peculiar to tragedy. Consequently anyone who understands what is good and bad in tragedy also understands about epic, since anything that epic poetry has is also present in tragedy, but what is present in tragedy is not all in epic poetry.

## 4. TRAGEDY: DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 *Definition*

6 We shall discuss the art of imitation in hexameter verse and comedy later;[22] as for tragedy, let us resume the discussion by stating the definition of its essence on the basis of what has already been said.

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification[23] of such emotions.

(By 'language made pleasurable' I mean that which possesses rhythm and melody, i.e. song. By the separation of its species I mean that some parts are composed in verse alone; others by contrast make use of song.)

### 4.2 *Component parts*

Since the imitation is performed by actors, it follows first of all that the management of the *spectacle* must be a component part of tragedy. Then there is *lyric poetry* and *diction*, since these are the medium in which the actors perform the imitation. (By 'diction' I mean the

actual composition of the verse; what is meant by 'lyric poetry' is self-evident.)

Now, tragedy is an imitation of an action, and the action is performed by certain agents. These must be people of a certain kind with respect to their character and reasoning. (It is on the basis of people's character and reasoning that we say that their actions are of 50a a certain kind, and in respect of their actions that people enjoy success or failure.) So *plot* is the imitation of the action (by 'plot' here I mean the organization of events); *character* is that in respect of which we say that the agent is of a certain kind; and *reasoning* is the speech which the agents use to argue a case or put forward an opinion.

So tragedy as a whole necessarily has six component parts, which determine the tragedy's quality: i.e. plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle and lyric poetry. The medium of imitation comprises two parts, the mode one, and the object three; and there is nothing apart from these.

### 4.3 *The primacy of plot*

Virtually all tragedians, one might say, use these formal elements; for in fact every drama alike has spectacle, character, plot, diction, song and reasoning.[24] But the most important of them is the structure of the events:

(i) Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life. Well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality; people possess certain qualities in accordance with their character, but they achieve well-being or its opposite on the basis of how they fare. So the imitation of character is not the purpose of what the agents do; character is included along with and on account of the actions. So the events, i.e. the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all.

## 5.5 *Universality*

9 It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or
51b necessity. The historian and the poet are not distinguished by their use of verse or prose; it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would be a history in verse just as much as in prose. The distinction is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen.[30]

For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars. The *universal* is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity; this is what poetry aims at, even though it applies individual names. The particular is the actions or experiences of (e.g.) Alcibiades.

In the case of comedy this is in fact clear. The poets construct the plot on the basis of probabilities, and then supply names of their own choosing; they do not write about a particular individual, as the lampoonists do. In the case of tragedy they do keep to actual names. The reason for this is that what is possible is plausible; we are disinclined to believe that what has not happened is possible, but it is obvious that what has happened is possible – because it would not have happened if it were not. To be sure, even in tragedy in some cases only one or two of the names are familiar, while the rest are invented, and in some none at all, e.g. in Agathon's *Antheus;*[31] in this play both the events and the names are invented, but it gives no less pleasure. So one need not try at all costs to keep to the traditional stories which are the subjects of tragedy; in fact, it would be absurd to do so, since even what is familiar is familiar only to a few, and yet gives pleasure to everyone.

So it is clear from these points that the poet must be a maker[32] of

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plots rather than of verses, insofar as he is a poet with respect to imitation, and the object of his imitation is action. Even if in fact he writes about what has happened, he is none the less a poet; there is nothing to prevent some of the things which have happened from being the kind of thing which probably would happen, and it is in that respect that he is concerned with them as a poet.

## 5.6 *Defective plots*

Of simple plots[33] and actions, the episodic ones are the worst. By an *episodic* plot I mean one in which the sequence of episodes is neither necessary nor probable. Second-rate poets compose plots of this kind of their own accord; good poets do so on account of the actors – in writing pieces for competitive display[34] they draw out the plot beyond its potential, and are often forced to distort the sequence. 52a

# 6. PLOT: SPECIES AND COMPONENTS

## 6.1 *Astonishment*

The imitation is not just of a complete action, but also of events that evoke fear and pity. These effects occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another. This will be more astonishing than if they come about spontaneously or by chance, since even chance events are found most astonishing when they appear to have happened as if for a purpose – as, for example, the statue of Mitys in Argos killed the man who was responsible for Mitys' death by falling on top of him as he was looking at it.[35] Things like that are not thought to occur at random. So inevitably plots of this kind will be better.

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## 6.2 *Simple and complex plots*

10 Some plots are simple, others complex, since the actions of which the plots are imitations are themselves also of these two kinds. By a *simple* action I mean one which is, in the sense defined, continuous and unified, and in which the change of fortune comes about without reversal or recognition. By *complex*, I mean one in which the change of fortune involves reversal or recognition or both. These must arise from the actual structure of the plot, so that they come about as a result of what has happened before, out of necessity or in accordance with probability. There is an important difference between a set of events happening *because* of certain other events and *after* certain other events.

