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## **Towards the Interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (XXIV, 1460a5-11)**

From the outset, the passage XXIV, 1460a5-11 from Aristotle's *Poetics* attracted the attention of translators and commentators of the treatise. As is well known, the given part of *Poetics* presents Aristotle's unambiguous opinion about the nature of Homeric characters, in particular, on how Homer individualizes his characters, i. e. by means of their speeches - monologues and dialogues [cf. 1, 114-115]. According to Aristotle: [9] ... ὁ δὲ ὀλίγη [10] φρονησάμενος εὐθὺς εἰσάγει ἄνδρα ἢ γυναῖκα ἢ ἄλλο τι [11] ἦθος, καὶ οὐδὲν' ἀήθη ἀλλ' ἔχοντα ἦθος [9]. "But he (i. e. Homer) after a brief [10] preface immediately brings in a man or a woman or any other [11] character and no one without character, but [only] with character." However, these are only the end-lines of the passage in question, specifically, the ending of line 9 and lines 10 and 11, unlike which the beginning of the same passage, lines 5-9, invite substantially different interpretations and has long been commented upon.

The first interpretation ensues from S. H. Butcher's (1895, 1898) and W. H. Fyfe's (1932) translations, while the second one results from I. Bywater's translation, published in 1909, G. F. Else's translation with comments, published in 1957 and D. W. Lucas' comment on *Poetics*, first published in 1968 and later in 1972 and 1978. Below I will try to show how the mentioned interpretations differ and which of them is more accurate, in my view.

According to Aristotle: [5] Ὅμηρος δὲ ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἄξιος ἐπαινεῖσθαι καὶ/Homer deserves praise for many other [reasons], but [6] δὴ καὶ ὅτι μόνος τῶν ποιητῶν οὐκ ἀγνοεῖ ὃ δεῖ ποιεῖν αὐτόν/also because alone among other [epic] poets he knows what to do.

Nothing is disputable in the quoted lines 5 and 6 and thus their sense is clear; however, Aristotle's words – μόνος τῶν ποιητῶν/alone among poets – must be interpreted as “alone among *epic* poets” and not as “alone among poets *in general*” – that is, among epic poets, dramatists and lyric poets. This is how the passage in question is translated by I. Bywater: “He alone among *epic poets*” (2, 83). On the other hand, D. W. Lucas emphasizes notes that this passage differs from the rest of Chapter 24 of the *Poetics* and therefore, does not refer to parallels and differences between epos and tragedy (3, 226). G. F. Else too provides a similar interpretation of this passage of the *Poetics*. Specifically, he reconstructs in brackets the word “epic” – (epic) poets (4, 619). Nevertheless, other translators and commentators, including those of our times, believe that in this passage Aristotle compares Homer not with other *epic* poets but with poets *in general*, i. e. epic poets as well as dramatists. Thus, I believe that the inaccurate interpretation stems from S. H. Butcher's and W. H. Fyfe's above-mentioned translations (5; 6), in which the words – μόνος τῶν ποιητῶν – are translated into English as “the only poet” and “alone of all poets” respectively.

In the following three lines of the passage, lines 7, 8 and the first part of line 9, Aristotle continues his reasoning in the following way: [7] αὐτὸν γὰρ δεῖ τὸν ποιητὴν ἐλάχιστα λέγειν: οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶ/and the poet himself should speak very little because [he] is not [8] κατὰ ταῦτα μιμητής. οἱ μὲν οὖν ἄλλοι αὐτοὶ μὲν δι' ὅλου/an imitator (i. e. a poet) owing to it. Others (i. e. other epic poets), in fact, always (i. e. throughout the whole poem) [9] ἀγωνίζονται, μιμοῦνται δὲ ὀλίγα καὶ ὀλιγάκις/*take part* themselves (αὐτοὶ), but imitate little and insignificantly.

The interpretation of given passage is complicated by the circumstance that Aristotle's words – αὐτὸν γὰρ δεῖ τὸν ποιητὴν ἐλάχιστα λέγειν [1460a7], i. e. “the poet himself should speak very little” – can be interpreted in two ways: 1. a poet should speak very little in the first person; 2. a poet should speak very little both, in the first and third persons.

