Aristotle's Poetics, translation and commentary in progress, Chapter 4

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Classical Inquiries

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Aristotle’s Poetics, translation and commentary in progress, Chapter 4

February 4, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy Comments off Edit This

In the postings for 2015.11.27 and 2016.01.21 and 2016.01.28, I translated and commented on Chapters 1 and 2 and 3 of Aristotle’s Poetics. In the posting here for 2016.02.04, I continue by translating and commenting on Chapter 4. But now I experiment with a new format. [full article here]

Introduction

In the postings for 2015.11.27 and 2016.01.21 and 2016.01.28, I translated and commented on Chapters 1 and 2 and 3 of Aristotle’s Poetics. In the posting here for 2016.02.04, I continue by translating and commenting on Chapter 4. But now I experiment with a new format. For the time being, I abandon the procedure I have followed up to now, where I insert my comments into footnotes that were originally formatted in Microsoft Word. A big disadvantage of this procedure is that it forces me to adopt an arbitrarily sequential numbering of my comments. So, I will do without footnotes this time, and instead I will highlight in the text of my translations—as also in the corresponding Greek text— the exact spot where my given comment belongs.

The comments I offer here are only a sampling. In another version, to be posted on a later occasion, I will offer more extensive comments, including a synthesis of Aristotle’s views on mimesis.

Aristotle’s Poetics Chapter 4

[[Parts of this Chapter, Poetics 1448b4–24 and 1448b24–34, have already been translated in an essay I posted in Classical Inquiries 2015.10.15, “Homo ludens in the world of ancient Greek verbal art.”]]
It seems that there are two causes [aitiai] that generated [gennēsai] the poetic craft [poiētikē tekhnē] as a whole, and these two [causes] are inborn in [human] nature. Here is what I mean. It is a naturally inborn thing in humans to imitate [mimelēthai], from childhood onward, and a human is different in nature from the other animals in this way, that this one [= the human as an animal] is most-capturable-of-imitation [mimētikōtaton] and achieves its first learning-experiences [mathēsis] by way of imitation [mimēsis]. Also, [it is naturally inborn in humans] to get pleasure [khaiōn] from imitations [mimēmata]. Evidence for this comes from what happens in [our own] experiences [epi tôn ergōn]. Here is what I mean. With regard to things that are unpleasant to see, of and by themselves, when we see visual-representations [eîkon plural] of these things—representations that are executed with the greatest accuracy—then we get pleasure from contemplating [theōrein] them, as for example [when we see] the forms of the most repulsive animals, or of corpses. And the cause [aition] for this too [= for the pleasure we get from seeing a mimēsis] is the fact that the experience of learning [manthanein] is the most pleasurable thing, not only for philosophers but for all other humans—though they [= humans other than philosophers] have a more limited share [in this experience]. You see, this is why humans get pleasure from seeing visual-representations [eîkon plural]. It is because, as they are contemplating [theōrein] what each thing is, they undergo the experience of learning [manthanein] and inferring [sullologizesthai]—inferring, for example, that ‘this one [houtos] is that one [ekēnos]’. Here is what I mean. Even if someone happens not to have already seen something [that is being imitated], the imitation [mimēma] [of that original something] will cause pleasure not as an imitation but because of the technique, or the coloring, or some other such cause [aitē]. Since imitating [mimelēthai] is natural to us, just as tune [harmonia] and rhythm [rhythmos] are natural to us [in the case of meters [metron plural], it is clear that they are subdivisions of rhythms], it follows that[,] from the very beginning, those who were naturally most inclined towards such things could evolve little by little in the generating [gennēsai] of poetry [poiēsis], starting from improvisations [autoskhediasmata].

Poetic composition [poiēsis] split apart, heading in two different directions, corresponding to the inherent characteristics [ēthos plural] [of their improvising makers]. Those who were more stately [semnotētai] by comparison with the non-serious [represented] [mimelēthai] noble actions [kalai praxeis]—actions of characters who were correspondingly that kind of people [= the noble ones]—whereas those who were less worthy [eutelesteroi] [represented] the actions of base [phauloi] people, at first making [poiēi] invective [posogos plural], whereas the others [= the noble people] made hymns [humnoi] and encomia [enkômia].

