

Lodovico Castelvetro

1505–1571

IN HIS COMMENTARY ON Aristotle's *Poetics*, particularly on Chapter XXIV, Castelvetro establishes the unities of time and place as rules of the drama. For this he is popularly known. In his treatment of the unity of time he makes demands more rigid than Aristotle's—demands later endorsed by many neoclassical critics. In this, as in his view that poetry should serve to keep the common people happy, he displays a curious literal-minded utilitarianism.

It is true that at times Castelvetro's rationalism hardens Aristotle's remarks into rigid precepts. It is also true, however, that Castelvetro gets around to making some subtle comments not only on Aristotle but on Plato as well. He is not alone among Renaissance Italians in his prolixity and in what would be, if his style were not so complicated, a leisurely approach to major issues. Castelvetro contributes a rather confusing chapter to the history of the distinction between poetry and history. At first disregarding the possibility, later taken up by Mazzoni, that poetry may be fantastic, Castelvetro limits the poet to inventing his plots and not taking them from history. Then he qualifies this distinction to the point of contradiction in a much subtler discussion of historical tragedies, in which he makes a great deal of the genius of the poet who is able to employ historical events and personages.

Perhaps the most charming and finally the most telling of Castelvetro's illustrations is his story of Michelangelo restoring the beard to a statue of a river god. In relating this story, Castelvetro's emphasis on the importance of the relationship among the parts of a work comes closer to a truly Aristotelian attitude toward the structure of a work of art than do his more rigid discussions of verisimilitude and the unities.

No full translation of Castelvetro's commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* is available. The reader may consult A. H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (1962) for a selection. Two useful critical works are H. B. Charlton, *Castelvetro's Theory of Poetry* (1913), and R. C. Melzi, *Castelvetro's Annotations to the "Inferno"* (1966).

FROM

THE POETICS OF ARISTOTLE TRANSLATED AND EXPLAINED

I

[28] . . . Aristotle writes that the sciences and the arts and history are not subjects of poetry. But I, who do not in the least have an opinion different from Aristotle's and think his entirely correct, believe I can explain the reasons which have led me to hold the same views; which if not altogether identical with Aristotle's, are perhaps not very different. . . . Poetry is a likeness of or resemblance to history. And, since history is divided into two main parts, that is, subject matter and words, so poetry is divided into two main parts which are likewise subject matter and words. But history and poetry differ in these two parts in that history does not have a subject matter provided by the talent of the historian; rather it is prepared for him by the course of worldly events or by the manifest or hidden will of God. The words are provided by the historian, but they are the sort used in reasoning. The subject matter of poetry is discovered and imagined by the talent of the poet, and its words are not the sort used in reasoning, because men are not accustomed to reason in verse. But the words of poetry are composed in measured verse by the working of the poet's genius.

Now the subject matter of poetry ought to be similar to that of history and resemble it, but it should not be identical, because if it were it would no longer be similar or resembling and if it were not similar or resembling, the poet would not have exerted

THE *Poetics* OF ARISTOTLE. Castelvetro's commentary *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata et sposta* was published in 1570 and revised in 1576. The text printed here was translated especially for this book by R. L. Montgomery. Chapter numbers are those of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Bracketed numbers refer to the pages of Castelvetro's edition of 1576.

himself at all and would not have shown the sharpness of his talent in discovering it and hence would not deserve praise. And especially he would not deserve that praise by which he is thought to be more divine than human; for he knows how to manage a tale, imagined by himself about things which have never happened, so as to make it no less delightful and no less verisimilar than what occurs through the course of worldly events or the infinite providence of God, either manifest or hidden. Therefore when the poet takes his subject matter from history, that is, from events which have happened, he takes no pains, nor is it clear that he is either a good or a bad poet, that is, that he does or does not know how to discover things like the truth, and he cannot be praised for making resemblances and thus he is criticized [29] and considered to have little judgment because he has not recognized this. Or else he is thought to possess an evil and deceptive nature if with the covering and colors of poetic language he has tried to dupe his readers or listeners into believing that there is poetic material beneath his words and hence to gain false commendation for it. Logically, therefore, Lucan, Silius Italicus, and Girolamo Fracastoro in his *Joseph* are to be removed from the company of poets and deprived of the glorious title of poetry because in their writings they have treated material already dealt with by historians, and when it has not already been dealt with by historians, it is sufficient that it has already happened and was not thought up by these writers.¹

