

1 Introduction

Plato's *Ion* depicts a conversation between Socrates and Ion, a rhapsode who has just arrived in Athens from Epidaurus, where he won first place in a rhapsodic contest.¹ A rhapsode, literally a 'song-stitcher,' is a traveling performer, who recites or performs scenes from poetry and, as Ion is eager to emphasize, gives speeches that interpret or present the meaning of the poetry. Early rhapsodes played the lyre while they sang, as in Figure 1, while later ones carried a staff, as in Figure 3 (on p. 37). Together Socrates and Ion discuss the nature of Ion's profession, rhapsody, as well as the nature of poetry, trying to determine whether it is expertise or divine inspiration that explains success in these domains.

Central to understanding the philosophical stakes of the *Ion* is a set of cultural assumptions about the educational role of poetry and about Homer's prominence amongst the poets. Poetry was thought to be a repository of both technical and ethical knowledge.² This might strike us as somewhat peculiar, but in oral cultures, poetry provides an easy way of codifying, memorizing, and passing on practical and cultural information. In Plato's time, Homer was still widely memorized and played a significant role in education, even though literacy and specialized crafts were well established.³ In Xenophon's *Symposium*, for example, one of the guests, Niceratus, says: "My father was anxious to see me develop into a good man so he made me memorize all of Homer; and so even now I can repeat the whole *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by heart" (3.6). On the basis of knowing Homer, he claims to know "the art of the estate manager, the political leader, and the general" (4.6). Ion assumes, like many of his contemporaries, that poetry is a source of knowledge and wisdom and that Homer's work contained the greatest store of wisdom. If poets are sources of wisdom and rhapsodes are experts on poetry, then it might be reasonable to think of rhapsodes as having expertise.

One of Plato's philosophical aims throughout his career is to undermine the traditional idea of the poets as sources of wisdom. The *Ion*'s approach is distinctive in several ways. While Plato also treats poetry and performance in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, only the *Ion* features rhapsody so prominently. This is significant since the rhapsode embodies three perspectives on poetry at once: the performer, the

¹ The dialogues of Plato are historical fictions usually involving known individuals, though we have no independent evidence about a rhapsode named Ion. The dialogues are also usually dated to a period within Socrates' lifetime; in the case of the *Ion*, scholars generally agree on a dramatic date before 412. See Moore (1974); Murray (1996, 96); Rijksbaron (2007, 1–2).

² On oral culture's reliance on song, see Havelock (1963, 36–60); on Homer as a repository of knowledge, see Havelock (1963, 61–86).

³ While modern scholars debate whether there was such a person as Homer, as opposed to a series of bards, the ancients took it for granted that a single individual composed the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*.



Figure 1 Rhapsode with lyre. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1956.

interpreter, and the critic. Further, since people commonly memorized, recited, and appealed to poetry themselves,⁴ the rhapsode may be seen as a professionalized version of the audience. While we see poetic interpretation enacted and its role in education discussed in the *Hippias Minor* and the *Protagoras*, only the *Ion* explores the epistemic conditions that make both interpretation and critical evaluation of poetry possible. The theme of the divine inspiration of poets is discussed or mentioned in several dialogues (*Phaedrus*, *Apology*, *Meno*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*), but the account in the *Ion* is distinctive both for its poetic and fanciful manner of articulation and for its exaggerated description of the poet's passivity when composing. Plato discusses the nature of expertise in many dialogues (including *Laches*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, *Euthyphro*, *Republic*, and *Statesman*), but the *Ion* articulates a distinctive and explicit statement of an epistemological principle for differentiating forms of knowledge. The *Ion* is similar in style to the shorter dialogues in which Socrates refutes a reputed expert, like Hippias, Euthyphro, and Euthydemus, exposing them as foolish and self-ignorant, but *Ion* is the only one whose epistemic claims are so closely tied to the wisdom of Homer.⁵

⁴ See Halliwell (2000) on the cultural practice of citing poetry and Plato's own extensive citation of poetry.

⁵ Cp. Xen. *Mem.* 4.2.10, *Symp.* 3.6, where rhapsodes are denounced as "foolish."

