

FICTIONALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS:
TWO ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERATURE
IN ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

To Prof. K. Tsantsanoglou

The 9th chapter* of Aristotle's *Poetics* is one of the most interesting sections of this treatise but also one of the most disputed¹: it is indicative that the author of a recent book on ancient poetics openly admits that the interpretation of *Poet.* 9 is fraught with difficulties which he opts not to discuss². On the other hand, considerable attention has been paid to the relation between poetry and history³ but this relation should not in my opinion be understood as the focus of *Poet.* 9.

* I should like to acknowledge my gratitude to my colleague Th. Kouremenos for translating this article; I should also like to thank Prof. Glenn W. Most for reading the typescript and making useful comments.

1. For literature on the subject see A. Schmitt, «Teleologie und Geschichte bei Aristoteles oder wie kommen nach Aristoteles Anfang, Mitte und Ende in die Geschichte?», in K. Stierle & R. Warning, *Das Ende. Figuren einer Denkform [Poetik und Hermeneutik, 16]*, Munich 1996, p. 528, n. 1. Especially relevant to *Poet.* 9 are K. von Fritz, «Entstehung und Inhalt des neunten Kapitels von Aristoteles' *Poetik*» in his *Antike und Moderne Tragödie*, Berlin 1962, pp. 430-457 and 495ff.; B. A. Kyrkos, «Der tragische Mythos und die Geschichte bei Aristoteles», *Φιλοσοφία* 1 (1971) 315-338; H. Erbse, «Aristoteles über Tragödie und Geschichtsschreibung (zum 9. Kapitel der "Poetik")», in *Bonner Festgabe-Johannes Straub dargebracht*, Bonn 1977, pp. 127-136; H.-J. Horn, «Zum neunten Kapitel der aristotelischen *Poetik*», *RhM* 131 (1988) 113-136; E.-R. Schwinge, «Aristoteles über Struktur und Sujet der Tragödie. Zum 9. Kapitel der *Poetik*», *RhM* 139 (1996) 111-126. I assume familiarity with the commentaries by S. H. Butcher (London 1911), I. Bywater (Oxford 1909); A. Gudeman (Berlin 1934); I. Sykutris (Athens 1937); G. F. Else (Cambridge, Mass., 1957); D. W. Lucas (Oxford 1968); O. B. Hardison (Englewood Cliffs, NJ); R. Dupont-Roc & J. Lallot (Paris 1980); S. Halliwell (London 1987). The comments of Butcher and Halliwell are very perceptive but, although they shed light on particular interpretive issues and *realia*, they do not illuminate Aristotle's train of thought in *Poet.* 9. For further literature see O. J. Schriber, *The Poetics of Aristotle and the Tractatus Coislinianus. A Bibliography from about 900 till 1996*, Leiden 1998, and M. I. Γιόση & A. Μερίστια, *Aristotle's Poetics. An Annotated Bibliography 1955-1975*, Athens 1998.

2. M. Fuhrmann, *Die Dichtungstheorie der Antike*, Darmstadt 1992, p. 32. S. Radt, «Aristoteles und die Tragödie», *Mnemosyne* 24 (1971) 189-205, also detects difficulties, inconsistencies and contradictions in *Poet.* 9. The widespread interpretive uneasiness about this chapter may be traced to U. von Wilamowitz, *Euripides Herakles*, vol. 1: *Einleitung in die Griechische Tragödie*, Darmstadt 1959, p. 112.

3. See e.g. G. E. M. de Ste Croix, «Aristotle on History and Poetry (*Poetics*, 9. 1451a36-b11)», in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton, NJ 1992, pp. 23-32. On

This paper aims at a clear and consistent reading of *Poet.* 9 without taking into account any other work of the Aristotelian corpus since the chapter in itself suffices for its interpretation. It is, therefore, necessary to quote *Poet.* 9 in full so that Aristotle's train of thought can be followed more easily.

