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Frédérique Woerther

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Chapter 4. The Arabic Philosophical Reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*: Translation, Transmission, and Interpretations. Al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes

Frédérique Woerther

Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990) gives important information concerning Aristotle's *Poetics* in the Arabic context. The treatise was translated at least twice into Arabic: a first time from a Syriac version made by the Christian Abū Bišr Mattā (d. 328/940), and a second time by Abū Bišr Mattā's student, the translator and commentator of Aristotle Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (d. 364/974). Themistius may also have written a commentary on the *Poetics*, but Ibn al-Nadīm notes that this attribution is considered erroneous. The philosopher al-Kindī (d. 252/866) also wrote an abridgment of the *Poetics*:

Account of *Poetica*, Which Means Poetry

Abū Bišr *Mattā* translated it from Syriac into Arabic, and *Yaḥyā* ibn 'Adī also translated it. It is said that in it there was a statement by Themistius, but it is also said that this was falsely claimed to be his. *Al-Kindī* wrote an abridgment of this book.¹

In another passage Ibn al-Nadīm reports that Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī tried to find a copy of the translation of the *Poetics* by Iṣḥāq ibn Ḥunayn (m. 260/873), which implies that the Syriac copy used as a model by Abū Bišr Mattā was this Syriac translation by Iṣḥāq:

Abū Zakaryā' (*Yaḥyā* ibn 'Adī) said that he offered fifty gold coins (s. *dinār*) to Ibrāhīm ibn 'Abd Allāh for a copy of the *Sophistici*, a copy of the *Oratory* [*Rhetorica*], and a copy of the *Poetry* [*Poetica*], as translated by *Iṣḥāq*, but he would not sell them. At the time of his death he burned them.²

1 Abū Bišr Mattā's Arabic Translation

From these two Arabic translations mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm, only Abū Bišr Mattā's translation is extant in an *Unicum*, the *Parisinus* 2346. It is the translation that was used by Avicenna and Averroes. Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī's translation is now lost; probably resulting from the revision of Abū Bišr Mattā's translation,³ Yaḥyā's translation was used by Avicenna⁴ (but not Averroes). Indeed, some technical terms in the *Poetics of the Šifā'* do not appear in Abū Bišr Mattā's version and thus originate from Yaḥyā's translation: for instance, the Greek terms τραγωδία (tragedy) and κωμωδία (comedy), which are systematically translated by Abū Bišr Mattā with the expressions *šinā'a al-madīh* (the art of praise) and *šinā'a al-ḥiǧā'* (the art of satire), are transliterated in Avicenna's text with the forms *ṭrāǧūdyā* and *qūmūdyā*.

Abū Bišr Mattā's translation that was edited several times⁵ is a literal translation that contains many obscurities, first because the Arabs were not aware of the cultural *realia* of fourth-century Athens, in particular those pertaining to tragedy, comedy, and epic. An example of such a literal translation

¹ Ibn al-Nadīm 1871, 250. 4–6; tr. Dodge in Ibn al-Nadīm 1970, 602.4–8.

² Ibn al-Nadīm 1871, 253. 3–4; tr. Dodge in Ibn al-Nadīm 1970, 609.6–10.

³ Hugonnard-Roche 2003, 211: "Several treatises of the *Organon* kept in the *Parisinus Arabus* 2346 contain marginal notes that go back to commentaries by Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī, and confirm his activity as an editor of earlier translations, in particular Iṣḥāq ibn Ḥunayn's translations. He may thus have revised (from the Syriac) Abū Bišr Mattā's translation, and not translated anew Iṣḥāq ibn Ḥunayn's Syriac version."

⁴ See Schrier 1997, 268–272; Afnan 1947; Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 5–9.

⁵ Abū Bišr Mattā 1887; Aristotle 1928; Abū Bišr Mattā 1953; Abū Bišr Mattā 1967.

is the passage at the end of chapter 6 where Aristotle mentions the “spectacle” (Greek ὄψις) as one of the parts of tragedy. The Greek text runs as follows:

(1) Ἡ δὲ ὄψις ψυχαγωγικὸν μὲν, ἀτεχνότατον δὲ καὶ ἥκιστα οἰκεῖον τῆς ποιητικῆς· (2) ἡ γὰρ τῆς τραγωδίας δύναμις καὶ ἄνευ ἀγῶνος καὶ ὑποκριτῶν ἔστιν, (3) ἔτι δὲ κυριωτέρα περὶ τὴν ἀπεργασίαν τῶν ὄψεων ἢ τοῦ σκευοποιοῦ τέχνη τῶν ποιητῶν ἔστιν.

(1) Spectacle is emotionally potent but falls quite outside the art and is not integral to poetry: (2) tragedy’s capacity is independent of performance and actors, (3) and, besides, the costumier’s art has more scope than the poet’s for rendering effects of spectacle.⁶

The Arabic translation of this passage by Abū Bišr Mattā is as follows:

(١) واما المنظر فهو معزى للنفس غير انه بلا صناعة وليس البتة مناسب لصناعة الشعرا (٢) من قبل انه قوة صناعة المديح وبغير الجهاد وهي من المنافقين (٣) وايضا تمام عمل صناعة الاوان هي اولى بالتحقيق عند البصر من صناعة الشعرا.

(1) Regarding the spectacle, it consoles the soul, but it is without art and pertains by no means to the art of poets (الشعراء) (2), since it [*scil.* the spectacle] is the potency of the art of praise, <that it is> without effort, and that it [*scil.* the potency of the art of praise] stems from the hypocrites. (3) Furthermore, the perfection of the work of the art of the objects (الاوراب) fits more to the verification, when watching, than the art of poets (الشعراء).⁷

1) The Greek ὄψις was translated into Arabic with the term *manẓar*, which has the same meaning as the Greek term, from the broad sense of “sight, view, panorama,” “look(s), appearance, aspect,” “prospect, outlook,” to the more particular sense of “scene (of a play),” “spectacle,” “stage setting, set, scenery.”⁸ The substantive adjective ψυχαγωγικόν, composed in Greek from the verb ἄγειν and the noun ψυχή, refers to the seducing character of the spectacle. It is a word-for-word translation through the expression *mu’azzī li-al-nafs*, literally “consoling for the soul.” The Greek adjective was understood by the Arabic translator from the particular, later attested meaning of the noun ψυχαγωγία, “consolation”: it is therefore not necessary to correct the Arabic expression with the expression *muḡrin li-al-nafs* (seducing for the soul), as does Badawī. Likewise, the Greek ἀτεχνότατον was translated with the preposition *bilā* conveying the alpha privative and the term *šinā’a* (art), and the meaning of the superlative was rendered, as is generally the case, with the adverb *al-batta*. The term “poetics” (Greek ἡ ποιητική) has no exact correspondence in the Arabic since it was translated with the periphrase *šinā’a al-šū’arā’*, lit. “the art of poets.”

2) Whereas it was quite easy for someone who knows Aristotle’s doctrine to understand the meaning of the first unit, the following passage is more problematic, in particular because of the absence of any cultural Greek reference. First of all, Abū Bišr Mattā interpreted the feminine article ἡ that accompanies the noun δύναμις as a pronoun referring to the spectacle (ὄψις, *manẓar*) mentioned at the beginning of the passage. Thus, δύναμις is the attribute of this pronoun. In other words, the spectacle is “the potency of tragedy.” Yet the notion of tragedy was not correctly rendered with the adequate term, since it refers to something unknown to the Arabs. The translator chose to adapt the word with a more evocative expression in his own language, that is “the art of praise” (*šinā’a al-madīh*). The Greek ἀγῶν that refers to the tragic competition was translated with the term *ḡihād*, “competition,” “fight,” “battle.” Finally, the Arabic feminine pronoun *hiya* can refer to “the potency of the art of praise,” as indicated in our translation, or more simply to “the art of praise.” The Greek text does not allow one to make a clear decision, since δύναμις and τραγωδία are feminine nouns, as in Arabic (*quwwa, šinā’a al-madīh*). The term ὑποκριταί, referring in Greek to actors of tragedy,

⁶ Arist. *Poet.* 6 1450b16–20; ed. Aristotle 2012, tr. Aristotle [1995] 2005.

