Ion

PLATO

c. 428–348 BC

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Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited

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Ion · Plato (c. 428–348 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Ion is a rhapsode, a professional reciter of Homer, fresh from winning first prize at a festival. He tells Socrates he speaks about Homer better than anyone alive. Socrates wants to know what knowledge makes him so good.

Ion can't say. He is brilliant on Homer and bored by every other poet, which no real expertise would explain. So Socrates offers another answer: poets and performers are not experts at all but are possessed by a god, linked like iron rings hanging from a magnet. Ion likes the idea of being divine, until Socrates asks what a reciter actually knows about chariot-racing, medicine or generalship.

This is one of Plato's shortest dialogues and one of his funniest. It is also the first statement of an idea that would echo through Western thought: that poetry comes from inspiration rather than skill.

Ion

Athens.
Socrates questions Ion, a prize-winning reciter of Homer,
about whether his gift is a skill or divine inspiration.

SOCRATES 530a Greetings, Ion! Where have you come from to visit us this time? From home, from Ephesus?

ION Not at all, Socrates. I've come from Epidaurus, from the festival of Asclepius.[1]

SOCRATES Don't tell me the Epidaurians hold a contest of rhapsodes in the god's honor too?[2]

ION They certainly do, and in every other art of the Muses as well.

SOCRATES Well? Did you compete for us? And how did you do?

ION 530b We carried off first prize, Socrates.

SOCRATES Good to hear. Now see to it that we win at the Panathenaea too.[3]

ION And so we will, god willing.

SOCRATES You know, Ion, I've often envied you rhapsodes your art. Your art makes it fitting for you always to be dressed up and to look as splendid as possible. At the same time you're obliged

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1 Epidaurus, in the northeastern Peloponnese, had a famous sanctuary of Asclepius, god of healing, and held a festival with contests in his honor.
2 A rhapsode was a professional reciter of Homer. Rhapsodes performed at festivals and competitions and also lectured on the poems' meaning.
3 The Panathenaea was Athens' great festival in honor of Athena. It included contests in which rhapsodes recited Homer.

to spend your time with many good poets, and above all with Homer, the best and most divine of poets, and to learn 530c his thought thoroughly, not just his lines. That really is enviable. No one could ever become a good rhapsode without understanding what the poet says. The rhapsode has to interpret the poet's thought to his audience, and it's impossible to do that well without knowing what the poet means. So all of this deserves to be envied.

ION That's true, Socrates. For me, at any rate, this has been the most laborious part of my art. And I think I speak about Homer more beautifully than anyone in the world. Neither Metrodorus of 530d Lampsacus nor Stesimbrotus of Thasos nor Glaucon nor anyone else who has ever lived has been able to offer as many fine thoughts about Homer as I have.[4]

SOCRATES Good to hear, Ion. Clearly you won't begrudge me a demonstration.

ION It's certainly worth hearing, Socrates, how beautifully I've adorned Homer. In fact, I think I deserve to be crowned with a golden crown by the Homeridae.[5]

SOCRATES And I'll make time to listen to you 531a yet. But for now just answer me this: are you a master only of Homer, or of Hesiod and Archilochus as well?[6]

ONLY HOMER?

Ion is brilliant on Homer but bored by other poets, though they speak of the same things.

ION Not at all. Only of Homer. That seems enough to me.

SOCRATES Is there anything on which Homer and Hesiod both say the same things?

4 Metrodorus, Stesimbrotus and Glaucon were well-known interpreters of Homer in the fifth century BC.
5 The Homeridae ("sons of Homer") were a guild of reciters on Chios who claimed descent from Homer.
6 Hesiod (around 700 BC) wrote the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Archilochus (seventh century BC) was famous for iambic and elegiac verse.

ION Yes, I think so. A great many things.

SOCRATES Then on those topics, would you explain better what Homer says or what Hesiod says?

ION Equally well on those, at any rate, 531b Socrates, the ones where they say the same things.

SOCRATES And what about the things on which they don't say the same? Take divination, for instance. Both Homer and Hesiod say something about it.

