

Literary Criticism and Theory

Lecture 1

The Stories Behind the Stories 1

Greece and Rome

- Literature and literary criticism in Western cultures cannot be understood without understanding its relationship to classical antiquity – Greek and Roman. Why?
- Because European and Western literature and cultures were produced as a **recreation**, a **revival** of the classical cultures of Greece and Rome.
- From the 16th to the 20th centuries, Western cultures considered Greece and Rome the most perfect civilizations, and Western drama, poetry, literary criticism, art, education, politics, fashion, architecture, painting, sculpture were ALL produced in imitation of classical antiquity (Greece and Rome).
- But the West's relationship with antiquity is not simple. It is full of contradictions and ambivalence.

Two aspects to this relationship need to be illustrated.

1. Rome's ambivalent relationship to Greece (Lecture 1)

2. The West's ambivalent relationship to classical antiquity (Lecture 2)

Roman poet Horace writes:

"Captive Greece took its wild conqueror captive"

Source: Horace, "A Letter to Augustus," in *Classical Literary Criticism*, p. 94.

Horace expresses a sense of inferiority and ambivalence because Rome conquered Greece politically and militarily but Rome could never produce a refined culture (poetry, philosophy, rhetoric, etc) like Greece.

We find this sense of ambivalence and inferiority everywhere in Roman (Latin) literature: in Horace, Quintilian, Seneca, etc.

The Romans conquered Greece militarily, but they always felt that the culture of Greece remained infinitely more sophisticated and refined in poetry, in philosophy, in rhetoric, in medicine, in architecture, in painting, in manners and in refinement. Hence the sense of inferiority.

Seneca, for example, writes:

"No past life has been lived to lend us glory, and that which has existed before us is not ours."

"[A] man who follows another not only finds nothing; he is not even looking."

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* (44).

Source *Seneca: Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard Gummere (Cambridge, MA and London: Heinemann and Harvard University Press), 1920.

For centuries, education in Rome consisted simply in IMITATING Greek masterpieces in literature, rhetoric, painting, etc. Horace, for example, advised his readers to simply imitate the Greeks and never try to invent anything themselves because their inventions will be weak and unattractive:

But he that hopes to have new words allowed

Must so derive them from the Grecian spring
As they may seem to flow without constraint....
New subjects are not easily explained,
And you had better choose a well-known theme
Than trust to an invention of your own;
For what originally others write
May be so well disguised, and so improved,
That with some justice it may pass for yours;
But then you must not copy trivial things,
Nor word for word too faithfully translate.

(Source: *Latin Literature: An Anthology*, Michael Grant, ed., Penguin, 1979, pp. 214-5

The Romans so desperately wanted to imitate the Greeks and so constantly failed to match them. The reason is simple. Imitation cannot produce originality. As Seneca puts it with bitterness, "a man who follows another not only finds nothing; he is not even looking."

The Romans were a simple rural and uncultivated people who became successful warriors, and at the height of their success when they ruled the biggest empire in the world, they still felt that they were inferior culturally to their small province Greece.

This situation strongly affected how culture was produced in Rome and will also strongly affect how culture will be produced later in Europe and the West

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LECTURE 2

The Stories Behind the Stories 2 Rome and Europe

In the Renaissance, Europeans rediscovered the books of the Greeks and Romans and that allowed them to develop a literature and a culture. The period is called the Renaissance because across Europe people wanted to “revive” the ancient learning of Rome and Greece.

During the Renaissance, Europe was far less sophisticated than Rome and Greece were. There were no written languages in Europe. The only written language was Latin and people who could read Greek, like Erasmus, were very rare. So we have an under-developed continent, largely illiterate that all of a sudden discovers a vast legacy from the ancient world – hundreds and hundreds of texts and books that no one had seen for hundreds of years. This material will transform the mind of Europe, and lead to the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and the modern technological world in which we live today

• Contradictions and Confusions

Like the Romans, Europeans wanted to produce poems, books and sophisticated culture because they thought, like the Romans did, that high culture, great books and poems were what great and mighty nations have.

Great nations do great deeds (like conquering lands and people) and record those great deeds and conquests in great books and poems.

The reason why “*les gestes* [the glorious deeds] of the Roman people” were unanimously celebrated and preferred to the deeds of the rest of humanity, Joachim du Bellay explains in the 1520s, was because they had “a multitude of writers.” That is the reason, he says, why “in spite of the passage of time, the fierceness of battle, the vastness of Italy, and foreign incursions, the majority of their deeds (*gestes*) have been in their entirety preserved until our time.” Joachim du Bellay

So the emergence of what we call today “literature” in Renaissance Europe had a strong political motivation and purpose.

What we call today literature emerged because Europeans were becoming politically and militarily powerful. They were conquering lands and taking over trade routes, and as the passage of du Bellay cited indicates, poetry and literature were necessary accessories of political power.

The logic was this:

Great empires needed great literature, just like the Romans and the Greeks had.

In that sense, the study of classical learning, literature and criticism all emerged with the purpose of giving the emerging European states written and “civilized” languages comparable to those of Rome and Greece.

Europeans saw poems and plays and books and stories like they were national monuments. They judged the greatness of a nation by the monuments it builds, (the Coliseum in Rome) and saw books, poems, plays and literature as monuments of the greatness of nations.