⁷ The Arabic text, corresponding to the *Parisinus Arabus* 2346, fol. 134v, l. 21–135r, l. 2, is the text edited by Margoliouth in Abū Bišr Mattā 1887, 17. It is the same text as the one edited by Tkatsch in Abū Bišr Mattā 1928, II, 234.21–236.2. We have retained the spelling of the manuscript, also used in both editions.

⁸ Kazimirski, s.v. مَنظَر, p. 1289, col. 2; Wehr, s.v. مَنظَر, p. 1146, col. 2.

and by extension to those who behave in a way that disagrees with their beliefs, was rendered with *al-munāfiqūn*, the “hypocrites.”

3) The last unit of this passage is quite far from the Greek text, probably because of the Syriac intermediary from which Abū Bišr Mattā wrote his translation. In any case, some occasional correspondences can be noted between the Greek and the Arabic, but the syntax is not respected and the meaning of the Arabic text is not satisfying: ἔτι/*ayḏān*; κυριωτέρα/*awlā*; τὴν ἀπεργασίαν/*amal*; ἡ τοῦ σκευοποιοῦ τέχνη/*šināʿa al-awṭāb*; τῶν ὀψεων/*inda al-baṣr*; [τέχνη] τῶν ποιητῶν/*šināʿa al-šuʿarā*. The Arabic expression *bi-al-taḥqīq* has no correspondence in the Greek. Because the Arabic translation was made from a Syriac intermediary that was realised from a Greek copy whose quality is unknown; because both Graeco-Syriac and Syriac-Arabic translators utilised – most of the time with success – semantic equivalents to Greek terms that were not referring to anything in the cultural context of ninth-century-Baghdad; and because some Greek terms were used in the *Poetics* with particular meanings that were correctly rendered into Arabic in spite of their obscurity thirteen centuries later: for all these reasons the Arabic translation of Abū Bišr Mattā poses a significant challenge to the Arabic philosophers who will later write commentaries on the *Poetics*. It is also this translation that will leave a profound mark and radically influence the way these philosophers will interpret Aristotle’s text.

Ibn al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist* mentions an abridgment (*muḥtaṣar*) of the *Poetics* by al-Kindī that is obviously not extant. As Henri Hugonnard-Roche states, “there is no reason to identify this abridgment with the treatise *On the Art of Poets* that is mentioned among the musical works of al-Kindī, as Tkatsch et Peters suggest.”⁹ Several Arabic texts are extant that mention more or less explicitly the *Poetics*. All of them are not commentaries, strictly speaking, and are not necessarily based on a direct reading of Aristotle’s treatise.

An exhaustive study here would be difficult due to the complex context, the richness of the texts, and the major role played by their authors in the development of Arabic philosophy. I will therefore approach the topic of the Arabic reception of the *Poetics* by considering in a limited perspective the general presentation of a question drawn from one of the works composed by each of the three major *falāsifa* (this term refers to the Arabic philosophers who are the successors of the Greeks). Such a decision does not imply that each topic was studied only by the philosopher who will be quoted in relation to it, rather the seeds of all these topics that characterise the Arabic reception of the *Poetics* already exist in al-Fārābī’s works. Avicenna and Averroes will later make these questions their own, each in their own way, in order to include them in their commentaries according to their own favourite subjects.

In any case, the study of the reception of the *Poetics* by the *falāsifa*¹⁰ will take into consideration three different elements.

1. First of all, the question of the sources. Arabic texts are not systematically based on a direct knowledge of Aristotle’s treatise, but they rather derive from intermediary texts and commentaries whose origin is usually Alexandrian. It is not always easy to identify this origin precisely because these intermediary texts are lost or little known. When they relate to the Arabic version of the *Poetics*, the commentaries face the challenge of giving a clear meaning to a text whose literal translation engendered many obscurities and several misinterpretations.

2. Secondly, the inclusion of the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* in the logical corpus of Aristotle that no doubt goes back to the Neoplatonist philosopher Simplicius (d. 560). This new organisation of the Aristotelian logical treatises, generally designated since Osborne Hardison¹¹ as the “context-theory,” had a hermeneutical impact on the way the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* were envisaged as logical

⁹ Hugonnard-Roche 2003, 212.

¹⁰ There is also an Arabic reception of the *Poetics* among the theoreticians of Arabic medieval literature: see Heinrichs 1969; Heinrichs 1978; Harb 2020.

¹¹ Hardison 1970; Walzer 1934.

treatises along with the *Categories*, the *Prior and Posterior Analytics*, the *Topics*, and the *Sophistical Refutations*.

3. Thirdly, the Islamic context in which the commentators became the heirs of the philosopher they considered as the “First Teacher.” Far from composing servile commentaries, they not only sought to defend and illustrate Aristotle’s thought in spite of a rough translation, but also endeavoured to adapt the doctrine of the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* to their needs and to their philosophical and political interests.

In order to give a sense of the implications of the Arabic philosophical reception of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, I will outline:

1. The question of eclecticism in the Arabic sources of the *Poetics*, and the influence of the Alexandrian heritage with the *Epistle on the Canons of the Art of Poetry* (*Risāla Fī qawānīn sinā’a al-šī’r*) of al-Fārābī (d. 339/950);
2. The notion of imagination (*taḥyīl*) in the definition of poetry and the reconstitution of the poetical syllogism from its psychological effects with the introductory chapter of the *Poetics of the Šifā’* of Avicenna (d. 428/1037);
3. The establishment of universal laws of poetry, the inclusion of Arabic poems, and the ethical and political dimensions of poetry with the Middle Commentary on the *Poetics* of Averroes (d. 595/1198).

2 Al-Fārābī: Eclecticism of the Sources and the Alexandrian Heritage

Al-Fārābī dedicated several works to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: in addition to the *Epistle on the Canons of the Art of Poetry* (*Risāla Fī qawānīn sinā’a al-šī’r*),¹² one can mention the *Book on Poetry* (*Kitāb al-Šī’r*), also known under the title *Šawāmi’ al-Šī’r* (*Short Commentary on the Poetics*),¹³ and the *Declaration about Proportion and Composition* (*Qawl Fī al-tanāsub wa-al-ta’līf*).¹⁴

The *Epistle On the Canons of the Art of Poetry* falls within the genre of the Alexandrian prologues where their authors endeavour to justify the classification and the rank of the treatises of the *Organon*, as well as the incorporation of the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* into this whole. The *Epistle* contains the seeds of the main themes that the *falāsifa* will continuously deal with, among which are the division of poetics and its rank in the *Organon*, and the definition of the “poetical statement” and its link to imagination and falsehood. The text is structured according to the different possible classifications of the poetical art envisaged as a logical art and delineates the distinctive features of poetics. These classifications are carried out a) according to the kinds of statements, b) by distinguishing poetics from sophistic, c) by distinguishing imitation from analogy, d) by classifying the statements according to their degree of truth, e) by classifying the statements according to their content and the metres used, f) by distinguishing three main classes of poets from which the poetic genres are drawn, g) by comparing poetry and painting from the point of view of matter, activity, and intention proper to each of these two arts.

