

## PLATO THE REPUBLIC (c.370 BCE) I

Plato. The Republic. Trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford. Oxford: OUP, 1941.

### Chapter IX: The Primary Education of the Guardians

This chapter is devoted largely to the education of the philosopher-king who is the appointed guardian of his ideal state and the crucial role played therein by exposure to literature

Some of what Socrates terms "stories" (68) are "true, others fictitious" (68), he points out, hence the necessity of censorship. Socrates focuses in part on the "content" (81) of the literature to which the future king would be exposed. He believes that while what is represented must be an accurate reflection of life (there should be no untruths, as it were, no depictions of things which do not actually exist), what is equally important is that only the better things ought to be portrayed, not least the "express image of noble character" (90).

In descriptions of "gods and demigods, heroes, and the world below" (79), there are several things to avoid: firstly, "false invention" (69), that is, "misrepresenting the nature of gods and heroes, like an artist whose picture is utterly unlike the object he sets out to draw" (69). The goal in the case of the gods is to "represent the divine nature as it really is. And the truth is that that nature is good and must be described as such" (71). The divine should not be depicted as the cause of our misfortune for the simple reason that "goodness is beneficent, and hence the cause of well-being" (71), not evil" "whereas the good must be ascribed to heaven only, we must look elsewhere for the cause of evils" (71). Secondly, any god should be depicted as a "being of entire simplicity and truthfulness in word and deed. In himself he does not change, nor does he delude others, either in dreams or waking moments, by apparitions or oracles or signs" (75). Thirdly, the after-life must be depicted not as something terrifying: the gloomy descriptions they now give must be forbidden, not only as untrue, but as injurious to our future warriors" (76). Fourthly, the depiction of too much "wailing and lamentations" is to be avoided as is "[v]iolent laughter" (78). Fifthly, a "high value must be set upon truthfulness" (78): people should not be depicted as telling lies" (78). Sixth, poets should depict "examples of self-control and fortitude" (79). In "literature concerned with human life" (79), "both poets and prose-writers [are] guilty of the most serious misstatements about human life, making out that wrongdoers are often happy and just men miserable; that injustice pays, if not detected; and that my being just is to another man's advantage, but a loss to myself" (80).

For Socrates, there is a link between content and the effect which it has on the audience at which it is directed. Stories form an important component of the education process from a very young age when "character is being moulded and easily takes on any impress one may wish to stamp on it" (68). Hence, the need to "supervise the making of fables and legends" (69) in order to ensure that the stories told "produce the best possible effect on his character" (70). This is why Socrates advocates censorship:

we must also supervise craftsmen of every kind and forbid them to leave the stamp of baseness, licence, meanness, unseemliness, on painting and sculpture, or any other work of their hands. . . . We would not have our Guardians grow up among representations of moral deformity, as in some foul pasture where, day after day, feeding on every poisonous weed they would, little by little, gather insensibly a mass of corruption in their very souls. Rather we must seek out those craftsmen whose instinct guides them to whatsoever is lovely and gracious; so that our young men, dwelling in a wholesome climate, may drink in good from every quarter, whence, like a breeze bearing health from happy regions, some influence from noble works constantly falls upon eye and ear from childhood upward, and imperceptibly draws them into sympathy

and harmony with the beauty of reason, whose impress they take. (90) Socrates is particularly concerned about drama, especially the possibility that the philosopher-king will be encouraged to perform parts and speak in the person of somebody else. He argues that the future Guardian should not be "capable of playing many parts" (82) because it robs him of the opportunity to cultivate consistency and constancy in his own life: "no man can successfully represent many different characters in the field of art or pursue a corresponding variety of occupations in real life" (82). Socrates is particularly concerned that he will be asked to imitate the words and actions of the wrong sort.

Socrates consequently advocates censorship, urging that morally suspect tales be suppressed and that mothers and nurses be allowed to tell their wards "the authorised ones only" (476). This is especially true where the future guardians of his ideal state themselves are concerned:

if they imitate at all, they should imitate from youth upward only those characters which are suitable to their profession--the courageous, temperate, holy, free, and the like; but they should not depict or be skilful at imitating any kind of illiberality or baseness, lest from imitation they should come to be what they imitate. Did you ever observe how imitations, beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice, and mind? (477)

Hence, Socrates' advice that the future guardians should not be allowed to imitate women, slaves, bad men, and the insane.

Socrates also considers matters of literary "form" (81), distinguishing between two *manners* of poetic representation. He argues that "any story in prose or verse is always a setting forth of events, past present, or future" (81). Storytelling is accomplished in two ways in works like the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. One is purely *mimetic* or, as he puts it, "by means of representation" (81), and consists in a direct representation of the words spoken by characters without an accompanying narrative. The other is *diegetic* or, as he puts it, "in pure narrative" (81), in which there is a narrator spinning a tale. As Socrates puts it, there is a simple difference between the two approaches: "if you omit the intervening narrative and leave only the dialogue, you get the opposite form" (81). Sometimes a work combines both methods:

Throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the events are set forth in these two different forms. All the time, both in the speeches and the narrative parts in between, he is telling his story; but where he is delivering a speech in character, he tries to make his manner resemble that of the person he has introduced as speaker. Any poet who does that by means of voice and gesture, is telling his story by way of dramatic representation; whereas, if he makes no such attempt to suppress his own personality, the events are set forth in simple narrative. (81)

Socrates proceeds to offer a rudimentary theory of *genre*, arguing that this distinction gives rise to "three forms" (81) of storytelling: "It may be wholly dramatic: tragedy, as you say, or comedy. Or the poet may narrate the events in his own person [lyric poetry]. . . . Or again both methods may be used, as in epic" (81-82). There are, in short, three main *kinds* of literature divided according to the manner of representation found therein: where characters speak in their own voice, so to speak, without the intervention of narrative, one has drama, which is further divisible into tragedy and comedy, that is, plays that end sadly or happily; lyric poetry where the poet speaks in his own voice; and epic poetry where the two styles mingle, that is, sometimes characters speak in their own voices and sometimes the poet tells the story of their actions.