Context and Significance of Aristotle's *Poetics*

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Although Aristotle is primarily renowned for his contributions to metaphysics, his mastery of insightful analysis and eloquent style is most evident in the "Poetics." In this work, Aristotle's conception of tragedy has immortalized the Greek ideal of drama, influencing theatrical traditions through the ages.

"Poetics" is one of Aristotle's shortest works, and only half of it has survived. Despite its brevity, it is filled with valuable insights and principles of literary art that have been continuously referenced by scholars and philosophers since Aristotle's time. The work has a history of varied interpretations and exists in different manuscript versions. Unlike most of Aristotle's writings, "Poetics" contains minimal argumentation, focusing instead on analyzing poetic art as it existed in his era and as he comprehended it. The enduring impact of "Poetics" testifies to the significance of Aristotle's observations. Modern readers must account for the narrower scope and achievements of literature of that time, as well as the specific characteristics, particularly in metrics, of the Greek language.

"Poetics" addresses tragedy and briefly touches on epic poetry, with a lost second section that presumably covered comedy. Aristotle observes that all forms of poetry are modes of imitation of character, emotion, and action, differing in their medium (rhythm, meter, language, harmony, or tune), manner (whether performed as a play, sung, or narrated), and objects of imitation. Artistic imitations depict actions that possess moral qualities, portraying people as better, worse, or the same as in real life. According to Aristotle, tragedy aims to depict people as better than they are in reality, while comedy aims to show them as worse.

Central to Aristotle's analysis is his explanation of mimesis, the representation of reality in literature. Mimesis does not mean mere mimicry of the everyday world; instead, Aristotle emphasizes that the role of "the poet" (interpreted by later critics as the author of any imaginative literature) is to create portraits of humanity that help audiences learn about themselves. Contrary to Plato's claim that poetic works are falsehoods, Aristotle argues that good poems and dramas benefit society by allowing readers and audiences to learn from fictional characters' experiences without undergoing the traumas and heartbreaks depicted in tragedies or the foolishness and humiliations shown in comedies.

However, during the later Renaissance and neoclassical periods, Aristotle's descriptive analysis of classical Greek drama and poetry was misinterpreted as prescriptive rules for creating and evaluating similar works. French and English dramatists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tried to produce plays adhering strictly to Aristotle's unities of time, place, and action. Although later generations moved away from these criteria for judging specific genres, Aristotle's analytical approach laid the groundwork for genre criticism. This method involves evaluating the worth of a poem, play, story, or novel by comparing it to established criteria that characterize similar works, becoming a fundamental aspect of literary criticism.

Aristotle's "Poetics," though brief, is one of the most illuminating and influential works ever produced. Despite its initial appearance of being hard and dry, it remains the most stimulating and helpful analytical work on poetry after twenty-two centuries. This compact treatise, dating from before 323 B.C., is indeed concise. Castelvetro's famous 1570 exposition fills 768 pages with around 384,000 words, whereas "Poetics" itself contains roughly 10,000 words. In the 1831 Berlin edition of Aristotle's works, it occupies only 30 columns, and in Bywater's 1909 edition, the text covers 45 out of 431 pages. "Poetics" constitutes about one-hundredth of Aristotle's extant works.

Although it is brief, "Poetics" was likely once longer and probably connected with other works of Aristotle, such as his dialogue "On Poets" and his "Homeric Problems." These writings, including the "Peplos" and the "Didascaliae," a history of Greek dramatic contests, suggest a more literary character to the original work. What we have today might be notes from Aristotle's lectures, later expanded and elaborated in discussions with his

students. Alternatively, they might be notes taken by someone who attended his lectures, explaining the gaps and discrepancies that modern scholars have noted. Some suggest the work may be an abstract created by a later student, which would account for its current form, established by the sixth century A.D.

"Poetics" does not fulfil its own promise of discussing comedy; some scholars see this addressed in the fragment known as the "Tractatus Coislinianus." We lack comprehensive knowledge about the composition of Aristotle's critical works. "Rhetoric," though now corrupt, was more widely used in the Graeco-Roman world than "Poetics," meeting the needs of Roman orators. Both treatises likely existed during Aristotle's teaching career and underwent revisions. "Poetics" is the only technical discussion of its subject to survive from ancient Greece and is crucial for studying Greek art and poetry.

