Poetry and Philosophy

As you might recall from Professor Smith’s video lecture in subunit 1.2.1, he states that in the *Apology*, Socrates is asking a fundamental question: “Who has the right to teach, to educate, to govern?” It might be added for our purposes here: “The poets or the philosophers?” Throughout Plato’s dialogues, and most thoroughly in Book X of the *Republic*, Plato addresses what he terms the long-running quarrel between philosophy and poetry (607b5-6). Before these lines at 606e, Plato identifies those to whom his critique is addressed:

Then, Glaucon, said I, when you meet encomiasts of Homer who tell us that this poet has been the educator of Hellas, and that for the conduct and refinement of human life he is worthy of our study and devotion, and that we should order our entire lives by the guidance of this poet, we must love and salute them as doing the best they can, and concede to them that Homer is the most poetic of poets and the first of tragedians, but we must know the truth, that we can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the Gods and the praises of good men. For if you grant admission to the honeyed Muse in lyric or epic, pleasure and pain will be lords of your city instead of law and that which shall from time to time have approved itself to the general reason as the best.¹

For Plato, poetry means recitations and performances set to music in the context of comic, tragic, and tragicomic theater central to the culture and society of Athens during his day. Religious services and holidays, modern day cinema, concerts, recorded music of all kinds, and the pervasive images of advertisements would better serve as an analogy to poetry in Plato’s time than poetry thought of as reading an anthology to oneself while lying on the couch. Poetry was a public event, and in criticizing poetry Plato is criticizing the culture and society of Athens. In the *Apology*, it is Meletus, as a poet himself and prompted by other poets, who brings charges against Socrates, and it is Aristophanes, “writer of comedies,” who stands as Socrates’ foremost critic embodied in his comedy *The Clouds*. Poets in Athenian society—and this only when cast in the best of lights, according to Socrates—are attributed with oracular capacity, meaning they serve as a kind of channel or link between the Gods and the masses like that of an oracle, a capacity which Socrates entirely disputes beginning in Book II of the *Republic*. This oracular form of presentation, whether acquired through divination or falsely assumed, contrasts with Socrates’ conversational, or dialectical, method, which emphasizes argumentation based in reason to arrive at what is true, just, and virtuous. What is at stake for Plato in the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is a clash between what might be called comprehensive world views. In the passage quoted above, Plato is not merely criticizing (and sympathetically so) those that have been seduced by Homer’s talents, but arguing that Homer’s medium should not be

considered as something which can lay hold of the truth, and therefore should not be constitutive of the soul and of society. So, Plato’s rendering in the *Republic* of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry extends beyond that of poetry to that of the arts in general. In designing an ideal society in contrast with existing societies, Plato addresses not merely political principles and structure, but all the ideas, images, influences, and practices that comprise culture. The quarrel between philosophy and poetry encompasses a theory about how the arts affect the soul and form character, which in turn affect the norms of a given society. But this is not a one-way process of cause and effect. These affectations occur in a manner where all are complicit whether poet, professional performer, or member of the audience. Poets pander to their audience, and this affects their world view as much as the world view of the audience is affected by what is seen and heard on stage. And although the poet, performer, and members of the audience might be affected in different ways, all are often unaware of being influenced given the subtle and gradual nature of the course of this continuing interaction over time. To give an example, it is easy to imagine a society where what was once considered offensive or embarrassing behavior is now considered entirely acceptable or even humorous, and a writer of comedies must take this into consideration. Innovation is a communal process for Plato, and what is of utmost importance to him in creating the ideal *polis* is to guard against *unnoticed* change for the worse. Socrates at 400e:

> Good speech, then, good accord, and good grace, and good rhythm wait upon a good disposition, not that weakness of head which we euphemistically style goodness of heart, but the truly good and fair disposition of the character and the mind. By all means, he [Glaucon] said.

> And must not our youth pursue these everywhere if they are to do what it is truly theirs to do?

> They must indeed.

