction between verse and prose, though there was no obvious pair of Greek words to make the distinction. But he is insistent that it is not the metrical form that makes something a poem; it is content rather than form that matters in poetry. The scientific writings of the philosopher Empedocles are not poetry, even though they are composed in hexameters; and if you put the histories of Herodotus into verse they would still be history and not poetry. On the other hand, it is clear to us—if not perhaps to Aristotle—that many of the features that he regarded as essential to epic and tragedy might well find expression in pure prose. If a verse Herodotus would still be history, might not a prose Homer still be what Aristotle calls poetry? After all, most of what the *Poetics* says about the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* remains true of the numerous prose versions of those works in modern languages.

What English term, then, covers all and only the things that Aristotle calls *poiesis*? 'Imaginative writing' and 'creative writing' come close, but one expression is too clumsy and the other too academic for regular use. The closest modern equivalent to Aristotle's word is the German *Dichtung*, which covers prose fiction as well as verse. In this translation I have decided to retain the traditional translation 'poetry', having prefaced it with this health warning.

The semantic properties of Aristotle's word for poetry mean that his treatise is inadequate as a treatment of Greek verse.

But they confer on it an immense countervailing advantage. Because of them, Aristotle's insights transcend the boundaries of ancient Greek culture and can be applied to creative writing of many ages and many nations. As we shall see in the course of reading the text, the technical concepts he here creates can be applied to novels, dramas, and operas in many languages—even, indeed, to detective stories. Aristotle provides a prism through which different kinds of imaginative writing may be viewed and evaluated.

The *Poetics* concentrates on a single art form: tragedy. Epic is taken seriously, but is given nothing like equal space. A treatment of comedy is promised, but the promise is never fulfilled. The emphasis is entirely intelligible: tragedy was the most fully developed literary product of the time. While seeking to lay bare the essence of tragedy, Aristotle was able to expose, through his close inspection of this single genre, some of the basic principles operative in the creative process itself.

Plato and Aristotle on Poetry

To understand Aristotle's message in the *Poetics* one must know something of Plato's attitude to poetry. In the second and third books of the *Republic* Homer is attacked for misrepresenting the gods and for encouraging debased emotions, and dramatic representation is attacked as deceptive and degrading. In the tenth book Plato's theory of Ideas provides the basis for a further, and more fundamental, attack on the poets. Material objects are imperfect copies of the truly real Ideas; artistic representations of material objects are therefore at two removes from reality, being imitations of imitations (597e). Drama corrupts by appealing to the lower parts of our nature, encouraging us to indulge in weeping and laughter (605d–6c). Dramatic poets must be kept away from the ideal city: they should be anointed with myrrh, crowned with garlands, and sent on their way (398b).

One of Aristotle's aims is to resolve this quarrel between poetry and philosophy. There are three elements in Plato's

attack: theological, ethical, and metaphysical. Aristotle has a response to each of them, but he deals with each criticism in a different manner. The metaphysical system of Plato is rejected outright. Poetry is shown to have a significant role within Aristotle's own ethical system. The theological criticism is accepted, but in response tragedy is tacitly secularized.

To understand the vehemence of Plato's attack on epic poetry one must realize that in the Athens of his day the works of Homer enjoyed a status comparable to that of the Bible during much of Christian history. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were a principal source of information about the divine, they contained models for ethical behaviour, and they provided a common source of reference and allusion for the discussion of a wide variety of human interests and values. Plato combines the fervour of a Luther dethroning a debased theology and a David Friedrich Strauss demolishing a mythological farrago.

Plato was not the first philosopher to attack Homer's Olympian gods. Xenophanes had earlier complained that Homer attributed to the gods theft, adultery, deception, and everything that, among humans, would be considered a shame and a reproach. But even if Homer's gods had behaved honourably, they would still resemble humans too much to be credible. Men fashion gods in their own image: Ethiopians believe in gods that are dark and snub-nosed, while the gods worshipped by the Thracians have red hair and blue eyes. 'If cows and horses or lions had hands and could draw, then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, cows like cows, making their bodies similar in shape to their own.' Instead of this childish anthropomorphism, Xenophanes offered a sophisticated monotheism. He believed in

> One god, lord over gods and human kind
> Like mortals neither in body nor in mind.

