An Approach to Aristotle's Poetics

ONTOLOGY AND THE ART OF TRAGEDY

MARTHA HUSAIN

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PREFACE

The idea from which this study developed was suggested by my sister, Herta Schmid of the University of Berlin, in 1987. The Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst supported it by a grant in 1988/89. Its final form took shape during a delightful sabbatical stay as a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University in 1997.

The focus on questions of approach crystallized slowly, aided by teaching and the thinking of students, by giving and hearing papers at conferences and university colloquia, and by discussion and the teaching of joint courses with my colleague Murray Miles at Brock University. I am indebted to many scholars both for points on which I agree and for points on which I disagree with them. One's debts *legetai pollachos.*

A word on texts, translation, and secondary literature may not be out of place here.

I have in general relied on the Oxford Classical Texts, and for the *Metaphysics* in particular on Ross's corrected 1953 Oxford Clarendon edition. For the *Poetics* I have relied on Kassel's 1965 Oxford Classical Texts edition. This has been used in conjunction with Lucas's 1968 commented edition of the text and with Halliwell's 1987 commented translation. Both have recorded few disagreements with Kassel's text, most of which do not affect the argument. Lucas had adopted Kassel's text, noting that the few places where he would have preferred a different reading are "negligible" (v). Halliwell lists his divergences from Kassel (66–68 of his Textual Notes), but only one really bears on the argument. There is thus an up-to-date reliable text available, which supersedes earlier editions. Other editions and commentaries have been consulted on contentious issues.[1]

My translations generally follow the Oxford Translation, to which I wish to record my indebtedness. I have, however, changed it in the light of other translations and commentaries and of the following principles: I have rendered *einai* as "to be" rather than as "to exist," deleted all

emphases and capitalizations that are not based on the text, deleted single quotations marks where they seemed misleading, and frequently sacrificed elegance for literalness. For the *Poetics* I have followed Halliwell's splendidly readable commented translation of 1987, though with changes where I felt them to be appropriate.

As for secondary literature, there is so much of it, by so many scholars in different fields, that an exhaustive survey would be impossible in what is meant to be a reasonably small book. This inevitably leaves some works out that deserve mention and makes the consideration of others too brief to do justice to their complexity. For both my apologies.

I thank my colleague Murray Miles for reading the text in its entirety and greatly improving its readability. And my gratitude to Irene Cherrington, the departmental secretary, is great in this as in many other things. I also wish to acknowledge the generosity of the Classics Department at Brock University, which has made its resources and expertise available to me for many years. My special thanks go to Fred Casler who first taught me Greek and to Richard Parker who read the *Poetics* in Greek with Murray Miles and me. The book also owes significant improvements to the fine work of my research assistant, Stefan Rodde.

The following list of italicized transliterated Greek terms, with translations, is to serve for the reader's orientation. These are technical terms that recur frequently. Keeping them in this form highlights how technical and consistent Aristotle's language in the *Poetics* is. But when any of these terms occur in longer Greek quotes, they are given in Greek script.

aitia or *aition*	cause, reason
aporia (aporiai, aporetic)	difficulty
arche (archai)	principle, beginning
ousia (ousiai)	substance
*dia (*mostly used as *di')*	through, because
dianoia	articulated rationality
dynamis	potentiality
ethos (ethe)	moral character
eidos (eide)	form, formal cause
einai (on, onta, esti)	to be
eleeinon (eleos)	pitiful
energeia	actuality
episteme (epistemai)	science
ergon	work, function
hyle	matter, material cause
katharsis (katharon)	clarification
lexis	language, delivery

logos (logoi)	language, speech, account, definition
melopoiia	choral lyrics
meros (mere)	part
mimesis (mimeseis, mimetic, mimetes)	imitation
mythos (mythoi)	plot-structure, story
oikeion	integral, of one's household
opsis	spectacle
pathos (pathema, pathemata)	action, event, emotion
perainein (perainousa)	to achieve, to complete
peri hena	focused on one person
peri mian praxin	focused on one action
poiesis (poiein, poietes, poietike)	making, poetry
praxis (praktike)	action
pros (pros ti, pros hen, pros ta theatra)	in relation to
phoberon (phobos)	fearsome
physis	nature
psyche	soul
rhetor (rhetorike)	public speaker
synthesis or *systasis*	structure
synolon (synola)	a composite being
techne (technai, technites)	craft
telos (tele, telic, auto-telic, hetero-telic)	end, purpose, final cause
tragikon (tragodia)	tragic

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INTRODUCTION

This study is not a new translation nor primarily a new exegesis of the *Poetics* but a sustained reflection on the principles and criteria that should guide an approach to this text. It aims at developing a canon for establishment, translation, and exegesis of the text. Since these three aspects of its reception are interconnected rather than neatly sequential, all three must be guided by the same principles and criteria.

