

## The Rise of Reading Culture Made Poetry Palpable to the Platonists

In his *Commentary on the Republic* Proclus seeks both to defend Homer against Plato's criticism and to demonstrate that Plato's ideas about poetics and Homeric poetry are wholly and irrefutably true (Lamberton 2012). How could Proclus reconcile what appear to be diametrically opposed goals?

By Proclus' day, *paideia* was largely conducted through reading and commentary rather than performance and dialectic, and this shaped his and other Neoplatonists' view of poetry. Through examination of Plato's major critiques against "mimetic poetry" in the *Republic* (376e-414c) and the *Ion* this paper argues that Proclus' seemingly contradictory aims make good sense under a reasonable assumption of his day: that in the educational context poetry was read and not musically performed.

For Plato, musical performance is inherent and implied in the teaching and learning of poetry (*Rep.* 376e1-8 & 377d3-5). According to long-held educational practices of his time, poetry is a natural component of musical education. Reciting Homer and Hesiod to children is a core aspect of their rearing. But Proclus' understanding of *mousike* was not Plato's, and what makes poetry *mousike* for Proclus is not what we, or even Plato, would call "music". For Proclus, music is the state of possession by the Muses (τὴν ἐκ Μουσῶν κατοκωκὴν μουσικὴν, *In Remp.* 57.24). In Plato's conception poetic education is musical because it is conducted through musical performance, whereas in Proclus' conception poetic education is musical because poetry is divinely inspired. This incongruity stems from Proclus' fundamentally different understanding of primary education. In Proclus' experience, even primary education was based on literacy and literature, one's letters and numbers; it was the grammaticus, not the poet, bard, or rhapsode, who

taught students Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, Aristophanes (Joyal et al. 2009). The material was read philologically in the educational context, not performed musically. This informs the way Proclus interprets and responds to Plato's critiques of poetry which, as we shall see, are largely critiques of poetry's musical and performative aspects.

In the *Ion* Plato criticizes poets and rhapsodes because their craft requires them to assume a Bacchantic state, which the melody and rhythm of the music induce (535a3-4). In Proclus' understanding of Plato, however, the poet is *mousikos* not because he is in thrall to rhythm and melody but because he is divinely inspired, not mad singer but an author given a sudden burst of clarity (cf. *In Remp.* 57.24).

Proclus assumes that there is no music to take over the poet's mind. Where Plato feared maddening drums Proclus knew instead poetic meter, which he says gives flavor to "written work" (*συγγράμματος*, *In Op.* 1.10–15; Van den Berg 2014). The spellbinding power of poetry is simply not as dangerous to Proclus as it seemed to Plato because poetry is not as "manipulative" when it is read from a page compared to when it is seen and heard performed. With written poetry meter makes reading flow beautifully and smoothly, without risk of Bacchant possession and manipulation of the soul. Passionate lines become artful, beautiful, rather than a spectacle that mimics real emotion and so "tricks" the audience into sympathetic emotion. Even the "lies" that Plato accuses Homer of perpetuating in Republic 2 and 3 can be brushed aside by Proclus as literary allegory (*In Remp.* 69.24-154.11).

In sum, this paper demonstrates that the transformation of poetry from being a part of musical education to being apart of the literary canon mitigated each aspect of poetry which Plato deemed most dangerous. This is why Proclus is able to both defend Homer's poetry and maintain the truth of Plato's argument.

## Bibliography

Joyal, Mark, Iain McDougall, and J.C. Yardley (2009). *Greek and Roman education: A sourcebook*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lamberton, Robert (Ed. and Tr.) (2012). *Proclus the successor on poetics and the Homeric poems: Essays 5 and 6 of his commentary on the Republic of Plato*. Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature.

Van den Berg, R.M. (2014). "Proclus on Hesiod's *Works and Days* and 'didactic' poetry." *The classical quarterly* 64(1): 383-397.