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The Tragic Theory of Aristotle's *Poetics*

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Aristotle's *Poetics* is the oldest literary theory in Europe, but its content is eventually a tragic theory. For Aristotle, tragedy was not one of various literary genres, but the most advanced genre of all. Treating the most advanced genre was, he probably thought, equivalent to treating literature in general. In *Poetics*, however, Aristotle disregarded the stagecraft and even expelled it out of his theory. There is no choice but to consider his tragic theory as a partial dramaturgy. If we

can insist that *Poetics* was a treatise of the literary theory, not the dramaturgy, then what made tragedy the highest genre? In this essay, I will deal with this complicated problem.

To begin with, why was the tragedy the highest literary genre? We should take into account the fact that well into the fifth century B.C., Greece was essentially a song culture and for the early Greeks, poetry was not to be read, but to be recited or sung or acted. Aristotle, therefore, regarded poetry (literature) as a performing art or a mimetic art. As far as imitation is concerned, drama (tragedy and comedy) is necessarily more mimetic than epic and lyric, because actors played roles of characters on the stage, instead of merely singing or reciting their actions. This is the reason why tragedy (and comedy) was to be evaluated the most developed genre.

In spite of it all, why was the stagecraft ignored by Aristotle? We could state three reasons for this. The first reason is the change of the cultural situation. After the early fourth century, when books had come to be current in Greece, poetry, including tragedy, was able to be enjoyed through reading. This change of the situation induced Aristotle to believe that the power of tragedy is independent both of performance and of actors. The second reason is the criticism about the situation in the contemporary theater. In the fourth century, actors were not only more influential and more prized than poets, but also modified playbooks at their own sweet will. Since Aristotle convinced himself that the true creator of tragedy was the poet, he could not possibly accept this situation. His *Poetics* declared that the art of tragedy was the production of playbooks. The third reason is Aristotle's "logocentrism." His philosophy was based on the theory that intellect was more valuable than perception. As a result, he held an unshakable belief that reading books was superior to perceiving, or watching, theatrical performance. The kernel of tragedy, in other words, did not consist of stage setting or acting, but of logos in

playbooks. It was this “logocentric” philosophy that made *Poetics* the literary theory.

We can not but say that Aristotle’s *Poetics* is a deficient dramaturgy, whereas his “logocentrism” exceeded the limit of dramaturgy, and moreover the mimetic theory. We should think that *Poetics* outlived more than two thousand years at the cost of the efficiency as a dramaturgy.