Φανερόν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ' οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. ὁ γὰρ ἱστορικὸς καὶ ὁ ποιητὴς οὐ τῷ ἢ ἔμμετρα λέγειν ἢ ἄμμετρα διαφέρουσιν (εἴη γὰρ ἂν τὰ Ἡροδότου εἰς μέτρα τεθῆναι καὶ οὐδὲν ἦττον ἂν εἴη 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. ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἢ ποίησις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη· τὸ δὲ καθ' ἕκαστον, τί Ἀλκιβιάδης ἔπραξεν ἢ τί ἔπαθεν. ἐπὶ μὲν οὖν τῆς κωμωδίας ἤδη τοῦτο δῆλον γέγονεν· συστήσαντες γὰρ τὸν μῦθον διὰ τῶν εἰκότων οὕτω τὰ τυχόντα ὀνόματα ὑποτιθέασιν, καὶ οὐχ ὥσπερ οἱ ἱαμβοποιοὶ περὶ τὸν καθ' ἕκαστον ποιῶσιν. ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς τραγωδίας τῶν γενομένων ὀνομάτων ἀντέχονται. αἴτιον δ' ὅτι πιθανόν ἐστι τὸ δυνατόν· τὰ μὲν οὖν μὴ γενόμενα οὐπω πιστεύομεν εἶναι δυνατὰ, τὰ δὲ γενόμενα φανερόν ὅτι δυνατὰ· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἐγένετο, εἰ ἦν ἀδύνατα. οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις ἐν ἐνίαις μὲν ἐν ἢ δύο τῶν γνωρίμων ἐστὶν ὀνομάτων, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πεποιημένα, ἐν ἐνίαις δὲ οὐθέν, οἷον ἐν τῷ Ἀγάθωνος Ἀνθεῖ· ὁμοίως γὰρ ἐν τούτῳ τὰ τε πράγματα καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα πεποιήται, καὶ οὐδὲν ἦττον εὐφραίνει. ὥστ' οὐ πάντως εἶναι ζητητέον τῶν παραδεδομένων μύθων, περὶ οὓς αἱ τραγωδίαί εἰσιν, ἀντέχεσθαι. καὶ γὰρ γελοῖον τοῦτο ζητεῖν, ἐπεὶ καὶ τὰ γνώριμα ὀλίγοις γνώριμά ἐστιν, ἀλλ' ὅμως εὐφραίνει πάντας. δῆλον οὖν ἐκ τούτων ὅτι τὸν ποιητὴν μᾶλλον τῶν μύθων εἶναι δεῖ ποιητὴν ἢ τῶν μέτρων, ὅσω ποιητὴς κατὰ τὴν μίμησιν ἐστίν, μιμεῖται δὲ τὰς πράξεις. κἂν ἄρα συμβῆ γενόμενα ποιεῖν, οὐθέν ἦττον ποιητὴς ἐστίν· τῶν γὰρ γενομένων ἔνια οὐδὲν κωλύει τοιαῦτα εἶναι οἷα ἂν εἰκὸς γενέσθαι [καὶ δυνατὰ γενέσθαι], καθ' ὃ ἐκεῖνος αὐτῶν ποιητὴς ἐστίν.

Aristotle's conception of history see R. Zoepffel, *Historia und Geschichte bei Aristoteles*, Heidelberg 1975, and the review by K. von Fritz in *Gnomon* 49 (1977) 345-349, as well as S. Gastaldi, «Poesia e historia nella Poetica aristotelica», *Istituto Lombardo (Rend. Lett.)* 107 (1973) 202-242. See now Ada Neschke, «Mythe et histoire d'après Aristote (*Poétique*, 9): Contribution à une histoire des concepts», in D. Bouvier & Cl. Calame (eds.), *Mῦθοι. Philosophes et historiens anciens face aux mythes*, Lausanne 1998, pp. 105-117, and G. M. Sifakis, *Aristotle on the Function of Tragic Poetry*, Heraklion 2001.

