THE RIGORISM OF ARISTOTLE IN HIS POETICS:
FACT OR FICTION?

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That Aristotle laid down norms for tragedy in his famed literary criticism, the Ars Poetica (Περί Ποιητικῆς) is a well-known fact. There is also little doubt that authors and critics through the centuries have, to a greater or lesser extent, regarded and followed him as an authority in this matter. But that a rigorism in his views on tragedy has been and is still being wrongly ascribed to him, is a fact that has as yet largely been neglected. The purpose of this investigation is to take the treatise of Aristotle and from the Greek text as starting-point, leaving secondary sources out of account, to select a number of aspects, and by reason of his choice of words to distinguish between properties of the pre-eminent tragedy which he regards as indispensable and imperative on the one hand, and the obvious characteristics of tragedy in general on the other. Furthermore I wish to prove from his deliberate choice of words that Aristotle consistently distinguishes between tragedies in general and the ‘ideal’ tragedy, and that when he lays down rigorous rules for the latter, these naturally pertain to the topmost layer of tragedies only, and are not for one moment meant to be the master plan according to which all tragedies must be constructed so as to qualify as such. I shall moreover indicate that his seemingly rigorous precepts are in reality not as inflexible as is generally assumed. Since the text itself is taken as starting-point and only the relevant sections are selected, justice cannot now be done to the numerous scholars who have published on Aristotle and tragedy.¹ There inevitably remain unanswered questions as a result of textual problems, but these have no effect upon the general trend I wish to indicate. Furthermore I wish to draw attention to the neglected distinction deliberately made between obvious elements of all tragedies and imperative qualities of the pre-eminent tragedy.

For a better understanding of the authority of Aristotle, some introductory remarks about him and his Ars Poetica are required.

Aristotle, a man of phenomenal learning, wrote on subjects ranging from logic, physics, metaphysics and ethics, to biology, psychology, theology and politics. His works are all but elementary reading matter—not only owing to the complicated subtlety of his ideas, but also as a result of his often obscure mode of expression. His attitude is often authoritative e.g. his view that the difference between master and slave is a natural and permanent feature of society and that this is good for both parties concerned. As a result of this trenchant attitude we are often inclined wrongly to assume that in the literary field too he propounds

his views as rigorous laws. Indeed, the following observation of Werner Jaeger gives us an idea of the extent of Aristotle’s influence through the ages: “Everybody knew, indeed that he was a power to be reckoned with... Melanchthon and the Jesuits both built their theology on his ‘Metaphysics’. Machiavelli got his rules from the ‘Politics’, the French critics and poets theirs from the ‘Poetics’. Moralists and jurists have drawn on the ‘Ethics’, and all philosophers down to Kant and far beyond on the ‘Logic’. 

The *Ars Poetica*, at first appearance a short treatise of lesser importance, was written between 330 and 323 B.C. The oldest existing Greek text dates from approximately 1000 A.D. The treatise became available to the western world for the first time when Giorgio Valla published a Latin translation in 1498. The *Poetics* was one of Aristotle’s later works and was evidently left in an unfinished state—possibly a set of lecture notes; because of its concise nature philologists found it aesthetically unattractive; moreover the style compares unfavourably with that of Plato. Consequently scholars through the ages have tried by all manner of explanations, emendations and transpositions to force it into the form of a readable text book. The general condition of the transmitted text scarcely contributes to a consensus of opinion as to its contents and meaning. Aristotle undertakes to discuss the four main branches of poetry i.e. epic and lyrical poetry, comedy and tragedy. However, only the last form is treated in detail. During the Renaissance the erroneous view caught on that Aristotle had laid down a set of rules for prospective poets. He should however rather be regarded as a refined and learned man of the 4th century B.C. who, having subjected the literary products of Greek civilisation to an empirical investigation and a critical evaluation, wrote down his observations in the form of generalisations and guiding lines. The misconception regarding Aristotle’s purpose is formulated by Gassner as follows: ‘It is, indeed, one of the ironies of history that Aristotle’s admirers from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries should have tried to convert the explorer into an absolute lawmaker.’ The laws he seemingly lays down, are rules already embedded in the Greek literary works; Aristotle merely succeeds in expounding and formulating the universal or generally accepted elements of these norms. The method he applies to tragedy shows a marked resemblance to his discussion of for instance biological, ethical and other questions. His *Poetics* contains many quotations from and references to Greek tragedies. Not only does he discuss the origin and nature of the genre as practised till his time, but from his observations he also gives his opinions as to the prerequisites for a pre-eminent tragedy. But for a correct understanding

