# Study on Aristotle's Dramatic Epic View and Its Influence

Guode Li[1,*]

[1]Baotou Teachers' College, Baotou, Inner Mongolia, China
*Corresponding author. Email: 584631709@qq.com

## ABSTRACT

While the dramatic theories of Aristotle's "Poetics" have been researched deeply and systematically in the academic circle, the study of his epic theory is obviously insufficient. After reviewing the academic background of Greece at that time and combing and comparing the critical theories of epic in the West, this paper mainly studies Aristotle's view of epic. Aristotle believes that the plot structure, types and elements of epic should be the same as drama, and the plot structure should be dramatized in particular. On this basis, the author holds that Aristotle's view of epic is a dramatic epic view, which has directly influenced the study and evaluation of epic for more than 20 centuries. "Dramatic epic view" is an innovative term proposed in this paper.

*Keywords:* Aristotle, epic view, dramatization, organic integrity

## I. INTRODUCTION

It was not until the emergence of oral formulaic theory in the 1960s that the international study on epics did an about-turn, and the paradigm, method and theory of epic study were completely transformed. A glance of the history of Western epics shows that Western classical epics dominated from ancient Greece to the 19th century, which is a miracle for Western poetics with many schools of thought. This is closely related to Aristotle's view of the epic. Aristotle is considered to be the first Western scholar to systematically study epic poems. [1] In *"Poetics"*, he criticizes all other epics but praises *Homeric Epics* and proposes that epics should be dramatic. It is no surprise that Aristotle concluded that epic is inferior to tragedy, but his appeal for dramatic epic hugely swayed the inheritance and development of Greek epic then, the research idea of Western epic, the creation of literary epics and even the narrative development of Western mainstream literature. As a result, the exploration on Aristotle's view on epic to some extent is theoretically significant for the re-evaluation of classical epic theory and the study on epic at China and abroad. This paper will delve the academic background of Aristotle's view of epic, specific requirement of epic dramatization and its influence.

## II. ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

It is a tradition of ancient Greek art to compare the structure of articles and art to organic life. According to Socrates, "the structure of article should be living thing, with featuring body, head and tail, middle part and limbs. The relation between parts, parts and the whole should be perfectly harmonized." [2] Socrates compares the structure of article to a living animal, aiming to explain the relationship between the parts of structure and the whole, and between the parts and the parts. Legend has it that Plato dissected a table and a frog, and found that the table could be rebuilt, but the frog lost its life forever. The table is made up of various parts, and the parts precede the whole, while the frog itself is developed from an indivisible whole, and the whole precedes parts. After the whole is divided, the parts lose their relevance. It is well known that Plato's eidos holds art is an imitation of second reality, the second reality an imitation of the first reality, while the first reality is the eidos itself. Therefore, art is separated from truth by three layers, and eidos is the most perfect whole. Aristotle, however, doesn't share Plato's idealism, holding that "art is imitation reproduction of the world as it is seen in normal action and perception." [3] Aristotle took that art was the second nature and the real. These are philosophical reflections on the relationship between art and nature in ancient Greece, and are the theoretical basis for the theory of artistic imitation. *"Poetics"* stipulates that the essence of epic, tragedy, comedy, Disulambes and other arts are all imitation, which differs in medium, object and way of imitation. Aristotle took epic and tragedy as the art of imitation, and the best effect can be obtained when the plot structure is as a properly sized animal. Therefore, what he demands: the epic plot should be like an animal, is not a whim, but grows out of academic tradition then. It is the ideal of artistic naturalization and the origin of organic holism in literature.

Besides the influence of academic tradition, the status quo of epic narrative then cannot be ignored. It is obvious in works then such as *The Republic* and *Poetics* that epic was in decline at that time. Plato is famous for his criticisms of epics and poets. He thought the epic was harmful to the education of the youth and drive poets out of his domain. Aristotle criticizes most epic poets of the day, arguing that instead of organizing the plot around an action, they end up either chroniclers or biographers. However, the plot of *Homeric Epics* is a copy of action, which accords with the plot theory and poetic ideal of Aristotle. *Iliad* revolves around the wrath of Achilles; while *Odyssey* revolves around the return of Odysseus. Aristotle's praise for *Homeric Epics* is based on his view on poetry. His theoretical justification of *Homeric Epics* is also reflected in his educational practice [4]. When Alexander the Great was his private student, Aristotle had Homer in his class. [5] At the Lucian School in Athens, the epic was one of the main topics of discussion among the Peripatetic apprentices.[1]