When it comes to those [poets] who lived before the time of Homer, we do not have anyone to tell about who made a composition [poiēma] of this kind [= invective poetry], although it is likely that there were...
many [who composed invective poetry already then]. But, starting with those who lived in the time of Homer, things is such a composition: it is his own [composition called] Margites, and there are other such things dating from his time. Among such compositions, there came about the good metron, the iambic [iambelion]. That is why this meter is even now called the iambic [iambelion], since it is in this meter that people used to make-injectives [iambizein] against one another. And that is how, among the ancient ones, some became the poetic-makers [poiētai] of [poetic] things heroic [hērōika], while others [became makers] of iambic-injectives [iamboi].

Just as, when it comes to things that are noble [spoudaia], Homer was by far the poet [poiētēs] of all poets, since he and he alone not only composed [poiein] in a good way but also composed things-of-mimesis [mimêsis plural] that were dramatic [drâmatikai] in form, so too was he the first to show-in-outline [hupodeik-nuthai] the form [skhêma] of comedy [kômôdia], by composing-in-dramatic-form [drâmatol-poiein] not invective [psogos], but what is laughable [tê gelolôn]. You see, his [composition called] Margites bears an analogous-relationship [analogon] to comedies: just as the Iliad 1449a and the Odyssey are to tragedies [tragôdiai], so also this [composition called] the Margites is to comedies [kômôdiai]. But when tragedy and comedy came on the scene, making their appearance, then those two kinds of people who were gravitating toward one or the other of the two forms of composing [poiēsis], that is, the composing of iambic or epic, now became respectively composers-of-comedy [kômôdio-poioi] instead of [composers of] iambic [iambos plural] and teachers-of-tragedy [tragôdido-didaskaloi] instead of [composers of] epic [epos plural], because these [= tragedy and comedy] had greater and more prestigious forms [skhêma plural] than those [= iambic and epic compositions]. To consider whether tragedy is as yet in fact sufficient in its forms [eidos plural] or not, and whether it is to be judged in and of itself and in relation to the productions-of-theater [theatron plural], is another story [logos]. In any case, tragedy, having been generated from an improvisatory [auto-skeïthesmekê] origin, and comedy [kômôdiai] as well, the one [= tragedy] originating from the leaders [exarkhôn plural] of the dithyramb [dithurambos], the other originating from the [leaders] of phallic songs [ta phalikai], which songs remain customary in many city-states [poleis] even now—it [= tragedy] kept on growing little by little as its visibility kept on emerging in the course of its being developed by those who were producing it. And then, after having changed [metabellein] by way of many changes [metabolê plural], tragedy [tragôdiai] finally stopped changing once it came into possession of its own natural-self [phusis].

Aeschylus first increased the number of the actors [hupokrîtis plural] from one to two, and diminished the [part] of the chorus [choros] and made dialogue [logos] take-the-leading-role [prôtagônistinest]. Sophocles [introduced] three [actors] and scene-painting [skênoiaphiê]. And here is another thing, with regard to the scale: from small plots [muthoi] and laughable [geloi] diction [lexis] because of its derivation from a form having to do with satyrs, [tragedy], in the fullness of time, became-stately [apo-semm-un-esthial], and the meter [metron] changed from tetrameter to iambic. You see, at first they used tetrameter on account of the poetic composition [poiēsis] being related-to-satyrs [saturikê] and more-related-to-dancing [orkhêstrôkêrê], but when [as an alternative to singing] there was speaking [lexis], then the nature [phusis] itself [of speaking instead of singing] discovered its own familiar [oikeion] meter [metron]: the iambic is, of all meters [metron plural], the most speakable [lektikon], and an indication of this is the fact that in conversation we speak iambbs [iambieia] more frequently than any other [meter]—[we speak in] hexameters rarely, and [only] when departing from conversational tone [lektikhê harmoniê]. And here is another thing, with regard to the number of episodes [ep-eis-odon plural] and the other ways in which each [part] is said to be arranged [kosmein]: let them be taken as already described by us, since it would be a great deal of work to go through each of them in detail.