4. Especially after Castelvetro who read the so-called rule of the ‘three unities’ into the *Poetics* (1570).
of views he propounds the reader ought to study the Poetics in the light of his other writings and especially of his philosophic system as a whole. Aristotle evidently chooses the Sophoclean tragedy King Oedipus as his most suitable model, for this drama has an unmistakable effect on his views.

On approaching the question as to Aristotle’s authority in the sphere of literature I cannot agree with, amongst others, G. E. R. Lloyd when he maintains that Aristotle too readily assumes that the various genres such as tragedy, epic poetry, etc. had been in a continual process of development, but that in his time they had acquired their natural and permanent form. Such rigour should not be imputed to Aristotle as appears from his admission in the Poetics that the poet may use fictitious subjects instead of the conventional myths (c. 9.8.). Furthermore metre is, according to him, not as essential for tragedy as was generally accepted (1, 6–9), and he even leaves room for further development (c. 4. 11). He does not regard the three great tragic poets (Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) as the norm or their works as canonical. Those who wish to typify Aristotle as rigorous, ascribe to him an ‘authority’ to which he does not lay claim himself. But as might have been expected there ensued periods when this forced authority had a restricting influence upon the potential development of tragedy. One may fairly inquire which other or even more developed forms tragedy might have acquired had it not been for this restricting ‘authority’.

How then is the authority of Aristotle to be understood? This high regard for him emerges from the fact that, as a competent judge, he critically investigates and compares all available tragedies inter se, then lists and explains the typical characteristics of tragedy in general on the one hand, and finally ‘discovers’ the indispensable qualities for the ‘ideal’ tragedy on the other. The degree to which poets and critics acknowledge, use and endorse these elements determines the extent of Aristotle’s authority. As mentioned above a fact too often neglected is that when Aristotle becomes seemingly rigorous he is writing about the ideal tragedy. We are therefore not justified in concluding that he would have rejected everything which does not comply with these ‘ideals’. There are indeed tragedies varying from excellent to poor—but all are tragedies.

I now intend to distinguish clearly, on the basis of Aristotle’s choice of words, between typical and obvious characteristics mentioned categorically (mostly by ἐστι, ἔνανι or εἰσι), and essential prerequisites deliberately expressed by words of obligation such as αὐτάκη, χρή or δέ. Is there any difference in importance, i.e. is the former not most important but the latter indispensable? By upholding this distinction in analysing Aristotle’s pronouncements on tragedy I intend to

8. Cf. the important τῆς καλλιοτης τραγωδίας, c. 13, 2; also κοινοτού ἀμείνονος (14.1); ἐκπρωτον (14.7); ἔλλοιν (14.8); κράτιστον (14.9). Note also the unmistakable degrees in the effect of the tragedy as illustrated by the words μᾶλλον . . . μᾶλλον . . . μᾶλλον . . . θεομοιστάτα (9.11, 12).
indicate to what extent he regarded his findings either on the one hand as laws or as norms or on the other as optional characteristics.

In his opening chapter Aristotle states that epic poetry, tragedy and comedy are (ποιμένοις οὕσαι) an imitation (μίμησις) of character (ηθός: what a person is, i.e. his moral qualities), of emotion (πάθος: what a person experiences), and of action (πράξεις: what a person does). Here we have a plain statement of a finding, of an obvious fact, which is exactly the typical example of how Aristotle brings into relief and formulates the universal element which is embedded in the tragedies studied by him. To reject this definition implies a failure to appreciate the authority not so much of Aristotle as of a universal obviousness which is of general validity.

