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ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* VERSUS MODERN THEORIES OF DRAMA

Drama as the third, besides lyric and epic (narrative), literary genre distinguished already in antiquity, differs from the others in many features¹ such as the different structure of expression, i.e. the predominant use of dialogue, and the preference for the expressive and cognitive function of language. But above all, its multi-subjective structure predisposes it for stage production. For this particular reason the question arose whether drama belongs to literature or it forms rather an integral part of a theatre play. Looking for an answer to this question, the theorists of drama are divided into three groups, i.e. the supporters of the literary theory of drama, the theatrical theory of drama and the “translation” theory.²

The literary theory of drama is the oldest and originates with Aristotle. It treats drama as an integral part of literature, i.e. as a literary genre, similarly to lyric and epic, i.e. it should be considered primarily as a verbal work. This theory is to be supported by such arguments as the possibility of multiple stage productions of the same drama and the existence of “closet” dramas (*Lesedrama*), not intended by their very nature for stage production.

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The Polish version of the article was published in *Roczniki Humanistyczne* vol. 57, issue 3 (2009).

¹ Bożena CHRZAŚTOWSKA, Seweryna WYSŁOUCH, *Poetyka stosowana*, 3rd edn. amended, (Warszawa: WSiP, 1978), 461.

² *Ibid.*

The theatrical theory states that drama is not a literary genre of its own, but is a kind of theatrical script which as a scenario comes to life in stage productions and achieves its fullness of expression only in theatre. The text of a drama is only an initial phase of a work for its theatrical implementation. “The literary text and drama use different materials. Literature uses only linguistic signs, whereas on the stage the word is accompanied by gestures, stage movement, facial expressions, intonation, silence, set design, costumes, music, lighting, dance etc. [...] drama generated many forms of expression unknown to literature [...], on the other hand, the basic literary forms—description, story—permeate drama as secondary forms, as they are always dependent on the dialogue and monologue.”³

The theatrical theory of drama is believed to be also supported by the subordination and reduction of the word in some of its forms, as well as by using by the playwrights of the so-called blocking (didascalies), which is not intended for the audience but only for the director. Moreover, the main text of a drama contains a “theatrical vision” that can be revealed in the course of its analysis.

The third theory tries to reconcile these two extreme approaches in that it proposes to distinguish the literary drama, which exists in the reader’s reception, from the stage drama, i.e. the stage performance, “as two separate, autonomous plays that convey the same meanings by means of different signs.”⁴ They differ in their code and way of existence: the reader’s drama exists as a literary text, while the stage performance is as a team work involving the senders (the director, the set designer, the author, the actors, the choreographer, the musician) and the receivers, i.e. the audience; it “exists as a system of interconnections and functional dependencies.”⁵ Thus, the third theory proposes to treat drama—its text and staging as two independent plays, conveying the same meanings by means of signs that are different and inherent in each mode.

In addition to these three theoretical approaches which draw a clear boundary between literature and theatre, there are also less radical proposals. For instance, Roman Ingarden considered drama to be the borderline case of a literary work, assuming that “besides language, there is another means of representation, i.e. concrete visual stimuli provided by actors and decoration, through which the represented things and characters or their actions and be-

³ Ibid., p. 463.

⁴ Ibid., p. 464.

⁵ Ibid., p. 466.

behaviour appear to the viewer.”⁶ Also Irena Sławińska, with all the regard for the text of a drama, paid attention mainly to its theatrical values, the theatrical vision contained in it, and emphasised that these aspects together with the theatrical reading of a drama constitute a new research perspective⁷.

As far as I know, among these theories and positions, only the supporters of the literary theory of drama seek justification for their arguments in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and taking reference to the authority of the Stagirite philosopher is for them an important argument in this discussion. Moreover, the conviction that Aristotle saw tragedy as a primarily literary work is so deeply rooted that even the supporters of the theatrical theory of drama take this position for granted and accuse the author of *Poetics* of almost omitting in his deliberations the aspects of performance, or at least he did not appreciate their significance for tragedy.