The dialogue treats a number of philosophical issues that are highly relevant for us today. First, there is still nowadays a cultural assumption that great literature, great art, and even great film have something to teach their audience about ethics, human nature, and life in general. In short, many people think that we can learn important truths from the works of (for example) Jane Austen, Henrik Ibsen, and Toni Morrison, and Plato's analysis shines critical light on such claims.⁶ Second, reacting emotionally to fiction is a familiar experience for most of us. We may cry, become nervous, and feel joy from reading Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or watching von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*. This is puzzling: Why do we have real emotional responses to people and events we know to be fictional? How *can* we? Plato's *Ion* contains the earliest articulation of the so-called paradox of fiction,⁷ suggesting these reactions are deeply irrational. Third, the dialogue's concern with poetry is connected to a series of epistemological questions about the legitimacy of epistemic authority, the nature and structure of expertise, and the proper methodology for acquiring knowledge. All of these are important, indeed pressing, questions at a time when the legitimacy of science is being called into question and scientific expertise is needed to deal with a number of looming global crises.

A brief summary of the *Ion* is in order. The dialogue can be divided into five scenes: In the opening scene (530a–d), Socrates praises Ion for having the enviable expertise of rhapsody, and Ion boasts about his skill and accomplishments. Then, Socrates tries to get Ion to specify the nature of his expertise (531a–533d), and the latter is unable to explain what knowledge of Homer amounts to, or how he could have such knowledge without also knowing other poets like Hesiod. In the dialogue's central scene (533e–536d), Socrates proposes an entirely different sort of explanation for Ion's exclusive abilities with respect to Homer: On this picture, Homer is divinely inspired by the Muse, Ion is in turn inspired by Homer, and neither of them possesses expertise. After Ion rejects this account, Socrates and Ion return to the assumption that Ion possesses expertise (536e–541e), but again Ion struggles to make clear what the nature and scope of his expertise is, finally claiming to have learned generalship from Homer. In the end (541e–542b), Socrates presents Ion with a choice: either he is knowledgeable and unjust, for refusing to explain his expertise, or he is not an expert but rather divine. Ion chooses the latter.

Plato's *Ion* has been the subject of scholarly controversy for centuries across several dimensions: (1) the portrayal of Ion; (2) the meaning of its central passage on divine inspiration; and (3) whether the dialogue offers a positive view at all.

⁶ See Urmson (1982, 133–134). ⁷ Radford (1975) is seminal for the modern debate.

First, scholarly discontent has surrounded the character of *Ion*, who is thought to possess, in Goethe's words, "incredible stupidity" and to whom it is hardly worth dedicating a whole dialogue. The portrayal has a generally comedic feel to it, and this makes scholars confused and angry. The most extreme reaction, common in the nineteenth century, was to declare the dialogue to be spurious.⁸ There are two issues here: the philosophical quality of the dialogue's arguments and the dialogue's critical target. First, *Ion*'s alleged stupidity is thought to compromise the arguments and diminish the philosophical value of the discussion. He misses opportunities to resist Socrates' arguments that scholars have found to be obvious. On my reading, *Ion*'s commitment to his own importance and to the great value of his knowledge of Homer makes him unable to see those objections. Indeed, the portrayal of *Ion* as self-ignorant actually enriches the arguments and is crucial to understanding the philosophical significance of the dialogue.⁹ Second, scholars have asserted that, since rhapsodes are unworthy opponents,¹⁰ the dialogue must have some other 'real' topic, and a number of replacements have been proposed: sophists (Flashar 1958), poets (Murray 1996), poetic criticism (LaDrière 1951), poetical inspiration (Tigerstedt 1969), and art (Dorter 1973).¹¹ Scholars have wrongly thought both that rhapsody cannot be relevant and that there has to be a single exclusive topic.¹² On my view, the fact that *Ion* is a rhapsode is crucially important to the dialogue, and the relational triad of poet-rhapsode-audience is the dialogue's central concern. It is, in short, about models of poetic reception, that is, how audiences are to respond to poetry and poetic performances.