In c.5.4 we read that tragedy tends as far as possible to fall within a single revolution of the sun. It is quite clear from the terms used that this is no 'law' but a general tendency which was empirically observed and stated accordingly. In spite of this it gave rise to the so-called 'unity of time' which led to absurd extremes: in England Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries were sharply criticised and even disparaged as barbarous for ignoring this 'law'. The Neo-classicists went even further—but for all that the action in tragedies such as the Agamemnon and the Eumenides extends to a number of days! Of the so-called 'three unities' (time, place and action) only the last is Aristotelian. Here too a fairly obvious feature is stated (ελιακ is used). The history of the 'three unities' illustrates how a false 'authority' hampered the development of tragedy.

Chapter 6 commences with the well-known definition of tragedy: It is an imitation of an action (μίμησις πράξεως) that is serious (σοφιότατος), and complete (τελείας) and of a certain magnitude (μέγεθος). It is presented in embellished language (δυσμένα λόγια) effecting through pity and fear (έλεου και φόβου) a catharsis (κάθαρσις) of these and similar emotions. If we think in terms of this definition of tragedies written during the last few centuries it is plain that it has stood the test of time, probably because it leaves ample scope for variation with regard to its various aspects. Once again it should be noted that Aristotle regards these as the obvious characteristics of tragedy in general (εστίν) and not as indispensable prerequisites for the ideal tragedy; had this not been the case he would certainly have denoted this clearly by words such as ἀνάγκη, δεί, etc.

The catharsis section of the definition has been discussed in great detail—perhaps more frequently than any other passage in classical literature—partly on account of its elliptical nature. Without being exhaustive, the following translations illustrate the variety of interpretations: 'a cure for painful

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9. For Plato μίμησις is on a low level, i.e. imitation of a reality which is already a copy of the idea. Aristotle fills this concept with a new and fuller meaning. Cf. amongst others L. Golden and O. B. Hardison, Aristotle's Poetics, 1968, Epilogue 'On Aristotelian Imitation', 281—296.
10. C. 58 ὁ μᾶλλον περισταί ὥσπερ μίν περιόδοι αἱλου εἶναι ὄ μικρὸν ἐξπλατάσσειν.
11. Cap. 7.2: Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole: κεῖται δὴ ἡμιν τὴν τραγῳδίαν τελείας καὶ ὀλίγος πράξεως εἶναι μίμησιν.
emotions', 12 . . . an emotional relief, a pleasurable vent for overcharged feeling', 13 . . . an easing of tension of the same sentiments in the audience'. 14 Basically relief and purgation are concerned, not only of the spectator's sympathy with the tragic hero, but also of his fear that the hero's fate may befall him too. This view of Aristotle as to the ethical purpose of tragedy was replaced during the Renaissance by the idea that the aim was to moralise by providing examples of virtue and vice, an approach which was symptomatic of the low level to which Aristotle's authority was unwittingly forced during this period.

In c.6.7 the six indispensable (ἀνάγκη) elements of tragedy are listed, 15 i.e. plot (μύθος), character (ήθος), diction (λέξις), thought (διάνοια), spectacle (δρας) and song (μελοποιία), seemingly in order of importance. It is clearly a necessity (ἀνάγκη) for Aristotle that all six elements should be present. The reader will notice that this rigorism is not confined to the ideal tragedy owing to the fact that a tragedy lacking one or more of these elements was to Aristotle's mind inconceivable. Nowadays more use is being made and should be made of music. For the rest all the remaining aspects are still to be found to a greater or lesser extent in tragedies, although music and spectacle do not primarily concern the dramatist but rather the producer.

