



PROJECT MUSE®

"Poetry" versus "History" in Aristotle's *Poetics*

David Gallop

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 42, Number 2, October 2018, pp. 420-433
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2018.0029>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/708997>

“POETRY” VERSUS “HISTORY” IN ARISTOTLE’S *POETICS*

Abstract. Why does Aristotle seem to take such a narrow view of “history” when contrasting it with “poetry”? I shall revisit his notions of “poetry,” “history,” and mimesis to clarify the contrast between declarative assertions central to history and mimetic displays of “universals” central to poetic fiction. The key difference lies in their treatment of individuals. While history affirms biographical facts based upon evidence, fiction illustrates types of characters in types of situations, as delineated by Aristotle in his ethical writings.

I

HISTORY, ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE, relates “things that happen (*ta genomena*); whereas poetry’s function is to relate the kinds of things that happen—that is, are possible in terms of probability or necessity.”¹ A generic clause (*hoia an genoito*), expressing “the kinds of things that happen” to certain *kinds of agents*, distinguishes the task of the poet from that of the historian.² History speaks of “particulars,” whereas poetry speaks more of “universals.” A historian might assert, for example, that Alcibiades urged the Athenians to invade Sicily, or that he was later exiled, and finally murdered; whereas a poet would use Alcibiades’s story to show the *kind of person* to whom *things of that kind* are likely or bound to happen. Poetry is therefore “more philosophical,” and “more elevated” (*spoudaioteron*) than history.

These contrasts between history and poetry seem at first sight almost perverse. Aristotle appears to belittle historians, as if they were mere chroniclers, limited to factual assertions about individual agents. He

says nothing about their selection of material, their use and assessment of evidence, their ordering of events in time, or their tracing of causal links between those events. Yet such matters are, for us, the very stuff of historical writing. The Greek word *historia* has given us not only “history” but its shortened form “story;” and true stories are what histories surely ought to be, or to contain, just as *histoire* in French and *Geschichte* in German can mean either “history” or “story.” The novelist E. M. Forster once famously observed that “the king died, and then the queen died” is a story, whereas “the king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot.³ “Plots,” in the relevant sense, indeed have no place in historical writing. Yet the causality that Forster assigns only to plots features in history no less than in drama and epic. So how could the presence of a causally connected story in poetry, or its absence from history, distinguish the two genres? And in what sense is the former “more elevated” than the latter?

Since this puzzle goes to the heart of literary theory, I wish to defend an answer to it in the service of philosophy rather than scholarship. I shall draw out some broad contrasts between poetry and history from selected passages in the *Poetics*. I hope thereby to recapture something of its spirit and some important truths that lie at its core. However, something must first be said about the words “poetry” and “history” themselves.

“Poetry” derives from *poiesis*, the ordinary Greek word for “making,” but is normally reserved for the making of verse. The English word does not even cover all verse compositions, but only those possessing meter, rhyme, or other special features of poetic diction. In its narrow scope, “poetry” partly resembles *poiesis*, which was reserved for metrical verse, as Plato had already noted (*Symposium* 205c–d). But Aristotle rejects meter as the defining property of poetic works, despite the standard metrical verse form of epic and drama (47b10–20, 51b1–2). What makes those genres “poetic,” he maintains, is that they are products of “imitation” (*mimesis*), using words, and other media, in mimicry of human speech, action, and emotion, and thereby enacting or narrating a human story. Greek, he observes, lacked a generic name for “mimetic” works covering prose as well as verse composition. A roughly suitable English term for this is “fiction,” and I shall therefore sometimes use it, or speak of “poetic fiction.” It is both a wider and a narrower notion than *poiesis*, but it will suit Aristotle’s purpose.⁴ For in his view, epic and drama, being essentially “mimetic,” were akin to prose constructs such as Socratic “discussions” (*logoi*, 47b11). These included the philosophical fictions

of Plato. The *Poetics* is often read, and I believe rightly, as the prose defense of poetry that Plato had once invited (*Republic* 607c), even though he is nowhere mentioned in the treatise by name. The nub of Aristotle's defense is that once poetry's true nature as "mimetic," and as concerned with "universals," is recognized, poetry can be seen to serve the same high purposes as Plato's own fictional writings. It will thus be vindicated as "more elevated" than historical narrative.

