

Socrates, True Student of the Poets

Plato's Socrates knows a lot of poetry by heart (see e.g. *Ion* 537a-539d, *Republic* 383b-393a). Yet in *Ion* 533d-535a, Socrates argues that Ion's poetry is not a τέχνη but that instead, Ion is possessed: he does not himself know whatever truths he expresses. Socrates thus shows himself to be a better reader of Homer than Ion is. Socrates knows that the poets "know nothing," and only receive truth through their connection to the all-knowing divinities:

ὕμεῖς γὰρ θεαί ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα,
ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν.

For you are goddesses and you are all-present and all-knowing,

But we only hear κλέος and we know nothing. (*Iliad* 485-6)

Socrates's response to Ion, as well as his negative statements about the poets, show that his ideas about poets are faithful to the self-understanding of Homer and Hesiod.

Socrates's negative statements about the poets in *Republic* 377ff (cf. 595-607) and *Apology* 22c find a solution in *Theogony* 27-28: Socrates is cautious about using poetry in education because the poets sometimes tell "lies like truth." Socrates still uses poetry of course, for the Muses can "tell true things when [they] want to" (*Theogony* 28). But he ultimately recognizes the need for dialectic (see Kamtekar 620) because he understands Homer's and Hesiod's self-expressed limitations.

Plato's Socrates has a high regard for the poets, but in accordance with their own statements about their singing he sees that poetry cannot take the place of dialectic. Socrates distinguishes between the original poets such as Homer and Hesiod and the purely imitative poets like Ion.

Work Cited

Kamtekar, Rachana. "Plato on Education and Art." In *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, edited by Gail Fine, 605-626. Oxford University Press, 2019.