

Plato's Atlantis Story: A Prose Hymn to Athena

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IN PLATO'S *Timaeus* and *Critias*, the description of the cults, myths, and religion of both prehistoric Athens and Atlantis forms a significant part of Critias' account of both cities. I argue here that Plato has formulated these religious elements of Athens and Atlantis in a manner designed to create a prose hymn for the Athenian Athena, to refashion Athenian mythology to meet his standards of myth as set forth in the *Republic*, and to redirect Athenians to a way of life that had once brought them world domination.

In relating the Atlantis story, Critias claims that he simultaneously will pay his debt of gratitude to Socrates for the past day's conversation and, more important to this discussion, will celebrate the goddess Athena during her Panathenaia with a true and merited hymn of praise (21A):

οὐ νῦν ἐπιμνησθεῖσιν πρόπον ἄν ἡμῖν εἴη σοί τε ἀποδοῦναι χάριν
καὶ τὴν θεὸν ἅμα ἐν τῇ πανηγύρει δικαίως τε καὶ ἀληθῶς οἶόν-
περ ὑμνοῦντας ἐγκωμιάζειν.

It would be fitting for us as we recall this to pay back our debt to you and, at the same time, justly and truthfully to praise the goddess during her festival as if we were singing her a hymn.

From the very outset, then, we have a pair of dialogues, the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, one of whose many concerns is religion. This aspect of Plato's Atlantis myth has received relatively little attention, and will thus be the focus of this paper.

The religious thread is reinforced almost immediately when Critias reveals the circumstances in which he himself first learned the tale he is about to tell—his eponymous grandfather told it to him on the Koureotis (Youth Day) during the Apaturia of his tenth year, a festival complete with the ceremonies,

contests, and prizes a Greek would expect from such an occasion, including recitation (21B). Significantly, one of the two gods honored during and presiding over the Apaturia festival is Athena, in this case Athena Phratria.¹ Welliver has aptly noted that Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates are, in effect, engaging in their own competition for Socrates, a notion that is supported in the *Critias* (108B) when Socrates warns Critias of the mind of his audience and how well Timaeus, the previous poet, was received by them.² What Welliver does not note, however, is that they are likewise honoring Athena by means of a prose hymn of sorts (21A quoted above). Despite the temporal remove, the setting for the performance of the tale of Atlantis remains constant: a festival honoring Athena.

Critias the Elder had related how Solon, a friend of his father's, first discovered the Atlantis story during his sojourn to Egypt and brought it back with him to Athens.³ Solon learned the tale in the city of Saïs at the apex of the Delta from the priests of the deity Neïth, whose Greek name, so they said, was Athena (21E).⁴ After a brief digression by the Egyptian priest on the dereliction of Greek learning, Solon eventually begs the priests who claim to know the tale of his ancestral people to relate it to him. In a statement remarkably similar to Critias the Younger's at 21A, the priest replies that he is happy to do so for

¹ The other is Zeus Phratrios. For a more complete account of the Apaturia festival see J. D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill 1983) 84–85, and *Ancient Greek Religion* (Oxford 2005) 154–155, 174; R. Parker, *Athenian Religion* (Oxford 1996) 104–106. On phratries, S. D. Lambert, *The Phratries of Attica* (Ann Arbor 1993).

² W. Welliver, *Character, Plot and Thought in Plato's Timaeus-Critias* (Leiden 1977) 31. Cf. L. Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker* (Chicago 1998) 49–50, on 21B: “Although Critias the Elder is not referring to real rhapsodists but to children who behave as rhapsodists during the Apaturia, there can be little doubt that what we have here is an allusion to the rhapsodes' competition that took place during the Greater Panathenaia,” for which see also J. A. Davison, “Notes on the Panathenaia,” *JHS* 78 (1958) 23–42.

³ The idea that Solon had visited the court of Amasis in Egypt was current in Plato's time: cf. Hdt. 1.30.

