

Faux pas: the french theatre academy's probable rejection of hamlet



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Aristotle, in his 335 BCE work of dramatic theory, *Poetics*, wrote several observations on the nature of ancient Greek theatre and poetry, and also gave his opinions about the qualities he thought theatre and poetry ought to have. *Poetics* was largely thought to be commentary on theatre and poetry until it received a surge of popularity in France as part of the neo-classical movement. The views and opinions Aristotle expressed in *Poetics* became wildly popular, especially among the members of the French academy, a panel established to maintain the purity of French arts and literature. Soon after the rediscovery of *Poetics*, the academy established a rule that no play could be produced unless it lived up to the Aristotelian standard. The Aristotelian standard the French academy set was that all plays had to adhere to the three unities Aristotle wrote about, and also have verisimilitude. In other words, all plays had to have unity of time, unity of place, unity of action, and also had to be believable. While these rules generated some great works, most notably from Corneille and Moliere, ironically enough, some English plays that were written and produced at the same time and probably would have been rejected by the Academy are considered some of the best plays ever written. For instance, even though William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is often considered one of the best plays of the English language, it is likely it would have been rejected by the French academy for not living up to what they perceived to be Aristotle's standard of theatre.

The first unity Aristotle writes about in *Poetics* is the unity of time. Aristotle wrote that "tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit" (Aristotle V).

While it is worth mentioning that the sun does not revolve around the Earth, the French academy interpreted the quote to mean that no play's plot should cover more than twenty four hours. As far as Hamlet is concerned, Shakespeare does not often make mention of the amount of time that has elapsed throughout the text. However, at one point Horatio reads a letter from Hamlet, who has been exiled to England, and the first few lines read "Horatio, when thou shalt have overlooked / this, give these fellows some means to the king: / they have letters for him. Ere we were two days old / at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment / gave us chase" indicating that Hamlet spent at least two days at sea, and that story could not have taken place in a span of only twenty hours (4. 6. 12-16). Aristotle would have been wholly unaccustomed to this form of storytelling, as Greek tragedies often had a very late point of attack, and what's more, it is likely the French academy would have censored Hamlet on the grounds that the play spans more than one day in the life of the Prince of Denmark.

Hamlet may have also been censored for not having unity of place. In Poetics, Aristotle wrote that "nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long" (Aristotle VII). The French academy interpreted these lines to mean that plays should not have a large setting, and rather, should be limited to one definitive location. Hamlet may have been close to passing inspection in terms of having unity of place because almost the entire play takes place within King Claudius' castle. However, the stage directions for act four, scene four read "A Plain in Denmark," indicating that for that scene the characters

are outside of the castle and therefore, in a different location than the rest of the play (4. 4. 0). Aristotle's firm belief that theatre should imitate real life as closely as possible would have made it difficult for him to accept the change in location, as obviously the stage's location has not moved, and therefore, the setting should not change either, in order to establish a sense of realism and consistency. The French academy would certainly not have accepted the change in location as it means Hamlet does not have unity of place, and the academy would have had yet another reason to censor the play.

Furthermore, Hamlet would have likely been censored by the French academy for not adhering to Aristotle's idea of unity of action. Aristotle wrote that in a play, " the plot manifestly ought...to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it," (Aristotle XXIII). Hamlet is presented in a linear fashion, which aligns with Aristotle's idea of unity of time; however, Hamlet does not have a single action as its subject. While the play remains fairly focused on Hamlet's breakdown, and his plot to expose the king as a murderer, there are digressions within the text. A notable digression is the inclusion of the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the first scene they appear in, King Claudius says to them " I entreat you both, / That, being of so young days brought up with him, / And sith so / neighbour'd to his youth and havior, / That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court / Some little time: so by your companies / To draw him on to pleasures," which not only serves as being his instructions to them, but also communicates to the audience that these characters are to be the

comedic relief (or at least, as close to comedic relief as the play will come) (2. 2. 10-15). Later on in the scene, Guildenstern confirms his role as a clown of sorts when he says "Heavens make our presence and our practices / Pleasant and helpful to him!" (2. 2. 37-38). The inclusion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would distract from the single action Aristotle talks about, and therefore, it would likely be another reason for the French academy to censor Hamlet.

Aristotle's final guideline for plays is that they be believable, or have verisimilitude. On the subject of verisimilitude, Aristotle wrote "since Tragedy is an imitation...the example of good portrait-painters should be followed. They, while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life" which reifies the concept of mimesis, and conveys Aristotle's belief that the closer to reality a play can come, the better it will be (Aristotle XV). It is difficult to determine whether or not something is believable or not, as few events are completely outside of the realm of possibility. Judging a play based on how likely the events described in it are to occur may expose a bit of a flaw in Aristotle's thinking, and certainly the thinking of the French academy, as even among groups as broad as optimists and pessimists, believability is subjective. That being said, the end of Hamlet has been criticized for being a bit far-fetched as four characters (the Queen, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet) all die within 50 lines of one another (5. 2. 295-345). Given how often such rapid slaughters occur in reality, it's likely that Aristotle would have rejected this ending, and that the French academy would have rejected not only the ending, but the play itself.

When looked at solely through the lens of Aristotelian rules such as the three unities and verisimilitude, Hamlet would not be considered a masterpiece, the French academy would have prevented the show from being produced, and the English language's best play would have never seen the light of day. But even though society's views on art have shifted such that the work we believe to be the best would be rejected thousands or even hundreds of years ago, society should not be too quick in rejecting the theories in Aristotle's Poetics, as it is still a valuable piece of literature. There are few other extant works that describe the theatre of the ancient Greeks in such detail, and it offers valuable insight into cohesion and the value of grounding work into reality. Art has ostensibly grown out of Poetics, as well as the French academy. Even so, it is important to continue to read works like Poetics, because by knowing our artistic and literary heritage, we allow art and literature the room to continue grow in the future.