

Aristotle as a critic in Poetics

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Abstract

This paper throws light on Aristotle's views on imitation and his general theory of poetic truth must be understood in the light of Plato's philosophy; not only because both of them considered art as an imitative act but also because the major portion of the poetics is meant to be a response to and a critique of Plato's castigation of poetry. Aristotle observe in the 'poetics' that imitation is the most fundamental principle of all fine arts. In poetry, the artist either imitates the noble actions of good men or the mean action of bad men. In the past, the imitation is the former led to the birth of epic and that of later to satire, further from epic organized tragedy and from satire arouse comedy. Epic and tragedy resemble each other in certain respects but differ in certain other ways.

Keywords: poetry, tragedy, epic

Introduction

Aristotle, who ranks among the foremost philosophers of the world, lived in Greece in the fourth century B.C. He studied at the academy of Plato who was the most distinguished teacher of the day. Plato was so impressed by his studious habits that he gave him the nickname of 'the reader'. After the death of Plato, Aristotle quite the academy of Plato, and a few years later in 335B.C, he set up his own school, called the lyceum, in the groves towards the northeast of Athens. At this academy, he preached his ideals which were contradictory to those of Plato. A dynamic lecture, Aristotle would teach his students while walking around in his lyceum. That is why his students earned the name of peripatetic. The canon of Aristotle's philosophy has had great influence on the succeeding generations of thinkers including Dante and Thomas acquires. He viewed the universe through the eyes of a biologist and established principles of classification for all living things. He departed from Plato's mystical idealism and relied more on deductive logic. Aristotle was also the teacher of Alexander the great.

The works of Aristotle fall in three categories.

1. Literary essays
2. Studies of constitutions
3. Lectures intended to be delivered to his students.

He wrote around 400 books covering almost all spheres of knowledge. A vast bulk of his works has been lost. The mention worthy among the extent works are:

Physics, Education Ethics, Metaphysics, Politics, Metrological, Historian Animalium, Constitutions, Poetics and Rhetoric.

We learn from Aristotle's works that he was a man of spontaneous learning. He possessed vast and deep knowledge on various subjects. According to him, this world is in the process of evolution. N Aristotle philosophy, god is "a cause of the motion of the universe" and not its creator, he is the mover of this universe, not its maker. He himself moved by nothing and he is not the slave of any master. Everything is in the universe is moved by this prime mover. The Aristotelian

god is perfect in the field of politics; Aristotle presents an analysis of 158 constitutions and concludes the relative merit of different forms of government. He considered dictatorship to be the worst form. He favors that type of government which enables each man to exercise his best abilities and allows him to live pleasantly. Revolutions are avoided when the rulers are the ruled. He is against communism because in this type of government, the individual shirks his responsibility. He believed "the old are more fitted to rule, the young to obey". The main aim of the government is to ensure public welfare. According to Aristotle, man is born to be happy. Happiness comes when we have good birth, good looks, good fortune and good friends. A noble man can be happy when even a short course of life. A noble soul can make himself happy by cultivating insensitivity to pain. Happiness lies in the performance of good deeds. Aristotle held that moderation should be the watchword in every sphere of activity. The middle course between the two extremer should adopted. An ideal does not expose him to danger in necessarily but does not hesitate of crisis. In the word of Aristotle, "the ideal man is altruistic".

Though poetics and rhetoric is his widely known books yet Nicomachean ethics in his most popular and influential work. The work is called so because it was Aristotle's son Nicomachus who edited the material of this book after the death of his father. The volume tells us about the ideals of the good life. It is divided in to ten books, each of which contains individual's chapters covering some aspects of the main topic. In the first book, he dwells on the goodness of our actions. The first chapter begins with the following board statement: "every art and every scientific enquiry, and similarly every action and purpose may be said to aim at some good". In book x he says: "pleasure are desirable but not if they are immoral in their origin, just as wealth is pleasant, but not as reward for turning traitor to one's country". Aristotle advises us in the end: "it is not enough to know what virtue is, we must strive to have and use it, and try whatever ways to become good". He says that the state, grounded in sound ethics, has an obligation to develop the character of its citizens.

Aristotle gives his views on the literary forms in the poetics

which is grand treatise on the different branches of literature, chiefly drama. The book deals with tragedy and comedy, but only the first half (tragedy) is extant. The author gives his ideas on the unities of time, place and action as well as the Greek concepts of catharsis, peripetia, hamartia and hubris.

The poetic is a treatise of about fifty pages, containing twenty six small chapters. It gives the impression of being the summary of Aristotle's lectures to his pupils, written either by them or by him. The book is incomplete and omits some of the important questions raised by Aristotle reserved for a fuller treatment in the second part. Aristotle begins his discussion with the statement: "epic poetry and tragedy, comedy also and dithyrambic poetry is all in their general conception modes of imitation". This imitation may present the character "better than life, or worse than life, or as they are". Comedy chooses the show people as worse, where as tragedy aims to show them better than life. The writer may choose to narrate the action, as homer does in his epic, or may present the characters acting but their own story, which is the dramatic method employed by Sophocles and Aristophanes.

Aristotle says that human beings differ from animals in the sense that they have an instinct for imitation, harmony and rhythm. Tragedy is like epic poetry in that it deals with noble characters, but it differs with it in meter, dramatic form and length. The length of the tragedy is confined to "a single circuit of the sun" whereas poetry has no limit of time, Aristotle says, "tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and is of certain magnitude, in a language established with every kind of artistic ornament, the play in the form of dramatic, not of narrative, through pity and fear effecting the proper purification of these emotions". To achieve this end, tragedy must have six parts, plots, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song.

Plot is the most crucial aspect of tragedy. Aristotle says that a plot must have "a beginning, middle and an end". It must be long enough to move sequence of events "from calamity to good fortune or from good fortune to calamity". There should be structural unity in the sense that everything that can be removed without disturbing unity is not necessary to the whole. There is peripetia and magnorisis in a good plot.

Aristotle says that the tragic hero must be a noble individual who brings about his own downfall "by some error or frailty" that is hamartia. In a tragedy, the audience must "thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place. This is known as the catholic effect of the tragedy".

A properly constructed tragedy must have "complication and unraveling or denouement". Aristotle concludes his comments with the statement that tragedy is a better form of art because it produces an appropriate amount of pleasure. Tragedy, therefore, attains its end more perfectly than the epic.

Conclusion:

To conclude Butcher rightly observes, "The failure and the success of the modern stage alike prove the truth of Aristotelian principle that the unity of the action is the higher and controlling low of drama". Aristotle theory of imitation refutes Plato's contention that poetry is an imitation-a "shadow of shadows" thrice removed from the truth.

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