For Aristotle plot is more important than character. But plot is the imitation of action, 16 and action reveals ethos to the spectator. In real life a man's nature causes his deeds, whereas in drama deeds 'cause' the nature of a character: Shakespeare for example assigns personality to Macbeth and Hamlet by way of deeds he lets them commit. 17 Or, put in a different way: the plot or action is like a sketch coloured by ethos, in the words of Butcher: 'Ethos divorced from plot is like a daub of beautiful colour, which apart from form gives little pleasure. The plot is the groundwork, the design, through the medium of which ethos derives its meaning and dramatic value'. 18 For this reason Aristotle describes plot (μύθος) as the first principle (ἀρχή) and the soul (ψυχή) of tragedy (c.6.14). 19 It is clear from the words used by Aristotle that he simply regards this as obvious (ἐστὶν).

There are three prerequisites for the plot: Firstly, it has a beginning, a middle and an end (c.7.3), but this too is seen as an obvious characteristic of tragedy in general. For long periods this was misunderstood, for instance writers of religious drama during the Middle Ages interpreted this as meaning a beginning at the Creation and an end coinciding with the Last Judgement. Perhaps one may agree with Hardison (p. 140) who sees the beginning as the first stage in the

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15. ἀνάγκη οὖν πάσης τραγῳδίας μὴ εἶναι ἔξ.
16. C. 6.6.: ἐστὶν δὴ τῆς μὲν πράξεως ὁ μύθος ἡ μέμησις.
19. Cf. c.7.1: πρῶτον καὶ μέγιστον τῆς τραγῳδίας.
change of a character’s fortune (e.g. Oedipus) and the end as the unavoidable climax. Secondly, the extent of the plot must be limited, and Aristotle regards this as a necessity (δεῖ, 7.5) for he realises there is a possibility of choice (too long or too short) and for practical reasons this has to be explicitly excluded. Thirdly, the plot must have (χρῆ) structural unity, all events being functionally related—a principle which is still being maintained after coming strongly to the fore during the era of French Classical tragedy. Here too the strong form χρῆ is used (c.8.4) so as to exclude any alternative—yet again a case of rigorism justified on logical grounds.

A further characteristic of poetry regarded by Aristotle as obvious (εστίν) is that poetry is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history.20 for poetry expresses the universal (τά καθόλου), history the particular (τά καθ’ ἐκαστον). As far as he is concerned there is simply no alternative and therefore he does not use a form of obligation. It may well be asked whether poetry in the various contemporary languages still possesses this universal feature. Incidentally, this ‘universal’ aspect was the origin from which renaissance and neo-classical critics derived a didactic theory of literature.21

In c.9.8 Aristotle states explicitly that we must not at all costs keep to (ζητητέον) the traditional mythological themes.22 This view represents an unusual breach of Greek dramatic conventions, and by his choice of the forceful verbal adjective he wishes to forstall the use of exclusively mythological themes. In this respect his authority is therefore acknowledged either consciously or unconsciously. This cannot be regarded as a rigorous law for the striving itself is accentuated and not its result.

In his subsequent remark Aristotle says the poet must be (δεῖ) the maker of plots (μῦθων) rather than of verses (μέτρων) (c.9.9). Accordingly verse mongering as such is inferior and content rather than form should be the poet’s primary concern. This is an important norm which still holds good today. If a poet therefore has a choice between more than one possibility and this choice is not obvious, Aristotle indicates the priorities in no uncertain terms. This is not a case of rigorism for the aim is not total exclusion of one element, but rather the underlining of a priority.

He returns to the plot and states the obvious (εἰσὶ) namely that plots are either simple (ἀπλοί) or complex (πεπλεγμένοι) (c.10.1): In the first case change (μετάβασις) takes place without a reversal of fortune (περιτέτεια) or a recognition (ἄναγνώρισις), whereas in the complex tragedy the change coincides.

It is most important to realise the Aristotle allows both types, but for the writer of the ideal tragedy (καλλίστη τραγῳδία, 13.2) there is no choice: his plot

20. ψιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον (c. 9.3).
22. δοστ’ οὐ πάντως εἶναι ζητητέον τῶν παραδεδεμένων μῦθων.
must (δεῖ) be complex.\textsuperscript{23} This confirms the point made earlier i.e. that Aristotle is no rigorous legislator: he acknowledges variety within the genre, but for the best result there is but one way.