ION Certainly.

SOCRATES Well then, take everything these two poets say about divination, whether they say it alike or differently. Who would explain it better, you or one of the good seers?

ION One of the seers.

SOCRATES And if you were a seer, and really could explain the things they say alike, wouldn't you also know how to explain the things they say differently?

ION Obviously.

SOCRATES 531c So why on earth are you a master of Homer but not of Hesiod or the other poets? Or does Homer talk about anything other than what all the other poets talk about? Hasn't he mostly gone through warfare, and how people deal with one another, good and bad, ordinary people and craftsmen? Hasn't he described how the gods deal with one another and with human beings, what happens in the heavens and in Hades, and the births of gods 531d and heroes? Aren't these the subjects Homer made his poetry about?

ION That's true, Socrates.

SOCRATES And what about the other poets? Don't they treat these same subjects?

ION Yes, Socrates, but they haven't composed the way Homer has.

SOCRATES How, then? Worse?

ION Much worse.

SOCRATES And Homer better?

ION Better, by Zeus, absolutely.

SOCRATES Well then, Ion, my dear friend, suppose many people are speaking about number and one of them speaks best. Surely someone will [531e] recognize the one who speaks well?

ION I'd say so.

SOCRATES Will it be the same person who also recognizes those who speak badly, or someone else?

ION The same, surely.

SOCRATES And that's the person who has the art of arithmetic?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES What about this? Suppose many people are speaking about which foods are healthy, and one of them speaks best. Will one person recognize that the best speaker speaks best, and another that the worse speaker speaks worse? Or will it be the same person?

ION Obviously the same, surely.

SOCRATES Who's that? What's he called?

ION A doctor.

SOCRATES So, to sum up, we're saying this. When many people speak about the same things, it will always be the same person who recognizes [532a] who speaks well and who speaks badly. If he can't recognize the one who speaks badly, clearly he can't recognize the one who speaks well either, at least on the same subject.

ION That's right.

SOCRATES So the same person turns out to be expert on both?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES Now, you say that Homer and the other poets, Hesiod and Archilochus among them, speak about the same

things, but not in the same way. You say he speaks well, and they speak worse?

ION And what I say is true.

SOCRATES Then if you recognize the one who speaks well, 532b you'd also recognize that those who speak worse are speaking worse.

ION So it seems.

SOCRATES Then, my excellent friend, we won't be mistaken if we say that Ion is just as expert on the other poets as he is on Homer. He himself agrees that the same person will be a competent judge of everyone who speaks about the same things. And nearly all the poets compose on the same things.

ION Then what on earth is the reason, Socrates? When someone talks about some other poet, I can't pay 532c attention and can't contribute anything worth mentioning. I simply doze off. Yet the moment someone mentions Homer, I'm instantly wide awake, I pay attention, and I have plenty to say.

SOCRATES That's not hard to guess, my friend. It's obvious to everyone that you can't speak about Homer through art and knowledge. If you could do it by art, you'd be able to speak about all the other poets as well. There is, I take it, an art of poetry as a whole. Or isn't there?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES 532d So when someone grasps any other art whatever as a whole, won't the same method of inquiry apply to all the arts? Do you need me to explain what I mean by this, Ion?

ION Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, I certainly do. I love listening to you wise men.

SOCRATES I wish what you said were true, Ion. But it's you who are wise, I suppose: you rhapsodes and actors, and the poets whose works you sing. All I do is speak the truth, 532e as you'd expect of an ordinary person. Just look at what I asked you a moment ago. How simple and commonplace it is! Anyone could understand what I meant: that the inquiry is the same whenever

someone grasps an art as a whole. Let's take it up in argument. There is an art of painting, taken as a whole, isn't there?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES And there are and have been many painters, good and bad?

ION Certainly.

