

The Birth of the Tragedy according to J. C. Scaliger's *Poetics*

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Abstract: The catalogue of genres presented by Scaliger in book 1, 4 *et seq.* of *Poetics*, is organized chronologically and describes the origin of various poetic forms based on the most primitive life styles. The theoretician is consistent with his system in that he justifies the origin of the tragedy in the comedy, as well as offering a definition of the tragedy different to the one advocated for by Aristotle

Keywords: Humanism; Renaissance poetics; Dramatic Genres; Scaliger.

According to Julius Caesar Scaliger², any form of language, as any other thing related to human beings, is necessarily contained in one of these three categories: the necessary, the useful and the enjoyable things. These functions are immersed in a slow evolution process, in which a new use of *sermo*, at first *corpus rude et inchoatum*³, is adopted. Also included in this process is the appearance of poetry as the climax and highest expression of *sermo*, of the different forms of poetry represented by literary genres and their types and, amongst them, tragedy. In our view, this link between poetry and language is also a characteristic of

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² We have considered the following publication for quotations and references to the Scaliger's text, showing the corresponding page after the book number and the chapter number in Arabic numerals: *Julius Caesar Scaliger. Poetices Libri Septem. Sieben Bücher über die Dichtkuns.* Unter Mitwirkung von M. Fuhrmann herausgegeben von L. Deitz und G. Vogt-Spira (Stuttgart 1994-2003) Volume 1, book 1, 1994.

³ 1.1.58.

humanist poetics⁴ in the middle of Renaissance. In addition, it is absolutely consistent with the importance given to language as an entity at that time which, together with reasoning, was considered as the most human-specific quality. It is also fully adequate for the interests of an author who, some twenty years before, had explained the causes rationally as applied to grammar studies of the Latin language.

However, it is obvious that the great work by Scaliger is deeply rooted in tradition, accepting or confronting multiple elements, doctrines and different sorts of opinions, from theoretical and historic-literary, philosophical, rhetorical, linguistic, grammatical ones to, obviously, poetical ones. Aristotle was Scaliger's self-confessed master, not only — but specially — with regard to *Poetics*. Regarding the abounding use of tradition, it did not prevent Scaliger from creating a very customized, elaborated and complex theoretical, aesthetic and literary system, which enabled him to differently examine the data taken from tradition. Some decades ago, the way used by the Renaissance author to refute and interpret capital postulates and concepts of Aristotelian poetics in a new way became evident⁵. It is a logical and impera-

⁴ See H.F. Plett, "The Place and Function of Stile in Renaissance Poetics": J.J. Murphy (ed.), *Renaissance Eloquence Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric*, Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 1983, pages 357-375, about the "humanist poetics" characterization as a type of treatise against the "court" type. Despite the author, who relates the first type to Scaliger's work, bases this difference mainly on the role of style in poetic treatises, and mainly in the treatment of figures, for us his conclusions are also significant: page 373: [...] *Suffice it to say that the humanistic style concept is primarily addressed to the learned respublica literaria and that it implies a pedagogical ethos that ascribes to the language of poetry a civilizing power of immense effect. Such is the ideology of what historical scholarship has come to term "civic humanism" [...]*.

⁵ B. Weinberg, "Scaliger versus Aristotle on Poetics": *Modern Philology* 39 (1942) 337-360. Text in Spanish: *Estudios de poética clasicista*. Robortello, Escalígero, Minturno, Castelvetro. Edition, texts' selection and preface by



tive consequence of the system and method used by him, which is mainly — but not only — based on his linguistic conception of poetry. There is no doubt that he was constrained by the exegesis that had been and still was applied to Aristotelian texts and other documents on that matter over the last centuries. The main aspect of these divergences, or at least the most outstanding one, is related to the definition of tragedy and to its constituent elements. Given the representative value of the genre to the Lyceum founder, to a large extent it is also related to the rest of poetry.

