Poetics (Aristotle)

Aristotle's *Poetics* (Greek: Περὶ ποιητικῆς, c. 335 BCE) is the earliest-surviving work of dramatic theory and the first extant philosophical treatise to focus on literary theory. In it, Aristotle offers an account of what he calls "poetry" (a term which in Greek literally means "making" and in this context includes drama—comedy, tragedy, and the satyr play—as well as lyric poetry, epic poetry, and the dithyramb). He examines its "first principles" and identifies its genres and basic elements. His analysis of tragedy constitutes the core of the discussion. Although Aristotle's *Poetics* is universally acknowledged in the Western critical tradition, Marvin Carlson explains, "almost every detail about his seminal work has aroused divergent opinions." The work was lost to the Western world and often misrepresented for a long time. It was available through the Middle Ages and early Renaissance only through a Latin translation of an Arabic version written by Averroes.

Core terms

- **Mimesis** or "imitation", "representation"  
- **Catharsis** or, variously, "purgation", "purification", "clarification"  
- **Peripeteia** or "reversal"  
- **Anagnorisis** or "recognition", "identification"  
- **Hamartia** or "miscalculation" (understood in Romanticism as "tragic flaw")  
- **Mythos** or "plot"  
- **Ethos** or "character"  
- **Dianoia** or "thought", "theme"  
- **Lexis** or "diction", "speech"  
- **Melos** or "melody"  
- **Opsis** or "spectacle"

Content

Aristotle's work on aesthetics consists of the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. The *Poetics* is specifically concerned with drama. At some point, Aristotle's original work was divided in two, each "book" written on a separate roll of papyrus. Only the first part— that which focuses on tragedy—survives. The lost second part addressed comedy. Scholars speculate that the *Tractatus coislinianus* summarises the contents of the lost second book.

Aristotle distinguishes between the genres of "poetry" in three ways:

- **Matter**
  
  language, rhythm, and melody, for Aristotle, make up the matter of poetic creation. Where the epic poem makes use of language alone, the playing of the lyre involves rhythm and melody. Some poetic forms include a blending of all materials; for example, Greek tragic drama included a singing chorus, and so music and language were all part of the performance.

- **Subjects**
  
  Also "agents" in some translations. Aristotle differentiates between tragedy and comedy throughout the work by distinguishing between the nature of the human characters that populate either form. Aristotle finds that tragedy treats of serious, important, and virtuous people. Comedy, on the other hand, treats of people who are less virtuous, who are unimportant, undignified, laughable. Aristotle introduces here the influential *tripartite division of characters* in superior (βελτίονας) to the audience, inferior (χείρονας), or at the same level (τοιούτους).

- **Method**
One may imitate the agents through use of a narrator throughout, or only occasionally (using direct speech in parts and a narrator in parts, as Homer does), or only through direct speech (without a narrator), using actors to speak the lines directly. This latter is the method of tragedy (and comedy): without use of any narrator.

Having examined briefly the field of "poetry" in general, Aristotle proceeds to his definition of tragedy:

Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play] and [represented] by people acting and not by narration, accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions.

By "embellished speech", I mean that which has rhythm and melody, i.e. song. By "with its elements separately", I mean that some [parts of it] are accomplished only by means of spoken verses, and others again by means of song (1449b25-30).\footnote{11} Tragedy consists of six parts which Aristotle enumerates in order of importance, beginning with the most essential and ending with the least:

- **plot (mythos)**
  
  Refers to the "structure of incidents" (actions). Key elements of the plot are reversals, recognitions, and suffering. The best plot should be "complex" (i.e. involve a change of fortune). It should imitate actions arousing fear and pity. Thus it should proceed from good fortune to bad and involve a high degree of suffering for the protagonist, usually involving physical harm or death.

  Actions should be logical and follow naturally from actions that precede them. They will be more satisfying to the audience if they come about by surprise or seeming coincidence and are only afterward seen as plausible, even necessary.

  When a character is unfortunate by reversal(s) of fortune (peripeteia), at first he suffers (pathos) and then he can realize (anagnorisis) the cause of his misery or a way to be released from the misery.

- **character (ethos)**
  
  It is much better if a tragical accident happens to a hero because of a mistake he makes (hamartia) instead of things which might happen anyway. That is because the audience is more likely to be "moved" by it. A hero may have made it knowingly (in Medea) or unknowingly (Oedipus). A hero may leave a deed undone (due to timely discovery, knowledge present at the point of doing deed ...).

