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Political Technē: Plato and the Poets

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Abstract
Plato’s treatment of poetry is usually discussed without reference to other contemporary reception of Greek poetry, leading to divergent political or aesthetic accounts of its meaning. Yet the culture of the Greek polis, in particular Athens, is the defining context for understanding his aims. Four distinct points are made here, and cumulatively an interpretation of Plato’s opposition to poetry: on the basis of other evidence, including Aristophanes’ Frogs, that Plato would quite reasonably understand poetry to claim the craft of looking after a city (political technē); that Socrates makes a rival claim that philosophy is the pursuit of this skill; that Plato considers the poets, owing to this rivalry, to aim to exclude philosophy from Athens; and finally, that Plato’s exclusion of poetry from the theoretical just city of the Republic is part of his defence of the possibility of philosophy in Athens.

Keywords
Plato – poetry – Athens – Aristophanes – tragedy – philosophy