The second controversy concerns the status of the central passage apparently celebrating poets as divinely inspired. Commentators like the late ancient Neoplatonist Proclus; the Italian Renaissance scholar Marsilio Ficino; and German Romantics like Schelling have read this passage as Plato's genuine celebration of the great value of poetry. On the other hand, many scholars have read the passage as polemical in nature, aiming to mock poets and rhapsodes.

⁸ The most prominent athetizers were Schleiermacher, Ast, Zeller, and Wilamowitz. The current consensus is that the dialogue is Plato's, with Thesleff (2009, 367–369), as a notable exception. Though stylometrical analyses have proved inconclusive, scholars generally assume an early date of composition, often taking the dialogue to be philosophically immature (Moore 1974, 421, 425). However, several scholars have placed the *Ion* later in Plato's career: see Moore's survey (1974, 421–2n.5) and, most recently, Rijksbaron (2007, 3–8). I make no assumptions about the dialogue's date of composition, since I think that doing so often unduly prejudices interpretations.

⁹ Cp. Trivigno (2016) for a similar analysis of Hippias' character.

¹⁰ Some scholars claim that rhapsodes had a reputation for stupidity, but all such arguments are circular, treating Xen. *Symp.* (3.5–6, 4.6–7) as independent evidence. Xenophon's discussion is either indebted to the *Ion* – there are several reminiscences – or to a common source, as Thesleff speculates (2009, 369).

¹¹ See LaDrière (1951, 26–29) for further discussion.

¹² Against the idea that a dialogue needs a single topic, see Trivigno (2009b).

I argue that the passage is, first and foremost, a comedic parody – an absurdly exaggerated version – of the way the poets thought of themselves. That said, the sheer number of times the idea of poetic inspiration is mentioned in the dialogues suggests that there is, according to Plato, some truth in the idea. In short, I argue that the inspiration story *as stated* in the dialogue ought to be distinguished from the inspiration story *as it might be restated*. The former is a parody, while the latter may well be Plato's real view.

Third, scholars disagree about whether the dialogue offers a positive view of poetry and rhapsody. The dialogue does not, strictly speaking, end in *aporia* but rather with an endorsement of the inspiration story. Some scholars have argued that, since the inspiration account cannot be taken seriously, its final assertion is just another way of rejecting the expertise model. One might compare this ending to that of the *Meno*, in which Socrates seemingly concludes that virtue is a “divine gift” (100b2–3), though there are strong reasons to doubt that this is his real view. Like the *Meno*, the *Ion* is typically classified along with the aporetic dialogues. There are, broadly speaking, two approaches to such dialogues: some see their purpose as clearing away false views without offering any positive solution, whereas others think that one finds at least the seeds of a positive solution. I incline towards an exploratory version of the latter view, which sees the dialogues as testing out philosophical ideas and encouraging readers to think with and beyond what is explicitly offered. Thus, I claim that a positive view about poetic reception can be articulated that is consistent with the arguments of the *Ion* but does not directly follow from them.

My interpretation of the dialogue is focused on two rival models for understanding the relation between the poet, the rhapsode, and audience: what I call ‘the expertise model’ and ‘the inspiration model.’ Each model seems to exclude the defining feature of the other: the expertise model is focused on the epistemic content of poetry to the exclusion of its beauty, whereas the inspiration model is focused on the divinely inspired beauty of poetry to the exclusion of its content. A core secondary aim is to understand how the dramatic interplay between Socrates and Ion contributes to the philosophical meaning of the dialogue. I first analyze the dialogue's opening scene in Section 2 to show how it raises the main philosophical questions and dramatic themes of the conversation. In Section 3, I articulate and examine the expertise model, on which poetry and rhapsody are forms of expertise; I argue that the upshot of these arguments is, first, that Ion has no expertise and, second, that rhapsody cannot be an expertise. Then, in Section 4, I present a reading of the passage articulating the inspiration model, on which divine inspiration explains poetic and rhapsodic success, as a parody of poets' self-understanding. I then compare the way that each model understands the notion of ‘beauty,’ *to kalon*, in Section 5, arguing that neither