The chapter opens with the distinction between *γενόμενα*, *οἷα ἂν γένοιτο* and *δυνατά*⁴. The *γενόμενα* can be either historical events or each individual's personal history; this is shown by the beginning of *Poet.* 8, where Aristotle points out that the multitude of events that can happen to a hero lacks unity, the essential characteristic of the poetic product⁵. Aristotle does stipulate that poetry represent a unified action which has beginning, middle and end, in other words that the poetic product be closed⁶. This product must, moreover, be structured in such a way that the subtraction or transposition of any part results in the collapse of its structure. Aristotle, therefore, conceives of the poetic product as an artifact produced by the poet who organizes the chaotically variegated events in pre-literary myths or history. As it is, Aristotle is correct in holding that the poet's task is not to represent *γενόμενα* – on the contrary, the material for the poetic product consists of the *οἷα ἂν γένοιτο* and the *δυνατά*. *οἷα ἂν γένοιτο* are events or situations that have not happened but are such that can very well happen, i.e. they fall in the realm of pure fiction. The nature of *δυνατά* is elucidated in the above quoted chapter: *τὰ μὲν οὖν μὴ γενόμενα οὐπω πιστεύομεν εἶναι δυνατά, τὰ δὲ γενόμενα φανερόν ὅτι δυνατά· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἐγένετο, εἰ ἦν ἀδύνατα*. This passage raises the thorny question why Aristotle uses the term *δυνατά* if they are nothing but *γενόμενα*, the events history deals with: if this is so, how does that square with the three-pronged distinction at the beginning of the chapter? The answer to this question is evident from the beginning of the chapter: although the *δυνατά* are *γενόμενα*, the former differ from the latter inasmuch as they happen in accordance with the rules of plausibility or necessity. That is, the relations between historical *γενόμενα*

4. Cf. Bywater's comment on *Poet.* 1451a38. Most scholars construe *καί* as explanatory to *οἷα ἂν γένοιτο*; cf. Dupont-Roc & Lallot, op.cit., p. 221 and Schwinge, op.cit., 113. This might very well be the case if, as will be seen below, the adjective *δυνατά* denotes, on the one hand, events that have not happened but could happen under certain conditions (i.e. purely fictional events) and, on the other, events that have already taken place.

5. Aristotle uses the *Odyssey* as an example and, more specifically, mentions the assembly of Greek troops at Aulis and Odysseus' wounding at Parnassus which will lead to the recognition of the hero by Eurycleia in *Od.* 19. On account of this passage some scholars suggested that Aristotle's edition of the *Odyssey* did not include the digression about Odysseus' scar or that Aristotle's memory failed him. Aristotle, however, argues correctly that there is no necessary connection between the assembly of troops at Aulis and the wounding at Parnassus; this does not, of course, entail a version of the *Odyssey* without the recognition scene in *Od.* 19. Cf. W. Suerbaum, «Die Ich-Erzählungen des Odysseus. Überlegungen zur epischen Technik der *Odyssee*», *Poetica* 2 (1968) 150-177, esp. 151, and R. Gleis, «Aristoteles auf dem Parnass. Zu einem Problem im 8. Kapitel der "Poetik"», *Hermes* 122 (1994) 151-161.

6. For the closed nature of the literary work see my «Aristoteles über die Einheit der Zeit in der Tragödie. Zu *Poetik* 1449b9-16», in H.-Chr. Günther & A. Rengakos (eds.), *Beiträge zur antiken Philosophie, Festschrift für W. Kullmann*, Stuttgart 1997, p. 251, n. 29.

might be random or irrational, whereas the δυνατά are γενόμενα which obey certain organizing rules. When, therefore, Aristotle observes in *Poet.* 1460a26ff. that he prefers what is impossible but plausible to what is possible but implausible⁷ and that there is a great difference between mere temporal succession and causality (μετὰ τάδε / διὰ τάδε: the latter pertains to poetry, the former can very well pertain to history), he emphasizes exactly the artificial and technical nature of the poetic product; as already pointed out, this is intrinsically related to the poet's organizational intervention in the chaos of reality. It follows that the first type of events distinguished at the beginning of *Poet.* 9 pertains to history, whereas the other two to poetry inasmuch as they both obey the rules of plausibility and necessity.

