

BMCR 2022.12.29

Aristote: Poétique

Pierre Destrée, *Aristote: Poétique. GF, 1637*. Paris: Flammarion, 2021. Pp. 272. ISBN 9782080712295

Review by

Thornton Lockwood, Quinnipiac University. tlockwood@qu.edu

Pierre Destrée's new translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* notes the work's "destin paradoxal": How can a work on Greek tragedy remain silent on the political, social, religious, or performative aspects of an artform that in historical context was profoundly public? How can a handbook on the various aspects of playwriting produce a superior drama when Aristotle himself acknowledges that artistic production is a matter of imagination? Destrée's answer: Aristotle's *Poetics* is neither an historical study of a classical Greek cultural institution nor a handbook for aspiring playwrights. Rather, as is often the case with Aristotle's treatises, Aristotle has created or carved out a new field for investigation and reflection; thus the *Poetics* creates the field of aesthetics, namely the study of beauty in the arts. Destrée has successfully produced a volume that provides general readers of Aristotle's *Poetics* with the historical, literary, and philosophical tools that will allow them to appreciate that much of what seems odd about that text is only paradoxical.

Destrée's edition is divided into three parts of approximately equal length. The *Présentation* that takes up the first third of the volume reviews the different genres in which scholars have tried to place the *Poetics*, identifies the value that Aristotle assigns to poetry, and provides an overview of its central elements, such as plot, character, style, and catharsis. Destrée identifies the central scholarly debates about the *Poetics* over the last forty years without getting bogged down in the substantial scholarly discussion that has constituted such. Destrée does an excellent job at addressing these debates for a general audience, with adequate scholarly references and guidance for those who wish to dig deeper into those debates.

The second third of Destrée's edition is his translation of the *Poetics* itself, a translation that sensibly eschews literal translation and instead tries to capture the various meanings of Aristotle's technical terms in different instances or contexts within the work. Destrée offers a revised annotated translation of the 2014 version published in Aristotle's *œuvres complètes* by Flammarion. Within the text of the translation, Destrée inserts a numerical outline of subdivision of the *Poetics*, which helps to make clear the overall organization of the treatise into its different parts or subsections. Destrée bases his translation on Rudolf Kassel's Oxford Classical Text Greek edition, but he includes a full apparatus indicating his departures from Kassel's text (249–251).

The last third of his edition consists in almost eighty pages of annotations and notes pegged to specific words and passages in the text. The notes are quite helpful and go significantly beyond the annotations one finds in other modern editions; they cover details within the text such as

literary and historical references, cross-references to other works in Aristotle's corpus, and explanations or clarifications of some of Aristotle's more obscure remarks in the *Poetics*. The notes will be very valuable to both a general audience and a more specialized scholarly one. The work concludes with a ten-page topical bibliography.

Although the scholarly introduction will be especially useful to a general audience and the annotations to both a general and a more specialized audience, let me examine how Destrée translates two of the more famous discussions in the *Poetics*, namely his account of the natural origins of poetry and the distinction between poetry and history. Let me present Kassel's Greek text along with the translations of Hardy, Kenny, and Destrée, followed by comment. Asterisks within the text indicate the insertion of explanatory notes.

Natural origins of poetry (*Poetics* 4.1448b4–9)

Kassel (1965): εοίκασι δὲ γεννηθῆσαι μὲν ὅλως τὴν ποιητικὴν αἰτίαι δύο τινές καὶ αὗται φυσικαί. τό τε γὰρ μιμεῖσθαι σύμφυτον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐκ παιδῶν ἐστὶ καὶ τούτῳ διαφέρουσι τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὅτι μιμητικώτατόν ἐστι καὶ τὰς μαθήσεις ποιεῖται διὰ μιμήσεως τὰς πρώτας καὶ τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασι πάντα.

