

Handout: Plain Speaking Tragedies: The Role of *Lexis* in the *Poetics*Abstract: <https://camws.org/sites/default/files/meeting2021/abstracts/2570AristotleLexis.pdf>**1. Aristotle, *Poetics* 22, 1458^a18–23**

“Excellence of style consists in clarity without banality. Now, the greatest clarity comes from the use of standard terms, but this involves banality: examples of this are the poetry of Cleophon and Stheneleus. Grandeur and avoidance of the ordinary, by contrast, can be achieved by the use of alien language (by which I mean foreign terms, metaphor, lengthened terms, and everything which goes beyond the standard)” (trans. Halliwell [1987:56]).

λέξεως δὲ ἀρετὴ σαφὴ καὶ μὴ ταπεινὴ εἶναι. σαφεστάτη μὲν οὖν ἐστὶν ἢ ἐκ τῶν κυρίων ὀνομάτων, ἀλλὰ ταπεινὴ: παράδειγμα δὲ ἡ Κλεοφῶντος ποιήσις καὶ ἡ Σθενέλου. σεμνὴ δὲ καὶ ἐξαιλάττουσα τὸ ἰδιωτικὸν ἢ τοῖς ξενικοῖς κεχρημένη: ξενικὸν δὲ λέγω γλῶτταν καὶ μεταφορὰν καὶ ἐπέκτασιν καὶ πᾶν τὸ παρὰ τὸ κύριον.

2. Aristotle *Poetics* 4, 1449^a19–281.1

“A further aspect of [the development of the tragic genre] concerns scale: after a period of slight plots and humorous diction, it was only at a late stage that tragedy attained dignity by departing from the style of satyr-plays, and that the iambic meter replaced the trochaic tetrameter. To begin with, poets used the tetrameter because the poetry had more of the tone of a satyr-play and of dance; and it was only when speech was brought in that the nature of the genre found its appropriate meter (the iambic is the most colloquial of meters, as we see from the fact that we frequently produce the rhythm of iambic lines in our conversation, while we rarely produce hexameters and only by departing from the register of ordinary speech)” (trans. Halliwell [1987:35]).

ἔτι δὲ τὸ μέγεθος: ἐκ μικρῶν μύθων καὶ λέξεως γελοίας διὰ τὸ ἐκ σατυρικοῦ μεταβαλεῖν ὄψε ἀπεσεμνύθη, τὸ τε μέτρον ἐκ τετραμέτρου ἰαμβεῖον ἐγένετο. τὸ μὲν γὰρ πρῶτον τετραμέτρῳ ἐχρῶντο διὰ τὸ σατυρικὴν καὶ ὀρχηστικωτέραν εἶναι τὴν ποιήσιν, λέξεως δὲ γενομένης αὐτὴ ἢ φύσις τὸ οἰκεῖον μέτρον εὔρε: μάλιστα γὰρ λεκτικὸν τῶν μέτρων τὸ ἰαμβεῖόν ἐστιν: σημεῖον δὲ τούτου, πλείστα γὰρ ἰαμβεῖα λέγομεν ἐν τῇ διαλέκτῳ τῇ πρὸς ἀλλήλους, ἐξάμετρα δὲ ὀλιγάκις καὶ ἐκβαίνοντες τῆς λεκτικῆς ἁρμονίας.

3. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy* ch. 9

“Everything that rises to the surface in dialogue, the Apolline part of Greek tragedy, appears simple, transparent, beautiful. In this sense the dialogue is a copy of the Hellene, whose nature is expressed in dance, because in dance the greatest strength is still only potential, although it is betrayed by the suppleness and luxuriance of movement. Thus the language of Sophocles' heroes surprises us by its Apolline definiteness and clarity, so that we feel as if we are looking straight into the innermost ground of its being, and are somewhat astonished that the road to this ground is so short” (trans. Speirs [Cambridge, 1999]).

4. Aristotle, *Poetics* 6, 1450^b13–15

“I define ‘diction’ as expression through the choice of words—something that has the same capacity in both verse and prose.”

λέξιν εἶναι τὴν διὰ τῆς ὀνομασίας ἐρμηνείαν, ὃ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἐμμέτρων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λόγων ἔχει τὴν αὐτὴν δύναμιν.

5. The elements of a tragic work (*Poetics* ch. 6, 1450^a39–1450^b20)

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| i. Plot (ὁ μῦθος) | the objects of poetic imitation |
| ii. Character (τὰ ἦθη) | (ἃ δὲ μιμοῦνται) |
| iii. Reasoning (ἡ διάνοια) | |
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| iv. Diction (ἡ λέξις) | the means (οἷς μὲν γὰρ μιμοῦνται) |
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| v. Song (ἡ μελοποιία) | seductive/pleasurable elements |
| vi. Performance (ἡ ὄψις) | —but disposable at the limit |

6. Aristotle, *Poetics* 9, 1451^a36–51^b11

“...[T]he poet’s task is to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which *could* occur (οἷα ἂν γένοιτο), and are possible by the standards of probability or necessity...” (trans. Halliwell [1987], 40–41)

φανερὸν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ’ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. ὁ γὰρ ἱστορικὸς καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς οὐ τῷ ἢ ἔμμετρα λέγειν ἢ ἄμετρα διαφέρουσιν (εἶη γὰρ ἂν τὰ Ἡροδότου εἰς μέτρα τεθῆναι καὶ οὐδὲν ἦττον ἂν εἶη ἱστορία τις μετὰ μέτρου ἢ ἄνευ μέτρων): ἀλλὰ τούτῳ διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο. διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποιήσις ἱστορίας ἐστίν: ἢ μὲν γὰρ ποιήσις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δ’ ἱστορία τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστον λέγει. ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἄττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἢ ποιήσις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη: τὸ δὲ καθ’ ἕκαστον, τί Ἀλκιβιάδης ἔπραξεν ἢ τί ἔπαθεν.

7. Aristotle, *Poetics* 9, 1451^b27–30

“So, it is clear from these points that the poet must be a maker of plots rather than verses, insofar as he is a poet with respect to imitation, and the object of imitation is action.”

δῆλον οὖν ἐκ τούτων ὅτι τὸν ποιητὴν μᾶλλον τῶν μύθεων εἶναι δεῖ ποιητὴν ἢ τῶν μέτρων, ὅσῳ ποιητὴς κατὰ τὴν μίμησιν ἐστίν, μιμεῖται δὲ τὰς πράξεις.

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