⁴ See Hdt. 2.28, 59, 170, 176; Paus. 2.36; Cic. *Nat.D.* 3.23; Plut. *Isis and Osiris* 9, 32, 62; Arnob. *Adv.Gent.* 4.137; cf. Th. H. Martin, *Études sur le Timée de Platon* (Paris 1981) 251.

several reasons: for Solon himself, for the sake of that man's city, and above all for honor of the goddess, patroness of both their cities (23D). By relating the contexts in which Solon and he himself learned of it, Critias thus inserts himself into the tradition of telling the tale of Atlantis as an offering to honor Athena. Socrates later proclaims the fittingness of Critias' tale when asked whether it will suit their purpose or if they should find another. He says that the story of Atlantis could not be changed for the better; its connection with Athena made it perfectly appropriate given the festival now being celebrated at Athens, the Panathenaia (26E):

καὶ τίν' ἄν, ὦ Κριτία, μᾶλλον ἀντὶ τούτου μεταλάβοιμεν, ὃς τῆ τε παρούσῃ τῆς θεοῦ θυσίᾳ διὰ τὴν οἰκειότητ' ἄν πρόποι μάλιστα;

And what better offering, Critias, could we exchange for this, which, given its relationship, would be especially fitting for the present sacrifice for the goddess?

This interlocking ring of connections to religious festivals and personages that begins in Egypt with Solon and the priests of Neïth continues with Critias and his grandfather during the Athenian Apaturia and ends, for the time being, during the Panathenaia being celebrated while the *Timaeus* takes place, and thus serves as a backdrop for the *Critias* proper that should color the way we read that text.

Given the attention Plato gives to religion in these dialogues, that the *Critias* begins with a prayer by Timaeus is not surprising. Although he prays to an unnamed god rather than Athena specifically, Timaeus does pray for knowledge (106B), one of that goddess' most central provinces, and this serves to keep her in the forefront of our minds. Hermocrates, Socrates' third interlocutor, whose exposition was to have been the third after Timaeus' and Critias', reminds Critias just before the latter begins his story that he must call upon Paion (Apollo) and the Muses in order to display and praise the excellence of Athens' ancient citizens (108C). This invocation would have been familiar and instantly recognizable both to readers and to festival-goers as a common way to open a poetic hymn to a god. But Luce has made the important observation that "Plato *never* calls [the Atlantis story] a *muthos*, but always a *logos* ... it should be classified as a 'panegyric discourse' (*logos panegurikos*) on a par

with the *Panathenaicus* of Isocrates or the *Funeral Oration* of Lysias.”⁵ Loraux denies the link between the Atlantis myth and Panathenaic orations, claiming that in the fourth century the latter had no institutional existence.⁶ But Morgan calls attention to the fact that the occasion for the *Timaeus-Critias* is not institutional, but rather one of festival. In addition, she says, “festival occasions gave many professionals the opportunity to display their eulogistic prowess ... Critias’ account of Athens and Atlantis stands recognizably ... in the tradition of eulogistic Athenian festival speeches along Isocratean lines.”⁷ In her closing remarks, Morgan observes that Platonic dialogues have intersecting levels of interpretation that resonate with each other.⁸ Absent however from her list of interpretive levels (which includes philosophy, history, and oratory) is religion. This religious level of interpretation is an important aspect of Plato’s endeavor and should be acknowledged as such. Through Critias, Plato combines the elements of the prayer-beginning typical of sung, poetic hymns and the form of panegyric discourse to create a genre all his own: the prose hymn.

Are our interlocutors in fact, by praising the excellence of the ancient Athenians, not in effect praising the deity who made that excellence possible in the first place? When he explains how modern-day Egyptian society parallels that of ancient Athens, the priest of Neith from the *Timaeus* does tell Solon that (24B–D)

in the matter of wisdom, you see what great care the law has bestowed upon it here from the very beginning, both as concerns the order of the world ... and acquiring all the other branches of learning connected therewith. All this order and system the goddess had set in order upon you earlier when she founded

⁵ J. V. Luce, “The Sources and Literary Form of Plato’s Atlantis Narrative,” in E. S. Ramage (ed.), *Atlantis: Fact or Fiction?* (Bloomington 1978) 49–78, at 58–59.

⁶ N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1986) 455 n.168.

⁷ K. Morgan, “Designer History: Plato’s Atlantis Story and Fourth-Century Ideology,” *JHS* 118 (1998) 108–118, at 106–107.