“It was, above all, Rome which provided the ideologues of the colonial systems of Spain, Britain and France with the language and political models they required, for the *Imperium romanum* has always had a unique place in the

political imagination of western Europe. Not only was it believed to have been the largest and most powerful political community on earth, it has also been endowed by a succession of writers with a distinct, sometimes divinely inspired purpose.”

(Source: Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France 1500-1800*, Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 11-2.

“Imitation of the Classics”

So to imitate Rome and Greece and develop “civilized” languages and cultures to go with their newly acquired military and political power, Europeans found a ready-made model to follow: the Romans.

From the Renaissance all the way to the 20th century, European writers called for the “imitation of the classics.” This is how the concepts: “imitation of the classics,” “imitation of the ancients,” “*imitatio*” (Latin), “*mimesis*” (Greek) or simply “imitation” became, from the Renaissance to the 20th centuries, the most prestigious and classical concepts in European cultures. No other concept has had a strong formative and foundational influence in modern European cultures like these concepts of imitation.

Imitation doesn’t lead to Originality

In Rome, imitation led to frustration and produced a plagiaristic culture. Europeans simply ignored these complications. The desire to produce poetic monuments to go with their political and military power was more important.

As long as imitation produced “textual monuments” in the form of books, poems and plays, European writers were happy with it.

“it is a sign of greater elegance and skill for us,” says du Bellay, “in imitation of the bees, to produce in our own words thoughts borrowed from others.” Du Bellay advised his contemporaries **not to be “ashamed”** to write in their native language in imitation of the ancients.

It is “no vicious thing, but praiseworthy,” he says, “to borrow from a foreign tongue sentences and words to appropriate them to our own.” Du Bellay wished that his own language “were so rich in domestic models that it were not necessary to have recourse to foreign ones,” but that was not the case.

Europeans adopted the Roman desire to produce a literary culture in imitation of the Greeks without realizing that this imitation method had failed in Rome and that it produced mainly an imitative and plagiaristic culture that remained inferior to the original Greek culture it tried to mimic and duplicate.

In addition, Europeans thought that they were imitating the classical cultures of Greece and Rome. In reality they imitated mostly the Romans. Very few Greek texts were available in Europe before the 19th century, and even those were read, studied and imitated through Roman perspectives. European classicism, for example, always claimed to be based on the ideas of Aristotle, but research shows that they knew very little of Aristotle’s work. In eighteenth-century England, for example:

Aristotelism Without Aristotle

“A first hand knowledge of Aristotle, even in translation, seem to have been exceptional: Walpole mentions him five times in his letters – usually coupled with Bossu and the ‘Rules’; and Cowper, at the age of fifty-three, had ‘never in his life perused a page of Aristotle.’ The *Poetics* were much revered, but little read.”

John W. Draper, “Aristotelian ‘Mimesis’ in Eighteenth Century England,” *PMLA*, 36 (1921), pp. 373-4.

European writers knew Greek works “only... through the praise of (Roman) Latin authors.”

Richard Marback, *Plato's Dream of Sophistry* (University of South Carolina, 1999), p. 46.

Renaissance scholars recognized that Roman art and literature were derived from the Greeks, but they could not discern, as Glynne Wickham notes, how plagiaristic the Romans were. Hence, the grotesque European rankings of Horace as a higher dramatic theorist than Aristotle, and of Seneca as a more accomplished dramatist than Sophocles and Euripides.

Glynne Wickham, “Neo-Classical Drama and The Reformation in England,” in *Classical Drama and Its Influence*, ed. M. J. Anderson (Methuen, 1965), p.158.

Important to note:

Literature is not simply stories or beautiful words, and literary criticism is not simply a discussion of the content or style of those stories or beautiful words.

There are more important, fascinating and REAL stories behind the fictitious stories and the beautiful words of literature.

Studying literature involves:

1. understanding the historical forces – political, economic, cultural, military – that made literature as an institution, as a tradition and as a discourse possible and
2. understanding the new historical realities – political, economic, cultural, military – that literature as an institution helps shape and create.

We have to understand the historical forces that produce literature and the historical forces and transformations that literature then goes to produce. This is how we can study literature from a critical, analytical and scientific perspective. Do NOT just consume uncritically the stories and the dramas that you read or watch. You are critics, analysts and experts and you should adopt critical and analytical perspectives to this material.

LECTURE 3

CRITICISM IN ANCIENT GREECE: PLATO ON POETRY GREECE AND WESTERN

- ❖ There is no genre of literature that we have today – tragedy, comedy, the different forms of poetry, the short story and even the novel – that the Greeks didn't develop.
- ❖ Yes, Western literature is based on Greek literature, but as the previous lecture showed and as we will see in this lecture, the reality is more complex than that.
- ❖ Greek thought influenced, in one way or another, every single literary form that developed in Europe and the West, but the differences between the two cultures remain significant.
- ❖ This lecture and the next will look at the two influential Greek thinkers who influenced the development of Western literature and criticism more than any other thinker in history: Plato and Aristotle.