The reversal as well as the recognition should (δεῖ) arise from the internal structure of the plot.\textsuperscript{24} While there is a possibility of a choice between the simple or complex plot, there is no alternative when it comes to the necessity of organic cohesion between the plot on the one hand and the reversal or recognition on the other. This prerequisite is of such importance to Aristotle that he regards this neither merely as an obvious characteristic of tragedies in general, nor as necessity for only the best of tragedies: all tragedies simply must have this coherence. The rigorism of this prescription is fully understandable and justified, for a successful tragedy without this organic unity is inconceivable.

Aristotle is outspoken about the ideal tragic hero (c.13). The ideal tragedy (τῆς καλλίστης τραγῳδίας) must (δεῖ) evoke pity and fear. Accordingly a

\textsuperscript{23} In cap. 16 he discusses and illustrates the various types of recognition scenes and concludes that the best (βελτιστή) must flow naturally from the incidents. However, this chapter is regarded by many as a late addition. Moreover, there is of course no specific 'ideal tragedy' and this explains why Aristotle selects his illustrations from so many different tragedies.

\textsuperscript{24} Σ. 10.3: ταῦτα δὲ δεῖ γίνεσθαι ἐκ αὐτῆς τῆς συστάσεως τοῦ μύθου.
virtuous man must not (δει) be brought from prosperity to adversity—it merely shocks us. Neither should a base man pass from adversity to prosperity—this is neither tragic nor morally justifiable. Likewise a villain should not fall into adversity—this serves him right and inspires neither pity nor fear. By a process of elimination he comes to the conclusion: the ideal is a man like ourselves (διμοτος) who although not deserving of such a fate (ἀνάξιος), ends up in misfortune through some error or flaw (ἀμαρτία). Yet again one must be careful not to typify Aristotle as rigorous: he admits that there are various possibilities, but if the best result (τῆς καλλίστης) is aimed at, it is a necessity (δει, ἀνάγκη, 13.2) that the last type of hero should be portrayed. His ‘authority’ in this matter is endorsed by what may be called the universal authority of empathy. Incidentally, after Aristotle’s authority had reached its lowest level during the Renaissance, the French dramatist Corneille produced his Le Cid, a highly successful drama for the simple reason that his hero is portrayed in compliance with Aristotle’s norms.

The error or flaw (ἀμαρτία) through which a hero ends up in misfortune should be briefly touched upon. The change of fortune of the hero must of necessity (ἀνάγκη) be brought about by ‘hamartia’—but, in keeping with Aristotle’s attitude of deliberate differentiation, this holds good only for the well constructed plot (τῶν καλῶς ἔχοντα μὴθον) for which all other possible causes of a downfall are explicitly excluded. This implies that the hero in an average tragedy may fall into adversity through other causes.

Fear and pity, says Aristotle (c.14.1), may be aroused by spectacular means, but they may also result from the inner structure of the action. The latter is the better way and indicates a superior poet (πρότερον καὶ ποιητοῦ ἀμείνονος). The possibility of a choice is simply stated as obvious (ἐστιν). But the element of necessity (δει) is introduced and once again in correlation with tragedy of superior quality (ποιητοῦ ἀμείνονος): for a better product the poet must achieve his aim without the aid of spectacular means which is a less artistic method (ἄτεχνοτερον, 14.2).

Aristotle continues his discussion of the ideal tragedy by saying that the poet must afford pleasure (δει ἡδονῆν παρασκευάζειν, c. 14.3), the medium being pity and fear. The prerequisite is that the tragic incidents (τὰ πάθη) must necessarily (ἀνάγκη) occur between those who are near or dear to one another. It should be noted that he does not regard this as an obvious characteristic of tragedy in general, but as essential for the ideal tragedy.