Book I *Historicus* as a whole is presented as a privileged meeting environment for inherited conventions and information defining Scaliger's system more adequately. This is due to the nature of the interests and contents included in it. It is not only a mere diachronic description about the origin of poetry and the origin and division of the different types of poetry, but it is also a work where fundamental matters, such as its relationship with the rest of forms of discourse, its functions and aims, and its components or causes, are addressed. This is done without forgetting the efficient cause of poetry: the poet, who is classified by Scaliger in different groups depending on various criteria⁶. It was precisely after this classification (at the end of chapter 2), when he focused on poetry and its product, *poesis* against *poema*. He considered the latter as constituent of and inseparable from the former, and intended to organize the specific sorts and types according to a rational method taken from Aristotle⁷.

J. García Rodríguez. Spanish translation: P. Conde Parrado and J. García Rodríguez (Madrid 2003) 109-139 (pages 114 and 135 *et seq.*).

⁶ Cf. J. A. Sánchez Marín: "Origen y naturaleza de la poesía según Julio César Escaligero": *Actas del Congreso Internacional sobre Humanismo y Renacimiento*. Vol. 1. Coord. M. Pérez González (León 1998) 647-653.

⁷ 1,2,90: [...] *Differunt autem poemata modis tribus. Hi sunt: quae imitatur, quibus imitatur et quomodo imitatur. Imitatur Medeam eandem Ovidius in Metamorphosi quam Seneca in tragoedia. Res igitur eadem, at versus quibus imitantur diversi, modus quo imitantur diversus, quippe aliter in scaena per personas*

The fundamental criterion then announced, which was based on imitation, was an intermediate objective accompanying a final one (*docere cum delectatione*), and also an organizing principle of Scaliger's *Poetics* and the basis of the three theoretical books: Book II on the means used to imitate; book III on imitated things; and book IV on the way we imitate. Short and tight chapter 3 is used as an introduction to the huge amount of poetic genres and types that Scaliger tried to systematize, as explained before, in particular from chapter 3 to chapter 57, the final one in book I.

In chapter 3, which is exclusively devoted to imitation modes as the genre characterization and division criterion (*Poematum per modos divisio et eorum ordo*), only some of them are specifically mentioned as simple opposite examples. For this purpose, the corresponding Greek but mostly Latinized terminology⁸, was used. Scaliger distinguished between: the narrative mode, illustrated with Lucretius, as Diomedes had done; the dramatic one, used by him to reject the *imitativum* term, which, in his view, can be applied to poetry as a whole; and the mixed one, without accepting Greek *koinón*, which was identified by him as

dramata, aliter in epico mixtum genus videtur. Iidem versus in Aeneide et Tityro; res et modus alii. Idem modus in Tytiro et in comoediis; res et versus non iidem. Cf. Arist., Po 1447a 16ss. We use the following edition for the Aristotelian text: D.W. Lucas: Aristotle Poetics. Introduction, Commentary and Appendixes by... (Oxford 1968).

⁸1.3.90-94: [...] Modi igitur sic dividuntur. Alius in narratione simplici consistit, quale est Lucretii poema; hoc Graeci diegematikón et exegematikón et apodiegematikón. Alius est in collocutionibus positus, cuiusmodi in comoediis; a Graecis dialogetikón prima et summa ratione...Hoc genus dialogetikón etiam ab gestu et actione dramatikón appellatum fuit. Drân etiam Dorica lingua significat agere...Quare histrio qui est imitator cum dicatur drân, imitativum hoc item genus non sunt veriti quidam nominare, tametsi iidem universae poeseos finem agnoverint imitationem. Mixtum autem est, in quo et narrat poeta et introducit collocutiones. Graeci miktón recte, koinón minus recte... Dramatici autem genera complura, quae mox suis locis digeremus. Antiquissimum pastorale, proximum comicum, e quo natum tragicum. Mixtum autem epicum, quod idcirco omnium est princeps, quia continet materias universas [...].



the epic genre, also as Diomedes⁹. The first divergence in connection with his expected model is explained as follows: in Aristotle's *Poetics*¹⁰, considering the interpretation preferred by the most part of editors as accepted¹¹, a tripartite classification of genres based on the imitation mode would not exist, since the "mixed" one would become just a variant or modality of the purely narrative one. This one differs from the "no-change" narration because it is the poet himself who narrates, both modalities characterizing epic. However, there is one more — and more striking — divergence. After mentioning a series of dramatic genres and their connections (the pastoral genre as the more ancient one, followed by the comedy, which in turn originated the

