Representation of the other and self-expression in Aristophanes and Aristotle[1]

Luisa Buarque, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

It is not exactly new to say that Greek creators of popular musical literary genres developed their own 'poetics', or at least 'proto-poetics' (in the sense of a broad reflection on their practices and techniques) in their works; or still, that they practiced their own kind of 'literary criticism'. Important theorists such as Dover (1993), Ford (2002), Halliwell (2011) and Lins Brandão (2015), among others, have drawn attention to the fact that the Greek poetic and musical traditions developed an acute degree of self-consciousness and engaged in debates about "the nature and functions of poetry" (Halliwell, 2011, p. 4). In short, according to the words of Halliwell, "the history of Greek poetics begins inside rather than outside poetry" (2011, p. 25 and p. 36).

It is also largely recognized that Aristotle examined these theories and critiques. I do not mean to ignore the profound differences between the forms of expression and functions of poetic literature, on the one hand, and philosophical literature, on the other, especially considering the Aristotelian texts that have been handed down to us. Even so, without ignoring the risk of projecting Aristotelian categories onto 'artistic' works, I propose that there is a *certain* continuity between these very different regimes, the literary aspect of musical poetry and that of philosophy, with specific regard to the theme of poetic theory and criticism. Aristotle debates to some degree authors (more or less as he debates Presocratic thinkers) while also nevertheless using some of their 'categories'. An example is the technical term *metabolé* indicating the change of fortune: 'A *reversal* is a change of the situation into the opposite, as described above, this change being, moreover, as we are saying, probable or inevitable' (1452a22).[2] There are other examples in ch. 11 and several occurrences of the verb *metabállein* in ch. 13, which appears with this similar meaning in Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* ("Great misfortune can offer great *reversals*, when it is fated", v. 721).[3] This all does not prove that Aristotle had this verse in mind, —that is not what I'm suggesting; but it is an indication that some words that circulated in musical-poetry also circulated in philosophy and vice versa, and in this specific case Euripides himself could have borrowed the term from some other context. It could have been a current topic, to which

---

1 This paper (made for oral communication and edited by Gregory Scott) is an adaptation of the text 'Representação do outro e expressão de si nas teorias antigas da produção poética', to be published in the book of the Ancient Philosophy Working Group of the XXth Meeting of the National Association of Philosophy Postgraduation (ANPOF), Brazil (2025). It has been published at www.epspress.com/Lisbon2025/BuarqueCh17.pdf on 12 August 2025.

2 Aristotle. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 23, translated by W.H. Fyfe. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1932.

3 Translations from Perseus Digital Library, except *Thesmophoriazusae*. Euripides. *The Complete Greek Drama*, edited by Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. in two volumes. *Iphigenia in Tauris*, translated by Robert Potter. New York. Random House. 1938.

people contributed with these words, which Aristotle took up or which circulated until his time.[4]

With this in mind, I would like to briefly explore some parallels between certain passages from the *Poetics* and two scenes from Aristophanes' work that have been considered, together, as a reflection on dramaturgical production, both comic and tragic – scenes that are often cited by translators of the *Poetics* in footnotes to a passage from chapter 17 and that, even though distant from the treatise in time, seem to be echoed by the Aristotelian argument. By this I mean the scenes in which the tragic poets Euripides (in *Acharnians*) and Agathon (in *Thesmophoriazusae*) are caught in the very act of dramatic composition. In the first case, there is a brief allusion to the Euripidean style, and in the second case there is a telling connection with ch. 17. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, we find a character (Agathon) presenting a sophisticated vision of the production of a dramaturgical work. In fact, the *Acharnians*' scene makes more sense as a sketch of a 'artistic theory' in the light of the scene from *Thesmophoriazusae*, which it seems to prefigure.