Plato's Critique of Poetry

- ❖ Extremely influential and extremely misunderstood.
- ❖ He wrote dialogues and in every single one, he addressed poetry. He was obsessed with poetry throughout his life. But to the present, Western literature and criticism cannot agree why Plato was so obsessed with poetry? Some critics love him, some hate him, but they all respect him.
- ❖ Plato's most important contributions to criticism appear in his famous dialogue the *Republic*. Two main ideas appear in this dialogue that have had a lasting influence. The following lecture will present those ideas and then provide some analysis.
- ❖ Our interest is in Book III and Book X of the *Republic*. Two ideas emerge in these two books that have had a lasting influence:

Book III of the Republic

- ❖ Plato makes the very important distinction between **Mimesis and Diagesis**, two concepts that remain very important to analyse literature even today. They are often translated as **imitation and narration** or **showing and telling**:
- ❖ If I tell you the story of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the third person: He sailed to Alexandria with 30 000 soldiers and then he marched on Cairo, etc." That would be a **narration (diagesis)**. I am **telling** you the story.
- ❖ But if I tell you the story in the first person, as if I am Napoleon: "I sailed to Alexandria with 30 000 soldiers, and then I marched on Cairo, etc." That would be an **imitation (mimesis)**. I am **showing** you the story.
- ❖ Drama with characters is usually a mimesis; stories in the third person are usually a diagesis.
- ❖ "But when the poet speaks in the person of another, may we not say that he assimilates his style to that of the person who, as he informs you, is going to speak?

Certainly

And this assimilation of himself to another, either by the use of voice or gesture, is the imitation (mimesis) of the person whose character he assumes?

Of course

Then in that case the narrative of the poet may be said to proceed by way of imitation?

Very true

Plato, *Republic* 393.

Mimesis-Diegesis (imitation-narration)

Plato was the first to explain that narration or story telling (in Arabic al-sard) can proceed by narration or by imitation:

“And narration may be either simple narration, or imitation, or a union of the two” (*Republic*, 392).

This distinction has been very popular in Western literary criticism and it remains today very important for the analysis of literature. We will see in future lectures how useful it is to twentieth century schools of criticism like Formalism and Structuralism.

Book X of the Republic :

- ❖ Plato introduced another idea that has produced strong reactions in Western literature and criticism and has been very difficult to understand.
- ❖ This is Plato’s famous decision in Book X of the *Republic* to ban poets and poetry from the city. Because European and Western cultures have always valued poetry, literature and art, Plato’s decision has always been difficult to explain. Western cultures have always claimed that their practice of literature and art are based on Greek antiquity, but here is the most important Greek philosopher rejecting art and poetry and banning them from his ideal city.

Plato Bans the Poet

Christopher Janaway sums up Western Reactions to Plato’s Ban of Poetry:

“They protest too much: Plato is assailed with ‘gross illogicality and unfairness’, ‘passionate, hopelessly bad arguments’, ‘trivial or sophistic arguments which he cannot himself regard as conclusive’, and a position which is ‘quite unacceptable’ (how dare he!) – but then again it is said that he is only ‘enjoying himself by over-stating his case’, that a ‘comparison with other dialogues makes it quite clear that [these sections of the *Republic*] do not contain his considered opinion’, and that we should ‘construct a nobler and more generous theory of Aesthetic Arts’ on his behalf. Perhaps there is a hidden ‘commendation of good art’ even within Book 10 itself, or is Plato ‘struggling after a theory of aesthetics which does not find full expression before Hegel’?”

Christopher Janaway, *Images of Excellence: Plato’s Critique of the Arts*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995), p.154, n. 46.

Some have even written imaginary dialogues with Plato to explain to him the gravity of his decision and teach him how good the Western concept of art is:

“We may be tempted to imagine teaching Plato this concept of ours, and patiently leading him out of error: ‘You see, these things that you are attacking are Art. If something is Art it invariably has the following value...and does not really need any further justification.’ (‘Thank you for clearing that up’, he might reply -...)”
Ibid.

Oral Society :

- ❖ Only in the 20th century that some scholars finally showed that the poetry that Plato talks about and bans is different from the poetry and art that Europe and the West have.
- ❖ Paul Kristller drew attention to the fact that the Greeks did not have anything similar to the Western ideas of art and literature. The Western ideas of art and literature did not exist in ancient Greece and Rome:
“The Greek term for Art and its Latin equivalent (ars) do not specifically denote the “fine arts” in the modern sense, but were applied to all kinds of human activities which we would call crafts or sciences.”
Paul Kristller, “The Modern System of the Arts,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vols. XII-XIII, (1951 and 1952), p. 498.
- ❖ A decade later Eric Havelock confirmed the same point:
“Neither “art” nor “artist”, as we use the words, is translatable into archaic or high-classical Greek.”
Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, (p. 33, n. 37.)
- ❖ The Western institution of “Fine Arts” or “*les Beaux Arts*” or Aesthetics”, as a system that includes on the basis of common characteristics those human activities [painting, architecture, sculpture, music and poetry] and separates them from the crafts and the sciences, are all products of the mid eighteenth century:

Arts is an 18th Century Invention

"The basic notion that the five "major arts" [painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry] constitute an area all by themselves, clearly separated by common characteristics from the crafts and the sciences and other human activities, has been taken for granted by most writers on aesthetics from Kant to the present day. It is freely employed even by those critics of art and literature who profess not to believe in "aesthetics"; and it is accepted as a matter of course by the general public of amateurs who assign to "Art" with a capital A that ever narrowing area of modern life which is not occupied by science, religion, or practical pursuit."

Paul Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," (p. 498.)

So what kind of poetry did the Greeks have? Why did Plato ban it?