SOCRATES Now, have you ever seen anyone who is expert at pointing out what Polygnotus son of Aglaophon paints well and what he doesn't, but who is [533a] helpless about the other painters? When someone shows him the works of other painters, he dozes off, is at a loss, and has nothing to contribute. But when he has to give his opinion on Polygnotus, or on any single painter you like, he's wide awake, pays attention and has plenty to say. Have you ever seen such a person?[7]

ION No, by Zeus, certainly not.

SOCRATES What about sculpture? Have you ever seen anyone who is expert at explaining what Daedalus son of Metion [533b] has done well, or Epeius son of Panopeus, or Theodorus of Samos, or any other single sculptor, but who is at a loss when faced with the works of other sculptors? Someone who dozes off and has nothing to say?[8]

ION No, by Zeus, I haven't seen anyone like that either.

SOCRATES And what's more, I think, you've never once seen such a man in pipe-playing or lyre-playing, or in singing to the lyre, or in rhapsody. He would be expert at explaining Olympus or Thamyras or [533c] Orpheus or Phemius, the rhapsode of Ithaca. But faced with Ion, the rhapsode of Ephesus, he'd be at a loss,

7 Polygnotus of Thasos was the most celebrated painter of the mid-fifth century BC, known for large wall paintings in Athens and Delphi.
8 Daedalus was the legendary master craftsman, and Epeius built the Trojan Horse. Theodorus of Samos was a real sculptor and architect of the sixth century BC.

unable to contribute anything about what Ion performs well and what he doesn't.[9]

ION I can't contradict you on that, Socrates. But this much I know about myself. I speak about Homer more beautifully than anyone in the world, and I have plenty to say, and everyone else says I speak well. But not about the others. Now, see what this means.

THE MAGNET

Poets and reciters speak not by art but by divine inspiration, like iron rings hanging from a magnet.

SOCRATES I do see, Ion, and I'm about to show you 533d what I think it is. This ability of yours to speak well about Homer isn't an art, as I was just saying. It's a divine power that moves you, like the power in the stone that Euripides called the magnet and most people call the stone of Heraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings but also puts a power into the rings, so that they in turn can do the very same thing the stone does and attract other 533e rings. Sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hangs one from another, and for all of them the power depends on that stone. In the same way, the Muse herself makes people inspired, and through these inspired people a chain of others who are inspired hangs down.[10] For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not by art but because they are inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets do the same. The Corybants are not in their right minds 534a when they dance, and in the same way the lyric poets are not in their right minds when they compose these fine songs. Once they step into harmony and rhythm, they're in a Bacchic frenzy and possessed. The bacchants, when possessed, draw honey and milk from the rivers, but not when they're in their right minds. The

9 Olympus, Thamyras and Orpheus were legendary musicians. Phemius is the bard in Odysseus' palace in the *Odyssey*.

10 Literally the "Magnesian stone," named after Magnesia, where lodestone was found.

soul of the lyric poets does just this, as they themselves say. For the poets tell us, of course, that [534b] they gather their songs from honey-flowing springs in certain gardens and glens of the Muses, and bring them to us like bees, flitting about like bees themselves. And they speak the truth.[11] For a poet is a light, winged, holy thing. He can't compose until he becomes inspired and out of his mind, and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a man keeps hold of this possession, he is quite unable to compose poetry or chant oracles. They don't compose by art when they say many fine things about [534c] their subjects, as you do about Homer. They compose by divine dispensation. So each of them can compose well only the kind of thing the Muse has stirred him to: one composes dithyrambs, another songs of praise, another dance-songs, another epic, another iambic verse. At everything else, each of them is poor. For it's not by art that they say these things but by divine power. If they knew by art how to speak well about one subject, they'd know how to speak well about all the others too. That's why the god takes away their intellect and uses them as his servants, just as he uses [534d] oracle-singers and divine seers. He does it so that we who hear them may know that it isn't these people, who have no intellect in them, who say these things of such great worth. It's the god himself who speaks, and through them he addresses us. The strongest evidence for this account is Tynnichus of Chalcis. He never composed any other poem that anyone would think worth remembering. Yet he composed the paean everyone sings, very nearly the finest of all songs, and simply, as he himself says, [534e] "a find of the Muses." In this case above all, it seems to me, the god has shown us, so that we wouldn't doubt it, that these fine poems are not human, nor the work of human beings. They are divine, the work of gods. The poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods, each possessed by whichever god possesses him. To show this, the god deliberately sang the finest

