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ἐποποιία in Aristotle's *Poetics* — in reference to Mei's interpretation

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Girolamo Mei (1519-1594), Italian humanist, editor of Greek texts and historian of Greek music, is known for contributing to 'Birth of Opera.' He examined Aristotle's *Poetics* and concluded that in the Greek tragedy, not only chorus, but also actors sang, instead of speaking. This conclusion affected the musicians and humanists of the same age and led them to bring birth to Opera. Although his interpretation turned out to be wrong in the end, his exegesis of *Poetics* abounds in other suggestive points. Among others, this essay treats his reading of ἐποποιία in Aristotle's *Poetics* (I am very much obliged to Tsugami for his translation of Mei's letters).

Poetics 1447a28-29

ἡ δὲ ἐποποιία μόνον τοῖς λόγοις ψιλοῖς ἢ τοῖς μέτροις, ... (Bekker's edition)

epopoia [imitates] either in plain language [= prose] or metrical forms, ... (translated after Halliwell's translation)

ἐποποιία is, in general, translated into the epic poetry, and almost all authorities on *Poetics* who believe that ἐποποιία is the epic poetry, delete ἐποποιία in the text, because the epic poetry is in the metrical form and an epic in prose is difficult to imagine. Mei, on the other hand, considered the word formation [ἔπος + ποιεῖν] and construed ἐποποιία [tale making] as a more comprehensive term, including epics and prose tales. Consequently, the deletion of ἐποποιία is not indispensable.

The current text of *Poetics*, however, contains several passages which seem to be inconsistent with Mei's exegesis. The first passage is the following.

Poetics 1447b13-14

οἱ ἄνθρωποι γε συνάπτοντες τῷ μέτρῳ τὸ ποιεῖν ἐλεγειοποιούς τοὺς δὲ ἐποποιούς ὀνομάζουσιν, ... (Bekker's edition)

people attach the verbal idea of "poetry" [poiein] to the name of the metre, and call some "elegiac poets," others "epic poets." (Halliwell's translation)

According to this reading, ἐποποιός is an epic poet called after the name of the meter, and then ἐποποιία is necessarily connected with verse. This reading is possible, and indeed makes a sense, but the Greek diction appears awkward to me and I believe that the meaning is not well in accordance with the context. The problem is in 'τοὺς δέ'. I think that these words, an article 'τοὺς' and a particle 'δέ', ought to be replaced by the demonstrative pronoun 'τούσδε'. In my reading, it is not necessary to suppose that ἐποποιία / ἐποποιός are always connected with verse. The text and its translation are as follows.

Poetics 1447b13-14

οἱ ἄνθρωποι γε συνάπτοντες τῷ μέτρῳ τὸ ποιεῖν ἐλεγειοποιούς τούσδε ἐποποιούς ὀνομάζουσιν, ...

people attach the verbal idea of "poetry" [poiein] to the name of the meter, and make these [coined] "elegiac poets" the name of tale makers (ἐποποιούς).

Besides this passage, Aristotle is thought to designate verse by ἐποποιία in 1449b9-12 and 1459b17-18. Yet both passages treat the epic poetry ---- virtually Homer's epics ---- on behalf of ἐποποιία [tale making]. In theory, ἐποποιία embraces prose tales, but in reality, epics represented by *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which constituted a subgenre in ἐποποιία, were dominant in the ancient Greek world. When it came to explaining ἐποποιία which was distinguished from dramas and choral songs, Aristotle illustrated ἐποποιία with Homer's works so that Greeks in those days might understand his exposition better. We must say Aristotle's terminology is confusing, but the philosopher conceived that Homer's epics were the most advanced subgenre in ἐποποιία, and that the nature of the whole genre was explained if he dealt with the most advanced subgenre. While his terminology is undoubtedly misleading,

his approach to *ἐποποιία* is not discrepant in any respect.

Finally, one passage remains to be probed. The passage is as below.

Poetics 1462b14-16

ἔπειτα διότι πάντ' ἔχει ὅσα περ ἡ ἐποποιία (καὶ γὰρ τῷ μέτρῳ ἔξεστι χρῆσθαι), καὶ ἔτι οὐ μικρὸν μέρος τὴν μουσικὴν [καὶ τὰς ὄψεις], δι' ἧς αἱ ἡδοναὶ συνίστανται ἐναργέστατα (Kassel's edition)

Add the fact that tragedy possesses all epic's resources (it can even use its metre), as well as having a substantial role for music [and spectacle], which engenders the most vivid pleasures. (translated after Halliwell's translation)

Halliwell's translation is universal as far as I know, and there is no grave problem except one phrase, 'it can even use its metre'. Tragedy can use epic's metre? It is not impossible, but is it worth mentioning at this place? I don't think so. The premise that *ἐποποιία* is the epic poetry is the cause of such a perplexing interpretation. The phrase at issue describes *ἐποποιία* and means that *ἐποποιία* can even use the metre. When we read 1447a28-29 as it is and construe that *ἐποποιία* includes prose tales, as Mei did, this phrase makes perfect sense.