

Simonides' *Ode to Scopas* in Plato's *Protagoras* and the Value of Poetic Interpretation in
Book 10 of the *Republic*

In a famous section of the *Protagoras* (*Prot.* 338e–348a), Plato portrays Socrates and the sophist from Abdera, together with Prodicus of Ceos, engaged in an animated literary debate regarding the interpretation of Simonides' *Ode to Scopas*. The passage, generally viewed as a humoristic interlude detached from the rest of the dialogue (Taylor 1926, Shorey 1933, Guthrie 1975) has been subject to intense scholarly activity. Socrates' analysis of the poem has been considered deliberately misleading and aims at uncovering the perils and deceptions of poetic μίμησις (Carson, 1992, McCoy, 1999, Beresford 2009, Trivigno 2013). This paper argues that the dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras, concerned with the connections between poetry and ἀρετή, represents the original core of a philosophical issue that will be later resumed by Plato in the *Republic*. This argument follows the conventional chronology of Platonic dialogues, which considers the *Protagoras* prior to the *Republic* (Thesleff 1982, Gerald 1989, Brandwood 1990, Charles 2003).

Book 10 of the *Republic* features a long discussion about the negative value of poetic interpretation in the ideal state. During his conversation with Glaucon, Socrates characterizes poets as mere imitators of τέχνη, devoid of whatsoever moral principle (*Rep.* 599b–d). To prove his point, he emphasizes Homer's failure in educating men due to the deceptive nature of his art, based on imitation and thus incapable of generating any sort of ἀρετή. On the contrary, Socrates continues, Protagoras and Prodicus were able to convince their contemporaries that they could provide them with an effective education (*Rep.* 600b–d). This paper proposes that Plato's mention of Protagoras and Prodicus in the *Republic* directly hints at discussion between them and Socrates in the *Protagoras*. In both dialogues the two

philosophers strikingly appear at the same time when the relations between poetry and ἀρετή are investigated.

The text of the *Republic* suggests that Plato is retrospectively alluding at the reflections developed in the *Protagoras* about the pernicious nature of poetic imitation. In book 10 of the *Republic*, however, the ideas which were just cursorily explored in the *Protagoras* are presented in a more articulated manner and receive precise theorization inside the system of the ideal state. The analysis of Simonides' poem in the *Protagoras* represents an apparently unrelated *intermezzo* serving as a preliminary survey of the multiform connections between ἀρετή and ἦθος, which will be later expanded by Plato in the *Republic*. The two passages seem to “echo” each other with a series of cross-references that reveal precise syntactic and thematic correspondences. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Socrates' discourse in the *Protagoras* represents an early stage of Plato's philosophical thought about poetry and contains *in nuce* all the fundamental concepts which will receive a more organic systematization in book 10 of the *Republic*.

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