

Plato's Quarrel with Homer's "Divine Bard":
Implied Censorship in *Republic* Book 3

Plato makes his attitude towards professional singers in the *Ion* quite clear: the talent of a bard is dependent on inspiration alone; he lacks *episteme*, *techne*, and *nous* (cf. 532c5-8, 533d1-3, 534b6) and thus has no expertise in interpreting Homer or understanding the subjects about which he speaks. In the *Republic*, however, Plato's criticism of professional singers takes a more subtle turn. In Book 3 of the *Republic* Plato quotes from passages in the *Odyssey* which include effluent praise of the art of the "divine bard". Yet Plato carefully suppresses this material, quoting only those lines from the passages which immediately precede or follow this positive treatment of professional singers, thus silently registering his criticism of the bards' art through a kind of implied censorship.

- 1) In *Republic* 3.389d2-3 Plato's Socrates warns that the rulers of his city-in-speech must be wary of experts who misuse their authority to lie to and corrupt the young. He colors his point by quoting from Eumaius' list of experts from *Odyssey* 17.383-384. He omits, however, the final expert on this list and the only one to which Eumaius offers especial praise: "[the] divine minstrel, who gives delight with his song ... [and is] bidden all over the boundless earth".¹ As in the *Ion*, here bards are again stripped of their status as experts. According to Socrates' argument they are the most dangerous kind of "experts" after all, as they abuse their position of authority in society by repeating the corrupting lies the poets have composed about the character and nature of the gods and heroes (cf. *Rep.* 364d-383b; 386c-391c).
- 2) In *Republic* 3.390a10-b2 Plato's Socrates argues that certain passages from poetry must be barred from the educational curriculum if the city's rulers are to possess the virtue of moderation. One of the passages Socrates singles out for attack is *Odyssey* 9.8-10. As in the quotation above, however, Socrates does not quote the passage in full; he includes the part which mentions the pleasure of food and drink but not that part which immediately precedes it on the pleasure of listening to a bard's song: "verily this is a good thing, to listen to a minstrel such as this man is, like unto the gods in voice. For myself I declare that there is no greater fulfillment of delight than when joy possesses a whole people, and banqueters in the halls listen to a minstrel". Socrates' treatment of this passage is highly ironic. By quoting the passage on food and drink, he preserves that which he pretends to censor; in actuality, however, he only censors Odysseus' praise of the bards as this remains completely absent from his text.

I shall argue finally that the meaning of these subtle attacks on bards would not have been lost on Plato's contemporaries, steeped as they were in Homer's poetry. Though it is an imperfect analogy, in the same way that a modern listener would detect the omission of a lyric in a well-known song, Plato's audience would have detected and appreciated the significance of Plato's misquotations of Homer's verse above.

While exegetical approaches to the problem of Plato's attitude towards the poetic arts abound, Plato's actual use of poetry, i.e. his quotations of it, have been by comparison largely ignored in scholarship. The quotations with which this paper concerns itself have not been discussed as a unit in any scholarly work to date. The significance of quotation #1 above has been discussed in preliminary fashion in Appendix II of Mitscherling 2008 and in an unpublished conference paper by Diskin Clay in 2003. The author of this abstract has discussed his findings in detail with both of the aforementioned scholars.

¹ The translations of Homer are taken from Butler's 1922 edition, part of the Perseus Digital Library.

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