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Someone Wrong or Someone Divine: A Comparative Study of the Concept of Poetry and Rhapsode In Hesiod's Theogony and Plato's Ion

Hatalı Olan mı, Kutsal Olan mı?: Hesiod'un Theogony ve Plato'nun Ion Adlı Yapıtlarında Şiir ve Ozan Kavramının Karşılaştırmalı Bir Çalışması

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ÖZET

Edebiyatın en eski biçimlerinden bir tanesi olan şiirin antik şair Hesiod ve düşünür Platon'a göre bazı farklı kuramsal boyutları vardır. Hesiod döneminde (çoğu zaman şarkı ya da ilahi biçiminde olan) şiir esin perilerince verilen kutsal bir armağan, şairin yaratıcılığı ise kendisinin tanrılarla olan dolaysız iletişiminin sonucu olarak görülür. Öte yandan Platon, akla değil de hislere hitap eden zararlı ve tehlikeli bir tür olarak değerlendirir. Bu yüzden Platon şairleri de esin ile mantık dışı bir biçimde yazan ve bu esinin sonucunda yaratıcılıktan, gerçeklikten ve dehadan uzak kimseler olarak tanımlar. Dolayısı ile Platon, Hesiod'un aksine bilgi, erdem ve akla dayanmayan şiirin hiçbir zaman nihai gerçekliğe ulaşamayacağını; yalnızca eleştirel düşünceye, diyalektik sorgulamaya ve düşünsel incelemelere dayanan felsefenin gerçekliği tartışabileceğini savunur. Bu bakımdan bu çalışma Hesiod'un Theogony ve Platon'un Ion adlı yapıtlarında sözü edilen farklı şiir ve şair imgelerini tartışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Platon, Hesiod, Ion, Theogony, Şiir, Ozan

ABSTRACT

As one of the oldest forms of literature, the concept of poetry has some theoretical dimensions from the points of ancient poet Hesiod and philosopher Plato. In the time of Hesiod, poetry (song or hymn), was considered a sacred gift coming from the Muses, and the creativeness of the poet (the rhapsode) coming from the poet's direct relationship with the gods. Plato on the other hand sees poetry as harmful and dangerous addressing to the senses, not the rational mind. Thus, Plato regards poets as inspired and irrational, and because of this inspiration he considers poets to be separate from creativity, reality and genius. Hence unlike Hesiod, Plato claims that poetry, which is not based on knowledge, wisdom and reason, cannot reach the ultimate truth; only philosophy can discuss reality through critical thinking, dialectical inquiry and philosophically analysis and not by inspiration as a gift from the Muses. This article will discuss Hesiod's concept of poetry in Theogony and that of Plato's in Ion.

Keywords: Plato, Hesiod, Ion, The Theogony, Poetry, Rhapsode

Until the fifth century B.C. there was not such a word as "poetry" and in the time of Hesiod, "song" or the "hymn" of the "singer" was used

as a term for poetry in *Theogony* and *Works and Days* by Hesiod.¹ From the time of Hesiod to Plato, poetry had divine origins as a sacred gift from the Muses, and “this divinity stems from the poet’s direct relationship with the gods.”² In the fifth century B.C., Plato, whose “views of poetry advanced in the Socratic dialogues” in *Ion*, regarded poets as inspired and irrational, and poetry as dealing with falsehood.³ This paper will discuss the poetics of Hesiod’s and Plato’s philosophies of poetry which involve theoretical dimensions.

In early Greece, there was a competing performance at public events and oral poetry was performed by singers called as rhapsodes. The rhapsodes “recited poetry in front of large audience, and also...interpreted the passages they recited, even answering questions from the audience.”⁴ It was thought that the divine nature of singers or poets in antiquity stemmed from poets’ direct relation with the gods. This divine origin of poetry “was first born and bred in heaven and was then bestowed upon mortals to sweeten their brief and stern existence.”⁵ As one of the singers, Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, tells that the guardians of poetry are the daughters of Zeus and the goddess Mnemosyne (Memory), mother of the Muses, from whom the power of rhapsodes comes.⁶ He states that it is the Muses who inspire him give mnemonic powers and also “offer to endow his poetry with truth.”⁷

