

*Lie about everything under the sun (May 2004)*

Poets are supposed to shine light on the actions of heroes and gods, but since they work with “shadows” (i.e., images), they are ill-prepared to do so. Because they “work far away from truth in doing [their] [. . .] work” (403), poets spread lies, not light, and they lie about everything under the sun. About justice and men, they tell us “that many men are happy though unjust” (189), an assertion Plato spends most of *The Republic* trying to disprove. About gods and heroes, they tell us these fundamentally good beings “beget evils,” a lie that ensures that “everyone will find an excuse for [themselves] [. . .] to be evil” (189).

But poets would work little evil if most people recognized their mistruths and deemed them ugly and repugnant. However, Plato argues that most people are unaware that poets “neither know nor have right opinion about what [they] [. . .] imitate” (402), and that they therefore find poets’ fables beautiful and appealing. No one more so than the young, for they have had little time to become acquainted with Beauty, and the “inferior part of the[ir] soul[s],” the part which “hungers to be satisfied with tears and a good hearty cry” and which poetry “feeds” (405), is not yet under the control of the reasoning part. And once they have “receive[d] the honeyed Muse,” they can “be sure that pleasure and pain will be kings in their” (407) souls, for poetry works like a virus in that it “destroy[s] the [soul’s] rational part” (405).

The plenitude of “unenlightened” and undisciplined people explains why Plato is as concerned as he is about poetry’s ability to corrupt, but he believes poetry can actually be used to help people “see” Justice. But in order to do so it must be stripped of much of what makes it poetical—of its “honey.” Poetry must be purged of its rhetorical excess, which excites a soul that should be made temperate. It must also be limited to showing us good people and good deeds, for we alter our natures in correspondence with what we imitate. And the only people who can be trusted with censorship that determines whether poetry undermines or facilitates justice are those who truly have “seen the light”: the philosophers.

Work Cited

Plato. *Great Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. W.H.D. Rowe. New York: Signet, 1999.