



Citation: F. Hörcher (2017) Dramatic Mimesis and Civic Education in Aristotle, Cicero and Renaissance Humanism. *Aisthesis* 1(1): 87-96. doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-20906

Received: December 15, 2016

Accepted: April 15, 2017

Published: July 11, 2017

Copyright: © 2017 F. Hörcher. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<http://www.fupress.com/aisthesis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Dramatic Mimesis and Civic Education in Aristotle, Cicero and Renaissance Humanism*

FERENC HÖRCHER

(Hungarian Academy of Sciences)
horcher.ferenc@btk.ppke.hu

Abstract. This paper wants to address the Aristotelian analysis of the concept of mimesis from a social and cultural angle. It is going to show that mimesis is crucial if we want to understand why the institution of the theatre played such a crucial role in the civic educational programme of classical Athens. The paper's argument is that the magic spell of theatrical imitation, its aesthetic machinery was exploited by the city for civic educational function. Dramas, and in particular tragedies helped to articulate the city's political expectations from the citizens, and they achieved it with far better efficiency than any other medium of propaganda which was available in those days. It will first reconstruct the duality within the internal structure of the Aristotelian account of mimesis in *Poetics*: it will show both 1.) the aesthetic and 2.) the socio-cultural dimensions of his theory of civic initiation through dramatic imitation. In the second part it will compare this Greek cultural context with a similar context in Rome in the activity and writings of Cicero. Finally, the paper presents the Renaissance republican context of early modern Europe, which also connected politico-moral education with the idea of mimesis.

Key words. Dramatic mimesis, Aristotle, Athenian democracy, *Poetics*, Cicero, civic education, Renaissance republicanism.

Mimesis is a key concept in Aristotle's theory of tragedy, as expressed in the *Poetics*. It is through this concept that the philosopher tries to make sense of the way Greek theatrical performances cast a spell over the imagination of a mass audience, mostly of the citizenry of their *polis*. This paper wants to address the Aristotelian analysis of the concept of *mimesis* from a socio-cultural angle. It is going to show that *mimesis* is crucial if we want to understand why the institution of the theatre played such a crucial role in the civic educational programme of classical Athens. The paper's argument

* This is an edited version of a paper presented at the conference "Ways of Imitation", November 12-14 2015, University of Florence. I am grateful to the organisers for letting me present my ideas there, and to the audience for the comments and questions after the session and in private.

is that the magic spell of theatrical imitation, its aesthetic machinery was exploited by the city for civic educational function. Dramas, and in particular tragedies helped to articulate the city's political expectations from the citizens, and they achieved it with far better efficiency than any other medium of propaganda which was available in those days. Theatre was regarded by the Athenian elite as a complex educational kit, which secured an emotional-intellectual experience through which the members of the audience learnt to reflect properly on the political challenges of their city, and by providing a first-hand artistic experience of fictional or mythological, sometimes even historical events it could enlarge and strengthen the practical moral repertoire of Athenians, and to support the virtues so necessary in times of crises.

This paper will first reconstruct the duality within the internal structure of the Aristotelian account of *mimesis* in *Poetics*: it will show both 1) the aesthetic and 2) the socio-cultural dimensions of his theory of civic initiation through dramatic imitation. In the second part it will compare this Greek cultural context with a similar context in Rome in the activity and writings of Cicero. Learning by imitation was crucial for the Romans, too, who also had to fight long wars during their unsettled lives, take part in the defence operations of their country, and therefore the method to learn the art of war and peace by imitating their fathers observed in real political and military fights was of primary importance for them. Finally, the paper presents the Renaissance republican context of early modern Europe, which also connected politico-moral education with the idea of *mimesis*.

1. THE AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF MIMESIS IN ARISTOTLE

In the Aristotelian account of the dramatic art *mimesis* appears to have two functions. First, the playwright faces the challenge whether his play (as performed on the stage) can imitate events in a way that would be recognised as such by the

audience. This certainly also depends on how actors convince and enchant audiences during the particular performances, but a huge part of the responsibility for the success of the performance is laid on the shoulders of the author. Second, the audience faces the challenge whether and how they can identify themselves with protagonists of the particular drama, and whether in doing so they can reflect on the similarities and dissimilarities of the play's plot and the particular matrix of their own personal and political setting. Let us see both of these two aspects of *mimesis*.