Acharnians

Regarding the plot, it is enough to know that the protagonist Dikaiopolis is being persecuted by the chorus of citizens of the demos of Acharnas for having signed a private truce with Sparta during the Peloponnesian War. For this reason, he puts on a disguise to defend himself, pretending to be someone else in order to calm the chorus and persuade them that he was right to want peace. He realizes that the plot of Euripides' tragedy *Thelephus*, lost to us, could be useful to him. *Telephus* was a Mysian king who dressed as a beggar and defended himself before the Greeks without them knowing it was him. The Euripidean plot fits the situation of Dikaiopolis like a glove, so he goes to Euripides' house to ask him for the necessary props for the disguise, notably the beggar's costume. When he arrives, he sees the tragediographer at work and exclaims:

> You perch aloft to compose tragedies, when you might just as well do them on the ground. I am not astonished at your introducing cripples on the stage. And why dress in these miserable tragic rags? I do not wonder that your heroes are beggars. (*Acharnians*, v. 411-414).[5]

What draws the attention of the comic character Dikaiopolis are the costumes and the position of the author's body while composing. It is as if the composer had to adopt gestures and manners that belong to the characters whose actions and lines he was creating. There is something of a "role-playing" in this kind of creation. The author is a

[4] We find in Plato, specially in the *Republic* III (394d-e; 397a1-398b4; 400d-e) and in *Laws* II (668b-669e), an important step of the philosophical transmission of those problems. I deal with the passages from the *Republic* in the Brazilian version of this paper. There are certainly other philosophical and literary examples of the circulation of these topics, but my frame in this paper is restricted.

[5] Aristophanes. *Acharnians*. The Eleven Comedies. Anonymous. New York. Liveright. 192?.

private actor, who plays in his own home the roles he proposes for the stage. Euripides was *par excellence*, at least according to Aristophanes, the poet who provoked pity through characters that, until then, had not populated the tragic stages, such as the lame, beggars, etc. The *Acharnians'* scene comically shows how he did it.

Thesmophoriazusae

The dramatist Agathon, who becomes a character in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, develops and deepens this association between author and actor. No wonder his speech contains what has been considered to be the earliest appearance of the noun '*mimesis*' used in an explicitly theatrical context linked to the authorship of dramas (Cantarella, 1970; Sousa e Silva, 1987; Mazzacchera, 1999, Saetta-Cottone, 2016).

The context is as follows: Euripides, once again an Aristophanic character (but now at the center of the plot), is accused by Athenian women of 'speaking ill' of them in his plays. They decide to try Euripides, taking advantage of the occasion of the celebration of the Thesmophoria, an exclusively female festival in which men cannot participate. Euripides decides therefore to visit the house of his colleague Agathon, regarded as an effeminate man, asking him to dress as a woman and infiltrate the women's meeting to defend Euripides. We once again experience a disguise-plan to make a defense. Agathon, according to Euripides, would be in a better position to impersonate a woman.

What interests us here is a brief conversation between Agathon and an old relative of Euripides, where Agathon presents his theory of composition:

> I'm wearing the clothes that match my state of mind. The task of a poet requires assimilation between his traits and the plays he has to write. If, for instance, he's writing plays of female roles, his body must also share in the traits involved. (…) When writing for masculine roles, the body already has its natural features. But as for the things we lack, we must use role-playing (mimesis) to help us pursue what we need (Aristophanes, *Thesm*., v. 148-56).[6]

Agathon develops a thesis about the need for every composer to adapt his behavior to the plays he is going to create. In this specific case, it was a play about women, which demanded that his body participate in the feminine nature. Apparently, this means that there will be a whole adaptation of manners, gestures, clothes and objects – as Euripides' scene in *Acharnians* also suggested. It can be seen that there is an emphasis on the poet's body when composing, on how he behaves and what he wears. The two drama-creators, Euripides and Agathon, seem to have scenic collections in their homes, containing a repertoire of elements that refer to characters and situations created in their plays.

