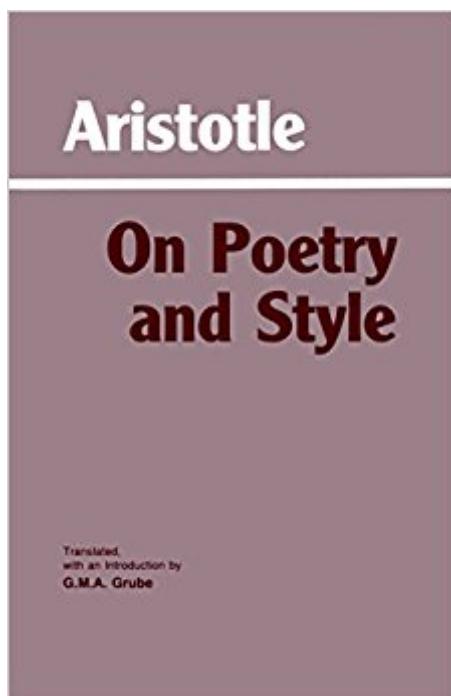


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On Poetry And Style (Hackett Classics)



Synopsis

Contains the Poetics and the first twelve chapters of the Rhetoric, Book III.

Book Information

Series: Hackett Classics

Paperback: 144 pages

Publisher: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (November 1, 1988)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0872200728

ISBN-13: 978-0872200722

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 5.5 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #207,651 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #65 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Aesthetics #166 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Aesthetics #459 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Greek & Roman

Customer Reviews

Text: English, Greek (translation)

Quality of language mattered to Aristotle. In classical Athens, all language was public: poetry, which mostly meant hymns and staged tragedies, was always performed for the assembled citizenry, and written prose was meant to be read aloud, particularly in courts. Therefore Aristotle, like his fellow Athenians, placed great stock in good-quality language. He was only one among many to write style manuals. Few others have had his durability, though. This volume combines two Aristotelian classics. First, the full text of Poetics, his consideration of high-minded public verse. For Aristotle, this mostly means tragedies. University professors often emphasize Aristotle's response to Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, as though this book specifically criticized one play. Actually, on reading, he quotes liberally from multiple plays, sometimes the only remaining evidence of once-important dramas. Aristotle was clearly familiar with this genre. Following that, this book includes twelve chapters from Aristotle's Rhetoric, his chapters on creating a moving prose style. He strenuously emphasizes distinctions between poetic and prose forms, sometimes referring audiences back to the Poetics (including occasional lost chapters) to emphasize understanding how to pick your form. And what forms he describes. Aristotle gives a spirited introduction to the creation

of warm, dynamic prose that stirs the audience, mind and soul. Taken together, these two books represent a widely circulated primer on connecting with one's audience for maximum impact. Concepts that remain widespread and influential in college writing courses, like the poetic foot or arguments from ethos, pathos, and logos, receive their first surviving descriptions from Aristotle. Though often dry and prolix himself, Aristotle concisely describes the decisions writers across ages have needed to make in composing their words. As already noted, for Aristotle, all writing is public writing. The poems he analyzes are mostly plays, performed in Athens' annual festival of Dionysus, before the assembled citizenry. His prose mostly means speeches, delivered first in the Agora, then copied for distribution afterward. These distributed copies were mostly read aloud in salons; the idea of reading alone, silently, arose largely after Gutenberg. Language, for Aristotle, happens aloud. To demonstrate these concepts, Aristotle cites extensively from poets and politicians, many still then living. He often alternates praise and criticism: he dislikes the tragedian Euripides overall, yet finds generosity enough to extol his ear for natural dialog. He acknowledges Herodotus for realizing the value of writing history in prose, though admitting he often gets high-flown and needlessly poetic. He concedes that even the great Homer could've been improved by brevity. It's somewhat unclear how widely these works were distributed in Antiquity. Aristotle's precepts were widely known and cited, though not always under his name; these ideas were perhaps common coin, and only familiar to us in this form because Aristotle transcribed them. His *Poetics* particularly seems to have been lost for some generations. And since he cites passages we no longer have, some scholars believe a second volume was lost. This edition weighs right at 100 pages, plus front and back matter, slim enough for a purse or jacket pocket. Yet it broaches enough topics to keep students and educators engaged with their topics for months. Translator George Grube provides liberal annotations to help readers unfamiliar with the Greek context decipher some of Aristotle's more obscure passages. This part-time classicist appreciates a skilled guide holding my hand. Some of Aristotle's descriptions apply specifically to Greek-language writing. Entire chapters meander on topics like verb tenses and infixes, which don't translate well; Grube, on multiple occasions, advises readers they can benignly skip this page. However, remarkable amounts of Aristotle's directions, on topics like choosing your audience, constructing active metaphors, and creating rhythmic language, remain current and practical. Many Aristotelian precepts could use more airing in our frequently ineloquent age. Aristotle's style often requires great endurance. Unlike Plato, whose entire body of work historians believe has survived, we actually have nothing written in Aristotle's own voice. Scholars conjecture that we basically have his lecture notes, like reading the handwritten

sketches from which university professors extemporize. If Aristotle sometimes seems dry and vague, it's because, like the style he advocated, he used language publically, and we lack his voice. Still, Grube, one of his generation's most accomplished classicists, annotates Aristotle sufficiently that, where possible, we have the information the Great Man's notes elided. Some passages remain obscure, details lost to history, but compared with the unannotated *Poetics* I read in graduate school, this is remarkably lucid. Literary criticism basically begins with these classics. And with them, we begin understanding how literary style works.

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