

The Concept of Mimesis (Imitation) in Aristotle and the Arabic Translations of Aristotle's De Poetica in the Medieval Ages

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Abstract

The concept of Mimesis in Aristotle has a great influence on both the Western and the Eastern traditions. The Arab writers admired the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. They translated almost all his works. His works have also been found in the Syriac tongue.

This paper shows that the Arab philosophers Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Hazim grasped a partial understanding of Aristotle's conception of imitation. They share with Aristotle the idea that poets present universal ideas from history in their works. When they explain different aspects of imitation, they partially realize what Aristotle means by imitation, and they go on to add and explain what the Arabs understand by the term. Averroes puts the works of Aristotle in the Arabic context, and uses Arabic examples, and so misunderstands the concept.

When the Arabs¹ invaded Egypt and Iraq, the Greek tradition was already known in that part of the world. It is said that the active Syriac translation movement was at its highest level in A.D. 450. That movement took place, partially, because there were many different opinions about the nature of Christianity and Christ. The Syrians researched Greek logic and philosophy. When Syria became part of the Islamic Empire, some of the Syriac translators converted to Islam, and they introduced the Greek tradition into Islamic religion and philosophy.

The real beginning of the Arab interest in Greek tradition is still obscure. It is well known that there were some individual efforts during the ummayyad period (661-750 A.D), but these early efforts did not concern Aristotle. When the Abbasyds came to rule the Islamic Empire about 750 A.D., the Arabic translation movement started seriously.

They transferred the capital of the Islamic Empire from Damascus to Baghdad. They were enthusiastic about knowledge and they were keen to establish Baghdad as the center of civilization in that period of their history. They gathered different resources of various civilizations in Baghdad, to make it the cultural center of the world as it had been in the past.²

Encouraging the intellectual movement in general, and translation in particular, is one of the methods which was used by the Abbasyd Caliphs to build that culture.

Al-M'amun (one of the Abbasyd Caliphs who died in 833 A.D.) established a research center in Baghdad. Most of the Greek works that had been translated into Syriac were translated into Arabic, and other works were translated directly from Greek into Arabic. Plato, Aristotle and other Greek and Roman commentators eventually became known in most of the Islamic institutions.³

This translation movement can be divided into two stages. The first one started from the first half of the ninth century and continued upto the first half of the tenth century. This stage was characterized by literal translation and most of the works were very poorly translated, and hardly readable. The second phase extends from the second half of the tenth century upto the end of the eleventh century when the translation movement was almost over. This phase was to some extent better than the first one in the nature of its work.⁴

During this phase Hunayn Ibn Ishaq who with his students, translated Aristotle's **Rhetorical** and **Physical**, and more than one hundred medical and philosophical Greek works into Arabic, revised most of the old translations. He mentioned that the method of the first generation was to translate word for word, but the second generation was more liberal in its method. They either read the sentences in Syriac twice or thrice, and then translated them into Arabic, or they read the whole work in the original and then summarized what they understood.

In general, most of these translations were not accurate. Some of the translators translated collections of Greek works without any distinction between the titles and most of them, except Hunayn, were not authorities in either the Greek tradition or the Arabic one. The scholars have noticed in many manuscripts that some of the Greek philosophical terms were transliterated into Syriac or Arabic.

In my discussion of the Arabic translations and comments on Aristotle's **De Poetica**, I refer to five Arabic scholars. The first one, Abu Bishr Matta translated the full text of *De Poetica* from Syriac into Arabic. It was the first full translation into Arabic and most of the later translations, revisions, summaries, and comments on Aristotle's work in question depended on Matta's translation. It was edited in 1887 in London by the British scholar, D.S. Margoliouth. The manuscript was found in the Bibliothèque National in Paris under number 2346, Arabic. Margoliouth edited that translation along with Avicenna's summary of the **De Poetica**, with Latin translations of both of these, and titled his work **Analecta Oriental Ad Poetical Aristotelem**.⁵

