

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS: AN ANALYSIS

Dr. L. B. Banashankari, Associate Professor of English, Govt First Grade College, Raibag, Dt: Belagavi (Karnataka)

Aristotle (384-322 BC) has been the founding figure of western philosophy and literary theory. Wikipedia describes him as “a Greek philosopher and polymath during the classical period of Ancient Greece.” (Wikipedia p.1) Aristotle founded the Peripatetic School of philosophy within the Lyceum and the wider Aristotelian tradition. He was influenced by Socrates, Epicurus and Empedocles. In turn, his science, philosophy, and social science and humanity's theories influenced Kant, Descartes, Copernicus, Hobbes, Marx and many more down in our times.

Aristotle calls Poetics and Rhetorics as productive sciences. His great work *Poetics*, first a notes, is once a lost work, but traced in the 13th century Arabia. Vincent Leitch observes:

The *Poetics* demonstrates Aristotle's analytical method, which here parallels that of his examinations of biology or zoology. Aristotle turns to the various categories of human artifacts, differentiating those made in language and eventually focusing on poetry and especially on the species-specific traits of epic and tragedy. He assumes a distinction between the wide class of objects that are humanly made and those that are naturally produced between, say, a chair and a tree. (The Greek word for a "poetry," *poiesis*, is itself based on the verb "to make.") In treating poetry as a craft, Aristotle differs from Plato, who discusses poetry in terms of inspiration and the emotive transport of the poet—a strain that continues in nineteenth-century Romanticism, exemplified by William Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of emotion." Aristotle limits his study of poetry to its observable kinds and its formal construction, more or less ignoring questions about its affective origins, which he regards as falling under the auspices of other pursuits, such as psychology or rhetoric. (Leitch 87)

Aristotle tells that poetry (meaning literature, and even arts) is representation (imitation). We use representation still, because, it is a pleasure, besides learning and documentation. Aristotle writes further:

Epic and tragic composition, and indeed comedy, dithyrambic composition, and most sorts of music for wind and stringed instruments are all, (considered) as a whole, representations. They differ from one another in three ways, by using for the representation (i) different media, (ii) different objects, or (iii) a manner that is different and not the same.

Some people use colours and forms for representations, making images of many objects (some by art, and some by practice), and others do so with sound; so too all the arts we mentioned produce a representation using rhythm, speech and melody, but use these either separately or mixed. E.g., the art of (playing) the oboe and lyre, and any other arts that have the same potential (e.g., that of (playing) the pan-pipes), use melody and rhythm alone, but the art of dancers (uses) rhythm by itself without melody; for they too can represent characters, sufferings and actions, by means of rhythms given form. (*Poetics* 91)

Some arts like tragedy (with language, dialogue, song, and dance), epic, and modern cinema make us of mixed media, objects and manner. Such arts are naturally rich. Aristotle throws light on the object,

one of the three parameters for differentiating representation.

Since those who represent people in action, these people are necessarily either good or inferior. For characters almost always follow from these (qualities) alone; everyone differs in character because of vice and virtue. So they are either (i) better than we are, or (ii) worse, or (iii) such (as we are), just as the painters (represent them); for Polygnotus used to make images of superior persons, Pauson of worse ones, and Dionysius of those like (us). Again, a third difference among these (kinds) is the manner in which one can represent each of these things. For one can use the same media to represent the very same things, sometimes (a) by narrating (either (i) becoming another (person), as Homer does, or (ii) remaining the same person and not changing), or (b) by representing everyone as in action and activity. Representation, then, has these three points of difference, as we said at the beginning, its media, its objects and its manner. Consequently, in one respect Sophocles is the same sort of representational artist as Homer, in that both represent good people, but in another he is like Aristophanes, since both represent men in action and doing (things). (*Poetics* 92)

Aristotle tells that Dorians perfected tragedy and Megarians that of comedy. Both Aeschylus and Sophocles perfected tragedy with characters, song and scenery. He thinks tragedy is superior to both epic and comedy. We know that tragedy is based on great people and it produces catharsis, while comedy and epic do not. Secondly epic is loose in its structure. Aristotle defines tragedy thus:

Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements (used) separately in (various parts) (of the play); (represented) by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions.

By "embellished speech," I mean that which has rhythm and melody, i.e. song; by "with its elements separately," I mean that some [parts of it] are accomplished only by means of spoken verses, and others again by means of song.

Since people acting produce the representation, first (i) the ornament of spectacle will necessarily be a part of tragedy; and then (ii) song and (iii) diction, for these are the media in which they produce the representation. By "diction" I mean the construction of the [spoken] verses itself; by "song" I mean that of which the meaning is entirely obvious.