Notice, first, that Plato does not use the words "literature" or "art." He uses the word "poetry." The discipline that we call today Literature is an 18th century European invention. In the ancient world, they had poetry, tragedy and comedy, but they were all known as "poetry." They poet could be a tragedian like Sophocles or Euripides, a comedian like Aristophanes, or an epic poet like Homer, but the Greeks never called any of these poets "artists" and they never called their poems and plays, "literature."

- ❖ The poet that Plato describes in the *Republic*, as Eric Havelock shows, is a poet, a performer and an educator. The poetry that Plato talks about was main source of knowledge in the society.
- ❖ It is only in an oral society that poetry becomes the most principal source of knowledge and education.
- ❖ The reason: in a society that does not have a system of writing, poetry becomes useful to record and preserve knowledge.
- ❖ Without a system of writing, how does a society preserve its knowledge, its customs and its traditions? How does this society transmit that knowledge, custom and tradition to the younger generation?

The answer is: Poetry!

Because poetry uses rhyme, meter and harmony and those make language easy to remember (like proverbs are easy to remember)

Oral societies, societies that do not have a system of writing, use poetry like modern societies use schools, libraries, newspapers and television. Poetry is the education institution. Poetry is the storehouse of knowledge, customs and traditions. Poetry is the medium of communication.

Oral Vs. Written Cultures

This poetry is vastly different that the Western institution of literature and art

- Literature is an interaction between a reader and a book
- Oral poetry is a communal performance.
- Literature is entertainment and pleasure
- Oral poetry teaches science, medicine, war and peace and social values
- The writer or artist of literature is a gifted individual
- The poet in an oral society is a leader, an educator, a warrior, a priest

These distinctions are important to understand why Plato saw the poet as a big danger to his society.

Poetry Cripples the Mind

- ❖ Plato accuses the poetic experience of his time of conditioning the citizens to imitate and repeat, uncritically, the values of a tradition without grasping it.
- ❖ The citizens, Plato says, are trained to imitate passively the already poor imitations provided by the discourse of poetry.
- ❖ The poet is only good at song-making. His knowledge of the things he sings about like courage, honour, war, peace, government, education, etc., is superficial. He only knows enough about them to make his song.
- ❖ The poet produces only a poor copy of the things he sings about, and those who listen to him and believe him acquire a poor education.
- ❖ Poetry excites the senses and neutralizes the brain and the thinking faculties. It produces docile and passive imitators.

- ❖ The first two Books of the *Republic* describe an unhealthy Greek society where "all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable than justice" (*Republic*, 360). Virtue and justice are considered painful and unrewarding. Vice and injustice, however, are not only easy and practical but also rewarding.
- ❖ Plato blames the traditional education given to the youth. It does not meet the standards of justice and virtue. Then he blames the parents and teachers as accomplices. If parents and tutors tell their children to be just, it is "for the sake of character and reputation, in the hope of obtaining for him who is *reputed* just some of those offices, marriages and the like" (*Republic*, 363).
- ❖ People are encouraged to 'seem' just rather than 'be' just. And the authorities to whom people appeal for these views are, of course, the poets. Homer, Musaeus and Orpheus are all cited for illustration. See *Republic* (363 a-d; 364c-365a; 365e-366b).
- ❖ It would be fine, he says, if people just laughed at these tales and stories, but the problem is that they take them seriously as a source of education and law.
- ❖ How are people's minds going to be affected, he asks, by the poetic discourse to which they are exposed night and day, in private and in public, in weddings and funerals, in war and in peace?
- ❖ What is the impact especially on those who are young, "quick-witted, and, like bees on the wing, light on every flower?"
- ❖ How are they going to deal with this dubious educational material poured into their minds? They are "prone to draw conclusions," he says (*Republic*, 365).

The Colors of Poetry: Rhythm, Harmony and Measures

Plato analyses two aspects of poetry to prove his point: style and content.

Style: Plato observes that the charm of poetry and its power reside in its rhythm, harmony, and measures. These are what he calls the 'colours' of poetry. Without them, he says, poetry loses most of its charm and appeal. The poet, he says, is merely good at the aesthetic adjustment of his verses and rhythms and is actually ignorant about the content of his songs or tales. He is a good craftsman in terms of spinning the appropriate rhythms and melodies to achieve the desired effect on the listener, but as far as the actual matters he sings about, like war or peace or justice or good or evil, he knows no more about them than his ignorant audience. The poet's craft, Plato says, demands only a superficial knowledge of things; just enough to be able to give an imitation of them:

"The poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colours of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in meter and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well - such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have. And I think that you might have observed again and again what a poor appearance the tales of poets make when stripped of the colours which music puts upon them, and recited in simple prose."

Republic, (601a); See also *Gorgias*, (502).

- ❖ Form in oral poetry is not only verbal it is also physical. The oral poet relies equally on gestures, movements and mimicry. These, too, can have a powerful impact on an audience. Like the poet's words, they divert attention from what is actually being said and only aim to impress the spectator by the skills of the delivery: "[A]nd he will be ready to imitate anything, not as a joke, but in right good earnest, and before a large company. As I was just now saying, he will attempt to represent the roll of thunder, the noise of wind and hail, or the creaking of wheels, and pulleys, and the various sounds of the flutes; pipes, trumpets, and all sorts of instruments: he will bark like a dog, bleat like a sheep, or crow like a cock; his entire art will consist in imitation of voice and gesture, and there will be very little narration."
- ❖ . Exposing the youth to poetry from childhood to adult age, Plato says, is simply indoctrination and propaganda. The youth will be educated to rely on emotions rather than reason.

