



# Aristotle

## Poetics

A new translation by Anthony Kenny

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## POETICS

ARISTOTLE (384–322 BC), with Plato one of the two greatest philosophers of antiquity, and in the view of many the greatest philosopher of all time, lived and taught in Athens for most of his career. He began as a pupil of Plato, and for some time acted as tutor to Alexander the Great. He left writings on a prodigious variety of subjects, covering the whole field of knowledge from biology and astronomy to rhetoric and literary criticism, from political theory to the most abstract reaches of philosophy. He wrote two treatises on ethics, called *Eudemean* and *Nicomachean* after their first editors, his pupil Eudemus and his son Nicomachus.

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ARISTOTLE

*Poetics*



*Translated with an Introduction and Notes by*  
ANTHONY KENNY

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Literary Legacy of Greece*

Of all the treasures that ancient Greece has bequeathed to us, its literature is the one that is best preserved. Greek architecture survives in ruins, Greek sculptures have suffered amputations, Greek paintings have almost vanished, and no one really knows how Greek music sounded. However, many masterpieces of literature have survived intact to be read and enjoyed across the centuries. We possess fine specimens of epic and lyric, of tragedy and comedy, of history and philosophy, and of rhetorical and political oratory. Moreover, Greece provided us not only with the earliest European literature, but also with the very earliest literary criticism, to which the present volume bears witness.

Epic was the first genre to be perfected in Greece. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer purport to recount events of the Trojan war of the thirteenth century BC, but they were probably put together in their present form in the eighth century. Perhaps at the end of that century, the poet Hesiod wrote epic texts on agriculture and on the gods of the Greek pantheon. In the late seventh century the poetess Sappho of Lesbos wrote enchanting love lyrics. The most famous Greek lyric poet was Pindar (518–446), who wrote odes in honour of the victors in panhellenic contests such as the Olympic Games.

The most glorious days of ancient Greece fell in the fifth century BC, during fifty years of peace between two periods of warfare. The century began with wars between Greece and Persia, and ended with a war between the city states of Greece itself. In the middle period flowered the great civilization of the city of Athens.

In 499 BC Greeks living in Ionia (now part of Turkey) rose in unsuccessful revolt against the Persian King Darius who ruled over them. Darius invaded Greece to punish those who had assisted the rebels; he was defeated by a mainly Athenian army



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at Marathon in 490. His son Xerxes launched a more massive expedition in 484, defeated a gallant band of Spartans at Thermopylae, and forced the Athenians to evacuate their city. By 479, however, he had been defeated both at sea (the battle of Salamis) and on land (the battle of Platea). At this point democratic Athens assumed the leadership of the Greek allies and built up a powerful empire of mainland and island communities

The Athenian leader Pericles rebuilt the city's temples which had been destroyed by Xerxes. To this day visitors travel across the world to see the ruins of the buildings he erected on the Acropolis, and the sculptures with which these temples were adorned are among the most treasured possessions of the museums in which they are now scattered. When Pericles' programme was complete, Athens was unrivalled anywhere in the world for architecture and sculpture.

Athens held the primacy too in drama and literature. Aeschylus (525–456), who had fought in the Persian wars, was the first great writer of tragedy: he brought onto the stage the heroes and heroines of Homeric epic, and his re-enactment of the homecoming and murder of Agamemnon can still fascinate and horrify. Aeschylus also represented the more recent catastrophes that had afflicted King Xerxes in his play *Persians*. Younger dramatists, the pious conservative Sophocles (496–406) and the more radical and sceptical Euripides (485–406), set the classical pattern of tragic drama. Sophocles' plays about King Oedipus, killer of his father and husband of his mother, and Euripides' portrayal of the child-murderer Medea not only figure in the twenty-first-century repertoire but also strike disturbing chords in the twenty-first-century psyche. The serious writing of history also began in the fifth century, with chronicles of the Persian wars written by Herodotus (484–425) at the beginning of the century, and Thucydides' (455–400) narrative of the war between the Greeks as the century came to an end.

Philosophy, too, was practised in Periclean Athens, by Anaxagoras (500–428), an early proponent of Big Bang cosmology.

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But its golden days were still in the future, with the great trio of Socrates (469–399), Plato (429–347), and Aristotle (385–322). In the Peloponnesian war between Athens and the other Greek cities which brought to an end the Athenian Empire, Socrates served in the Athenian heavy infantry. During the war he displayed conspicuous physical courage, and after it remarkable moral courage in resisting political pressure to carry out illegal acts. This made him unpopular with successive Athenian governments, and he was executed, on trumped-up charges, by the democratic rulers in 399.