Aristotle in the *Poetics* accepts that Xenophanes may well have been right about the nature of the gods; he thinks, however, that Homer can still be defended. But as we shall see later in

detail, in his treatment of the great Greek tragedies he pares down to the minimum the divine element they contain.

Both Plato and Aristotle in their ethical systems treated at length of the emotions, and they shared a psychological model in which reasoning and feeling were activities of different parts of the soul, and the intellectual soul was paramount. The role assigned to the emotions was different in the two systems, however. In Plato's virtuous man the expression of emotion would be confined to the minimum. For Aristotle an important part of virtue was the appropriate amount of feeling: there could be too little, as well as too much emotion, in a man's life. In emotion as in action, Aristotle's virtuous person aims at a happy mean. Both philosophers emphasize that there is a close link between poetry and emotion; it is because they have different attitudes to emotion that they have different attitudes to poetry.

As we have seen, a key element in Plato's philosophy was the theory of Ideas. The theory can be characterized as follows. Socrates, Simmias, and Cebes are all called 'men'; they have it in common that they are all men. Now when we say 'Simmias is a man', does the word 'man' stand for something in the way that the word 'Simmias' stands for the individual man Simmias? If so, what? Is it the same thing as the word 'man' stands for in the sentence 'Cebes is a man'? Plato's answer is yes: in each case in which such an expression occurs it stands for the same thing, namely, that which makes Simmias, Cebes, and Socrates all men. This is the Idea of Man, which is something simple, universal, immutable, and everlasting. In general, in any case where the particular things A, B, and C, are all F, Plato is likely to say that they are related to a single Idea of F: they participate in or imitate the Idea. It was on the basis of this theory that Plato complained that works of art were imitations of imitations.

Aristotle rejected the classical theory of Ideas (which, it is fair to notice, was substantially criticized and modified by Plato himself in his later years). The theory, he claimed, fails to solve the problems it was meant to address. It does not confer intelligibility on particular things, because immutable and

everlasting Forms cannot explain how particulars come into existence and undergo change. Moreover, the Ideas do not contribute anything to the knowledge of other things or to their being. All the theory does is to bring in new entities equal in number to the entities to be explained: as if one could solve a problem by doubling it. By rejecting the theory, Aristotle undercut the metaphysical objection to poetry.

Aristotle did, however, agree with Plato about the importance of universals; only, he denied that there were any universals separated from individuals. Like Plato, he attached supreme importance to truths that are universal and necessary: they are the province of philosophy. Like Plato, he attaches secondary importance to contingent truths about the empirical world. But he disagrees with Plato about the relative importance of empirical truths and dramatic fictions. Whereas Plato ranked in descending order the disciplines of philosophy, history, and poetry, Aristotle offers a different ranking: philosophy, poetry, and history. He does so on the basis that poetry is more philosophical than history, since it deals with universals rather than particulars.

Representation

Aristotle sites his criticism of Plato within a general theory of imitation or representation. Imitation, he says, so far from being the degrading activity that Plato describes, is something natural to humans from childhood, and is one of the features that makes man superior to animals, since it vastly increases his scope for learning. Secondly, representation brings a delight all of its own: we enjoy and admire paintings of objects that in themselves would annoy or disgust us (1448b5–24).

The Greek word used in this dialogue with Plato is *mimesis*—the word from which our 'mime' is derived. It is often translated 'imitation', and this is indeed appropriate to render Plato's use, since its slightly pejorative overtones would be an expression of Plato's distaste for the activity. But it is not clear that the word

is the best English one to render the concept as understood by Aristotle. Several translators simply use the word *mimesis* itself inside an English context. Commonly, the use of transliteration instead of translation is a mark of cowardice in translators. But in this case the difficulty of finding an English word that fits in all the Aristotelian contexts makes one sympathize with those who have given up the task.