"History" derives from Greek, through Latin, *historia*. The English word can mean either an account of the past or the past itself. In the latter sense we speak of European or American history, of an athlete making history, of a patient's medical history, of a statesman's place in history, of events that changed the course of history, or even of history repeating itself. *Historia*, however, was never used in such ways. Aristotle's concern in the *Poetics* is not with the nature or course of past events, but only with the recording of them, or "historiography," in contrast with the composition of "poetry."

Historia meant, originally, inquiry or research into some field of interest, such as animals or nature. Such research, or its written products, need not concern the past. When Plato's Socrates says (*Phaedo* 96a) that he once had a passion for "inquiry about nature" (*historia phuseos*), his interests were not in the past as such, but only in explaining natural phenomena and solving certain mathematical or conceptual puzzles. Aristotle's own *History of Animals* is full of generalizations about zoological species based upon empirical observations, but without reference to the past. "Natural history" is still used in that sense today.

When contrasting history with poetry, however, Aristotle means the recording of past human actions and experiences. It is sometimes suggested that he was thinking primarily of records for such items as Olympic victors or the constitutions of different city-states. This seems unlikely, however, since, as a prime example of "history," he mentions the writings of Herodotus (51b2–3), whose so-called "histories" were expressly designed as a narrative record of the Persian Wars for future generations (Herodotus 1.1). Similarly, Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, though written during that war, was a time-conscious narrative, designed to remain "a possession for ever" (Thucydides 1.22).⁵ Yet if Aristotle thought of either Herodotus or Thucydides as historians, how could he have understood *historia* as the mere listing of unconnected items? Both writers were storytellers of the first rank, and certainly far from simple chroniclers of discrete matters. Both of their histories are packed with narrative and explanations of interrelated events, their

causes and consequences. Both deal in the probabilities and generalities that Aristotle takes to be distinctive of fiction. How, on his view, is this to be explained?

Two further preliminary points need noting. First, poetic works were more narrowly focused upon individual lives than our own fictions often are. Before the age of prose writing, epic and tragedy had been conceived as tales about their principal figures, often a single person. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* introduce their respective heroes in their very opening lines. About two-thirds of extant Greek tragedies are named for their protagonists. Six out of seven extant plays by Sophocles, and twelve out of twenty by Euripides, are so titled. Plato's dialogues are likewise most often named for a single participant, commonly Socrates's main interlocutor. The focus in both Platonic and Aristotelian ethics is upon the life of the individual, and how it may best be lived. Accordingly, the whole arc of a person's life is a major concern for Aristotle when discussing suitable protagonists in tragedy (52b27–53a14).

Second, the agents in traditional epic and tragedy are regarded, or at least treated by Aristotle, as having been real, historical figures (51b15–18). "Poetry" and "history" thus shared a common subject matter, so were less easily differentiated than they are for us. The Greeks did not distinguish, as we do, a blended genre of "historical fiction" from "pure" fiction. Yet "historical fiction" was what their epics and tragic dramas were felt to be. For us Achilles is a figure of legend, more like King Arthur than King Alfred. Consequently, Greek epic and tragedy can feel to us almost like pure fiction. Even if their protagonists really existed in the distant past, the facts about them are of no literary significance, whatever their interest for archaeologists or art historians. But in an age when they were assumed to have been real, Plato's claims that the poets misrepresented them raised the sort of doubts that we often feel about fiction when it is promoted as "based on fact." How much of the so-called "true story" does the author really know? Ought the writer of fiction to remain faithful to the historical record, when it is known? May a maker of fictions about real people distort or falsify or omit or contradict known facts about them, or fabricate new ones without evidence? Was Richard III, for example, really a psychopathic child murderer, or was he unjustly portrayed by Shakespeare? Have Thomas Cromwell's or Thomas More's characters been faithfully captured by Hilary Mantel? Plato himself raised analogous questions about Homeric epic and classical tragedy, to which the *Poetics* is partly responding.

