

Plain Speaking Tragedies: The Role of *Lexis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*

In the following essay I offer an account of the role of *lexis* or 'diction' in Aristotle's *Poetics*. A reconsideration of *lexis*, its scope in the *Poetics*, and its relationship to Aristotle's theory of tragedy, should shed new light on some old questions: first, to what extent does Aristotle emphasize discourse over song, and the iambic meter of dialogue over lyric poetry? The intense interest in the singing chorus, its origins and significance, among modern scholars over the past two centuries, has at times been characterized as explicitly anti-Aristotelean (e.g. Loraux: 2002; esp. ch. 5). Any such project should be careful not to set up a straw man in Aristotle whose reasons for largely excluding lyric verse from explicit discussion are not obvious, and should be carefully considered. Secondly, if theories of the Greek chorus, which refocus our attention on the lyrics of tragedy and their nondiscursive elements, often also articulate efforts to grapple with collective tragedies in the contemporary world (Billings 2013), then the same impulse, to think the collective, should not be immediately denied to Aristotle himself.

In tuning to the *Poetics* and the role of *lexis*, I will begin with a fundamental observation: The primary locus for the interpretation of style in tragedy was for Aristotle the tragic trimeter. In Aristotle's treatment of style (*Poetics* 22), outside of a single allusion to dithyramb, *there is no mention nor citation of any kind of lyric verse*. No mention is made of the lyrics of tragedy. Therefore, the discussion of 'diction' in chapter 22 seems to revolve around spoken verse, that is, verse forms recited without the aid of musical instruments. Does *lexis* in Aristotle's conception then refer exclusively to dialogue-composition in spoken verses (i.e., hexameter and trimeter)? The simple answer is, no —as at 1450b 12–15 Aristotle makes

clear: λέξιν εἶναι τὴν διὰ τῆς ὀνομασίας ἐρμηνείαν, ὃ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἐμμέτρων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λόγων ἔχει τὴν αὐτὴν δύναμιν, “I define diction as expression through the choice of words—something that has the same capacity in both verse and prose.” The domain of expression through word-choice (τὴν διὰ τῆς ὀνομασίας ἐρμηνείαν) includes all poetry and prose and so naturally the entirety of any dramatic text. Aristotle shows no initial sign that he will limit the scope of his discussion of *lexis* to the spoken verses. This remark on the pervasive significance of ‘expression through the choice of words’ (i.e. pervasive across genres) is then a general stylistic comment, and, in my view, a hint that the discussion of *lexis* in the *Poetics* belongs in the wider ambit of Aristotle’s reflections on language, to be compared for example with the sustained treatment in *Rhetoric* 3.

This essay aims to point up the systematic emphasis in the *Poetics* on spoken verse when it comes to any kind of discussion of poetic language. First and foremost, it must be recognized how “generally speaking, Aristotle is disinterested in the *distinctive features* of poetic language; he views them as of secondary importance and as not essential in relation to signification” (Baechle 2007, 140). If Aristotle had been more interested in the generic distinctiveness of tragic language as such, his treatment of style might have been correspondingly broader and more detailed. Instead, Aristotle strikes a certain compromise between the philological onus of a full reconstruction of the audience’s shared sensibility for trimeter dialogue and the exposition of one of his own ideas about language: namely that the relationship between sense and style is conditioned by tensions inherent in what a writer or speaker owes to his audience (Halliwell 1993). On my reading, the virtue of clarity (σαφήνεια) emerges as a quality of verbal style that is of fundamental significance for Aristotle in his thinking about language and poetry. It is important however not to miss Aristotle’s specific point about clarity

in *Poetics* 22: that the clarity of tragic speech is a clarity appropriate to the tragic stage, and ought to be compared but not conflated with clarity in other domains and arts.

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