represents what Plato thinks of as real or genuine beauty. Turning to the dialogue's drama in Section 6, I provide an analysis of Plato's presentation of *Ion* as comedic imposter, or *alazōn*, and Socrates as ironist, or *eirōn*. I argue that Socrates' ironic praise serves to structure *Ion*'s knowledge-claims and that the exposure of *Ion* is aimed at showing that his foolish character is a function of his misguided epistemic commitments with respect to poetry. Finally, in Section 7, I try to think beyond the dialogue's explicit content and lay out the core components of what I call the 'critical engagement model'; I claim that it is compatible with the content of some poetry being divinely inspired and that it allows for the possibility of knowledge-based poetry. My interpretation of the *Ion* is distinctive in that it integrates the comedic aspects with the philosophical content, makes philosophical sense of the portrayal of *Ion*, offers a new account of Socratic irony, and proposes a novel way of understanding the philosophical upshot of the dialogue.

2 The Opening Scene

The opening scene of the *Ion* (530a–d) introduces the dialogue's core philosophical themes – about poetry and rhapsody, knowledge and beauty, and performance and interpretation – and sets up the dramatic interplay between Socrates and *Ion*.¹³

The dialogue begins with a little vignette establishing the rapport between *Ion* and Socrates. *Ion* is well-traveled, boastful, and keen on praise, whereas Socrates presents himself as an enthusiastic supporter, who admires *Ion* and wishes him well:

You know, I've often envied you rhapsodes, *Ion*, for your craft (*technē*). Not only is it always fitting for you to dress up your bodies in order to appear as beautiful (*kallistois*) as you can, it is at the same time necessary for you to spend your time with the poets: many good ones, but most especially Homer, who is the best and most divine poet. And you have to learn not just the man's verses but his thought (*dianoia*) as well – that is enviable! No one could ever become a good rhapsode if he did not understand what the poet is saying. The rhapsode must be an interpreter (*hermēnea*) of the poet's thoughts for the audience, and it is impossible to do this beautifully (*kalōs*) without understanding what the poet says. All of this then is worthy of envy. (530b5–c6)¹⁴

Could Socrates really mean all of this? Most scholars take Socrates' repeated insistence that he envies rhapsodes to be ironic and in line with the praise he

¹³ Plato's opening scenes often have this function. See e.g. Trivigno (2011a); Procl. *In Prm.* 658–659.

¹⁴ Translations of the *Ion* are from Woodruff's in Cooper (1997), with minor emendations.

heaps on figures like Euthyphro and Hippias, but there is deep disagreement about what it means to say that Socrates is being ironic.

On my interpretation, which I will elaborate and defend more fully in Section 6, Plato borrows and adapts Aristophanes' techniques of characterization, placing Ion in the role of *imposter*, that is, one who presents himself as important and deserving of rewards, and Socrates in the role of *ironist*, that is, one who, under a mask of friendly solicitousness, attempts to expose the imposter as a fraud.¹⁵ Plato's imposter, unlike Old Comedy's, is fooled by his own pretensions;¹⁶ his ironist, unlike Old Comedy's, actually aims to help and improve the interlocutor. I have argued extensively that Plato adapts the ironist-imposter device in his presentation of intellectual charlatans as rivals to Socrates and philosophy.¹⁷ In the typical Platonic encounter, the imposter is ironically praised, the praise elicits claims to wisdom, such claims are undermined and the imposter is exposed as a self-ignorant fool.

Socrates' short speech is exuberant in its ironic praise, and Ion responds as one expects of an imposter: taking Socrates' account to be incredibly flattering, he endorses it wholeheartedly and boasts that he is the best rhapsode who has ever lived:

That's true, Socrates. For me it's the interpretive part of the craft (*technēs*) that required the most work, and I think I speak more beautifully (*kallion*) about Homer than anyone else. Neither Metrodorus of Lampsacus nor Stesimbrotus of Thasos nor Glaucon nor anyone else past or present could declaim as many beautiful thoughts (*kalas dianoiās*) about Homer as I can. (530c7–d3)

Socrates' strategy is successful in eliciting an explicit claim to knowledge in connection with Ion's favored poet, Homer. As we will see, Ion will spend the entire dialogue attempting to articulate and defend this claim against Socrates' skeptical questioning. When Socrates asks for a "demonstration" (530d5) of his interpretive abilities, this prompts even further boasting from Ion:

Really, Socrates, it's worth hearing how well I've adorned (*kekosmēka*) Homer. I think I'm worthy of being crowned with a golden crown by the Sons of Homer! (530d6–8)

¹⁵ See Ranta (1967).

