Ferroni, Lorenzo and Arnaud Macé (trans., comm.). <i>Platon Ion</i>. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2018. lxiii, 175 p. €28,50 (pb). ISBN 9782251448282.

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With this new edition and commentary on Plato’s <i>Ion</i>, Ferroni and Macé have done several types of readers a great service. Students and scholars from other fields will appreciate the introduction and the French translation. More advanced readers will be grateful for the new Greek text, full critical apparatus, the thirty-page section of “Notes Textuelles,” and the ample references to additional primary and secondary resources. All readers will benefit from the roadmap of the dialogue’s arguments that the authors sketch in the introduction and discuss in the commentary.

This volume is the eleventh, and most recent, in the relatively new <u n=https://www.lesbelleslettres.com/collections/38-commentario>Commentario series from Les Belles Lettres</u>. Since no reviews of the series have appeared yet in BMCR, I’ll begin by saying a little about Commentario. Helene Casanova-Robin oversees the collection, which “se situe entre les ouvrages pédagogiques universitaires et les travaux scientifiques spécialisés.”[[1]] Based on the two volumes I’ve worked with,[[2]] I think they have succeeded in their goal of allowing “un public relativement large d’accéder à une lecture scientifique et approfondie des œuvres.” All Commentario volumes include an introduction, Greek or Latin text, facing French translation, and commentary. Individual volumes also include supplementary material appropriate to the text or editor.[[3]] The books are attractively and well produced, and the design is clearly meant to recall that of the look of the <u n=https://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/classical-studies/classical-literature/series/cambridge-greek-and-latin-classics>Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics series</u>. I initially assumed that Commentario volumes would be a cross between a Cambridge “green and yellow” and one of the <u n=https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/series/series-12801>Aris & Phillips Classical Texts</u>. This is more or less true, except that the commentary in Commentario volumes is more discursive than these other series. A Cambridge commentary, for example, gives a brief summary of each major chunk of the text and then provides notes on individual words, phrases, or sentences. A Commentario commentary proceeds the other way around: each chunk of a text receives a short essay, in the course of which individual words or phrases may receive particular attention.

As a result, Ferroni and Macé complement recent commentaries on <i>Ion</i> rather than compete with them. In his 2007 edition, for example, Albert Rijksbaron focuses on Plato’s language, and his edition is meant for students and scholars of Greek. Ferroni and Macé make excellent use of Rijksbaron,[[4]] but they focus on argument and cultural background, and they offer an introduction and commentary that Greekless readers can learn from without difficulty.

Ferroni and Macé do several things very well. They explain the cultural and religious context of rhapsody both in the introduction and the commentary. They argue clearly and succinctly that the dialogue has a dramatic date before 412 BCE and a compositional date in the late 390s.[[5]] They make useful connections between themes in <i>Ion</i> and other Platonic dialogues, especially <i>Apology</i>, <i>Republic</i>, and <i>Phaedrus</i>. They reveal the way that Socrates blends moral and epistemological concerns in his examination of practices and lives. They offer valuable guidance through the main paths of argument that Socrates and Ion follow. Finally, the authors keep the main text readable while providing ample references to primary and secondary material in footnotes.[[6]]

Naturally, I also have some reservations. I wish that Ferroni and Macé had said more about Plato’s use of humor and irony in the dialogue. Their Socrates is surprisingly serious—even in the face of Ion’s elaborate outfit. I also wish that they had said more about the details of the arguments in the dialogue. As I said above, Ferroni and Macé help the reader to see what conclusions Socrates aims to reach at different stages of the dialogue, but they don’t always spend enough time on the precise steps of those arguments. In at least one case, which I will discuss in more detail below, their inattention to irony and to an argument’s details may considerably weaken the authors’ interpretation of the dialogue.

Ferroni and Macé argue for one especially controversial view. Following Christopher Janaway,[[7]] they believe that Plato does not deny the existence of poetic and rhapsodic τέχναι in the dialogue. Quite the opposite, they claim that at least one Platonic argument depends on the existence of a poetic and a rhapsodic τέχνη. If Ferroni and Macé are correct, then Plato argues roughly as follows. Poets such as Homer possess a poetic τέχνη, and rhapsodes such as Ion possess a rhapsodic τέχνη. These τέχναι underlie, e.g., Homer’s ability to compose formally correct dactylic hexameters and Ion’s ability to select appropriate scenes from Homer on demand. However, these τέχναι do not underlie, e.g., Homer’s ability to say true and beautiful things or Ion’s ability to speak knowledgeably about Homer’s poetry. Poets and rhapsodes have these latter abilities, as Socrates says, “not by skill but by divine inspiration” (536d2-3).