Poetry cripples the mind. It weakens the critical faculty and breeds conformity.

"Did you never observe," he asks, "how imitation, beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grows into habits and becomes a second nature, affecting body, voice and mind?"

- ❖ The mixture of rhymes, rhythms and colourful images can have a strong and powerful impact on the listener, because rhythm and harmony," he says, "find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten (*Republic*, 401).
- ❖ Excitement of physical pleasures and internal passions, according to Plato, produce a neutralisation of the faculty of sense and judgement.
- ❖ Plato's merit is that he distanced himself enough from these experiences to understand that the passivity effect produced was calculated.
- ❖ The passivity of the spectator/listener is a desired effect produced by a calculation of the components of the poetic medium.
- ❖ To be sure it is not only the naïve or the ignorant that succumb to the power of poetry. The strength of this tradition and its strong grip on minds is emphasised by Plato when he says "the best of us" are vulnerable to a good passage of Homer or the tragedians:
- ❖ "Hear and judge: The best of us, as I conceive, when we listen to a passage of Homer, or one of the tragedians, in which he represents some pitiful hero who is drawling out his sorrows in a long oration, or weeping, and smiting his breast – the best of us, you know, delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most.
- ❖ Yes, of course I know"
- ❖ (*Republic*, 605).

Seeming Vs. Being

- ❖ Poetry creates a culture of superficiality. People want only to "seem" just rather than "be" just.
- ❖ This culture of appearances can be most devastating in politics and law, for it is there that material rewards and economic exploitation are great.
- ❖ Fake appearances can be of great use to politicians. They could develop, on its basis, superficial ideologies with the sole aim of control and profit. The poets and the rhetoricians are recognized as spin doctors who would ensure that people consent to being deceived or exploited. If that is not enough then there is always the option of force and coercion:
"Nevertheless, the argument indicates this, if we would be happy, to be the path along which we should proceed. With a view to concealment we will establish secret brotherhoods and political clubs. And there are professors of rhetoric who teach the art of persuading courts and assemblies; and so, partly by persuasion and partly by force, I shall make unlawful gains and not be punished." (*Republic*, 365)
- ❖ The superficial culture that poetry produces is not, therefore, equally harmful to everybody. There are those who suffer it and there are those who use and benefit from it.
- ❖ The benefits are an incentive for many to devote themselves to the game of breeding and developing appearances and lies. Only a cover is needed: "a picture and shadow of virtue to be the vestibule and exterior of my house."

Conclusion

- ❖ It seems obvious that, for Plato, it was a deplorable fact that such an experience, or communion, constituted the official form of cultural organization on which the destiny of a whole people for generations depended. It was obvious to him that the Greeks' reliance on such sensational emotionalism as a source of law, education and morality was a very unhealthy state of affairs, and a recipe for disaster.
- ❖ Take a step away from it, he suggested to his people, and you will realize how poor and fake an experience it is. You will realize, he says, that it is a blind imitation of modes and patterns of being with no recourse to even the most basic sense of evaluation and judgment.

LECTURE 4

Criticism in Ancient Greece

Aristotle on Tragedy

Criticism in Ancient Greece

Aristotle on Tragedy

Unlike Plato, Aristotle has always proved easier to incorporate in Western literary and philosophical systems. His analysis of Tragedy in the *Poetics* are still today the foundation of artistic, dramatic and literary practice. Western scholars who dislike Plato's discussion of poetry or disagree with it are usually full of praise for Aristotle.

Western scholars prefer Plato to Aristotle

"When Aristotle comes to challenge his great master and speaks up for art, his attitude to the work of imitation is altogether more respectful." John Jones (1962), pp. 23-4.

"One must keep in mind Plato's devaluation of mimesis in order to appreciate the impact of the repairs Aristotle undertook." Wolfgang Iser (1991), p. 281.

"Plato is known to have had shifting opinions on art depending on whether he thought art was useful for or detrimental to his ideal state. Aristotle's was also an aesthetics of effect, but a more enlightened and dehumanised one." Theodor Adorno (1986), p. 289.

The Czar and the Bible of Literary Criticism

Aristotle has, for centuries, been considered in Western cultures as the unchallenged authority on poetry and literature; the 'czar of literary criticism,' to borrow the expression of Gerald Else.

The *Poetics* has for centuries functioned as the most authoritative book of literary criticism – the Bible of literary criticism

The following is an illustration of the main concepts of the *Poetics*.

Definition of Tragedy

"Tragedy, then, is **an imitation of an action** that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of **action, not of narrative**; with incidents **arousing pity and fear**, wherewith to accomplish its **katharsis** of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have **six parts**, which parts determine its quality—namely, **Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody.**"

Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher.

Tragedy is the "imitation of an action (*mimesis*) according to the law of probability or necessity."

Aristotle says that tragedy is an imitation of action, not a narration. Tragedy "**shows**" you an action rather than "**tells**" you about it.

Tragedy arouses **pity and fear**, because the audience can envision themselves within the cause-and-effect chain of the action. **The audience identifies with the characters, feels their pain and their grief and rejoices at their happiness.**

Plot: The First Principle

Aristotle defines plot as **“the arrangement of the incidents.”** He is not talking about the story itself but **the way the incidents are presented to the audience**, the **structure** of the play.