The importance of plausibility is supported by Aristotle's conclusion regarding the nature of poetry: κἂν ἄρα συμβῆ γενόμενα ποιεῖν, οὐθὲν ἦττον ποιητής ἐστι· τῶν γὰρ γενομένων ἔνια οὐδὲν κωλύει τοιαῦτα εἶναι οἷα ἂν εἰκὸς γενέσθαι [καὶ δυνατὰ γενέσθαι], καθ' ὃ ἐκείνος αὐτῶν ποιητής ἐστιν. For Aristotle the difference between poetry and philosophy lies in that the former organizes the γενόμενα in a plausible manner. A case in point is Aeschylus' *Persae*. The fact that Phrynichus had handled the same topic four years earlier suggests that there can be different poetic versions of a historical event that obey the rules of plausibility. Since Phrynichus' play is lost, we have to limit ourselves to some observations concerning Aeschylus' play. The historical core of the play is the sea-battle at Salamis which Aeschylus had himself witnessed as a combatant. However, Atossa's ominous dream⁸, the chorus' reactions towards the defeated Xerxes and especially the admonitions of Darius' ghost (which obviously reflect Aeschylus' ideology) are invented by the poet and are by no means contrary to the principle of plausibility⁹. The same holds for the myths which were thought to be

7. Already Pindar claims in O.1.30ff. that in poetry Χάρις can render unbelievable events believable: Χάρις δ', ἅπερ ἅπαντα τεύχει τὰ μείλιχα θνατοῖς, / ἐπιφέροισα τιμὰν καὶ ἄπιστον ἐμήσατο πιστόν / ἔμμεναι τὸ πολλάκις; cf. D. E. Gerber, *Pindar's Olympian One: A Commentary*, Toronto 1982, p. 66ff.

8. As is well known, Aeschylus opens his plays with an ominous premonition which eventually comes true. The beginning of the *Persae* thus conforms with the standard rules of Aeschylus' dramatic technique, a conclusion that bears out the technical nature of poetry. For the structural rules of Aeschylean poetry see W. Jens, «Stukturgesetze der frühen griechischen Tragödie», in H. Hommel (ed.), *Wege zu Aischylos*, vol. 1 [*Wege der Forschung*, 82], Darmstadt 1974, pp. 86-103.

9. For the deviations of Aeschylus' *Persae* from history and for their ideological use in drama and rhetoric see Gudemann on *Poet.* 1451b27 (p. 214) and W. Kierdorf, *Erlebnis und Darstellung der Perserkriege*, Göttingen 1966; cf. also Chr. Pelling, «Aeschylus' *Persae* and History», in Chr. Pelling (ed.), *Tragedy and the Historian*, Oxford 1997, pp. 1-19.

historical events as much by the tragedians as by Aristotle himself¹⁰. In *Poet.* 9 Aristotle observes that in comedy the names of the characters are invented and added to a plausible plot, whereas tragedy keeps to the names of mythical figures for the sake of plausibility¹¹, the implication being that, were these names not the names of real persons, it would be hard to believe that some events did take place – the horrible stories of e.g. Oedipus or Thyestes would seem utterly implausible. More than that, however, Aristotle holds that plausibility is the common denominator of traditional tragic plots that draw on pre-literary mythological material as well as of invented tragic plots: as far as the latter are concerned, plausibility functions as a substitute for the veracity of traditional mythological stories. The fact that the story of Orestes' revenge was handled by each of the three great tragedians shows that there can be several poetic versions of a traditional story, exactly as is the case with historical events. Since, however, tragedy often deals with extreme and horrible situations (matricide, parricide, fratricide, incest, dismemberment by relatives etc.), the traditional stories, which are on a par with historical events, are guarantors of its veracity, which is required if tragedy is to be convincing.

By the three-pronged division of events at the beginning of *Poet.* 9 Aristotle has marked off the domain of poetry from that of history. There is, though, no absolute barrier, for poetry can draw on *γενόμενα* too, provided that they obey the rules of plausibility or necessity. As it is, there arises the question whether history too can poach on the domain of poetry. Aristotle is very clear on this issue – even if cast in verse, the historical work of Herodotus cannot count as poetry; in *Poet.* 1 Aristotle has argued along similar lines that although Empedocles wrote hexametric poetry like Homer's, he is nonetheless a cosmologist, not a poet. For the Stagirite the metre is, therefore, an extrinsic, not intrinsic characteristic of poetry¹²; the distinguishing mark of poetry is for him imitation, not *qua* accurate reproduction of reality

10. See Sykutris' introduction to the *Poetics* 68ff. For the ideological and other uses of myth in antiquity see K. Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, London - N. York 1992.