Agathon's thesis is then rounded off with an addendum: if the play deals with male issues, the poet, being a man, will already have everything he needs in his own body. However, when he doesn't, he will resort to *mimesis*. It's a matter of either possessing somatically, or naturally, what is necessary for the composition, or resorting

[6] Translation by Stephen Halliwell, 2015.

to the simulation of what you don't have, either through practices, devices or supplements (such as clothing), or through poses and positions, gestures and voice, in order to capture what you don't have. Mimetic power would provide the technical devices that dramatic art depends on. In this sense, art, through *mimesis*, would provide what nature did not offer to the composer and, once again, the authorial technique would be surprisingly close to the technique of the actor, who learns to 'transform' himself, so to speak, into many different characters.

However, immediately afterwards Agathon states a thesis that does not fit completely the first one. He says that it is disconcerting to see a rough and hairy poet and, furthermore, that many of the most esteemed composers dressed well and were beautiful:

> Besides, it's such an uncultured sight to see a poet who looks like a peasant and is shaggy all over. Take famous Ibykos and Anakreon of Teos, Alkaios too: their lyrics have piquant flavours and they wore head-scarves and displayed Ionian softness. Or take Phrynicus, you've surely heard of him. He had beautiful looks, his clothes were beautiful too; that's why his plays were beautiful works as well. A poet is bound to write what's like his nature. (*Thesm*., 159-67)

In this second thesis, musical poetry seems to be directly associated with femininity or at least beauty; composers, therefore, should all be beautiful by nature, as the examples point out, which leads him to state that composers compose according to their nature (v. 167).

His interlocutor, then, gives examples which show that Agathon's thesis is also capable of explaining the origin of bad poetry: it helps us understand why the poems of Philocles, Xenocles and Theognis are bad. If poets compose according to their characters, then all beautiful and good works must have been made by the hands of beautiful and good composers; rude and ugly poets, if there are any, will compose ugly poems (v. 168-70).

It all culminates in Agathon's following statement: "There's no escaping the link. I've recognized this and have pampered myself accordingly." (v. 171-2). Either Agathon was delicate and effeminate by nature, or he became so because he observed the direct relationship between poetry and beauty. According to him, therefore, it is necessary for a male author to make himself beautiful if he wants to produce beautiful works, because every work is nothing more than the expression of the nature of the composer who produced it (and apparently there is room for manoeuvre in this 'nature', because it can be trained, or at least moulded and strengthened, perhaps becoming the composer's *éthos*).

Putting the two aspects of Agathon's explanation together is not easy and it was to underline these two aspects that my title contrasts 'representation of the other' with 'self-expression'. At first the character makes it clear that, to compose a play that revolves around women, he needs to mimic what he does not have and what he is not ('representation of the other'), yet he then says that poems express the habits and personalities that their authors already have or are ('self-expression'). The second thesis

presents an argument that seems to ignore the first. In the beginning, dramatic art aimed to fulfill a natural lack – perhaps something closer to Euripides, who was neither lame nor a beggar, composing with rags and feet up in *Acharnians*—but afterwards, dramatic art is a direct result of nature, almost a mirror of it, and its task is only to intensify what already belongs to the composer – something closer to the case of Agathon himself, who was apparently feminine and beautiful even before composing female dramas.

We can deal with this ambiguity by remembering that it is unnecessary to find a coherent thesis in the two comic scenes. What we have in this context is the mockery of a character of marked androgyny who explains himself for having been seen wearing women's clothes and props (a silly but recurrent theme in the Aristophanic universe). There is something *ad hoc* about his thesis. Furthermore, as Mazzacchera believes, Agathon's condition complicates his own theory, since the clothes he wears reveal themselves "not as *mimesis*, but as the visualization of the poet's *physis*" (1999, p. 210), something which finally displaces the meaning of *mimesis* in his speech.

If a first reading leads us to think of the term as a representation of the other, after this observation we conclude that it can also point to the expression of oneself (visualization of one's *physis*), both situations fitting into the notion. In short, the interest of the scene could be restricted to its comicality and its functionality in the context of the plot, were it not for the fact that it displays a tension that seems to be somehow present also in the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Thus, the coordinated reading of the two comic scenes with brief excerpts from the Aristotelian treatise has the chance to show not only what topics from the *Poetics* were circulating before Aristotle, as I said at the beginning, but also how much the Aristotelian vision is capable of organizing, articulating and philosophically clarifying such topics.

