

Poets and Plutarch: A Snapshot of the Middle Platonist Negotiation of Plato's Critique of Poetry

This paper examines Plutarch's reception of Plato's proscriptive approach to literary representation, usually in the form of poetry or myths, and situates it in the context of the Middle Platonist development of Platonic thought.

In certain passages, Plutarch echoes the Platonic critique that poetry can mislead its audience. This can either occur through the misrepresentation of cosmic or divine reality or through the overstimulation of sensory or *thymoeidic* elements in the soul. These concerns are to be expected of someone in Plato's intellectual heritage. However, there are many more instances of Plutarch citing poets and poetry in a positive light, given that they either contain implicit divine truths or are useful as a pedagogical tool. In these instances, Plutarch identifies poetry's worth in the perspective taken toward the content rather than the bare words themselves.

In the *Lives*, moreover, Plutarch demonstrates poetry's value when he positions poets as trusted advisors to rulers or even as rulers themselves, when he describes those rulers' introduction of certain poetry into their city for the edification of the populace, and when he cites the appreciation of poetry as an example of his subject's refinement. Plutarch here takes Plato's cautious reconsideration of poetry and channels it into full rehabilitation.

In this way, Plutarch's perspective represents an avenue, unexplored in modern scholarship, of the creative evolution of Plato's thought among the Middle Platonist milieu, in this case through literary representations such as Apuleius's *Metamorphosis*, the Gnostic/Hermetic mythologies, and even Plutarch's own use of *bios*.