In addition, in his *Theogony*, Hesiod claims that “For it is through the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that there are singers and harpers upon the earth: but princes are of Zeus, and happy is he whom the Muses love: sweet flows speech from his mouth.”⁸ Apollo, being the god of music and a symbol of poetry, is considered as the source of inspiration. Hesiod becomes “a faithful disciple of the doctrine of divine inspiration...He never allows his reader to forget that his vocation is sanctioned by divine patronage and that all singers are on earth through the Muses and Apollo.”⁹ In other words, the singer is divinely inspired and derives his art from the Muses or the gods, and Hesiod begins his *Theogony* by claiming that, being a poet or a rhapsode, he has learned the song (poetry) from the Muses who gave him divine voice to sing and that “the goal of his poetry, the poet says, is to be heard by all Hellenes everywhere”¹⁰:

From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mouth of Helicon...And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses

said to me—the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis.¹¹

Gregory Nagy argues that “By the time of Plato rhapsodes seem to have been performers only, whereas the oral poet technically performs while he composes, composes while he performs” and he also adds that “an oral poet in a traditional society does not make things up, since his function is to re-create the inherited values of those for whom he composes/performs.” So, it can be said that the ultimate oral poet should have various repertoires for composing epics and theogonies like Hesiod. Thus, before Plato, a poet was as a god like person who composed poetry beautifully only when inspired by the Muses’ power. Penelope Murray states that:

But despite the poet’s dependence on the Muse, it is never suggested that he is merely the unconscious instrument of the divine: poetry is presented both as a gift of the Muses and as a product of the poet’s own invention...Thus in pre-Platonic literature poets are portrayed both as *sophoi*, “wise men”, who have access to knowledge through the inspiration of the Muses and as skilled craftsmen.

Another point in *Theogony* is that, good poetry is distinguished by Hesiod as able to instruct people as well as entertain them. Hesiod regards the singer (the poet, the artist) as a teacher to instruct and educate people by giving moral lessons, so the morality of the poetry plays an important role in his time. In other words, a poet is considered an educator of the community, and Hesiod is aware of his mission as a teacher by the help of patrons of poetry; Zeus, Muses and Apollo. He claims that poets who are considered to be the servants of Muses persuade people with gentle speech in order to instruct them and at the same time help them forget grieves and the ills of life:

whomever of the heaven- nourished princes the daughters of great Zeus honors, and behold him at his birth, they pour sweet dew upon his tongue, and from his lips flow gracious words. All the people look towards him while he settles causes with true judgments: and, he, speaking surely, would soon make wise end even of great quarrel; for therefore are there princes wise in hearth, because when the people are being misguided in their assembly, they set right the matter again with ease, persuading them with gentle words. And

when he passes through a gathering, they greet him as a god with gentle reverence, and he is conspicuous amongst the assembled: such is the holy gift of the Muses to men. For though a man have sorrow and grief in his newly-troubled soul and live in dread because his hearth is distressed, yet, when a singer, the servant of the Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and blessed gods who inhabit Olympus, at once he forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all; but the gift of the goddesses soon turn him away from these.

Furthermore, Hesiod believes that singers are regarded as specially chosen and qualified by the Muses; ordinary man cannot be a poet. The poet speaks as the authority over all other poets just as Zeus speaks as the authority over all other gods. Hesiod claims that poets are different from ordinary men because only poets gain knowledge through the Muses' inspiration and are regarded as divine people. Hence, Hesiod expresses that the Muses tell him what to sing, and then he does as a divine inspiration coming from them:

So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they plucked and gave me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvelous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things there were aforesaid; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally, but ever to sing of themselves both first and last.