From this also it can be understood that the arts and sciences cannot be the subject matter of poetry and cannot with approval be included in poems, because the arts and sciences, having already been considered and understood by reasons which are necessary and verisimilar and by the long experience of philosophers and artists, are in the same position as history and things which have already occurred. The poet who merely embellishes with poetic language the subjects already established and written by others, and about which it can be said that history has already been composed, has no place here in the sense that he can boast of being a poet. Therefore it is not astonishing if those versifiers, Empedocles, Lucretius, Nicander, Serenus, Girolamo Fracastoro in his *Syphillis*, Aratus, Manilius, Giovanni Pontano

¹ Compare Scaliger's remark on Lucan in *Poetics*, above, p. 141.

in his *Urania*, and Virgil in his *Georgics*, are not accepted into the company of poets, for even if they themselves have been the first to discover some science or art, not deriving them from another philosopher or artist, and have revealed their discoveries in verse, they should not thereby be called poets.² For if they have discovered some science or art by speculation, they have still discovered something already in existence and bound to continue to exist in the nature of things, something with which that science is concerned or according to which that art is constituted. They will have discharged the office of a good philosopher or a good artist, but not of a good poet, which is by observation to make resemblances of the truth about what happens to men through fortune, and by resemblances to provide delight to the audience, leaving the discovery of the truth derived from natural or accidental things to the philosopher or to the artists who have their own way of delighting or entertaining which are quite distant from that of the poet.

In addition to this, the subject matter of the arts and sciences, for another reason more evident to common sense, cannot be the subject matter of poetry, inasmuch as poetry has been found solely to delight and recreate; and I say to delight and recreate the minds of the vulgar multitude and common people. They do not understand the reasons, distinctions, or arguments subtle and remote from the practice of common men which philosophers use in investigating the truth of things and artists in practicing their skills. It is not fitting that a listener, when another speaks to him, should be annoyed or displeased, for we are naturally uncommonly irritated when another [30] speaks to us in a way which we cannot understand. Therefore if we concede that the subject matter of the arts and sciences is the subject matter of poetry, we will also concede that either poetry was not discovered to delight or that it was not meant for the common people, but so that it might instruct and that for the sake of those sophisticated in letters and dissertation. This will be acknowledged to be false by what we shall prove as we proceed.

Now because poetry has been found, as I say, to

delight and recreate the common people, it ought to have as its subject matter those things which can be understood by the common people and which, when they are understood, make them happy. These are things which happen daily, which are talked about by the people, and which resemble news of the world and history. And for this reason, I affirm, with respect to the subject matter, that poetry is a likeness of or resemblance to history. The subject matter, because it resembles history, not only makes its inventor glorious and makes and constitutes him a poet, but also delights more than an account of things that have really happened. . . . To which may be added versification, by which the poet speaks marvelously and delightfully . . . for example, by being able without unseemliness to raise his voice on the stage so that the people may listen in complete comfort. . . . Because, then, the subject matter of the arts and sciences is not understood by the people, not only should it be avoided and shunned as the universal subject of a poem, but also we must guard against using any part of the arts and sciences in any place in the poem. In this respect Lucan and Dante in his *Comedy* have especially and unnecessarily erred when they reveal the time of year and the time of day and night by astrology. Neither Homer nor Virgil in the *Aeneid* ever fell into this error. Therefore I cannot but be somewhat amazed at Quintilian who supposes that no one ignorant of the art of astrology or unskilled in philosophy can be a good reader of poetry.³ . . .

IV

[65] Aristotle did not hold the opinion that poetry was a special gift of the gods, yielded to one man rather than to another, as is the gift of prophecy and similar privileges which do not derive from nature and are not common to all. Doubtless he means, even though he does not state it openly, to challenge the opinion which some have attributed to Plato that poetry is infused in men by divine frenzy. This opinion must have had its origin in the ignorance of the common people, and it flourished and gained favor through the vainglory of poets for this reason and in this way. Anything which someone else does

² Aristotle raises the question of whether Empedocles, a writer of the fifth century B.C., was a poet. See *Poetics*, I. 8, above, pp. 48-49. The poets to whom Castelvetro refers wrote discourses on various subjects in verse.