Commentary

these two [causes] are inborn in [human] nature

Compare Plato Laws 2.673D, where we read that something inborn in human nature is the drive to leap, and this drive is linked with a sense of rhythm, which in turn led humans to produce [egennêse kai etete] dancing [orkhêsi], after which the union of rhythm [rhythmos] and melody [melos] brought forth [etekêtê] song and dance [khoreiâ] and playfulness [paidiâ].

GN 2016.01.31, repeated from GN 2010.03

This comparandum from Plato was first suggested by EB 2010.03. Note the play of synonyms in this passage from Plato. Further analysis in Nagy 2010.

GN 2016.01.31, repeated from GN 2012.05

contemplating [theôrein] (two occurrences here)

1. The verb theôrein can be interpreted as meaning ‘to look at’ or ‘to contemplate’. The corresponding noun theôros means, etymologically, ‘one who sees [root hor-] a vision [thei]’. In the first of the two occurrences of theôrein that we see here in Aristotle’s Poetics, it seems as if this word referred here only to the process of looking at an image produced by a medium of visual arts—as in the case of an image that is painted. From other contexts, however, we see that theôrein can also refer to the very process of
imagining. And what is imagined can be created not only by the art of painting, for example, but also by the art of theater. The ancient Greek word for ‘theater’, theātron, means literally ‘the instrument for looking’: in other words, the noun theātron is derived from a combination of (1) the root of the verb theāsthai, which means ‘look’, and (2) the suffix -tron, which expresses instrumentality (H24H 21§25).

2. A related concept is the Greek noun prosōpon, which means ‘theatrical mask’: this noun is a compound consisting of the elements (1) pros-, meaning ‘toward’, and (2) ὄπ-, meaning ‘look’. This noun prosōpon refers not only to a given mask worn by a given persona in theater but also to the given persona who is wearing that mask. Further, this noun can refer also to a given person in grammar, whether it be the first or the second or the third person. I argue in H24H 21§§19–28 that the Greek theatrical mask, as indicated by the word prosōpon, is a subjective agent, an ‘I’ who is looking for a dialogue with a ‘you’. And I also argue there that the subjectivity of the mask is related to the idea of Dionysus as god of theater.

3. I have more to say in PH 164–166 (6§§35–39) about the relationship between the word theōrein ‘look, contemplate’ and the word theātron ‘theater’. And I have more to say there also about the relationship of this word theōrein to the word sēma ‘sign, something indicated’. Here I confine myself to observing that this relationship is pertinent to the usage of such modern lexical creations as theory and semantics or semiotics.

'this one [houtos] is that one [ekeinos]'

This formulation by Aristotle, which conveys the cognitive process of actually recognizing mimesis, is analyzed in my posting for 2015.10.15 §§9–11.

For more on the hermeneutics of ‘teaching’ (didasklein) as the authorization of a composition in performance, see PH 371 (12§61n168) and HPC 33.

forms [eidos plural]

See my comments on eidos in Chapter 1. The question here raised is whether tragedy is yet complete as a genre.

leaders [exarkhōn plural]

The technical term for the leading of a khoros ‘chorus’ is ex-arkhein, which ‘signals an individuated act of performance that leads into a distinctly collective or choral act of performance’ (Nagy HC 2§68). Thus the participle exarkhōn or noun form exarkhos are standard words for the leader of a choral ensemble.

[ta phallika]

Analysis in HC 2§65.
chorus [khoros]
It is important for me to emphasize here that a khoros 'chorus', including a tragic chorus, is an ensemble of performers who sing and dance. This meaning is different from modern conceptions of the chorus, which involve singing but not dancing. Preliminary comment in PH 20 (1§8).

GN 2016.02.04

conversational tone [lekítē harmoniā]
Further commentary in my posting for 2015.10.15 §§23–29, especially with reference to the iambic trimeter and the trochaic tetrameter catalectic.

GN 2016.02.04

episodes [ep-eis-odion plural]
For the definition of an episode [ep-eis-odion] and its relation to the other parts of a drama, see Poetics Chapter 12 (1452b20).

EB 2010.03

Bibliography
HC. See Nagy 2008|2009.
HPC. See Nagy 2009|2010.


PH. See Nagy 1990.


Tags: Aristotle, Commentary, Poetics

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