In chapter 15 our author returns to the ἰθώς or nature of a character the ideal at which must be aimed (δει στοιχέζομαι) being a good character (χρηστῶν), true to its nature (ἀρμάττοντα), true to life (διμοτον), and consistent (διμαλῶν).

25. A tremendous amount has been published on this aspect: cf. especially J. M. Bremer, Hamarían, Amsterdam, 1969.
26. ἀνάγκη . . . μεταβάλλειν . . . δι’ ἀμαρτίαν μεγάλην (c. 13.4).
Without analysing the diverse interpretations, I wish to stress the scope of free play within the framework held up as ideal—as against his avowed rigorism.

In the portrayal of character the poet should always aim (χρῆ... δεῖ ξητεῖν, c. 15.6) at the necessary or the probable. In this case the element of necessity (χρῆ) is not used in connection with the ideal tragedy, but this is not a rigorous prescription by which a certain element is totally excluded: the ideal is stated which must be pursued, be it to a lesser or greater extent.

Next he states that the unravelling (λύσις) of the plot must (δεῖ) arise out of the plot itself and must not be brought about by the ‘deus ex machina’ (ἀπὸ μηχανῆς, c.15.7). Alternative solutions, specifically the intervention by gods, are thus rigorously excluded. This is no arbitrary rigorism but is fully justified, and no one would wish to blame Aristotle for his attitude in this matter. In western literature Aristotle’s authority in this regard has been generally acknowledged and was so acknowledged even during the Renaissance.

Tragedy is (έστιν) an imitation of persons who are above the common level—this is the simple statement of an obvious fact—, therefore the example of good portrait-painters should be followed (δεῖ μιμεῖσθαι) and characters should be portrayed (δεῖ ποιεῖν) true to life (δομούς) but not more beautiful (καλλίους). This seeming rigorism however appears to be not so inflexible, for the exact extent of embellishment is not prescribed.

The following three aspects of poetry or tragedy are simply stated as obvious (έστιν) having been empirically observed: poetry implies either natural ability or a strain of madness. Secondly, every tragedy has two parts (έστιν), i.e. the complication (δέσις) and the unravelling (λύσις) (c. 18.1). Thirdly, there are four kinds of tragedy: the complex (πελαγεμένη, treated above), the pathetic (καθητική), the ethical (ηθική), and the simple (απλή) (c. 18.2). Again it should be noted that here a further example appears, not of the authority of Aristotle, but of the authority of the tragic poets of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.—an authority embedded in their works and observed and formulated by Aristotle as obvious characteristics of tragedies in general.

In c. 18.3 Aristotle expresses a most interesting principle which has perhaps not received its due attention: the poet must endeavour (δεῖ πειράσθαι) to combine all poetic elements; or failing that, the greatest number and those the most important; the reason for this is the caviling criticism of the day (συκοφαντοῦσιν). The critic, be he layman or scholar, is therefore acknowledged as critic and his opinion must be taken into account. This is a healthy

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27. ἔστι δὲ μιμησίς ἐστι στρατηγεία μελητόνων (c. 15.8).
28. διὸ εἰσφορᾶς ἡ ποιητική ἐστιν ἡ μακρινή (c. 17.2) Castelvecchio’s version ‘ability rather than madness’, is supported by the Arabian version (cf. Hardison, op. cit. 219 f.). It is interesting to note that Socrates (Plato, Apology 22c) also concludes from his interrogation of the poets that they write poetry not by wisdom (σοφία), but by some natural ability (φυσική) and inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμένη).
29. The focus here is not upon the narrative but the person. Many tragedies of this sort were produced during the 19th and 20th centuries. Cf. also Shakespeare’s monologues which centre around personalities.
principle, also as far as contemporary poetry is concerned. It is no rigorous law but a tendency toward an ideal which allows of much free play.

According to Aristotle the chorus should (δεῖ) be regarded as one of the actors and it should be an integral part of the whole (μόριον ... τοῦ ὀλοῦ, 18.7), as may be observed especially in the tragedies of Sophocles. In his opinion the tragedies of Euripides are not as successful because of these 'interludes'. Nevertheless they have been and are generally highly thought of. Those who wish to typify Aristotle as a rigorous lawmaker have here to my mind the only real basis for their view.