The first challenge, as we saw, is that of the playwright. Is he able to (re)create a story that will be recognised by the audience as an artistic reenactment of the original story? To make sense of the challenge we can start out from the well-known definition of tragedy in *Poetics*:

Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions. (Aristotle [1984b]: 1449)

Representation (*mimesis*) is mentioned here two times, together with action (*praxis*), in a close proximity – the term *mimesis praxeos* is picked out from this context and used by scholars to describe Aristotle's understanding of theatrical *mimesis* in general². He opposes this kind of representation to the use of narrative, i.e. narrative poetry, in particular, the Homer's epics. The difference that Aristotle points out is easy to apprehend: while narrative poetry recollects the action of men in the medium of natural language, the drama is a way of re-presentation where actors play out the story «live». That is, real life actors personify protagonists as they act out the story in real time in front of a large crowd³. There is a direct physical

² See Ritoók (2009).

³ It is to emphasize the presence of that dramatic performance in the neo-classical theatrical tradition as determined by Boileau in 17th century France is required to

link between the stage and the audience, which turns the life and blood presence of the actors into an embodiment of the story. Watching the performance in the audience is also to have the impression of becoming part of a larger whole, as we also experience together with our own sensations the experiences of our neighbours, and in this sense a performance is a group experience as well.

Certainly, actors do not only act on the stage. The playwright determines the words they have to utter, as the performance is not a pantomime, but these are the acclaimed words of the protagonists of the story, the playwright has no voice of his own, no chance to comment or reflect on the events, to describe the situation, and to draw conclusions. He has no bodily presence at all, in fact, he is not a participating character in the play. To be sure, there is a special type of protagonist in classical Greek dramas, the *chorus*, but they are there to give voice to the community and not simply to the playwright. In other words they in fact re-present the audience on the stage, the body of the whole free, male citizen-community of the city – and not the singularity of the author. The *chorus* is a group of non-individualised members, who have, however, one voice. They usually do not participate in the action, in this sense they are much more like «a raisonneur», or opinion-monger than real protagonists. The fact that they dance and sing as well as speak, points also to a dramaturgical significance of the chorus: they help the audience to make sense of the story and to express their emotional reactions to it. Add to it that the ancients held the view that music had perhaps the most effective power to impress the audience and through that they expected the performance to directly improve the manners of the members of the audience. Music in this sense has a reverse mimetic effect: it does not imitate an original story (in this sense it is unlike modern European programme music) but rather adjusts in a mimetic fashion the character of the member of the audience⁴.

present one line of action which happens at one place and in one time.

⁴ I would like to refer here to a question brought up by Stephen E. Kidd on musical education in his paper at the

While music has an important role in classical dramas, the challenge of mimesis in the sense of copying an original story makes words and deeds more important. After all, dramatic plays do not simply want to impress their audiences, they also have to put on stage long and complex stories taken from ancient myths and Homeric epics, or from historical narratives. In order to make their inherited or borrowed stories easily decoded, playwrights have to be rather skilful with their selection of the important episodes and with their transformations of stories into dialogues and dramatic scenes. Authors of tragedies performed during the long Dionysia festival were competing with each other for the tribute of the jury, so they had to be rather astute in putting stories on stage, as the large audience was always ready to express their dissatisfaction loudly and in a rather rude way as soon as they found the performance boring. On the other hand, however, as Aristotle puts it, dramatic imitation could have a magic spell over people's mind:

There is the enjoyment people always get from representations. What happens in actual experience proves this, for we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses. (Aristotle [1984b]: 1448b)

A special problem of dramatizing *mythos* was how to imitate a long line of events on the relatively small stage. Performances had to be simplified to focus on the essence of the tragic conflict, to the stakes of the matter, the (real and supposed)

conference. As Aristotle points out in book 8 of *Politics*, «music has a power of forming the character, and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young. [...] Music has a natural sweetness. There seems to be in us a sort of affinity to musical modes and rhythms». Aristotle also refers to the mimetic element in this musical character-formation: «Even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character, for the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are differently affected by each» (Aristotle [1984a]: 1340b 12-16, 1340a 40-41). Thanks to Professor Kidd to remind me of this Platonic locus of Aristotle.

alternatives available to the main protagonists, of which to choose. The choice itself might turn out to be either *prohairesis*, right choice, in accordance with a moral character⁵, or when a wrong decision is made: *hamartia*. In other words the text of the play had to keep tension and momentum during the exploration of a rather long and complex plot. Greek drama had its own traditional pattern of building up stories on stage, within which mode most of the well-known playwrights had their own «dramaturgical style».