This interpretation makes sense for several reasons. First, it may seem charitable to Socrates and Plato. If we follow Ferroni and Macé, Socrates and Plato agree that Homer and Ion possess genuine skills which guide their performances, at least in part. Otherwise, we might think that they need to invoke divine inspiration to explain something as simple as writing a single correct hexameter verse. Second, Socrates often says things in the dialogue that <i>prima facie</i> imply the existence of a poetic or rhapsodic τέχνη. Third, if Ferroni and Macé are correct, we can more easily understand why Socrates focuses so much attention on Ion’s ability to speak well about Homer rather than his ability to perform Homer. Recent interpreters have generally agreed that Plato denies the existence of poetic and rhapsodic τέχναι, but Ferroni and Macé give us reason to question this orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, let me briefly state two problems I see with the interpretation Ferroni and Macé offer. (Perhaps it goes without saying, but I do not hope to settle anything in this brief review. The issues deserve serious consideration, and I hope that Ferroni and Macé will inspire others to respond t greater length.) First, I worry that Ferroni and Macé overlook the importance of Socratic irony in a key passage. In their comments on 532c8-e4, they insist that Socrates agrees unconditionally that there is a poetic τέχνη. However, in this same passage Socrates also insists that he is not wise—he only speaks the truth—while rhapsodes, critics, and poets are wise. I would argue that we must read both statements ironically.[[8]] Second, Ferroni and Macé rely heavily and explicitly on Janaway’s reconstruction of an argument Socrates uses to establish that Ion does not speak well about Homer through a τέχνη. However, they don’t discuss the details of Janaway’s reconstruction,[[9]] and they should say more in response to criticisms of Janaway by other scholars.[[10]]

I have one more general criticism of the book before concluding. Although Ferroni and Macé discuss and cite philosophical articles that specifically address their dialogue, they do not make use of the larger body of philosophical scholarship on Socrates. They make no reference, for example, to Vlastos or Irwin on Socratic <i>elenchus</i>, to Vlastos, Nehamas, Gottlieb, Lane, or Vasiliou on Socratic irony, nor to Irwin or Woodruff on τέχνη in early Plato. This is a great shame since these works shed a great deal of light on these topics. It may be that there is simply a tendency for academic sub-disciplines to ignore each other,[[11] but if so, we all should regret this tendency.

Despite these criticisms, I repeat my initial overall assessment: Ferroni and Macé have done all readers of Plato a great service. Both students and scholars can learn a great deal from this book, especially about the cultural and religious background of the dialogue. At the same time, Ferroni and Macé will force readers to reconsider long-held views concerning Plato’s view of poetry and τέχνη. Textual critics will appreciate the detailed information about the manuscripts of Plato’s <i>Ion</i>, and all Greek readers will benefit from the new text. The book is well made and affordably priced, and it deserves to be widely read.[[12]]

Works Cited:

Janaway, Christopher. “Craft and Fineness in Plato’s <i>Ion</i>.” <i>Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy</i> X, 1992: 1-23.

Murray, Penelope. <i>Plato On Poetry</i>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Rijksbaron, Albert. <i>Plato Ion Or: On the Iliad</i>. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

[[1]] This quotation, and the one that follows, come from <u n=https://www.lesbelleslettres.com/collections/38-commentario>the publisher’s website for Commentario</u>.

[[2]] In addition to reviewing this edition of <i>Ion</i>, I’ve also worked with <u n=https://www.lesbelleslettres.com/livre/2106-poemes>the Commentario edition of Catullus</u>.

[[3]] For example, the edition under review provides an entirely new critical text, a full <i>apparatus criticus</i>, and thirty pages of detailed discussion of textual issues. Much of this material derives from Ferroni’s 2006 doctoral dissertation.

[[4]] Ferroni and Macé single out Rijksbaron’s work for praise: they describe his edition as “une étape incontournable dans l’étude des textes platoniciens” and “une source constante d’inspiration, toujours présente” (IX). They refer to Rijksbaron so often that he often appears as “le savant hollandais” or “le philologue hollandais.”

[[5]] On page XXII, an small but potentially confusing typo slipped through: “La date de rédaction de L’<i>Ion</i>, à la fin des années 490.” It is clear from the rest of this section that we should read 390 for 490 here.

[[6]] Happily, the footnotes are exactly where they belong on the bottom of the page.

[[7]] As the result of an unfortunate lapse, Christopher Janaway is usually cited as “Jaraway,” including in the bibliography. Ferroni and Macé do not agree entirely with Janaway’s interpretation, but he is essential to their arguments, as they acknowledge.

[[8]] Socrates uses που to qualify both the status of poetic τέχνη (532c7) and the wisdom of rhapsodes and poets (532d6). See Rijksbaron for the role of που at 532c7 (Rijskbaron, 152).

[[9]] To be more specific in my concerns: in an inital reference to Janaway, Ferroni and Macé say nothing about the details of Janaway’s reconstruction (69); later, however, they mention in another context that they reject some of the terms which Janaway employs (76). Ferroni and Macé may be able to give Socrates a valid version of Janaway’s argument without those terms, but they don’t even try. As such, they make it difficult for readers to know precisely what argument they have in mind in the earlier passage.

[[10]] For example, Ferroni and Macé write that Socrates must grant the premise that poetry is a τέχνη since otherwise he wrecks his own argument against Ion: “Ce point nous paraît clairement établi au moins depuis Jaraway [sic] 1992” (69, footnote 81). In her 1996 commentary, however, Penelope Murray gives an alternative reconstruction of this passage, and she explicitly argues against Janaway. Ferroni and Macé need to respond to such criticisms if they wish to argue that their view is long settled.

[[11]] Note, for example, that Robert Todd criticized Penelope Todd’s edition of <i>Ion</i> in similar terms when he reviewed that edition for BMCR: <b>97.04.02</b>.

[[12]] I did not notice typos other than the ones mentioned in notes 5 and 7. However, as a reader rather than a speaker of French, I am not confident that I would notice minor errors as quickly as I should. Nevertheless, I hope that the book receives a second printing as soon as possible in order to correct Christopher Janaway’s name throughout the volume.