The first classification based on kinds of terms (*al-alfāz*) establishes the following divisions echoing to a Platonist dichotomy where each stage of the division introduces a further property. The terms (*al-alfāz*) are divided into signifying (*dalla*) and non-signifying (*ğayr dalla*) terms; among the signifying terms, some are simple (*mufrada*) and others compound (*murakkab*); the compound signifying terms are in turn divided into statements (*aqāwīl*) and non-statements (*ğayr aqāwīl*); the statements are either categorical (*ğāzima*) or non-categorical (*ğayr ġāzima*); among the composed

¹² This text was edited for the first time by Arberry in al-Fārābī 1938. It was reedited by Badawī in Aristotle 1953, 149–158, and by Danechpajouh in al-Fārābī 1987, 493–499.

¹³ Al-Fārābī 1971. The text was also edited by Danechpajouh in al-Fārābī 1987, 500–503.

¹⁴ Al-Fārābī 1987, 504–506. See also Aouad and Schoeler 2002.

signifying terms that are categorical statements, some are true (*ṣādiqa*), others false (*kāḍiba*); the latter are in turn divided into two further kinds:

Among the <signifying compound terms that are categorical statements> and false: some induce in the mind of the hearers the object referred to, taking the place of a statement; others induce <in the mind> of the hearers the imitation of the object, and these last are poetical statements.¹⁵

These imitations of things have different degrees of perfection. Those who deal with poetics and the various languages and dialects are supposed to study them. This first series of dichotomies can be illustrated in the following way (fig. 4.1):

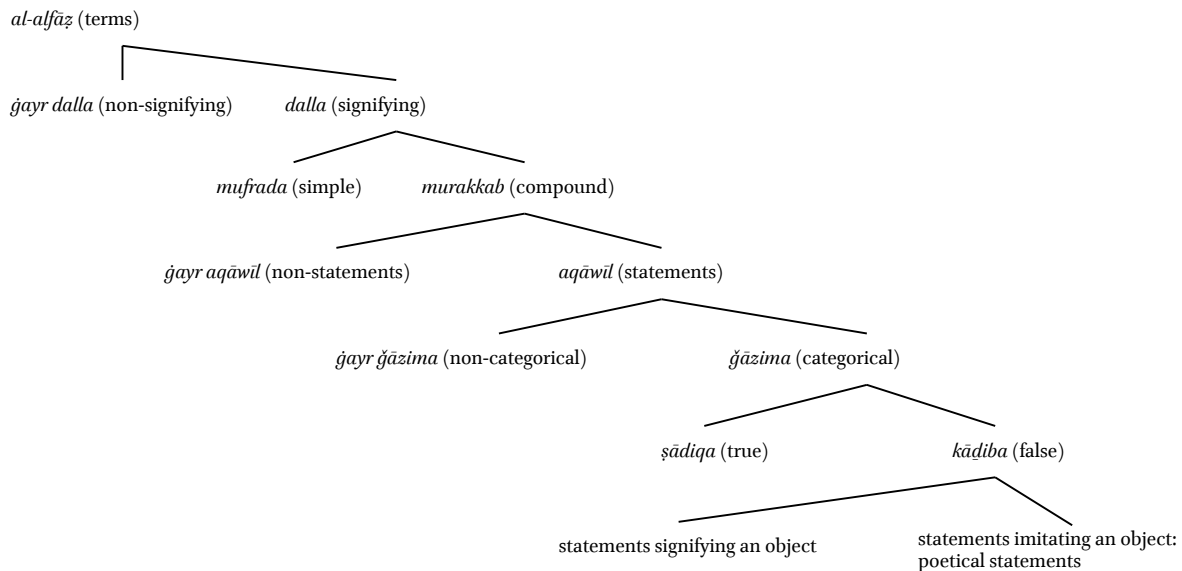


Fig. 4.1. Classification based on kinds of terms (*al-alfāz*).

The second kind of classification derives from the first series of dichotomies. Indeed, what differentiates poetical statements from sophistic ones? For both arts seem close to each other since they use false statements. Poetics is distinguished from sophistic from the point of view of their proper goals: the sophist seeks to delude his hearer so that he imagines that what is is not, and what is not is, whereas the imitator of the thing (*al-muḥākī li-al-ṣay'*) causes his hearer to imagine, not a contrary of what is, but its resemblance (*al-ṣabīh*). Such a distinction between sophistic and poetics is illustrated through an example echoing Plato: for they differ from each other in the same way that there is a difference, in the realm of sensation, between a person at rest who imagines that he is moving as if he was on board a ship travelling (a situation that is *contrary* to the actual situation), and a person who looks into a mirror. In the latter case the man does not look at something contrary to reality but rather at the likeness of a real object.

A further division is made by al-Fārābī that introduces the notion of syllogism (*qīyās*), notably the notion of “poetical syllogism,” which will give rise to many developments on the syllogistic status of poetical statements. Syllogisms, as al-Fārābī says, are statements that in general can be divided into the following categories: absolutely true statements, and these are demonstrative statements; absolutely false statements, and these are poetical statements; mainly true but partly false statements, and these are dialectical statements; mainly false but partly true statements, and these are sophistic statements; and statements that are true and false in equal proportions, and these

¹⁵ Al-Fārābī 1987, 493.14–15 (my translation).

are rhetorical statements. Under these circumstances the poetical statement is thus neither demonstrative, nor sophistical, nor dialectical, nor rhetorical, yet for all that it belongs to a “kind of syllogism,” that is what follows the syllogism:

And I mean by my declaration “what follows the <sylogism>,” the induction, the example, the physiognomy, and what is like, among what has the same power as a syllogism or has the power of a syllogism.¹⁶

The second chapter of the *Enumeration of the Sciences (Iḥṣā al-‘ulūm)*¹⁷ takes back this classification and refines it. The parts of logic are eight, and the kinds of syllogisms and the arts using these syllogisms are five. Al-Fārābī thus distinguishes 1) apodictic syllogisms that are used to reach certain science; 2) dialectical syllogisms that are composed from notorious statements and are used in discussions where opposite theses are defended; 3) sophistical syllogisms whose function is to deceive an interlocutor by making him believe that what is not true is true and what is true is not true; 4) rhetorical syllogisms that persuade one of an opinion in such a way that the soul of the interlocutor gives its assent, either stronger or weaker, without any certitude being produced; and finally 5) poetical syllogisms that engender in the soul of the interlocutor imaginative imitations that spur him to act by raising an emotion or a feeling, without any deliberation, investigation, or thinking taking precedence over imagination.

To each of these five arts corresponds a kind of syllogism, a goal, and an object. Al-Fārābī distinguishes among the eight treatises of the *Organon* three preliminary or introductive treatises: 1) the *Categories*, which gathers the rules for the simple intelligibles and simple terms that refer to them; 2) the *Peri Hermeneias*, which gathers the rules for the simple utterances that are intelligibles composed each from two simple intelligibles and the utterances composed each from two terms referring to these intelligibles; and 3) the *Prior Analytics*, which contains utterances allowing the validity of the syllogisms common to the five demonstrative arts to be tested. The *Posterior Analytics* is the noblest part of logic, whose rules allow one to test apodictic utterances. Regarding the last four books, their rules are for two reasons: they provide the fourth part with logical tools on the one hand; they distinguish between the different demonstrative arts and their proper rules on the other hand, in order that, for example, when seeking the true and the certain one can avoid using dialectical or rhetorical procedures, which would lead to strong opinions or persuasion, not to certitude. These four last books also provide specialists in each of these arts with correct rules for using dialectical, sophistical, rhetorical, and poetical demonstrations. These treatises are: 1) the *Topics*, which contains the rules allowing for testing dialectical utterances and leading a dialectical discussion; 2) the *Sophistical Refutations*, which provides the rules for those who aim at altering and falsifying the truth, or tracking down any deceit; 3) the *Rhetoric*, whose rules ensure a test of rhetorical statements and discourses and their rhetorical validity; 4) the *Poetics*, which contains rules for testing poetry and poetical statements, as well as constituting elements producing poems and poetical statements.