But almost all of them tried to be loyal to the Aristotelian principle that a whole action needs to be put on stage, distinguished by its main and necessary ingredients. The description of narrative wholeness is given by Aristotle's famous definition:

We have laid it down that tragedy is a representation of an action that is whole and complete and of a certain magnitude, since a thing may be a whole and yet have no magnitude. A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end. (Aristotle [1984b]: 1450)

He also adds to this, that the three pillars of a «well-constructed plot» have to be joined by necessary links:

A beginning is that which is not a necessary consequent of anything else but after which something else exists or happens as a natural result. An end on the contrary is that which is inevitably or, as a rule, the natural result of something else but from which nothing else follows; a middle follows something else and something follows from it. Well constructed plots must not therefore begin and end at random, but must embody the formulae we have stated. (Aristotle [1984b]: 1450)

It is not absolutely clear, whether this wholeness and order belongs originally to the action imitated (i.e. to what narratology calls *fabula*), or if it is the result of the way it is imitated and put on stage by the author (*sujet*)⁶. But in both cases, the end result met by the audience is a well con-

structed stage action, one, which is not only amusing, but also worth to be seen and heard for the political education of Athenian citizens⁷.

The second challenge is that of the audience. Although a more or less experienced audience (and drama festivals were regular events in the heyday of democratic Athens, which meant that onlookers might have gathered a lot of experience in decoding drama plots) would easily recognize protagonists, differentiate between sorts of dramatic conflicts and would even be able to suspect the end of the story much before its actual termination, even they could get lost sometimes when trying to decipher the message of the story. These stories were not simple propaganda pieces, and therefore their meaning was not flat. In these cases perhaps onlookers were expected to ask more refined questions from themselves like: why exactly was this topic chosen for this occasion? How does the theme relate to our own present day circumstances and to our present political (internal or external) conflicts? But most often the ones to ask questions like these were philosophers or at least sophists. Most probably the majority of the members of the audience would not formulate problems raised by dramatic performances with any precision.

However, the human inclination called imitation would substitute the missing reflective-interpretive conceptual framework in their cases, too. For indeed there is an inbuilt propensity in us to imitate the action of others, and it does not make much of a difference if the action in question is a real or a fictional one, and if we are ready to theoretically reflect on it or not. Members of the audience almost always choose a protagonist with whom they can identify themselves at the very beginning of the play, and they start watching the story from that specific personal angle. The capacity which allows this empathy (*Einfühlung*) to be

⁵ See Formichelli (2011).

⁶ For a good but technical summary of this formalist distinction see Schmid (2010): 175.

⁷ Aristotle is not really clear about the relationship of *mythos*, *praxis* and imitation, but at one point he describes this relationship with the following condensed set of words: «It is the plot (*mythos*) which represents (*mimesis*) the action (*praxis*)».

felt in connection with a fictional character is due to the character trait called sociability of humans (*zoon politikon*)⁸, which is requisite for a rather unconditioned sympathy with most (but not necessarily all) people. Empathy helps humans to join each other's company and create communities. But how does this human social potential relate to imitation?

According to Aristotle, imitation has a major educational function: it is a natural capacity which helps individuals to learn about others, and about others' experiences, by way of playing a substitution game:

From childhood men have an instinct for representation, and in this respect, differs from the other animals that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things. (Aristotle [1984b]: 1448b)

Although Aristotle is usually described as a staunch defender of the rational capacities of man, here he seems to admit a rather different form of learning process. Arguably, the substantial distinction of learning through rational explanation, as in our modern schools and through imitating others in a drama-pedagogical fashion can be compared to Oakeshott's distinction of technical and practical knowledge. The first is «formulated into rules», while the other «exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules» (Oakeshott [1991]: 12). All working knowledge actually contains both, but the two forms of knowledge can be conceptually distinguished. The essential difference of the two is that the first form of knowledge can be acquired alone, by a simple rational procedure, the other one can only be learnt by imitating an existing practitioner, in other words together with others.