Hardy (2008): La poésie semble bien devoir en général son origine à deux causes, et deux causes naturelles. Imiter est naturel aux hommes et se manifeste dès leur enfance (l'homme diffère des autres animaux en ce qu'il est très apte à l'imitation et c'est au moyen de celle-ci qu'il acquiert ses premières connaissances) et, en second lieu, tous les hommes prennent plaisir aux imitations*. (33)

Kenny (2013): Two things, both of them natural, seem likely to have been the causes of the origin of poetry. Representation comes naturally to human beings from childhood,* and so does the universal pleasure in representations. Indeed, this marks off humans from other animals: man is prone to representation beyond all others, and learns his earliest lessons through representation. (20)

Destrée (2022): Il semble bien que, dans son ensemble, l'art de composer de la poésie doive sa naissance à deux causes [N.43], toutes deux naturelles [N. 44]. En effet, les êtres humains sont dès leur enfance naturellement enclins à imiter (d'ailleurs, ceci les distingue des autres animaux : l'homme est l'être le plus enclin à imiter, et il fait ses premiers apprentissages au moyen de l'imitation [N.45]), et tous ils prennent naturellement plaisir aux imitations et aux représentations [N.46]. (98)

COMMENT: *Poetics* 4.1448b4–9 presents two challenges: first, what are the two natural causes of poetry and second, how should one translate the Greek term μίμησις. Although all three translations identify the two causes as (a) the human tendency to imitate or copy and (b) the pleasure humans take in representations, Kenny's translation departs significantly from the Greek syntax (his translation relocates the claim about how humans differ from animals until after the identification of the two causes) whereas Hardy and Destrée preserve the syntax of the sentence by placing that claim in parenthesis. But Destrée alone points out in his notes that 1448b20–21 poses an interpretive challenge to 4.1448b4–9, since that text claims that by nature, humans are given not only to mimesis, but also to melody and rhythm (which might suggest that 1448b4–9 only identifies the first of the two causes). In this regard, Hardy's

insertion of “en second lieu” (which is absent from the Greek) and Kenny’s choice to place (a) and (b) together are ultimately interpretive moves rather than reflections of what the Greek text actually says. Destrée, by contrast, preserves the ambiguity in the Greek, albeit with a note to help the reader see the interpretive challenge that the text poses. Here, I find commendable Destrée’s application of the principle “less is more,” namely, to avoid the translations of words into the text that force a non-explicit interpretation.

Destrée’s notes are especially helpful in elucidating the philosophical significance of this passage (and more generally throughout his translation). Kenny’s note on this passage points out that the English word “play” can mean both games and a drama and Hardy’s note briefly characterizes both causes (in a single sentence). Destrée, by contrast has paragraph-length interpretative notes on the tension between 1448b4–9 and 1448b20–21 (N.43), the relationship between Aristotle’s claim about the naturalness of poetry and the view found in Plato (N.44), the juxtaposition of human and non-human animals with respect to mimesis across Aristotle’s corpus (N.45), and the difference between “imitations” and “représentations” (N.46).

The second challenge that 1448b4–9 presents concerns the translation of the Greek word μίμησις (and its cognates μιμέομαι and μίμημα), which can mean simulation, imitation, copy, or representation. Kenny represents one strategy: he translates all instances of μίμησις with the term “representation.” But when Aristotle talks about the activity performed by children, he likely has in mind imitations—for instance, copying the noise of an animal or a parent. By contrast, the claim that all humans take pleasure in a mimetic activity seems to have in mind a representation of something, say as a painting, or in a novel, or on the stage. Destrée captures both of these senses by rendering μίμησις with two different words: for example, he translates τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασι with “prendre plaisir aux imitations et aux représentations.” Here, I find commendable Destrée’s application of the principle “more is more,” namely, that accurate translation sometimes requires going beyond a literal translation of the text.