Having experimented with several renderings—'mimicry', 'copying', 'portrayal', and 'imitation' itself—I finally opted for 'representation'. In most contexts this is clearly what Aristotle is talking about, and 'representative arts' sounds more natural than 'imitative arts'. What has prevented translators from adopting this version is, I think, the fact that the concept is introduced in connection with the behaviour of children. When a child pretends to be a tiger, or children play at doctors and nurses, it seems a little heavy to say that they are representing something, whereas 'imitation' is quite a natural description of what they are doing. None the less, what they are doing does fall under the concept of representation as sketched by Aristotle, and it is no accident that in English the word 'play' covers both childish pretence and dramatic performance. In the other contexts in which Aristotle uses the word *mimesis*, 'representation' is the English word that comes closest to his sense.

Aristotle begins with a very broad concept of representation. It covers epic, drama, painting, sculpture, dancing, and music. The last two items in this list may give us pause. Dancing, however, fits well enough if we remember that the kind of dances Aristotle would have seen resembled ballets or liturgical processions rather than ballroom dancing. But is music, as such, representational? We do not know enough about Greek music to guess whether Aristotle had in mind something like programme music or rather the imitative effects to be found in Haydn's *Creation* and Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*.

At all events, that kind of music would be quickly ruled out by Aristotle's further development of the concept of representation. Forms of representation, he tells us, differ from each

other in respect of their medium, their object, and their mode. The broad concept outlined above was hospitable to many media, but when Aristotle moves on to consider object and mode he narrows the concept considerably. The objects of representation, he tells us, are people in action. Thus both comedy and tragedy are representational, differing only in the kinds of people represented; but there is no room for flutes imitating birdsong. Finally, representation may be effected in two different modes, the narrative (as in epic) or the dramatic (as in tragedy). Later, in chapter 24, in the interests of privileging tragedy over epic, Aristotle will even deny that narrative is truly representation; in the *Iliad* only the dramatic speeches really deserve the name. When the concept has been so tendentiously narrowed down from its original scope it begins to lose its utility.

The Natural History of Poetry

In the fourth and fifth chapters of the *Poetics* Aristotle offers a sketch of the development of poetry from the earliest times. First of all, representation took the form of improvised ditties and sketches. The first truly poetical forms were, on the one hand, hymns to gods and panegyrics on heroes, and on the other, lampoons of fools and invectives against knaves. Tragedy developed out of the first kind of poem and comedy out of the second, with Homer as the common ancestor of both.

Tragedy, Aristotle tells us, went through many changes and then ceased to evolve. In its natural condition it has a certain defined length, it involves three actors, it is written in iambic trimeter, and it contains a limited number of choral lyrics. We may feel inclined to smile when we are told that the natural condition of tragedy is precisely the form it took in the works of Sophocles. Indeed, some critics have mocked Aristotle for regarding a human creation such as tragedy as exhibiting any pattern at all of natural evolution and development: this is one more example, they say, of Aristotle's obsession with biology as the model for every scientific discipline. But many respected

writers to this day treat human institutions as having a natural history involving a development from primitive to mature forms. It is taken for granted by many political writers in the West, for example, that liberal democracy is the mature form of the state, with monarchy and oligarchy as primitive approximations to, or regressive deviations from, an ideal norm. And while Sophoclean tragedy may not be the one and only mature form of drama, it remains to this day one of the most impressive products of representational art.

Modern scholars tell us that Aristotle's historical account of the development of Greek poetry is inaccurate. Epic, for instance, did not grow out of hymnody and panegyric. The Homeric hymns were no earlier than Homer, and the poets of encomia, such as Simonides and Pindar, wrote considerably later. Defenders of Aristotle say that his treatment is meant to be more schematic than chronological. Those who regard democracy as the ideal form of polity do not contend, after all, that every democracy has reached its maturity by the same route.

The Nature of Tragedy

Aristotle defines tragedy in the following terms:

> Tragedy is a representation of an action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself—presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions. (1449b24 ff.)

Every word in this definition needs careful explanation. Aristotle goes on to offer paraphrases for each of them—except for the most difficult of all, namely *katharsis* or purification. This is the only time the word is used in the *Poetics* and it is never defined. It has been the object of much discussion among commentators, as we shall see. But before contributing to the controversy I will summarize what Aristotle himself has to tell us in expansion of his definition.

Six things, Aristotle says, are necessary for a tragedy: the story, the moral element, the style, the ideas, the staging, and the music. It is the first two of these that chiefly interest him. Stage performance and musical accompaniment are dispensable accessories: what is great in a tragedy can be appreciated from a mere reading of the text. The ideas and the style are more important: it is the thoughts expressed by the characters that arouse emotion in the hearer, and if they are to do so successfully they must be presented convincingly by the actors.