Aristotle did not pioneer this field; he improved upon existing models. He suggested that Homer worked with conscious art and acknowledged earlier theories of rhetoric and poetry. The treatise, while original, drew upon extensive study and comparison of numerous Greek dramas and narrative poems. Aristotle, with his background in philosophy, ethics, politics, logic, psychology, and rhetoric, approached the analysis of poetry with a biologist's interest in life and its principles. He studied poetry as a form of life, focusing on its structure and function.
"Poetics" does not lead us any further: it says little about Greek comedy and doesn't address modern notions of poetry, which often focus on lyrical and Neoplatonic themes. For Aristotle, poetry was either epic or dramatic, with tragedy being the highest form. Although he considered the choral odes of tragedy, he did not treat lyric poetry as a separate form. Had he done so, it would likely have been in a treatise on music, reflecting the close relationship between poetry and music in Greek culture. During the time of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes, poets were responsible for writing both the words and the music for their dramas. However, Aristotle, the author of the "Poetics," who came later, does not appear to have had a comprehensive musical education.

The "Poetics" now consists of 26 chapters of varied length, likely divided for convenient reference after Aristotle's time. The text can be divided into four sections: chapters 1-5, 6-22, 23-24, and 25-26, with the first being introductory. Aristotle discusses poetic art in general and categorizes poetry by function, explaining how a tragedy or epic poem should be structured to achieve the desired effect on an audience or reader. He views a work of art as a living organism, comparing each type of poetry and individual poem to an animal, focusing on its ideal form or structure related to its purpose. In the first section, he addresses epic poetry, tragedy, and comedy under the general concept of imitative art. The specific meaning of 'imitation' in Aristotle's terms is clarified later, as it differs from the modern understanding.

The second section defines tragedy and principles of construction of tragedy in detail. The third section covers epic poetry, principles of its construction, similarities with tragedy, and their differences. The fourth section addresses criticism problems and their solutions, partially defending poetry and responding to Homer's critics. The final problem concerns the relative merits of epic poetry and tragedy. While Homer is considered the greatest poet, Aristotle regards tragedy, particularly in the hands of Sophocles, as the noblest poetic art form.

Aristotle's promise to discuss comedy, mentioned alongside Homer, Sophocles, and Aristophanes in the first section, is not fully realized in the extant text. Some scholars suggest that the "Tractatus Coislinianus," first printed in 1839, might derive from a lost portion of Aristotle's literary criticism. This fragment sketches the forms of the ludicrous, displaying a masterly grasp of Aristophanic comedy.

Analyzing "Poetics" is challenging due to its densely packed thoughts and hints intended for expansion in lectures. Additionally, textual corruptions have led to scholarly disagreements. To accommodate modern thinking, Aristotle begins by dividing poetry into species, primarily epic poetry, tragedy, and comedy, and assumes that a poem should be judged by its effect on an educated and sensible person, not necessarily an expert. A well-constructed tragedy should not offend such a person. Aristotle likens a well-formed poem to a beautiful living animal, providing the right kind of pleasure to a discerning judge.

Various species of poetry are modes of 'imitation.' The poet, like a painter, musician, or sculptor, has a conception to represent for personal and others' delight. A painter aims to depict a man, resulting in an 'imitation' of a man in line and colour on a flat surface. Similarly, a sculptor 'imitates' in marble, and a musician 'imitates' sentiments in melody and rhythm. Greek dancers 'imitated' emotions through rhythmical motions and postures. A dramatist uses words, music, and a chorus to represent characters, actions, and experiences. The artist's 'object' is 'men in action,' and the principal 'medium' is spoken language. A dramatist directly presents actions, while an epic poet narrates them. Tragedy and comedy differ in representing people as nobler or less noble than they are.

Aristotle's term for 'imitative' can be translated as 'mimetic,' and he acknowledges the poetic quality of farcical prose dramas and Platonic Dialogues. He argues that metrical composition is not the defining feature of poetry; turning prose into verse does not create a poem. However, he acknowledges that the beauty of Homeric tales is enhanced by their hexameter verse, and tragedy and comedy benefit from metre, song, and dance. Meter is a species of rhythm found in drama's speeches and songs.