Athenian theatrical performance during the Dionysia festival can be seen as the second form of knowledge, if viewed from the perspective of the audience. It was a special kind of initiation ritual, where Athenian citizens could and were expected to learn through performances about

earlier examples of how cities were run by their respective elites, and what sort of mistakes were committed during the reign of those elites. In other words they learnt by watching the dramatic performance how to behave as a virtuous citizen and what typical errors (the tragic mistakes of tragic heroes) were to be avoided. Watching the cathartic stories of virtuous heroes «live», they were actually under the spell of a sort of «conditioning»: they got into imaginative contact with people personified on the stage who committed mistakes in their judgement (*hamartia*) and had to fall as a result, and this way they could deepen their own practical knowledge (*phronesis*) and more particularly their ability to choose correctly (*prohairesis*), which could be seen as their first steps towards becoming capable political agents (*phronimos, epieikes* or *spoudaios*)⁹.

2. CIVIC EDUCATION BY EXAMPLE IN ANCIENT ROME: CICERO'S POLITICAL WISDOM

I tried to show how Greece provided an example of teaching members of the citizenry by theatrical performances. In what follows I would like to look at a later example, and to see how imitation was employed in the educational process of the Roman gentleman. As this is a field of history much wider than the scope of the present paper I shall have to focus on a single issue within this broad perspective. This overview aims to recall Cicero's ideas of education interpreted as a follow-up to the Aristotelian model of theatre as an initiation ritual into the life of the city.

Cicero is a more or less faithful follower of the Socratic tradition of doing philosophy. His reference to Plato is obvious (*De Re Publica* 2.52), not only in his practical engagement with the life of the city, but also in the way he looks at philosophy itself as a practical affair of giving an account of the household and of the political community¹⁰. On the other hand, Cicero interprets certain

⁸ «Man is by nature a political animal» (Aristotle [1984a]: 1253a).

⁹ See Sparshott (1994).

¹⁰ In my interpretation of Cicero's relevant ideas I shall rely on the ideas of Nickgorski (2013a). For the con-

aspects of philosophy as Aristotle interpreted the theatre. He claimed that the act of philosophising means to follow the example of a master through whom one can be initiated into the life of one's city. Learning by imitation leads to initiation into the inner life of the city. Cicero's own political and philosophical praxis was itself based on this very idea. «Cicero is, in many respects, a model as well as a conveyor of models» [Nickgorski 2013a].

Cicero's main attraction for his politically motivated readers lay in the fact that he wrote about politics in a philosophically sound manner after having experienced politics from the inside, as an active political agent. No doubt, his main reason for doing so (together, perhaps, with a suspected actual political agenda behind his major work on politics, *De Re Publica*) was that «he wants to focus attention on existing political structures and the real, if not perfect, achievements in those structures and practices» [Nickgorski 2013a]. But he also looks beyond the existing institutional structures, because he is even more interested in the nature and character of actual agents, the decision makers, those leaders who control the workings of the structures, and whose individual style will necessarily leave a trace on the very structure while operating them.

We see Cicero's interest in the personal dimension first in connection with the legal profession. As Nickgorski (2013a) explains: «It seems the art of law like that of rhetoric (on which Cicero is explicit in this respect) follows nature and is derivative from experience (*De Or.* 2.356). This can help us understand that the mode of education in law was above all to sit under, work with and observe good lawyers in action, the mode of apprenticeship (*Brut.* 304ff.)». It is acclaimed that the Athenian theatre was influenced by the practice of law courts in Athens; there is no doubt that this connection worked in Rome, too, and in both directions. There, too, court performers had much in common with actors. Perhaps the best orators actually learnt from the rhetorical techniques