⁹ Diom.. gramm. 1.482 Keil: [...] *Poematos genera sunt tria. Aut enim activum est vel imitativum, quod Graeci dramaticum vel mimeticon, aut enarrativum vel enuntiativum, quod Graeci exegeticon vel apangelticon dicunt, aut commune vel mixtum, quod Graeci koinón vel miktón appellant. Dramaticum est vel activum in quo personae agunt solae sine ullius poetae interlocutione, ut se habent trágicae et comicae fabulae; quo genere scripta est prima bucolicon et ea cuius initium est 'quo te, Moeri, pedes?' exegeticon est vel enarrativum in quo poeta ipse loquitur sine ullius personae interlocutione, ut se habent tres georgici et prima pars quarti, item Lucreti carmina et cetera his similia. Koinón est vel commune in quo poeta ipse loquitur et personae loquentes introducuntur, ut est scripta Ilias et Odyssia tota Homeri et Aeneis Vergilii et cetera his similia.* The most evident differences between Scaliger and Diomedes regarding this matter are the fact that the former does not specifically mention the triad to refer to the modes as a whole, and that the latter includes lyric poetry as the second form of the mixed type — *ut est Archilochi et Horatii*. Otherwise, as Deitz — op. cit., 1.1, 54 — states, the typology of genres based on imitation modes is not really transcendental to Scaliger, as we will check below. In addition, from Diomedes' point of view, classification is not related to imitation and its modes at all, and apart from a superficial and very distant Aristotelian echo, nothing is perceived.

¹⁰ Po. 1448a 19-24.

¹¹ Cf. Lucas, *Aristotle...* 67. And V. Garcia Yebra, *Aristotélous peri poietikês. Aristotelis ars poetica. Poética de Aristóteles*. Trilingual Edition (Madrid 1974) 251, no. 46. He indicates, in the controversial text, a main opposition between epic and dramatic poetry and other secondary between two types of epic poets. According to this author, tripartite exposition presented by Diomedes can come from Varro.



tragic one), Scaliger considered the epic genre as a mixed genre, which at the same time, is the main one (*princeps*), because it contains every subject. Nevertheless, and not paying attention to this typology based on imitation modes any more, at the end of chapter 3 he acknowledged two possible procedures to address genres: depending on their dignity or quality, based on the excellence of represented or imitated things, or depending on the moment where they were created. The hierarchical order is specified as follows: firstly, anthems and paeans; secondly, songs, odes and scholia praising hard-working people; thirdly, the epic genre, which dealt with heroes and other more modest characters¹²; next, tragedy and comedy follow, comedy on its own being the fourth¹³; and, lastly, satires, farces, games, nuptials, elegies, monodies, songs and epigrams. Considering the chronological/historical order, the oldest genre also represents the simplest, weakest and clumsiest one. It is the origin of the evolution of the different genres and poetic forms to a higher degree of perfection.

The catalogue of genres based on the chronological order is not specified, because it is the one followed by the author, who considered it was based on nature, where the simplest genre is the origin and basis to build the rest¹⁴. Afterwards, and in accordance with this principle and planning, the author devotes long chapter 4 to expose the origin, development and different forms of Pastoral

¹² 1.3.94: [...] *Horum vero tractandorum ratio duplex: aut enim nobilitatem respiciemus aut tempora, quibus quidque exortum est. Ac nobilissimi quidem hymni et paeanes, secundo loco mele et odae et scholia, quae in virorum fortium laudibus versabantur. Tertio loco epica, in quibus et heroes sunt et alii minutiores* [...]. Despite this meticulous specification of the *res* level, imitated things, the epic “principality” is maintained in the book III (*Heroica*. Chapter 95, while the next chapter is jointly devoted to tragedy, comedy and mime).

¹³ Ibidem: [...] *Quem ordinem consequetur etiam tragoedia simul cum comoedia. Comoedia tamen seorsum quartam sedem obtinebit* [...].

¹⁴ Ibidem: [...] *Quod si tempora putemus ipsa, antiquissimum idem et mollissimum et simplicissimum et ineptissimum intellegemus. Praestat autem ab hoc auspicari naturam imitando, quae ex simplicioribus cetera componit* [...].