  Main character should be

  - good - Aristotle explains that audiences do not like, for example, villains "making fortune from misery" in the end. It might happen though, and might make the play interesting. Nevertheless, the moral is at stake here and morals are important to make people happy (people can, for example, see tragedy because they want to release their anger)
  
  - appropriate—if a character is supposed to be wise, it is unlikely he is young (supposing wisdom is gained with age)
  
  - consistent—if a person is a soldier, he is unlikely to be scared of blood (if this soldier is scared of blood it must be explained and play some role in the story to avoid confusing the audience); it is also "good" if a character doesn't change opinion "that much" if the play is not "driven" by who characters are, but by what they do (audience is confused in case of unexpected shifts in behaviour [and its reasons, morals ...] of characters)
  
  - "consistently inconsistent"—if a character always behaves foolishly it is strange if he suddenly becomes smart. In this case it would be good to explain such change, otherwise the audience may be confused. If character changes opinion a lot it should be clear he is a character who has this trait, not a real life person
- this is also to avoid confusion

• thought (dianoia)—spoken (usually) reasoning of human characters can explain the characters or story background...

• diction (lexis)
  
  Refers to the quality of speech in tragedy. Speeches should reflect character, the moral qualities of those on the stage.

• melody (melos)
  
  The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors. It should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action.

• spectacle (opsis)
  
  Refers to the visual apparatus of the play, including set, costumes and props. Aristotle calls spectacle the "least artistic" element of tragedy, and the "least connected with the work of the poet (playwright). For example: if the play has "beautiful" costumes and "bad" acting and "bad" story, there is "something wrong" with it. Even though that "beauty" may save the play it is "not a nice thing".

He offers the earliest-surviving explanation for the origins of tragedy and comedy:

Anyway, arising from an improvisatory beginning (both tragedy and comedy—tragedy from the leaders of the dithyramb, and comedy from the leaders of the phallic processions which even now continue as a custom in many of our cities) [...] (1449a10-13)\[12\]

**Influence**

*Poetics* is considered to have been less influential in its time compared with what is generally understood to be its more famous contemporary, *Rhetoric*. This is probably because in Aristotle's time rhetoric and poetics were classified as sort of siblings in the pantheon of ideal things. Because of rhetoric's direct importance for law and politics, it evolved to become, to a large degree, distinct from poetics, in spite of both themes being classified under aesthetics in the Aristotelian system of metaphysics. In this sense, rhetoric and poetics are two sides of the same thing—the aesthetic dimension. In Aristotelian philosophy, this is regarded as one of the metaphysical aspects of things; in the Kantian view of the pure aesthetic, it is understood as something non-conceptual that frees the mind.

The Arabic version of Aristotle's *Poetics* that influenced the Middle Ages was translated from a Greek manuscript dated to sometime prior to the year 700. This manuscript was translated from Greek to Syriac and is independent of the currently-accepted 11th-century source designated *Paris 1741*. The Syriac language source used for the Arabic translations departed widely in vocabulary from the original *Poetics* and it initiated a misinterpretation of Aristotelian thought that continued through the Middle Ages.\[13\]

There are two different Arabic interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics* in commentaries by Abu Nasr al-Farabi and Averroes (i.e., Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd).

Al-Farabi's treatise endeavors to establish poetry as a logical faculty of expression, giving it validity in the Islamic world. Averroes' commentary attempts to harmonize his assessment of the *Poetics* with al-Farabi's, but he is ultimately unable to reconcile his ascription of moral purpose to poetry with al-Farabi's logical interpretation.

Averroes' interpretation of the *Poetics* was accepted by the West because of its relevance to their humanistic viewpoints. Occasionally the philosophers of the Middle Ages even preferred Averroes' commentary to Aristotle's stated sense. This resulted in the survival of Aristotle's *Poetics* through the Arabic literary tradition.
English translations

- Thomas Twining, 1789
- Samuel Henry Butcher, 1902: full text [14]
- Ingram Bywater, 1909: full text [15]
- William Hamilton Fyfe, 1926: full text [16]
- L. J. Potts, 1953
- G. M. A. Grube, 1958
- Richard Janko, 1987
- Stephen Halliwell, 1987
- Stephen Halliwell, 1995 (Loeb Classical Library)
- Malcolm Heath, 1996 (Penguin Classics)
- Seth Benardete and Michael Davis, 2002 (St. Augustine’s Press)

Popular culture

The Poetics—both the extant first book and the lost second book—figure prominently in Umberto Eco’s novel The Name of the Rose.

Notes

[11] Janko (1987, 7). InButcher's translation, this passage reads: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play, in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions."
[12] Janko (1987, 6). This text is available online (http:www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Aristot.+Poet.+1449a) in an older translation, in which the same passage reads: "At any rate it originated in improvisation—both tragedy itself and comedy. The one tragedy came from the prelude to the dithyramb and the other comedy from the prelude to the phallic songs which still survive as institutions in many cities."
[16] http:www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=aristot.+poet.+1447a
Sources


External links

- librivox.org audio recording (http://librivox.org/poetics-by-aristotle/)
- Seven parallel translations of Poetics: Russian, English, French (http://nevmenandr.net/poetica/1447a8.php)
- Notes of Friedrich Sylburg (1536-1596) in a critical edition (parallel Greek and Latin) available at Google Books (http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=l2M-AAAAbAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)
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