> And there is surely much of these qualities in painting and in all similar craftsmanship—weaving is full of them and embroidery and architecture and likewise the manufacture of household furnishings and thereto the natural bodies of animals and plants as well. For in all these there is grace or gracelessness. And gracelessness and evil rhythm and disharmony are akin to evil speaking and the evil temper, but the opposites are the symbols and the kin of the opposites, the sober and good disposition.²

And at 401d, line 4, Socrates continues:

² Ibid, pgs. 645-646.
And is it not for this reason, Glaucon, said I, that education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the contrary? And further, because omissions and the failure of beauty in things badly made or grown would be most quickly perceived by one who was properly educated in music, and so, feeling distaste rightly, he would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good. The ugly he would rightly disapprove of and hate while still young and yet unable to apprehend the reason, but when reason came the man thus nurtured would be the first to give her welcome, for by this affinity he would know her.3

It is often thought by readers of Plato that in the ideal city of the Republic, poetry and poets would be banished. However, this is not entirely the case; in the life of Plato's conjured society, poetry would remain as a presence albeit in different form. Although the greatest names of Greek literature including Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes would have no place in Plato's Republic, the question is not of banishing poetry, but of banishing the wrong sorts of poetry that Plato saw as appealing to the lower, irrational or non-rational attributes of the human soul and character through what might be called a form of stealth. It is not merely the content of the arts with which Plato is solely concerned, but the method of its delivery—the often unnoticed accumulation of images through sight and sound that seep past, or are independent of, reason's activities of judgment, evaluation, and belief-formation. In short, no matter our degree of education or station in society, all can be affected emotionally in ways that bypass our established beliefs and the normal processes of judgment. Only graceful appearances should meet our eyes and only appropriate kinds of musical poetry should come to our ears. For Plato, given the communal and subtle manner in which the arts carry their influence, the whole culture must be ideal to foster and buttress that which is ideal within us, leading to the kind of character and thus the kind of citizenry that is constitutive of an ideal polis.

Plato’s charge, and perhaps the most shocking to the citizens of Athens, is that from Homer onwards, rather than serving as oracles for the Gods, the poets have spoken of nothing but falsehoods—the entire religious and mythological tradition charged with blasphemy. And again, Plato is not just concerned with what he sees as the content of the popular culture of his times, such as false statements attributed to the Gods, but with the very practice, or method, of poetry, and those who would aspire to emulate or surpass its practitioners. It is not merely that poets pander to what Plato considers our lower nature or base proclivities that is upsetting, but what might be called the violation of the “one man, one job” principle so central to the heavily codified structure of Plato’s ideal polis.

3 Ibid, 646.
To explain, what is of central importance to Plato’s critique of poetry is *mimesis*, which can be translated as “imitation” or “representation,” although for Plato’s purposes the concept carries a great deal more weight. Poets, or at least the best poets, are masters of *mimesis*; they are imitators capable of appearing as real. Earlier it was mentioned, that in the best of lights according to Socrates, the poet, e.g. Homer, is attributed with oracular capacity, meaning he serves as a kind of channel or link between the Gods and the masses like that of an oracle. Under this picture of the poet, Homer is a mere vessel for the divine, and thus his words all the more authentic—a picture which by Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates has entirely dismantled.

For instance, Plato gives the example of a couch. In accordance with his Theory of Forms, the original form of a couch is that which precedes, and is the essence of, all particular couches—it is the idea or form of what it means for something to be a couch, and this Idea comes in its original and true incarnation at the hand of God (596d-598d). Following this idea of the couch is the carpenter, who creates a particular couch or many different kinds of couches. All of these particular couches employ the original idea of the couch and hold it common, but nonetheless are each once removed from the true form of what *is* a couch. Along comes a painter, who creates a painting of a couch made by the carpenter. Socrates asks, “Shall we also say that the painter is the creator and maker of that sort of thing [a couch]? (597d13). Glaucon answers no, and that it seems to him the most reasonable designation is that the painter is an imitator of things which others have produced, while Socrates in agreement adds that the painter is the producer of a product thrice removed from the idea of the couch, meaning thrice removed from what is ultimately real. Socrates continues his critique in that the painter is yet even further removed from the truth: his concern is not for the imitation of reality as it is even if thrice removed, but of mere appearance as it appears—or what Socrates calls a phantasm. Nonetheless, the painter is capable of rendering this phantasm in such a manner that observers of the painting will conclude that he must know a great deal about couches, and for that matter anything else that the painter chooses to paint such as the sun, the stars, buildings, animals, or flowers.

