Myth and philosophy on stage in Platonic dialogues
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4. Conclusion

In this thesis I have demonstrated how my approach to myth opens up new possibilities for understanding differences between myths and, more specifically, how it helps to identify and appreciate the relevance of Plato's myths. I explained that it is difficult and misleading to use many modern standard criteria for evaluating myth and apply them to Plato's myths. My theory brought to light the distinguishing dimensions of philosophical myths (myth/hypotheses), which cannot be illuminated using other approaches.

I elucidated the many reasons why many modern scholars use the term 'myth' for a diverse range of tales and the obstacles hindering conventional interpretations of the relationship between myth and philosophy. As I explained, the study of Plato's myths has been plagued by similar problems to those faced by myth scholar. The significance of the myth/argument relationship in Plato has yet to be discovered completely and in this thesis I have tried to provide a method that illuminates the most salient features of the relationship and I demonstrated a number of different ways in which my method performs this crucial function. As a result I clarified why Plato's myths cannot be identified under the same generic category used to classify other myths. By indicating how the modern study of Plato's myths has been affected by similar, if not the same, influences as the study of most myths from other cultures and eras I was able to move forward and tailor specifically an approach sensitive to the nuances of Platonic myth and the idiosyncrasies of Plato's philosophy. My theory of 'mutual scaffolding' acknowledges these peculiarities by recognizing Plato's diverse and particularly savvy literary techniques along with the delineation of his more familiar metaphysical, epistemological and ethical concerns. This was possible by incorporating developments from disciplines such as religious studies, myth studies, cultural and symbolic anthropology and literary criticism.

The potential for importing literary, aesthetic, theological, and social science methods and research to what has become a philosophical or classical area of study has not been explored thoroughly. All academic theories are influenced by academic and research constraints that often discourage the blurring of disciplinary boundaries. Here I have endeavored to employ techniques from other disciplines with philosophical rigor.[1] My primary intention was to focus on the narrative features of Plato's myths in relation to the aims of his philosophical arguments, and the aspects of the form and content of his myths that are relevant to the philosophical parts of the dialogues. To appreciate fully the philosophical potential of literary features in the myths meant that the tools I used to connect them to the philosophical counterparts include methods specifically concerned with narrative (whether from within philosophy or from without). In this respect it was necessary that I concentrate on issues such as plot structure, tropes, character selection, narrative mode, themes and motifs and other elements such as liminality.

My description of the problems and directions in myth studies at the beginning of this thesis was important for many reasons. Prior to addressing Plato's myths in detail I think it was necessary to establish first some conceptual order. I realized that it would be helpful to address the most pertinent questions influencing modern debates about the status and evaluation of myth. In order to delineate the different parts of Plato's dialogues into myth and philosophy, distinguish the different kinds of Platonic myths and, subsequently, discuss the possible relations between those myths and the arguments in the dialogues it was extremely beneficial to use the major questions driving contemporary myth studies as a guide. These questions, listed at the beginning of this study, also illuminate some fundamental theoretical presuppositions characteristic of myth studies that have possibly been imported into Plato studies. It is helpful to revisit these questions in light of the argument I have presented:

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[1] This is not unprecedented if one considers some of the developments in literary criticism such as the work of Erich Auerbach and Hayden White, both of which I have referred to. The history of philosophy has many examples of the combination of literary interpretation and philosophical analysis. One need only look at the history of biblical exegesis and its influence on philosophy.

Questions relating to literary, textual and performative aspects:

a) What are the literary and dramatic characteristics of the myths?

b) How is the myth related to other similar materials? Does the myth have an equivalent in terms of genre? Is it an anti-genre? Is it unique?

c) What materials may have influenced its formation and development?

d) What are the dramatic or literary markers which are not found elsewhere in other cultural creations and literature (including other Platonic dialogues), and why are they there?

e) Are there indications in the myth of the correct context for interpretation?

Questions relating to structural authority:

a) What are the innate dynamics of the myth and do they correspond to those found in the wider context of the dialogue?

b) To what extent does the myth represent a class of similarly structured materials, and to what extent is it unique?

c) How does the myth fit into the dialogue's conceptual, aesthetic, and semiotic system? Is it shaped by other privileged codes or does it function as a master code that governs other elements in the text?

Questions relating to hermeneutical matters:

a) What symbolic and iconic traces of the myth can be found in the rest of the text? And, correspondingly, how can the place and function of certain symbols and icons be understood once they are identified as traces of the myth?

b) What relevance does the positioning of myths have in Plato's dialogues? How can we understand the myth as a primary element rather than a secondary or peripheral element?

c) How self-evident is the meaning of the myth to the reader-listener? Does it require extensive exegesis?

In grappling with these questions I made a concerted effort to avoid certain trends and conventions often repeated in mythographical research. Modern accounts of myth, governed by dominant structural and interpretative themes and techniques, have reduced these kinds of narratives, with their distinctly different messages, functions and referents, to one category or genre which suits their own ideological and social agendas. I tried to avoid this 'single genre' or 'monomythic' approach to Plato's myths. In rendering an alternative way of answering the above questions – at times criticizing the appropriateness of the question itself – I revealed simultaneously some presuppositions in Plato scholarship that have distorted and misrepresented the *mythos/logos* relationship.