Since [tragedy] is a representation of an action, and is enacted by people acting, these people are necessarily of a certain sort according to their character and their reasoning. For it is because of these that we say that actions are of a certain sort, [1450a] and it is according to people's actions that they all succeed or fail. So (iv) the plot is the representation of the action; by "plot" here, I mean the construction of the incidents. By (v) the "characters," I mean that according to which we say that the people in action are of a certain sort. By (vi) "reasoning," I mean the way in which they use speech to demonstrate something or indeed to make some general statement.

So, tragedy as a whole necessarily has six parts, according to which tragedy is of a certain sort. These are plot, characters, diction, reasoning, spectacle and song. The media in which (the poets) make the representation comprise two parts (i.e. diction and song), the manner in which they make the representation, one (i.e. spectacle), and the objects which they represent, three (i.e. plot, character and reasoning); there are no others except these. Not a few of them, one might say, use these elements; for they may have instances of spectacle, character, plot, diction, song and reasoning likewise. (*Poetics* 95)

Aristotle elaborates the six parts of tragedy, plot, character, reasoning, diction, song and spectacle and tells that,

But the most important of these is the structure of the incidents. For (i) tragedy is a

representation not of human beings but of action and life. Happiness and unhappiness lie in action, and the end (of life) is a sort of action, not a quality; people are of a certain sort according to their characters, but happy or the opposite according to their actions. So, the actors do not act in order to represent the characters, but they include the characters for the sake of their actions. Consequently, the incidents, i.e. the plot, are the end of tragedy, and the end is most important of all.

(ii) Again, without action a tragedy cannot exist, but without characters it may.

(iii) Again, if (a poet) puts in sequence speeches full of character, well-composed in diction and reasoning, he will not achieve what was (agreed to be) the function of tragedy; a tragedy that employs these less adequately, but has a plot (i.e. structure of incidents), will achieve it much more.

(iv) In addition, the most important things with which a tragedy enthralls (us) are parts of plotreversals and recognitions.

(v) A further indication is that people who try their hand at composing can be proficient in the diction and characters before they are able to structure the incidents; e.g., too almost all the early poets. (*Poetics* 94)

So, plot is the origin and as it were the soul of tragedy, and the characters are secondary. It is very similar in the case of painting too: if some-one daubed (a surface) with the finest pigments indiscriminately, he would not give the same enjoyment as if he had sketched an image in black and white. Tragedy is a representation of an action, and for the sake of the action above all (a representation) of the people who are acting.

Reasoning comes third, i.e., being able to say what is possible and appropriate... Diction is fourth. By diction I mean communication by means of language, which has the same potential in the case of both verse and (prose) speeches. Of the remaining (parts), song is the most important of the embellishments. Spectacle is something enthralling, but is very artless and least particular to the art of poetic composition. The potential of tragedy exists even without a performance and actors; besides, the designer's art is more essential for the accomplishment of spectacular (effects) than is the poets'. (*Poetics* 96)

Aristotle thinks plot (action) is the soul of tragedy. Plot is primary and characters secondary. He tells it why.

Aristotle lists the three unities thus:

- a) Unity of action
- b) Unity of place
- c) Unity of time

Aristotle thinks literature/ art is more universal than history as art deals with the general, probable and possible, while history with the particular. Tragedy is written on historical characters such as Oedipus, Hamlet, and Akbar. The plots can be complex with recognition, reversal and suffering. Complex plots are good.

Finally, tragedy should produce catharsis. He writes,

So, it is clear from these arguments that a poet must be a composer of plots rather than of verses, insofar as he is a poet according to representation, and represents actions.

The representation is not only of a complete action but also of terrifying and pitiable incidents. These arise to a very great or a considerable extent when they happen contrary to expectation but because of one another. For they will be more amazing in this way than if they happened on their own, i.e., at random, since the most amazing even among random events are those which appear to have happened as it were on purpose. Consequently, plots of this kind are necessarily finer.

The external parts of tragedy are as follows: (i) prologue, (ii) episode, (iii) exit and (iv) choral part. The first part of the tragedy is problem and the latter part is but solution.

Aristotle's influence was somewhat eclipsed in the nineteenth century when the Romantics and Symbolists turned more to Plato and Longinus. In his book *Aristotle's Poetics*, Mallikarjun Patil thinks, "In the earlier twentieth century, the impact of Aristotle's attempt to treat poetry systemically as a distinctive sphere can be seen in Russian Formalists such as Boris Eichenbaum, in some of the New Critics, and in the systematic archetypal criticism of figures such as Northrop Frye." (Patil 23)

References:

1. Wikipedia_Aristotle's Poetics.
2. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 2001. All the textual references are from this work.
3. Patil, Mallikarjun. *Poetics*. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2001.