Poetics

As is known, the fourth chapter of the *Poetics* contains some of the most important considerations regarding the origin of poetry, on the one hand, and the origin of poetic genres, on the other. In this context, consider the following observation about Homer:

> And just as Homer was a supreme poet in the serious style, since he alone made his representations not only good but also dramatic, so, too, he was the first to mark out the main lines of comedy, since he made his drama not out of personal satire but out of the laughable as such. His *Margites* indeed provides an analogy: as are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to our tragedies. (*Poet*., 1448b33-35)[7]

This passage attributes a proto-comic composition to Homer (the *Margites*) to argue that the greatest of the musical poetic creators composed both the ancestors of tragedies and the ancestor of comedies. If, when reading this passage, we had only in mind the initial introduction of *mímesis* in Ch 1, we might conclude that the best composers, like Homer here, would 'mimic' things that were comic and tragic, funny and serious. This idea

[7] *Aristotle.* Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 23, translated by W.H. Fyfe, *op. cit.*

would also be in line with the passage in the previous chapter in which, to clarify what he means by 'mimetic mode' (*hós*), Aristotle states that narration, or recitation, can be done "by assuming a character other than your own (*héteron ti gignómenon*)—this is Homer's method—or by remaining yourself without any such change (*metabállonta*)" (*Poet*., 1448a23),[8] a passage that will be complemented by a much later one, in 24, which states that:

> Homer deserves praise for many things and especially for this, that alone of all poets he does not fail to understand what he ought to do himself. The poet should speak as seldom as possible in his own character, since he is not "representing" the story in that sense.[1] Now the other poets play a part themselves throughout the poem and only occasionally "represent" a few things dramatically, but Homer after a brief prelude at once brings in a man or a woman or some other character, never without character, but all having character of their own. (1460a6-11)

Homer would not have made dramas in the strict sense - this would have been chronological nonsense - but he would have presented the main conditions to do so, since he would have employed *mímesis* more and better than the others. And, in this sense, ideally all creators of dramatic-type art would act like Homer and try to imitate a lot and in a variety of ways, being able to compose things as disparate as women and men, comedies and tragedies.

However, chapter 4 also indicates otherwise. Before the commentary on Homer, and after noting that human beings are mimetic and also 'musical' or 'rhythmic' animals, Aristotle had clarified that some humans are naturally better disposed for this (*Poet*., 1448b22) – namely *mímesis*, melody and 'rhythm', which he had just mentioned – and these people were precisely the ones who gave rise to musical-poetry from improvisation.

Up to this point, we could continue in the same vein and think that those most gifted in *mímesis* and music, by improvising, would imitate many things. In this sense, although we are all naturally mimetic, there would be a kind of scale of mimicry in which, the more one imitates, the more one is prone to poetry[9], including its various genres. However, this is not the conclusion the text reaches; in fact, it indicates that the causes of the origin of poetry in general are not the same as those that explain the division of poetry into its genres. Following the simplified history of poetry a little further, Aristotle specifies that poems are the result of what is most spontaneous for poets, or more specifically, of their *éthos*:

> Poetry then split into two kinds according to the [poet's] *éthe*. For the more serious poets represented fine doings and the doings of fine men, while those of a less exalted nature represented the actions of inferior men, at first writing satire just as the others at first wrote hymns and eulogies. (*Poet*., 1448b24-7).

---

[8] Aristotle here accepts Plato's tripartite division from the *Republic* (393c-394d)*:* that the "manner" is (I) pure narration; (ii) full dramatic acting; and (iii) a combination of both, which Homer did.

[9] And, of course, to art of all kinds.