Such reflections are of course always present, at least implicitly, in scholarly attempts at reception of this as of any other ancient Greek text. For reception is beset by so many difficulties that it cannot be achieved unreflectively. The difficulties are of two kinds. First, the ambiguity of the ancient texts themselves makes reception governed by different principles and criteria defensible. The ambiguity results in large part from the loss of context. For in their own time they stood in a concrete context within which their meaning could be ascertained by recourse to a much richer and denser environment consisting of other Aristotelian texts, of those of other philosophers and schools, of the literary and wider culture around them, of the historical sources, and even of the author and his colleagues and students as also of his rivals and opponents. The second difficulty arises from our own historical situation in the long and varied history of exegesis. The texts have been filtered through different layers of the vagaries of transmission, of translation, and of interpretation in terms of later purposes, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches. These later purposes, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches are enormously diverse and affect not only our ability to get back to the ancient texts themselves but even our willingness to make the attempt. Aristotle's *Poetics* in particular has been appropriated in such diverse ways that access to the text itself has been obscured.

In the face of these difficulties, the present study attempts to develop principles and criteria for reception of the text itself. For while its diverse

appropriations may be legitimate and worthwhile within their own pa-
rameters, both intellectual honesty and the furtherance of critical scholarly
debate would seem to demand that those parameters be delineated in
careful reflection, so that they can be assessed both in terms of their power
to illumine the text and in their limitations. The here proposed principles
and criteria are meant to be a contribution to such reflection and debate.

My guiding heuristic principle is von Trendelenburg's celebrated
dictum: *Aristoteles ex Aristotele.* This can never be more than a guiding
principle, since one cannot leave one's historical situation and magically
return to Aristotle's Lyceum. But it can also never be less, if the attempt
to understand the text in and for itself is not to be abandoned. And that
attempt, notwithstanding all the difficulties, is worth preserving, not only
for the text's intrinsic interest and value and the preservation of our
intellectual heritage, but also as the indispensable precondition of under-
standing what it is that we are appropriating in terms of diverse pur-
poses, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches.

At this point it is reasonable to ask why one should concern oneself
with developing a canon for the reception of the *Poetics* in particular rather
than for Aristotle's works as a whole. For surely the *Poetics,* as a small and
incomplete part of that whole, cannot be understood apart from it. This is
true, but two considerations mandate the development of principles and
criteria for this text in particular. One is the nature of an individual Aris-
totelian treatise, the other its particular location within the *corpus* as a
whole. An individual treatise has a distinct subject matter of its own, which
it elucidates in terms of substantive-methodological *archai* of its own. This
substantive-methodological differentiation is made possible by the flexibil-
ity of Aristotle's technical vocabulary. While certain key concepts apply to
all his works and stamp them as Aristotelian, they nevertheless function
differently within different subject matters. *An. Post*. I. 76a37–40 even char-
acterizes the common basic truths of demonstrative science as analogous
rather than identical for different sciences. Such differences must be taken
into account, if reception of any individual treatise is to be achieved.
Secondly, an individual treatise has a particular location within the *cor-
pus* as a whole in the sense that the network of its relationships with the
other treatises is unique. It may need to be read to a greater or lesser
extent in the light of others, and the achievement of reception hinges
crucially on identifying those other treatises correctly. This is especially
important for a small and incomplete text such as the *Poetics*.

The present study is motivated in part by the belief that the *Poetics*
has not always been understood as having a distinctive subject matter of
its own, and that it has all too often been read in the light of the wrong
other treatises. This has obscured both how technical Aristotle's vocabu-
lary is and how it functions in this text. The reason for this study is

therefore also partly polemical. The study embodies a proposal to read the *Poetics* as having a distinctive subject matter of its own, whose location in the *corpus* is such that it should be read principally in the light of the *Metaphysics* rather than of the *Ethics-Politics* or *Rhetoric*.[1]

Whether this proposal turns out to be right or wrong or somewhere in between, it is perhaps worthwhile to work it out and to present it as an alternative and as a contribution to the critical scholarly debate on the metalevel, at which alone principles and criteria for reception can be refined in such a way as to achieve a better approximation to von Trendelenburg's guiding heuristic principle.

The basic idea of the present approach, namely, to read the *Poetics ex Aristotele* in the context of his philosophy, is not new. Frede (in Rorty 1992), and Belfiore 1992 have clearly expressed this as a desideratum, as have other scholars earlier. In fact, all responsible classical scholarship attempts this.

