

The role of divination in Plato's *Ion* emerges as a problem for Socrates' division between technical and inspired abilities. Socrates cites divination in different ways throughout the dialogue to assist his argument on poetry and rhapsody. These ways, however, are contradictory: *mantikê* is cited both as a *technê* (531b, 538e-539e) and as a form of inspiration (534b-e). The final mention occurs in a particularly problematic passage (538e-539e), where Socrates cites *mantikê* as an example of *technê*, while illustrating his point with the only instance of ecstatic prophecy in Homer. Thus he juxtaposes the two contradictory claims implicit earlier in the dialogue (namely, that divination is technical, and that it is divinely inspired). I will examine this passage closely and explain the contradiction as one which reveals the breakdown in Socrates' division between *technê* and inspiration. This breakdown, I propose, applies to *linguistic* abilities, such as poetry, prophecy, criticism, and philosophy. Indeed, whatever technical feats language is capable of, it is in origin intuitive, mysterious, *inspired*.

This conclusion is anticipated earlier in the dialogue. When Socrates characterizes the rhapsode as a *hermeneus* who must convey the poet's *dianoia* to the ignorant listeners (530b-c), he figures the rhapsode as a seer able to translate the inscrutable mind of the poet. When he later remarks that "to every *technê* has been granted *by god* [my emphasis] the power of knowing its work," 537c, he implies that even *technai* are in origin divine. The final puzzling passage on Homeric divination illuminates these adumbrations and compels us to revise our interpretation of the dialogue's overt claims separating *technê* and inspiration. On the dramatic level, Socrates is testing the attentiveness of Ion, who failed to pick up on the inconsistency in Socrates' characterization of the seer before and fails again to do so now; the attentive reader must "divine" the meaning for him/herself. Socrates now points to a different conception of hermeneutics which undermines the dialogue's explicit claim. This conception is derived from reading the Homeric passages cited in context, where the language of the seer and the language of the homeric narrator are virtually indistinguishable. Socrates thus conflates hermeneutics (the reading of signs) with poetics (the production of poetry), and acknowledges a mysterious origin for both; poetry, criticism, and philosophy are all arguably examples of such "oracular" pronouncements about the world. The difference is that philosophy can defend itself, can examine its own pronouncements, while poetry and criticism (as represented by Ion) cannot.

The literature on *Ion* has rarely dealt with the role of divination in the argument. Only two scholars note the inconsistency (Bloom 1987, 389-91; Lowenstam 1993, 26-27), and only one commentator has recognized the ecstatic nature of the Homeric prophecy (Murray 1997, 128). I offer the first close examination of the passage which foregrounds the paradoxical role of the seer in Socrates' argument, and collapses his distinction between *technê* and inspiration. This collapse reveals the common nature of poetry and philosophy.

Divining Divination in Plato's *Ion*

Works Cited:

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