In a digression, Aristotle discusses the etymology of drama and the claims of the Dorians to the invention of both tragedy and comedy. He notes debates on comedy's origins, whether in Dorian Megara or Syracuse, and concludes that drama directly presents characters. He does not delve into the origins of tragedy or comedy's names but focuses on the psychological origins of art, stemming from humans' impulse to imitate and the natural pleasure in observing imitations. Aristotle cites children's play-acting as evidence of this artistic impulse and explains that people enjoy learning from imitations, even of unpleasant objects.

Humans' natural instinct for music and rhythm also plays a role in the origin of poetry, initially through naive improvisations. Poetry then evolved, with grave spirits representing noble actions and lesser spirits depicting ignoble ones. Homer excelled in both serious and comic veins, marking the lines of comedy with his "Margites." Tragedy and comedy eventually became distinct forms, with poets gravitating towards the more esteemed newer forms.

Aristotle briefly considers drama's origin and progress, noting changes like Aeschylus' addition of a second actor and Sophocles' introduction of a third actor and painted scenery. Tragedy moved away from satyr-dance origins to greater action and style, with iambic meter replacing trochaic. Comedy's early history is less documented, but Aristotle notes Crates' shift from personal abuse to generalized comic actions, influencing Aristophanes.

In Aristotle's view, comedy portrays men of inferior moral bent, focusing on shortcomings that are ludicrous but not harmful, as seen in comic masks. Aristophanes' characters and plots are ridiculous but not painful, reflecting this principle. Aristotle differentiates tragedy and epic poetry, noting their similarities and differences in verse, presentation, and length. Tragedy directly presents actions and employs varied meters, while epic poetry tells a longer tale in hexameter.

The second section begins with Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy, emphasizing its serious and complete nature, embellished language, direct presentation, and function of arousing and purging pity and fear. The language used includes rhythmical, metrical, intoned, and sung forms. The catharsis of pity and fear refers to the emotional relief experienced by the audience, as seen in "Oedipus the King." Aristotle's concept of catharsis is both psychological and physiological, with tragedy providing a harmless relief of latent emotions through its artistic presentation.

In every tragedy, there are six elements: plot, moral bent, thought, spectacle, musical composition, and composition in language. The quality of a tragedy depends on how well these elements are handled, as they determine the overall excellence of the work. Two elements, musical composition and composition in language, pertain to the medium of imitation; spectacle relates to the manner; and plot, moral bent, and thought are the objects of imitation.

Readers might struggle with Aristotle's idea that a poet doesn't merely create characters who sing, speak in verse, and perform actions. However, Aristotle's analytical method is useful in distinguishing between a character's

choices (like the impulsive acts of Oedipus or Hamlet) and how characters generalize and argue. These elements are as distinct yet related as rhetoric and ethics. A poet must ensure that the tragic hero makes poor decisions at crucial moments and that characters argue and reason appropriately for each situation and the play's outcome.

Aristotle considers the plot the most important of the six elements. He doesn't rank it above the characters, as he sees human nature in drama as divided into will and intellect. While all six elements are essential, the plot demands primary attention, similar to how a building's plan is crucial. Changing the plan alters the building's essence. Aristotle argues that tragedy imitates action and life, happiness and misery, which are not states but activities. Characters do not act to display their moral bent; instead, the display of moral bent is secondary to their actions. Therefore, the incidents and their structure are the tragedy's primary focus, with the final purpose being most important.

In discussing life and drama, Aristotle eloquently asserts that action is so crucial that tragedy cannot exist without it. One might construct a tragedy without distinctive characters, but not without action. He notes that many Greek tragedies, particularly those of Euripides, lack character development. Aristotle's point is that a series of well-written speeches without a plot won't achieve the effect of tragedy, whereas a plot-driven tragedy, despite other shortcomings, is more likely to succeed. The most engaging aspects of a tragedy, such as reversals of fortune and discoveries, are part of the plot. Beginners in drama often excel at versification and character depiction before mastering plot construction.