In chapters 20–22 diction (λέξεις) is treated and various valuable definitions are given.

The following two chapters deal with epic poetry which is compared with tragedy. The two genres differ only in scope and in metre. Aristotle is merely describing and comparing, and confirms the traditional conventions, without, however making laws. One misses the range and depth characteristic of his treatment of tragedy.

After some precepts to the poet concerning the object of imitation, he provides guiding lines for the critic, but with no element of compulsion. Having compared tragedy with epic poetry he concludes that tragedy is the superior art. The treatise then ends rather bluntly.

But what are the findings of this investigation? In the first place Aristotle was and is often wrongly interpreted and regarded as a rigorous lawmaker. Thus an unasked for 'authority' was forced upon him. To place his authority in its correct perspective we had to look not only at what he said about tragedy but also at how he said it. Secondly, his choice of words provided the key to the establishment of a deliberate difference he makes between obvious characteristics of and indispensable prerequisites for tragedy. Thirdly, a striking correlation was observed between these prerequisites and his deliberate periodic reference to the 'ideal' or 'best' tragedy. This needs clarifying: of the 27 cases analysed there are 10 in which obvious characteristics of tragedy are stated which he regards as the general and universal features of all tragedies. In these instances he mostly uses the word 'is' (ἐστὶ, ἐστιν, etc.). Of the 17 remaining cases there are five in which he deliberately refers to the 'ideal tragedy', and by denoting in forceful terminology a single quality which is the necessary prerequisite for the best result, he excludes any possible alternative. Terms such as 'must', 'should', 'ought' and 'necessary' are thus specifically used for preeminent tragedies. The remaining twelve instances where obligatory terms are not pertinently used in connection with the best tragedy, wrongly give the impression to a superficial reader that Aristotle is generally authoritative and rigorous, and that he has masterminded a plan according to which all tragedies must be constructed so as to qualify as tragedies. Upon a closer analysis of

30. C. 10.1; 13.1; 13.4; 14.1.2; 14.3.

31. It should be kept in mind that even though obligatory terms are not used explicitly with regard to the ideal tragedy, the possibility cannot be excluded that the correlation is implied.
his choice of words it becomes evident that in four of these twelve cases the precept is in reality stated as a necessary *endeavour or tendency*, and that in seven instances the rigorism can be explained on logical grounds because either a deviation from the rule is unthinkable, or there are varying degrees and some scope within this apparent rigorism. There is one case only that provides a basis for calling Aristotle a rigorist (18.7). In fine, Aristotle clearly distinguishes between tragedies in general and the ‘ideal’ tragedy, and rules for the latter pertain only to pre-eminent tragedies. He admits therefore that tragedies may differ radically in quality and may vary from outstanding to poor, but he does not deprive the poorer tragedies of their right of existence merely because they do not comply with the special requirements for the top quality tragedies. Therefore the rigorism ascribed to him, is unjustified, for on the one hand only the ideal tragedy is concerned, and on the other the rigorism simply denotes a striving after an idea, or it is a logical rigorism, or it allows of so much free play that the initial impression of inflexibility fades away completely.

Aristotle’s great merit lies in his ability of observing and illuminating the universal characteristics of tragedies, as well as in his explicit expression of the prerequisites for the ideal tragedy. He does not devise techniques himself but extracts a successful technique from existing Greek literature and lays it down as norm. He undoubtedly has a phenomenal mental capacity, an astonishing memory and critical ability, and the result of his investigations as presented in his *Ars Poetica* is incomparable.

32. ζητητέων, 9.8; δεὶ στοχάζεσθαι, 15.1; χρὴ ζητεῖν, 15.6; δεὶ πειράζονται, 18.3; cf. also δεὶ μᾶλιστα πειρᾶται, 5.4.
33. C. 6.7; 7.5; 8.4; 9.9; 10.3; 15.7; 15.8.
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