An example of this standpoint can be the position of the English hellenist Oliver Taplin, who in his seminal book *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*⁸ criticises Aristotle who—contrary to Plato—did not appreciate the visual aspects of Greek tragedy because he went with the zeitgeist: „During the fourth century it had become possible to regard the text of a Greek tragedy as the tragedy itself and not as the libretto of a performance. His attitude is not to be found in Plato, and may to some extent be a reaction to Plato's emphasis on performance. Once tragedy is treated as a text then it is all too easy to lose sight of its visual meaning. That Aristotle did, and critics ever since have turned their backs in the same direction.”⁹

But does Aristotle in his *Poetics* really consider tragedy only as a literary work, with omission and disregard for the aspects of performance? In my opinion, this standpoint is wrong. First of all, the point of departure of Taplin's argument, i.e. his claim that in the 4th century “tragedy is treated as a text,” is wrong. After all, many new and huge theatres were built in that century, with a capacity of up to twenty thousand spectators, which proves that drama was still commonly received in its theatrical form during

⁶ Roman INGARDEN, *O dziele literackim. Badania z pogranicza ontologii, teorii języka i filozofii literatury* (Warszawa: PWN, 1988), 461.

⁷ Irena SŁAWIŃSKA, „Struktura dzieła teatralnego,” in *Problemy teorii literatury*, vol. 1, edited by Henryk Markiewicz (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1987), 243–261. See also: Jan CIECHOWICZ, „Było przyjemnie,” in *Świat jako spektakl. Irenie Sławińskiej na dziewięćdziesiąte urodziny*, edited by Wojciech Kaczmarek (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2003), 186.

⁸ Oliver TAPLIN, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 25 and 476–479.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

performances at agons organized by the cities during the Festivals of Dionysus, or at the courts of Macedonian and then Hellenistic rulers, at ceremonies that today we would call rather secular, which, for instance, celebrated the seizure of power, the birth of an heir to the throne, or a great victory. As far as Aristotle is concerned, it is hard to imagine that he would rarely watch theatre performances, although undoubtedly he also became familiar with tragedies and comedies as a reader. This is reflected in his *Poetics*, and the analysis of this work does not prove the view that the philosopher lost sight of the theatrical dimension of tragedy and saw drama only in the literary dimension.

According to Taplin, there are three clear suggestions (“insinuations”) in *Poetics* that prove Aristotle’s underestimation of the visual aspect of the tragedy, namely the statement that: (1) “tragedy is evaluated better while reading”; (2) “the visual aspects of a staged play are something external, added for the satisfaction of the audience”; (3) “the visual aspects of a tragedy are not the domain of the playwright but theatrical technicians.”¹⁰

Indeed, in Part VI of Aristotle’s *Poetics* we read that “For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.”¹¹ Then in Part XIV we find the statement that “A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation.”¹² A similar message can be found in the statement from Part XXVI: “Again, Tragedy like Epic poetry produces its effect even without action [gestures of actors about which Aristotle wrote earlier—R.R.Ch.]; it reveals its power by mere reading.”¹³

What actually results from these statements of the author of *Poetics*? First of all, it should be noted that they are practical remarks for playwrights to write their works in such a way that they retain their power of influence also outside the theatre, i.e. when they are received as texts. By all means, this does not mean that the philosopher places the reader’s reception of a drama

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 477.

¹¹ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, VI, 1450b 18–19. Translation, similarly to the other English quotations from *Poetics*, are given after: ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, transl. by Samuel H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1895) (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>).

¹² Ibid. XIV, 1453b 1–6.

¹³ Ibid., XXVI, 1462a 11–13.

higher than its reception in the theatre. The furthest legitimate conclusion is that, according to Aristotle, a tragedy from the reader's perspective does not lose its value, and thus it retains its power of influence (δύναμις) over the recipients and achieves its main goal—the evocation of pity and fear. For Aristotle, the tragedy from the reader's perspective is only a possibility by the evocation of which he can defend real tragedy, which is the subject of his deliberations, the tragedy as a theatrical work. If an engineer claimed that a car could fulfil its basic function of covering the distance without a body, he would be right, but it would not allow for drawing a conclusion that a car without a body is a car for him. In a similar vein, Aristotle's claim that tragedy can achieve its purpose also without a stage setting does not imply that he perceives tragedy only as a text.

In Part XXVI cited above,¹⁴ Aristotle writes about the fact that, according to some people, tragedy is worse than epic, because epic is addressed to more educated people who to understand a work do not need any gestures as an addition to words, which is the case with tragedy. He himself does not share this view and recognizes its legitimacy only for lower-level stage performances, but for this he blames not the poets but the performers who resort to exaggerated gestures, since the right gestures do not deserve condemnation. It follows from this that despite everything, for him a tragedy is a theatrical work because he defends it first of all as a spectacle and not as a literary text; only as an additional argument he invokes the already quoted statement that “Again [ἔτι], Tragedy like Epic poetry produces its effect.”