(*Pastoralia*). These aspects are used to describe the origin of poetry, which dates back to a very old life genre in remote times. Three social groups are distinguished in them, which are respectively focused on pasturage, hunting and agriculture. Except from hunters, who do not use to talk due to the nature of their activity, each group create their own songs. Shepherds were the pioneers for they were the oldest one and their profession made it possible for them to have more free time while watching over their herds. Harmony, which was discovered in nature, was present in these primitive songs, be it in the form of imitating birds or whistling trees. Scaliger narrates the development of both pastoral and rural songs sang by peasants, mainly during cereal and grape harvest time. At first as a result of improvisation and natural life, and progressively adopting artistic characteristics, their forms and Greek names are mentioned in connection with other peoples, and with existing religious worships in Greece. He also deals with the origin of *Bucolics* among Sicilian people. Theocritus Idylls are mentioned on numerous occasions and Virgil's *Bucolics* are referred to several times. He explained the latter in detail at different problematic points.

After treating the differentiation of arts based on imitation modes in chapter 3, which resulted in the classification of genres¹⁵, the next chapter in Aristotle's *Poetics* is devoted to the origin of poetry and its most primitive phases of development with the appearance of tragedies and comedies¹⁶. Chapter 5 is also devoted to provide a historical explanation, address the development of comedy and the way tragedy is treated as compared to epic¹⁷. Chapter 6 is devoted to define the tragedy and to determine its constitutive parts. Using a very parallel distribution, the Renaissance theoretician studies the origin of the two most

¹⁵ Arist. *Po.* 1448a 19-b3.

¹⁶ Arist. *Po* 1448b4-1449a 30.

¹⁷ Arist. *Po* 1449a3 1-b20.

important dramatic forms in chapter 5: comedy and tragedy. Chapter 6 is exclusively devoted to tragedy. The origin of comedy as a result of rural songs accounts for the continuity between them and dramatic genres, which evolve in an almost natural way. The author highlights a common term for the pastoral *actio* and the scenic one: *komásdo*, used by Theocritus¹⁸. This proximity is further acknowledged by the demand of comedy, which was also exercised by Sicilian people. The game and party spirit characteristic of the pastoral environment and its original creations, is also present in this close dramatic genre in that the group of young singers and dancers, who are sated after the feast, stroll over crossroads and suburbs, is highly important. They are known as *kómai*, a term the author found to be etymologically related to *komázein*¹⁹. Nevertheless, according to Scaliger, the natural and logical development of man's life after the roughest and most primitive periods does not only serve to explain the progressive development of genres in a continuous effort of creation. It also determines that the quest for and finding of what is pleasant, most common and ordinary, was prior to and more immediate than the quest for what is contrived, refined and arduous. This is the reason why it may be suggested that, from a temporal point of view, comedy prevails over tragedy²⁰. The refutation of the opposite thesis seems to be addressed to grammarian Evancio, whose arguments in favor of tragedy preceding comedy²¹ are rebated by

¹⁸ Theoc. 3.1: *komásdo poti tán Amarillída*.

¹⁹ It is slightly different in Arist. *Po.* 1448a 35-38.

²⁰ 1.5.124: [...] *Tragoediam vero esse rem antiquam constat ex historia. Ad Thesei namque sepulchrum certasse tragicos legimus. Non tamen, quod tradunt, tragoediam comoedia vetustiore. Nam et res laetae in cantionibus quaesitae prius et prius nuptiae quam interitus, et potationes quam sobrietates, et communis sermo quam ampullatus, et pastoralis vita quam regia. Probatio quoque falsa. Aiunt enim Iliadem priorem Odyssea, Iliadem tragoediae modulum, comoediae Odysseam [...]*.

²¹ Evanth. *de fabula* 1.4 s., 14 Wessner: [...] *itaque, ut rerum ita etiam temporum reperto ordine, tragoedia prior prolata esse cognoscitur. nam ut ab incultu ac feris moribus paulatim perventum est ad mansuetudinem urbesque sunt conditae*



Scaliger, on the basis of dramatic characteristics present in the famous Homeric poems, which had already been highlighted by Aristotle²². Scaliger neither accepts that the *Iliad* represents an example of tragedy, nor the *Odyssey* an example of comedy, because he does find some elements of authentic tragedy in the last one, but not in the *Iliad*. To sum up, Homer is not an expert on tragedy or on comedy: on the contrary, he learnt from peasants' small fables and from the old women from Ithaca and Chios much more than what he taught.