³ *Institutes*, I. 4.

is highly regarded and admired by those who lack the ability to do it themselves, and because men commonly measure the bodily strength and the skill of others by their own, they consider a miracle and a special gift of God what they cannot obtain by their own natural powers and see that others have obtained. Therefore the first poets were reputed by the ignorant to be filled with the divine spirit and assisted by God. They admired excessively the invention of the fable in the poets' compositions, and also the continuation of many verses by which the fable was revealed, and they were especially admiring when they saw the divine response of Apollo given in such verses, for they thought that through these the gods spoke. Therefore they could not understand that it was possible that the poet could invent a fable so like the truth and so delightful, and after he invented it, they could not see how he could lay it out in verse and in verse so well chosen that such things could not be made by other than human means. . . . This popular belief, though false, was pleasing to poets because it afforded them great praise and they were considered dear to the gods. Therefore they nourished the belief with their consent, and making it seem that things were as they said, they began at the opening of their works to invoke the aid of the Muses [66] and of Apollo, the god who rules over poetry, and to pretend that they uttered their poems through the mouths of those gods. . . . It is therefore mistaken to attribute to Plato his opinion about the frenzy induced in the poet by the gods, for, as I have said, its origin is in the agreement of poets cultivating their own interest. When Plato mentions it in his books, he is undoubtedly joking, as it is usually his habit to do in similar situations. Thus in the *Phaedrus*, when he says the lover is possessed by madness and wants to prove that not everyone possessed by madness is necessarily in the grasp of an evil spirit, he suggests that it is a benevolent madness which possesses the prophetic women at Delphos and the priests at Dodona, and the Sybil, and other diviners, and poets. But he is not really proving that poets are possessed by any divine madness; rather he is adducing a similar case by an example such as was commonly believed.⁴ . . . And he writes jokingly in

the *Apology* of Socrates when he says that poets do not understand what they write in their poems when moved by divine madness.⁵ This is plain enough, for if he were speaking seriously and believed that poems derived from divine inspiration, why did he exclude them from his republic? . . .

[68] The imitation natural to men is one thing; that required of poetry is another. For the imitation of others which is natural to men and which is in them from childhood, by which they first acquire knowledge, by which all men are disposed more than animals, and as a result of which they are made glad, is nothing other than following the example of others and doing as they do without knowing the reason why. But the imitation required of poetry not only does not follow the examples set by another, nor does it do what others do without knowing the reason why they do so, but it also does something quite different from what is available and proposes instead, so to speak, an example for which it is necessary that the poet know very well the reasons why he does what he does. And he must take time to think and to discern, insofar as he can with certainty, that the imitation required of poetry does not consist, and ought not to consist, in what may be called literal copying, but does consist, or ought to, in what may be called the struggle of the poet and the disposition of fortune or the course of worldly affairs, in finding an accident in human behavior delightful [69] to hear and marvelous. . . .

VI

[116] Because it seemed to Plato that tragedy by the example of tragic characters could injure citizens and debase good customs in them, making them vile, cowardly, and sentimental, he did not wish tragedy to be represented in his republic, for he believed that if the people heard and saw men thought to be valorous doing and saying things which sentimental people do and say, then the frightened and the vile would console themselves and pardon weakness of spirit in themselves, as well as fear and pusillanimity, seeing that they had companions among the great,

⁴ See Plato, *Ion*, above, pp. 14–16. Castelvetro's argument is not powerful enough to reason away Socrates' words, which definitely attribute poetry and other forms of prophetic utterance and ecstatic behavior to divine inspiration.

⁵ Plato, *Apology*, 22. Socrates does appear to exaggerate in this passage, for he is illustrating the point that his wisdom, though superior to that of poets and soothsayers, is nevertheless worthless.