However, Hesiod claims that the Muses appear to the poets and teach them to speak many false things, as though they are true, as well as true things. In *Theogony*, the muses announce to Hesiod: "Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things." Hesiod's muses claim that they can tell many lies that resemble truth while also telling the truth when they wish to do so. According to Robert Lamberton, "Hesiod's Muses, after all, never suggest that they will tell Hesiod the truth or tell the truth through him. They simply point out that they could, if they wanted to. Bruce Heiden commends on Hesiod's view of truth that these lines:

are almost always translated as "lies resembling truth". But in Greek epic the sense of truth "was indefinite; it means

“equivalent with respect to a quality”, with the quality regularly specified in the context. Rarely if ever was the equivalence a deceptive resemblance. Therefore in Theogony 27, the Muses' words mean "lies equivalent to truth." Since the nature of the equivalence is left unelaborated, the line poses a riddling paradox. In addressing Hesiod the Muses mysteriously claimed to tell only the truth, because even their lies were somehow equivalent to truth.

On the other hand, when we come to the fifth century B.C., Plato opposes to the previous views on poetry and criticizes rhapsodes or poets in his *Ion*. William Greene states that Plato criticizes poets because “they are perverters of morality, mere imitators and deceivers and their art is concerned with the world of appearance, not of reality.” For Plato, poets cannot speak the truth that is three degrees away from their reality. Since poetry is mimetic and “poetry does its audience direct and unavoidable psychological damage by fueling non-rational parts of the soul, its status as mimesis prevents it from providing knowledge” and truth. Plato agrees with this in *Ion* because poets (singers) have no idea about the truth. He accuses poets of telling false things unlike the truth. Plato rejects that poetry depicts truth and teaches morality because it is based on inspiration, rather than knowledge. Suzanne Gillet adds that “Plato seeks to subvert the traditional status of poetry by having Socrates argue that poetry is both non-rational and non-cognitive in nature.”

Ion, Plato's shortest dialogue, is a discussion between Socrates and an oral interpreter, Ion the rhapsode at that time. Socrates subjects Ion to his philosophical and dialectical questions and claims him to be a professional performer of poetry taking his power from his divine possession as an inspiration. Ion is a professional reciter traveling from city to city and interprets the epics of Homer in competitions at Greek religious festivals. Ion says that he has come from Epidaurus, from the festival of Asclepius where prizes are awarded for the competition of the rhapsodes and he is carried off the first prize. Ion seems to be a self-satisfied rhapsode who knows himself and his job to be important and “is far from the radical self-doubt of philosophy.” Socrates starts the conversation, but Ion is not very interested and gives short answers, responding in a way that can end the conversation. However, Socrates insists on returning and praises him and his profession in order to

attract him by making clear that he is one of his admirers:

You know, Ion, many times I've envied you rhapsodes your profession. Physically, it is always fitting for you in your profession to be dressed up to look as beautiful as you can; and at the same time it is necessary for you to be at work with poets-many fine ones, and with Homer above all, who's the best poet and the most divine- and you have to learn his thought, not just his verses! Now that is something to envy! I mean, no one would ever get to be a good rhapsode if he didn't understand what is meant by the poet. A rhapsode must come to present the poet's thought to his audience; and he can't do that beautifully unless he knows what the poet means. So this all deserves to be envied.

Socrates defines a good rhapsode as one who must understand what the poet means and the knowledge of what the poet thinks in order to convey his thoughts to the audience. At the same time he makes comments and gives lectures to the people about the epics which he recites. This shows the dual function of a rhapsode in Greek society. Donald Hargis states that "With his recitation of portions of the Homeric epics the rhapsode served as an oral interpreter and, as well, he was a lecturer who gave allegorical interpretations of the meaning of the poetry and applied them to everyday life." Socrates wants Ion to accept the definition of the rhapsode that includes both reciting and interpretive abilities. Plato, through his spokesperson Socrates, criticizes the effectiveness of the rhapsode as a reciter whose inspiration comes from the Muses within the discussion of the dialogue. He claims that there is not any systematic and conscious art when the poet composes his poetry because he writes his poem only when he is inspired by the Muses. In other words, the poem is not based on conscious knowledge or truth because the poet's source of power comes from his unconscious inspiration rather than from any conscious art or knowledge.

In Plato's world, wisdom and truth were above everything. According to him, the physical world known through our senses was merely an "appearance". He describes in his Republic that, the world that surrounds us is not the real world but a reflection, because it is dependent upon a world of pure form or ideas, which can be achieved only by reason and not senses. In addition, Plato argues that poetry or literature in general is the imitation of this actual world. This idea is also

called mimesis. Since the actual world in which we live is the imitation of the ideal world, art is the imitation of an imitation and takes its audience further away from reality.