11. It is disputed which phase in the development of comedy Aristotle alludes to here; I agree with M. Heath, «Aristotelian Comedy», *CQ* 39 (1989) 344-354, that Aristotle can very well have the Aristophanic comedy in mind.

12. Cf. R. Kassel, «Dichtkunst und Versifikation bei den Griechen» in his *Kleine Schriften*, Berlin - N. York 1991, pp. 99-120, esp. 111-114, and the objections in Schwinge, op.cit., 113 n. 6; cf. also my note in *Hellenica* 35 (1984) 142. Aristotle's view did not win general acceptance, since poetry was generally defined by the metrical criterion introduced by Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen* 9. Aristotle emphasizes that the poet is a maker of plots, not verses at the end of *Poet.* 9. For the concept of plot in the *Poetics* see S. Klimis, *Le statut du mythe dans la Poétique d'Aristote. Les fondements philosophiques de la tragédie*, Brussels 1997.

but *qua* artwork drawing on the two types of events discussed above. It might of course be objected that some parts of Herodotus' narrative could turn into tragedies if they were slightly modified and cast in verse¹³; even if, however, Aristotle were aware of this possibility, it must be concluded that he consciously brushed it aside simply because it does not square with his views.

The above account is supported by Aristotle's remark in *Poet.* 9 that history deals with τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον, i.e. what Alcibiades did or what happened to him. Aristotle, in other words, links history with the protagonists of events so that his conception of history is person-centered: history is for him spatiotemporally determined. Of particular importance to the issue at hand are also the terms Aristotle uses to denote historical events. Since he avoids the verb λέγειν and uses only the verbs πράττειν and πάσχειν, he identifies history with external events¹⁴. Poetry, on the contrary, deals with τὰ καθόλου, i.e. with the actions or words that are appropriate to a given character. What Aristotle means by τὰ καθόλου is made clearer in *Poet.* 17 where he identifies the main joints in the plot of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*: the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis, her rescue and displacement to Tauris, the custom of sacrificing strangers, the arrival of the brother. Aristotle thus points out what much later on Propp will call «functions» in Russian folktales, e.g. the blood relation between two heroes, the danger one of them runs, their recognition etc., and it is worth noting that he puts emphasis on their words as well as on their actions, which obviously include their sufferings¹⁵. Poetry is, therefore, more important, and thus more philosophical, than history because, far from being person-centered as is the case with history, it deals with the words and deeds of certain human types, which

13. Cf. e.g. R. Rieks, «Eine tragische Erzählung bei Herodot (*Hist.* 1,34-45)», *Poetica* 7 (1975) 23-44.

14. De Ste Croix suggested that the reference to Alcibiades alludes to the historical work of Thucydides. I think he is wrong. Aristotle singles out a notorious politician whose turbulent career was well known: Alcibiades is thus a concrete example of a politician who does much and suffers much. In his letter to King Phillip (10) Speusippus compares Alcibiades and Amyntas in a critique of Isocrates (V 58-61) and, since Alcibiades was used as a historical example in the fourth century, there is no need to invoke Thucydides. For Speusippus' letter see E. Bickermann & J. Sykutris, *Speusippus Brief an König Philipp*, Leipzig 1928, who date the letter to 342 B.C. For Alcibiades see J. de Romilly, *Αλκιβιάδης*, Athens 1995, and D. Gribble, *Alcibiades and Athens: A Study in Literary Presentation*, Oxford 1999. The absence of λέγειν from the passage in question is a further indication that there is no allusion here to Thucydides: how could one allude to Thucydides and at the same time ignore the speeches, one of the most prominent characteristics of Thucydides' work?