The first interpretation is stemmed from Butcher's and Fyfe's above-mentioned translations and are unambiguously conveyed in the comments on the translation. For example, Butcher's mentioned passage has the following comment: “Aristotle points out that the poet should take as little part as possible in the actual story of an epic – meaning limited first-person narration, and no personal appearances in scenes if possible” (5), while according to the comment on Fyfe's translation of the passage, “when Aristotle says “the poet speaks himself” and “plays a part himself” he refers not to narrative, of which there is a great deal in Homer, but to

the “preludes” (cf. φροίμασιόμενος...) in which the poet, invoking the Muse, speaks in his own person. Ridgeway points out that in the whole of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* Homer thus “speaks himself” only 24 lines (6).

As mentioned above, a different, and in my opinion, the most accurate, interpretation of the passage is provided by Else and Lucas. In particular, according to G. F. Else, “... to Aristotle’s mind Homer is not really so much a narrator as a dramatist. He is just that epic poet who narrates least and dramatizes most” (4, 620), “... Homer, then, is the only epic poet who understood the poet’s duty: that is, to imitate (mimeistai = poiein), not merely to talk (legein)” (4, 621).

Lucas offers an even more detailed analysis and draws parallels with Chapter 3 of the *Poetics*, after which he concludes: “Apparently, A[ristotle] does not distinguish between passages in which poets narrate (i. e. speak themselves in the III person, - Z. Kh.) and those in which they speak personally (i. e. in the I person, - Z. Kh.) as in invoking the Muse or commenting on their story, e. g. *Il.*, 23. 176” (3, 67, cf. 226). According to Lucas, Aristotle considers Homer the only epic poet who “speaks little”, whether in the first or in the third person. This is narrated part of the poem and is expressed by a word ἀγωνίζονται (1460a9). Hence, Homeric narrative is more often presented from the characters’ perspective, that is, through impersonation, which, according to Lucas, is expressed in the passage as μιμοῦνται (1460a9). This exactly marks his superiority over other epic poets. Finally, Lucas sums up his reasoning over the distinction between ἀγωνίζονται and μιμοῦνται in the following way: “anyway the distinction is between narration [ἀγωνίζονται: in place of λέγουσι] and impersonation, the meaning of μιμοῦνται here” (3, 226-227).

Thus, taking into consideration Else’s and especially Lucas’ comments, I comprehend the given passage (XXIV, 1460a5-11) of *Poetics* in the following way: [5] “Homer deserves praise for many other [reasons], but also [6] because alone among other [epic] poets he knows what to do, [7] and the poet himself should speak very little [as a narrator] because [he] is not [8] an imitator (i. e. a poet) owing to it. Others (i. e. other epic poets), in fact, always (i. e. throughout the whole poem) narrate themselves [9], but imitate (i. e. impersonate) little and insignificantly. But he (Homer) after a brief [10] preface immediately brings in a man or a woman or any other [11] character and no one without character, but [only] with character” (i. e. in contrast to other epic poets, Homer individualizes his characters through their speeches, or dialogic – and not narrated – parts of the text).

Finally, I would like to focus attention on one more point: the above interpretation of passage XXIV, 1460a5-11 of *Poetics*, in my view, makes it

possible to analyze the question of the individualization of Homeric characters and at the same time, provides an opportunity to study the problem of the genesis of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in an innovative way. I mean the fact that, according to Aristotle, Homer exceeds other epic poets in the large number of dialogic parts of his poems. I think, that the double innovation of the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – his successful aspiration to the compositionally organized monumentality, or to an extensive and at the same time, structurally united composition, as well as to the large number of dialogic parts of the text – can be logically connected to each other. However, Homeric researchers, as far as I know, have never taken such an opportunity. But this is the subject of further discussion (7).

## REFERENCES:

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- > (3) Lucas D. W., *Aristotle, Poetics*, Introduction, Commentary and Appendixes, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978.
- > (4) Else G. F., *Aristotele's Poetics: The Argument*, Leiden 1957.
- > (5) <http://www.gradesaver.com/aristotles-poetics/study-guide/section6/> (Summary and Analysis of Chapt., 21-24).
- > (6) Aristotle in 23 vls., v. 23, translated by W. H. Fyfe, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1932.  
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