## 6.3 *Reversal*

11 A *reversal* is a change to the opposite in the actions being performed, as stated – and this, as we have been saying, in accordance with probability or necessity. For example, in the *Oedipus* someone came to give Oedipus good news and free him from his fear with regard to his mother, but by disclosing Oedipus' identity he brought about the opposite result;[36] and in the *Lynceus*, Lynceus himself was being led off to be killed, with Danaus following to kill him, but it came about as a consequence of preceding events that the latter was killed and Lynceus was saved.[37]

## 6.4 *Recognition*

*Recognition*, as in fact the term indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship[38] or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune. Recognition

is best when it occurs simultaneously with a reversal, like the one in the *Oedipus*.

There are indeed other kinds of recognition. Recognition can come about in the manner stated with respect to inanimate and chance objects; and it is also possible to recognize whether someone has or has not performed some action. But the one that has most to do with the plot and most to do with the action is the one I have mentioned. For a recognition and reversal of that kind will involve pity or fear, and it is a basic premise that tragedy is an imitation of ac- *52b* tions of this kind. Moreover, bad fortune or good fortune will be the outcome in such cases.

Since the recognition is a recognition of some person or persons, some involve the recognition of one person only on the part of the other, when it is clear who the other is; but sometimes there must be a recognition on both sides (e.g. Iphigeneia is recognized by Orestes from the sending of the letter, but the recognition of Orestes by Iphigeneia had to be different).[39]

## 6.5 *Suffering*

So there are these two parts of the plot – reversal and recognition; a third is suffering. Of these, reversal and recognition have already been discussed; *suffering* is an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on).

## 6.6 *Quantitative parts of tragedy*

We have already mentioned the component parts of tragedy which 12 should be regarded as its formal elements. In quantitative terms, the separate parts into which it is divided are as follows: prologue; episode; finale; choral parts, comprising entry-song and ode – these are

common to all tragedies, while songs from the stage and dirges are found only in some.

The *prologue* is the whole part of a tragedy before the entry-song of the chorus; an *episode* is a whole part of a tragedy between whole choral songs; the *finale* is the whole part of a tragedy after which there is no choral song. Of the choral part, the *entry-song* is the first whole utterance of a chorus; an *ode* is a choral song without anapaests or trochaics; a *dirge* is a lament shared by the chorus and from the stage.

We have already mentioned the component parts of tragedy which should be regarded as its formal elements. In quantitative terms, the separate parts into which it is divided are these.[40]

## 7. THE BEST KINDS OF TRAGIC PLOT

### 7.1 *First introduction*

13 What, then, should one aim at and what should one avoid in constructing plots? What is the source of the effect at which tragedy aims? These are the topics which would naturally follow on from what has just been said.

### 7.2 *First deduction*

The construction of the best tragedy should be complex rather than simple; and it should also be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity, since that is the distinctive feature of this kind of imitation. So it is clear first of all that decent men should not be seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune – this does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust. Nor should depraved people be seen

undergoing a change from bad fortune to good fortune – this is the least tragic of all: it has none of the right effects, since it is neither agreeable, nor does it evoke pity or fear. Nor again should a very 53a wicked person fall from good fortune to bad fortune – that kind of structure would be agreeable, but would not excite pity or fear, since the one has to do with someone who is suffering undeservedly, the other with someone who is like ourselves (I mean, pity has to do with the undeserving sufferer, fear with the person like us); so what happens will evoke neither pity nor fear.

We are left, therefore, with the person intermediate between these. This is the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error[41] of some kind. He is one of those people who are held in great esteem and enjoy great good fortune, like Oedipus, Thyestes, and distinguished men from that kind of family.

It follows that a well-formed plot will be simple[42] rather than (as some people say) double, and that it must involve a change not *to* good fortune *from* bad fortune, but (on the contrary) *from* good fortune *to* bad fortune – and this must be due not to depravity but to a serious error on the part of someone of the kind specified (or better than that, rather than worse). There is evidence of this in practice. At first poets used to pick out stories at random; but nowadays the best tragedies are constructed around a few households, e.g. about Alcmeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus and any others whose lot it has been to experience something terrible – or to perform some terrible action.[43]

So the best tragedy, in artistic terms, is based on this structure. This is why those who criticize Euripides for doing this in his tragedies, most of which end in bad fortune, are making the same mistake;[44] for this is, as has been stated, correct. There is very powerful evidence for this. On stage and in performance people recognize that plays of this kind (provided that they are successfully executed) are the most tragic, and Euripides, even if his technique is