Despite these judgments and other similarly negative ones about Homer, who according to Aristotle²³ was "the maximum poet of the noble genre", Scaliger does not consider that he has seriously contradicted his own master so far. With regard to Homeric poetry, it is known that Aristotle finds *Margites* close to comedies, and affirms the analogy between tragedies and both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*²⁴. Furthermore, Aristotle, as Scaliger indicated, does not specify that the tragedy had been invented before, but rather that it had reached perfection before²⁵ (an also official recognition, as the Greek philosopher clarified²⁶).

Even with not sufficient or convincing enough data, as he stated, Scaliger does not only opt for contradicting grammarian authors, whom he attacked again on the grounds of the name of

et vita mitior atque otiosa processit, ita res tragicae longe ante comicas inventae.// quamvis igitur retro prisca volventibus reperiatur Thespis tragoediae primus inventor et comoediae veteris pater Eupolis cum Cratino Aristophaneque esse credatur, Homerus tamen, qui fere omnis poeticae largissimus fons est, etiam his carminibus exempla praebeuit et velut quandam suorum operum legem praescripsit: qui Iliadem ad instar tragoediae, Odysseiam ad imaginem comoediae fecisse monstratur [...].

²² Arist. Po. 1448b 35-1449a 2.

²³ 1448b 34.

²⁴ Cf. supra no. 22.

²⁵ 1.5.126 [...] *Itaque Aristoteles non dixit prius inventam tragoediam, sed prius excultam; sero enim comoediam expolitam [...].* Cf. Arist. Po. 1448b 13-15.

²⁶ 1449b 1-2.

the tragedy²⁷, but also for affirming a common genre for comedy and tragedy. This choice was based on the authority of philosophy, and on the fact that they have a common name, *fabula*, and they are the same thing with regard to the imitation mode²⁸. Therefore, it seems that, by emphasizing this aspect, he is closer Aristotle, or at least the latter seems to be very important for him. However, the coup of grace arrives very soon: based on the text he had at his disposal, he included the definition of tragedy by the Greek philosopher in Greek language, without the Latin translation, but with a comment; even if he states that he is not trying to contradict the Aristotelian definition, but merely proposing his own version (:“imitation, through actions, of the eminent fortune, with a unfortunate denouement, with a serious

²⁷ 1.6.130: [...] *Nomen traxit ab hirco nullam aliam ob causam, nisi quia in eius numinis honorem ageretur eiusmodi fabula, cuius victima esset hircus. Eo igitur victores donati rem illam divinam facere. Primum sane agi coeptam vindemiarum tempore scriptum est, unde occasio data grammaticis, uti parà tòn trýgeton nomen ducerent quasi trygodían, quam vocem integram etiam apud Aristophanem habes Akharneusi. Qui eam primus dederit, haud ita pro comperto habetur. Satis constat illud a Thespi poeta factam nitidiorem, qui primus pensiles scaenas in plaustis circumegit addiditque nudis oribus faecem pro persona, a quibus faecibus vinaceis alii tragoediae nomen deductum maluere. Id enim significat trýx, quemadmodum trýgetos vindemiam. Falluntur tamen hi quoque, cum ipso Thespi nomen hoc fuerit antiquius [...]* Here, we find the three possible etymologies to explain the term established by Scaliger (1st, *trágos* “billy goat”; 2nd, *trýgetos* “grape harvest”; 3rd, *trýx* “wine or oil sediments”), which are found in the grammatical tradition. Cf., Evanth., de fabula I,2 -1st and 3rd -; more extended Diom., gramm. I, 487 s. Keil -1st, 3rd, mentioning Horace, and 2nd corrupted by Scaliger with Aristophanes, Ach. 499s.-; see about the last text Deitz, Julius Caesar Scaliger..., page 131, no. 145.