For instance, most Enlightenment thinkers viewed the relationship between the rational and the emotional in terms of a dichotomy, i.e. two conflicting functions which correspond to two opposing forms of explanation. For many modern philosophical programs that promoted reason as the highest human faculty, diversions such as irrationality, emotional expression and mythical production were demoted. They understood the movement of history as progress from brutishness to culture and as the stages develop further the value of human beings is better recognized, taste becomes more refined and definite practical principles are designed and established. As a result, human activity that did not live up to their rational criteria was simply limited and inaccurate. In the context of a scientific progressive view of history irrational or non-rational forms of expression are merely a failure on the part of individuals to actualize their natural human rational predispositions; at best they may be interpreted as elementary or preliminary stages in the course of improvement. Therefore, the development and serious consideration of literary genres such as myth could never be considered to be 'philosophical'. However, one only need consider the fact that most humans express their situations and interpret their experiences in emotional rather than rational modes in order to realize the limits of this interpretation. Also, some of the most influential and important developments in human history can not be reduced to the actualization of a strictly or predominantly rational predisposition. This is not to say that one needs to reverse the dichotomy but that the dichotomy paradigm needs to be

seriously criticized and rethought. The positivist paradigm has dominated most of the theories and schools of thought in the area of mythography and one of my aims has been to challenge this tendency. Serious consideration of the intellectual history of religious studies and its effect on the study of myth are important if we are to move toward a polymythic hermeneutics; a perspective that I argued leads to an appreciation of the philosophical potency of Plato's mythic project. A multidisciplinary approach provides the framework in which one can situate and understand newly emerging contemporary methods used to study phenomena such as myth. The initial stages of such an approach must expose the limitations of preceding methodologies and theories used for studying a topic as ambiguous as myth before it renders and tests its radical, poly-semantic focused analysis. This initial stage of research puts scholarship of unique issues like Plato's myths in perspective and motivates innovation. My thesis was one attempt to interpret Plato's myths in light of these developments in academia. I showed that it was indispensable to notice the restrictions that have been placed on analyzing myths in the dialogues and to create a horizon for a more dynamic and interdependent understanding of the *mythos/logos* relationship.

It would be interesting to consider how Plato would take to reducing his own myths and his own philosophy to a rationally biased dichotomy. It is anachronistic to assume that Plato shared the same view as modern scholars concerning *mythos* and *logos*. On the one hand, it is clear that distinguishing between artistic representation and different kinds of rational thought was an issue for Plato. On the other hand, we must not run the risk of anachronistically imposing Enlightenment or other modern presuppositions onto Plato. If, as a gambit, we were to place the history of modern myth studies in parentheses and approach Plato's myths without modern frameworks we are basically left with the text, and a literary one at that. I have proved that it is wiser to begin with this move and only after that scan the modern tradition of myth studies to discover what elements can enhance a reading of Plato. My study of the dialogues have illuminated how scenes from particular dialogues express Plato's unique view towards

narrative and its potential to introduce special features into a debate – features that work in harmony with argument.

Another theme that has fostered a great deal of presupposition in myth studies which I have tried to combat in this thesis is the concern for verifiability. Myth is often classified as a non-falsifiable and non-argumentative discourse. The argument is based on the fact that philosophers contrast the narrative discourse of myth, the referents of which are not accessible to sense or intellect, with the dialectical reasoning of logic, which is falsifiable. I described how, for many scholars, it follows that Plato would have criticized his own myths as having the same referents and having the same relation to logic as the myths contained in the epics and tragedies, i.e. occupying an inferior status but having a particular usefulness in the realm of ethics and politics as an instrument of persuasion independent of allegorical interpretation.[2] According to the traditional evaluation, myth is labeled derogatorily as unfalsifiable and therefore only a likely account. One of the key issues surrounding this critique is the problem facing the referent that myth is intended towards – the fact that it is unavailable to rational demonstration. For instance, Brisson explains how the Atlantis myth differs from other historical accounts that are based on actual historical events such as the Median and Peloponnesian wars. He distinguishes between descriptions of historical events and Plato's tale about the war between Atlantis and ancient Athens in terms of accuracy and precision in dating the events. Brisson states: "Myth is distinguished from true discourse about the past by its inability to precisely state when the events which it mentions took place."[3] The Atlantis myth, with its own contentious dating and unverifiable source, is akin to a story such as the *Odyssey* in that it is completely independent of anything but the reality which it creates for itself. In fact, Brisson states, that the discipline of history, which objectifies events, renders myth void because it documents an occurrence, subjecting it to validation – something that myth is unable to do. In contrast I approached Plato's myths by investigating the structural and regulatory reasons for why he inserts myths into his dialogues rather than attempting to

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[2] Brisson (1998) p. 137.
[3] Brisson (1998) p. 22.