Plato, by Socrates's method of questioning, reveals Ion's ignorance in a debate about the nature of the rhapsode's knowledge of poetry, and he claims that poetry is a form of divinely inspired madness: "the poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy." It is through divine possession, as opposed to knowledge, that a rhapsode "is able to compose beautifully only that for which the Muse has aroused." Plato claims that poetry is not based on knowledge but inspiration and sensation, and the poet composes his art only by inspiration without systematic art. In *Ion*, Socrates adds that poet's power is "a divine power...That's why the god takes their intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants...the god himself is the one who speaks, and gives voice through them to us." Socrates means that this inspiration "comes at the price of the temporary loss of one's rational and cognitive faculties", therefore, poets cannot tell the absolute truth that it can only be approached by reason.

In *Ion*, Socrates relates this divine inspiration to a magnet; how "a magnet attracts iron and passes that attraction along so the gods inspire the artist, who inspires the interpreter, who, in turn, inspires the audience." Plato questions the reality of poetry with this magnet metaphor to explain the chain; the god first gives the inspiration to the poet, so it comes from Muses to poet, next from poet to reciter and finally from reciter to audience; three times away from reality. Plato regards all art as a mimesis of nature and poetry as "merely a copy of a copy." In *Ion*, Socrates claims that the ability of Ion as a rhapsode does not depend on reason but on a divine power inspired by the Muses. He also states that "these beautiful poems are not human, not even from human beings, but are divine and from gods; that poets are nothing but representatives of the gods" and turns to Ion and adds that, as a rhapsode "So you turn out to be representatives of representatives." In other words, Plato views poetry as an imitation of an imitation of reality.

In *Ion*, Plato speaks of the good poet as inspired and possessed but not in their mind. He claims that poets may utter true things but do not have knowledge which a philosopher alone attains. Plato claims that

poetry appeals to emotion. He regards emotion as the lowest form of human expression, so he sees poetry as a low form of experience. Ion expresses the powerful emotions he feels in the process of reciting as: "Listen when I tell a sad story, my eyes are full of tears; and when I tell a story that's frightening or awful, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart jumps." Socrates then asks if Ion knows that he has the same effects on most of his spectators too. Ion replies: "I know very well that we do. I look down at them every time up on the rostrum, and they're crying and looking terrified, and as the stories are told they are filled with amazement." Plato claims that poetry arouses emotional effect in people, so a poet appeals to the senses and not to reason. Hesiod claims that a poet not only entertains or arouses feeling of emotions but also instructs people by giving moral lessons. However, for Plato poetry cannot educate people and cannot give moral lessons as it speaks the falsehood. Plato also states that only philosophy can instruct people by the help of dialectical thinking so poetry cannot tell the truth or give knowledge.

In terms of the poetic inspiration, Plato emphasizes the passivity of the poet and irrational nature of the poetic process. His concept of poetry differs from those of Hesiod and his predecessors because poetic inspiration does not consist of knowledge and the poet is not a master of his knowledge. According to Hargis "as with inspired inspiration, Plato appears to develop this doctrine as a step toward another and related premise that, in the same way, the allegorical commentaries of the rhapsode spring from inspiration alone rather than from the foundation of a pragmatic and scientific critical system." To Plato, poetry does not consist of dialectical thinking and is not based on philosophical truth. Plato attempts to separate poetry from knowledge and truth. He searches for truth in philosophical concept and sees philosophy, which is based on reason, superior to poetry, which is based on inspiration, emotions and senses. In other words, his objection to art is that art addresses to our feelings rather than our reason. Since reason is very important in order to reach the absolute truth and the ideal state of mind, Plato argues that art distracts people and prevents them from reaching the absolute truth.