actors used to attract attention or to keep audiences silent for long hours staging ancient myths or elaborate historical narratives. Most importantly, protagonists of the court procedure must have been interested in the way actor's dramatic speeches convinced their audiences. If Aristotle's theory of imitation gave a clue to actors and directors of how to behave on stage (i.e. how to imitate in a way that affects the audience, by offering models for self-identification), Aristotle's theory (both of poetics and of rhetoric) offered clues how to win over the sympathy of the majority of the audience. As in the theatre, the masses at the hearings of the law court must have enjoyed the performance the same way because of identifying themselves with one of the protagonists, and they were trembling with their heroes when the decline of the fortune of the character they sympathised with was claimed to be inevitable. This way they were able to learn in a subjective and existentially pro-active manner a lot about the risks one has to confront if one decides to disregard the law – and later commits the mistake not to win over the sympathy of the judges.

«As in the case of law, Cicero is more interested in the example of great achievers, in this case, orators (*De Or.* 1. 23) than in the technical aspects of rhetorical manuals» [Nickgorski 2013a]. Himself an orator-politician, Cicero held the view that professional orators might influence the audience much better than other professional speakers, for example lawyers or politicians, because they are the artists of language use, and this know-how helps them to win in the tight competition of convincing others in the run for popularity. And again, one of the key techniques of good orators is to raise sympathy, through which they let the audience identify with them. When they recall a story they use the most vivid and emotionally appealing expressions and describe the events in a pathetic and dramatic manner, and the audience can imaginatively identify themselves with the actions imitated by the speaker.

However, the professional knowledge of the lawyer and the orator is not enough to form the character (and to cultivate the soul) of the perfect

nection between Cicero and Aristotle, see Nickgorski (2013b).

Roman gentlemen. Cicero argues that the ideal patrician citizen needs something more – indeed, wisdom. For he claims that the fulfilment of the potential of *humanitas* requires as a precondition the sort of self-knowledge which enables one to find in himself the image (*simulacrum*) of god, which will lead him to act «in a way worthy of so great a gift of the gods». It is through this exercise of self-reflection and an introduction to the liberal arts which liberates one's intellectual capacities in order to gain self-reflection and attain prudence. In his view, prudence is the highest virtue of the statesman and the citizen, which helps one to realise his duty «to take part in the life of a State».

Cicero's theory of learning through imitation includes the assertion that the good statesman – among other deeds – should honour the traditional wisdom of the forefathers, and to keep their memory alive, in other words to «hand down to everlasting memory the deeds and counsels of brave and wise men, and the infamy of the wicked». It belongs to the common culture – a word which is closely connected to Cicero – and practical wisdom of the good statesman to keep recalling those stories which might help fellow-citizens to strengthen their civil status. The virtuous deed of Cicero's model statesman – to keep in memory and retell in order to offer for imitation the stories of the forerunners – reminds one of the tradition of the theatre as an initiation ritual for the Greeks in the Aristotelian-Athenian paradigm. In both cases examples are presented in an artistic or rhetorical manner to influence the members of the city to undertake the civic duties which can safeguard the liberty of the political community¹¹.

3. CIVIC EDUCATION AND IMITATION IN THE RENAISSANCE HUMANIST PARADIGM – HAMLET, AS PLAYWRIGHT AND STAGE MANAGER

No doubt, the humanist ideal of creativity as it emerged in 14th-16th century Italian city states

itself is based on a notion of imitation. For indeed the concept of rhetoric that came to dominate in the public arena of the early modern Italian city states was based on the assumption that art (and indeed, intellectual achievement, in general) aims at «the imitation of model authors» (Moss [2008]: 107). In art theory we see this conviction fuelled by a reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*¹², and its «conflating and harmonizing» with Horace's *Ars poetica*. This fashion was made the more interesting by the fact that the dependence of the humanists on the Aristotelian model was supported by a view, according to which Horace's popular piece itself was an «obscure and subtle imitation» of the Greek philosopher's treatise¹³.