During the nineteenth century, the Academy of Science in Austria established a committee to study and edit the Arabic translations of Aristotle's works. In 1899, the committee asked the Orientalist, Jaroslaus Tkasch to edit Matta's translation of the *De Poetica*. Tkatsch died after he had finished the work which appeared in 1928 and in 1932, in two volumes with extensive comments and with literal translation. It was titled, **Die Arabische Uebersetzung des Aristoteles und die Grundlage der kritik des Griechischen Textes**.⁶

The second Arabic scholar is Al- Farabi (Al Pharabius d. 950. D.A.). A.J Arberry discovered Al-Farabi's short essay called, "On Composing Poetry", in the library of the India Office under number 3832, sheet number 42. This

essay was edited with the English translation in **Rivits dagli Studi Oriental**, in 1937. There was also another essay by Al-Farabi called "On Poetry", which was found in Czechoslovakia, and it was edited for the first time in Cairo by M.S. Salem in 1971.

The third one is Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 1037 d.A.D.). He wrote a book called **The Art of Poetry**, and it was based on Aristotle's *De Poetica*. This book was found with his encyclopedia, *Al-Shifa*⁷, and it was classified under Logic. **The Art of Poetry** was edited by Margoliouth.⁸

The fourth one is Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1198 d.A.D.) His summary of **De Poetica** was edited by F.Lasinio in 1872. Another manuscript of Averroes's summary was discovered in Leyden and it was edited by M.S. Salem and published in 1971 in Cairo.⁹

The fifth scholar is Haszim Al-Qartajani (1200 d.A.D.) This scholar wrote a book on poetry in general, entitled **Menhaj al Bulgha Wasraj al Adba**, which was edited in Tunisia in 1986. A portion of his manuscript that concerns the idea of imitation had been published by Abdulrahman Badawi in 1961 in Cairo.¹⁰

In this part of the paper, I illustrate the idea of imitation and what the Arabs understand from it, basing my remarks either on their translations or on their comments on Aristotle's **De Poetica**. The reason I choose this idea is that it is one of the great issues in the book and it explains the difference in the conceptions of literature held by the Arabic people and the Western people, and consequently it illustrates the difference between their perception about the universe in general.

The translation of Matta is very literal and is hardly understandable. It is divided into two parts. The first one is from the beginning of **De Poetica** to Chapter Five. This part is relatively clear and its language is to some extent readable. The second part is from 1449b to the end of the book. This part is hardly understandable and it is quite clear that Matta is not familiar with the names and the works which Aristotle uses in **De Poetica**. Matta transliterates some of the Syriac into Arabic, for example "History". The syntax of the sentences in the second part strictly follows the Syriac, which differs in many cases from the Arabic one.

He does not know what is comedy and what is tragedy, so he translates

the term for tragedy as "Madeeh" (panegyric) and the term for comedy is "Hejha" (lampoon).¹¹ These two forms are available in Arabic lyrical poetry. The "Madeeh" is used to praise great men in verse and to dedicate some of the poems to their souls. This concept is completely different from that of tragedy in Western thought. The "Hejha" is used to make fun of people and to attack them in poetry. It uses sarcasm and irony. In some cases, names of victims are mentioned in the poems. Clearly, the aim of this form is to cause pain and destruction and this, again, is different from what Aristotle means by comedy. In fact, this sarcastic and ironic form had been used earlier in Greek poetry, and rejected by Aristotle. As we shall see later, the mistake confusing comedy with "Hejha" and tragedy with "Madeeh" was also made by Averroes.

What Matta understands of imitation is that it is a reproduction and manifestation of the truth. People reproduce actions and movements of others, and everything they see in their life.

Men have been endowed with the natural ability to imitate each other. It is one of the main processes by which we manage our lives. In other words, imitation is essential to the process of life. The child imitates his father, and the student imitates his teacher.

His understanding of imitation in literature is based on his concept of imitation in life. Matta believes that young poets should imitate the ancient ones. The young generation follows the old one without any change in its literary works. The modern poets imitate the classical poets in their diction, thought, and everything they write or articulate. Although this illustration is completely different from Aristotle's view of imitation in literature, Matta thinks that he conveys the exact word of Aristotle. In other words, Matta believes that to Aristotle imitation is copying and reproducing the ancient works.