Socrates left no writings, and the only portrayal of him in his lifetime was made by Aristophanes (448–380), the greatest writer of Greek comedy, who represents him (in the play *Clouds*) as presiding over a school of chicanery and an academy of bogus research. However, Socrates' philosophical views were preserved and adorned in the dialogues of his pupil Plato, and it is Plato's Socrates who has been the patron saint of philosophy ever since.

Socrates' own interests focused on moral philosophy: what was the nature of virtue, and could it be taught in the way that a craft can be taught? Plato presented a system of moral philosophy with an elaborate metaphysical underpinning, the theory of Forms or Ideas. In his best-known writings he used this theory to solve problems in logic and epistemology as well as in ethics; but in later life he began to see flaws in his system, and to reform it in fundamental ways. Some of the criticisms he set out to answer may have been derived from Aristotle, who was a member of Plato's philosophical school, the Academy, for twenty years.

Aristotle was a polymath: a logician, biologist, zoologist, economist, and political theorist as well as a metaphysician and philosopher of mind. As a moral philosopher, he followed Plato's structuring of the virtues and Plato's emphasis on the close connection between virtue and happiness. But he rejected the theory of Ideas, the metaphysical substructure of Platonic ethics, and developed his own moral theory, presented

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in magisterial form in two different treatises, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*.

In place of the Idea of the Good which was central for Plato, Aristotle offers happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the supreme good with which ethics is concerned, for, like Plato, he sees an intimate connection between living virtuously and living happily. In both ethical treatises a happy life is a life of virtuous activity, and each of them offers an analysis of the concept of virtue and a classification of virtues of different types. One class is that of the moral virtues, such as courage, temperance, and liberality, that constantly appeared in Plato's ethical discussions. The other class is that of intellectual virtues: here Aristotle, unlike Plato, makes a sharp distinction between the intellectual virtue of wisdom, which governs ethical behaviour, and the intellectual virtue of understanding, which is expressed in scientific endeavour and contemplation. The principal difference between Aristotle's two ethical treatises is that one of them regards perfect happiness as constituted solely by the activity of philosophical contemplation, whereas for the other it consists in the harmonious exercise of all the virtues, intellectual and moral.

Philosophy was the last form of literature to reach maturity in classical Greece, but with its arrival literature became for the first time reflective, and conscious of itself. Both Plato's and Aristotle's works contain reflections on the purpose and value of literature. Both philosophers are keenly interested in the relationship between literature and morality, and because they have different conceptions of morality they have different attitudes to literature. In Plato's writings the discussions of literature are scattered, the most interesting of them occurring in his dialogue the *Republic*, which is principally devoted to moral and political philosophy. (These reflections are reprinted in translation in this volume.) Aristotle, however, devoted a self-standing work, the *Poetics*, to the issues that Plato had discussed in fragmented fashion. His brief treatise stands out, therefore, as the first surviving work devoted to literary criticism, and indeed the first essay in the broader field of aesthetics.

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### *Aristotle's Poetics*

It is many centuries too late to change the title of this treatise of Aristotle's, but 'Poetics' gives a misleading impression of the contents of the treatise. The Greek word *poiesis* (literally 'making'), as used by Aristotle, has both a narrower and a wider scope than the English word 'poetry'. The *Poetics* treats at length of Greek epic and tragedy, both of which were written in verse; but there were many forms of Greek poetry in which Aristotle shows no interest: didactic treatises like Hesiod's, for instance, or love-lyrics like Sappho's. He was indeed well aware of the distinction between verse and prose, though there was no obvious pair of Greek words to make the distinction. But he is insistent that it is not the metrical form that makes something a poem; it is content rather than form that matters in poetry. The scientific writings of the philosopher Empedocles are not poetry, even though they are composed in hexameters; and if you put the histories of Herodotus into verse they would still be history and not poetry. On the other hand, it is clear to us—if not perhaps to Aristotle—that many of the features that he regarded as essential to epic and tragedy might well find expression in pure prose. If a verse Herodotus would still be history, might not a prose Homer still be what Aristotle calls poetry? After all, most of what the *Poetics* says about the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* remains true of the numerous prose versions of those works in modern languages.