11 The Corybants were worshippers of the goddess Cybele. Their rites involved ecstatic dancing to wild music.

song through the most worthless [535a] poet. Or don't you think I'm right, Ion?[12]

ION By Zeus, I do. Your words touch my soul somehow, Socrates. And I believe the good poets interpret these things to us from the gods by divine dispensation.

SOCRATES And you rhapsodes, in turn, interpret the works of the poets?

ION That's true too.

SOCRATES So you're interpreters of interpreters?

ION Absolutely.

OUT OF HIS MIND

Ion admits that when he performs he weeps, his hair stands on end, and his audience weeps too.

SOCRATES [535b] Hold on, then, and tell me this, Ion, and don't hide anything I ask you. Think of when you recite epic well and astonish your audience most. Perhaps you're singing of Odysseus leaping onto the threshold, revealing himself to the suitors and pouring the arrows out at his feet. Or of Achilles rushing at Hector. Or of one of the pitiful passages about Andromache or Hecuba or Priam. At such moments, are you in your right mind? Or are you [535c] beside yourself, and does your soul, inspired, believe it's present at the events you describe, whether they happen in Ithaca or in Troy or wherever the poem sets them?

ION How vivid that piece of evidence is, Socrates! I'll tell you without hiding anything. When I recite something pitiful, my eyes fill with tears. And when it's something frightening or terrible, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart pounds.

SOCRATES [535d] Well then, Ion, are we to say that this man is in his right mind at that moment? He's decked out in embroidered clothes and golden crowns, yet he weeps at sacrifices and fest-

12 Tynnichus is otherwise almost unknown. A paean was a hymn, usually sung to Apollo.

ivals, though he has lost none of these things. Or he's frightened while standing among more than twenty thousand friendly people, when no one is robbing him or doing him any wrong.

ION No, by Zeus, Socrates, not at all, to tell you the honest truth.

SOCRATES And do you know that you rhapsodes produce these very same effects in most of the spectators too?

ION 535e Oh, I know that very well. Every time, I look down on them from up on the platform, and there they are, weeping, staring wild-eyed, caught up in amazement at the words. And I have to pay very close attention to them. If I set them crying, I'll be the one laughing as I take their money. If I set them laughing, I'll be the one crying, because I'll lose it.

SOCRATES Then do you know that this spectator is the last of the rings I was talking about, the ones that take their power from one another through the magnet? The middle one is you, the 536a rhapsode and actor, and the first is the poet himself. Through all of these the god draws people's souls wherever he likes, making the power hang down from one to the next. And just as from that stone, an enormous chain hangs down of choral dancers, chorus-masters and assistant masters, hanging off to the side from the rings suspended from the Muse. One poet is suspended from one Muse, another from another. We call it being "possessed," but it 536b comes to much the same thing, since he is *held*. And from these first rings, the poets, others in turn are suspended, some from one poet and some from another, and are inspired: some from Orpheus, some from Musaeus, but most are possessed and held by Homer.[13] And you, Ion, are one of these: you are possessed by Homer. When someone sings the work of any other poet, you fall asleep and have nothing to say. But as soon as someone strikes up a song of this poet's, you're wide awake at once, your soul dances, and you have plenty 536c to say. That's because it isn't by art or knowledge that you say what you say about Homer, but by divine dispensa-

13 Orpheus and Musaeus were legendary singers of the earliest age, to whom much religious poetry was attributed.

tion and possession. Think of the Corybants. They are keenly alive only to the one tune that belongs to the god who possesses them, and for that tune they have plenty of movements and words, but they pay no attention to any other. In the same way, Ion, when someone mentions Homer, you have plenty to say, but about the others you're at a loss. 536d And the reason for this, which is what you're asking me—why you have plenty to say about Homer and not about the others—is that it's not by art but by divine dispensation that you're such a marvelous praiser of Homer.