Let us move on to the following statements by Aristotle, referred to by Oliver Taplin. Part VI of *Poetics* reads:¹⁵ “The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry.”¹⁶ The completion and elaboration on this thought can be found in Part XIV: “Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place.”¹⁷ The same reservations mentioned above apply to these statements, namely that despite these reservations and limitations, real tragedy for the author of

¹⁴ Ibid. 1462a 2–4.

¹⁵ Ibid. 1450b 16–18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1450b 16–20.

¹⁷ Ibid. 1453b 1–6.

Poetics still remains a tragedy with the element of the spectacle, regardless of its greater or lesser value for the whole and regardless of the fact whether its creator is a poet or someone else. Of course, if we look at theatrical practice from the historical perspective, it turns out that Aristotle's reservations were true in his lifetime, but in the 5th century BC poets did not only write the plays, but were also directors of their staging, composed music and were the authors of dance arrangements for choirs, and until the time of Sophocles they used to play the main protagonists, while choosing performers for other roles at their own discretion. One of the ancient sources referring to Aeschylus simply states that the poet "burdened himself with all the issues related to the staging of his tragedy."¹⁸ Besides, the supporters of the theatrical theory do not claim that a drama in its visual and acoustic aspects is the work of a poet, but that the written text (i.e. the work of a poet) is only an earlier stage of the work, whereas its final form comes with its staging.¹⁹ In addition, Aristotle never claims that tragedy can reach its fullness in reader's reception. The only thing he states is that the poet should compose his play in such a way that it can achieve its main goal also outside of theatre, i.e. in a literary form.

In order to understand Aristotle's position, it is not enough to rely on his selected statements, in which he speaks about the values of purely literary aspects of tragedy, but it is also necessary to take into account what he says about its theatrical aspects, and thus its dimension as performance. Here, one of the key terms is ὄψις, used several times in *Poetics*. Some commentators—as H. Podbielski rightly points out²⁰—from the statement closing Part VI "the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet" draw the wrong conclusion that the term ὄψις (visual aspect) or the whole expression ὄψεως κόσμος (visual effect) used previously by Aristotle²¹ should be referred only to the appearance of stage characters. The already quoted Oliver Taplin, who investigated this issue more closely, convincingly demonstrated²² that in his work Aristotle balances between the two meanings of the word *opsis*: its more superficial and deeper meaning, it means that for him ὄψις is what the choreographer and σκευοποιός (a person preparing masks and costumes) bring to the

¹⁸ CHAMAJLEON, frag. 41 (Wehrli).

¹⁹ Roman INGARDEN, *O dziele literackim*, 463

²⁰ ARYSTOTELES, *Poetyka*, transl. and compiled by Henryk Podbielski, fn. 6 to Part VI.

²¹ Part IV, 1449b 33.

²² Oliver TAPLIN, "Aristotle Poetics on „opsis”,” in IDEM, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, 477–479.

performance, while at other times he treats ὄψις as a visual element, capable of influencing the viewers in a similar way as the verbal layer, although in a less artistic way. In this deeper sense, ὄψις is considered by Aristotle to be a necessary component of tragedy: ἐπεὶ δὲ πρᾶττοντες ποιοῦνται τὴν μίμησιν, πρῶτον μὲν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἂν εἴη τι μόνιον τραγωδίας ὁ τῆς ὄψεως κόσμος²³—“Now as tragic imitation implies persons acting, it necessarily follows in the first place, that Spectacular equipment will be a part of Tragedy” and includes ὄψις among the six components of tragedy that constitute its essence: “Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot [*mythos*], Character [*ethos*], Diction [*lexis*], Thought [*dianoia*], Spectacle [*opsis*], Song [*melopoia*].”²⁴ Two of these components (i.e. diction and song) constitute the means of imitation, one (i.e. spectacle [ὄψις]) the manner of imitation, and three (plot, characters and thought) are the objects of imitation. As can be seen based on these two statements, ὄψις is not something external to tragedy but something necessary, together with the other components determining its essence, i.e. “how mimesis takes place in tragedy [ὡς μιμοῦνται].”²⁵

And after all, for Aristotle, the way in which mimesis takes place in tragedy is what distinguishes this literary genre from epic. It is already emphasized in its famous definition that mimesis in drama does not take place through storytelling, but through characters’ actions—ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις [...] δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι’ ἀπαγγελίας.²⁶ In my opinion, the term οἱ δρώντες (“acting characters”), just like the term οἱ πρᾶττοντες used elsewhere but meaning the same (to which I will come back), cannot mean here literary characters, because they also appear in epic, but rather physical incarnations of characters in the visually represented poetic reality of a drama in its stage production.²⁷

The confirmation of this claim can be found in Part XXIV of *Poetics*. There Aristotle discusses in more detail the difference between tragedy and epic. He sees this difference above all in the fact that tragedy has the character of a theatrical work, because—as he writes—it differs from epic in

²³ *Poetics*, 1449b32. The text in Greek cited from *Aristotelis de arte poetica liber*, rec. Rudolf Kassel (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982 (= 1965)).