²⁸ 1.5.126 and 128: [...] *Tragoediae vero et comoediae genus unum commune, commune unum nomen, fabula. Certe haec haud longe abest ab ea sententia, quam introduxit tantum, non etiam definivit Plato in Symposio [...]. Cum igitur unum sint comoedia et tragoedia, quod ad modum attinet [...]*.



discourse made in verse"²⁹), he chides some fundamental terms in the Aristotelian theory (harmony, singing, extension and catharsis) and he qualifies other ones that which are not included in his definition³⁰. No other term in the Aristotelian theory was understood or accepted by him.

There is no doubt that his strong opposition to Aristotle's concept of tragedy is present in the widest sense in historical and cultural conceptions professed by the Italian-French theoretician in connection with language. He considered language as the driving force of both civilizing development as a whole, and related manifestations as poetic activity in the hands of men that are described widely and in detail at the dawn of this work. These conceptions form the foundations of the system he advocates for. In addition, they are consistent with the *iudicium*, specified in book V, of this Renaissance author. Scaliger is completely aware of the differences between tragedy and comedy (social status of characters, nature of fortunes and matters, end or denouement and, therefore, style³¹). However he assumes the existence of a close relationship in their origin between the rural ways of life of shepherds and farmers, and popular festivities and certain types of worship exercised by peasants to mark equally the birth of both dramatic forms among

²⁹ Translation based on the Spanish version. 1.6.132: [...] *Quam nolo hic impugnare aliter quam nostram subnectendo: imitatio per actiones illustris fortunae, exitu infelici, oratione gravi metrica* [...].

³⁰ 1.6.132 and 134: *Nam quod harmoniam et melos addunt, non sunt ea, ut philosophi loquuntur, de essentia tragoediae. Etenim tragoedia in scaena tantum esset, eadem extra scaenam non esset. Quod autem dixit mégethos ekhoúses, positum est ad differentiam epopeiae, quae aliquando prolixa est, non tamen semper cuiusmodi vides apud Musaeum. Praeterea kátharsis vox neutiquam cuius materiae servit, sicut mégethos mediocritatem significat hic. Paucis enim versibus nequit satisfieri populi expectationi, qui eo convenit, ut multorum dierum fastidia cum aliquot horarum hilaritate commutet. Quaemadmodum inepta quoque est prolixitas* [...].

³¹ 1.6.128 and 130: *Tragoedia, sicut et comoedia in exemplis humanae vitae conformata, tribus ab illa differt: personarum condicione, fortunarum negotiorumque qualitate, exitu, quare stilo quoque differat necesse est...*

the Greek people. An accomplished *accessio sapientiae* and a complete awareness of mastery will only be reached by poets thanks to Latin poetry. Poetic perfection goes hand in hand with Virgil and is found in the *Aeneid*, but not in tragedy.



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Resumo: O catálogo de géneros apresentado por Escalígero no livro 1, 4 ss. da *Poética* está organizado de forma cronológica e descreve a origem de várias formas poéticas baseando-se nos modos de vida mais primitivos. O teorizador é consistente com este sistema em que justifica a origem da tragédia com a comédia, oferecendo também uma definição da tragédia oposta à apresentada por Aristóteles.

Palavras-chave: Humanismo; Poética do Renascimento; Géneros dramáticos; Escalígero.

Resumen: El catálogo de géneros que presenta Escalígero en el libro 1, 4 ss. de la *Poética* está organizado de forma cronológica y describe el origen de las distintas formas poéticas basándose en los modos de vida más primitivos. El poetólogo se muestra coherente con su sistema al justificar el origen de la tragedia en la comedia, ofreciendo además una definición de tragedia diferente de la que propone Aristóteles.

Palabras clave: Humanismo; Poética Renacentista; Géneros dramáticos; Escalígero.

Résumé: Le catalogue de genres présenté par Scaliger au livre 1, 4 ss. de la *Poétique* est organisé chronologiquement et décrit l'origine de différentes formes poétiques en s'appuyant sur les modes de vie plus primitifs. Le théoricien reste cohérent avec ce système et il justifie l'origine de la tragédie avec celle de la comédie, offrant une définition de la tragédie qui s'oppose à celle présentée par Aristote.

Mots-clé: Renaissance; poétique; tragédie; J. C. Scaliger.