verify the content. In most cases Plato does not attempt to doubt or prove the existence of gods, daimons, heroes, the activities of the immortal soul and the past exploits of gods and men because it is not important to the issues under scrutiny in the dialogue; he must have conceded that one could never achieve a definitive description of those things and therefore could not evaluate their truth or falsity. Instead, the working relationship of these elements in the framework of a plot and their unique collaboration with elements in his arguments justifies their implementation in the dialogues. Philosophical discussion invites the use of various forms of discourse and rhetorical expression requires, and in fact demands, an understanding of the appropriate context they are to be used in. The purpose and applicability of different forms of explanation must be judged according to a network of different integral elements in order to be falsified. And if different discourses and expressions are indispensable parts of a unity – connected through mutual scaffolding – then the target of criticism must be the coherence of the whole rather than the validity of the parts. Particularly in the later dialogues Plato's characters focus on the scope of paradigms, to what extent one should explicate them and the proper form of discourse one should utilize.[4] Therefore, questioning the relevance and benefits of myth entails questioning the relevance and benefits of other methods of explication it may be working in conjunction with. In light of this interpretation (which I described as mutual scaffolding), once one recognizes the mutual cooperation demanded by Plato's two most dominant forms of explication – both carefully crafted and thoughtfully arranged – one realizes the counterproductive, and somewhat inconsequential, nature of comparing and contrasting *mythos* and *logos* and moves towards more meta-questions that are concerned with the appropriate length of exposition, paradigm application, the limits of the question and answer form of dialectic and the place of figurative language in philosophical discussion.[5] Questions targeted at the truth status of myth are relevant but it is more important to transcend this basic form of analysis and concentrate on, more fundamentally, a critique of method in general, i.e. implement an overarching approach

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[4] Morgan (2000) p. 157.
[5] Morgan (2000) p. 157.

aimed at critically evaluating the veracity of every kind of human discourse which involves hybrid explanatory creations.

In themselves, Plato's myths are a hybrid of traditional symbols and themes and Plato's own idiosyncratic constructions. But in relation to philosophy, many philosophers believe that they remain inferior to reason in every essential way and can be dispensed with if one can understand the ideas without myth's rhetorical or symbolic efficacy. However, considering different kinds of uses for myth is of great importance in evaluating it because it reveals the degree to which myth can convey truth and further clarifies Plato's use of it. I have shown how Plato exhausts the ability of myth to communicate something important. By opening up the possibilities for interpreting the way that myth interacts with argument I was able to reveal some of the most important aspects of Plato's thought and the style in which the interaction communicated his ideas. Plato was addressing the same audience that Socrates sought to communicate with by using myth; an audience that embraced a particular kind of 'mythocentric' identity. And when it comes to, in some cases, distinguishing myth from philosophy and, in other cases, recognizing when the two are used in conjunction we can not depend on Plato 'grandfathering' us through every part of the dialogue, telling us what he is doing in every situation and with every literary technique. This would defeat the heuristic nature and intellectual purpose of Plato's philosophical project. If he instructed the reader on the use of myth and the style of myth by setting them out discursively the text would leave little room for critical analysis and may lose an epistemologically provocative quality. It would be naïve to assume that the mythological parts of Plato's dialogues exhibit an accessibility that the discursive sections notoriously do not. The purpose of my thesis was to demonstrate one way of identifying when a particular and special kind of myth was being used in a very particular and specialized way. Also, I elucidated what features of those myths must be dealt with in order to illuminate their potential for understanding the rest of the dialogue. I explained these features as:

1) plot structure
2) character selection (determined by the plot)

3) the use of tropes to combine, and separate, elements

4) the meaningful selection and use of mythic themes and motifs

In addition, my approach concentrated on:

1) Setting – how Plato introduces the theme of the dialogue – the introduction of the philosophical question and how particular problems arise, the character that raises them and the contexts which create the dilemmas.

2) Narrative mode – who is the explicit or implicit narrator/s and narratee/s; what is behind Plato's choice of narrator/s and narratee/s.

3) Specialized literary techniques – such as liminality.

Plato's myths belong fundamentally to a completely different genre to other myths, if any at all. The idiosyncrasies I have dealt with are honest to Plato's style and hermeneutically relevant to his philosophical mission. Therefore, I believe it is clear now that one cannot infer that Plato's own myths are also subject to the same criticism targeted at other myths because of some minor commonalities? In order to argue that Plato's myths constitute a distinct form of myth that was unprecedented in his time I had to elucidate common features exhibited by a number of important dialogues. The points I listed above are concerned with structures, themes, elements, techniques and icons which apply to particular myths integral to the six dialogues I selected and which illuminated the integrity of his mythological/philosophical project. The way myth is used by Plato indicates a particular attitude towards the use of literary devices in philosophy. "Philosophical tales are often newly invented because they have a point to make that does not fit into previous narrative formats, but most importantly because they must demonstrate how to employ myth correctly."[6]

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[6] Morgan (2000) p. 16.