As can be seen, the theory of the birth of poetic genres is quite different from the theory of the birth of poetry. One is general and the other particular (it is here that the supposedly Homeric *Margites* is mentioned for the first time). In line with this, *éthos* is both what characterizes the poet in that passage (we can think of various things here: his customs, his manners, his character, his personality, even his inclinations), and the manners or personality of each (kind of) character that inhabits each (kind of) poem or play.[10] It is the relationship between one *éthos* and another that, according to Aristotle, tends to imbue a literary genre with a certain *éthos* too, in the sense of being high or low, serious or funny, praising or slandering, tragic or comic, etc. As Dupont-Roc and Lallot say about this passage, "the work is thus implicitly considered as a 'projection' or 'reflection' of the author" (1980, p. 167). In other words, if we were to translate the two explanations in chapter 4 (of the origin of poetry and of the origin of genres) with the two expressions in my title, we would be talking, in the first case, about the tendency to represent or simulate the other, and in the second case, to express one's own *éthos*.

Later in the chapter there is an example close to this second strand:

> When tragedy and comedy came to light, poets were drawn by their natural bent towards one or the other. Some became writers of comedies instead of iambs, the others produced tragedies instead of epics. (*Poet*., 1449a2-5)

Only here, instead of the *éthos*, we have the author's *phýsis* determining the poetry he is going to exercise. What then becomes of the claim that Homer is like the father of tragedy **and** comedy? Apparently, Homer is an honorable exception, who provides the paradigm of the multimimetic capacity of 'representation of the other' to be replaced later by the perhaps more common mimetic type of 'self-expression'. In fact, Homer plays the role of a kind of a *hors concours* composer in the *Poetics*, as shown by some passages from chapters 23 and 24 which make him sound divine, for instance:

> 'So in this respect, too, compared with all other poets Homer may seem, as we have already said, divinely inspired…' (1459a30); and

> 'All these [elements] were used by Homer for the first time, and used well. Of his poems he made the one, the *Iliad*, a "simple" story turning on "calamity," and the *Odyssey* a "complex" story—it is full of "discoveries"—turning on character. Besides this they surpass all other poems in diction and thought' (1459b12-17).

---

[10] The following passage from *Laws* II, 669c-d, supports the same point: "For the Muses would never blunder so far as to assign a feminine tune and gesture to verses composed for men, or to fit the rhythms of captives and slaves to gestures framed for free men, or conversely, after constructing the rhythms and gestures of free men, to assign to the rhythms a tune or verses of an opposite style."
Plato. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 10 & 11 translated by R.G. Bury. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967 & 1968.

So far, a tension seemingly exists between an ideal of the universal mimicry and the conclusion that, in practice, poets mimic what they are most inclined to be. This tension would explain the differences between the kinds of poetry they make, a tension that is not resolved by the attribution of the role of father of both the comic and the tragic to Homer, which can be explained by his exceptional talent.

However, a passage from chapter 17 (precisely the one that is usually associated with Aristophanes' scenes) recalls what has hitherto seemed separate or tensioned, and shows that the tension is just an apparent one:

> In constructing plots and completing the effect by the help of dialogue the poet should, as far as possible, keep the scene before his eyes. (...) The poet should also, as far as possible, complete the effect by using the gestures [*skhémasin*]. For, if their natural powers are equal, those who are actually in the emotions are the most convincing; he who is agitated blusters and the angry man rages with the maximum of conviction. And that is why poetry needs either a sympathetic nature or a madman (*manikoû*), the former being impressionable (*eúplastoi*) and the latter inspired. (*Poet*., 1455a21-35).