There is no doubt that Aristotle views the epic from the standpoint of tragedy. Epic serves as a foil to his study of tragedy, and its purpose and conclusion are obvious: tragedy is superior to epic. This seems to be the result of comparative study, but in fact it is the necessity that the ancient epic art is replaced by the emerging drama. The fall of epic declared the end of the epic era, while *Homeric Epics* survived the crucial transformation period of social thought. Aristotle's praise of *Homeric Epics*, which he hailed as a model, has become a standard by which other epics are judged. This directly belittles the other epics, and limits the existence and development of various forms of epics. Tragedy is a more recent art than the epic, which grows out of oral tradition. Although the subject is mostly derived from myths and epics, tragedy covers more rational thinking and philosophical implications, which are more in line with the social and cultural context of the time. This is due to the times. As Zhu Guangqian puts it, "it must also be remembered that Plato lived at a time when Greek culture had passed from literary peak to philosophical peak." [6]

## III.   THE DRAMATIZATION OF EPIC PLOT

### A.  *Organic whole*

Aristotle discusses the epic plot in a whole chapter (Chapter 23), beginning by suggesting that it should be dramatized: "the art of imitation by narrative and metre is now discussed. It is obvious that the epic poet, like

tragic poet, should compose a dramatic plot, that is, an action with a beginning, a middle, and an end, that is, a complete unity. In this way, it can be like a complete individual animal, giving people a sense of pleasure caused by it." [7] Aristotle first defined epic as the art of imitation and demanded that the composition of epic plots should be consistent with tragedy. He took that plot is the most important element of tragedy, and therefore of epic poetry, the essence and soul of epic poetry. The epic plot should also be a parody of a complete action, with a beginning, middle and end, like a pleasurable animal with a head, body and tail. The organic integrity of art is the idealization of Aristotle's poetics, which is highlighted by the requirement for the completeness of plot structure of tragedy, which he applies directly to the epic and requires the epic poets to learn to prepare plots.

The decisive factor in the epic drama lies in the epic poet: "Compared with other poets, Homer really stands out. Although the Troy War is complete, he never describe the entire course. Otherwise, the plot would be too long to show the whole picture. If the length is controlled, numerous events will make the work too complicated. In fact, he only described part of the war, interspersed with other content, such as the use of ship list, to enrich its content." [8] Aristotle held that the epic plot should not be described in its original order, or else it would become a chronicle and should be compiled by the poet just as a drama is. Aristotle even took that Homer was the best poet to arrange the plot, as Homer adopted a way different from his counterparts to arrange plots. Rather than writing down the whole war, he depicted the epic with a complete action as center, finally creating an organic whole with head, body and tail. He concluded that the two aspects of "plot choice" and "intersperse" best reflect Homer's superb ability on plot arrangement. Among the options for constructing epic plot around "a character," "a period," or "an action", Homer chose the last one, interspersing the narrative of the main action with other related events, such as the causes of the war, the ship list, the scenes of everyday life, and so on.

It was common practice for most poets then to arrange epic plots around "a period": "Instead of being a record of an action, history covers all events that took place in a period of time and involved one or some people — though there is only casual correlation between one event and others. The Battle of Salamis and the war with Carthaginian in Sicily took place at the same time, but with very different finish. In the case of difference in order, sometimes one thing follows another without deriving the same ending. Most poets, however, write epic poems in this way." [9] Poets who developed the epic plot in a historical way was criticized by Aristotle as various events in a historical period cannot form an organic whole. Although there were certain timing and coupling between these events,

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[1]    Aristotle is said to have been fond of pacing up and down corridors and courtyards in his lectures, hence the name Peripatetic Philosophy, also known as corridor school. [Ancient Greek] Aristotle. Translated by Chen Zhongmei. Poetics [M].  Beijing: Commercial Press, 1996.

they could not lead to the same ending. Despite certain sequence and accidental connection, there is a certain sequence and accidental connection, these events share no same finish. If poets formulate the plot in a historical way, the epic will be onerous, which will make it difficult for the audience to understand. The dramatization of epic is not only a request from the perspective of the audience, but also an embodiment of the ideal of poetics as a whole.

The practice of comparing the organic wholeness of tragic plots with most of the loosely structured epics then is subjective, the same as comparing the strengths of tragedy with the weaknesses of epic. However, it leads to the groundless accusations against the chronicles, biographies and multiple action epics, which makes these epics hard to be handed down.