such as kings. And following such examples they would let themselves improperly be moved by such passion.⁶ But Aristotle, so that men [117] would not believe, on the authority of Plato, that he himself, writing about the method of tragedy, had contrived to present it as an art harmful to the citizenry and apt to contaminate their morals, affirmed that tragedy functioned in precisely the opposite way. That is, by its example and by its frequent representation it brings spectators from baseness to magnanimity, from anxiety to security, and from sentimentality to severity, habituating them by repeated usage of things worthy of pity, fear, and baseness to be neither sentimental, nor fearful, nor base; for tragedy by means of the aforesaid passions, terror and pity, purges and expels those same passions from the hearts of men. Now to make clearly understood what Aristotle perhaps wanted to say but uttered darkly and scarcely hinted at, either because, as is often said, his remarks in this book are brief notes for use in a larger work, or because he did not wish openly to censure the opinion of his master Plato, whom he held in some reverence, it is necessary to realize that just as pure wine of a certain quantity, which has had no drop of water mixed in it, has more vigor and spirit than the same amount of wine of equal quality mixed with a large proportion of water, for although it is greater in quantity than the former, by the addition of so much water it becomes watery and loses all its previous vigor and spirit; so the love of fathers for their children is much greater and more fervent and they care for them better when there are few, that is three or two or one, than they would for many, that is a hundred or a thousand or more. Likewise men's pity and fear directed towards a few pitiful and fearful cases are more vigorous and move them more powerfully than if they are scattered among a greater number of events worthy of pity and fear. Therefore tragedy which represents to us similar actions and makes us see and hear them more often than we would see and hear them without it is the cause of pity and terror being diminished in us because we have to divide the effect of these passions among so many diverse actions. We see the proof of this most appreciably during epidemics, for at the beginning when three or four people begin to die we find ourselves moved by pity and fear, but then when we see hundreds and thousands die, the feeling

of pity and fear ceases in us. We know this also by the experience of dangerous skirmishes in which new soldiers are at first terrified by the booming of the guns and arquebuses⁷ and experience the greatest pity for the dead and wounded, but after they have been in many battles they stand fast and see before their eyes companions wounded and dead without feeling much pity. Perhaps these reasons, although they are quite powerful, are not so important that because of them the law forbidding tragedy ought to be annulled, since they are directed elsewhere [118] toward the target Plato aimed at in his prohibition. And so that the way things are may be clear it must be understood that there are persons who undergo the most fearful and pitiful experiences, such as those previously mentioned. These persons are of two sorts, the strong and the timid, and similarly the actions are of two sorts, the rare and the frequent, and both have diverse effects according to the diverse ways in which they occur. Therefore if the persons who suffer are strong and patient, the example of their suffering and patience affects the souls of others and expels fear and pity, but if those persons are timid and weak, their example increases terror and pity in the spectators and confirms them in their fearfulness and weakness. . . . Similarly if fearful and pitiful actions are rare they move men to terror and pity more, but if they occur frequently they are less moving and because of their frequency they can purge terror and pity from the hearts of mortal men. This occurs for two reasons: one is that when we witness the occurrence of many misfortunes which do not involve us, little by little we feel more secure and convince ourselves that God, who has watched over us many times in the past, will also protect us in the future; the other is that those misfortunes which happen frequently and to many people, do not seem so fearful and as a result do not seem so pitiful, although we may be sure that they will touch us since we see that so many others have not been spared. . . . Plato, then, when he forbids tragedy as inducing fear and pity, forbids it because of the example of respected persons who exhibit weakness of soul in adversity, is harmful to the people.⁸ If this is so, it is so because in tragedy as Plato understood it the same type of character is always introduced. . . .

[140] If the plot is the end of tragedy, and hence

⁶ See Plato, *Republic*, above, pp. 19–23.

⁷ An early portable gun.

⁸ See *Republic*, above, p. 20.

of any kind of poem (for the plot occupies the same place in any kind of poem as it does in tragedy), then it is final and not accessory to the morals of the characters but on the contrary their morals are accessory to the plot. Then their morals do not occupy the final place and are accessory to the plot, and it follows that many authors of great renown in letters among the ancients and moderns, among them Julius Caesar della Scala, or Scaliger, have gravely erred in supposing that the intention of good poets, such as Homer and Virgil in their most famous works, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, is to depict and exhibit to the world, let us say, a commander in the most excellent manner possible, or a brave leader or a wise man, and their natures, and similar nonsense. If this is true, the moral qualities of characters would not be used by poets to support the action, as Aristotle says; on the contrary, the action would be used to exhibit moral qualities. Otherwise, if this material were primary and not accessory, it could not be poetic subject matter, being naturally the subject of philosophy, treated by many philosophers and especially by Aristotle and Theophrastus.⁹ Therefore, good poets such as Homer and Virgil in their most famous works, and others like them, have tried to compose a proper fable, according to which the characters and moral qualities are suited, and thus more appealing, in other words marvelous and verisimilar. . . .