²⁴ *Poetics*, 1450a 8–10.

²⁵ *Poetics*, 1450a 11.

²⁶ *Poetics*, 1449b 24–26. H. Podbielski’s translation: “tragedy is a mimetic presentation in a dramatic form, not in a narrative one” does not accurately reflect Aristotle’s thought.

²⁷ Their psychophysical existential bases are actors. See Roman INGARDEN, *O dziele literackim*, 463, fn. 1.

two components that today we would call non-literary, i.e. song and spectacle: καὶ τὰ μέρη ἔξω μελοποιίας καὶ ὄψεως ταῦτά (“The parts also, with the exception of song and spectacle, are the same”),²⁸ and in that it may contain only those events which can be imitatively presented on stage by actors: “In Tragedy we cannot imitate several lines of actions carried on at one and the same time; we must confine ourselves to the action on the stage and the part taken by the players. But in Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented.” This rather long quotation seems to unambiguously show that Aristotle thinks about tragedy in its stage and not literary form. If Aristotle treated a tragedy only as a literary work, I would not see any obstacle for it to contain many motifs similarly to an epic.²⁹

Another proof that Aristotle treats tragedy as a theatrical work are the statements from Part XVII, where the philosopher recommends to poets that when creating, they should have in vision the whole situation in its visual aspect: “In constructing the plot and working it out with the proper diction, the poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action, he will discover what is in keeping with it, and be most unlikely to overlook inconsistencies. The need of such a rule is shown by the fault found in Carcinus. Amphiarus was on his way from the temple. This fact escaped the observation of one who did not see the situation. On the stage, however, the Piece failed, the audience being offended at the oversight.”³⁰ In a commentary to this fragment, H. Podbielski rightly points out that regardless of the unclear details of this event “it is essential that Aristotle draws attention to the visual aspects which should be an integral part of the dramatic action.”³¹

Let us return once again to the definition of tragedy provided in Part VI.³² Tragedy is referred to here as “an imitation of an action”—μίμησις πράξεως and we must immediately ask whether the word πρᾶξις used here means ac-

²⁸ *Poetics*, 1459b 9–10. According to Aristotle, in terms of its structure, epic differs from tragedy also with respect to the size and the character of the poem. See *Poetics*, 1459b 17–18.

²⁹ By the way, it can be noticed that the playwrights were able to present parallel events using contemporary relations. For example, in *The Suppliants* by Aeschylus, Danaos in a suppliant description plays the Egyptians’ landing which takes place during the stage action, and in *Seven Against Thebes*, by singing and dancing the choir plays (μίμειται) the event of the attack on the city gates.

³⁰ *Poetics*, 1555a 21–28.

³¹ ARISTOTELES, *Poetyka*, 51, footnote 2.

³² *Poetics*, 1449b 24.

tion in a literary sense, and thus a type of plot, or the real action of the characters on stage. Apart from the definition in *Poetics*, Aristotle repeats several times that πράττοντες ποιοῦνται τὴν μίμησιν—“tragic imitation implies persons acting.”³³ Thus, in order to answer the previous question about the meaning of the word πράξις, we must first define who these πράττοντες are—if they are only literary characters or characters performing on stage played by actors. And here, Aristotle gives an unambiguous answer in the statement which I have already quoted in part: ἐπεὶ δὲ πράττοντες ποιοῦνται τὴν μίμησιν, πρῶτον μὲν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἂν εἴη τι μόνιον τραγωδίας ὁ τῆς ὄψεως κόσμος· εἶτα μελοποιία καὶ λέξις—“Now as tragic imitation implies persons acting, it necessarily follows in the first place, that Spectacle will be a part of Tragedy. Next, Song and Diction, for these are the media of imitation.”³⁴ The heroes of a tragedy, being merely literary characters, cannot cause the necessary occurrence of the three mentioned components of a clearly non-visual (ὄψις) and acoustic (μελοποιία, λέξις) character. In this context, even λέξις is not a written word, not a text, but a spoken word, because—as the philosopher further explains³⁵—λέξις is equivalent to μέτρων σύνθεσις—“metric composition,” which for the ancient people existed only in the auditory mode. Therefore, if the term πράττοντες does not refer to the purely literary characters, but the physical incarnations of the heroes of a tragedy, i.e. people acting on stage, the term πράξις by definition should also be understood as a stage action. And without such an action, according to Aristotle, tragedy would not be possible: ἔτι ἄνευ μὲν πράξεως οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο τραγωδία—“without action there cannot be a tragedy.”³⁶ This is in line with the earlier statement that ὄψις is a necessary component of tragedy.