The early modern reintroduction of Aristotle's views on poetry took some time to gain acknowledgement, as the new readers had to find or invent ways how to square their own primarily «ethico-rhetorical preoccupations» with the aesthetically more nuanced Aristotelian theory. While Aristotle's interest in the dramatic theatre of ancient Athens was less directly morally engaged, «the philosophical and scientific goals of Humanism were essentially practical, aiming at moral and civic education as a premise to construct a Christian ideal society» (Barsella [2007]: 950). In order to tune Aristotle's more universalistically formulated theory to their own way of moral thinking, they had to reinterpret the *Poetics* in a practically oriented way, strengthening the moralistic overtones of it. As Stephen Halliwell summarizes, different efforts were made to translate for example *catharsis* in a way which would better fit this intellectual framework:

Whether the emphasis was placed on acquiring fortitude or resistance against the assaults of misfortune, as it was by Robortello; or on the administration by tragedy of a conscious moral lesson, as it was by Segni and Giraldi; or on pity and fear as a means of helping us to avoid other dangerous emotions (anger, lust, greed, etc.), as it was by Maggi and others – in

¹¹ In the last paragraph I relied on Cicero (1928/2000): Book I, 56-63.

¹² See Javitch (2008).

¹³ This is Maggi's formulation, as quoted by Javitch (2008): 53.

all these cases, a much more direct and explicit effect is posited than anything which can reasonably be thought to have been Aristotle's meaning. (Halliwell [1986]: 300-301)

But Aristotle was not the only one who had to suffer this sort of innovative reinterpretation. As the humanists' culture was rhetorical in its nature, there is no reason to be surprised to find that all the major ancient authors who were conceived by them as dominant players in literary theory (Horace, Aristotle, Quintilian and Cicero) were read as theorists of imitation who provided guidelines how to re-read their own texts in an innovative fashion, leading to «critical emulation and reassessment» (Norton [2008]: 4-5). Perhaps the strongest element of this reinterpretation was the emphasis laid on the civic pedagogical aspects of poetry and drama, connecting the Aristotelian *mimesis praxeos* with Cicero's ethical-political programme, in his search for the model statesman's practical wisdom.

The preponderance of the ethico-political hand-in-hand with the artistic for its own sake, so characteristic of Renaissance humanism can be finally illustrated here with the analysis of an episode of one of the most famous dramas of the age, Shakespeare's Hamlet. The well-known mousetrap scene presents a play-in-the-play, this way providing a concentrated mirror image of the drama as a whole within the drama itself. In this scene Hamlet invites his old friends, the barn-stormers to present an Italian drama for the king and his court (Shakespeare [2008]: Act III, Scene II). Hamlet, a graduate student of Wittenberg, an almost perfect humanist scholar himself, by rewriting the text of the play to mirror the story of his stepfather, Claudius killing his father is disregarding the pure artistic pleasure the play can provide for its royal audience. Rather his intention is to provoke the new king, Claudius, his political and personal opponent, whom he charges with killing his father, the lawful king. It is through re-presenting the story of a murder that Hamlet wants to let the king lose face: «This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna» – his text claims, only to make it

obvious, that there is a direct reference to real-life events in it.

The risk the prince takes is that the theatrical provocation can only work if the king is able to recognise the similarity between the plot of the drama and his own earlier deeds, and if his reactions are going to be bodily observable – as is the case in the audience of contemporary productions of Globe, his rather popular theatre. The fictive story is there to offer the king his own deed, in order to reflect on it and through this ritual to re-awaken his conscience, or at least to let «fear and pity» rise in his own soul. In order for the plan to succeed it needs to play on both of the Aristotelian levels of dramatic imitation, mentioned earlier. First the plot on the stage needs to resemble the actual murder in a sufficient way to help Claudius recognise the mimesis. Secondly, it needs to lead Claudius, a member of the audience (and intended receiver of its main message) to realise that the character with whom he can identify himself, i.e. the king of the story, is in fact in a snare, and that it also means that Claudius himself, the onlooker of the drama is in a mousetrap, too. His reaction to the provocation is like a conclusion of an Aristotelian practical syllogism. The imitation of his earlier action and its open performance on stage leads him, a member of the audience, to a further action. In the middle of the scene he jumps on his feet and rushes out with his escort from the room. This abrupt move makes it obvious that he understood the provocative angle of the play, and that he takes it as a personal attack on himself and as a direct assault on his own moral integrity. Having witnessed the imitation of his earlier murderous action on stage has a direct cognitive as well as a mixed, but rather strong emotional effect on him. Being a politician he is ready to act out, to perform his practical conclusions. The obvious urgency on his part breaks his cover, and from that moment he is doomed to lose the case and with it, his life as well.