ION That's well said, Socrates. Still, I'd be amazed if you could say it well enough to convince me that I'm possessed and out of my mind when I praise Homer. I don't think you'd believe it either, if you heard me speaking about Homer.

WHAT DOES THE RECITER KNOW?

Homer describes charioteering, medicine, fishing and prophecy, and each belongs to its own expert.

SOCRATES And I really do want to hear you, but not before 536e you answer me this. Of the things Homer talks about, which do you speak well about? Surely not all of them.

ION Every single one, Socrates, I assure you.

SOCRATES Surely not the things you happen to know nothing about, though Homer talks about them.

ION And what sort of things are these, that Homer talks about but I don't know?

SOCRATES 537a Well, doesn't Homer talk about the arts in many places, and at length? Chariot-driving, for instance—if I can remember the lines, I'll quote them for you.

ION No, I'll recite them. I remember them.

SOCRATES Then tell me what Nestor says to his son Antilochus when he advises him to take care at the turn in the horse race held in honor of Patroclus.

ION

"Lean over yourself," he says, "in the polished chariot
537b a little to the left of the pair; and the right-hand horse
goad on with a shout, and give him rein with your hands.
And at the post let the left-hand horse shave close,
so that the hub seems just to graze its edge—
the hub of the well-made wheel; but take care not to strike
the stone."

SOCRATES That's enough. Now, Ion, who would be the better judge of whether Homer has these lines 537c right or not—a doctor or a charioteer?

ION A charioteer, of course.

SOCRATES Because he has this art, or for some other reason?

ION No, because he has the art.

SOCRATES Now hasn't each of the arts been assigned by the god some particular work it's able to know? Surely what we know by the art of steering a ship we won't also know by medicine.

ION Of course not.

SOCRATES Nor will we know by carpentry what we know by medicine.

ION 537d Of course not.

SOCRATES So it's the same with all the arts: what we know by one art we won't know by another? But answer me this first. Do you say that one art is one thing and another is something different?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES Do you reason the way I do? When one body of knowledge is about one set of things and another about a different set, that's how I come to call one of them one art and the other 537e a different art. Do you do the same?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES Because if two kinds of knowledge were about the same things, why would we say one was one art and the other a different one, when you could know the same things from either? It's like this: I know that these fingers are five, and you, just like me, know the same thing about them. And if I asked you whether you and I know the same things by the same art, arithmetic, or by a different one, you'd say, I take it, by the same one.

ION Yes.

SOCRATES [538a] Then tell me now what I was about to ask you a moment ago. Do you think it holds for all the arts that by the same art we must know the same things, and by a different art not the same things—that if it really is a different art, it must know different things too?

ION That's what I think, Socrates.

SOCRATES So whoever doesn't have a particular art won't be able to judge properly what is said or done in that art?

ION [538b] That's true.

SOCRATES Then take the lines you quoted. Will you know better whether Homer puts it well or not, or will a charioteer?

ION A charioteer.

SOCRATES Because you're a rhapsode, I take it, and not a charioteer.

ION Yes.

SOCRATES And the rhapsode's art is different from the charioteer's?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES Then if it's different, it's also knowledge about different things.

ION Yes.

SOCRATES Well then, what about when Homer says that Hecamede, Nestor's concubine, gives the wounded Machaon a

mixed potion to [538c] drink? He puts it something like this: "With Pramnian wine," he says, "and over it she grated goat's cheese / with a bronze grater; and beside it an onion, a relish for the drink." Whether Homer gets this right or not—is it for medicine to judge properly, or for the rhapsode's art?

ION Medicine.

SOCRATES

And what about when Homer says: [538d] "And she sank to the bottom like a lead weight,
which, set on the horn of an ox that ranges the fields,
speeds down among the ravening fish, bringing them harm"? Shall we say it's for the fisherman's art rather than the rhapsode's to judge what he's saying here, and whether it's well said or not?[14]

ION Clearly it's the fisherman's, Socrates.