		Treatises	Types of syllogisms	Addresses used to establish the validity of a thing ^a
Preliminary or introductive treatises	1	<i>Categories</i>		
	2	<i>Peri Hermeneias</i>		
	3	<i>Prior Analytics</i>		
Main treatises	4	<i>Posterior Analytics</i>	apodictic	certain (<i>yaqīniyya</i>)
	5	<i>Topics</i>	dialectical	opivative (<i>zunūniyya</i>)
	6	<i>Sophistical Refutations</i>	sophistical	deceptive (<i>muǧalliṭa</i>)
	7	<i>Rhetoric</i>	rhetorical	persuasive (<i>muqni‘a</i>)

¹⁶ Al-Fārābī 1987, 495.2–3 (my translation).

¹⁷ Al-Fārābī 1949, 70.6–74.13.

Table 4.1. Classification of the different types of reasoning and rank of the treatises of the Aristotelian Organon, according to al-Fārābī's *Enumeration of the Sciences*

a. Cf. Al-Fārābī 1949, 43. 13–15: “The kinds of addresses that are used in order to establish the validity of any <utterance> in any realm are five in total: certain, opinative, deceptive, persuasive, and imaginative” (my translation).

Looking back to al-Fārābī's *Epistle* and another possible classification of the poetical statements, one must mention the criterium of metre (*wazn*), which belongs properly to the investigation of the musician or prosodist, and the criterium of content, or subject-matter (*ma'nā*). The majority of poets do not prescribe now a special metre for each variety of poetical theme, as opposed to the ancient Greeks, who did so according to the twelve kinds of poetry that would be taken back later by Avicenna at the end of the first chapter of the *Poetics of the Šifā*¹⁸ and that al-Fārābī assigns to Aristotle, Themistius, and other commentators of their books who are not all identified. These twelve kinds are: i) tragedy (*ṭrāğūđiā*), ii) dithyramb (*dīṭīrambyī*), iii) comedy (*qūmūđiā*), iv) iambus (*aīāmbū*), v) drama (*drāmāṭā*), vi) *ainos* (*aīnī*), vii) *diagramma* or *dikaia* (*dīqrāmī*), viii) satyric (*sāṭūrī*), ix) *poēmata* (*fīūmūtā*), x) epic (*afīqī*) and rhetoric (*rīṭūrī*), xi) *amphi geneseōs* (*anfīğānāsūs*) and xii) acoustic (*aqūstiqī*). Al-Fārābī writes about tragedy:

Regarding tragedy, it is a kind of poetry having a particular metre, affording pleasure to all who hear or recite it. <In tragedy> good things are mentioned, praiseworthy matters which are an example for others to emulate, and governors of cities are also praised in it. Musicians used to sing <these good things and praiseworthy matters mentioned in tragedies> before kings, and whenever a king died, they would insert in its parts [*scil.* of the tragedy] some melodies lamenting the dead king.¹⁹

Closer to Aristotle (*Poetics* 4 1448b24–1449a6), the *Epistle* also divides poetry according to the nature of each poet, but with the difference that he distinguishes the presence or the absence of any technical knowledge for each of them:²⁰ 1) on the one hand, those who are naturally gifted and have the faculty to find comparisons and examples, either in one form of poetry or in all the forms; 2) on the other hand, those who have a true knowledge of poetical art and its rules and who are “syllogising poets” (*al-šu'arā' al-musāğğisūn*) in its full sense; 3) those who imitate the first two classes of poets without having any predisposition to poetry nor any knowledge of poetical rules.

The final comparison drawn by al-Fārābī at the end of the *Epistle* is about the art of the poet and the art of the painter, like a slight echo to the first chapter of the *Poetics*.²¹ Whereas the matter (*al-mādda*) in each art is different since the painter uses colours (*al-aşbāğ*) and the poet statements (*al-aqāwīl*), the forms (*şūrāt*) of their arts, their activities (*al-af'āl*), and their goal (*al-ğarađ*) are the same or at least similar. For the painter and the poet both produce a simile (*taşbīh*) and seek to carry out impressions on the imagination and the senses by means of imitations.

These few examples of the divisions of poetical art gathered in al-Fārābī's *Epistle* bring to light the eclecticism of its sources that echo Aristotle and Plato. The use of some technical terms or divisions undoubtedly reminds one of the *Poetics*, but the inaccuracy and the lack of precision, especially with the twelve poetical genres assigned to Aristotle, show that, at least in the *Epistle*, al-Fārābī did not have direct access to Aristotle's *Poetics*, but more likely depended on various sources, teachings, readings and successive elaborations carried out in the Neoplatonist tradition. In any case, al-Fārābī's

¹⁸ Avicenna 1966, 166.1–167.9; Avicenna 1974, 67–68.

¹⁹ Al-Fārābī 1987, 496.3–6 (tr. Arberry in al-Fārābī 1938 slightly revised).

²⁰ Arist. *Poet.* 1 1447a18–20.

²¹ Arist. *Poet.* 1 1447a18–23.

Epistle is a crucial text for the Arabic reception of the *Poetics* since it raises questions that will be developed in later commentaries like Avicenna's *Poetics of the Šifā'*.

3 Avicenna: Poetry, Imagination, and the Mechanism of the Poetical Syllogism

Avicenna dealt with the *Poetics* in the *Philosophy for 'Arūdī (Al-Ḥikma al-'Arūdiyya)*²² and the *Book of the Healing (Kitāb al-Šifā')*²³ and is influenced by the Farabian tradition of the *Epistle*, since he takes back the question of the *Poetics* as being a logical treatise and tries to justify this status by means of the concept of "imagination" (*taḥyīl*) and the notion of "poetical syllogism."

With the exception of the first chapter, chapters 2 to 8 of the *Poetics of the Šifā'* follow the structure of the twenty-six chapters of the *Poetics*, in a more or less abridged and accurate way. Avicenna likely used the two Arabic translations made by Abū Bišr Mattā and Yaḥyā b. 'Adī,²⁴ and reuses more or less freely Aristotle's statements introduced by the expression *qāla* (he said), either by summarising them and inserting some comments, or by introducing interpretative passages that are not drawn from Aristotle and often refer to analogies between rhetoric and poetics.

The introductory first chapter allows one to observe how Avicenna develops and refines the question of the status of poetry when he describes the kind of assent that poetical statement engenders in the soul. He first lists the four constitutive elements of poetry, namely, imaginative statement, rhythm, metre, and rhyme:

We first say that poetry is imaginative speech, composed of utterances that are measured and commensurate – and, in Arabic, rhymed.²⁵

The logician (*al-mantiqīy*) considers poetry only in so far as it is imaginative speech (*kalām muḥayyil*). The measure is the proper concern of the musicologist (in terms of investigation and general practice) and the prosodist (in terms of scansion and according to the practice of each nation), whereas the rhymist considers rhyme as a distinct science, the science of rhyme (*'ilm al-qawāfī*). How then is one to define the notion of "imaginative" (*muḥayyil*) which, from a logical point of view, makes a speech be called "poetical"?

The imaginative is the speech to which the soul yields, accepting and rejecting matters without pondering, reasoning or choice. In brief, it is affected toward it [*scil.* the imaginative] by a psychological affection, not by an intellectual affection, whether the utterance produces a conviction or not.²⁶

The imaginative is defined by the response it raises in the soul, and that is an emotional, not a rational reaction. The soul is moved by the imaginative speech, whereas the speech producing a conviction that is demonstrative (in the broad sense of the term) engenders conviction in the soul. The imaginative speech is therefore differentiated from the speech producing a conviction (*muṣaddiq*) and that proves the truth and gets from the soul a rational response, the conviction (*taṣdīq*). In other words, the imaginative (*muḥayyil*) speech gets from the soul a psychological response, imagination (*taḥyīl*), whereas the speech producing a conviction (*muṣaddiq*) gets from the soul a conviction (*tasdīq*) that differs according to the kind of demonstrative statement that was produced (from the certitude engendered by an apodictic statement up to persuasion engendered by a rhetorical statement). Imagination (*taḥyīl*) is therefore analogous, for the imaginative speech, to what conviction is for the demonstrative speech:

²² Avicenna 1969.

