

Homeric Criticism in the *Hippias Minor*

The *Hippias Minor*'s perplexing argument that the man who lies intentionally is morally superior to the man who lies by accident begins with a discussion about whether Achilles or Odysseus should be called the "best of the Achaeans." Socrates' argument in favor of Odysseus takes direct aim at Hippias' traditional claim that Achilles deserves this title. Scholars interested in Plato's dialogue form have taken this exchange to be an example of his opposition to poetic interpretation (Blondell 2002, Hobbs 2000 and Kahn 1996). However, by focusing on the philosophical aspects, they lose sight of the performative elements of this scene. Likewise, scholars of ancient literary criticism have often used Plato's *Ion* as an important example of the role of the Homeric commentator in understanding fifth century Athenian literary criticism. They, in turn, have failed to consider the scene of the *Hippias Minor* in these discussions, despite obvious links between the two dialogues. In this paper I examine how this interlude incorporates the stylistic elements of a critical, rhapsodic contest (Ford 2002, Janaway 1995 and Nagy 1996). I argue that the contest between Socrates and Hippias should place the *Hippias Minor* alongside the *Ion* and *Protagoras* as a prime example of literary-critical exchange in classical Athens.

In response to Hippias' own speech, Socrates asks a series of elenctic questions before he abandons this style of argumentation for a performance of his own. I argue that in his speech, he masterfully employs key elements of rhapsodic competition— performance, memory and interpretation—in his refutation of Hippias' claim that Achilles is *alethes kai haplous* in contradistinction to Odysseus' *polutropos kai pseudes* character. In so doing he out-performs and thus out-argues Hippias. The latent analogy between rhapsodic and Socratic dialectic at 369b-371e brings the expertise of the interlocutors to the fore. Socrates shows himself to be a master of both arts, whereas Hippias, despite claiming expertise in everything, is master of neither.

Finding Hippias incompetent as a Homeric interpreter, Socrates takes up the task of interpreting the poetic basis for Hippias' moral position (Cormack 2006, Sprague 1962, Zembaty 1989). By so doing, he makes a larger point than that the liar and the truth-teller are the same man, or that unintentional wrongdoers are worse than deliberate wrongdoers. By reappropriating the language of rhapsody, Socrates subverts the Homeric content in a way that is reminiscent of Plato's *Ion*. However Plato takes aim at a much more able interlocutor in the *Hippias Minor*. I conclude that by mastering the rhapsodic skill, he shows that the

supposedly authoritative interpretations of Homer lead to moral dilemmas from which even Socratic dialectic cannot free us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blondell, R. (2000) *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues*. Cambridge University Press.

Cormack, M. (2006) *Plato's stepping stones: degrees of moral virtue*. Continuum Publishing.

Ford, A. (2002) *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece*. Princeton University Press.

Hobbs, A. (2000) *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*. Cambridge University Press.

Janaway, C. (1995) *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts*. Clarendon

Kahn, C. (1996) *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*. Cambridge University Press.

Nagy, G. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*. Cambridge University Press. 1996.

Sprague, R. K. (1962) *Plato's use of fallacy. A study of the Euthydemus and some other dialogues*. Routledge and K. Paul.

Zembyk, J. M. (1989) 'Socrates' Perplexity in Plato's *Hippias Minor*. In *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy, III: Plato*. Edited by John P. Anton. State University of New York Press.