### B. The identity of imitator

Aristotle considered epic to be an art imitated by narrative and verse, and he had clear requirements for the poets: "The poet should speak as little as possible in his own identity, for this is not the work of an imitator. Other poets have always performed with their own ideas, only in imitation of individuals, and only on a limited number of occasions." [10] This is exactly why Aristotle elevates *Homeric Epics* imitations of art and denounces other epics as chronicles. The epic is mainly composed of two parts: the poet's "pure narration" and their imitation of the character's speech, whose proportions in the whole verses are important criteria of dramatization of epic. The following is a discussion of "Table I".

The total number of lines in *Iliad* is 15,693, among which 7,110 lines are imitation of individuals, accounting for about 45%, as shown in "Table I":

Imitation of individuals in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* accounts for about 55% of the total lines, as shown in "Table I".

TABLE I.     PROPORTION OF IMITATION OF INDIVIDUALS IN *HOMERIC EPICS*[2]

| Name | Total number of lines | Number of lines imitating individuals | Ratio | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Iliad | 15693 | 7110 | 45.31% | Translated by Luo Niansheng and Wang Huansheng, 1994, People's Literature Publishing House |
| Odyssey | 12110 | 8237 | 68.02% | Translated by Wang Huansheng, 1997, People's Literature Publishing House |
| Total | 27803 | 15347 | 55.19% | |

The above table shows that in *Homeric Epics*, the lines in which the artist imitates characters account for a large proportion, about 45% in *Iliad* and 68% in *Odyssey*, among which the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth volumes are almost 100%. The number is more than 55% as for the two. No wonder Aristotle praise that Homer excels in this respect: Homer speaks for himself only in a brief prologue, and then imitates characters. Therefore, Aristotle's proposing of dramatic epic is driven by the fact most poets then narrated the epic on behalf of themselves, which was in conflict with his theory that the epic was an imitation of art. It's obvious that Aristotle's requirements for epic artists are as follows: the more imitations, the better.

To sum up, tragedy is a pure imitation art. The actors imitate the actions and words of the characters on the stage and cannot perform with their own identities. While epic is the art combining narration with imitation, the epic artist switches back and forth between poet and character. It follows that the higher the proportion of imitation in epic, the more dramatic it becomes. Aristotle's request is not only the expression of his poetic ideal, but also based on his study of Homer's epic. The original meaning of 'epic' in ancient Greek is speech. Voltaire wrote in *On Epic*: "The word epic comes from the Greek EPOS, which originally meant 'to speak', and by custom this word is associated with narrative of heroic adventures written in verse." Voltaire concluded that there existed no connection between the original intention of epic and heroic narrative, but just a habit. However, it's true that heroic

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[2]     The number of lines in the characters' imitation discourse is calculated by the author from the two works for reference only.

adventure employs large proportion to imitate character's words.

As a result, Aristotle's demand that the epic poet must describe the epic as an imitator, is inevitable, otherwise the epic will be no different from history.

### C. Omniscient effect

Aristotle's purpose is clear: to satisfy the audience's aesthetic demands and pleasure. Tragedy is the imitation of a serious, complete, and of a certain length of action. In proposing such definition, Aristotle certainly included aesthetics. "Completeness" and "certain length" are two necessary conditions from the perspective of aesthetic acceptance, and the latter is the further limitation of the former.

In Chapter 7, he proposes two main elements of beauty: "In addition, to be beautiful, whether it be a living animal or a whole composed of parts, two conditions must be met: the parts of the body must be arranged properly and have a certain, not accidental, volume, as beauty depends on volume and order." [11] He also took that volume and order were two factors in determining beauty, whether natural or artificial. He went on to conclude from experience: Although all are a whole, animals are too small or too large to be beautiful. An animal is only beautiful in the right size. Subsequently, Aristotle also made requirements on the length of the tragic plot: "the plot is too long to summarize, too short to be perceived, and should therefore be easily remembered." [12] This takes into full consideration the audience's aesthetic demands. If the story is too long or too complicated, the audience will not be able to take it all in. The desired effect cannot be achieved, nor can it produce pleasure.