²³ Avicenna 1966.

²⁴ Avicenna's technical vocabulary is different from the one used in Abū Bišr Mattā's translation: cf. Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 5–9.

²⁵ Avicenna 1966, 161.7–8; tr. Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 61.5–7.

²⁶ Avicenna 1966, 161.15–16; tr. Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 61.18–62.3 (modified).

$$\frac{\text{producing a conviction} \\ (\text{muṣaddiq})}{\text{conviction (taṣdīq)}} = \frac{\text{imaginative} \\ (\text{muḥayyil})}{\text{imagination (taḥyīl)}}$$

As Ismail Dahiyat indicates, the terms *muḥayyil* (imaginative) and *taḥyīl* (imagination), deriving from the same root ḤYL, have two main aspects: “the first covers the mimetic or image-making nature of poetry as it is distinguished from the strictly expository and discursive nature of logical statements; and the second aspect conveys the particular effect of poetry, which is primarily emotive and pleasurable rather than apodictic and ratiocinative.”²⁷

The imitation of a thing that is therefore not syllogistically demonstrated, and engenders in the soul an emotion or imaginative imitation that is also characterised by the wonder and pleasure it raises:

Imitation has an element of wonder that truth lacks.²⁸

The production of the image of a thing, that is imitation as imitative process (*al-muḥākāt*), provides the soul with the result of this imitative process, that is the image or imitation itself. The result is in poetry an imaginative statement that raises in the soul an emotional response that is distinguished from the conviction raised by demonstrative statements. Avicenna adds that this emotional response is in part due to the effect of wonder that truth lacks.

The notion of “wonder” (*ta’ḡīb*) combines pleasure and wonder that result from a poetic statement. It is “a pleasurable emotion, a psychological appreciation of a poetic image both as a form and as a vivid representation of an idea or object. This emotion is so compelling that it arrests the power of reasoning and forces the soul to pursue or avoid a potential course of action or an object of desire.”²⁹

Such a spur is without any rational procedure, as the imagination takes precedence over conviction:

But human beings are more amenable to imaginative representation than to conviction.³⁰

Human beings tend to follow what an imaginative statement suggests, as its power derives from wonder and pleasure, rather than the conviction conveyed by a demonstrative, rational, statement. Furthermore, if wonder and pleasure are caused by the imaginative statement itself, that is, by the form of this statement (through poetical tropes and in particular metaphors and metonymies, and also through rhymes, metres, and rhythms), conviction produced by demonstrative statements draw their power from the content, not the form of the speech:

Both imaginative assent and conviction are [kinds of] compliance. Imaginative assent, however, is a compliance due to the wonder and the pleasure that are caused by the utterance itself, while conviction is a compliance due to the realization that the thing is what it is said to be. Imaginative assent results from the utterance itself, conviction from what is spoken of, i.e., the focus is on the matter being conveyed.³¹

These elements can be summed up in the following table:

Arts	Logical Arts (demonstrative, dialectical, sophistical, rhetorical)	Poetical Art
Treatises	- <i>Posterior Analytics</i> - <i>Topics</i>	<i>Poetics</i>

²⁷ Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 61, n. 1.

²⁸ Avicenna 1966, 162.6–7; tr. Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 62.15–16.

²⁹ Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 62, n. 5. The notion of “wonder” (*ta’ḡīb*) became crucial in fifth/eleventh-century Arabic poetry, to the point that it gave birth to an aesthetic theory: see Harb 2020. See also Schoeler, forthcoming.

³⁰ Avicenna 1966, 162.5; tr. Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 62.12–14.

³¹ Avicenna 1966, 162.10–13; tr. Dahiyat in Avicenna 1974, 63.6–12.

	- <i>Sophistical Refutations</i> - <i>Rhetoric</i>	
Assent	conviction (<i>taṣdīq</i>)	imagination (<i>taḥyīl</i>)
Statement	producing a conviction (<i>muṣaddiq</i>): - apodictic syllogism - dialectical syllogism - sophistical syllogism - rhetorical syllogism	imaginative (<i>muḥayyil</i>)
Goal	demonstration of the truth (<i>ṣidq</i>)	production of imagination (<i>taḥyīl</i>) and wonder (<i>ta'ḡīb</i>) that produces pleasure
Practical Value	spur to or deter from an action/matter	spur to or deter from an action/matter

Table 4.2. Aristotle's *Poetics* and the other treatises of the *Organon* according to Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Šifā*

The first chapter of the *Poetics of the Šifā'* contains further elements characterising the poetical art, in particular the relationships between poetics and rhetoric envisaged as political arts; the unlimited nature of poetical images as opposed to the topics of the rhetoric; the figures from which imaginative statements are built.

One of the main features of the Avicennian approach is undoubtedly the link between logic and psychology. First, the production in the soul of imagination by means of poetical statements is part of the psychological doctrine inherited from Aristotle's *De anima*. For representation or imagination (Greek φαντασία) refers to a faculty intermediary between sensation and thought that is defined as a movement of the soul generated by actual perception.³²

Secondly, Avicenna refines and develops the idea expressed by al-Fārābī in the *Epistle*, according to which a poetical statement is an implicit syllogism, or "in potency,"³³ and describes the formal structure of such a syllogism. The question of the possible syllogistic structure of a poetical statement was the subject of several studies³⁴ based on two examples given by Avicenna in the *Book of Syllogism (Kitāb al-Qiyās)*,³⁵ on a passage of al-Fārābī's *Declaration about Proportion and Composition (Qawl Fī al-tanāsub wa-al-ta'lif)*,³⁶ and on the *Book of Poetics* written by Ibn Ṭumlūs, a direct disciple of Averroes.

In his article dedicated to the poetical syllogism,³⁷ Gregor Schoeler suggests a reconstruction of this logical argument based on the first example given by Avicenna in the *Book of Syllogism*:

So-and-so is a moon (because he is handsome).³⁸

³² It is the definition given by Arist. *De an.* 3.3 429a1-2.

³³ Which means that it has the power of a syllogism even though it is not a true syllogism.

³⁴ Schoeler 1983; Black 1989; Black 1990; Aouad and Schoeler 2002; Aouad 2004.

³⁵ Avicenna 1964, 57.9–58.4.

³⁶ Al-Fārābī 1408H (=1987).

³⁷ Schoeler 1983, 47–53. This article is a complete synthesis devoted to the poetical syllogism and divided into eleven questions.

³⁸ Avicenna 1964, 57.11–12.

A possible reconstruction of the entire syllogistic structure for this statement is:³⁹

(Minor premise)	[This] man has a beautiful face
(Major premise)	Each person with a beautiful face is a moon
<hr/>	
(Conclusion)	Therefore, [this] man is a moon

With the middle term (“having a beautiful face”) = M; the subject of the conclusion (“[This] man”) = S; the predicate of the conclusion (“moon”) = P; and “a” a universal affirmative proposition:

S is M	In other words:	S a M
All M is P		M a P
<hr/>		<hr/>
Then S is P		S a P

It is a conclusive syllogism in the first figure, but it differs from normal categorical syllogisms with two assertoric premises insofar as its major premise (and therefore its conclusion as well) is not assertoric, but contains false propositions – or at least propositions with figurative statements, or – to borrow a rhetorical figure of Western nomenclature – metaphors: each person with a beautiful face *is not* a moon, but rather *resembles* a moon or *is like* a moon.⁴⁰ Such premises are poetical or imaginative, that is, they raise an imagination: in the major and in the conclusion the relationship of the subject to the predicate is the relationship of the model to its image. A poetical syllogism, adds Gregor Schoeler, always appears in the form of only one proposition – in the previous example, its conclusion “[This] man is a moon” – whereas the enthymeme for example is a truncated syllogism whose two propositions remain.