Plot is the order and the arrangement of these incidents in a cause-effect sequence of events.

According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the hero/protagonist.

Qualities of Good plots:

The plot must be **“a whole,”** with a **beginning, middle, and end.**

- The beginning, called by modern critics the **incentive moment**, must start the cause-and-effect chain.
- The middle, or **climax**, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself causes the incidents that follow it.
- The end, or **resolution**, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents. **The end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment.**
- Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax **the “tying up”** (*desis*). In modern terminology, it's called the **complication**.
- He calls the cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the **“unravelling”** (*lusis*). In modern terminology, it's called the **dénouement**.

The plot: “complete” and should have “unity of action.”

- By this Aristotle means that the plot must be **structurally self-contained**, with the **incidents bound together by internal necessity, each action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention.** According to Aristotle, the worst kinds of plots are **“‘episodic,’ in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence”**; the only thing that ties together the events in such a plot is the fact that they happen to the same person. Playwrights should not use coincidence. Similarly, the poet should exclude the irrational.
- **The plot must be “of a certain magnitude,” both quantitatively (length, complexity) and qualitatively (“seriousness” and universal significance).**
- Aristotle argues that plots **should not be too brief**; the more incidents and themes that the playwright can bring together in an organic unity, the greater the artistic value and richness of the play. Also, the more universal and significant the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience, the better the play will be.

II. Character:

Character should support the plot, i.e., personal motivations of the characters should be intricately connected parts of the cause-and-effect chain of actions that produce pity and fear in the audience.

Characters in tragedy should have the following qualities:

- **“good or fine”** - the hero should be an aristocrat
- **“true to life”** - he/she should be realistic and believable.
- **“consistency”** - Once a character's personality and motivations are established, these should continue throughout the play.
- **“necessary or probable”** - must be logically constructed according to **“the law of probability or necessity”** that govern the actions of the play.
- **“true to life and yet more beautiful,”** - idealized, ennobled.

Thought and Diction

III. Thought:

Aristotle says little about thought, and most of what he has to say is associated with how speeches should reveal character. However, we may assume that this category would also include what we call the **themes** of a play.

IV. Diction is “the expression of the meaning in words” which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy:

Here Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in metaphors: “the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; . . . it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”

Song and Spectacle

V. Song, or melody is the musical element of the chorus:

Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be “mere interludes,” but should contribute to the unity of the plot.

VI. Spectacle (least connected with literature); “the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.”

Aristotle argues that superior poets rely on the inner structure of the **play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear**; those who rely heavily on spectacle “create a sense, not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous.”

Katharsis

The end of the tragedy is a *katharsis* (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear:

Katharsis is an Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means “purging.”

Tragedy **arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess**, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion.

Aristotle also talks of the “pleasure” that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art.

LECTURE 5

Latin Criticism

Horace, Quintilian, Seneca

Literary Criticism and Theory

Living Culture Vs. Museum Culture

In Ancient Greece:

- ❖ Homer's poetry was not a book that readers read; it was an oral culture that people sang in the street and in the market place, in weddings and funerals, in war and in peace.
- ❖ The great Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were not plays that people read in books. They were performances and shows that people attended at the tragic festival every year.
- ❖ Greek culture was a "living culture" that sprang from people's everyday life. All the Greeks – old and young, aristocrats and commoners, literate and illiterate – participated in producing and in consuming this culture.

In Ancient Rome,

- ❖ Greek culture became books that had no connection to everyday life and to average people.
- ❖ Greek books were written in a language (Greek) that most of the Romans didn't speak and belonged to an era in the past that Romans had no knowledge of. Only a small, educated minority had the ability to interact with these books. It was a dead culture, past, remote, and with no connections to the daily existence of the majority of the population.
- ❖ In Rome, Greek culture was not a living culture anymore. It was a "museum" culture. Some aristocrats used it to show off, but it did not inspire the present.
- ❖ Roman literature and criticism emerged as an attempt to imitate that Greek culture that was now preserved in books.
- ❖ The Romans did not engage the culture of Greece to make it inform and inspire their present; they reproduced the books.

Florence Dupont makes a useful distinction between "Living Culture" (in Greece) and "Monument culture" (in Rome). See her *The Invention of Literature: From Greek Intoxication to the Latin Book*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

I. Horace: *Ars Poetica*

- ❖ Very influential in shaping European literary and artistic tastes.
- ❖ Horace, though, was not a philosopher-critic like Plato or Aristotle. He was a poet writing advice in the form of poems with the hope of improving the artistic effort of his contemporaries.

In *Ars Poetica*:

- ❖ He tells writers of plays that a comic subject should not be written in a tragic tone, and vice versa.
- ❖ He advises them not to present anything excessively violent or monstrous on stage, and that the *deus ex machina* should not be used unless absolutely necessary (192-5).
- ❖ He tells writers that a play should not be shorter or longer than five acts (190), and that the chorus “should not sing between the acts anything which has no relevance to or cohesion with the plot” (195).
- ❖ He advises, further, that poetry should teach and please and that the poem should be conceived as a form of static beauty similar to a painting: *ut pictura poesis*. (133-5).

Each one of these principles would become central in shaping European literary taste.

Ars Poetica, in *Classical Literary Criticism*. Reference to line numbers

“Sensibility”

- ❖ At the centre of Horace’s ideas is the notion of “sensibility.”