The two things that bring out the genius of a tragic poet are called by Aristotle *muthos* and *ethos*. *Muthos* is often translated 'plot', but it is just the ordinary Greek word for any story, and the *Poetics* has a different expression to denote the plot of a drama, *sustasis pragmatōn*, 'the putting together of events'. *Ethos* is often translated 'character', but this word on its own is inappropriate, since in English everyone who figures in the dramatis personae is a character in the drama, and on the other hand 'character' can also refer to a person's individuality, which is not what Aristotle has in mind. In translation, I have used 'moral element' when Aristotle is talking about the *ethos* of a drama and 'moral character' when he is talking about the *ethos* of a person. It is these two features of tragedy that really interest Aristotle, and he devotes a long chapter to *ethos*, and no less than five chapters to *muthos*.

The protagonist or tragic hero must be neither supremely good nor supremely bad: he should be a person of rank who is basically good, but comes to grief through erring in some serious way. A woman may have the kind of goodness necessary to be a tragic heroine, and even a slave may be a tragic subject. Whatever kind of person the protagonist is, it is important that he or she should have the qualities appropriate to them, and should be consistent throughout the drama. Every one of the dramatis personae should possess some good features: what they do should be in character, and what happens to them should be a necessary or probable outcome of their behaviour.

In Homeric epic the word 'good', applied to a person, can

indicate either social or moral status: it is not always clear whether it indicates power, prowess, or virtue. Echoes of this ambiguity survived into modern times. 'Aristocracy', a word transliterated from the Greek, means etymologically the rule of the best people. In Victorian and Edwardian times to call someone 'a gentleman' might be to compliment him on a particular set of virtues, or simply to indicate the class to which he belonged.

Something of the Homeric ambiguity survives in the *Poetics*. When, in Chapter 14, Aristotle praises Homer for making Achilles a good man and also a paradigm of stubbornness one wonders what moral qualities constitute his goodness, given what is related of him in the *Iliad*. Power, yes, prowess, yes, even, eventually, pity: but virtue? Again, we are told that tragedy deals with people who are 'better than us' and that its plots should deal with noble families: this suggests that tragedy concerns our social betters. But the mention of the goodness of women and slaves shows that it is moral status that is primarily in question. Certainly in his ethical treatises Aristotle is in no doubt that moral virtue is an essential element in human flourishing, whereas noble birth and material wealth are optional extras.

But if it is moral worth that is in question, how far can we accept the principle that every character must have some goodness in them? Should we criticize *Othello* because Iago is bad through and through, or reject *Paradise Lost* because Satan is a protagonist, or condemn *Don Giovanni* out of hand because of its hell-bound hero? Perhaps Aristotle's vision was narrowed because of the tiny number of characters in Greek drama. It is surely much more plausible to claim that every work of fiction should contain some characters with whom we can identify and who have something of goodness within them—though this is not a precept that every modern novelist obeys.

Aristotle insists that in tragedy the most important element of all is story: the characters are created for the sake of the story, and not the other way round. The plot must be a self-contained

narrative with a clearly marked beginning, middle, and end; it must be sufficiently short and simple for the spectator to hold all its details in mind. The play must have a unity. You do not make a tragedy by stringing together a set of episodes connected only by a common hero; rather, there must be a single significant action on which the whole plot turns (1451a21–9). Once again, one may query whether Aristotle's point can be generalized to fictions of other kinds: taken literally, his *diktat* would rule out *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, and the *Divina Commedia*. Undoubtedly there is a great difference between a tragic drama and a picaresque novel: but the beneficial effects that Aristotle attributes to tragedy may be achieved in either genre.

