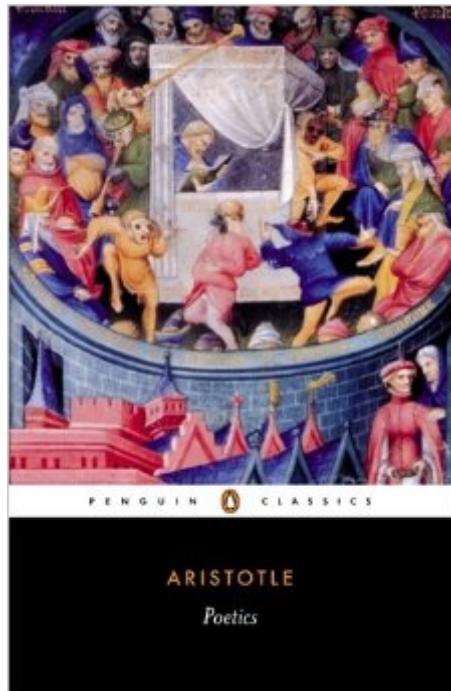


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Poetics (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Essential reading for all students of Greek theatre and literature, and equally stimulating for anyone interested in literature. In the *Poetics*, his near-contemporary account of classical Greek tragedy, Aristotle examines the dramatic elements of plot, character, language and spectacle that combine to produce pity and fear in the audience, and asks why we derive pleasure from this apparently painful process. Taking examples from the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the *Poetics* introduced into literary criticism such central concepts as *mimesis* ('imitation'), *hamartia* ('error') and *katharsis*, which have informed serious thinking about drama ever since. Aristotle explains how the most effective tragedies rely on complication and resolution, recognition and reversals, while centring on characters of heroic stature, idealised yet true to life. One of the most perceptive and influential works of criticism in Western literary history, the *Poetics* has informed serious thinking about drama ever since. Malcolm Heath's lucid translation makes the *Poetics* fully accessible to the modern reader. In this edition it is accompanied by an extended introduction, which discusses the key concepts in detail, and includes suggestions for further reading. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

Series: Penguin Classics

Paperback: 144 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics (March 1, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140446362

ISBN-13: 978-0140446364

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.4 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (74 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #10,759 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Aesthetics #3 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Movements & Periods > Ancient & Classical #3 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences >

Customer Reviews

After reading Aristotle's "Poetics," I felt a severe sense of shame for not having read it much, much sooner. As a student of literature, I found that many of the concepts upon which my evaluation of literature are based, whether I picked them up in classes or through amateur theorization, are founded in the "Poetics". The "Poetics," which the Penguin editor Malcolm Heath explains in his outstanding introduction/explication, is probably comprised of lecture notes, and not intentionally meant for public consumption, nonetheless stands as the standard against which literary criticism is gauged. This is amazing, as the work itself is hardly 50 pages long. Aristotle begins by talking about the origins of art in imitation: Artists convey their sense of the world through imitating what they see and feel around them. This is accomplished both in visual art, and for a more thorough understanding of human events, in poetry. Aristotle goes on to explain the history of literature: how encomium(praises) and invective(curses) give rise respectively to epic and lampoons. These then pave the way for tragedy and comedy. In terms of these basic steps, in the later part of the "Poetics," Aristotle gives definitions to parts of speech, to wit, nouns, verbs, etc., and how they are used in different forms of speech, and in various contexts within the genres he outlines. Spending the greater part of the work on an investigation of tragedy, Aristotle examines the component parts of what he takes to be the best kinds of tragedies. In terms of quality, the work must be complete, showing the causal relation of events and the causal reactions of characters to those events. It should have a plot wherein a character or characters experience a reversal of fortune or a recognition that leads to the conclusion of that plot. Plot is essential to Aristotle, and, to appropriate Heath's translation, 'universalizes' the "Poetics" to encompass even those prose works for which Aristotle himself admits to have no definition. We can apply his standards to short stories, novels, and so on. Aristotle's notions of unity, completeness, and magnitude are the conventions to which and against which all Western literature and criticism can be seen to either conform to or struggle against. Without Aristotle's strict definitions of tragedy, comedy, unity, and so on, I can scarcely imagine how we would have notions of mock-tragedy, tragi-comedy, or even the modern or post-modern literary forms. In short, the "Poetics" is absolutely crucial reading for anyone who reads anything.

I teach a course on Ethics and Aesthetics in Aristotle to graduate students. This translation and its introduction are the best for my purpose. Both are clear, crisp, and readable. The translation is

reliable and the endnotes are very helpful. I would highly recommend this edition to anyone who has a serious interest in either Aristotle or aesthetics that does not rise to a level that requires a reading knowledge of the Greek text.

The "Poetics" contains Aristotle's observations on what elements and characteristics comprised the best tragedies based on the ones he'd presumably seen or read. He divides "poetry," which could be defined as imitations of human experience, into tragedy, comedy, and epic, and explains the differences between these forms, although comedy is not covered in detail and tragedy gets the most treatment. For one thing, tragedy, he states, seeks to imitate the matters of superior people, while comedy seeks to imitate the matters of inferior people. To Aristotle, the most important constituent of tragedy is plot, and successful plots require that the sequence of events be necessary (required to happen to advance the story logically and rationally) and probable (likely to happen given the circumstances). Any plot that does not feature such a necessary and probable sequence of events is deemed faulty. Reversals and recognitions are plot devices by which tragedy sways emotions, particularly those that induce "pity and fear," as is astonishment, which is the effect produced when the unexpected happens. He discusses the best kinds of tragic plots, the kinds of characters that are required, and how their fortunes should change over the course of the plot for optimum tragic effect. With regard to poetic language or "diction," he emphasizes the importance of figurative language (metaphor, analogy) in poetry and the importance of balancing figurative with literal language. It is his opinion that metaphoric invention is a natural ability and not something that can be taught. Of all the poets Aristotle mentions who exemplify the ideals proposed in the "Poetics," Homer draws the most praise. Malcolm Heath's introduction in the Penguin Classics edition offers some helpful and amusing clarification and commentary on the "Poetics," including a demonstration of the Aristotelian method of constructing a tragedy using the story of Oedipus as an example. A work that is scant in volume but rich in ideas, the "Poetics" demands to be read by all those interested in ancient thought on literature.

I was surprised at how readable this was. Aristotle's world was very different than ours is today. He talks of poetry and drama, which we think of as separate, as being the same thing. And of the addition of a second player in that drama as being an innovation. But his talk of the use of spectacle in poetry/drama made me think of the sometimes tiresome CGI spectacles in our modern movie dramas. His observations applied equally to his time and to our most current entertainment. He was the first to write down many of the principles of plot and character that sometimes seem so obvious

as to not need mentioning. And then he'll use that obvious observation to provide an insight that might not otherwise be quite so clear. Some parts are just as relevant now as they ever were. Some parts are fascinating from an historical perspective, and made me wish I were more familiar with his chosen exemplars, like Aeschylus, Homer, and Euripides. Some parts are just cool, like his dissertation on metaphors, and how to construct them. And Some parts are more wholly of his time than ours. Readable, for the most part, and anyone who professes a love of writing should read this.

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