Aristotle sees the length of the epic as the difference between epic and tragedy. Though not demanding on epic's length, Aristotle suggests that sweeping effect should be achieved: "the length criteria mentioned above are applicable: be seen from beginning to end. Given such requirement met, the structure of work should be shorter than that of the early epic, which is approximately equal to the length of several tragedies seen at one time." [13] Obviously this is a little fuzzy. As for "early epic", Chen Zhongmei gives special explanation in the annotation, considering it an implicit criticism of *Homeric Epics* by Aristotle: "Shorter than the early epics" might be interpreted as "shorter than *Iliad* and *Odyssey*," so that "the early epics" would refer to the two. The author thinks that there is another explanation: the early epics are those that maintain the traditional narrative style, and the plots are not dramatized, but still retain the narration style of the original epics. The oral epics handed down to some extent retain their original landscape, which also justifies that the original form of epics is not dramatic epic required by Aristotle, but epics he criticizes focus

on one or more heroes. The three great Chinese epics illustrate this point. The plot and structure of *Homeric Epics* enjoys dramatic characteristics, which are the imitation of actions, and they are neither chronicles nor biographies, which is also the main reason why it is favored by Aristotle.

Aristotle argues that the epic has grown in length considerably longer than tragedy: "The epic has a unique advantage in terms of length. Tragedy can only show what the actors do on the stage, but not many simultaneous events. A parody of the epic, carried out through narrative, makes it possible to describe many simultaneous events — things that, if properly arranged, can add weight to the poem." [14] Aristotle describes the advantage of the epic. The epic poet can describe many things at once, and arouse the interest of the audience, while the tragedy can only imitate one action on the stage, and it is easy to bore the audience. If the epic is to appeal to the audience, it must have a decent plot arrangement, which is to intersperse the main action with relevant events.

Aristotle proposes another evidence for *Homeric Epics* that can be seen at a glance: *Iliad* and *Odyssey* each offer the subject of one or, at most, two tragedies. However, such epics as *Kuplia* and *Little Iliad* can each provide multiple tragic subjects, the latter even as many as eight. The limitation *Homeric Epics* can provide tragic theme just proves the dramatization of its plot, which is an important guarantee for the audience to get a full view.

### D. Self-justification

Aristotle strictly defined the logic of the events of the tragic plot: "Events can only happen one after another". Things appear in accordance with the law of likelihood or necessity. The specific performance of the plot is that the good times turn to the bad times or from the bad times to the good times, for example, Oedipus the king turned from the good times to the bad times.

The tragedy imitated the action of the character on the stage for the audience, while the epic poet told the story of hero to audience. This prevents the audience from seeing the action of the characters, and makes the epic more tolerant of the improbable than the tragic. Aristotle thought Homer had the faculty of "justifying himself" and was good at making use of paradoxical inferences: the second thing was true, and so was the first. A typical example is when Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, tells his wife that he entertained Odysseus before washing his feet, on the grounds that he mentioned the clothes Odysseus was wearing. His wife surmised that it was true that the beggar had seen Odysseus, because Odysseus was wearing the clothes he said he was wearing. Aristotle then concluded that it was preferable for something impossible to happen to be credible than for something possible to happen and

impossible to be credible. A plot should not consist of unreasonable things. It's better not to have any implausible things in the plot; If there is something implausible, put it outside the layout, not in the main plot. [15] But if the absurd is taken, it is better to make such an unreasonable thing perfectly reasonable, which requires the poet's embellishing and concealment, and Homer is such a genius. Aristotle divided such epic into two categories: the viewer's dislike and the poet's glorification of art.

Aristotle carefully analyzed and compared the plot structure, the poet, the plot length and the rationality of the event, and put forward corresponding views and stipulations. Aristotle mainly discusses the tragic art in his *"Poetics"* and examines the epic from a comparative standpoint. The epic is the reference for the study of tragedy. The tragedy is superior than epic, but Aristotle still speaks highly of *Homeric Epics*, as it is a highly "dramatic epic," which he regards as far superior to chronicle epic. However, according to the research results of international epics, oral epics are the original form of epics, and narrating the stories of gods and heroes is the duty of epics. It is a pity in the history of Western epics that Aristotle's dramatic epics objectively limited the diverse inheritance of Greek epics and the research horizon of later epics.

## IV. EPIC GENRE AND COMPOSITION

At the beginning of Chapter 24 of *"Poetics"*, Aristotle made a request for the genre and components of epics: "Furthermore, the genre of epics should be the same as those of tragedies, namely, simple epics, complex epics, character epics and misery epics. *Iliad* is a simple epic of suffering, while *Odyssey* is complex. The characters are also revealed. The duo are superior to other epics in terms of language and thought." [16] Aristotle's classification of epic is also based on the classification of tragedy. In Chapter 10, the classification criteria of tragedies are explained: "It is obvious that the action the plot imitates can be simple or complex, so is plot." [17] The classification of tragedy is based on the action imitated by the plot: the first element of tragedy.

