

AVERROES'
MIDDLE COMMENTARY
ON ARISTOTLE'S
POETICS

TRANSLATED, WITH
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES, BY
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TO CATHERINE AND ERIC

*whose courage, faith, and love
opened new horizons*

parts they have already forgotten the first ones. The rhetorical statements used in competition have no naturally defined scope. Therefore it was necessary for people to measure the time of competition between the contestants either by means of a water device—as was the custom among the Greeks, since they used to have recourse only to enthymemes—or by fixing the days—as with us, since it is only to externally persuasive things that recourse is had in contests among us. Therefore if the art of eulogy had to do with competition, it would be necessary to measure the time of the competition by water clocks or something else. Since this is not the case, however, the art of poetry must have a natural limit just as existing things have a natural scope. That is, just as all generated things come to have a naturally defined magnitude when no bad luck impedes them in the course of generation, so too must it be with poetical statements and especially with the two sorts of representation—I mean, the one that passes from one contrary to another or that represents the thing itself without passing to its contrary.⁹

1451^a18-19 36. He said: a poem's constitution is enhanced by not mentioning at length the several things that occur to the single thing the poem is about.¹⁰ Indeed, several things occur to a single entity,¹¹ just as a single designated entity¹¹ has several activities.

1451^a19-35 37. He said: it seems that not all poets have been mindful of this. Rather, with the exception of Homer, they would pass from one thing to another and would not stick to one single purpose. You will find that this frequently occurs in the poems of the Arabs and of the moderns,¹² especially with respect to eulogy—I mean,

⁸ The text has the plural (*al-aqdār al-tabī'iyah*).

⁹ The reference is to reversal and discovery; see above, para. 25.

¹⁰ Literally, "the single thing intended by the poem" (*al-shai' al-wāhid al-maqṣūd bi al-shi'r*).

¹¹ Literally, "thing" (*shai'*).

¹² See above, Introduction, note 25. There are four poetical periods or classes generally recognized in Arabic literary theory: pre-

that when any one of the reasons for which a man is praised offers itself to them, like a sword or a bow, they busy themselves with its representation and turn away from mentioning the man being praised. In general, art must resemble nature—I mean, it should do everything it does for the sake of a single purpose and a single end. Since that is the case, comparison and representation must be of a single thing and directed to a single purpose;¹³ its parts must have a definite magnitude; it must have a beginning, middle, and end; and its middle must be the most excellent part. For when existing things that have order and are finely organized are deprived of their order, they no longer have a particularly characteristic activity.

38. He said: from what has been said about the intention of poetical statements, it is clear that representation that comes about by means of false inventions—namely, the things called parables and stories like what is in *Kalilah wa Dimnah*¹⁴—is not part of the poet's activity. Indeed, the poet speaks only about existing or possible matters, because these are the things he seeks¹⁵ to have people flee or pursue or for which he seeks¹⁶ a congruous comparison as was said with re-

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Islamic or *Jāhili*, contemporary to Muhammad or *Mukhadrami* (1/622-11/632), Islamic or *Islāmi* (11/632-133/750), modern or *Muḥdath* (133/750-656/1258). Though overlapping with the modern period, Averroes seems to use the term "recent" (*muta'akhhir*) to refer to his own time. See Ibn Rashīq, *al-'Umdah*, vol. 1, p. 114.

¹³ Literally, "and have a single purpose intended by it" (*wa maqṣūdan bih gharāḍ wāhid*).

¹⁴ Though both manuscripts have *Dimnah wa Kalilah*, the work is known as *Kalilah wa Dimnah*. It is a tale fitting into the mirror for princes genre that was written about 300 in Kashmir in Sanskrit and then translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa' (102/720-139/756) by the intermediary of Persian. The title comes from the corruption of the Sanskrit names of the two principal characters, the jackals Karāṭaka and Damanaka. For the reference to "the intention of poetical statements," see above, paras. 8 and 20-21.

¹⁵ Literally, "he intends" (*yaqṣid*).

¹⁶ Here "he seeks" is my addition.

spect to the headings of representation.¹⁷ Those who do make parables and stories are making something other than what poets make, even if they have made those invented parables and tales in metered speech. That is because even though both share in using meter, the one completes the work he is intent upon—namely, the prudence to be provided through the invented tales—by means of his myth even if it is not in meter, whereas the poet does not completely attain his intended imitation except by means of meter. The one who makes invented parables and stories invents individuals who do not exist at all and sets down names for them. The poet, on the other hand, only sets down names for existing things, and sometimes they speak¹⁸ about general things. Therefore the art of poetry is closer to philosophy than the art of inventing parables. What he has said here, which accords with their custom in poetry, seems to be something natural to natural nations.

1451^b15-
1452^a1

39. He said: in the art of eulogy one must above all have recourse to existing matters and not to those with invented names for representations of things, for eulogy is directed toward provoking voluntary actions. When the actions are possible, persuasion with respect to them—I mean, the poetic conviction that provokes the soul to pursuit or to flight—takes place more readily. For non-existing things, names are very seldom set down or invented in the art of eulogy—as when they set liberality down as an individual then set down actions for him, making representations of them, and exaggerate in praising him. Even if this type of imitation has a not insignificant usefulness for relating the

¹⁷ See above, paras. 8-11. Note, however, that in para. 12 Averroes claims that he has now discussed the sorts of comparisons and their headings. In other words, he takes comparison (*tashbih*) and representation (*muḥākāh*) to be virtually synonymous terms. See also para. 4 and note 18.