⁸ Morgan, *JHS* 118 (1998) 118.

your society, choosing the place in which you were born because she saw that the well-tempered climate would bear a crop of men of highest intelligence. Being a lover of war and wisdom, the goddess chose the region that would bear men most closely resembling herself and there made her first settlement.

In the end, then, the ancient Athenians have Athena to thank for what makes them praiseworthy, namely their wisdom and excellence in war. Furthermore, Johansen cogently urges that “just as Plato appropriates the Athenians’ forebears in the service of a new set of philosophical ideals, so he appropriates their patron goddess.”⁹ Plato thus primes Athena to play a major role in his idealized city.

After invoking the aid not only of the deities Hermocrates has bidden but also that of the rest of the gods and especially of Mnemosyne, Critias takes his interlocutors back in time 9,000 years¹⁰ and explains how, once upon a time, the gods divided up the entire earth into lots, but not by strife (109B). This casting of lots is particularly interesting because it contradicts the Athenian cult myth presented in Plato’s own *Menexenus* where, in Socrates’ retelling of Aspasia’s purported funeral oration, there *is* strife between Poseidon and Athena over Athens (237C–D):

Our country deserves to be praised by all mankind, not only by us, and for many other reasons, but first and foremost because it happens to be loved by the gods. The strife and judgment of the gods who contended over her bears witness to our argument.

The strife to which Socrates here alludes is the chariot race to the Acropolis between Poseidon and Athena, well known throughout antiquity.¹¹ Plato himself, however, would never

⁹ T. K. Johansen, *Plato’s Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge 2004) 38–39.

¹⁰ Harking back to the antiquity of Egypt and its unbroken civilization was a common appeal to authority in ancient Greece; cf. Hdt. 2.142, 145.

¹¹ For this myth see Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion* 56–57; W. B. Tyrell and F. S. Brown, *Athenian Myths and Institutions* (New York 1991) 180. The most famous classical account is not written, but carved on the west pediment of the Parthenon. Xen. *Mem.* 3.5.10 relates how Cecrops presided over the contest between Athena and Poseidon, deciding in favor of the former. Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.1 rejects this view in favor of Olympian intervention but describes the contest in greater detail.

allow for such a contest; his gods know better.¹² Instead, they settled the lands apportioned to them by just allotments (109B). In order to uphold his notion of just gods, Plato abandons the traditional conflict between Poseidon and Athena, transferring it instead to the war between Atlantis and Athens, over which the two divinities preside respectively as chief deities. In this way, Plato is able to glorify Athena without abandoning his ideology: the quarrel is removed from the divine to the mortal level, allowing both gods to maintain their justness and Athena to achieve her victory over Poseidon, albeit indirectly through her people. In a prose hymnic style, then, Plato, through Critias, sings Athena's praises.

The very manner by which the gods divide up the land in the *Critias*, the drawing of lots, is yet another testament to Athena's glory, for this is how the Athenians themselves run their government—how Athena and Hephaestus taught them to run their government (109D). The *politeia* that Athena instills in their minds is democracy, and the use of the lot is just one of the more prominent elements and symbols of that.¹³ Once again restricted by his notion of the gods' justness, Plato omits the traditional Athenian cult myth regarding Hephaestus' attempted rape of Athena and the subsequent birth of Erechtheus from the Earth,¹⁴ opting instead for a harmony between the two who, of a like nature (wisdom- and craft-loving) and having the same father, were jointly apportioned Athens, a land by nature congenial and suited to virtue and to wisdom,

¹² Plato did not accept the notion that the gods fought or contended with one another: *Euthphr.* 6B ff., *Resp.* 378B ff.

¹³ In addition to its use in political election and drafting for juries, Athens, by means of the Delphic oracle, used the lot for such important decisions as their ten new eponymous heroes during the Cleisthenic reforms.