Aristotle thinks that the action imitated by the tragic plot can be divided into simple and complex. "Simple action" means "action that is coherent, in which change is not abrupt and is accompanied by discovery." [18] Chen Zhongmei stated that the "change" here probably refers to the change in the fate of the characters. [19] In general, "change" refers to the protagonist's fate from favorable to adverse. "Coherence" is a requirement for the plot, and "unity" is a requirement for the beauty presented by the structure. "Complex actions" fall into three camps: The first is an action that involves discovery; the second is actions that involve "sudden shifts"; while the third involves the actions of the first

two. "Discovery" is the rediscovery of the identity of the person (the other party), is a process from ignorance to knowledge. The best discoveries happen at the same time as sudden shift, which can inspire compassion and fear. A sudden turn is "a change in the course of action from one direction to the other in accordance with the principle of possibility or necessity". [20] A sudden change of action caused by certain causes is bound to bring about countering effect, and Aristotle believes that such change is either possible or inevitable. The principle of possibility is that in theory, which may not happen in reality. The principle of necessity is logical and follows the order of cause and effect. The action becomes complicated if it involves discovery or a sudden turn. This is the basis of Aristotle's classification of epics. He considers *Iliad* a simple epic and *Odyssey* a complex one. The former is organized around the protagonist Achilles' wrath. The latter is structured around two clues: the first is Odysseus' return journey, and the second is that his wife is waiting at home for Odysseus, which contains a wealth of discoveries and turnings, especially discoveries. Besides "discovery" and "transformation", "suffering" is also an integral of the plot, mainly referring to destructive or painful actions. He regarded *Iliad* as an epic of suffering, and the tragic death of heroes such as Hector were an important basis for his judgment.

According to Aristotle, there are six elements determining the nature of tragedy: plot, character, thought, speech, verse and scene. The object of imitation includes plot, character and thought; the medium of imitation covers speech and verse; while the method of imitation belongs to scene. [21] These six components differ in their importance in tragedy: Plot, the root and soul of tragedy, is priority. Character comes second as tragedy can be a tragedy without it. Thought occupies the third place, especially referring to the ability to express opinions in a proper manner, that is, the ability of a tragedian to imitate his character and express his thoughts and opinions. Speech means the expression of meaning in words, especially the lines used in tragedy to be recited. The verse is the most important "decoration" of tragedy and plays the role of seasoning. Scene is the least important, it has something to do with costumes and props and other theatrical personnel, not with poetry.

As for the composition of epic, Aristotle said, "In addition to verse and scene, the composition of epic is the same as that of tragedy. In fact, the epic should also cover sudden shift, discovery, and suffering, as well as its words and thoughts. Homer was the first to employ such ingredients, and he did it well. In fact, two of his epics embody the content above." [22] It follows that plot, character, speech and thought are the common ingredients of epic and tragedy. On the basis of his research on the components of *Homeric Epics*, Aristotle puts forward these requirements, and on this basis he

gives dramatic classification and identification of the components. His classification of epic genres is also based on plot, which is the most important element of the epic. It can be seen that plot is the basis of Aristotle's poetics theory and the premise of the epic dramatization theory.

## V. CONCLUSION

The epic developed with the social and historical stages is the uncrowned king of art in the pre-writing period. However, the emergence of writing, a seminal creation, forced ancient epic out of stage. Aristotle elevated *Homeric Epics* a model according to his own poetic ideal and practical research, through which he be a pioneer in Western classical epic theory. In addition, his move serves as an important turn in the history of epic, from oral to written, from oral tradition to dramatization.

Aristotle's dramatic epic view and organic holism also directly influenced the epic study and creation of Horatius, Virgil, Vico, Goethe, Hegel, Belinsky, etc. Goethe's re-interpretation of Aristotle's organic holism expands the objects of metaphor in literature from animal to plant, which means that the study of literature develops from formalism to generative theory. It's no exaggeration to take Hegel the master of Western classical epic theory given his in-depth study of the nature and characteristics of epic. According to Yin Hubin, "It should be said that Aristotle's analysis of epic exerted seminal influence on later Western scholars. As a literary genre, epic becomes the predecessor of narrative literature. *Homeric Epics* has become a model of Western literary criticism and creation after a long period of refinement and repeated forging by countless folk artists and literary artists. Cultivated by classical studies and philology, Western epics developed along the Aristotelian paradigm and deepened people's understanding of the form and structure of epics." [23] The classical epic theory in Western poetics endures from ancient Greece to the 19th century, dominating Western epics for more than 20 centuries. It was not until the birth of oral formulaic theory in the 20th century that the international epics entered a new era, turning from written classical to live oral.

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