

Plato on Art 1: The *Ion*

1. It has been said that Plato is the greatest enemy of art Europe has produced. He banishes the poets from the ideal city in the *Republic*, for example.

Two questions:

- (1) Why does he engage with poetry so seriously?
- (2) How do we reconcile the literary elements of Plato's own works with his critique?

2. Plato's attempts to characterize and attack poetry

- (1) Poetry as *purveyor of knowledge* (The *Ion*);
- (2) Poetry as *inspiration* (*Ion* again);
- (3) Poetry's attempt to *depict a world that is accessible and knowable outside art* and by whose norms art can therefore be judged (*Republic* 10);
- (4) Poetry's attempt to produce *pleasure* through its image making (the moral/psychological affects of poetry; *Republic* 10);
- (5) Poetry as *creativity* and the role of beauty (the *Symposium*).

Context for understanding the *Ion*

1. a. There is no set idea of the 'arts'.

b. Most influential form of cultural expression = *musikê* – sung lyric poetry; tragic theatre: story, plot, music, acting, dance, singing combined; all occurring at religious festivals and gatherings.

c. There was no such thing as 'aesthetics', sharply separated from other values.

Janaway (1995) p. 5: 'What we may find it hard to forgive in Plato is the apparent arrogance with which he ignores our orthodoxy'

Rhapsode: professional reciter (singer) of epic poetry, particularly that of Homer, at great religious festivals. They participated in competitions and were distinguished by a staff and special clothing (*Laws* 658d, *Ion* 535).

Solon decreed that at Athens they should repeat the whole of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in relay at the Panathenea festival (see *Ion* 530b). They had status.



Plate 1. A rhapsode, reciter of Homeric poetry, on an amphora by the Akrokorinth Painter. Early 5th century B.C. British Museum. Photo: R. Schoder, S.I.

2. Poetry and Knowledge

Homer and education: the status and authority of poets as "teachers of Greece"

Havelock has described Homer's poetry as:

1. “An epic archetype of the orally preserved word, composed as a compendium of matters to be memorised, of a tradition to be maintained, or a *paideia*, a culture, to be transmitted” (1963: 49).

This coheres with a remark of Plato’s in the *Republic* where he writes that his attack is on:

2. “Those praisers of Homer who say that this poet educated Greece and that in the management of human affairs it is worthwhile to take him up for study and for living, by arranging one’s entire life according to this poet”.

3. Two sense of this claim: narrow and broad

Narrow: *Why in heaven’s name, Ion, when you’re both the best general and the best rhapsode in Greece, do you go around the country giving rhapsodies but not commanding troops?* Plato, *Ion* 541b-c

Broad: Compare Dylan Thomas: “A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone’s knowledge of himself and the world around him”

For ancient Greeks, the role of oral poet was didactic:

- Aristophanes says: poets fulfill for adults the function of schoolmasters for boys.
- The poetical contest between Aeschylus and Euripides is fought mainly on the basis of the moral and political effect of their work.
- Plato, *Protagoras*: Athenian schoolboys learned good poems by heart with the object of stirring them to emulation (*mimesis*) – not only by reading out, reciting, singing poems, but by practical everyday, moral actions (325e-326a)

3. The structure of the *Ion*:

The thesis to be refuted is that the rhapsode possesses a *techne* – an art/expertise (530c8).

- (1) Socrates argues against Ion that his success as a rhapsode cannot be due to *techne*, since he is only competent when speaking about Homer.
- (2) Socrates presents an alternative explanation of rhapsodic success in terms of divine inspiration
- (3) Socrates provides a broader argument to show that the rhapsode has no *techne* based on what we might call the “principle of specialization”.

The resulting dilemma: “If you really have a *techne*, it is unjust of you to deceive me; if, however, you are possessed by divine inspiration you do no wrong. Choose which you prefer: to be regarded as unjust or divine”

4. How does Socrates understand Ion’s supposed skill?

Socrates: “Physically it is always fitting for you in your profession to be dressed up to look as beautiful as you can, and at the same time it is necessary for you to be at work with poets, many fine ones, and with Homer above all, who is the best poet and the most divine. And you have to learn his thought, not just his verses. Now that is something to envy. I mean, no one would ever get to be a good rhapsode if he didn’t understand what is meant by the poet. A rhapsode must come to present the poet’s thought to his audience; and he

cannot do that beautifully unless he knows what the poet means. So all this deserves to be envied” (530b-d).

Ion can hold forth in a “display”; he is also a “critic”, and a eulogist.

5. Socrates questions this expertise: First Argument (531a-532c)

- (1) There are many things about which Homer and other poets say the same things and in those cases Ion can explain them all equally well (531b1);
- (2) But there are many subjects about which Homer and the other poets do not say the same things (e.g. divination) and, in such cases, someone else (a diviner) could judge their disagreements better than Ion (531b3-5);
- (3) However, if Ion were a diviner himself, he could judge their disagreements equally well (531c);
- (4) Therefore, since Homer and the other poets speak about many of the same things (war, relations between men and gods), and since Ion has agreed that if the poets say the same he can expound them equally well, his skill cannot be confined to Homer.

The assumption is that knowledge of a *techne* (craft/art) must be generalizable across all its subject matter: poetry as a whole. A critic should be able to judge everyone in the relevant art.

6. The Second Argument (531d-532b)

- (1) When several people talk about the same subject and one speaks better than the others, the person who is the most confident to judge the good speaker is also competent to judge the bad speaker (531e);
- (2) These comparative judgments are made by the same person – the one who possesses the relevant art/ *techne* (Ion agrees to this at 531e5);
- (3) In any art/*techne* whoever is most competent to judge who speaks better is also competent to judge who speaks worse (532a1);
- (4) Ion makes comparative judgments about the poets when they speak on the same subjects (532a6);
- (5) Therefore, if Ion is competent to judge that Homer speaks better than the other poets, he must be equally competent to judge if they speak worse.
- (6) So, his skill as a rhapsode cannot be confined to Homer.

How plausible is this argument? What does it mean to “speak better”?

“Have you seen a man, Socrates asks, with the skill to point out what is good or bad and what is not in the works of Polygnotus, but without the power to do so in other painters? (532e7-533a1). The argument can be put as follows:

- (1) If the exercise of an art/*techne* such as painting or poetry is to be judged by another art/*techne*, e.g. rhapsody, then that *techne* employs principles which are generalizable across all instances of the relevant *techne* (illustrative examples of this are painting, sculpture and lyre playing and poetry is a parallel case);
- (2) If judgements of poetry are made according to a critical art/*techne*, then they are made on the basis of principles generalizable across all instances of poetry;
- (3) Ion’s judgments about Homer are not made on the basis of generalizable principles;
- (4) Therefore, Ion’s judgments do not arise from the exercise of a critical art/*techne*.