Philosophical nature of tragedy (*Poetics* 9.1451b1–7)

Kassel (1965): ὁ γὰρ ἱστορικὸς καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς οὐ τῷ ἢ ἔμμετρα λέγειν ἢ ἄμμετρα διαφέρουσιν. εἶη γὰρ ἂν τὰ Ἡροδότου εἰς μέτρα τεθῆναι καὶ οὐδὲν ἤττον ἂν εἶη ἱστορία τις μετὰ μέτρου ἢ ἄνευ μέτρων. ἀλλὰ τούτῳ διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο. διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἢ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δ’ ἱστορία τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστον λέγει.

Hardy (2008): En effet, l’historien et le poète ne diffèrent pas par le fait qu’ils font leurs récits l’un en vers l’autre en prose* (on aurait pu mettre l’œuvre d’Hérodote en vers et elle ne serait pas moins de l’histoire en vers qu’en prose), ils se distinguent au contraire en ce que l’un raconte les événements qui sont arrivés, l’autre des événements qui pourraient arriver*. Aussi la poésie est-elle plus philosophique et d’un caractère plus élevé que l’histoire ; car la poésie raconte plutôt le général, l’histoire le particulier*. (42)

Kenny (2013): The difference between a historian and a poet is not a matter of using verse or prose: you might put the works of Herodotus into verse and it would be a history in verse no less than in prose. The difference is that the one relates what actually happened,

and the other the kinds of events that would happen. For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history; poetry utters universal truths, history particular statements. (28)

Destrée (2022): En effet, l'historien et la poète ne se différencient pas en ce qu'ils s'expriment en vers ou en prose ; on pourrait mettre les livres d'Hérodote en vers : ils n'en seraient pas moins de l'histoire qu'en prose. Ils se différencient bien plutôt en ce que le premier raconte ce qui est effectivement arrivé, tandis que le second raconte les événements tels qu'ils pourraient arriver. C'est pourquoi la composition poétique est une tâche plus philosophique et qui a plus de valeur que l'histoire [N.120]. En effet, la poésie raconte les événements davantage selon une structure générale ; l'histoire, les événements dans leur particularité. (113)

COMMENT: *Poetics* 9.1451b1–7 presents two different challenges: first, how to render the optative in modern languages that lack it and second, how to render a term with multiple means in Aristotle's corpus. In the first case, the challenge is one of expressing Aristotle's juxtaposition of the modality that poetry and history represent, namely the difference between τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, and τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο. Aristotle claims that the historian is limited to describing things that happened in the past. But the poet burdens under no such constraints and instead possesses the "poetic license" to construct "the kinds of things that may or could happen." In French, Aristotle's γένοιτο is nicely captured with *le conditionnel*, i.e., a mood that captures possibility—hence Hardy and Destrée rendering γένοιτο as "pourraient arriver." English calls upon helper verbs like "could" or "would" to render the optative, but I think Kenny's "the kinds of events that would happen" fails to capture the possibility open to the poet. No doubt, the poet is constrained by verisimilitude, but at this point in *Poetics* 9, I take it that the emphasis is on possibility rather than likelihood.

The second challenge 9.1451b1–7 concerns the rendering of quasi-technical terms in Aristotle's vocabulary that receive a slightly different spin in *Poetics* 9. The terms in question are Aristotle's contrast between τὰ καθόλου and τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον. Elsewhere in Aristotle's writings, the terms contrast "universal" and "particular" (e.g., "All humans are bipeds" versus "Socrates is a biped"). Kenny's "poetry utters universal truths, history particular statements" seems motivated by such a contrast. But as *Poetics* 9 goes on to show, the term "universal" carries a slightly different nuance, namely that which is likely for a "character" to do or say, rather like the "characters" of Theophrastus' work of the same name. Here, I think *Poetics* 9 moves from possibility to likelihood: heroes are usually brave and villains are usually treacherous. Destrée captures Aristotle's meaning of καθόλου better with "une structure générale" than Kenny does with "universal truths." More generally, Destrée's edition invites the reader to understand Aristotle's *Poetics* accurately and to engage its philosophical richness within the broader context of both Aristotle's writings and the field of aesthetics.