Firstly, the gesticulation appears again, as in Aristophanes, and gesturing brings the composer closer to the actor. In order not to make certain mistakes that would be obvious on stage, he needs to test the plausibility of his creation by putting himself in the shoes of his characters. Furthermore, he will be more convincing if he can express what he really feels, but this doesn't mean only producing works that are close to his character. On the contrary, it means taking on the same passions that he wants to imprint in his poem, or even provoking them in himself (perhaps with costumes and props, gestures and voice, like the Aristophanic dramatists?). For this reason, the less rigid and more moldable or impressionable he is (the emphasis is on the *eúplastoi*), the more he will know how to become others and imbue himself with varied passions and personalities, in order to express this variation in what he composes. In addition, although this doesn't directly concern his character in the strong sense –we know that there is a deep distinction between *páthos* and *éthos* – ultimately this plastic variability of his affections and passions can perhaps be seen as an ethical "euplasty" (not least because, even if he is a composer of a single genre – say, tragedies – his plays are very likely to contain varied characters). Instead of just retracting his *éthos* to show other ones, he will have and provoke in himself fluctuations of emotions and moods, behaviors, perhaps even thoughts and points of view, because it is by feeling, seeing, thinking and being something else that he will persuasively and beautifully compose what he has felt and thought. He will finally express himself too.

In short, Aristotelian playwrights – like an Agathon beautiful by nature and dressed as a woman, or like an Euripides with his feet to the ceiling – become vehicles for their own poetry and temporarily merge with the characters they put on stage. In this sense, the author composes by representing figures and adopting *éthe* that, although diverse and possibly alien, he nevertheless experiences as his own. He is fluid so that he can express himself in a variety of ways without these expressions ceasing to be a

projection of himself. This Aristotelian composer, therefore, seems not only to echo the scenes of the Aristophanic dramatists but also to retroactively shed light on them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ARISTÓFANES. *Comédias I. Acarnenses, Cavaleiros, Nuvens*. Trad. Maria de Fátima Sousa e Silva e Custódio Magueijo. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 2006.

ARISTÓFANES. *Comédias III. Mulheres que celebram as Tesmofórias, Rãs, Mulheres na Assembleia, Dinheiro*. Trad. Maria de Fátima Sousa e Silva. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 2019.

ARISTÓFANES. *Duas comédias: Lisístrata e As Tesmoforiantes*. Trad. Adriane da Silva Duarte. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2005.

ARISTOPHANES. Frogs and other plays. A new translation by Stephen Halliwell. Oxford University Press, 2015.

ARISTÓTELES. *Poética*. Trad. Paulo Pinheiro. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2015.

ARRIGHETTI, Graziano. *Poeti, eruditi e biografi: Momenti della riflessione dei Greci sulla letteratura*. Pisa: Giardini, 1987.

CANTARELLA, Rafaelle. *Scritti minori sul teatro Greco*. Brescia: Paideia, 1970.

DUPONT-ROC, Roselyne; LALLOT, Jean. *Aristote. Poétique. (Texte, trad., notes)*. Paris: Seuil, 1980.

HOLANDA, Luisa S. B. Poética aristofânica. In: *Poesia e Filosofia. Homenagem a Orides Fontela*. LAVELLE, Patricia; BRITTO, Paulo H.; ESTRADA, Henrique; DUARTE, Pedro (orgs.). Rio de Janeiro: Relicário Edições, 2019.

HOLANDA, Luisa S. B. Poética cômica. In: *As fronteiras da estética*. DUARTE, Pedro; SÜSSEKIND, Pedro (orgs.). Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2024.

MAZZACCHERA, Elena. Agatone e la mímesis poetica nelle Tesmoforiazuse di Aristofane. *Léxis: poetica, retorica e comunicazione nella tradizione classica*, v. 17, p. 205-224, 1999.

MOURA SILVA, Camila de. *Vidas Trágicas: Ésquilo, Sófocles e Eurípides no imaginário helenístico*. Dissertação de Mestrado apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia da UFRJ, 2019.

PLATÃO. *A República*. Trad. Maria helena da Rocha Pereira. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2001.

SAETTA-COTTONE, Rossella. *Aristophane. Les Thesmophories ou la fête des femmes.* Traduction commentée. Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 2016.

SOUSA E SILVA, Maria de Fátima. *Crítica do teatro na comédia antiga*. Coimbra: Editora da Universidade de Coimbra, 1987.

VELOSO, C. W. *Aristóteles Mimético.* São Paulo: Discurso Editorial, 2004.