¹⁴ For a fuller version of this myth and the conflation of Erechtheus and Erichthonius, see Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion* 58–59, and Roscher, *Lex.* I 1296–1300, 1303–1308. Accounts of the rape include Eur. *Ion* 267 ff. and fr.925; Amelesagoras *FGrHist* 330 F 1; Callim. *Hec.* fr.260.19 ff.; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.6. For other versions of the birth of Erechtheus/Erichthonius from the Earth, see Hom. *Il.* 2.546–551; Hdt. 8.55; Soph. *Aj.* 202; Pind. fr.253, *Danaïs* fr.2; Eur. *Ion* 20–25.

where they planted autochthonous men of virtue (109C–D).¹⁵ The myth has changed, and yet autochthony is preserved.¹⁶ Unlike in the *Timaeus*, Athena and Hephaestus both are allotted Athens. In historical Athens, too, Hephaestus and Athena were closely associated—as the patrons of the smith’s art and a woman’s handicraft, respectively. The link between the deities is also evident in cult worship.¹⁷ But even more importantly, we know also that torch-light processions were held at the Apaturia in honor of Hephaestus as god of the hearth fire and the home.¹⁸ Gill has also noted that the Atlantis story heightens the association between Hephaestus and Athena because Plato “sees each god as the patron of one of the two classes in his primaeval state (the intellectual warrior being the patron of the guardians, the craftsman god being patron of the craftsmen), and the unity of the patron-gods accentuates the unity of his state.”¹⁹

Returning to the gods’ allotments, we should take note of how, just before he explains that Poseidon drew the island of Atlantis, Critias states that the gods provided for themselves shrines and sacrifices (113C). In establishing the foundations for their own worship, Critias’ gods mirror the actions of the gods presented in the foundation myths in the *Homeric Hymns*, most notably in those to Apollo (294–295, 486–492) and Demeter (273–274). In another move that mirrors the *Hymns*, Plato has human agents, in this case Critias’ Atlantians, do the actual

¹⁵ Tyrell and Brown, *Athenian Myths* 139, aptly note that this image of Athena sowing and tending her people as a gardener does his plants was familiar to Plato from Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* (911–912).

¹⁶ C. Gill, *Plato: The Atlantis Story* (Bristol 1980) 55, has further observed that “Plato’s choice of pre-Theseus heroes [at 110A7 ff.] seems designed to give prominence to the idea of autochthony ... the names Erichthonius and Erysichthon include the word *χθών* (‘land’).”

¹⁷ W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1985) 220: “Athena has a statue in the temple of Hephaistos which overlooks the Agora, and conversely the ever-burning lamp in the temple of Athena Polias on the Acropolis may be understood as the presence of the fire god.”

¹⁸ A. Fairbanks, *A Handbook of Greek Religion* (New York 1910) 162. See Istros *FGrHist* 334 F 2.

¹⁹ Gill, *Plato* 54.

work of fitting out their sanctuaries (115C).²⁰ But these parallels in content between the *Homeric Hymns* and Critias' Atlantis story are by no means the only indicator Plato supplies to signal that the latter is actually a variation on the former.

At 113A, Critias tells us that Solon intended to use the story for his own poetry. He relates further in the *Timaeus* the opinion of his grandfather (21C–D):

If, Arynander, [Solon] had not treated his poetry as by-work, but had taken it seriously even as others did, and if he had finished the story he brought here from Egypt and had not been forced to neglect it by the factions and other troubles he found on returning here, in my opinion neither Hesiod, nor Homer, nor any other poet would have been more famous than he.

These statements, paired with the epic character of the invocations of the divine mentioned above, clearly indicate a resonance between Plato's endeavor and the epic poets', especially with the *Homeric Hymns*. Morgan aptly observes that the Atlantis story "combines both heroic and didactic elements: it tells the audience how they should live their lives (on the model of the *Republic*) and ... would thus have replaced Homer and Hesiod as the foundational text of the society ... The fields of poetry, politics, and wisdom/philosophy might have been united in one person, [but] poetry must cede to politics."²¹ But we must also bear in mind exactly what kind of poetry Plato condones in his *Republic*, for he disallows the vast majority of it. In Book 10, he specifies (607A):

εἰδέναι δὲ ὅτι ὅσον μόνον ὕμνους θεοῖς καὶ ἐγκώμα τῶν ἀγαθῶν ποιήσεως παραδεκτέον εἰς πόλιν.

But know that the only kinds of poetry that ought to be accepted in our city are hymns to gods and praises of good men.

As we have seen, in Athens' case, these two kinds of poetry are essentially one and the same; as if through a hendiadys, praising Athens' citizens is a way of hymning their patron deity Athena.

