

## Aristotle, Classic Technique, and Greek Drama

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*This article was originally published in A Short History of the Drama. Martha Fletcher Bellinger. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927. pp. 61-67.*

IT is to the Greeks that we owe not only the first great plays, but also the first principles of criticism and of dramatic construction. Not every Athenian was a good critic, as some would have us think; but we know that the comic poets took it upon themselves to deliver judgments, to compare one writer with another, and in some measure, to lay down the laws of drama. It fell, however, to Aristotle, a philosopher and teacher born in the first quarter of the fourth century, to become not only the most important mouthpiece of Greek dramatic criticism, but also one of the most important influences in all the history of literature. He analyzed the plays of the fifth century as well as those of his own time, classified the kinds of drama, and laid down rules for the construction of tragedy.

Aristotle had the very human characteristic of harking back to the good old days, and thinking them much better than the days in which he lived. Taking scant account of Aeschylus, he regarded Sophocles and Euripides as models in tragedy. His chief complaints were that the poets of his own time spoiled their work by rhetorical display; that the actor was often of more importance than the play; and that the poets tampered with the plot in order to give a favorite actor an opportunity of displaying his special talent. He said that the poets were deficient in the power of portraying character, and that it was not even fair to compare them with the giants of the former era; that the drama was greatly in need of fresh topics, new treatment, and original ideas; that it was polished in diction, but lacking in force and vitality. The playwrights too frequently made use of the god-from-the-machine for the purpose of extricating characters from their troubles. Such was the tenor of Aristotle's "reviews" and criticisms.

### THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF ARISTOTLE

The greatest tragedy, in the opinion of Aristotle, was Oedipus the King by Sophocles. The reasons for its supremacy lay in the excellent management of plot and chorus, in the beauty of the language, in the irony of the situations, and in the general nobility of conception. Aristotle cited also the Helena of Euripides as a model of its kind, and lauded the author for the skill with which he had set forth the complicated plot. Euripides was to him the most tragic of the poets. At the same time, he found much in Euripides to censure. Only in Sophocles, the perfect writer, were united ideal beauty, clearness of construction and religious inspiration--the three qualities which alone make tragedy great.

The subjects of tragic drama, Aristotle said, were rightly drawn from ancient mythology, because coming from that source they must be true. If man had invented such strange incidents, they would have appeared impossible. The chief characters of a tragic action should be persons of consequence, of exalted station. The leading personage should not be a man characterized by great virtue or great vice, but of a mixed nature, partly good and partly bad. His errors and weaknesses lead him into misfortune. Such a mixture of good and evil makes him seem like ourselves, thus more quickly arousing our sympathy. The course of the tragic action should be such as to saturate the spectator with feelings of compassion, drive out his petty personal emotions, and so "purge" the soul through pity and terror (Catharsis). The crimes suitable for tragic treatment may be committed either in ignorance, or intentionally, and are commonly against friends or relatives. Crimes committed intentionally are generally the more dramatic and impressive. (This in spite of the fact that the central crime in Oedipus the King was committed in ignorance.) As to style, a certain archaic quality of diction is needful to the dignity of tragedy.

### THE THREE UNITIES

The most famous of the Aristotelian rules were those relating to the so-called unities--of time, place, and action. The unity of time limits the supposed action to the duration, roughly, of a single day; unity of place limits it to one general locality; and the unity of action limits it to a single set of incidents which are related as cause and effect, "having a beginning, a middle, and an end." Concerning the unity of time, Aristotle noted that all the plays since Aeschylus, except two, did illustrate such unity, but he did not lay down such a precept as obligatory. Perhaps tacitly he assumed that the observance of the unity of place would be the practice of good playwrights, since the chorus was present during the whole performance, and it would indeed be awkward always to devise an excuse for moving fifteen persons about from place to place. The third unity, that of action, is bound up with the nature not only of Greek but of all drama.

### GREEK DRAMA MORE CONCERNED WITH PLOT THAN WITH CHARACTER

Aristotle conceived the action, or plot, of a play as of far greater importance than the characters. This conception he gained from the plays of the fifth century, which, in general, centered around a personified passion rather than around a character. The action was "the vital principle and very soul of drama." Again he says, "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of actions." Second in

importance was characterization; and third were the sentiments aroused by the action. He insisted very clearly that in tragedy the plot does not rise out of the characters, but on the contrary the plot tests the characters through the working-out of destiny -- "blind fate." The main duty of the dramatist was to organize first the action, then display the moral character of his people under the blows of fate. "The incidents of the action, and the structural ordering of these incidents, constitute the end and purpose of tragedy." Finally, and perhaps most important of all, was Aristotle's belief that although tragedy should purge the emotions through pity and terror, yet all drama was meant to entertain: tragedy through the sympathies, comedy through mirth.

#### PERVERSION OF ARISTOTLE'S PRINCIPLES

In this manner was begun the formulated technique of the drama. The principles enunciated by Aristotle were deduced from a study of the plays which were effective in his time, and under the conditions of the Athenian stage; but as time went on, critics and playwrights often studied Aristotle instead of plays, and left out of consideration differing circumstances and conditions. In this way, rules, created for the open-air Athenian production, were applied indiscriminately to all sorts of stages, whether indoors or out. Many writers failed to recognize the new life in their own art, and missed seeing the truth that a first-hand observation of life is always of more value than rules of any sort. Therefore an immemorial war has been waged between the sticklers for old laws, on the one side, and, on the other, the genuinely creative writers. In no art has this war been more apparent than in the drama; and in no art have rigid rules been more oppressive. There have been long periods when the dominance of technical rules, wholly or partially outgrown, has sterilized and all but killed the theater.

**Group 1:** Summarize the section, "THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF ARISTOTLE." Develop short synopsis of section along with further independent research.

**Group 2:** Summarize the section, "THE THREE UNITIES." Develop short synopsis of section along with further independent research.

**Group 3:** Summarize the section, "GREEK DRAMA MORE CONCERNED WITH PLOT THAN WITH CHARACTER." Develop short synopsis of section along with further independent research.

**Group 4:** Summarize the section, "PERVERSION OF ARISTOTLE'S PRINCIPLES." Develop short synopsis of section along with further independent research.

**Group 5:** Independently research Aristotle and develop a brief biographical sketch.

**Group 6:** Independently research Plato's view on drama.