Yet the second example of poetical syllogism given by Avicenna in the *Book of Syllogism* allows one to reconstruct the previous poetical syllogism as an invalid syllogism in the second figure.⁴¹ Avicenna’s example is the following: “the rose is a mule’s anus in the middle of which dung is visible.” Its syllogistic structure is thus:

(Minor)	The rose is a mule’s anus in the middle of which dung is visible.
(Major)	Everything that resembles a mule’s anus (i.e. that is red on the outside and yellow on the inside) is dirty and disgusting.
<hr/>	
(Conclusion)	Therefore, the rose is dirty and disgusting.

The first mentioned example of poetical syllogism can therefore be reconstructed as follows:⁴²

(Minor)	[This] man is a moon.
(Major)	Each person with a beautiful face is a moon.
<hr/>	
(Conclusion)	[This] man has a beautiful face.

According to Deborah Black, the first structure (syllogism in the first figure) would be the paradigm which Avicenna “considers to be the foundation of poetry’s claim to logical status,” whereas the second structure (invalid syllogism in the second figure) would be more audience-oriented,⁴³ insofar

³⁹ Arabic logicians switch the order of the major and the minor premises (see Schoeler 1983, 46).

⁴⁰ According to the terminology of the Arabs, it is in both cases (with or without a particle of comparison) a “comparison” (*tašbīh*).

⁴¹ See Aouad and Schoeler 2022, 187–188, and Aouad 2004.

⁴² Aouad 2002, 267 explains the structure of this syllogism by means of another example.

⁴³ Black 1990, 231.

as the audience needs to draw the conclusion (“[This] man has a beautiful face”) from the poetical premise provided to him (“[This] man is a moon”).

4 Averroes: Arabic Poetry, and the Ethical and Political Dimensions of the *Poetics*

Averroes wrote two commentaries on the *Poetics*. The *Short Commentary on the Book of Poetics* (*Ġawāmi‘ Kitāb al-Ši‘r*)⁴⁴ was composed around 1157; in it Averroes relies on the earlier Arabic tradition of commentaries on the *Poetics*, since he does not refer to tragedy, bestows a central role on the notion of imagination (*taḥyīl*) in the definition of poetry, and deals with the poetical syllogism.⁴⁵ Averroes wrote in 1175 a *Middle Commentary on the Poetics* (*Talḥīs Kitāb al-Ši‘r*)⁴⁶ where he frees himself from the previous exegetical tradition and, following his method,⁴⁷ goes back to the source, that is to Aristotle’s text in the Arabic version.

The Middle Commentary is therefore an exegesis directly composed from the translation of Abū Bišr Mattā, following through seven chapters the structure of Aristotle’s text. While seeking to rebuild the meaning of the *Poetics* in its Arabic version, Averroes is also one of the few commentators who reconcile Aristotle’s doctrine with Arabic poetry. He mentions in his Commentary illustrations drawn from pre-Islamic poets like Imru’ al-Qays (d. ca 500) or al-Aswad ibn Ya’fur (end of the sixth century) up to more recent ones like Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī (d. 357/968) and al-Ma’arrī (d. 449/1058), including Abū Tammām (d. 231/845 or 232/846), Ibn al-Mu’tazz (d. 296/908), or al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965).⁴⁸

Two main features characterise Averroes’ Middle Commentary: 1) the narrow interpretation of the Aristotelian *mimēsis* as figurative speech that leads among other things to an original definition of the notions of reversal and recognition; 2) an ethical and political understanding of poetry, which echoes the way Averroes envisioned rhetoric.⁴⁹

The Middle Commentary opens on the goal pursued by Averroes, that is to expose the universal rules for the composition of poems that are common to all nations:

The purpose of this discussion (*talḥīs*) is to comment upon those universal rules in Aristotle’s *Poetics* that are common to all or most nations.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Averroes 1977, 83–84 (tr.); 203–206 (ed.); 132–134 (notes).

⁴⁵ Schoeler 1980, in particular 298, col. 2–299, col. 2; 300, col. 2.

⁴⁶ The three main editions of this text are: Averroes 1953, 199–250; Averroes 1971; Averroes 1986a.

⁴⁷ Gätje 1964, 59–65.

⁴⁸ I would like to thank Loïc Bertrand (Inalco) for his comments on the translation and interpretation of the Arabic verses quoted by Averroes. I am, of course, solely responsible for any errors that may remain in the following remarks.

⁴⁹ In the *Faṣl al-maqāl* (*Decisive Treatise*) Averroes underlines the demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical arguments used in the Qur’ān: “We say: since what is intended by the Law is teaching true science and true practice; and teaching is of two sorts, forming a concept and bringing about assent, as those adept in dialectical theology have explained; and there are three methods of bringing about assent for people – demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical – and two methods of forming concepts, either by means of the thing itself or by means of a likeness of it; and not all people have natures such as to accept demonstrations or dialectical arguments, let alone demonstrative arguments, given the difficulty in teaching demonstrative arguments and the lengthy time needed by someone adept at learning them; and since what is intended by the Law is, indeed, to teach everyone; therefore, it is obligatory that the Law comprise all the manners of the methods of bringing about assent and all the manners of the methods of forming a concept. Since some of the methods for bringing about assent – I mean, assent taking place because of them – are common to most people, namely, the rhetorical and the dialectical, the rhetorical being more common than the dialectical; and some of them are particular to fewer people, namely, the demonstrative; and what is primarily intended by the Law is taking care of the greater number without neglecting to alert the select [few]; therefore, most of the methods declared in the Law are the methods shared by the greater number with respect to concept or assent taking place” (Averroes 2001, §39–40).

⁵⁰ Averroes 1986a, 53.5–6; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 59.3–5.

4.1 Shifting from the Imitation from Tragedy to the Stylistic Dimension of a Poem

Whereas Aristotle divided the different mimetic activities from three criteria – the medium (ἐν ᾧ), the objects (ἅ), and the mode (ὡς) of imitation – Averroes interprets the passage in its Arabic version as three different kinds of poetical statements (*al-aqāwīl al-šir'iyya*), also defined as imaginative because they induce imagination.⁵¹

1) The first kind is defined as “the comparison <of a thing> with <another> thing and its representation by means of it” (*tašbīh bi-shay' wa-tamṭīluhu bi-hi*). It is realised either (a) by means of adverbs of comparison called by Averroes “particles of comparison” (*hurūf al-tašbīh*), or (b) through the substitution (*ibdāl*) of one term with another term. The substitution is illustrated with a verse of the poet Abū Tammām (d. 231/845 or 232/846) about the liberal man:

He is the sea from whatever direction you come to him.⁵²

Indeed, the abundance of the sea and the generosity of the liberal man are similar since they are both fertile and endless. Averroes adds that substitution (*ibdāl*) can take the form of a metaphor (*isti'āra*) or a metonymy (*kināya*). He illustrates both usages with two examples drawn from the poet Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā (d. 627) and the Qur'ān:

Metaphor is like the poet's statement:

“The horses of youth and its trapping have been removed,”

and metonymy is like His statement, may He be exalted,

“Or if one of you comes from the hollow.”

However, metonymy is more substitution with respect to what is linked to the thing, whereas metaphor is substitution with respect to its analogues – I mean, when the relation between one thing and another is the same as the relation between a third thing and a fourth, the name of the third may be substituted for the first and conversely.⁵³

The metaphor of the “horses of youth,” which Averroes does not analyse here, while asserting that it is a four-term analogy⁵⁴ (where $a : b = c : d$) could (perhaps) be explained by establishing that the removal of the trapping of the youth (litt. the horses) is a metaphor for the end of the passions attached to youth, because the relationship of the horses (a) to the reason why they are ridden (b) is like the the relationship of passions (c) to youth (d), that is a way of achievement.