Unlike Matta, Al-Farabi showed a better understanding of Aristotle's work. Al-Farabi devoted most of his essay, "On Poetry", to the concept of imitation. He divides imitation into two kinds. The first one is imitation by words and the second one is imitation by action.¹² Imitation by action has two parts.

1. I do something with my hand or any kind of activity in order to imitate something I like to reproduce. For example, I admire somebody and especially his features, so I make a statue of him or I draw his features on a

piece of paper, and I feel great pleasure in performing this kind of activity.

2. I imitate the very action of somebody else. I like the way he behaves and moves, so I reproduce his behavior in mine.

Imitation by words, also has two parts:

1. I imitate some words or some sentences because I feel that they are good in themselves. I reproduce those words or sentences because they are beautiful stylistically and I feel pleased by reproducing them.
2. Some literary works are imitated because they relate some experience to our memory. The reader enjoys these kinds of literary works because they carry his soul to something he enjoys or dislikes. They represent some episodes which are taken from life and these episodes symbolize the desire of human beings as the significance of life.¹³

Although the influence of Aristotle's theory on rhetoric is clear in most of these points, Al-Farabi shows some understanding of the idea of imitation. He knows that imitation implies the reproduction of human action. The second part of imitation by words indicates that words are symbols and man recognizes human action through them. The poet composes his work according to what he notices in human affairs, and he characterizes in certain words what happens in the human mind and in human thought.¹⁴

Avicenna's, **Art of Poetry**, which is based on Aristotle's **De Poetica**, is arranged under the following eight titles:

1. Poetry in general and the different kinds of Greek poetry.
2. Imitation and its means and objects.
3. The origin of poetry and its part in Arabic literary history.
4. The number of lines in comedy and tragedy, and how they affect the object according to whether they are short or long.
5. The definition of beginning, middle, and end and how they relate to each other.
6. The different parts of tragedy and comedy as far as the form is concerned and what kind of meaning every part should carry.
7. Diction and how to choose words for literary work.

8. The problems of poetry and the concepts of truth and impossibility in it.¹⁵

Avicenna's ideas about imitation are present in all the eight chapters, but are concentrated more in chapters two and four. I summarize four aspects of what he understands by imitation.

1. Artificial imitation which takes place with some of the lower animals, and which sometimes also takes place in our normal lives when we want to insult or make fun of somebody else.
2. Natural imitation which takes place in our childhood and generally in all our psychological and physical growth, because it is one of the natural causes of this growth.
3. Imitation also implies the representation of some of the episodes which comprise human affairs. These episodes are given universal meaning by the poets and they will be comprehensible to all nations and races. This kind of imitation, which is embodied in literary work, is enjoyed by the readers because it touches something in their memory and it fulfills a desire they have. Avicenna states that, "the soul is pleased by imitation because it is one of the best things it likes. The proof that people enjoy imitation is that they have pleasure while they are watching a picture even if the subject of the picture is bad, and even if they dislike it when they see it in reality".¹⁶ He states that this is the concept of imitation in the Greek tradition. Avicenna does know what he is dealing with when he states that tragedy comes from serious imitation and comedy comes from imitation which is not serious. He defines tragedy as "an imitation of a completely serious action that has an effect on the soul of the readers, and that stimulates in them pity and fear".¹⁷

Avicenna knows, that for Aristotle, the means of imitation are rhythm, language, and harmony. If we get language and harmony, we have poetry, and if we get rhythm without harmony, we have dancing. A combination of harmony and rhythm alone gives us "flute-playing and lyre playing". He does not speculate on the manner of imitation except in one sentence at the end of chapter two on page 170.

4. The fourth aspect of imitation is rather close to the concept of persuasion in rhetoric. He says that the role of persuasion in rhetoric is to make the audience follow the speech of the orator, and since imitation is natural in

human beings and it is enjoyable to them, poets should emphasize the role of imitation in their works, to be believable to, and accepted by their audience.