Critias himself makes this connection explicit by announcing

²⁰ Cf. *Hymn.Hom.Ap.* 502–512, *Hymn.Hom.Cer.* 300.

²¹ Morgan, *JHS* 118 (1998) 109.

his intention literally to combine the normally separate modes of “hymning gods” and “praising men” in 21A (οἰόντες ὑμνοῦντας ἐγκωμιάζειν), which is exactly what is happening in all three repetitions of the Atlantis tale.²² In successfully combining the genres of hymn and encomium, Plato thus effectively creates a new genre: the prose hymn.²³

Critias, in expounding upon the legal system of the Atlanteans—how each of the ten kings held the power of life and death over his people, his power absolute in his particular kingdom—notes that the governance the kings uphold amongst themselves follows a different set of rules, ones originating with Poseidon, transmitted by law and inscribed by their forbears on an orichalcum pillar that stands in Poseidon’s temple at the center of the island (119C). Poseidon’s role as lawgiver is reminiscent of the opening of the *Laws*, where Clinias calls Zeus the Cretans’ lawgiver and Apollo the Spartans’ (624A). But in Atlantis, Poseidon is not the only agent at work; his sons are also. 119C thus places the original ten kings of Atlantis “in the category of hero-institutor[s like Erichthonius], the first to celebrate [the Panathenaia], and himself subsequently celebrated in it”²⁴

²² W. D. Furley and J. M. Bremer, *Greek Hymns I* (Tübingen 2001) 2, cite “repetition from occasion to occasion” in a list of features, any or all of which distinguish a hymn as a form of utterance from normal speech. Brisson, *Plato* 56, additionally reminds us that whereas the Dionysia and the Greater Panathenaia “provided opportunities for the recitation of myths by such professionals as rhapsodes ... the majority of those who related myths were necessarily non-professionals” like Solon, and both Critias the Elder and Critias the Younger.

²³ In explaining the nebulous “nature of Greek hymns,” Furley and Bremer, *Greek Hymns* 3, write that “there were various forms of Greek hymn which were spoken or recited rather than sung.” Furthermore, A. E. Harvey, “The Classification of Greek Lyric Poetry,” *CQ* 5 (1955) 157–175, at 166, shows that there was a tradition in antiquity holding that the term ὕμνος was used rather generically for a song for a god, standing in relation to other terms such as *paian* as genus does to species, for which see Didymus cited in Orion *Etym.* (pp.155–156 Sturz). Photius (*Bibl. cod.* 239 [V 159 Henry]) agrees that anything written for a god is a hymn, and even cites the “enkomiastion-hymn” as genus-species designation.

²⁴ E. Kearns, *The Heroes of Attica* (London 1989) 112. Cf. J. D. Mikalson, “Erechtheus and the Panathenaia,” *AJP* 97 (1976) 141–153.

and provides yet another link to actual cult practice in classical Athens. The crucial distinction here, however, is that whereas Poseidon gives the Atlanteans their laws, Athena gives Athenians instead the means to create their own by giving them reason.

Critias assigns to Poseidon responsibility for the greatness and distinctiveness of the Atlanteans' power, claiming that the god marshaled them against the ancient Athenians. Given the laws themselves rather than the means to create them, the Atlanteans obeyed their laws and maintained a kindly disposition toward their godly kin only so long as their divine nature survived sufficiently intact (120E). What made the Atlanteans noble was their share in the divine. Critias relates how in time the Atlanteans lost their virtue owing to the liberal admixture with mortals and the concomitant diminution of divinity (121A–B). Through no fault of their own, then, dispossessed of their nobility, the Atlanteans became greedy and attacked Athens. The Athenians, on the other hand, have no divinity to lose; indeed, the story of their Hephaestean origin has already been implicitly disavowed. Instead, the story of Athenian autochthony is transformed: their highest virtue, *phronesis*, is imparted unto them by the very land that Athena has chosen for them.

Gill rightly assigns to this notion exceptional significance. In the *Statesman*, Plato employs as a metaphor for the relationship between gods and men the notion of the divine herdsmanship of mankind (271E5–7). This same metaphor is employed also in the *Critias*, but with qualifications (109B–C):

In the manner shepherds tend their flock, [Athena and Hephaestus] nourished us as their chattel and nurslings, except that they did not force our bodies with bodily force, as the shepherds tend their flock with blows, but rather directed from the stern by that part by which a creature is most easily turned, persuading the soul in the manner of a rudder, according to each one's disposition; thus they guided and steered all mankind.