The metonymy, defined as the switching of one thing with one of its attributes or accidents (*lawāḥiq*) concerns, in the verse of the Qur'ān, the plural *al-ġā'it*. The broader context of the verse refers to the conditions in which the Prayer must be approached:

You who believe, do not come anywhere near the prayer if you are intoxicated, not until you know what you are saying; nor if you are in a state of major ritual impurity – through the mosque – not until you have bathed.⁵⁵

The term *ġā'it* refers in its proper sense to cavities dug in the ground in order to be used as toilets. It was translated by Abdel Haleem with “in a state of major ritual impurity.” *Al-ġā'it* refers metonymically to excrement, and the verse means that one must not approach the Prayer if one comes from the toilets and is therefore impure.

2) The second kind of poetical statement consists in inverting the comparison (*an yubaddal al-tašbīh*), like saying “the sun is as though it were such and such a woman” (*al-šams ka-annahā fulāna*)

⁵¹ See Averroes 1986a, 54.11. Cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1 1447a16-18 and 6 1450a10-12.

⁵² Averroes 1986a, 55.2; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 60.20–21.

⁵³ Averroes 1986a, 55.4–56.1; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 61.3–15 (slightly modified).

⁵⁴ On metaphor, see also Averroes 2002, II, 311 (3.10.11).

⁵⁵ Qur'ān 4:43 (tr. Abdel Haleem, 55).

or “the sun is such and such a woman” (*al-šams fulāna*), not “such and such a woman is like the sun” (*fulāna ka-al-šams*) nor “she is the sun” (*hiya al-šams*).⁵⁶

3) Regarding the third kind, Averroes only indicates that it is composed from these last two simple kinds and provides no example of it.

Then, following Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Averroes notes that imitation is realised by means of three things:

With respect to poetical statements, imitation and representation come about by means of three things: harmonious tune, rhythm, and comparison itself.⁵⁷

These first elements corresponding to the first chapter of the *Poetics* (1447a17–18 and 1447a22) highlight the hermeneutical choice made by Averroes that will dominate the whole commentary. While the Aristotelian *mimēsis* refers to an imitative activity that may include dancing, flute-playing, lyre-playing, epic, tragedy, comedy, etc., Averroes restricts the scope of the *mimēsis* (*al-tašbīh wa-al-muḥākāt*) to poetry alone; that is, discursive imitation in a poetical genre. Envisaged as an art among the arts dealing with *logos*, poetry acquires a natural place among the logical treatises. The fall back of the notion of *mimēsis*, and in particular of tragedy, to praise alone brings about an original meaning for other central notions of the *Poetics*. It is for instance the case for reversal (Greek περιπέτεια) and recognition (Greek ἀναγνώρισις), defined by Aristotle as parts of the plot (τοῦ μύθου μέρος) in tragedy in chapter 6 of the *Poetics*,⁵⁸ and studied in particular in chapter 11:

Reversal is a change to the opposite direction of events, as already stated, and one in accord, as we insist, with probability or necessity; as when in the *Oedipus* the person who comes to bring Oedipus happiness, and intends to rid him of his fear about his mother, effects the opposite by revealing Oedipus’ true identity. [...] Recognition, as the very name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or to enmity, and involving matters which bear on prosperity or adversity. The finest recognition is that which occurs simultaneously with reversal, as with the one in the *Oedipus*. [...] But the kind most integral to the plot and action is the one described: such a joint recognition and reversal will yield either pity or fear.⁵⁹

Both reversal and recognition are grasped in the *Poetics* as parts of the plot of the tragedy, while Averroes interprets them as two kinds of imagination, “the kind called ‘reversal’ (*idārā*), and the kind called ‘discovery’ (*istidlāl*)”:⁶⁰

He said: by reversal, I mean first imitating the contrary of what is intended to be praised by something that the soul flees and then turning to an imitation of the praised thing itself – as when one wants to imitate happiness and happy people one begins by first imitating misery and miserable people, then turns to an imitation of happy people and does so by means of the contrary of that by which he imitated miserable people. Now discovery is simply imitation of something.⁶¹

The best discovery is the discovery mixed with reversal. Both kinds can be carried out for animated and inanimate things in order to raise imagination:

The kind of discovery that he mentioned – I mean, discovery and reversal with respect to inanimate things – predominates in the poem of the Arabs. It is like the statement of Abū al-Ṭayyib:⁶²

⁵⁶ Charles Butterworth’s distinction between *šams* (feminine), the sun, and *šams* (masculine), the clasp, does not seem relevant to the context of this passage. It seems that the change of gender is rather due to a copyist’s error, and that the four examples given here refer to a comparison between a woman and the sun.

⁵⁷ Averroes 1986a, 57.1–3; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 62.17–63.1.

⁵⁸ Arist. *Poet.* 6 1450a33–35.

⁵⁹ Arist. *Poet.* 11 1452a22–26; 1452a29–33; 1452a36–1452b1; tr. Aristotle [1995] 2005.

⁶⁰ Averroes 1986a, 80.8–9; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 87.15–16.

⁶¹ Averroes 1986a, 81.1–5; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 87.26–35 (slightly modified).

⁶² *Scil.* Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbī.

“How many secret visits have you made to the Bedouins,
when they were asleep, even more cunning than those of the wolf!

I visited them when the darkness of night interceded in my favor,
and I would slip away, when the morning whiteness calls people to take him on.”

Now the first verse is a discovery and the second reversal. Because these two verses combine both sorts of imitation, they are exceptionally fine.⁶³

The poet starts with the representation of the opposite of the praiseworthy, i.e. the reprehensible help he receives from the night to accomplish his misdeed,⁶⁴ and then goes on to represent the praiseworthy directly (i.e. the day’s denunciation of the malefactor).

Thus, the notions applied to tragedy in Aristotle are now transposed into the lexical level of the poem. Reversal and discovery are two kinds of imitation, that is, two figured stylistic devices that are carried out at the level of the verse.

4.2 An Ethical and Political Poetry

The Rushdian interpretation of the Aristotelian *mimēsis* is therefore characterised by the use of poetical, imaginative statements⁶⁵. Given this strong hermeneutical choice, it is necessary to consider how Averroes understood the two central concepts of the *Poetics*, tragedy and comedy. Influenced by the Arabic translation, Averroes bestows on them a new definition. Indeed, they were translated into Arabic with the expressions *ṣināʿa al-madīḥ* (art of praise) and *ṣināʿa al-ḥiġāʿ* (art of satire) respectively. As a result, he also defines the poem and the poetical statement by taking into account their ethical content:

He said: every poem and poetic statement is either satire or praise. This becomes evident from an inductive examination of poems, especially their poems about voluntary matters – I mean, about the noble and the base.⁶⁶

The poetical statement is thus defined from the object imitated, which is restricted to “voluntary matters.” These voluntary matters are also defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – also known by Averroes, who commented on it⁶⁷ – as the thing whose principle is in the agent and its agent knows its particulars in which the action consists.⁶⁸ And since it is within our power to be good or bad, vices and virtues are also in our power:

That is, the things which are in our power to do are in our power not to do, and we may also say No in regard to the things in regard to which we may say Yes. If the doing of good is in our power, the doing of evil is also in our power, and when the doing of good and evil deeds is in our power, similarly not to do them is within in our power. This is the meaning of our being good or bad, so that it is within our power to be good or bad.⁶⁹

Poetry is thus ethical due to the kind of objects it imitates and because its function is to spur to virtuous actions and to deter from non-virtuous actions:

⁶³ Averroes 1986a, 81.10–15; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 88.7–21 (modified).