A poet, according to Horace, who has “neither the ability nor the knowledge to keep the duly assigned functions and tones” of poetry should not be “hailed as a poet.”

This principle, announced in line 86 of the *Ars Poetica*, is assumed everywhere in Horace’s writing.

Whenever Horace talks about the laws of composition and style, his model of excellence that he wants Roman poets to imitate are the Greeks.

The notion of “sensibility” that he asks writers to have is a tool that allows him to separate what he calls “sophisticated” tastes (which he associates with Greek books) from the “vulgar,” which Horace always associates with the rustic and popular:

“I hate the profane crowd and keep it at a distance,” he says in his *Odes*.

Horace, *Odes* (3.1.1) in *The Complete Odes and Epodes*, trans. David West, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 76.

In the *Satires*, he refers to “the college of flute-players, quacks, beggars, mimic actresses, parasites, and all their kinds.”

Satires, (1. 2) quoted in Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks Mimes, and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre*, (Cooper Square Publishers: New York, 1963), p. 80.

Horace’s hatred of the popular culture of his day is apparent in his “Letter to Augustus” where he writes:

“Greece, now captive, took captive its wild conqueror, and introduced the arts to rural Latium. The unprepossessing Saturnian rhythm [the common verse of early Roman poetry] went out, and elegance drove off venom. All the same, traces of the country long remained, and they are there today. It was late in the day that the Roman applied his intelligence to Greek literature...he began to enquire what use there might be in Sophocles, and Thespis and Aeschylus.”

Horace, “A Letter to Augustus,” in *Classical Literary Criticism*, p. 94.

This passage how Horace saw the contact between the Greek heritage and his Roman world.

- ❖ It was a relationship of force and conquest that brought the Romans to Greece. As soon as Greece was captive, however, it held its conqueror captive, charming him with her nicely preserved culture (books).

Horace shows prejudice to the culture of everyday people, but he does not know that the culture of Greece that he sees in books now was itself a popular culture.

Horace equates the preserved Greek culture (books) with “elegance” and he equates the popular culture of his own time with “venom.”

❖ Horace’s hatred of the popular culture of his day was widespread among Latin authors.

❖ Poetry for Horace and his contemporaries meant written monuments that would land the lucky poet’s name on a library shelf next to the great Greek names. It would grant the poet fame, a nationalistic sense of glory and a presence in the pedagogical curriculum.

“I will not die entirely,” writes Horace, “some principal part of me yet evading the great Goddess of Burials.” That great part of him was his books.

Horace, *The Odes* (3. 30), ed. J. d. McClatchy, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 243.

❖ Horace’s poetic practice was not rooted in everyday life, as Greek poetry was. He read and reread the *Iliad* in search of, as he put it, what was bad, what was good, what was useful, and what was not. (Horace, *Epistles*: 1. 2. 1).

❖ In the scorn he felt towards the popular culture of his day, the symptoms were already clear of the rift between “official” and “popular” culture that would divide future European societies.

❖ The “duly assigned functions and tones” of poetry that Horace spent his life trying to make poets adhere to, were a mould for an artificial poetry with intolerant overtone.

❖ Horace’s ideas on poetry are based on an artificial distinction between a “civilized” text-based culture and a “vulgar” oral one.

Imitating the Greeks

❖ In all his writing, Horace urges Roman writers to imitate the Greeks and follow in their footsteps. “Study Greek models night and day,” was his legendary advice in the *Ars Poetica* (270).

❖ This idea, though, has an underlying contradiction. Horace wants Roman authors to imitate the Greeks night and day and follow in their footsteps, but he does not want them to be mere imitators.

❖ **His solution, though, is only a set of metaphors with no practical steps:**

“The common stock [the Greek heritage] will become your private property if you don’t linger on the broad and vulgar round, and anxiously render word for word, a loyal interpreter, or again, in the process of imitation, find yourself in a tight corner from which shame, or the rule of the craft, won’t let you move.” *Ars Poetica* (130-5).

Horace’s own poetry shows the same contradictions

❖ **In the “Epistle to Maecenas” he complains about the slavish imitators who ape the morals and manners of their betters:**

How oft, ye servile crew

Of mimics, when your bustling pranks I’ve seen,

Have ye provoked my smiles – how often my spleen!

(Horace, "Epistle To Maecenas, Answering his Unfair Critics," in *The Complete Works of Horace*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), pp. 360-1.)

❖ In the process of following and imitating the Greeks, Horace differentiates himself from those who "mimic" the ancients and slavishly attempt to reproduce them. **Obviously, he does not have much esteem for this kind of imitation and saw his own practice to be different:**

"I was the first to plant free footstep on a virgin soil; I walked not where others trod. Who trusts himself will lead and rule the swarm. I was the first to show to Latium the iambics of Paros, following the rhythm and spirit of Archilochus, not the themes or the words that hounded Lycambes. Him, never before sung by other lips, I, the lyricist of Latium, have made known. It is my joy that I bring things untold before, and am read by the eyes and held in the hands of the civilized." (Horace, "Epistle to Maecenas" (21-34).)

- ❖ In imitating the Greeks, Horace claims originality, but the bold claim he makes of walking on virgin soil strongly contradicts the implied detail that the soil was not virgin, since Greek predecessors had already walked it.
- ❖ In addition, as Thomas Greene notes, the precise nature of what Horace claims to have brought back from his "walk" is not clear.

(Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p.70.

- ❖ However Horace conceives of his imitation of the Greeks, he does a poor job at describing it or articulating its dialectics. Imitation seems to have been only a loose and imprecise metaphor in his vocabulary.

Horace and Stylistic Imitation

❖ In *Ars Poetica*, Horace also advises the aspirant poet to make his tale believable:

"If you want me to cry, mourn first yourself, then your misfortunes will hurt me" *Ars Poetica* (100-110).

"My advice to the skilled imitator will be to keep his eye on the model of life and manners, and draw his speech living from there" *Ars Poetica* (317-19).

"Whatever you invent for pleasure, let it be near to truth." **This is the famous:**

"*ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris.*" *Ars Poetica* (338-340).

- ❖ This use of imitation denotes a simple reality effect idea. Horace simply asks the writer to make the tale believable, according to fairly common standards. His use of the term and the idea of imitation are casual and conventional. If you depict a coward, Horace advises, make the depiction close to a real person who is a coward.
- ❖ But Horace only had a stylistic feature in mind. As Craig La Drière notes, Horace could not even think of poetry, all poetry, as an imitation, the way the idea is expressed in Book X of the *Republic*, or in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Craig La Drière, "Horace and the Theory of Imitation," *American Journal of Philology*, vol. Lx (1939): 288-300.

- ❖ Horace's ideas about imitating the Greeks and about poetry imitating real life models were both imprecise, but they will become VERY influential in shaping European art and literature

- ❖ the principles of taste and “sensibility” (*decorum*) he elaborates to distinguish what he thought was “civilized” from “uncivilized” poetry will be instrumental in shaping the European distinction between official high culture and popular low one.
- ❖ Horace’s ideas also helped form the conception of literature and poetry as national monuments and trophies.
- ❖ Poetry in Horace’s text was subordinated to oratory and the perfection of self-expression. Homer and Sophocles are reduced to classroom examples of correct speaking for rhetoricians to practice with.
- ❖ The idea of following the Greeks, as Thomas Greene notes, only magnified the temporal and cultural distance with them.

II. Quintilian - *Institutio Oratoria*.

❖ From 68 to 88 C.E, he was the leading teacher of rhetoric in Rome. He wrote the *Institutio* as a help in the training of orators.

❖ Sometimes Quintilian justifies the imitation of the Greeks:

“And every technique in life is founded on our natural desire to do ourselves what we approve in others. Hence children follow the shapes of letters to attain facility in writing; musicians look for a model to the voice of their instructors, painters to the works of their predecessors, countrymen to methods of growing that have been proved successful by experience. In fact, we can see that the rudiments of any kind of skill are shaped in accordance with an example set for it (10. 2. 2).”

(*Institutio Oratoria*, in *Ancient Literary Criticism*), references are to line numbers.

❖ But imitation is also dangerous:

“Yet, this very principle, which makes every accomplishment so much easier for us than it was for men who had nothing to follow, is dangerous unless taken up cautiously and with judgement” (10. 2. 3).

“It is the sign of a lazy mentality to be content with what has been discovered by others” (10. 2. 4).

“it is also shameful to be content merely to reach the level of your model” (10. 2. 7).

Quintilian advocates two contradictory positions:

- ❖ First that progress could be achieved only by those who refuse to follow, hence the undesirability of imitating the Greeks.
- ❖ At the same time, Quintilian continues to advocate imitation, and goes on to elaborate a list of precepts to guide writers to produce “accurate” imitations.

- The imitator should consider carefully whom to imitate and he should not limit himself to one model only.

- He should not violate the rules of genres and species of writing, and should be attentive to his models’ use of decorum, disposition and language.

III. Seneca

Seneca singles out the process of transformation that takes place when bees produce honey or when food, after it is eaten, turns into blood and tissue. He, then, explores the process of mellification and its chemistry. Did it happen naturally? Does the bee play an active role in it? Is it a process of fermentation? He does not select any one theory to explain the production of honey. Instead, he stresses a process of transformation:

“We also, I say, ought to copy these bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading, for such things are better preserved if they are kept separate; then by applying the supervising care with which our nature has endowed us, - in other words, our natural gifts, - we should so blend those several flavours into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from that whence it came.”

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* (84. 5-6).

“This is what we see nature doing in our own bodies without any labour on our part; the food we have eaten, as long as it retains its original quality and floats in our stomachs as an undiluted mass, is a burden; but it passes into tissue and blood only when it has been changed from its original form. So it is with the food which nourishes our higher nature, - we should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it, otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power.”

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* (84. 6-7).

- ❖ Latin authors never discuss poetry or literature as an imitation (mimesis); they only discuss them as an imitation of the Greeks.
- ❖ Latin authors are not familiar with Plato's and Aristotle's analysis of poetry. **The *Poetics* or Republic III and X do not seem to have been available to the Romans:**

“Unfortunately, Aristotle's *Poetics* exerted no observable influence in the classical period. It appears likely that the treatise was unavailable to subsequent critics.”

Preminger, Hardison and Kerrane, “Introduction,” in *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism*, p. 7.

❖ Latin authors used poetry and literature for two things only:

- To improve eloquence
- To sing the national glories of Rome and show off its culture.
- ❖ This conception of literature will remain prevalent in Europe until the mid 20th century, as future lectures will show.