¹⁶ See Socrates' description in the *Apology*: "I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not" (21c5–7).

¹⁷ See Trivigno (2012a, 2012b, 2016, 2017).

The Sons of Homer were a Homeric guild claiming descent from Homer, and *Ion* claims to deserve even more victories, accolades and financial rewards. Socrates immediately puts off the demonstration for some other time and pivots to a philosophical question about the nature and scope of *Ion*'s alleged expertise.

Socrates' irony plays an important role in the dialogue, bringing out an ethical dimension to the critique of the epistemic value of rhapsody. It reveals something about *Ion*'s self-knowledge, or more to the point, his self-ignorance, since Socrates exposes the gap between how *Ion* thinks of himself and who he really is. Socrates' ironic praise is also philosophically crucial both in laying out several of the premises that guide the ensuing discussion and in indicating some of the tensions in the notion of rhapsody that come to the fore in the dialogue. The claim that rhapsody is a craft is central to the expertise model. The Greek word for 'craft' is *technē*, and this term picks out forms of expertise ranging from carpentry to mathematics.¹⁸ It usually indicates a profession that ranges over a particular domain and involves a specialized methodology. In several dialogues (though not in the *Ion*), Plato has Socrates argue that virtue is a craft, or at least very much like a craft (see e.g. *Euthyphro* 13a–14b, *Laches* 184e–185e, and *Charmides* 165c–e). The beautiful appearance of the rhapsode, praised here by Socrates, is central to the inspiration model. The Greek term for 'beautiful' is *kalos*, and this wide term covers everything from physical appearance to nobility of character. The adverbial form, *kalōs*, is usually translated as 'well'; but 'beautifully' preserves the linguistic resonance. The beauty of poetry and rhapsodic performance is a crucial theme of the dialogue, in particular the potential gap between seeming beautiful and really being beautiful.

The centrality of Homer in Socrates' description is no accident, since it was Homer above all who was credited as "the man who educated Greece" (*Rep.* 606e2). Thus, if Plato is to take up philosophy's fight against the ethical and epistemic authority of poets, it is Homer that needs to be unseated. Socrates' designation of Homer as the "most divine" (530b10) poet is also an implicit gesture towards the inspiration model, since that model makes the gods the ultimate source of poetic beauty. Homer's primacy is connected to the enormous scope of his writings, and thus the apparently unlimited range of his 'thought.'¹⁹ This is important for the expertise model and for understanding *Ion*'s avowedly *exclusive* interest in Homer (531a3–4): if Homer is an expert about everything, and one is an expert about Homer, then one might think that one already possesses all the knowledge there is to have.

Socrates' description of rhapsody indicates that he sees it as comprising two main activities: (1) the recitation and performance of a poet's verses and (2)

¹⁸ See LSJ, s.v. ¹⁹ Cp. Xen. *Symp.* 4.6

the interpretation and evaluation of a poet's thought. Both activities require that the rhapsode understand "what the poet is saying," and both are ways for the rhapsode to communicate the poet's thought to an audience. The 'thought' or epistemic content of poetry concerns how to perform various crafts or skills, or more generally, how to act ethically and live a good life. Rhapsody has, then, a certain structure, with an epistemic core, two methods, and a common goal. One might object to my taking performance and interpretation to be parallel activities. Shouldn't the rhapsode's interpretation be subordinate to his performance? The most straightforward evidence for denying this is that Ion himself foregrounds his role as interpreter (*hermēneus*), as opposed to performer, in response to Socrates' praise, and he is eager to demonstrate his interpretive skills.²⁰ The term, *hermēneus*, is derived from the name of Hermes (*Hermēs*), who was the gods' messenger, and it is the origin of the English word 'hermeneutics,' or the art of interpretation. The rhapsodes were not sophists and should not be confused with them, but their interpretive task put them directly in competition with sophists, who gave speeches interpreting and evaluating poetry and thought understanding poetry was central to education (cp. *Hip. Min.*; *Prt.* 339a–347d). Plato has the sophist Protagoras declare that "the greatest part of a man's education is to be clever about poetry, that is, the ability to understand the words of the poets, to know when a poem is correctly composed and when not, and to know how to analyze a poem and to respond to questions about it" (*Prt.* 338e6–339a3).²¹ Thus, rhapsodes contended with the sophists for the legacy of the poets and the claim to wisdom that they enjoyed.