VIII

[178] Aristotle . . . stubbornly demands that the action which comprises the plot should be one and concern one character only, and if there are other actions that they support each other. He adduces no reason or proof for this except the example of the tragic poets and Homer who have adhered to the

⁹ See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Theophrastus' *Characters*, both influential in neoclassical literary characterization. At this point one might well weigh Sidney's discussion of "the speaking picture of poesy" against Castelvetro's priorities. In his *Apology for Poetry* Sidney remarks: "let but Sophocles bring you Ajax on a stage, killing and whipping sheep and oxen, thinking them the army of Greeks, with their chieftains Agamemnon and Menelaus, and tell me if you have not a more familiar insight into anger than finding in the schoolmen his genus and difference" (below, p. 161).

single action of a single character in composing the fable. But [179] it can be easily seen that in tragedy and comedy the fable has a single action, or two when by one depending on the other they can be thought single, and it has most often a single character rather than one family, not because the fable is unsuited to more than one action, but because the length of time of twelve hours at most and restrictions of place in which the action is represented do not permit a multitude of actions, or even the actions of one family, nor for that matter the whole of one action, if it is somewhat long. And this is the principal and necessary reason why the fable of tragedy and of comedy ought to be one, that is containing the single action of one character, or two thought of as one because of their dependence on each other. This motive of limited time and place could not work so as to restrict Homer to a single action of a single character in the epic, which can narrate not just a single action, but more, and longer, and occurring in diverse lands.

IX

[188] In the plot of tragedy and epic there necessarily occur events which have been reported to have taken place in the life of a particular man, and which are known in a summary way, as, for example, Orestes, accompanied by his friend Pylades and aided by him and by his sister Electra, murdering his mother Clytemnestra. But no one knows particularly or exactly the ways and means he took to accomplish the murder. Now the reason is clear, and so abundantly clear, that it can be demonstrated, for it is proper that the plot of tragedy and epic should accept things which have actually happened and which are common to it and to historical truth. For the plot of these two kinds of poetry should include action not simply human but also magnificent and regal. And if it ought to include regal events, it follows that it includes action that has actually occurred and is certain, and is the action of a king who has existed and is known to have existed, since we are unable to imagine a king who has not existed nor attribute any action to him. And insofar as he existed and is known to have existed, we cannot attribute to him actions which have not occurred. It would be as if we were to say that before the Roman republic was

established there was a king of the Romans named Julius and then say that he lay with his daughter, or as if we were to say that Julius Caesar the permanent dictator of the Romans murdered his wife Calpurnia when he discovered her in adultery; for it is not true that any king of the Romans was so named or so committed any such incestuous act, and it is equally untrue that Julius Caesar discovered his wife in adultery and murdered her. Because kings are known through fame and through history, as well as their notable actions, to introduce new names of kings and to attribute to them new actions is to contradict history and fame and to sin against open truth. This is a much greater sin in the composition of the plot than to sin in verisimilitude. Therefore the plots of all tragedies and all epics are and ought to be composed of events which can be called historical, although for several reasons Aristotle had a different view. . . . [189] But the abovementioned events ought not to be manifested by history or fame except summarily and in a general way, so that the poet can perform his task and show his skill in discovering the ways and particular means by which these incidents have had their fulfillment. For if these ways and particular means by which these incidents were brought to completion were made clear in other ways, we would not have material suitable for the plot, nor would it be pertinent to the poet, but to the historians. Neither with all this should we allow the opinion that it is easier to compose the plot of a tragedy or an epic than that of a comedy, just because in the plots of those poems the poet does not invent everything on his own, as he does in comedy. . . .

Now to fill in the plot of comedy the poet by his skill finds universal and particular incidents. And because they are completely invented by him, neither events which have occurred nor history has any part. He also supplies names for the characters as it pleases him and can do so without inconvenience and he ought reasonably to do so. He can construct the incident he has chosen in all its parts and accordingly it should deal with a private person about whom, along with the incidents that have happened to him, there is no knowledge, and they will not be passed on to the memory of those in the future either by history or fame. Therefore, someone who makes up new and entire incidents involving private persons and gives them names as it pleases him, cannot be

contradicted by history or fame as having reported falsehoods. And if he wishes rational men to think him a poet, that is, an inventor, he ought to invent everything, because, since the private subject matter makes it easy for him, he can invent it. But no one ought to believe that the inventor of the comic plot has license to invent new cities he has imagined, or rivers, or mountains, or kingdoms or customs or laws, or to alter the course of nature, making it snow in summer or putting the harvest in winter, and so on. For it is fitting to follow history and truth, if in constructing his plot he happens to require such things, just as in the same way it is fitting for the poet making a tragic or epic plot. . . . Therefore the possibility that things have happened, which is the subject of poetry and the actuality of what has happened, which is the subject of history, distinguish the former from the latter, and this is the essential difference between the two, and not what some have asserted, that is, that history is distinguished from poetry by its prose and poetry from history by its verse.¹⁰ . . .