Shakespeare's dramaturgy reveals here, in perhaps a bit exaggerated form, yet in a very vivid fashion the ethico-political significance attributed to tragedies in the humanist reinterpretation of Aristotelian theories of poetry.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper wanted to draw attention to two problems. One of them is the fact that Aristotle's theory of imitation did not only describe the challenge of the playwright to re-present human action the recognition of which might cause pleasure to the audience. It also provides hints of the other side of dramatic imitation: how members of the audience did sympathize with protagonists, and how they must have enriched their own practical wisdom by this artistic experience of a theatrical performance, which they saw through the lenses of the individual characters they identified with. It was argued that ancient Greek drama festivals had the function to educate the citizenry in the tradition of the city, by evoking public memory and through this exercise leading them closer to practical wisdom.

The second problem is the continuity of this interplay between dramatic *mimesis* (where art imitates human actions) and civic education (where art induces human actions through the viewers' identification with the protagonists) in European history, from the ancient Athens of Aristotle to the republican Rome of Cicero and finally, to the mimetic culture of Italian Renaissance humanism, which reintroduced Aristotle's poetics and Cicero's rhetorical writings in order to show that it is possible to read tragedies along ethico-political lines. This thesis was illustrated by the mousetrap scene in Shakespeare's Hamlet, where prince Hamlet persuades the actors to present an Italian drama of revenge to the new King, which is rewritten in certain parts by the well-educated prince, in order to unmask the new king, Claudius by his uncontrolled reactions to the performance, and this way to indirectly prove his sinfulness. This rhetorically charged, witty part of Shakespeare's play is used here to show that a talented playwright can reflect on the ethical-political constraints of his drama within the plot of the tragedy itself in a way, which is able to mirror the real-life context of the drama, and through this it can give it a civic educational potential.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle, 1984a: *Politics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by J. Barnes, The Revised Oxford Translation, vol. 2, Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J.
- Aristotle, 1984b: *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by J. Barnes, The Revised Oxford Translation, vol. 2, Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J.
- Barsella, S., 2007: *Humanism*, in G. Marrone *et al.* (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies*, Routledge, New York-London.
- Cicero, 1928/2000: *On the Laws*, Book I, eng. transl. by C. Walker Keyes, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Formichelli, M.A., 2011: *Aristotle's Theory of Prohairesis and Its Significance for Accounts of Human Action and Practical Reasoning*, Umi Dissertation Publishing, Proquest.
- Halliwell, S., 1986: *Aristotle's Poetics*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- Javitch, D., 2008: *The assimilation of Aristotle's Poetics in sixteenth century Italy*, in G.P. Norton, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 2: «The Renaissance», Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Moss, A., 2008: *Literary imitation in the sixteenth century: writers and readers, Latin and French*, in G.P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Nickgorski, W.J., 2013a: *Cicero on Education: the Humanizing Arts*, "Arts of Liberty: A Journal on Liberal Arts and Liberal Education", 1, 1, pp. 1-22.
- Nickgorski, W.J., 2013b: *The Politics of Aristotle*, "Reconstructions and Interpretations, a special issue of the Hungarian Philosophical Review", 57, 4, pp. 34-56.
- Norton, G.P., 2008: *Introduction*, in G.P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol II: «The Renaissance», Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 1-22.
- Oakeshott, M., 1991: *Rationalism in Politics*, Liberty Press, Indianapolis.

- Ritoók, Zs., 2009: *Mimésis praxeós*, in *Vágy, költészet, megismerés (Desire, poetry, epistemology)*. *Selected essays*, Osiris, Budapest, 2009.
- Schmid, W., 2010: *Narratology. An Introduction*, De Gruyter, Berlin/New York.
- Shakespeare, W., 2008: *Hamlet*. *The Oxford Shakespeare Hamlet*, ed. by G.R. Hibbard, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Sparshott, F., 1994: *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the Nicomachean Ethics*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.