II

Plato had criticized poetic works as if they were biographical assertions. But in Aristotle's view, since poetic fiction has different aims from biography, it should be judged by different criteria, even when its principal characters are real. Biography aims to portray its subjects truthfully, but not—save incidentally—to arouse its readers' feelings. To understand the basic principle that distinguishes biography or history from fiction, we need to grasp more fully what is entailed in the Aristotelian notion of mimesis. For their mimetic nature is what differentiates poetic works from the factual assertions of history and biography. Mimesis is, as Halliwell has said, "the foundational concept of the *Poetics*" (Halliwell, p. 29n3).

In chapter 4 of the *Poetics*, the poet's craft is explained as mimetic in two ways, both rooted in human nature. The first is our inborn instinct to imitate. The second is the pleasure we take in the imitative products of others. In the first explanation, Aristotle observes that children gain their earliest understandings (*matheseis*) through mimesis. It is not clear whether this refers to their learning to walk and talk; to their mimicking their elders in play; or to their drawing, painting, and modeling likenesses. In the second explanation, however, Aristotle is clearly thinking of representational drawing and modeling. For viewers of such likenesses are said to recognize the subjects that they represent, "to infer (*sullogizesthai*) what each thing is." The pleasure is taken in identifying the subject of a portrait or sculpture who is already familiar: "this person is so-and-so."⁶

Both mimicry and representation pertain closely to poet-craft. The former is what most obviously approximates dramatic enactment. A mimic reproduces the behavior, appearance, movements, activities, noises, or speech of someone or something else. Our ability to mimic, to "become something else" (48a21), is a deeply mysterious faculty, already manifest in early infancy, and enabling us, as we grow up, to identify sympathetically with others, entering into their mind-sets, situations, thoughts, and feelings. Dramatists must, at least in imagination, mimic the emotions, voices, mannerisms, and gestures of their characters (55a28–34), and actors must do so overtly. As for representation in images, Aristotle, like Plato, constantly uses analogies between poetic composition and the representation of living things through drawing, painting, and sculpture. The Greek for painting (*zographia*) means the depiction of life. Analogies between the structure of a fictional plot and that of living creatures pervade the entire treatise.⁷

Neither in mimicry nor in image making is any verbal assertion made about the original. No explicit reference to it is needed: the mimicry or the image simply show what they resemble, enabling the mimetic artifact or performance to stand alone and speak for itself. The identity of the original can be read through inference from the mimetic work, and needs no caption or program note to identify it. It is therefore characteristic of such works to call for *interpretation*, in a way that ordinary, factual assertions do not. Aristotle's distinction between "history" and "poetry" is rooted in this contrast between assertion and depiction, between stating and showing. The former refers to real human subjects and makes explicit assertions about those named individuals, whereas the latter displays implicit truths about subjects of their general type, inviting the audience to infer those truths for themselves.

In dramatic or epic poetry, accordingly, none of the words attributed to the characters are to be heard as direct assertions by the author. When discussing epic, Aristotle praises Homer for *showing* his characters' qualities by making them speak for themselves, rather than by narrative exposition. The epic poet "should say as little as possible himself, since it is not this that makes him a mimetic artist" (60a7–8). The term "mimetic artist" (*mimetes*) in that crucial sentence must mean one who "mimics" or enacts. In drama, since every word spoken on stage is being enacted, poets never truly "say," i.e., assert, anything themselves at all. This doctrine, when pushed to the limit, disengages the poet from his text altogether. The disengagement is most obvious in drama, but it can be extended to other fictional genres, including some unavailable to Aristotle, that do not require live performance before an audience. We, who can read novels silently to ourselves, are apt to forget that in antiquity, fiction was most often experienced through being spoken aloud. When Aristotle notes that drama can make its impact merely through reading (62a11–17, see also 50b16–19, 53b3–6), he probably means reading aloud without theatrical production, rather than reading silently to oneself.⁸ He is, admittedly, willing to categorize narrated fiction as a mode of mimesis (48a19–22) and to speak of epic as "narrative mimesis" (59a16). In an extended sense, therefore, even the narrated passages of Homer, whose epics were performed publicly by professional reciters, would count as "mimetic."⁹ In the purest form of mimesis, however, the whole text is enacted, so that its authors "say nothing" in their own person. Sir Philip Sidney made the same point, many centuries later, when he wrote that the poet "nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; so

as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet (as I said before), never affirmeth.”¹⁰