[213] It appears that if things which have happened cannot constitute poetry and do not contribute to the constitution of a poem, they ought to contribute to the distinction and diminution of poetry when they are mingled with things which might possibly happen in the future and with things invented by the poet, if we compare actual events with those which might happen in the future mixed with what [214] can really happen in the future. That is, it would seem that the plot of tragedy and epic, when made up of actions which have occurred, and retaining true names (as we have shown plots ought to be formed) would make its author less a poet than the author of a comedy or of the plot of a tragedy in which all the events and names are invented, as is the case with the tragedy of Agathon called *The Flowers*. For if the plot entirely made up of events which have occurred does not allow him to be a poet at all, then the plot made up in part of events which have occurred would to that extent deny him his role as poet and so he would be less a poet than he who is totally the poet because his plot is made up of events entirely invented or events which could happen in the future. Nonetheless it is my judgment that the maker of the

¹⁰ This discussion can be profitably compared to Scaliger's in *Poetics*, above, p. 141.

tragic and epic taken from history and with real names should not be considered a lesser poet than the maker of a plot in which every event and every name is imaginary. Perhaps instead he ought to be considered greater. For events which have occurred, with which the first sort of poet is concerned in making the plot of epic and tragedy, are not so many nor are they spread out in such a way that they relieve him of the effort of invention, for everyone can imagine similar things without great subtlety of wit. We may suppose something that every man can easily imagine, such as the story in broad outline of a son who murders his mother who has murdered her husband and hounded her son out of the kingdom so she may enjoy her lover. But the difficulty is in finding the means for the son to achieve this murder in a marvelous fashion such as has not occurred previously. This difficulty is greater than that of inventing the general line of plot and the particular ways and means by which it draws to a conclusion, since the general line of the plot invented by the poet is not so fixed or stable that it cannot be altered or changed, if it turns out to be appropriate or if he is unable to make his characters clever or dull or endowed with other qualities, as he judges it to be best according to the ways which occurred to him initially of making a fine plot. Whoever takes his plot from events which have occurred cannot do this, since he is held within certain limits from which he is not allowed to escape.

And to show by one example what this difference is, I say that not many years ago during excavations in Rome there was found a marble statue of a large, fine river god whose beard was broken and sparse, and by means of that portion which remained on the chin it was evident that the entire beard, according to proportion, would reach to the navel, even though the point of the beard was seen to rest high on the chest without reaching any further. Everyone marveled at this, and no one was able to imagine what that beard was like when it was intact. Only Michelangelo Buonarroti, a sculptor of most rare skill who was present, stood still for a while, and realizing how things stood, said, "Bring me some clay." It was brought and he formed that part of the beard which was lacking of such a size that it matched [215] the proportions of the rest. And fastening it on he drew it down to the navel. Then tying it up with one knot he showed clearly that the point of the beard he had formed struck the high point of the chest at the same

place as the broken beard. Therefore to the great admiration of all those present he showed how the missing beard was made and how it was knotted. And there was no one there who did not judge that Michelangelo for subtlety of wit in having restored that missing beard so remarkably was to be preferred before any other artist in having made an entire beard suitable to his judgment without regard to any of the remaining pieces of the original beard.

XIII

[275] Now whether it is true or false that tragedy can have no other subject matter than what is fearful or pitiable, I will not at the moment discuss. But it does seem that this has not been proven by Aristotle in the things he has said so far, although he does assume that they are proven. But since he has set out to contradict Plato, who said that tragedy is injurious to the people's good morals, he does not wish to approve a kind of tragedy other than that which according to him is advantageous in providing the people with good morals and by means of fear and pity purges those same passions, driving them out of the souls of the people in the manner we have mentioned above. And he is so intent on this matter that he does not avoid contradicting himself and the things he has said previously. Therefore if poetry is established primarily for delight and not for profit, as he has shown, in speaking of the origin of poetry in general, why does he say that in tragedy, which is a kind of poetry, utility is what is principally sought for? Why is not delight principally sought without regard to utility? Either he ought to ignore utility or at least he should not give it so much attention that he rejects all other kinds of tragedy which lack it. He should restrict himself to one single kind of utility, that which effects only the purgation of fear and pity. And even so, if utility is to be considered, other kinds of tragedy can be presented, as for example that which deals with the change of good men from misery to happiness, or of evil men from happiness to misery, so that the people, convinced by the examples proposed, may confirm themselves in the holy belief that God [276] looks after the world and the special providence of his own, defending them and confounding his and their enemies. . . .

