

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a 36 - 1451b 15

φανερὸν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ' οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ **κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον**. **ὁ γὰρ ἱστορικὸς καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς** οὐ τῷ ἢ ἔμμετρα λέγειν ἢ ἄμετρα διαφέρουσιν (εἴη γὰρ ἂν τὰ Ἡροδότου εἰς μέτρα τεθῆναι καὶ οὐδὲν ἦττον ἂν εἴη ἱστορία τις μετὰ μέτρου ἢ ἄνευ μέτρων) ἀλλὰ τούτῳ διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο. διὸ καὶ **φιλοσοφώτερον** καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ' ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει. ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ νῦν ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἡ ποίησις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη· τὸ δὲ καθ' ἕκαστον, τί **Ἀλκιβιάδης** ἔπραξεν ἢ τί ἔπαθεν. ἐπὶ μὲν οὖν τῆς κωμωδίας ἤδη τοῦτο δῆλον γέγονεν· συστήσαντες γὰρ τὸν μῦθον διὰ τῶν εἰκότων οὕτω τὰ τυχόντα ὀνόματα ὑποτιθέασιν, καὶ οὐχ ὥσπερ οἱ ἱαμβοποιοὶ περὶ τὸν καθ' ἕκαστον ποιοῦσιν.

Translation

It is clear from what I have said that this is the playwright, not to say the things that happened, but the sort of things that might happen and that are possible according to the probable or the necessary. For the historian and the playwright do not differ in speaking in meter or without meter. (The work of Herodotus might be set in meter and it would no less be history, whether with or without meter.) Rather, they differ in this, in the one saying the things that happened, but the other what sort of things might happen. Therefore, fiction inclines more toward wisdom and is more serious than history. For fiction says things of the universal, but history speaks about things according to the particular. “Of the universal” is for a sort of a person, the sort of things he happens to do or say, according to the probable and the necessary, which fiction aims at, setting names on the people. “According to the particular” is what Alcibiades did or what he suffered. On the subject of comedy, this has already been made clear. For, having composed the plot through the probable, thus they set the names that happen to be as the foundation, and they do not create according to the particular like the writers of iambs.

Commentary

This commentary will focus on terms used by Aristotle, their place in his works, and how they can be understood. It is generally accepted that the surviving works of Aristotle are not polished pieces of writing, rather, “They have been thought of as lecture notes, either used by the lecturer or taken down by the pupil, as sketches for proposed works, or as summaries of works already completed, but it is pretty generally agreed that they formed part of a course of oral instruction and were not intended for wide circulation outside the school.”¹ Therefore, terms often appear with little explanation, and it can be helpful to look to other places Aristotle uses similar terms. This leaves room for scholars in different eras to apply the terms to their own settings, and it can be difficult to know whether these interpretations are faithful to Aristotle’s intent. This commentary will explore such issues for a number of important terms in the passage.

κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον - Both of these terms occur frequently and are defined elsewhere in Aristotle’s works. *τὸ ἀναγκαῖον* is that which must be as it is because an outcome or existence itself is impossible otherwise, because of compulsion, or simply because it cannot be otherwise.² Amongst those things which can be otherwise, *τὸ εἰκὸς* is what happens in most cases. It is related to that which cannot be otherwise as the particular is related to the universal.³ Although these terms likely would have been familiar to the listeners,⁴ they occur as a pair only in *Poetics*.⁵ Fiction is generally coherent and believable, while histories, on the other hand, relate what happened, which may not be clear and comprehensible. “It is emblematic of the philosopher’s whole view of the genre that intelligibility must be preserved even at the heart of tragic instability.”⁶

Aristotle’s surviving works are traditionally divided into three categories: 1) the theoretical sciences, 2) the practical sciences, and 3) the productive sciences, *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* comprising this last category.⁷ While *Rhetoric* is concerned with the construction of speeches so as to persuade, *Poetics* is concerned with the production of creative works,

¹ Lucas, p. ix.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015a 20-35.

³ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1357a 35-39.

⁴ Halliwell, p. 99.

⁵ Benardete & Davis, p. 26, note 69.

⁶ Halliwell, p. 104.

⁷ Shields.

particularly tragedies, as artifacts. Martha Husain calls this “object-centered,” as it is about the creation of an ουσια⁸, and suggests reading it “principally in light of the *Metaphysics* rather than of the *Ethics*, *Politics*, or *Rhetoric*.”⁹

ὁ γὰρ ἱστορικὸς καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς - I have translated the former “historian” because Greek authors refer to their work as histories. Indeed, Herodotus opens by calling his work an ἱστορίης ἀπόδεξις, in order that τὰ γενόμενα might not be forgotten¹⁰ Certainly historians do more than write lists of events to remember. They inevitably shape the narrative, but in the service of giving an accurate account. Ἱστωρ began with a digamma, and shares a root with εἶδω and οἶδα.¹¹ When historians depart from what they can know directly, as Thucydides does for speeches that are difficult to remember, he writes what seems right to him, assuming speakers said what was necessary on the occasion, for the purpose of a lasting, accurate account,¹² not for the sake of the perfection of the construction of the work.