In poetic fiction, whether narrated or enacted, the use of proper names for characters differs significantly from their use by historians. A historian does not choose or invent names, since real persons already possess their names independently of anyone’s writing about them. In history, therefore, the use of names anchors the writer’s statements to their bearers, enabling them to achieve reference to real persons and real events. Fiction writers, by contrast, can first decide upon the attributes their characters are to display, and then devise or tailor events to illustrate them, adding suitable names later (*onomata epitithemene*, 51b9).¹¹ They may either adapt an old story for their purpose or invent a new one. They may use existing names for the subjects of traditional legend or new ones for invented subjects, or a mixture of the two. But the names are not used in order to make factual assertions about real persons, even about those who have actually borne those names.

This point about the naming of characters helps clarify the sense in which poetry deals with “universals” (*ta katholou*). Nothing at all grand or “metaphysical” is implied in Aristotle’s use of this term. He explains it simply as “the kinds of things which it befits a certain kind of person to say or to do” (51b7–9). Earlier, he sketched the development of comedy from lampoons (*iamboi*), whose original targets were real individuals (49a32–b7). These evolved into a genre that used plots of a “universal” nature. The targets of fully developed comedy need no longer be real individuals but ludicrous types, personified by fictitious characters with invented names (51b13–14). Many later comedies (such as those of Molière) are titled after “universals” of that sort.

We can now understand the bearing of the “recognition” example from chapter 4 upon the appreciation of poetic fiction. Recognition of a likeness has often seemed a weak explanation for enjoying visual art or learning from it. If artists aimed merely at fidelity to a real original, it is said, they would have been put out of business by the camera, and their work could no longer be judged once its original subject had been forgotten. Indeed, a picture may have no real original at all. However, the portrait example has, I believe, been generally misunderstood. Aristotle does not mean that pleasure or learning derive from the mere identification of a portrait’s subject. Rather, we take pleasure in the success of the artist in capturing, and calling our attention to, the subject’s distinctive features: “That’s Socrates to the life. That quizzical

look is thoroughly typical of him.” For that sort of pleasure to be taken in a portrait *as a mimetic work*, one must have seen the original subject before, as Aristotle observes. For he writes: “Since if one happens not to have seen the subject before, the image will not give pleasure qua mimesis but because of its execution or color, or for some other such reason” (48b17–19).

If fiction exhibits “universals” in the manner proposed above, the recognition example in chapter 4 has simply anticipated that doctrine. The recognizable subject of a portrait will be an analogue of familiar human traits that a poetic fiction illustrates in the words and actions of its story, whether it portrays a real subject or an invented one. Such traits will be the objects of prior knowledge in the audience, for they will bring to the theater some familiarity from their own experience. Much of the pleasure of fiction lies, indeed, in recognizing how its words and actions capture real human traits already familiar to us. Jane Austen’s Mr. Woodhouse is fictitious, but his obsession with his own health is recognizable. We have all known hypochondriacs who typically see things only from their own selfish point of view, hence we can recognize this attribute from the character’s entirely self-centered talk and behavior. His creator has, to our great delight, captured exactly the way such people carry on—an example, in a simple case, of recognizing a “universal” in a work of fiction.¹²

The claim that fiction is “more philosophical” than history (51b5) now comes into focus. In aiming to illustrate abstract concepts in action, fiction serves the purposes of philosophy. Philosophical accounts of many traits of character, along with their attendant emotions and typical behavior, are to be found in Aristotle’s ethical writings (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.6–12; 4.1–9). The job of fiction is to depict the effects of character upon choice and action in a structured plot (see 50b7–10), by devising or elaborating incidents, and, above all, by inventing conversations. Aristotle rightly conjoins what an agent *does* with what he or she *says* (51b9). For it is through their verbal interactions with others, or with themselves in soliloquy, that agents most fully reveal their character and motivation. That is why spoken conversations are what writers of historical fiction most often supply from their imaginations, elaborating the factual record and making the story come vividly alive for their readers. Those conversations, though wholly invented, illustrate the generalizations of philosophy by showing an agent’s character, motives, and choices in credible detail. Thus fiction, although by no means the same as philosophy, assists the latter’s purposes.