⁶⁴ In this motif of the prohibited visit, the poet never claims that it is a legitimate action; on the contrary, it is because it is a transgression that it is a reason for pride.

⁶⁵ See Woerther, forthcoming b.

⁶⁶ Averroes 1986a, 54.7–9; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 59.20–60.3 (slightly modified).

⁶⁷ Averroes’ Middle Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* is now lost in its Arabic version. It is now extant in its medieval Latin and Hebraic translations. The Hebrew was edited by Berman in Averroes 1999. The entire Latin text is now extant in nine manuscripts, and some Latin fragments are also kept in three manuscripts. There is no complete critical edition of this text, and only Book X was edited in Woerther 2018, whose introduction provides a full description and an exhaustive study of the relationships between the different witnesses.

⁶⁸ Cf. Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3.3 1111a22–24; ed. Aristotle 1995, 193.6–7.

⁶⁹ Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3.7 1113b7–14; ed. Aristotle 1995, 207.1–4 (text) and 204.32–206.7 (tr.).

He said: because those who make imitations and comparisons seek thereby to encourage the performance of some voluntary actions and discourage others, the things they seek to imitate must necessarily be either virtues or vices. That is to say, every action and every character follow from one of these two – I mean, from virtue and vice. [...] Since every comparison and imitation⁷⁰ is concerned only with the noble and the base, it is clear that in every comparison and imitation only embellishment and depreciation are sought.⁷¹

4.3 *The Incitative Function of Poetry and the Role of Pleasure*

Poetry is defined by the pleasure it raises in the soul of the addressee, by mean of some melodies, some metres, and also because comparisons and imitations, through metaphors, metonymies, and more generally stylistic figures, are linked to pleasure in humans. This is what Aristotle writes in the *Poetics* when he recalls that we take pleasure in contemplating imitated things while we would not take any pleasure in actually perceiving them.⁷²

The pleasure humans take in imitations explains why instruction uses images or illustrations. For they make easier the comprehension of what needs to be conveyed, since they are pleasant and raise the imagination of the hearers:

Because of this [*scil.* man naturally delights and rejoices in making imitations], illustrations are used in instruction and in conversation to foster understanding. Indeed, due to the pleasure existing in illustrations as a result of the imitation in them, they are a tool that tends to produce understanding about the intended object. Through the pleasure the soul takes in them, it becomes more completely receptive to that object.⁷³

The pleasure taken in images or illustrations that are similar to actual matters and are used in instruction is like the pleasure that is brought into play in the realm of ethics – both in the acquisition of virtues and the performance of virtuous actions⁷⁴ – and that is more generally a central part in human life.⁷⁵ The habituation of the soul towards pleasure and pain taken where and when it is necessary is the distinctive mark of moral instruction that makes a man capable of living in society. Likewise, an instruction that is undertaken by means of pleasant imaginative poetical statements is the condition for an effective education and moral progress.

4.4 *Poetical and Rhetorical Statements, and the Political Function of Poetry*

Poetical statements intended to achieve ethical progress and to encourage to virtuous actions by means of imagination share some common features with rhetorical statements. They both address hearers whose logical ability and reasoning are limited, as opposed to the philosopher who is able to follow and produce apodictic demonstrations. Poetical and rhetorical statements thus convey ethical truths only by means of tools that do not have the binding nature of demonstrations but carry out the persuasive power of images.

The political value shared by poetics and rhetoric appears clearly in a passage of Averroes' Commentary, where the qualitative parts of praise are listed and the belief (*i'tidāl*, corresponding to the Greek δίαβολα) is mentioned:

⁷⁰ The Arabic word *ḥikāyā* is used here as a strict synonym for *muhākāt*.

⁷¹ Averroes 1986a, 59.2–4; 8–10; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 66.2–8; 13–16 (modified).

⁷² Arist. *Poet.* 4 1448b6–19.

⁷³ Averroes 1986a, 63.9–12; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 69.18–25.

⁷⁴ On the central role played by pleasure (and pain) in acquiring moral virtues and performing moral actions, see Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 2.2 1104b3–29.

⁷⁵ The entirety of Book 10 of the *Eth. Nic.* is dedicated to the notion of pleasure. On its Commentary by Averroes, see Woerther 2018.

The third part of the art of praise – I mean, the one subsequent to the second – is belief. This is the ability to imitate what exists or does not exist in such and such a way. This is like the explanation undertaken in rhetoric that something does or does not exist, except that rhetoric undertakes it by means of persuasive statement and poetry by means of imitative statement. This imitation is also found in scriptural statements.

He said: the earliest founders of regimes used to content themselves with establishing beliefs in the souls by means of poetical statements until later ones became aware of rhetorical methods. The difference between the poetical statement that urges belief and that which urges habit is that the one that urges habit urges that something be done or avoided, whereas the statement that urges belief only urges that something does or does not exist, not that it is to be pursued or avoided.⁷⁶

Poetical and rhetorical statements are addressed to a majority whose rational ability is limited and whom Arabic philosophy also defines as “the mass” (*al-‘amma*) opposed to “the elite” (*al-ḥāssa*). While rhetorical statements aim at persuading, by means of enthymemes, that something is or is not, poetical statements aim at imagining, or imitating in the soul, something that is to be fled or pursued, since praise spurs one to voluntary actions.

Further issues could be studied in order to better characterise the nature and the use of poetical statements in Averroes’ Commentary on the *Poetics*, such as: the necessary imitation of a real, non-fictional matter; the notion of *ta‘jīb* (wonder) linked to poetry since at least Avicenna; the hierarchy between imaginative statements, melody (*lahn*) and metre (*wazn*); the role of the delivery (*al-aḥd bi-al-wuḡūh*) in poetry and in rhetoric; the figure of Homer; the rules for composing a poem, etc. From Abū Biṣr Mattā’s Arabic translation Averroes endeavoured to ensure coherence and consistency in Aristotle’s text by referring to earlier commentaries on the *Poetics* and highlighting the political value of poetry. Envisaged as a discursive way to address the mass and give it an ethical education, the poetical statement is thus logical, aesthetical, and political.

5 Conclusion

This brief sketch is far from exhausting the main difficulties posed to al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes when they commented on the Arabic version of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. While doing so, the three *falāsifa* were depending on intermediary sources and on Arabic translations that had to include cultural *realia* unknown to the Arabs. They also inherited the Alexandrian *Organon* where the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* are envisaged as logical treatises. Lastly, they lived in the cultural and religious context of Islam and always saw themselves as the true heirs of the “First Teacher”. They thereby took over and developed the doctrine of the *Poetics* as it resulted from the many filters of translations, and in particular Abū Biṣr Mattā’s translation.

By trying to impose coherence and unity on a text that emerged from centuries of interpretations, these three figures show that the notion of tradition is not a return to origins, but rather what allows one to be part of a history; it is not being faithful to a text, but rather what urges the reader to discover a new meaning. It is this sense that Hermannus Alemannus sought to rediscover in 1256⁷⁷ when, faced with the Arabic version of the *Poetics*, he chose to turn to Averroes’ Commentary on the *Poetics*:

Then, when I achieved with great difficulty the translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, as I aimed at getting ahold of his *Poetics*, I found it so challenging due to the divergence between Greek metres and Arabic metres and because of the obscurities of the vocabulary and for some other reasons, I admitted being simply incapable of entrusting the translation of this work to Latin studies. I therefore seized the explicative edition,

⁷⁶ Averroes 1986a, 71.10–72. 6; tr. Butterworth in Averroes 1986b, 78. 6–24 (slightly modified).

⁷⁷ At this time the Graeco-Latin translation by William of Moerbeke was not yet available, as it was made only in 1278.

made by Averroes, of this treatise, according to what he could draw as something intelligible from it, and I rendered it, as much as I could, into Latin.⁷⁸

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⁷⁸ Averroes 1965, I, 1.2–17 (my translation).

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