

Poets and their role in Plato's ideal cities of Callipolis and Magnesia

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Abstract

Plato's attitude toward the poets and poetry has always been a central point of debate, discussion, controversy and notoriety, but most of the scholars have failed to see their central part in the ideal cities of the Republic and the Laws, that is, Callipolis and Magnesia. In this paper, It has been elaborately discussed that in neither dialogue does Plato "exile" the poets, but, instead, believes they must, like all citizens, exercise the expertise proper to their profession, permitting them the right to become full-fledged participants in the productive class. Moreover, focus to certain details shows that Plato harnesses both positive and negative factors in poetry to bring his ideal cities nearer to a practical realization. The status and position of the poet and his craft in this context has rarely to my knowledge been addressed.

Keywords: Poetry; Poets; Mimesis; Myths; Demiurge; Callipolis; Magnesia.

Introduction

In Homer and Hesiod, the bards or singers (*aoidoi*) are classified as *demiourgoi*, that is, as "public" or "professional" craftsmen (*Odyssey* 17.383-85; *Works and Days* 26). Nonetheless, there is no uncertainty that such bards thought themselves to be divinely motivated. As Hesiod notes, the Muses taught him the art of *aoidē*, that is, the art of singing in verse (*Theogony* 22) in order to unveil and celebrate the truth (*alethea*, 28) both past and future. The idea that the reason of the poets was due to divine inspiration was a traditional belief in ancient Greece. Even the atomist Democritus was a firm believer in poetic inspiration, and it was, as he notes, precisely this that enabled Homer to build a *kosmos* of varied verse (DK68B17, 18, 21). Democritus was in fact the first to use the word *enthousiamos* to characterize the poetic phenomenon – a word that Plato subsequently employed on numerous occasions.

It is pertinent to note that over time poetry started to lose its connection with divine inspiration. During the late fifth century, and largely under the influence of the sophists, people began to think of a teachable poetic craft without religious associations. The sophist Gorgias (c.483-375) formulated this position, most notably in his *Encomium of Helen*, in which he uses examples of poetry and magic spells to show that speech or *logos* can have the same power over the soul as drugs on the body. The famous medical analogy will be used also by Plato, who likens myth to a charm or incantation, calling it an effective tool to educate or tame the *hoi polloi* (see Brisson 1998, 75-85). Plato, like Gorgias, is well aware that poetry can shape the souls of those it encounters.

Plato was as unsure about the poets as he was toward the myths they created. Sometimes, he is critical, even contemptuous (*Gorgias* 501d-503b); and at other times, he gives the poets high praise, and even gives them quasi-philosophical status (*Symposium* 210d-e). The respect that Plato has for the poets, at least in certain dialogues, is premised on his assurance that the great poets such as Homer and Hesiod were indeed inspired by the Muses. Plato seems unambiguous about this: without inspiration, without the madness that is the gift of the Muses, a man will be no more than a poet manque (*Phaedrus* 245a). Still, a major problem Plato wrestles with is that inspiration does not equal knowledge: lacking a *techne*, that is, expert knowledge or a teachable craft, the poets can explain neither the meaning of their poems nor the process by which they were produced. Thus, although the works of "true" poets have an important positive didactic value (consider the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*), without *techne*, poets in general contribute little of value to the social and political good of a community. But Plato's position on poetic *techne* is far more complex than generally recognized.

In no two works do I find Plato's attitude toward the poets and poetic *techne* more ambivalent than in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, that is, in the ideal cities of Callipolis and Magnesia. In this paper, I will argue, in opposition to many, that in neither dialogue does Plato "exile" the poets, although poetry has a more positive function in the *Laws* than in the *Republic*. If the poets are not to be banished, Plato believes they must exercise the expertise proper to their profession, which would necessarily become a part of the productive class. The status of the poet in this context is rarely to my knowledge addressed.⁷ Moreover, attention to certain details will show poetry plays a central role in

both political dialogues and that Plato recuperates positive and negative factors in poetry to bring his ideal cities closer to a practical realization. Let me begin with the *Republic*.

The opening of the *Republic* makes it clear that the poets will play a crucial role. Indeed, all the speakers in Book 1, with the exception of Thrasymachus, cite the poets in support of their respective accounts of justice and thus as a primary source of their respective education. Plato's own opening salvo is best summarized in his reaction to Polemarchus' contention that justice is what the poet Simonides observed: giving to each individual what they are owed (331e). As Plato find out that, this idea of justice can be interpreted in many ways and, thus, is nothing more than a riddle. In fact, many poets seem to speak in riddles (*einixatoi* 332b14) and so their texts should not be used as instructions for morality (Ford 2002, 213-14). It is clear that Plato is already implying that poets in general are lacking the credibility that comes with *techne*, that is, technical expertise – a sine qua non in his ideal state (see below).