Avicenna studied the Greek tradition thoroughly and relied heavily on Al-Farabi, and through him he understood Plato and Aristotle. It is quite clear that his understanding of imitation is rather close to Al-Farabi's and that through him he understood Plato and Aristotle. He also borrowed from him the transliteration of comedy and tragedy. However, his **Art of Poetry** shows a remarkable understanding of the Greek tradition and, "il a parfaitement saisi la theorie de l'imitation, et il a donné une idée exacte de l'elocution poetique et des moyen de resoudre les difficultes poetiques. En somme, il a compri ce qu'un oriental, ignorant tout de la litterature grecque, pouvait comprendre: des idees générales, ou des idees qui correspondent a quelque chose dans la litterature arabe. Du reste, il le reconnaît lui-meme".¹⁸

The greatest confusion about **De Poetica** came from Averroes. It is quite clear that he does not understand most of the work and the cause of this inability stems from his effort to explain **De Poetica** with reference to Arabic poetry and prose. He outlines **De Poetica** and he illustrates it in terms of the Arabic cultural context. In many points, the reader hardly knows whether he is dealing with Greek or with Arabic tradition.

Averroes shows great misunderstanding and tries to Arabize the text in three places. The first is where Aristotle talks about Greek authors and works and specially where he talks about plots and characters. The second is where Aristotle deals with the tragic elements, the constitution of the plot, and recognition and reversal. The third is where Aristotle illustrates the concept of imitation, and the relation between imitation and necessity, probability, and history and historical truth.

It seems that Averroes is rather influenced by Matta. He does not understand what is comedy and what is tragedy, so he translates them into Madeeh and Hejah.¹⁹ His understanding of imitation is that it is a reproduction and a manifestation of the truth. The imitator should exactly imitate his model and reproduce all its detail. In poetry, modern poets copy and reproduce the classical poets. Briefly, his idea about imitation is similar to Matta's.

Hazim presents four aspects of imitation and since he took most of his

ideas from Avicenna, I will only briefly list them here.

1. The first aspect is to imitate the meaning of a complete action in its nature. This action or episode is taken from history and it has one meaning as historical fact, and another universal one (i.e. literary meaning). The poets provide this episode with its literary meaning when they portray this universal meaning in a literary work.
2. The second aspect is to imitate the style of the ancients.
3. The third aspect is to imitate the diction of the ancients. The young generations should notice carefully how the old generations use the words and how they arrange them.
4. The fourth aspect of imitation is imitating the ancients while composing poetry, using meter and rhyme in the manner they used them.

The last three aspects could be combined in one aspect, but Hazim prefers to divide them, and he gives some examples to explain each one of them. At the end of his long illustration of the three aspects, he states, as Horace and Longinus have done, that the young poets need long experience and time to master the techniques of the ancients.

Conclusion

From what I demonstrate in this paper, it emerges that there is a partial understanding of Aristotle's concept of imitation by Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Hazim. They share with Aristotle the concept that poets present in their works, universal ideas from history. In other words, a poet constructs his work according to what he thinks human thought indicates to man. He perceives that life consists of ideas and actions, and these ideas and conceptions represent the significance of life through imitation, a process which presents this significance.

Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Hazim understand that this kind of imitation is restricted to the Greek tradition and it is unknown in Arabic culture. When they explain different aspects of imitation, they partially realize what Aristotle means by imitation, and they want to add and explain what the Arabs understand by the term. They know, on the one hand, that Aristotle's imitation is to imitate action in nature and, on the other, to Arabs in general the term means copying and reproducing certain models. Al-Farabi and Avicenna put the term in perspective

with Aristotle's philosophy and his psychology of the human mind, so they grasp the term.

As opposed to these three, Averroes tries to put **De Poetica** in the Arabic cultural context, and he is lost right at the beginning of the road. His mistake is illustrated by his effort to explain the outline of the book with instances from Arabic poetry and prose, which are not suited in some cases to the main ideas. He turns the means of imitation into figures of speech which are known and popular in Arabic poetry.

