

Selections from Aristotle

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1. *Poetics* 1448b4–19 (Mimesis)

Two causes seem to give rise to poetry as a whole, and these are natural. Mimesis [*mimēsis*] is innate in human beings from childhood, and they differ from the other animals in that the human is the most mimetic [*mimētikos*] and begins its education through mimesis. All human beings take pleasure in mimesis, and there happens to be proof of this in practice: we take pleasure in looking upon the most exact images of the very things we find grievous to look at, such as shapes of the most despised beasts or corpses. The reason for this is that understanding is very pleasurable not only for philosophers, but equally for all people—although they take part in this only superficially. Therefore they enjoy seeing images, because while viewing they perceive and infer what each thing is, along the lines of “this is that.” But if you happen not to have seen the thing already, the thing of mimesis [*mimēma*] causes pleasure not in that way but by its workmanship or color or some such cause.

2. *Poetics* 1449b24–28 (Catharsis)

Tragedy, then, is the re-enactment [*mimēsis*] of a serious and complete action. It has magnitude, with language embellished individually for each of its forms and in each of its parts. It is done by performers [*drôntes*] and not by way of narrative, bringing about through pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] the purification [*katharsis*] of such emotions [*pathēmata*].

3. *Poetics* 1451a36-b11 (Poetry and History)

It is clear from what has been said that the task of the poet is not to tell what happened, but to tell the sort of thing that would happen and what is possible according to likelihood or necessity. The historian and the poet differ not by whether they use meter or not—it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into meter and it would no less be history, with or without meter. The difference is that the historian tells what happened, while the poet tells the sort of thing that would happen. Therefore poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry speaks more of generalities [“things with respect to the whole”], while history speaks of particulars [“things each one at a time”]. The general deals with what sort of man happens by likelihood or necessity to say or do what sort of thing—this is what poetry aims at, adding names later. The particular deals with what Alcibiades did or what happened [*paskhein*] to him.

4. *Poetics* 1453a17-22 (Subject Matter)

At first the poets used to go through whatever plots [*mūthoi*] they chanced upon, but now the finest tragedies are composed about a few dynasties, such as the ones about Alkmaion, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephos, and all the others to whom it happened that they suffered [*paskhein*] or did [*poieîn*] terrible things.

5. Politics 1342a8-15 (Catharsis)

We see from sacred songs that whenever those who are in a state of *enthousiasmos* [= being *entheos* 'possessed' = 'having a *theos* (god) inside] use songs that stir up the *psūkhē*, they are put into a condition as if they had undergone a medical treatment and *katharsis*. People liable to pity or fear must experience the same thing—and other generally emotional [*pathētikoi*] people, as much as is appropriate for each. All of them attain some *katharsis* and are pleasantly relieved.

6. Rhetoric 1371a31-b10 (Mimesis)

Both understanding and wonder are, for the most part, pleasurable. In wonder there is the desire to understand... . Since both understanding and wonder are pleasurable, it is necessary that a work of mimesis also be pleasurable, like painting, sculpture, poetry, and everything that is well represented [*mimēisthai*], even if the thing represented [*mimēisthai*] is not in itself pleasurable. For it is not there that the pleasure lies, but in the inference "this is that." What happens as a result is that we understand something.

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