Fiction is also “more elevated” than history (51b5). In displaying general types, it approximates scientific knowledge more closely than history, whose first duty is to ascertain and record particular facts. Aristotle’s adjective (*spoudaios*) also has an earnest moral dimension. Fiction’s quasi-philosophical purpose gives it an ethical import lacking in dispassionate historical narrative. An impartial historian does not select facts to support moral judgments, to preach moral conclusions, or to arouse an audience’s emotions. Fiction, by contrast, through its focus upon ethical concepts, and its powerful emotional impact, can have profound moral import, if it is properly interpreted. Far from being pernicious, as Plato had charged, poetic fiction lies closer to philosophy than history does as a source of ethical enlightenment.

The word “elevated” should not mislead us here into thinking only of tragedy, for poetic fiction covers comedy as well. Austen’s romantic comedies, with their happy endings, are as serious as the bleakest tragedies for the ethical understanding their characters provide. W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s *The Pirates of Penzance* makes an ethical point essentially similar to Henrik Ibsen’s in *The Wild Duck*: both plays feature misguided “slaves of duty,” and portray the folly of a blind fixation upon doing one’s duty at all costs.¹³ Yet the first is an ludicrous comedy, and the second a grimly serious tragedy. Both, in different ways, are in earnest. By contrast, one of the funniest comedies in English has a nicely ironical title: Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* mocks conventional propriety, and is not in “earnest” at all.

The distinction between fiction and history, Aristotle adds, is more obvious in comedy, because it uses invented plots, where fidelity to historical fact is not an issue (51b10–18). Tragedy, because it more often uses real subjects, and bases its plots upon supposedly real events, is more easily confused with history. Real events, because they *have* happened, are the more credible as the sorts of things that happen or would be likely to happen (51b17–19). The factual basis of traditional tragic stories can therefore enhance fictional realism. Yet even in tragedy, names and stories are sometimes wholly invented. Indeed, the use of invented plots, with entirely fictitious characters, is said to clinch the status of poetic fiction as essentially mimetic (51b27–30).

III

Poetic fiction’s mimetic character may serve, then, to absolve it from Plato’s charges that it is false to fact. But that still may not seem enough

to justify Aristotle's treatment of history. The suspicion remains that he regards historians as mere chroniclers. When discussing epic, he requires an organic unity of action in poetic fiction, which is lacking in history. For he mentions "histories" that include totally unrelated items, such as two battles occurring on the same day, but belonging to independent trains of events (59a21–28).

Can history's inclusion of unrelated items be explained with reference to its "biographical" focus? Surely not. A biography must present some narrative of events in a causally connected sequence. It has to be more than a bare listing of discrete items, such as those in an individual's curriculum vitae. Moreover, since any well-crafted poetic fiction reflects the sort of causal order possessed by events in real life, we should expect any biography worthy of the name to contain a high degree of causal order. Nevertheless, biography does not have to confine itself to a unified, organically structured plot of the sort that Aristotle demands for tragedy and epic: an individual life may contain many items worth recording, even though they may not all be related to the same single train of events. This obviously applies on the wider stage of world events. Thucydides, for example, when numbering each year of the Peloponnesian War as it ends, sometimes notes occurrences within that same year belonging to quite separate circumstances.

What, then, did Aristotle mean by limiting history to "particulars" (*ta kath' hekaston*)? Unfortunately, he does not enlarge upon his sole example of a historical particular, "what Alcibiades did or experienced" (51b11). His brevity is understandable, given that his central concern in the treatise is not with history but with the mimetic status of poetry. The example about Alcibiades, being couched in the past-tense grammar of plain historical assertion, might be taken to stand for a full-scale, detailed narrative of his career, such as we can read in Thucydides or Plutarch. Possibly, however, Aristotle means to limit "history" to discovering and recording verifiable facts about Alcibiades, as a minimal basis for an objective and truthful assessment of the man and his whole life. The accurate recording of unadorned facts might be thought of as analogous to recording observations in the natural sciences. In that case, Aristotle's concept of *historia* simply reflects the process of basic historical research. Understood in that way, it means discovering and recording well-attested facts, before interpreting and drawing conclusions from them. There is an important difference between ascertaining what agents did and assessing their characters or the overall significance of their lives. Such appraisals must rest upon a firmly established factual

basis. Perhaps Aristotle's notion of historical affirmation, in its strictest sense, is limited to that bedrock of ascertained fact. For in that respect the tracking of human history has something in common with the scientist's empirical researches in natural history.