What English term, then, covers all and only the things that Aristotle calls *poiesis*? 'Imaginative writing' and 'creative writing' come close, but one expression is too clumsy and the other too academic for regular use. The closest modern equivalent to Aristotle's word is the German *Dichtung*, which covers prose fiction as well as verse. In this translation I have decided to retain the traditional translation 'poetry', having prefaced it with this health warning.

The semantic properties of Aristotle's word for poetry mean that his treatise is inadequate as a treatment of Greek verse.

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But they confer on it an immense countervailing advantage. Because of them, Aristotle's insights transcend the boundaries of ancient Greek culture and can be applied to creative writing of many ages and many nations. As we shall see in the course of reading the text, the technical concepts he here creates can be applied to novels, dramas, and operas in many languages—even, indeed, to detective stories. Aristotle provides a prism through which different kinds of imaginative writing may be viewed and evaluated.

The *Poetics* concentrates on a single art form: tragedy. Epic is taken seriously, but is given nothing like equal space. A treatment of comedy is promised, but the promise is never fulfilled. The emphasis is entirely intelligible: tragedy was the most fully developed literary product of the time. While seeking to lay bare the essence of tragedy, Aristotle was able to expose, through his close inspection of this single genre, some of the basic principles operative in the creative process itself.

### *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*

To understand Aristotle's message in the *Poetics* one must know something of Plato's attitude to poetry. In the second and third books of the *Republic* Homer is attacked for misrepresenting the gods and for encouraging debased emotions, and dramatic representation is attacked as deceptive and degrading. In the tenth book Plato's theory of Ideas provides the basis for a further, and more fundamental, attack on the poets. Material objects are imperfect copies of the truly real Ideas; artistic representations of material objects are therefore at two removes from reality, being imitations of imitations (597e). Drama corrupts by appealing to the lower parts of our nature, encouraging us to indulge in weeping and laughter (605d–6c). Dramatic poets must be kept away from the ideal city: they should be anointed with myrrh, crowned with garlands, and sent on their way (398b).

One of Aristotle's aims is to resolve this quarrel between poetry and philosophy. There are three elements in Plato's

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attack: theological, ethical, and metaphysical. Aristotle has a response to each of them, but he deals with each criticism in a different manner. The metaphysical system of Plato is rejected outright. Poetry is shown to have a significant role within Aristotle's own ethical system. The theological criticism is accepted, but in response tragedy is tacitly secularized.

To understand the vehemence of Plato's attack on epic poetry one must realize that in the Athens of his day the works of Homer enjoyed a status comparable to that of the Bible during much of Christian history. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were a principal source of information about the divine, they contained models for ethical behaviour, and they provided a common source of reference and allusion for the discussion of a wide variety of human interests and values. Plato combines the fervour of a Luther dethroning a debased theology and a David Friedrich Strauss demolishing a mythological farrago.

Plato was not the first philosopher to attack Homer's Olympian gods. Xenophanes had earlier complained that Homer attributed to the gods theft, adultery, deception, and everything that, among humans, would be considered a shame and a reproach. But even if Homer's gods had behaved honourably, they would still resemble humans too much to be credible. Men fashion gods in their own image: Ethiopians believe in gods that are dark and snub-nosed, while the gods worshipped by the Thracians have red hair and blue eyes. 'If cows and horses or lions had hands and could draw, then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, cows like cows, making their bodies similar in shape to their own.' Instead of this childish anthropomorphism, Xenophanes offered a sophisticated monotheism. He believed in

One god, lord over gods and human kind  
Like mortals neither in body nor in mind.

Aristotle in the *Poetics* accepts that Xenophanes may well have been right about the nature of the gods; he thinks, however, that Homer can still be defended. But as we shall see later in

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detail, in his treatment of the great Greek tragedies he pares down to the minimum the divine element they contain.

Both Plato and Aristotle in their ethical systems treated at length of the emotions, and they shared a psychological model in which reasoning and feeling were activities of different parts of the soul, and the intellectual soul was paramount. The role assigned to the emotions was different in the two systems, however. In Plato's virtuous man the expression of emotion would be confined to the minimum. For Aristotle an important part of virtue was the appropriate amount of feeling: there could be too little, as well as too much emotion, in a man's life. In emotion as in action, Aristotle's virtuous person aims at a happy mean. Both philosophers emphasize that there is a close link between poetry and emotion; it is because they have different attitudes to emotion that they have different attitudes to poetry.

