http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-rhetoric/

"For **it is necessary that the good poet**, if he is going to make fair poems about the things his poetry concerns, **be in possession of knowledge** when he makes his poems" (598e3–5)

All those "skilled in making" (***tous poietikous***), along with this educator of Greece and leader of the tragic poets, are painted as "imitators of phantoms of virtue and of the other subjects of their making" (600e4–6).

And what, apart from their own ignorance of the truth, governs their very partial perspective on the world of becoming? Socrates implies that they pander to their audience, to the *hoi polloi* (602b3–4). This links them to the rhetoricians as Socrates describes them in the *Gorgias*. At the same time, they take advantage of that part in us the *hoi polloi* are governed by; here Socrates attempts to bring his **discussion of psychology**, presented since book III, to bear. The ensuing discussion is remarkable in the way in which it elaborates on these theses.

[…] the tragic imitators excel at portraying the psychic conflicts of people who are suffering and who do not even attempt to respond philosophically. Since their audience consists of people whose own selves are in that sort of condition too, imitators and audience are locked into a sort of mutually reinforcing picture of the human condition. Both are captured by that part of themselves given to the non-rational or irrational; both are most interested in the condition of internal conflict. The poet "awakens this part of the soul and nourishes it," producing a disordered psychic regime or constitution (*politeia*, 605b7–8; compare this language to that of the passages at the end of book IX of the *Republic*). The "childish" part of the soul that revels in the poet's pictures cannot distinguish truth from reality; it uncritically grants the poet's authority to tell it like it is. Onlookers become emotively involved in the poet's drama.

Another remarkable passage follows: "Listen and consider. When even the best of us hear Homer or any other of the **tragic poets** imitating one of the heroes in mourning and making quite an extended speech with lamentation, or, if you like, singing and beating his breast, you know that we enjoy it and that we give ourselves over to following the imitation; **suffering along** ['sympaschontes', a word related to another Greek word, 'sympatheia'] **with the hero** in all seriousness, **we praise as a good poet the man who most puts us in this state**" (605c10-d5). So the danger posed by poetry is great, for it appeals to something

to which even the best—the most philosophical—are liable, and induces a dream-like, uncritical state in which we lose ourselves in the emotions in question (above all, in sorrow, grief, anger, resentment).

As one commentator aptly puts it, “on the one hand, poetry promotes intrapsychic conflict; on the other, it keeps us unconscious of that conflict, for the irrational part of our psyche cannot hear reason's corrections. That is why poetry, with its throbbing rhythms and beating of breasts, appeals equally to the nondescript mob in the theater and to the best among us. But if poetry goes straight to the lower part of the psyche, that is where it must come from.”[16] Further, the picture of the gods that the Greek poets painted was a projection of the tumultuous and conflictual lower parts of the soul, one which in turn gave sustenance and power to those very same parts of the soul.

The worry, then, is that in experiencing the emotions vicariously—by identifying, so to speak, with the drama—we release emotions better regulated by reason, and become captive to them in “real” life. In a psychological sense, drama supplies what today we would call “role models.” Socrates' point is not that we think the drama is itself real, as though we cannot distinguish between what takes place on and off the stage; but that “the enjoyment of other people's sufferings has a necessary effect on one's own.” Why? “For the pitying part [of the soul], fed strong on these examples, is not easily held down in one's own sufferings” (606b).[17] And this applies to comedy as well; we get used to hearing shameful things in comic imitation, stop feeling ashamed at them, and indeed begin to enjoy them (606c).[18] Socrates quite explicitly is denying that aesthetic “pleasure” (606b4) can be insulated from the ethical effects of poetry. To put the point with a slight risk of anachronism (since Plato does not have a term corresponding to our “aesthetics”), he does not think that aesthetics is separable from ethics. He does not separate knowledge of beauty and knowledge of good. It is as though the pleasure we take in the representation of sorrow on the stage will—because it is pleasure in that which the representation represents (and not just a representation *on the stage*or in a poem)—transmute into pleasure in the expression of sorrow in life. And that is not only an ethical effect, but a bad one, for Plato. These are ingredients of his disagreements on the subject with Aristotle, as well as with myriad thinkers since then.[19] He is asserting, though without filling out the psychological mechanisms in the detail for which one would wish, that from childhood up, mimesis shapes our images and our fantasies, our unconscious or semi-conscious pictures and feelings, and thereby shapes our characters, especially that part of our nature prone to what he thinks of as irrational or non-rational.

The poets help enslave even the best of us to the lower parts of our soul; and just insofar as they do so, they must be kept out of any community that wishes to be free and virtuous. Famously, or notoriously, Plato refuses to countenance a firm separation between the private and the public, between the virtue of the one and

the regulation of the other. What goes on in the theater, in your home, in your fantasy life, are connected. Poetry unregulated by philosophy is a danger to soul and community.[20]