Poetry for Averroes imitates the truth and poets should expose the true ideas in their poetry. He states that society will reject the false poets. This truth is measured by the prescribed principles of religious and literary life in Arabic culture.

In Arabic culture, there are certain models and they are set out as the best examples in Arabic life. In religion, for example, the life of the prophet, Muhammad, is the best example to be followed. The religious man who wants to live happily in this world and in the one that follows, should strictly imitate the life of the Prophet in all of its aspects. The time of the Prophet, also, is the best time and it is the era which we long to reproduce.

This religious significance of imitation left its mark on literature as well. The Holy Quran is considered the best book, and its style the best one. It was revealed by God and all people are challenged to compose anything equivalent to it in style. "Say; if the whole of mankind and jinn's were together, to produce the like of this Quran, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other".²⁰ It becomes conventional that the best style is in the holy book. Since the ancient poets live around the life of Mohammad, they grasped the essence of nature and they describe in their poem what the other should follow and reproduce. It seems to me that this view is quite similar to the views of Horace (65-8 B.C) when he states that "It was Greeks who had at the Muse's hand the native gift, the Greeks who had the Utterance of finished grace; for their sole greediness was for glory".²¹ It is also like the prescribed rules of the French critic Nicholas Boileau (1636-1711) who teaches us, "Let your Muse, fertile in Learned lessons, everywhere attach the amusing to the solid and useful".²² Alexander Pope (1688-1744) follows and imitates Boileau by saying:

Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem; To copy nature is to copy them.²³

I hope to illustrate this point in a later paper.

Footnotes

1. The word, "**Arabs**", means here those who speak arabic and use it as their language of lettres regardless of their religion or their origin. There were many philosophers and literary critics who were originally Persian, or Turkish, like Avicenna, but who spoke Arabic and who used it in all their works. There were, also, some Christian and Jewish philosophers who used Arabic as their official tongue.
2. E.E. Peters, **Aristotle and the Arabs**. New York: New York University Press, 1968.
3. Carl Brockelman, **History of Islamic People**, trans., by J. Carmichael & M. Porlman. Cornwall: The Cornwall Press, Inc., 1947.
4. Aristotle, **De Poetica**, trans, into Arabic and edited by A. Badawi. Cairo: Maktabat Al-Nahada, 1953.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Al- Shifa is basically a summary of all Aristotle's works.
8. Op. cit.
9. M.S. Salem, **Averroes's Summary of Aristotle's De Poetica**. Cairo: The Islamic Tradition Press, 1971.
10. A. Badawi, ed., **Hazim Al-Qartajani and Aristotle's Theories on Poetry and Rhetoric**. Cairo: Cairo Press, 1961.
11. Abu Bishr Matta, trans., **De Poetica**. Ed. by Shukri M. Aiad Cairo: Dar Al-Katib Al-Arabi, 1967.
12. Al-Farabi, **On Poetry**. ed. by M.S. Salem. Cairo: The Islamic Tradition Press, 1971.
13. Ibid.
14. The following points further prove that Al- Farabi absorbed Aristotle well:
 - a- In his other short essay, "**On Composing Poetry**" he explains with remarkable understanding the different kinds of poetry in the Greek tradition.
 - b- He lived in Syria and his mother was from Greece. There are some hints that he might have known the Greek language, but these hints are not confirmed yet.
 - c- He transliterates tragedy and comedy, though his understanding of them is rather shaky.
15. Avicenna, **Art of Poetry**. ed by A. Badawi. Cairo: Maktabat Al-Nahada, 1953.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Taha Hussain, **La Rhétorique Arabe de Djahiz à Abd al Kahir**, Étude présentée au VIIIème Congres des Orientalistes, à Leiden, le 11 Septembre 1931.
19. Op. cit.
20. Ahmed Yusuf Ali, trans., **The Holy Quran** Beirut: Dar Al Arab, 1964.
21. Hazard Adams. **Critical Theory Since Plato**. New York: Harcourt Brace Johanovich, Inc, 1976.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.

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