As we have seen, a key element in Plato's philosophy was the theory of Ideas. The theory can be characterized as follows. Socrates, Simmias, and Cebes are all called 'men'; they have it in common that they are all men. Now when we say 'Simmias is a man', does the word 'man' stand for something in the way that the word 'Simmias' stands for the individual man Simmias? If so, what? Is it the same thing as the word 'man' stands for in the sentence 'Cebes is a man'? Plato's answer is yes: in each case in which such an expression occurs it stands for the same thing, namely, that which makes Simmias, Cebes, and Socrates all men. This is the Idea of Man, which is something simple, universal, immutable, and everlasting. In general, in any case where the particular things A, B, and C, are all F, Plato is likely to say that they are related to a single Idea of F: they participate in or imitate the Idea. It was on the basis of this theory that Plato complained that works of art were imitations of imitations.

Aristotle rejected the classical theory of Ideas (which, it is fair to notice, was substantially criticized and modified by Plato himself in his later years). The theory, he claimed, fails to solve the problems it was meant to address. It does not confer intelligibility on particular things, because immutable and

everlasting Forms cannot explain how particulars come into existence and undergo change. Moreover, the Ideas do not contribute anything to the knowledge of other things or to their being. All the theory does is to bring in new entities equal in number to the entities to be explained: as if one could solve a problem by doubling it. By rejecting the theory, Aristotle undercut the metaphysical objection to poetry.

Aristotle did, however, agree with Plato about the importance of universals; only, he denied that there were any universals separated from individuals. Like Plato, he attached supreme importance to truths that are universal and necessary: they are the province of philosophy. Like Plato, he attaches secondary importance to contingent truths about the empirical world. But he disagrees with Plato about the relative importance of empirical truths and dramatic fictions. Whereas Plato ranked in descending order the disciplines of philosophy, history, and poetry, Aristotle offers a different ranking: philosophy, poetry, and history. He does so on the basis that poetry is more philosophical than history, since it deals with universals rather than particulars.

### *Representation*

Aristotle sites his criticism of Plato within a general theory of imitation or representation. Imitation, he says, so far from being the degrading activity that Plato describes, is something natural to humans from childhood, and is one of the features that makes man superior to animals, since it vastly increases his scope for learning. Secondly, representation brings a delight all of its own: we enjoy and admire paintings of objects that in themselves would annoy or disgust us (1448b5–24).

The Greek word used in this dialogue with Plato is *mimesis*—the word from which our ‘mime’ is derived. It is often translated ‘imitation’, and this is indeed appropriate to render Plato’s use, since its slightly pejorative overtones would be an expression of Plato’s distaste for the activity. But it is not clear that the word



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is the best English one to render the concept as understood by Aristotle. Several translators simply use the word *mimesis* itself inside an English context. Commonly, the use of transliteration instead of translation is a mark of cowardice in translators. But in this case the difficulty of finding an English word that fits in all the Aristotelian contexts makes one sympathize with those who have given up the task.

Having experimented with several renderings—‘mimicry’, ‘copying’, ‘portrayal’, and ‘imitation’ itself—I finally opted for ‘representation’. In most contexts this is clearly what Aristotle is talking about, and ‘representative arts’ sounds more natural than ‘imitative arts’. What has prevented translators from adopting this version is, I think, the fact that the concept is introduced in connection with the behaviour of children. When a child pretends to be a tiger, or children play at doctors and nurses, it seems a little heavy to say that they are representing something, whereas ‘imitation’ is quite a natural description of what they are doing. None the less, what they are doing does fall under the concept of representation as sketched by Aristotle, and it is no accident that in English the word ‘play’ covers both childish pretence and dramatic performance. In the other contexts in which Aristotle uses the word *mimesis*, ‘representation’ is the English word that comes closest to his sense.

Aristotle begins with a very broad concept of representation. It covers epic, drama, painting, sculpture, dancing, and music. The last two items in this list may give us pause. Dancing, however, fits well enough if we remember that the kind of dances Aristotle would have seen resembled ballets or liturgical processions rather than ballroom dancing. But is music, as such, representational? We do not know enough about Greek music to guess whether Aristotle had in mind something like programme music or rather the imitative effects to be found in Haydn’s *Creation* and Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*.

At all events, that kind of music would be quickly ruled out by Aristotle’s further development of the concept of representation. Forms of representation, he tells us, differ from each