# 5. *Phaedrus*

Readers of the *Phaedrus* have often wondered how the dialogue hangs together. The first “half” seems to be about love, and the second about rhetoric. A slightly closer look reveals that any such simple characterization is misleading, because the first half is also about rhetoric, in several different ways. To begin with, the first half of the dialogue contains explicit reflections on rhetoric; for example, Socrates draws the distinction between what we would call the “form” and the “content” of a discourse (235a). Still further, it consists in part in three speeches, at least the first of which (“Lysias' speech”) is a rhetorical set-piece. The other two are rhetorical as well, and presented as efforts to persuade a young beloved. All three are justly viewed as rhetorical masterstrokes by Plato, but for different reasons. The first is a brilliantly executed parody of the style of Lysias (an orator and speech writer of significant repute). The second speech simultaneously preserves aspects of its fictional frame (the first was a paradoxical sounding address by a “non-lover” to a “beloved”), develops that frame (the non-lover is transformed into a concealed lover), and deepens the themes in an impressive and philosophically enlightening way. The third (referred to as the “palinode” or recantation speech) contains some of the most beautiful and powerful images in all of Greek literature. It is mostly an allegory cast in the form of a myth, and tells the story of true love and of the soul's journeys in the cosmos human and divine. That is, the rhetoric of the great palinode is markedly “poetic.” Especially noteworthy for present purposes is the fact that the theme of inspiration is repeatedly invoked in the first half of the dialogue; poetic inspiration is explicitly discussed.[27]

The themes of poetry and rhetoric, then, are intertwined in the *Phaedrus*. It looks initially as though both rhetoric and poetry have gained significant stature, at least relative to their status in the *Ion*,*Republic*, and *Gorgias*. I will begin by focusing primarily on rhetoric, and then turn to the question of poetry, even though the two themes are closely connected in this dialogue.

## 5.2 Rhapsodes, Inspiration, and Poetry in the *Phaedrus*

That poetry is itself a kind of persuasive discourse or rhetoric has already been mentioned. It comes as no surprise to read that Socrates indicts rhapsodes on the grounds that their speeches proceed “without questioning and explanation” and “are given only in order to produce conviction” (277e8–9). This echoes the *Ion*'s

charge that the rhapsodes do not know what they are talking about. But what about the rationale that the poets and rhapsodes are inspired?

Inspiration comes up numerous times in the *Phaedrus*. It and the related notions of Bacchic frenzy, madness, and possession are invoked repeatedly almost from the start of the dialogue (228b), in connection with Phaedrus' allegedly inspiring recitation of Lysias' text (234d1–6), and as inspiring Socrates's two speeches (237a7–b1, 262d2–6, 263d1–3). These references are uniformly playful, even at times joking. More serious is the distinction between ordinary madness and divine madness, and the defense of the superiority of divine madness, which Socrates' second speech sets out to defend. In particular, he sets out to show that the madness of love or eros "is given us by the gods to ensure our greatest good fortune" (245b7-c1). The case is first made by noting that three species of madness are already accepted: that of the prophets, that of certain purifying or cathartic religious rites, and the third that inspiration granted by the Muses that moves its possessor to poetry (244b-245a). As noted, it begins to look as though a certain kind of poetry (the inspired) is being rehabilitated.

And yet when Socrates comes to classify kinds of lives a bit further on, **the poets (along with those who have anything to do with *mimesis*) rank a low sixth out of nine**, after the likes of household managers, financiers, doctors, and prophets (248e1–2)! The poet is just ahead of the manual laborer, sophist, and tyrant. **The philosopher comes in first**, as the criterion for the ranking concerns the level of knowledge of truth about the Ideas or Forms of which the soul in question is capable. This hierarchy of lives could scarcely be said to rehabilitate the poet. The *Phaedrus* quietly sustains the critique of poetry, as well as (much less quietly) of rhetoric.

# 6. Plato's Dialogues as Rhetoric and Poetry

Plato's critique of writing on the grounds that it is a poor form of rhetoric is itself written. Of course, his Socrates does not know that he is "speaking" in the context of a written dialogue; but the reader immediately discerns the puzzle. Does the critique apply to the dialogues themselves? If not, do the dialogues escape the critique altogether, or meet it in part (being inferior to "live" dialogue, but not liable to the full force of Socrates' criticisms)? Scholars dispute the answers to these well-known questions.[32]

There is general agreement that Plato perfected—perhaps even invented—a new form of discourse. The Platonic dialogue is a innovative type of rhetoric, and it is hard to believe that it does not at all reflect—whether successfully or not is another matter—Plato's response to the criticisms of writing which he puts into the mouth of his Socrates.

**Plato's remarkable philosophical rhetoric incorporates elements of poetry.** Most obviously, his dialogues are dramas with several formal features in common with much tragedy and comedy (for example, the use of authorial irony,

the importance of plot, setting, the role of individual character and the interplay between *dramatis personae*). No character called “Plato” ever says a word in his texts. His works also narrate a number of myths, and sparkle with imagery, simile, allegory, and snatches of meter and rhyme. Indeed, as he sets out the city in speech in the *Republic*, **Socrates calls himself a myth teller** (376d9–10, 501e4–5). In a number of ways, the dialogues may be said to be works of fiction; none of them took place exactly as presented by Plato, several could not have taken place, some contain characters who never existed. These are imaginary conversations, imitations of certain kinds of philosophical conversations. The reader is undoubtedly invited to see him or herself reflected in various characters, and to that extent identify with them, even while also focusing on the arguments, exchanges, and speeches. Readers of Plato often refer to the “literary” dimension of his writings, or simply refer to them as a species of philosophical literature. Exactly what to make of his appropriation of elements of poetry is once again a matter of long discussion and controversy.[33]

Suffice it to say that Plato's last word on the critique of poetry and rhetoric is not spoken in his dialogues, but is embodied in the dialogue form of writing he brought to perfection.