15. For a convincing interpretation of the terms καθ' ὅλου and καθ' ἕκαστον cf. J. M. Armstrong, «Aristotle on the Philosophical Nature of Poetry», *CQ* 48 (1998) 447-455. It is worth noting that in his *Poetics* Aristotle uses only the terms πράξις and πράττειν for the object of imitation which constitutes the essence of poetry (1448a1, a27, 1449b31, b36ff.).

means that it is not spatiotemporally determined. Poetry thus differs from history, at least by Aristotle's lights, in that it deals with repeatable events, whereas history is restricted to unique events. It is widely known that through the myths Euripides alludes to contemporary historical, social, and philosophical problems, and for Aristotle this flexibility, which allows one to move freely in time from the mythical past to contemporary reality, is a feature of poetry, not history. On the other hand, tragedy adopts the names of mythical figures in order to gain veracity and in that regard differs from comedy – here the names of characters are invented and grafted onto an already constructed plot. Aristotle touches on the kindred dramatic genre of comedy also at other points in his *Poetics*. In *Poet.* 1448a25ff. he points out that tragedy is akin to the Homeric epic on account of its serious subject but also resembles comedy in that its medium is dramatic and not narrative; in *Poet.* 4 he assumes that tragedy and comedy developed in parallel from the dithyramb and the phallic songs respectively. It is, therefore, to be expected that Aristotle would not avoid to compare tragedy with the practice of comedy in *Poet.* 9, all the more since he wishes to bolster his view by falling back on the practice of comedy. If we enjoy comic dramas with their invented plots and names, what prevents tragedy from adopting these practices? Aristotle points out that in some tragedies most names are made-up – only one or two are known to the audience. These plays are, therefore, a precursor of the completely invented tragedy and Aristotle singles out Agathon's *Antheus* as an example of a tragic play with invented plot and characters¹⁶. Since Agathon's play is lost, I suggest that we turn briefly to a surviving play, Euripides' *Orestes*, which in my opinion meets all require-

16. It is difficult to understand what Aristotle means by ἐπεὶ καὶ τὰ γινώριμα ὀλίγοις γινώριμα ἔστιν, ἀλλ' ὅμως εὐφραίνει πάντας. Does he have in mind his contemporary audiences which perhaps lacked the mythological knowledge of a fifth century audience? Some scholars have found support for this view in Antiphanes fr. 191 K. and in Aristotle's prohibition of any deviation from the received version of myths. This prohibition is intrinsically related to the issue of veracity which has been repeatedly emphasized above. A plausible solution to the problem might lie in this direction: Aristotle distinguishes between different members of the audience and the ὀλίγοι are those familiar not only with mythology but also with the various versions of myths. Cf. C. W. Marshall, «Literary Awareness in Euripides and his Audience», in I. Worthington (ed.), *Voice into Text. Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece* [Mnemosyne, suppl. 157], Leiden 1996, p. 95, who argues that intertextual relations between the plays of the three great tragedians were not perceived by all members of the audience but only by those familiar with mythology and literature: see also J. Vahlen, *Beiträge zu Aristoteles' Poetik*, Leipzig - Berlin 1914, p. 28, whose view is adopted by Horn, op.cit., 127, and Gudemann on *Poet.* 1451b25 (p. 213). For Antiphanes fr. 191 K. see E. W. Handley, «Comedy», in P. E. Easterling & B. M. W. Knox (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1: *Greek Literature*, Cambridge 1986, p. 412. It is worth noting that an orator like Aeschines had deficient knowledge of mythology and history; cf. Bickermann & Sykutris, op.cit., p. 42 with n. 4.

ments of an invented tragedy¹⁷. Already the ancient *hypothesis* hints that this play is invented by remarking *παρ' οὐδετέρω κείται ἡ μυθοποιία*¹⁸. The subject of *Orestes*, as is known, is the illness that befell Orestes six days after the matricide. Orestes faces the death penalty in an Argive court and seeks Menelaus' intervention in order to save himself and his sister Electra. It is obvious that, since the plot of this play takes place after Orestes' matricide, it can only be invented – the only traditional element is Orestes' dementia which is also known from the *Iphigenia in Tauris*. The Argive court secularizes Orestes' trial by the Areopagus court in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, whereas Orestes' conviction tests the family ties of Orestes and Menelaus and triggers a fictional attempt to murder Helen. All this is of course annulled by the intervention of Apollo as *deus ex machina* and must be annulled simply because it diverges drastically from the tradition. As it is, the plot of *Orestes*, which is intertextually linked with older plays, is to a large extent invented. If, therefore, the poet can construct a convincing plot that obeys the rules of plausibility or necessity, the sole and highest criterion for Aristotle is the pleasure caused by the play¹⁹. For Aristotle tragedy has thus two sides: production, with regard to which the poet's task is the construction of a plausible plot, and effectiveness, which pertains to the audience. Aristotle, in other words, opts for a poetics of effectiveness.