Turning to the conclusion, first of all, I would like to say that my aim was not to decide which of the modern theories of drama is right or closer to the truth, although in my works on Greek tragedy I assume that the visual aspects play an important role in it and cannot be overlooked in the interpretation of works by classical playwrights. In this short article I only tried to show that attributing to Aristotle the views identified with the literary theory of drama has no basis in his *Poetics* because, firstly, he does not identify tragedy with a verbal work. On the contrary, for him the visual and auditive dimensions of tragedy is a fundamental component that distinguishes it from

³³ *Poetics*, 1449b 31, 1449b 36, 1450b 3.

³⁴ *Poetics*, 1449b 31–32.

³⁵ *Poetics*, 1449b 32–33.

³⁶ *Poetics*, 1450a 23–24.

epic, which for him—to use our modern term—is a purely literary work. Secondly, for Aristotle, the visual element (ὄψις or ὄψεως κόσμος) is an important and necessary element of tragedy. The analysis of *Poetics* also proves that when writing about tragedy, Aristotle means drama in its stage production, not its literary character. Although he claims that tragedy can exist without ὄψις, this is only a hypothetical situation, analogous to the one where he claims that “there may be [tragedy] without character”—[τραγωδία] ἄνευ δὲ ἡθῶν γένοιτ’ ἄν.³⁷ And yet, based on these words, nobody has ever dared to say that Aristotle favours tragedy without characters because that would be absurd. Subsequently, undermining the significance of ὄψις by the philosopher reminds of his remarks about the inferiority of characters in relation to the plot, when he writes that “The plot, then, is the first principle [*arche*], and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place.”³⁸ In fact, however, when he writes about tragedy, he speaks of both the characters and the visuo-acoustic side of tragedy as its important and necessary components, and he considers tragedy not as literature or a text, but as a theatrical work, which in his opinion, nonetheless, does not lose its values also when received outside of the theatrical context.

It is also difficult to identify Aristotle’s views with the theatrical theory of drama, especially in its extreme version, according to which drama is not an independent genre, but is a kind of script. This is clearly contradicted by a strong emphasis on the importance of the literary aspect of tragedy in *Poetics*. Aristotle also does not distinguish two separate realities in tragedy, i.e. one as a tragedy in reader’s reception and the other in theatrical reception, as postulated by the translation theory. For him, the aspects that we today refer to as literary and theatrical are combined to form the organic whole of a tragedy. That is why, in my opinion, R. Ingarden and I. Sławińska are two Polish contemporary drama theorists whose approach is the closest to the idea contained in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, although naturally, both authors use a completely different language to describe and present issues related to drama.

³⁷ *Poetics*, 1450a 25.

³⁸ *Poetics*, 1450a 37–38.

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VERSUS MODERN THEORIES OF DRAMA

Summary

This paper seeks to prove that there are no grounds in the *Poetics* to ascribe to Aristotle the views identified with the literary theory of drama because he does not identify drama with a verbal work. On the contrary, the spectacular dimension of tragedy is for Aristotle one of the distinctive features of tragedy vis-à-vis epos, which for him is only – to use our modern terms – a literary work. Thus, the visual element (ὄψις or ὄψεως κόσμος) is not only very important for Aristotle, but it is even a necessary component of tragedy. Indeed there are some remarks in the *Poetics* that suggest tragedy may exist without ὄψις, but this is only regarded as a hypothetical situation, analogical to the one when he argues that tragedy may exist without characters. In fact, however, both ὄψις and characters are regarded by Aristotle as necessary components of tragedy. He makes his considerations assuming both components. At the same time, he treats tragedy not as a text but a theatrical work in which *mimesis* can be conducted by the "acting persons" (πράττοντες). They are understood not as literary figures, but as stage embodiments of the heroes whose psychophysical ontic paradigms are actors.

Key words: Aristotle; *Poetics*; *opsis*; modern theories of drama.

Translated by Rafał Augustyn



The preparation of the English version of *Roczniki Humanistyczne (Annals of Arts)* and its publication in electronic databases was financed under contract no. 836/P–DUN/2018 from the resources of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for the popularization of science.