When Ion first articulates in his own words what is valuable about his interpretive abilities, he claims that he speaks "more beautifully (*kallion*) about Homer than anyone else" and that he expresses "many beautiful thoughts (*kalas dianoiās*)" about Homer. This might seem puzzling. Ion does not say that his thoughts about Homer are true or even that Homer's thoughts are true. What makes these thoughts beautiful, and what notion of beauty is Ion operating with? Ion claims that his speeches "adorn" Homer, but again it is not clear how exactly to understand this. Will his interpretation praise Homer, who will then seem even more beautiful? Will it improve Homer somehow? I tackle the question of how to understand what it is to be 'beautiful' – or *kalos* – directly in Section 5. There I also take up the question of how beauty is understood very differently on the expertise and inspiration models respectively.

In sum, Socrates' ironic praise lays the groundwork for two ways of understanding what is praiseworthy about Ion and rhapsody. Socrates first offers the

²⁰ Pace Dorter (1973, 68). On the rhapsodic tradition of interpretation, see Richardson (2006).

²¹ See Trivigno (2013).

expertise model, making Ion a praiseworthy poetry expert, and then offers the inspiration model, praising Ion as divinely inspired, but Ion ends up rejecting each in turn. At the end of the dialogue, Ion is praised for having the noble art of generalship, but Ion abandons this idea too, choosing to be divine and praiseworthy over being a blameworthy expert (542a–b). On my reading, these larger movements between the expertise model and the inspiration model are best explained by Ion's desire to be worthy of the praise that Socrates first heaps on him.

3 The Expertise Model of Poetic Reception

Ion is very eager to give his demonstration, but Socrates, just after asking for one, demurs and says that he would rather hear whether Ion is an expert only about Homer. This question begins the first of two long passages trying to account for Ion and rhapsody according to the expertise model. In this section, I argue that the expertise model of poetic reception forms the basis of two arguments: a *reductio ad absurdum* argument concluding that Ion does not possess a *technē*, that is, an expertise (531a–533d) and a more general argument concluding that there is no such expertise as rhapsody (536e–541e).²² The expertise model is committed to what I will call 'the content thesis' about poetry, namely that poetry can teach its audience by transmitting true *epistemic content* to them. Rhapsodic expertise about Homer's poetry is then expertise about what his poetry can teach us.

3.1 The Content and Scope of Poetry

Socrates first examines the scope or domain of the alleged rhapsodic craft. Socrates proceeds on the assumption that an expertise has a determinate range of objects about which it has knowledge (cp. 537c–e; *Grg.* 452a–455d) and that this scope will be general in nature, picking out a kind rather than individuals. Thus, Socrates' question about whether Ion is "clever" (531a2) – the Greek word, *deinos*, carries the same ambiguous connotations in English²³ – "only about Homer" (531a–2), or also about Hesiod and other poets, is not an entirely innocent one. Ion thinks that it is "enough" to have expertise about Homer (531a3), claiming to find discussions of other poets boring (532b–c).

The core question is: What does it mean to have expertise *about* Homer?²⁴ Having expertise about Homer is taken to be, or at least include, expertise

²² Pace Pappas, who sees the first argument as more general and stronger (1989, 384).

²³ The term is also used in a positive vein: see Protagoras' self-description as "clever" (*Prt.* 338e6–339a3, quoted in Section 2). Cp. the use of *deinos* in the "ode to man" in *Soph. Ant.* 332–375.

²⁴ The about-relationship is repeatedly expressed in the Greek by *peri* plus the genitive; see LSJ s.v.