Mastery of plot is the mark of a true dramatist. The plot is the tragedy's core, similar to design in painting, where even the most beautiful colours applied haphazardly cannot match the appeal of a simple black-and-white sketch. Next in importance is moral bent, followed by thought. Tragic characters must speak and argue fittingly for their situation, requiring the poet to understand politics, ethics, and rhetoric. The elder poets like Sophocles made their heroes statesmanlike, while Euripides' characters displayed rhetorical tricks. Diction is the fourth element, as it is the medium through which characters express sentiments. Aristotle observes that diction is fundamentally the same in prose and metrical composition.

Of the remaining elements, music is more important than spectacle because it provides the main accessory pleasure of drama. Spectacle, though essential for engaging the audience, requires less artistic skill and concerns the stage manager more than the poet. A tragedy can produce its effect when read aloud, without the need for stage presentation.

Aristotle then examines the four main elements of tragic and epic poetry: plot, moral bent, thought, and diction. He says little about music, possibly due to his limitations or the decreasing association between poet and composer since Sophocles' time. He also gives incidental notice to spectacle, as many staging details don't concern the tragic poet. In discussing plot construction and tragic effect, Aristotle starts with basic principles that may seem obvious but are often neglected. A tragedy must be a complete action with magnitude, having a beginning, middle, and end. A well-constructed story must conform to these principles and have an appropriate length for the audience to perceive its order and beauty. The plot should be long enough for the hero to transition from happiness to misery or vice versa through a series of linked incidents.

The plot must be unified, not just centered around one person. Homer exemplified this by selecting and organizing related incidents in the Odyssey and Iliad. An epic or tragedy should represent a unified action with an interconnected structure. The poet should aim for ideal, not historical, truth, portraying what is likely to happen rather than what did happen. A poet is a maker of plots, not just verses, and even when using historical subjects, they should focus on probable or necessary sequences. Actions in a plot can be involved or uninvolved. Uninvolved plots, like episodic ones, lack necessary or probable sequences. A complete tragic action should consist of incidents that evoke pity and fear, often through unexpected events. Involved actions include reversals and discoveries, which should naturally arise from the plot. A reversal is a change from one situation to its opposite, while a discovery is a transition from ignorance to knowledge, often involving recognition between characters.

Aristotle then considers the parts of a tragedy, such as prologue, episode, exode, and choric song, before returning to plot construction for the best tragic effect. He advises against three types of stories: good people falling into misery, bad people rising to happiness, and excessively bad people falling from prosperity. The most effective tragedy involves a character who falls from high estate due to a mistake or shortcoming, evoking pity and fear.

Aristotle also emphasizes that tragic quality must be integrated into the incidents, especially when involving natural ties like family relationships. The poet should depict characters as good, true to type, true to life, and consistent. The plot should follow a probable or necessary sequence, avoiding arbitrary devices like deus ex machina. The irrational should be minimized and placed outside the main action.

Aristotle's significant contribution to literary studies lies in his perspective that each art form must produce its specific effect. Everything else is secondary; the final goal dictates all aspects. Without organic unity, there is no art and, consequently, no pleasure. Without a tragic flaw in a noble character, the audience cannot be moved to fear and pity, whose relief is the purpose of tragedy. Without embellishments, a painful story cannot be made pleasing. This pleasure is tied to our innate delight in learning, which differentiates human enjoyment from animal satisfaction. This explains our pleasure in artistic imitation as a whole, in discovering the play's outcome, and in recognizing details like recognitions and reversals when unexpected revelations occur.

The poet's aim is to provide pleasure, with the arousal of pity and fear serving only as means to achieve the end goal of tragic delight. The "Poetics" also marks the beginnings of scientific grammar. While some readers might be puzzled by its inclusion, grammar is essential to literary art. Though Aristotle's grammar has imperfections, his principles are superior to those of later Latin grammarians who dominate modern studies.

On the positive side, Aristotle provides valuable insights. On the negative side, he guards against common misapprehensions in criticism. For instance, the standard of conduct in imitative art differs from that in ethics or politics. Fictional characters should not be unnecessarily evil; an Edmund, Regan, or Goneril must be artistically, not ethically, justified. We should not judge fictional utterances as if they were real-life statements from the author. It is a mistake to attribute Milton's Satan's sentiments to Milton himself. Satan, a character depicted as a debased Stoic and master of sophistry, utters half-truths that do not reflect Milton's beliefs. Similarly, the maxims of a senile Polonius do not represent Shakespeare's wisdom. Following the "Poetics" helps avoid such errors.

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