Plato condemn the poets (including Homer, Hesiod, Musaeus, Orpheus, Archilochus, Pindar, Simonides and Aeschylus) at the beginning of *Republic* 2 (363a-367a) and prior to the introduction of the ideal city for their tacit support of justice only for the reputation, honour and awards it brings. Moreover, while the gods may not sanction injustice, the poets contend that the gods can be bribed (quoting Homer, *Iliad* 9.497-501). Although the poets are not the only ones targeted by Plato (the prose writers are also in his line of fire), he alludes to their craftiness and insincerity (2.364a-366c) and thus provides a prologue to his more famous offensive and subsequent severe condemnation, if not censorship, of the traditional educators of Greece. In the *Gorgias*, poetry was associated with an art of "conscious" deception and the relationship between poetry and deception plays a major role in his condemnation of the poets in the *Republic*, in particular, in Book 10. In sum, if we can speak of a poetic *techne* or craft in the *Republic*, it is without any positive references to poetic inspiration, nor for that matter are there any to the Muses – both of which are positively represented in the *Laws*. It is instead the notion of "specialization" or *techne* that is the driving force for the realization of the ideal state.

In his inquiry into the definition of justice and its effects on the individual soul, Plato proposes to seek the principle behind the logical development of an actual state. Since individuals are not self-sufficient, it is agreed that the state originates and develops according to the principle of the natural division of labour, that is, the notion that each

individual should perform a single task for which each has a natural aptitude (369b-370c). The strict adherence to this principle, which also applies to the tripartition of the state and the soul of the individual, is at the foundation of justice in Plato's ideal state.

Although, Plato insists that the poets must be compelled to follow the models suggested by the founders, he still suggests that some dramatic poetry would be acceptable. Other passages that do not conform to his *tupoi* would have to be deleted. In fact, he indicates, that recitation of a reformed and closely supervised poetry (386b) would appear to benefit people, especially the very young. At this stage in Plato's argument, even though the poets are to be kept under the thumb of the founders, and passages in Homer's epics suppressed, there is nothing to show that the poets are to be banished from the city.

When we turn to *Republic* 10, we witnessed a much harsher assessment of copied poetry. By this time we have a better idea of what Plato thinks about the role of philosophers in the "ideal" city, and of how the three parts of the soul are different from each other. We can now also contrast the difference between a traditional education and a philosophical education. From an epistemological viewpoint, the poet is three or four degrees from reality. He does with words what a painter does with colours; a painter does not even paint the image of a particular bed, let alone the form of a bed, but only a particular bed as it appears from different perspectives (596e-598c). Such a copycat has neither knowledge nor right opinion. The poet, like the painter, has no direct knowledge of his subject matter. Plato's comments in *Republic* 10 echo the *Gorgias*, where poetry is highlighted as pandering to the crowd, as employing deception, trickery, magic and insincerity (602d). In both works, Plato emerged obsessively fearful of the dramatic power of poetry. Certainly, it is so powerful, he contends, that it can even corrupt "good men" (605c), who can be seduced by its emotional sight. By its very nature such poetry generates a bad *politeia* (constitution/government, *kake politeia*, in the soul. Consequently, if Homer, the most poetic of the tragedians, did indeed educate Greece, then this would explain why there will be no respite from evils until philosophers govern.

Now in the "ideal" city of Callipolis, as observed, traditional poetry is as severely curbed for epistemological as for moral factors (although the former appear to reinforce the latter). Plato's primary opposition is based on the idea that the primary entities in myth: gods, heroes, daimons, events in Hades, were seen as the models of human behaviour in traditional poetry. In the passage cited above, Plato seems to restrict poetry to "hymns to

the gods" and "encomia of good people." Let's look more closely at these. As Ford correctly notes the Greek word *humnos* – the etymology of which is still a matter of debate – originally meant just "song". Of course, all songs are poetic. Thus, the expression, "to sing a song" (*humnon aeidein*) in Hesiod's *Works and Days* is find out. It was in fact Plato in the *Laws* who started *humnos* as a term to select a precise genre that is, "songs (or poems) to gods", which were always sung to the accompaniment of a lyre. This occurs in one of his many criticisms against the musical decadence of his time. Plato contends that in the old days there were unmixed forms of pure song. One of these was the *humnos* that consisted solely of "song-prayers to gods" (*euchai pros theous*, 700b2), although at 802a Plato mentions hymns and encomia in honour of certain men.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, if "dramatic poetry" was seen an addictive drug in the *Republic*, indeed, from the time of its inception, it seems that Plato has now channelled it toward a useful end. There can be no poetry in the ancient Greek tradition without singing and dancing. In fact, the mark of a well-educated man, as Plato contents in the *Laws* (644b) "is one that is able to sing and dance well". Since all music is a matter of "rhythm and harmony" (665 a), in which poets excel, along with "representation and imitation" (668 a-c), the models of which are provided by philosophers and legislators, we can now appreciate why the talent and skills of both groups must be amalgamated in order for Plato to realize his dreams.

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