If, therefore, Aristotle conceives of aesthetic pleasure as the dominant criterion with regard to the reception of the play, on the level of production he emphasizes the importance of fictionality, provided that it conforms with the strictures of plausibility²⁰. It is worth noting that, as Aristotle points out in *Poet.* 4, one need not know in advance (*προεωρακώς*) what a painting represents²¹ – even if one cannot identify the depicted persons (*οἷον ὄτι οὗτος ἐκείνος*), one feels pleasure for some other cause. Thus for Aristotle the aesthetic pleasure drawn from a work of art is the paramount criterion for the success of this work. In the *Poetics* Aristotle claims that Homer taught

17. For a detailed interpretation of Euripides' *Orestes* see J. R. Porter, *Studies in Euripides' Orestes* [Mnemosyne, suppl. 128], Leiden 1993, and the commentary by C. W. Willink, *Euripides Orestes*, Oxford 1986. Recently Scott Scullion, «Tradition and Invention in Euripidean Aitiology», in M. Cropp - K. Lee & D. Sansone (eds.), *Euripides and Tragic Theatre in Late Fifth Century* (= ICS 24-25 [1999-2000]), pp. 217-233, has argued that cultic *αἴτια* at the end of Euripidean tragedies are fictitious.

18. See Gudemann on *Poet.* 1451b21 (pp. 211ff.).

19. See also Dupont-Roc & Lallot, *op.cit.*, p. 225.

20. Cf. *op.cit.*, p. 227.

21. The relationship between *Poet.* 4 and 9 is correctly emphasized by S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, London 1986, p. 78ff. For the equal status of poetry and visual arts according to Aristotle see D. Thomas Benediktson, *Literature and the Visual Arts in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Norman 2000, p. 53ff.

the other poets how to lie well, that is how to construct invented plots in accordance with the rules of ancient aesthetics. Already Odysseus' invented stories hint clearly at Homer's self-consciousness²², which amounts to nothing but the awareness that the construction of a poem is ultimately the construction of a fictional world. Thus in Aristotle's *Poetics* the concept of falsehood acquires aesthetic significance and has by no means moral content²³.

Summing up, in *Poet.* 9 Aristotle lays down two fundamental concepts that determine the essence of literature. On the one hand, he makes clear that the *μίμησις πράξεως*, which is characterized by unity, is not faithful representation of reality, even if a contemporary historical event is dramatized, but a sort of art that follows certain rules; as it is, poetry is by definition fictional²⁴. On the other hand, good poetry must cause a pleasure peculiar to it, as Aristotle will emphasize later on. Poets who respect the recipients of their poetry aim exclusively at effecting this peculiar pleasure even if their plays are not staged but simply read (cf. *Poet.* 1453b1ff.). This peculiar pleasure and fictionality are, therefore, the cornerstones of the poetic product and herein lies the fundamental theoretical importance of *Poet.* 9.

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

D. J. JAKOB

22. See my monograph *Η Ποιητική της αρχαίας ελληνικής τραγωδίας*, Athens 1998, ch. 2. For the invention of fictionality in archaic epic see M. Finkelberg, *The Birth of Literary Fiction in Ancient Greece*, Oxford 1998.

23. For this conception of falsehood see M. Hose, «Fiktionalität und Lüge. Über einen Unterschied zwischen römischer und griechischer Terminologie», *Poetica* 28 (1996) 257-274, and W. Röschler, «Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität in der Antike», *Poetica* 12 (1980) 283-319. In the same direction points the verb *εὐρίσκειν* in *Poet.* 1453b25. For Aristotle the poets cannot deviate drastically from the received version of a myth, in other words they must represent Orestes as a murderer of his own mother; the details, however, the motives and the characterization of the tragic hero fall in the realm of fiction, as is clearly shown by the handling of Orestes' matricide in the surviving plays of the three tragedians.

24. See Halliwell, op.cit., p. 135ff.