Socrates carries this critique of the painter over to that of the epic poet at (598c4-599a4):

But for all that, my friend, this, I take it, is what we ought to bear in mind in all such cases. When anyone reports to us of someone, that he has met a man who knows all the crafts and everything else that men severally know, and that there is nothing that he does not know more exactly than anybody else, our tacit rejoinder must be that he is a simple fellow, who apparently has met some magician or sleight-of-hand man and imitator and has been deceived by him into the belief that he is all-wise, because of his own inability to put to the proof and distinguish knowledge, ignorance, and imitation. Most true, he [Glaucon] said.
Then, said I, have we not next to scrutinize tragedy and its leader Homer, since some people tell us that these poets know all the arts and all things human pertaining to virtue and vice, and all things divine? For the good poet, if he is to poetize things rightly, must they argue, create with knowledge or else be unable to create. So we must consider whether these critics have not fallen in with such imitators and been deceived by them, so that looking upon their works they cannot perceive that these are three removes from reality, and easy to produce without knowledge of the truth. For it is phantoms, not realities, that they produce.\(^4\)

What is troubling for Plato is that poets do not know the truth about the topics of which they speak, yet both they and their audience are ignorant of this fact. The audience is ignorant in the sense of not knowing or recognizing that the poet knows nothing but how to imitate, yet "lays on with words and phrases the colors of the several arts in such fashion that others equally ignorant, who see things only through words, will deem [the poet’s] words most excellent, whether he speaks in rhythm, meter, and harmony about cobbled, or generalship or anything whatever." (601a-b) The poet, on the other hand, is ignorant not only in not knowing the truth about that of which he speaks, but also in terms of what might be called feedback. Plato gives the example of a flute maker that comes to know the quality of his flute-making from the reports of those experts that play his flutes—the measure of the excellence, beauty, or rightness of something that is made coming from its use. The poet as imitator has no such recourse other than the applause or lack thereof from the ignorant multitude.

What is still further unnerving to Plato is that the poets undertake to speak and feign knowledge of matters of great import, such as wars and generalship, the administration of cities, and the education of men. Socrates asks at 599d3:

Friend Homer, if you are not at the third remove from truth and reality in human excellence, being merely that creator of phantoms whom we defined as the imitator, but if you are even in the second place and were capable of knowing what pursuits make men better or worse in private or public life, tell us what city was better governed owing to you, even as Lacedaemon was because of Lycurgus, and many other cities great and small because of other legislators. But what city credits you with having been a good legislator and having benefited them? Italy and Sicily say this of Charondas and we of Solon. But who says it of you?\(^5\)

So, in answer to Professor Smith's question, “Who has the right to teach, to educate, to govern?” for Plato’s ideal polis, the masters of mimesis will not be allowed past the gates of the city. They constitute a danger to the soul and to the community; their hubris based not on a capacity to disclose that which is true, but in a capacity to

\(^4\)Ibid, 823-824.
\(^5\)Ibid, pg. 824.
entertain and its consequent popularity. The notion that we should order our entire lives by the guidance of poetry is for Plato absurd. A poet does not have nor is concerned with knowledge of that which is true, just, and virtuous; and, even worse, the poet is either (i) ignorant of his own lack of knowledge, or (ii) aware of his ignorance while continuing to misrepresent himself as knowledgeable to others.