SOCRATES Now look. Suppose you were the one asking, and you asked me: "Well then, Socrates, since [538e] you're finding in Homer, for each of these arts, the passages that are proper for each to judge, come and find me the ones for the seer and his art of prophecy too—what sort of passages it's proper for him to be able to judge, whether they're well or badly composed." Look how easily and how truly I'll answer you. He speaks of this in many places in the *Odyssey*, for instance in what the seer of the line of Melampus, Theoclymenus, says to the suitors: [539a] "Poor wretches, what evil is this you suffer?"[15]

14 Homer is describing the goddess Iris plunging into the sea; anglers weighted their lines with lead set in a piece of ox horn.

"In night are wrapped
your heads and faces and your limbs below;
a wailing has blazed up, your cheeks are wet with tears;
the porch is full of ghosts, and the courtyard is full too,
of ghosts hastening down to Erebus, into the gloom; the sun
539b has perished out of the sky, and an evil mist has spread
over all." And in many places in the *Iliad* too—at the
battle at the wall, for instance. There too he says: "For a
bird came upon them as they were eager to cross,
a high-flying eagle, skirting the army on the left,
539c carrying in its talons a monstrous blood-red serpent,
alive, still writhing; and it had not yet forgotten the fight.
For it struck the eagle that held it, on the breast beside the
neck,
twisting back; and the eagle flung it from him to the
ground,
stung with pain, and dropped it in the middle of the throng,
539d and with a scream flew off on the gusts of the wind."
These passages, and others like them, I'll say, are the
ones it's proper for the seer to examine and judge.

ION Yes, and what you say is true, Socrates.

SOCRATES And so is what you say, Ion. Come on, then, now it's your turn. Just as I picked out for you from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* the sort of passages that belong to the seer, the sort that belong to the doctor, and 539e the sort that belong to the fisherman, you pick out for me—since you're more experienced in Homer than I am—the sort that belong to the rhapsode, Ion, and to the rhapsode's art: the ones it's proper for the rhapsode, beyond anyone else, to examine and judge.

ION All of them, Socrates, I say.

15 Theoclymenus, descended from the legendary seer Melampus, here foresees the suitors' doom in *Odyssey* 20.

SOCRATES No, Ion, you don't say "all of them"—or are you really that forgetful? And yet it would hardly be fitting for a rhapsode to be forgetful.

ION 540a Why, what am I forgetting?

SOCRATES Don't you remember saying that the rhapsode's art is different from the charioteer's?

ION I remember.

SOCRATES And didn't you agree that, being different, it would know different things?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES Then by your own account the rhapsode's art won't know everything, and neither will the rhapsode.

ION Except, perhaps, things like that, Socrates.

ION THE GENERAL

Ion claims a reciter knows what a general should say, and that he would be Greece's best general.

SOCRATES 540b By "except things like that" you mean except more or less everything that belongs to the other arts. But then which things will he know, since he doesn't know them all?

ION What it's fitting, I'd say, for a man to say, and what for a woman; what for a slave and what for a free man; what for someone under command and what for the one in command.

SOCRATES Do you mean that the rhapsode will know better than the ship's pilot what the one in command should say when his ship is caught in a storm at sea?

ION No, the pilot will know that, at any rate.

SOCRATES 540c Well, will the rhapsode know better than the doctor what the one in charge of a sick person should say?

ION Not that either.

SOCRATES But you mean what's fitting for a slave?

ION Yes.

SOCRATES For instance, what a slave who herds cattle should say to calm his cows when they're getting wild—you mean the rhapsode will know that, and not the cowherd?

ION Certainly not.

SOCRATES Well, what's fitting for a woman who spins wool to say about working 540d the wool?

ION No.

SOCRATES Well, will he know what's fitting for a man to say when he's a general encouraging his soldiers?

ION Yes, that's the sort of thing the rhapsode will know.

