Notes on Poetics by Aristotle

Important Terms

Mimesis - Mimesis is the act of creating in someone's mind, through artistic representation, an idea or ideas that the person will associate with past experience. Roughly translatable as "imitation," mimesis in poetry is the act of telling stories that are set in the real world. The events in the story need not have taken place, but the telling of the story will help the listener or viewer to imagine the events taking place in the real world.

Hamartia - This word translates almost directly as "error," though it is often rendered more elaborately as "tragic flaw." Tragedy, according to Aristotle, involves the downfall of a hero, and this downfall is effected by some error on the part of the hero. This error need not be an overarching moral failing: it could be a simple matter of not knowing something or forgetting something.

Anagnorisis - This word translates as "recognition" or "discovery." In tragedy, it describes the moment where the hero, or some other character, passes from ignorance to knowledge. This could be a recognition of a long lost friend or family member, or it could be a sudden recognition of some fact about oneself, as is the case with Oedipus. Anagnorisis often occurs at the climax of a tragedy in tandem with peripeteia.

Mythos - When dealing with tragedy, this word is usually translated as "plot," but unlike "plot," mythos can be applied to all works of art. Not so much a matter of what happens and in what order, mythos deals with how the elements of a tragedy (or a painting, sculpture, etc.) come together to form a coherent and unified whole. The overall message or impression that we come away with is what is conveyed to us by the mythos of a piece.

Katharsis - This word was normally used in ancient Greece by doctors to mean "purgation" or by priests to mean "purification." In the context of tragedy, Aristotle uses it to talk about a purgation or purification of emotions. Presumably, this means that katharsis is a release of built up emotional energy, much like a good cry. After katharsis, we reach a more stable and neutral emotional state.

Peripeteia - A reversal, either from good to bad or bad to good. Peripeteia often occurs at the climax of a story, often prompted by anagnorisis. Indeed, we might say that the peripeteia is the climax of a story: it is the turning point in the action, where things begin to move toward a conclusion.

Lusis - Literally "untying," the lusis is all the action in a tragedy from the climax onward. All the plot threads that have been woven together in the desis are slowly unraveled until we reach the conclusion of the play.

Desis - Literally "tying," the desis is all the action in a tragedy leading up to the climax. Plot threads are craftily woven together to form a more and more complex mess. At the peripeteia, or turning point, these plot threads begin to unravel in what is called the lusis, or denouement.

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Context

Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) is notorious for attacking art in Book 10 of his Republic. According to Plato's Theory of Forms, objects in this world are imitations or approximations of ideal Forms that are the true reality. A chair in this world is just an imitation or instantiation of the Form of Chair. That being the case, art is twice removed from reality, as it is just an imitation of an imitation: a painting of a chair is an imitation of a chair which is in turn an imitation of the Form of Chair. Further, Plato argues that art serves to excite the emotions, which can detract from the balanced reasoning that is essential to virtue.

Aristotle's Poetics can be read as a response to Plato's attack on art. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) was a student at Plato's Academy from the time he was seventeen until Plato's death some twenty years later. He spent the next twelve years engaging in scientific research and serving as tutor to the then teenaged Alexander the Great. He returned to Athens in 335 B.C.E., and founded his own school on the steps of the Lyceum. He remained there until 323 B.C.E., when he was forced to leave as a result

of his associations with Alexander. He died a year later of natural causes. The Lyceum remained open until 525 C.E., when it was closed by the emperor Justinian.

None of the works of Aristotle that we have today were actually published by Aristotle. He wrote a number of treatises and dialogues, but these have all been lost. What survives are collections of notes, possibly from lecture courses Aristotle gave at the Lyceum, which are often unclear or incomplete. The Poetics, in true form, was likely a much longer work than the one we have today. Aristotle supposedly wrote a second book on comedy, which is now lost.

The main focus of the Poetics is on Greek tragedy. Though there were thousands of tragedies and scores of playwrights, we only have thirty-three extant tragedies, written by the three great tragedians: Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.E.), Sophocles (496-405 B.C.E.), and Euripides (485-406 B.C.E.). Tragedies were performed in Athens twice annually at festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and excess. Though the tragedies likely evolved out of religious ceremonies celebrating the cycle of the seasons, they became increasingly secular. The dramatic festivals were immensely important events, and the winning playwrights achieved great fame.

The Poetics also discusses epic poetry, using the example of Homer (eighth century B.C.E.) almost exclusively. Homer wrote two great epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, which deal with the fall of Troy and Odysseus's subsequent wanderings respectively. These epics are the source of a great number of Greek tragedies and are considered among the earliest great works of world literature.

Though the Poetics is not one of Aristotle's major works, it has exercised a great deal of influence on subsequent literary theory, particularly in the Renaissance. Later interpreters unfortunately turned many of Aristotle's suggestions into strict laws, restricting the flexibility of drama in ways that Aristotle would not have anticipated. The tragedies of Racine and Corneille in particular are formed according to these demands. Even though such great playwrights as Shakespeare often went against these laws, they were held as the model for writing tragedy well into the nineteenth century.

Overview

Aristotle proposes to discuss poetry, which he defines as a means of mimesis, or imitation, by means of language, rhythm, and harmony. As creatures who thrive on imitation, we are naturally drawn to poetry.

In particular, Aristotle focuses his discussion on tragedy, which uses dramatic, rather than narrative, form, and deals with agents who are better than us ourselves. Tragedy serves to arouse the emotions of pity and fear and to effect a katharsis (catharsis) of these emotions. Aristotle divides tragedy into six different parts, ranking them in order from most important to least important as follows: (1) mythos, or plot, (2) character, (3) thought, (4) diction, (5) melody, and (6) spectacle.

The first essential to creating a good tragedy is that it should maintain unity of plot. This means that the plot must move from beginning to end according to a tightly organized sequence of necessary or probable events. The beginning should not necessarily follow from any earlier events, and the end should tie up all loose ends and not produce any necessary consequences. The plot can also be enhanced by an intelligent use of peripeteia, or reversal, and anagnorisis, or recognition. These elements work best when they are made an integral part of the plot.

A plot should consist of a hero going from happiness to misery. The hero should be portrayed consistently and in a good light, though the poet should also remain true to what we know of the character. The misery should be the result of some hamartia, or error, on the part of the hero. A tragic plot must always involve some sort of tragic deed, which can be done or left undone, and this deed can be approached either with full knowledge or in ignorance.

Aristotle discusses thought and diction and then moves on to address epic poetry. Epic poetry is similar to tragedy in many ways, though it is generally longer, more fantastic, and deals with a greater scope of action. After addressing some problems of criticism, Aristotle argues that tragedy is superior to epic poetry.

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