

II Col·loqui internacional *Mimesis*

Conceptes clau de la poètica renaixentista

Una recreació del llegat clàssic

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II sessió

ARISTOTELISME



CATARSI

Sweet Medicine. Aristotelian Katharsis in Renaissance Poetics

Brigitte KAPPL (Universität Marburg)

I Introduction

According to modern positions (nearly all of which already occur in the Cinquecento) katharsis is interpreted as:

- 1) an emotional, or, more narrowly, physiological/medical process
 - 2) an intellectual process
 - a) as a pleasurable experience without moral connotations (hedonist view)
 - b) as an experience with moral impact on the recipient (moralist view)
- version 1 a) has become the most widely accepted view.

II Fundamental traits of Aristotle's concept of emotion and their bearing on the interpretation of tragic katharsis

- emotions are not purely physiological phenomena, the underlying physiological process is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for emotions to occur.

- every emotion requires a preceding act of cognition which determines the emotion's quality and intensity (nobody feels pity, if he does not realize that somebody has suffered something without deserving it), cf. *De anima* I 1; *Rhetorica* II 1-11; *De motu animalium* 6-8.

→ there is no strict separation between cognition and emotion in so far as cognition is up to the individual and can be developed or trained, the emotions are also capable of being educated.

- emotions are complex phenomena involving somatic changes, desire, and, above all, pleasure (hedoné) or pain (lýpe), cf. the definitions of páthe in *Rhetorica* II and *Ethica Nicomachea* II 4.

pleasure and pain are the specific domain of ethical virtue (ethiké areté): ethical virtue consists exactly in feeling pleasure or pain about the right things in the right degree / in having adequate emotions in the respective situations, e.g. to fear something which threatens to do real harm to you, and it is vital for a happy and virtuous life that you get used to feeling pleasure and pain in the adequate way as early as possible (cf. *Ethica Nicomachea* II 2 and 3).

→ there is an intrinsic connection between pleasure / pain and moral behaviour

→ emotions are not bad; ethical virtue is not concerned with getting rid of the emotions, but with learning to have the right, that is adequate, emotions.

- as a consequence, katharsis should be considered as a purification, in the sense of a cultivation, of the emotions:

- tragic mimesis represents good persons who, by a serious, but understandable mistake, undergo a complete and undeserved reversal of fortune, and it does this in such a way that through the action represented the character of the agent and his motives are revealed. the spectator, while witnessing the action unfold, realizes that the protagonist is a principally virtuous character, who nevertheless is causing his own downfall (cognitive aspect), and in realizing this he feels pity and fear (emotional aspect).

in this way tragic mimesis enables the spectator to understand human action and its consequences and reacting with adequate emotions; this is also a pleasurable experience, because learning affords pleasure (cf. *Poetica* 4)

III Katharsis in the commentaries on Aristotle's Poetics and other poetological treatises of the Cinquecento

There is a broad range of interpretations; most approaches favour one or more of the following views about the meaning of katharsis as:

1) the education of emotions: tragedy teaches us to have adequate emotions (Robortello).

2) the elimination of bad emotions: pity and fear drive other emotions like anger, pride etc. out (Maggi, Segni).

3) the hardening against emotions: by frequently being exposed to dreadful / pitiable events we are getting used to it and feel less fear and pity (Robortello, Castelvetro u.a., medical purgation: Giacomini).

4) the insight into the human condition: by realizing that all men are subject to the fickleness of fortune we develop a tranquillity of mind (Robortello, Castelvetro, Piccolomini, Minturno).

5) the awareness of fatal consequences which immoderate passions lead to: seeing people ruined by passions makes us more cautious and moderate (Minturno, Scaliger).

characteristic features:

- emotions tend to be suspected as dangerous and irrational, something which has to be eliminated or at least moderated and subjugated to the control of reason (2,3,5).

- the cognitive aspect inherent in the emotions themselves is neglected (2,3).

→ the tie between the tragic emotions and the specific structure of tragic action, which is established in the *Poetics*, becomes loose, because for the functioning of katharsis in senses 2 and 3 it is irrelevant *how* the emotions are elicited.

- the cognitive value of tragic mimesis is reduced to abstract reasoning independent of the emotional response during the play (4, 5)

tragic mimesis becomes a simple and abstract moral lesson ("fortune is blind", "beware of passions") instead of a complex and concrete experience

→ the connection between emotion and cognition, which has proved essential for the Aristotelian approach, is severed

cf. the concept (inherited from antiquity) that poetry teaches the same lessons as moral philosophy, but whereas the precepts of moral philosophers, being boring and bitter, have no impact upon the masses, the poet, by means of ornate language and metre, and by representing unheard-of and miraculous events,

also attracts ordinary people and thus makes them (as the famous metaphor puts it) “swallow the bitter medicine by covering the rim of the cup with sweet honey”; thus, Aristotle’s sweet medicine becomes a distasteful potion, which has to be administered with sweet condiments so as to become enjoyable.

but if poetry teaches the same moral lesson as the philosopher, the moral content obviously can’t be the specific difference, which constitutes poetry as poetry as a result, literary theory starts to focus on the formal aspects (the “condiments”), and finally ends up banishing anything that tastes of morals from the realm of aesthetics.