

Supervisor's Review of Bachelor Thesis

Title: Antidote to the Effects of Poetry in Book X of Plato's *Republic*
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Alena Egorenko has chosen a topic that is both complex and controversial, a topic that interests modern scholars and can be attractive not only for Plato's fans. She has tried to solve a question how we should understand the critique of poetry presented in Plato's *Republic*: how should we read the obvious tension between rather harsh criticism and captivation by poetry admitted by Socrates (not mentioning that Plato himself makes use of poetic language and imagery in his dialogues)? What kind of relation is there – in Plato's terms – between poetry and philosophy?

The thesis is well structured and written in colourful language that is able to draw reader's attention. There are some minor formal issues like missing punctuation or typos, or language ones like missing words, wrong spelling etc. The author was consulting her work regularly.

The starting point of the thesis is Socrates' announcement at the beginning of book X which resumes previous discussions about poetry and – seemingly – goes even further: he claims that *all* imitative art (*poiésis hosé mimétiké*) should be expelled from the ideal city because it maims the thought (*diánoia*) of those who hear it and do not have a remedy (*farmakon*): “the knowledge of how they really are” (*Resp.* 595b).¹ The main question of the thesis therefore is: what precisely is the danger of poetry Socrates has in mind here and what is the remedy that is able to protect the audience? And consequently: is it possible to be a philosopher and a lover of poetry at the same time – to be a “philosophical lover of poetry”?

In order to answer these questions, Alena summarized the discussion about *mimésis* and poetry from previous books of the *Republic* (namely II. and III.) and commented on the (seeming?) inconsistency between books III. and X., the main questions being: (a) does book X bans more poetry than book III? and (b) is the concept of *mimésis* different in books III. and X.? After answering these questions using secondary literature (M. F. Burnyeat), Alena focused on explaining the specific danger that is discussed in book X claiming – again following Burnyeat – that the danger is of *epistemological* nature. Following the interpretation of Ch. Janaway, Alena then clarifies a rather puzzling example of painted carpenter (*Resp.* 598c) which helps her to expose the (epistemological) danger book X. is talking about: an artistic performance can lead people into a “*false believe that the poet knows the arts that his characters are good at*” (p. 23). After reminding the topic of “philosophical lover of poetry” (part 4.3), the author finally comes to discuss what is the “antidote” to poetry's charm (part 5).

In her bachelor thesis, Alena proved her ability to pick up and formulate an interesting philosophical problem and to unravel some of the complex questions Plato's *Republic* presents us with. She has also demonstrated the ability to read the text using different perspectives from secondary literature. She established a solid ground for tackling the initial problem: parts 3.4 and 4.2 present a good answer to the first question, i.e. what is the danger of poetry book X. is talking about.

However, the answer to the second question (what is the antidote) seem to remain midway, or rather unclear and vague. In the appropriate section we read: “*Thus, the knowledge, which Socrates refers*

¹Quoted Bloom's translation: Bloom, A.: *The Republic of Plato*, Basic Books (2nd edition) 1991, ISBN-10 0-465-06934-7, p. 277.

to is the knowledge of the nature of mimesis with regard to its epistemological value.” (p. 27). This sentence does not say much more than the initial question and in the text that follows (part 5.1.1) we can find only a small addition: it is “the knowledge that uncovers the artificiality of mimesis” (p. 28). Various aspects of this “artificiality” are explained at length in previous sections. The reader, however, is left in doubt about what precisely is meant by it here: is it Socrates’ reflection that an artist (like a painter) produces only “likeness of a likeness” (p. 28)? Or that “it appeals to the part of us that is ‘far from prudence’” (ibid.)? Or that a poet (like Homer) produces his work in an essential ignorance of what is good and bad, and yet people believe that he is the right educator in these matters (see p. 23)? Is it all these taken together? Or is it yet something else?

Even bigger doubts are raised when we are reminded (still in the same line of argument, p. 28) of the part from book III. about things that can cause a change of guards’ *opinions*: the author presumably overlooks the essential difference between the discussion in book III. where maintaining of *guards’ opinions* is at stake, and book X’s where we talk about (*philosopher’s*) *knowledge*. In other words, the cure book X. is talking about seems to be some kind of *knowledge* (*to eidenai*, *Resp.* 595b6) that can (presumably) work only for philosophers (and the author is well aware of that, see p. 27), but not for guards who have only *opinions* (*doxa*). In other words, guards’ antidote consists of good memory and training under philosophers’ surveillance,² whereas philosophers’ antidote has to be (presumably) something else. Putting these things together without explanation is very confusing. These (and some other) essential differences are unfortunately somewhat blurred in the final sections of the essay, even though the author has taken big efforts to establish them in previous parts. In short, Alena has prepared a good ground for a non-trivial answer to the initial questions but failed to make a good use of it in the final part of her work.

There are also some minor opacities in summarizing perspectives from secondary sources, mainly Burnyeat’s view on what is *mimésis* (p. 17): it is impossible to understand Burnyeat’s interpretation in this point from the essay only, without looking at the source itself.

General Assessment The author has proved her ability to tackle the complexities of Plato’s *Republic* with honor, to focus on philosophical problem and to see it from different perspectives. In her interpretation, she depends substantially on secondary sources and their arguments, which is appropriate for a work at bachelor level. She was less successful in bringing different threads together without losing sight of the important aspects and details of the problem. With regard to the intricacies of Plato’s *Republic* and to the fact that the first two thirds of the essay present a solid interpretation of the text, I suggest this work to be graded “very good”.

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²In fact, the guards should not need such an antidote since they will have no access to poetry that could harm their thoughts: all they will experience will be censored and approved by philosophers-rulers.