As Dorothy Sayers pointed out, in her Oxford lecture reprinted here, many of Aristotle's concepts and precepts concerning plot fit very well a genre which is even further distant from Greek tragedy than the picaresque novel—namely, the detective story. A tragedy must be a unified whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and it must be on an appropriate scale, not too long and not too short. In a typical tragedy, Aristotle tells us, the story gradually gets more complicated until a turning-point is reached, which Aristotle calls a 'reversal' (*peripeteia*). That is the moment at which the apparently fortunate hero falls to disaster, perhaps through a 'discovery' (*anagnorisis*), namely his coming into possession of some crucial but hitherto unknown piece of information (1454b19). The reversal marks the end of the complication (*deesis*) of the plot, which is followed by its explication (*lusis*) in which the twists earlier introduced are gradually unravelled (1455b24 ff.).

The most important of the six elements of tragedy are, then, the story and the morality of the characters. The third item is called by Aristotle *dianoia*—a common Greek word for 'thought', here rendered 'ideas'. By this he means the intellectual element of the dialogue: the thoughts expressed by the characters in offering arguments or reporting facts. *Dianoia* is the expression of the intelligence of the persons in the drama, while the choices they make are the expression of their moral character. *Dianoia*

is closely related to the fourth element of tragedy, style (*lexis*), which is the literary quality of its expression.

The fifth element is called by Aristotle *opsis*, which is literally 'visual appearance'; it is often translated 'spectacle'. This, with the sixth element, music, is what makes the difference between attending a performance of a tragedy and merely reading it at home. 'Staging' seems the most appropriate translation—it includes not only the stage-setting but also the visible performance of the actors. Music is treated only summarily in the *Poetics*.

Aristotle's observations are illustrated by constant reference to actual Greek plays, in particular to Sophocles' tragedy *King Oedipus*. Oedipus, at the beginning of the play, enjoys prosperity and reputation. He is basically a good man, but has the flaw of impetuosity. This makes him commit two fatal errors: he kills a stranger in a scuffle, and marries a bride without due diligence. The 'discovery' that the man he killed was his father, Laius, and the woman he married was his mother, Jocasta, leads to the 'reversal' of his fortune, as he is banished from his kingdom and blinds himself in shame and remorse.

This analysis by Aristotle of *King Oedipus* is a striking illustration of the lengths to which he was prepared to go to secularize the plots of Greek dramas. According to the mythology on which Sophocles drew for his play, Laius, having offended the god Apollo, was told that if he fathered a son he would be killed by him. Accordingly, when his son Oedipus was born he was handed over to a servant with orders to kill the child by exposing it. The servant instead gave the baby to a shepherd, who handed him over to the king and queen of Corinth to bring up and treat him as their son. Oedipus, informed by the Delphic oracle that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother, swore never to return to Corinth where, as he supposed, his parents lived. He went instead towards Thebes, and then fulfilled both the curse and the prophecy by murdering Laius and marrying his widow Jocasta. To a modern reader the most chilling feature of the tragedy is the insistence that no

matter what steps you take to thwart it, you must in the end succumb to a divine predestination. One who knew the Oedipus story only from Aristotle would never guess at the importance of this.

Tragedy and Emotion

In Aristotle's account of the moral virtues, as dealt with in books II to V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the second and third books of the *Eudemian Ethics*, the emotions play an important part. 'By emotions', Aristotle tells us (*EE* 1220b11), 'I mean things like anger, fear, shame, desire, and in general anything that as such is generally attended by feelings of pleasure and pain.' The mere occurrence of an emotion does not in itself imply any vice or virtue, but what does indicate character is the relation of emotion to reason. 'What is responsible for whether these emotions occur in accord with reason, or in opposition to it, is states of character: things like courage, temperance, cowardice, intemperance.' The virtues are abiding states, and thus differ from momentary emotions like anger and pity. What makes a person good or bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy, is neither the simple possession of faculties nor the simple occurrence of passions. It is rather a state of character which is expressed both in purpose (*prohairesis*) and in action (*praxis*) (*NE* 1103a11–b25; 1105a19–1106a13; *EE* 1220b1–20).

Virtue is expressed in good purpose, that is to say, a prescription for action in accordance with a good plan of life. The actions which express moral virtue will, Aristotle tells us, avoid excess and defect. A temperate person, for instance, will avoid eating or drinking too much; but he will also avoid eating or drinking too little. Virtue chooses the mean, or middle ground, between excess and defect, eating and drinking the right amount. Virtue is concerned not only with action but also with emotion. An irascible man is one who gets angry more often than he should, and an impassive man gets angry less often than he should.