I use “playwright”, instead of the cognate “poet” to translate ποιητής, because of the etymological affinity between ποιέω and wright, both indicating a maker or artisan. However, I have used “fiction” to translate ποιησις, because, “It is both a wider and a narrower notion than poesis, but it will suit Aristotle’s purpose.”¹³ This conflates genres, but the lines between genres are arbitrary and culture-specific. Choosing a modern genre wouldn’t capture the role ποιησις played in the culture in Aristotle’s time. The medieval Arabic commentators Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd are often faulted for being unable to comprehend tragedy or for understanding *Poetics* in terms of their own poetry.¹⁴ I am not sure we do any better when we say Aristotle is writing about poetry or drama, given the vastly different roles that the genres play in our culture compared to ancient Greece.

⁸ Husain, p. 87.

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Herodotus 1.1-2.

¹¹ Liddell & Scott, p. 714.

¹² Thucydides, I.22.

¹³ Gallop, p. 421.

¹⁴ For instance, Benardete & Davis, p. xi.

Ἀλκιβιάδης - Why does Aristotle use the words and deeds of Alcibiades as an example? Alcibiades was an Athenian general and politician who lived from 450 - 404 BCE, approximately. He was a friend of Socrates and a key figure in the Peloponnesian War.¹⁵ Else suggests that he is mentioned, “Perhaps not merely because Alcibiades was a well-known *historical* figure, (in tune with the reference to history just above), but *because he was a favorite and conspicuous butt of the Old Comedy*.”¹⁶ Aristotle’s treatise on comedy did not survive, so we cannot know if he was an example there. *Poetics* is often considered a response to Plato’s critiques of poetry in *Republic X*¹⁷, and mentioning Alcibiades might be a nod to that. If the mention of Alcibiades looks backward to the discussion of history, he is an interesting choice because there are accounts of him in Thucydides and in Plato. The latter, of course, is not history, but, “Alcibiades’ eulogy of Socrates is still commonly cited for historical facts about its hero’s life, but allowance should certainly be made for its fictional context.”¹⁸ Perhaps it was even in Aristotle’s day. On the other hand, it has been suggested that this is an oblique reference to Thucydides¹⁹, who is not otherwise mentioned. “There is no really satisfying explanation of Aristotle’s absolute neglect of Thucydides,... who had unmistakably tried to make history philosophical, i.e., an analysis of causes, not merely a record of events, and whose speeches so often deal with οἷα ἂν γένοιτο.”²⁰

φιλοσοφώτερον - When Aristotle says that fiction inclines more toward wisdom, he is talking about the construction of the work of fiction itself, not the intent of the playwright nor the effect on the audience, although both of these subjectivities may also incline toward wisdom. For Aristotle, the creation of a proper fictional scenario requires more skill and attention than the recording of events that happened. Σοφία can mean skill in any art, not just abstract wisdom. Gallop claims. “In aiming to illustrate abstract concepts in action, fiction serves the purposes of philosophy,” and the invented conversations therein, “illustrate the generalizations of philosophy by showing an agent’s character, motives, and choices in credible detail. Thus fiction, by no means the same as philosophy, assists the latter’s purposes.”²¹ Perhaps φιλοσοφώτερον points to

¹⁵ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, p. 37.

¹⁶ Else, p. 313.

¹⁷ Gallop, p. 422.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 430.

¹⁹ de la Ste. Croix, pp. 23-33.

²⁰ Else, p. 304.

²¹ Gallop, p. 427

a symbiotic relationship between fiction and wisdom. For Ibn Rushd, this justifies his belief that poetry, at least the poetry with which he is familiar (مدیح) is didactic, showing people the good qualities they should pursue.²² Although this is not at issue for Aristotle in this passage, it is a reasonable application of Aristotle's arguments to the contemporary landscape for Ibn Rushd. The nearest modern parallel might be that Aristotle would hold playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* in higher esteem than historian Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton*. The musical's effects on the audience may vary, as may opinions concerning Miranda's didactic intent, but *Hamilton* is cleverly constructed and inclines toward that cleverness or wisdom in a way that *Alexander Hamilton* does not.

²² Averroes & Butterworth pp. 25-26, 83-84.

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