SOCRATES What? Is the rhapsode's art the art of generalship?

ION Well, I certainly would know what's fitting for a general to say.

SOCRATES Maybe that's because you're a general too, Ion. After all, if you happened to be a horseman and a lyre-player at once, you'd know horses 540e that were well ridden and badly ridden. But if I asked you, "By which art, Ion, do you know the horses that are well ridden—the one that makes you a horseman, or the one that makes you a lyre-player?" what would you answer me?

ION The one that makes me a horseman, I'd say.

SOCRATES And if you could also tell the good lyre-players apart, you'd agree that you did it by the art that makes you a lyre-player, and not by the one that makes you a horseman.

ION Yes.

SOCRATES And since you know military matters, do you know them because you're a general, or because you're a good rhapsode?

ION I don't think there's any difference.

SOCRATES 541a What? You say there's no difference? Are you saying that the rhapsode's art and the general's are one art, or two?

ION One, I think.

SOCRATES So whoever is a good rhapsode turns out to be a good general as well?

ION Absolutely, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then whoever turns out to be a good general is a good rhapsode as well.

ION No, that I don't think.

SOCRATES But you do think the other way round: that whoever is a good [541b] rhapsode is also a good general?

ION Certainly.

SOCRATES And you're the best rhapsode in Greece?

ION By far, Socrates.

SOCRATES Are you also the best general in Greece, Ion?

ION You can be sure of it, Socrates. And I learned that, too, from Homer's poems.

SOCRATES Then why in the gods' name, Ion, if you're the best in Greece at both, as general and as rhapsode, do you go around Greece performing as a rhapsode, but not leading armies as a general? Or [541c] do you think the Greeks have great need of a rhapsode crowned with a golden crown, but none at all of a general?

ION Because my city, Socrates, is ruled by you Athenians, and its armies are led by you, so it has no need of a general. And your city and Sparta wouldn't choose me as general: you think you're capable enough yourselves.[16]

SOCRATES My excellent Ion, don't you know Apollodorus of Cyzicus?

ION Who's he?

SOCRATES A man the Athenians have often chosen as their general [541d] though he's a foreigner. And there are Phanosthenes of Andros and Heraclides of Clazomenae: foreigners though they

16 Ephesus was at this time a subject city of the Athenian empire.

are, this city promotes them to generalships and the other offices, once they've shown they're men of some account. And Ion of Ephesus, then—won't it choose him as general and honor him, if he seems a man of some account? Besides, aren't you Ephesians Athenians by descent, and isn't Ephesus 541e second to no city?[17]

DISHONEST OR DIVINE

Socrates gives Ion a choice: be a man who does wrong, or a man inspired by the gods.

SOCRATES But the fact is, Ion, if you're telling the truth that it's by art and knowledge that you're able to praise Homer, then you're doing me wrong. You promised me that you knew many fine things about Homer, and claimed you'd show me, and now you're deceiving me and are far from showing me anything. You aren't even willing to tell me what the subjects are that you're so clever about, though I've been begging you all this time. Instead, exactly like Proteus, you take on every shape, twisting this way and that, until in the end you slip away from me by turning up as a general, 542a so as not to show how clever you are in your wisdom about Homer. Now if you are a master of an art and, as I was just saying, are deceiving me after promising a display about Homer, then you're unjust. But if you're not a master of an art, but say many fine things about the poet while knowing nothing, because you are possessed by Homer through divine dispensation—as I said of you—then you're doing no wrong.[18] So choose: would you rather we thought you an unjust man, or a divine one?

ION 542b There's a big difference, Socrates. It's much finer to be thought divine.

17 Phanosthenes and Heraclides were foreigners who held Athenian commands in the late fifth century BC. Ephesus was traditionally said to have been founded by colonists from Athens.

18 Proteus is the shape-shifting old man of the sea in the *Odyssey*, who changes form to escape whoever has hold of him.

SOCRATES Then that finer title is yours in our eyes, Ion: to be a divine praiser of Homer, and not a master of an art.