A modern English historian has written: "Evidence as to the character and statesmanship of most of the great figures of ancient history is genuinely defective. There are gaps, and the imagination of the historical artist must perforce take wings where the industry of the historical researcher is unable to cut steps."¹⁴ On the austere view of history just suggested, Aristotle's concept of *historia* would limit it strictly to "cutting steps," and leave no room for "the historical artist" to take wings. Indeed, the true historian, on such a view, is not an artist and should have no "wings" at all.

Poetic fiction, as we have seen, has no such restrictions. Instead of establishing facts about real agents, and then drawing inferences from them, it starts from abstractions, and illustrates them through a structured plot, leaving the audience to infer what has been shown. It displays, through action contained within the plot, the attributes illustrated in its central figures. But it must strike us, finally, that something analogous is also the purpose of Plato's "Socratic conversations." Plato, the philosopher dramatist, likewise illustrates ethical universals with fictional portraits. His characters personify in their speech and behavior the ethical attributes that they explore in philosophical discussion.¹⁵ Psychological and conceptual studies are pursued in tandem.

Most notably, the Platonic "Socrates" exemplifies concepts prominent in two of the greatest dialogues. In the *Phaedo* he embodies the special wisdom (*phronesis*) that he himself describes (69b–d), a spiritual serenity purified from pleasure and pain, in terms that Aristotle repeats almost word for word, when stating the purpose of tragedy (49a26–28).¹⁶ Similarly, the *Symposium* depicts the multiform nature and power of love (*eros*) through the varied characters of its speakers. Alcibiades, in whom the love impulse has gone disastrously astray, is contrasted with Socrates, who is true love incarnate.¹⁷ Alcibiades's eulogy of Socrates is still commonly cited for historical facts about its hero's life, but allowance should surely be made for its fictional context. It is, after all, the drunken effusion of a gate-crasher, narrated at third hand, and artfully composed for a philosophical purpose. Even if it tells "the truth" about Socrates, as it repeatedly claims to, it cannot be relied upon as evidence for historical fact.¹⁸ Nor does there seem any reason to suppose that Aristotle thought it could be.

Could it be, then, that he was alluding obliquely to Alcibiades's behavior in the *Symposium*, when speaking of "what Alcibiades did and experienced" to exemplify a particular? Was he insinuating a *contrast* between actual historical fact and Plato's mimetic recounting of Alcibiades's story? If so, his response to Plato has brought us full circle. For in defending poetic fiction as "mimetic," as showing "universals," as "more philosophical," and as "more elevated," than history, Aristotle was suggesting that "poetry" could serve the same serious ethical purposes as the writings of Plato himself.

TRENT UNIVERSITY

An earlier version of this article was presented at the "Aristotle 2400 Years" World Congress, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, in May 2016. It supplements, and partly revises, my "Animals in the Poetics," Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 8 (1990): 145–71, hereafter abbreviated "Animals."