However, Ion does not admit himself to be inspired and out of his mind. Socrates tries to convince him that the success of Ion as a rhapsode depends upon his inspired power. However, Ion does not accept his view and says "You're a good speaker, Socrates. Still, I would

be amazed if you could speak well enough to convince me that I am possessed or crazed when I praise Homer. I don't believe you'd think so if you heard me speaking on Homer." He insists that he knows and speaks every subject of Homer, and Homer (as a poet) is a master of all the true knowledge. Socrates attacks that Ion cannot speak and know all subjects on Homer such as chariot driving, medicine, and fishing because rhapsodizing is not a skill or a science "based on principles that can be learned" and unlike a scientist (or a philosopher), a poet cannot require knowledge of the various fields, and cannot bring various data together in order to understand their relations and general principles. Socrates then explains:

I find that the knowledge (involved in one case) deals with different subjects from the knowledge (in another case)...I mean if there is some knowledge of the same subjects, then why should we say there are two different professions?

-Especially when each of them would allow us to know the same subjects! Take these fingers: I know there are five of them, and you know the same thing about them that I do. Now suppose I asked you whether it's the same profession-arithmetic-that teaches you and me the same things, or whether it's two different ones. Of course you'd say the same one.

Plato claims that science, which is based on principles and reason, teaches people the same things, but poetry arouses different feelings in people; therefore, it speaks to feelings and not to reason. In addition, he argues that the poets write about wars in their works, although they know nothing about it. They also establish or demolish countries, they speak in the name of the gods, which they should not do, and sometimes they show gods as bad creatures with follies and mistakes. In other words, a poet cannot tell the feeling of a soldier because he is not a soldier; a poet cannot tell about victory because he has not defeated an army. Hence Plato states that a poet cannot be a master of everything and cannot tell the truth. In order to prove this, Socrates asks many questions such as "what should a leader say when he's at sea and his ship is hit by a storm-do you mean a rhapsode will know better than a navigator?" and "when he is in charge of a sick man, what should a leader say-will a rhapsode know better than a doctor?" Socrates states that "But, you, Ion, you're doing me wrong, if what you say is true that what enables you to praise Homer is knowledge or mastery of a

profession.” Finally, Socrates convinces Ion by asking:

If you’re really a master of your subject, and if, as I said earlier, you’re cheating me of the demonstrations you promised about Homer, then you’re doing me wrong. But you’re not a master of your subject, if you’re possessed by a divine gift from Homer, so that you make many lovely speeches about the poet without knowing anything-as I said about you-then you’re not doing me wrong. So choose, how do you want us to think of you-as a man who does wrong, or as someone divine?

At the end, Ion admits that poetry is just based on inspiration rather than reason and truth: “There’s a great difference, Socrates. It’s much lovelier to be thought divine.” Socrates convinces Ion that a rhapsode cannot know everything about the poet he is reciting. Plato claims that poems are subjective; they cannot give all the true knowledge because they are based on emotions, and poetry is deceptive and harmful for not revealing the truth, so poets are not masters of the truth. As Mott Greene says, Socrates proceeds “by dialectical inquiry into meaning, by the critical demolition of pretenses to knowledge...and undertook a search for a means of approach absolute truth.” Therefore later in Republic, Plato claims that “poets lie and ought to be banished from the ideal republic” because their art is “subjective and speaks to feelings instead of to reason.”

In conclusion, before the time of Plato, the term poetry was considered as song in the form of hymns and epics and rhapsodes who were travelling from festival to festival presented their performances by reciting the poems of great poets. In Plato’s Ion, we learn that rhapsodes specialized in reciting the works of poets such as Homer and Hesiod, and as a result they are awarded to the best performer. Hesiod, also being a rhapsode, was among these great poets who considered that his divinely power came from the Muses as a gift. Therefore, Plato in his Ion argues that poets are not responsible for their works since they are inspired by divine sources, the Muses. Because this inspiration comes from the Muses, a poet is far from being a creative artist and far from being a genius; therefore Plato regards poets as not revealing the truth. Moreover, he claims that only philosophy can reach the ultimate reality which is based on knowledge and reason and that the imitations of reality can only be discovered through reasoning. Only philosophers, by using wisdom and reason, can justify their views by rational argument.

Hence, unlike Hesiod, Plato claims that one can only reach reality by critical thinking, dialectical inquiry and philosophical analysis and not by inspiration as a gift from the Muses.

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