

How does Aristotle operate as a literary historian? The purpose of this paper is to disentangle and characterize two different yet complementary approaches that Aristotle's explanatory project in *Poetics* 4 combines, namely an empirical and a theoretical one. Since the two approaches involve deep differences of conception, I argue that they should not be blended. On the contrary, the recognition of two different conceptual frameworks can help account for some apparent inconsistencies in *Poetics* 4. For example, the two different antecedents of tragedy and comedy correspond respectively to the empiric explanation (choral types of poetry) and to the theoretical one (solo types of poetry). Thus dithyramb and phallic songs would be "historical" ("out of which") forerunners of the dramatic genres (but see Leonhardt, 1991), whereas epic poetry and iambos would be "conceptual" ("similar to") predecessors.

At 1448b20-23 and 1449a9-15 (also in 1449a16-b8) terminology typical of the Natural Sciences helps identify an empirical or inductive explanation. In analogy with the growth of living beings, the development of cultural products is explained as brought into being "out of" (ἐκ and ἀπό) previous existing poetic types: both comedy and tragedy out of improvisation, tragedy out of those who led the singing and dancing of dithyramb, comedy out of the leaders of phallic songs. Aristotle appears to be partly following written records (cf. 1449a31-b8), partly making inferences from contemporary phenomena. Within his empirical approach Aristotle considers internal development within the genres. For example, the reference to early tragedy (1449a19-24), characterized by short plots, comic diction and trochaic tetrameter due to its origins 'out of satyrs' performances, defies any strictly binary opposition.

At 1448b24-1449a6 the development of poetry is described exclusively in terms of what human agents produce according to their own character. With a *telos* in mind Aristotle reconstructs backwards through the application of the axiomatic binary division of poetry into two branches. Within such scheme change is accounted for not through the emergence of one element out of a previously existing one, but through a progression in which poets devote themselves to new forms. Three stages are described:

1. poets of *psogoi* – poets of hymns and *enkomia* (arguably an hypothetical stage, for Aristotle finds no pre-Homeric example of *psogos*).
2. poets of heroic poetry – poets of *iamboi*.
3. poets of comedy instead (ἀντί) of *iamboi* – tragedians instead of (ἀντί) poets of epic poetry.

The account is based on conceptual affinities (cf. ἀνάλογον ἔχει, 'in proportion') between epic poetry and tragedy, iambic poetry and comedy, but neither tragedy nor comedy are said to have emerged out of *epos* or *iambos*. Those affinities account only for the non-choral aspects of dramatic performances. The fact that several forms of praise and blame poetry were co-existent with tragedy and comedy should prevent from taking the apparent chronological setting of the scheme at face value.

The speculative character of many statements in *Poetics* 4 has long been recognized (e.g. Else, 1957, 126-7; Pickard-Cambridge, 1962², 94-7, 133-4; Halliwell, 1986, 92-6, 254-6), but is the outline truly "a-historical" (Halliwell, 1986, p. 95)? The identification of two complementary approaches offers a means to distinguish between what is meant to be factual information from speculation. This is consistent with Aristotle's methods in other fields (cf. *Parts of Animals* 640a10-b4 for the theoretical / deductive approach and *Metaphysics* 1032a12-14 for the empirical / inductive approach). Indeed, as a scientist, Aristotle based his historical outline on empirical research or at least on empirical observation, whereas as a philosopher, he strived for generality.