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b4. The translation of this sentence is my own. I use the standard page numbers from Immanuel Bekker's edition of Aristotle's works (Berlin: 1831) for citing the *Poetics*, but with the initial two digits ("14") hereafter omitted. Elsewhere I sometimes use Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1995), hereafter abbreviated "Halliwell," and occasionally modified.
2. Translators generally use "might happen," or "could happen," for *genoito* at 51a38. However, I take the optative mood of the verb simply to mark the generic force of the *hoia* clause—"the *kinds of things* that happen"—and the *kai* following the clause as explicative. The "kinds of things that happen" are *not* meant to exclude, but to include, things that actually *do* happen, as Aristotle's ensuing argument in chapter 9 shows. In chapter 25 the poet's status as a mimetic artist once again is related to his representation of generic situations: "the *sorts of things* that are or were the case, or are said to be or should be the case" (60b8–10). The generic *hoia* is used three times, perhaps for emphasis.
3. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), p. 82.
4. "Wider" because "fiction" includes made-up stories in prose; "narrower" because it does not cover lyric poetry, odes, or hymns. Aristotle mentions these, but says little about their role in drama, treating its choral odes as mere embellishments (50b15). For a defense of translating "*poiesis*" as "fiction," see "Animals," pp. 146–48.
5. Although Aristotle nowhere in his extant works mentions Thucydides by name, an allusion to Thucydides 8.97.2 has often been seen in the *Athenian Constitution* 33.2.
6. With Halliwell, p. 38, I now keep the received text *houtos ekeinos* at 48b17–18. In "Animals," p. 168nn36–37, I favored emending it to *touto ekeino*, thus bringing it into line with *Rhetoric* 1371b4, and enabling the recognized item to be part of a zoological

model. However, the preceding lines (b14–16) now seem to me intended to explain why mimetic objects in general, and not only the zoological models just mentioned, appeal to a wider range of viewers than philosophers. For present purposes, therefore, I assume, with most commentators, that the item recognized is the subject of a portrait, who is already familiar to the viewer, as at *Phaedo* 73e.

7. For detailed study of the relevant passages, see “Animals.”

8. At 53b4–6 Aristotle speaks of “hearing” the story of Oedipus. As noted by Halliwell (p. 74n115), this suggests hearing the play recited aloud, not merely a verbal summary of the plot. It remains uncertain when silent reading became common practice. However, St. Augustine could record with wonder that he had watched St. Ambrose reading without using his voice or tongue, and guessed that he might have been trying to rest his voice (*Confessions* 6.3). The fact that silent reading amazed Augustine, as if it were a feat that had to be specially explained, suggests that it was still highly unusual to read silently, even seven centuries after Aristotle’s time.

9. However, Aristotle makes no attempt to distinguish, in the manner of modern theorists, between the author and the “authorial voice”—for example, between an autobiography and a work of fiction narrated in the first person. Like Plato (*Republic* 393a, 394c), he assumes that in narrative passages of Homeric epic, the poet is speaking “himself.” This might be questioned, at least for the *Odyssey*, since its story in books 9–12 is narrated in the first person by Odysseus.

10. See Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of English Poetry* (1595) in *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. B. Vickers (1999; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 370.

11. Halliwell, pp. 60–61, translates *onomata epitithemene* as a concessive phrase: “even though attaching names to the agents.” I take the participle as temporal, following Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. D. W. Lucas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 121, and as noted in “Animals,” p. 15n10. The poet attaches names *after* first determining the general import and direction of the plot, common practice among fiction writers.

12. Studies of character traits, and their relation to plot structure, may of course often be profoundly complex and difficult to understand. Mr. Woodhouse is one thing, but Hamlet is quite another.

13. As George Bernard Shaw perceptively observed. See G. B. Shaw, *Music in London 1890–94* (London: Constable and Co., 1932), p. 226. Gilbert continued to satirize the Victorian obsession with duty in *Ruddigore* (1887).

14. D. C. Somervell, *Studies in Statesmanship* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1923), p. 267.

15. It is no accident, for example, that the question “Who is Meno?” is used as an analogue of “What is virtue?” (*Meno* 71b). The inquiry into virtue is treated as a search for the bearer of a name, with no difference recognized between a common noun for an attribute and the proper name of a person.

16. I take the much-disputed *katharsis* clause as a direct reference to *Phaedo* 69c. See David Gallop, “Aristotle’s Aesthetics and Philosophy of Mind,” in *The Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, *From Aristotle to Augustine*, ed. D. J. Furley (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 88–90.

17. The indications that Socrates himself is meant to personify *eros* are ubiquitous in the *Symposium*. They are summarized in Plato, *Symposium*, 2nd ed., ed. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp. lx–lxiii.

18. Modern writers still often cite Plato uncritically, especially the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, as evidence for biographical detail about the historic Socrates. This may be a credit to the “realism” of Plato’s writing. Yet it may also be treating literary fiction as fact, thereby mistaking “poetry” for “history,” the very confusion the *Poetics* seeks to expose.