What is new is rather the deliberate, sustained, systematic, and sequential focus on questions of approach. Its purpose is to give the adjective *Aristotelian* conceptual content by making the author's understanding of Aristotle's philosophy explicit. For it is only by giving conceptual content to the adjective *Aristotelian* that what the author means by reading the *Poetics* as an *Aristotelian* treatise can be made clear—and only this can in turn subject that meaning to critical debate. The four chapters bring the conceptual content of *Aristotelian* to bear on the *Poetics*.

Chapter 1 sets out the author's approach to the *corpus* as a systematic doctrinal whole, marked as Aristotelian by a core of pervasive substantive-methodological conceptual constants. These are: the concept of being, the categories of being, the categorial priority of *ousia*, immanent causal form-matter constitution in the category of *ousia*, and the ontological and cognitive priority of the object. These comprise Aristotle's distinctive philosophy of being, as primarily elucidated in the *Metaphysics*. The *Poetics* is to be read in this context.

Chapter 2 locates the subject matter of the *Poetics* within this distinctive philosophy of being by gradual adumbration, successively narrowing it down from the full extension of being *(panta ta onta)*, through the craft-nature disjunction, the artistic craft–useful craft disjunction, the literary arts–visual arts disjunction, to the tragic literary art.

Chapter 3 shows that Aristotle conceptualizes a tragedy in terms of his distinctive philosophy of being, because the pervasive substantive-methodological conceptual constants are either explicitly or implicitly present in the text of the *Poetics*. The chapter distinguishes and evaluates different kinds of direct and indirect textual evidence and concludes that Aristotle understands a tragedy as a *synolon*, a composite being in the category of *ousia*, with all that that entails for him.

Chapter 4 contrasts tragic, ethical, and rhetorical action in terms of the *synolon,* on which each one is centered. Tragic action in the *Poetics* is object-centered on the tragedy, ethical action in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is agent-centered on the ethical agent, rhetorical action in the *Rhetoric* is patient-centered on the audience. The three modes of centering are mutually exclusive, from which it follows that the *Poetics* cannot be read either in the light of the *Ethics* or of the *Rhetoric.* It must instead be read in the light of the *Metaphysics,* which sets out the object-centered structure of natural and man-made *ousiai.*

The *Appendix* deals with textual evidence, particularly with the distinction between the lexical and the textual meaning of the technical vocabulary of the *Poetics.* It makes some recommendations for translation, and it shows that the approach of the present study can resolve exegetical difficulties that arise from other approaches.

A new exegesis of the *Poetics* emerges from this approach. Since the latter has been made explicit, its link with the exegesis is clarified. Clarification of the link between approach and exegesis is one of the purposes of the present study.

The most important and perhaps surprising features of the new exegesis are as follows: Aristotle's *Poetics* is well integrated into, and consistent with, his distinctive philosophy of being. A tragedy is categorized and defined as an *ousia* with an intrinsic definitory nature of its own, hence *katharsis* in the formal definition cannot be in the tertiary category of *pros ti.* Two distinct *mimetic* levels (*mimesis* 1 and *mimesis* 2, respectively) connect a tragedy with nature and with human life. The tragic *(to tragikon)* is art-specific for Aristotle, it is the specific nature of a tragedy *(tragike mimesis),* and the *mythos* functions as its compositional principle or "soul."

The final assessment of his theory of art sees its strength and continuing relevance in the antireductionist conceptual elucidation of the adjective *artistic,* a feat rarely equalled in the 2,300 years since Aristotle. It sees its weakness in its representational tie with human life, which renders it unable to encompass nonrepresentational art.

The present study's emphasis on questions of approach makes it possible to put scholarly debates on a more fundamental level. For example, Belfiore 1992, chapter 8, sees the fundamental exegetical contrast between the intrinsic and the homeopathic interpretations of *katharsis.* She proposes an allopathic view as the fundamental contrast to the homeopathic. But bringing Aristotle's distinctive philosophy of being to bear on the issue, shows both the homeopathic and the allopathic views to be but variants of patient-centering. The fundamental distinction is between patient-centering and object-centering, which is for Aristotle a sharp and mutually exclusive divide. Only when his three modes of

centering with their normal Aristotelian implications are taken into account, do the *Poetics* and *Ethics* and *Rhetoric* become comparable, and only then can the location of the *Poetics* within the *corpus* be assessed.

The project of reading the *Poetics* in light of the *Metaphysics* necessitates a preliminary (chapter 1) presentation of Aristotle's distinctive philosophy of being. This is indispensable as it introduces the reader to the basic concepts of Aristotle's thought-world, and so to the conceptual space within which the *Poetics* is located. If the *Poetics* is to be understood as an Aristotelian treatise, an awareness of these concepts is necessary.

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