¹⁸ Though the verb is plural and has no clear subject, it must refer to poets generally.

actions and affections of that invented thing to existing matters, one ought not to have recourse to it in the art of eulogy. Indeed, this type of imitation is not agreeable to all natures; rather, many people may laugh at it and make light of it. The best to be found under this heading among the Arabs, even though it is not such as to encourage virtue, is the statement of al-A'shā:

Upon my life, watchful eyes have perceived
a fire's light burning on the rise;
Blazing for two cold men seeking its warmth,
Generosity and al-Muḥalliq, night-long at
the fire;
Having sucked milk from the breast of a single
mother, they swore
by her dark nipple never to become
sundered.¹⁹

If this is so, it is clear that the poet is a poet insofar as he makes myths and meters to the same extent as he makes comparisons and representations.²⁰ And he makes comparisons²¹ of existing voluntary matters, although there is no stipulation upon him that only matters that are existing be represented. Rather, he might represent matters that are presumed to be possible. Nor is he therein any less a poet than he is in making a representation of existing matters, for there is nothing to prevent those things from existing in the same manner as things existing now. In poetic imitation there is no need of invented myths like these, nor does the exceptionally fine poet need to complete his rep-

¹⁹ See al-A'shā Maimūn Ibn Qais (ca. 565-8/629), *Dīwān*, pp. 223-225. His nickname, "al-A'shā" means "the nearsighted man." In this imaginative linking of al-Muḥalliq with generosity, al-A'shā praises for his hospitality an otherwise poor and unknown man with several daughters whose marriages he despaired of being able to arrange; see Ibn Rashīq, *al-'Umdah*, vol. 1, pp. 48-49.

²⁰ The text has the singular (*al-tashbih wa al-muḥākāh*).

²¹ The text has the singular (*al-tashbih*).

resentation by means of external matters—namely, what is feigned by means of dissimulation and delivery. Indeed, only those who pretend to be poets employ them²²—I mean, those who think they are poets and are not poets. True poets do not employ them,²² except when they want to confront thereby the sham poets' use of them.²² When they confront excellent poets, they do not employ them.²²

1452^a1-7 40. In some instances, the exceptionally fine poets²³ may be obliged to resort to employing things external to the pillar of poetry because perfect things that can be completely represented do not occur in every instance. Indeed, it is difficult to represent deficient things by statement, and so they resort to representing them by means of external things. This occurs especially when they are intent upon representing beliefs because, being neither actions nor substances, it is dif-

²² The object here is denoted by a singular pronoun (*hu*) but clearly refers to "external matters" (*al-umūr allatī min khārij*), perhaps because they were first referred to by a singular verb in the passive voice—"what is feigned by means of dissimulation and delivery" (*wa huwa alladhī yudda'ā nifāqan wa akhdhan bi al-wujūh*). In principle, delivery pertains to the recitation of the poem and thus to the activity of the rhapsode (*munshid*); see above, para. 20, note 9. Though he does not link dissimulation with the rhapsode's activity, Averroes argues that it and delivery, as well as "the attitudes suggested by the poet's voice and manner," belong more properly to the art of rhetoric; see above, para. 31, and below, para. 77.

²³ The word "poets" is my addition. The term translated here and in the preceding paragraph as "exceptionally fine" is *muftiq*. According to Ibn Rashīq, there are four divisions of poets: the poet who is an excellent poet and also excels in reciting the poetry of his predecessors, *khindhīdh*; the poet who is an excellent poet, but who does not recite the poetry of others, *muftiq*; the poet who is merely a little better than a bad poet, *shā'ir faqat*; and the poet who is not of any worth, *shu'rūr*. In this same context, he also says that the *fahl* poet is equivalent to the *khindhīdh* type of poet; see *al-'Umdah*, vol. 1, pp. 114-115. In para. 71, below, Averroes links the terms *fahl* and *muftiq* as complementary ways of speaking of outstanding poets. By citing a verse of Imru' al-Qais immediately afterwards, Averroes seems to suggest that he is to be considered as such a poet—one of the "masterly and exceptionally fine poets."

ficult to imitate them. These external things may occasionally be mixed in with poetic representations, as though they happened to be placed there by chance.²⁴ And since things that are such as to come about by chance are amazing, they have an amazing effect.

41. He said: the excellence of many poetic statements comes from simple, non-multifarious representation. Indeed, the excellence of many of them comes from the comparison and representation itself. That is, the situation with respect to comparison is the same as that with respect to deeds. Just as some deeds are accomplished by a single, simple action and others by a complex action, so is it with representation. Simple representation is that in which one of the two kinds of imitation is employed—I mean, the kind called reversal or the kind called discovery²⁵—whereas complex representation is that in which both sorts are employed. That happens either by beginning with reversal and then turning to discovery or by beginning with discovery and then turning to reversal. The sanctioned way is to begin with reversal and then turn to discovery, for there is a big difference between beginning with reversal and then turning to discovery as against beginning with discovery and then turning to reversal.

42. He said: by reversal, I mean first representing the contrary of what is intended to be praised by something that the soul dislikes and then turning to a representation of the praised thing itself—as when one wants to represent happiness and happy people one begins by first representing misery and miserable people, then turns to a representation of happy people and does so by means of the contrary of that by which he represented miserable people. Now discovery is simply representation of something.

²⁴ Literally, "by chance, unintentionally" (*bi al-ittifāq min ghair qaṣad*).

²⁵ See above, para. 25 and note 26.

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