But Gill's statement, that "this qualification lays stress on the closeness of men to the gods, the greater equality of the relationship, and their common possession of reason which en-

ables this relationship,²⁵ is somewhat misleading. Not all men have the same disposition and, as such, different people are guided by different rudders, even if the gods ultimately wield them all. The Athenian rudder, which cannot be lost so long as they inhabit a land naturally disposed to it, is *phronesis*. The Atlantians' virtue, on the other hand, is rooted rather in their divine ancestry, which becomes more and more diluted with each generation. In time, they develop new rudders as they become filled with unjust greed and power (121B).

Critias' assigning to Poseidon responsibility for the Atlantians' attack on Athens reminds us once more of Plato's inventive dividing up of the world by lots. In order to maintain his notion of the morality of the gods, Plato has chosen to transfer the strife between Poseidon and Athena from the traditional setting, Athens (as in the *Menexenus*), to a more macrocosmic setting between imperfect agents who represent them, namely men. The epic grandeur with which he describes the state of Atlantis serves the ancillary function of inflating Athens' enemy, which of course casts on Athens a much brighter light when it overcomes its vastly more powerful rival in war. The allusion to the situation Athens faced during the Persian Wars, especially at Marathon where they were pitted against an equally large, barbaric, and seemingly indomitable foe, is almost tangible. And yet Welliver has rightly noted that classical Athens herself had since then grown into a role not unlike Atlantis' so many thousands of years before.²⁶

Plato saw the Athenians as doing more than merely being steered by rudders of greed. He was alarmed at the influence of Poseidon, hailed as the savior of all Greece, including Athens, which had grown exponentially in the wake of the Persian Wars, and specifically of the naval Battle of Salamis. Plato's dislike of the sea and Athens' expansion has been well documented in his other writings.²⁷ The Atlantis story *qua* hymn to

²⁵ C. Gill, "Plato and Politics: The *Critias* and the *Politicus*," *Phronesis* 24 (1979) 148–167, at 157.

²⁶ Welliver, *Character* 42–43.

²⁷ Cf. *Leg.* 705A, 706A–707D where the Athenian Stranger describes the sea and *Grg.* 518E–519A where Socrates attacks Athens' expansion as poli-

Athena is thus a means of reclaiming for Athens its patron goddess, a reenactment of the original chariot race for the city in a manner more amenable to Plato's idiosyncratic conception of the gods. Writing in a post-imperial age, Plato calls for a return to the golden age in which ancient Athens, the embodiment of his own *Republic*, was preeminent *for the right reason*.²⁸ What is more, with *phronesis* lying fallow in the land itself, waiting to be employed once more, this return is in fact ripe for the harvesting; unlike other gods (like Poseidon), Athena has provided her people with a unique advantage. But this is not to say that Plato thinks this revitalization of the Athenians' pristine virtue will be easy or that he even claims to know the way. After all, given the incomplete nature of the *Critias*, Athena's champions emerge victorious from a war whose details we will never know.²⁹

June, 2008

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ticians fill it with harbors, docks, and the like, which he equates with moral decline. See P. Vidal-Naquet, "Athènes et l'Atlantide: Structure et signification d'un mythe platonicien," *REG* 77 (1964) 420–444; C. Gill, "The Genre of the Atlantis Story," *CP* 72 (1977) 287–304, at 297; J. Luccioni, "Platon et la mer," *REA* 61 (1959) 15–47, at 43–46.

²⁸ Gill, *CP* 72 (1977) 293–298, points in this direction but, under the idea of a pro-Spartan historical *Critias*, finds the parallel between ancient Athens and contemporary Sparta a more convincing link than that between ancient and pre-Marathonic Athens.

²⁹ I should like to thank those whose encouragement and insightful comments on previous versions of this paper have strengthened it considerably, most especially Jon Mikalson, but no less Douglas Olson, Greg Hays, John Dillery, Kent Rigsby, and my anonymous readers. Any deficiencies that remain are, of course, mine alone.