XIV

The delight proper to tragedy is that which derives from fear and pity proceeding from the change from happiness to misery due to the error of a person of middling virtue. But someone may ask what sort of delight it is which derives from watching a good man undeservedly forced from happiness to misery, since that ought not rationally to give delight but displeasure. Now I have no doubt that Aristotle meant by the word *pleasure* the purgation and expulsion of fear and pity from the human soul by means of the operation of the same passions, in the fashion which I have already explained above at length. Thus purgation and expulsion, if they proceed as he affirms from those same passions, can quite properly be called *hedone* [ἡδονή], that is, pleasure or delight, and strictly speaking it ought to be called utility, for it is health of mind gotten through bitter medicine. Therefore pleasure derived from pity and fear, which is truly pleasure, is that which we have previously called oblique pleasure. And it occurs when, feeling pain from the misery which comes unjustly to another, we recognize that we are good, since injustice displeases us. This recognition is the greatest pleasure for us, by reason of the natural love which we have for ourselves. And added to this pleasure is another which is not in the least trivial, that is, when we see tribulations beyond reason which have come upon others and which might possibly come upon us or upon others like us, we realize tacitly and unconsciously that we are subject to the same fortune and that we cannot trust in the tranquil course of worldly things. This delight is much greater than if another, acting as a teacher and openly presenting the subject, instructs us in the same lesson. For the experience of events which have happened impresses doctrine more in our minds than the mere voice of the teacher, and we rejoice more in the little which we learn for ourselves than in the greater amount which we learn from others, since we cannot learn from others if we do not confess ourselves to be ignorant of what we learn and obliged to them for what we learn from them. And perhaps the wise man was thinking of such things when he said that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of banqueting.¹¹

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 7:4: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."

XVII

[374] It has been concluded that he who knows how to transform himself into an impassioned person is also skilled at representing such a character, that is, he knows without art how to say and do those things which are suited to someone in a state of passion. And not everyone is apt for this, but only those endowed with a good wit, and an impassioned person can be represented not only by this means but also by another, which is to consider carefully what people in a state of passion say and do in such circumstances. This method is not for everyone, but only for the gifted man. It follows, then, that poetry is conceived and practiced by the gifted man and not the madman, as some have said, for the madman is not able to assume various passions, nor is he a careful observer of what impassioned men say and do. But we should be aware of what seems to me to be an error in the text, since the words ἡ μανικοῦ ("of the madman") should be written οὐ μανικοῦ ("not of the madman"). . . . It is not surprising that *not* should be made *or* by those who have already swallowed that opinion about poetic furor, which was foisted upon minds of men as we have explained above, and which the arguments of Aristotle have refuted. It is true that the reading *or of the madman* can be retained without wandering much from the idea expressed above if we read *or of the madman* as *rather than of the madman*. . . . That is, Aristotle says that poetry is usually the work of the gifted man rather than of the madman, but because *than* put in the place of *rather than* seems to be more appropriate to verse than to prose, we stand on what we said at first.

XXIV

[533] Now to understand fully what is being discussed, it must be remembered that Aristotle said before that there were two dimensions to tragedy, one accessible to the senses and external and measurable by the clock; the other accessible to the intellect and internal and measurable by the mind and which comprises the movement from misery to happiness or from happiness to misery. The duration which is accessible to the senses and is measured by the clock, cannot last more than one revolution of the sun over the earth for the reasons mentioned above; this

duration, which has nothing to do with art according to Aristotle, nevertheless is shaped by and receives its measure from the time of the intellectual dimension, for the two cannot be diverse in time measurement. For, as we said above, as much length of time is to be taken in representing in tragedy an action

moving from misery to happiness or from happiness to misery as would elapse in the actual or imagined occurrence of the action.¹²

¹² This passage is representative of a number of commentaries insisting on the so-called unity of time. See particularly Corneille, *Of the Three Unities*, below, pp. 219–26.