



Don't Blame Socrates (Xen. Mem. 1.2.40—46)

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Classical Philology*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (October 2011), pp. 349-356

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/662042>

Accessed: 02/04/2012 06:37

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DON'T BLAME SOCRATES (XEN. *MEM.* 1.2.40–46)

Socrates was formally accused of, among other things, corrupting young men.¹ That his associations with both Critias and Alcibiades at least partly underlay this particular charge is clear from Xenophon's extensive discussion of it in *Memorabilia* 1.2.² This same chapter of the *Memorabilia* contains two anecdotes about Socrates and Critias documenting the former's ultimately futile attempts to check the latter's immoral and tyrannical tendencies (Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.29–38). The result of these attempts, according to Xenophon, was a falling out between the two men well before Critias came to power as one of the notorious Thirty Tyrants, and a continued enmity on his part toward Socrates thereafter. About Alcibiades, however, Xenophon has only a single anecdote to relate in *Memorabilia* 1.2 (= *Mem.* 1.2.40–46), and Socrates does not directly figure into it. The story concerns a reported conversation between Alcibiades and Pericles, Alcibiades'

1. Diog. Laert. 2.5.40 preserves what is presumably the actual text of the indictment, which Favorinus (c. 85–155 C.E.) claims to have located in the archives of Athens; cf. the strikingly similar wording of Pl. *Ap.* 24b–c, Xen. *Ap.* 10, and Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.1. On "corrupting young men" as a separate, actionable offense in legal terms, see the discussion in de Stryker and Slings 1994, 89–91.

2. Cf. Aeschin. *In Tim.* 173, which claims as the reason for Socrates' conviction and execution the fact that "he was shown to have been the teacher of Critias" (Κριτίαν ἐφάνη πεπαιδευκός). This connection between Socrates' relationships with Critias and Alcibiades and the charge of corrupting young men does not require that these relationships, of which most members of an Athenian jury were presumably well aware, have been explicitly invoked at the trial itself. I therefore take no position here on whether "the accuser" (ὁ κατηγορὸς) first mentioned by Xenophon in *Mem.* 1.2.9 is to be identified with Polycrates, who published an *Accusation of Socrates* sometime after 393 B.C.E., or with someone, perhaps Anytus, who participated in Socrates' actual prosecution.

guardian as well as Athens' most prominent democratic leader, on the nature of law (νόμος) and the difference, if any, between this and coercion (βία).

Commentators have generally seen in this passage an example of one of Socrates' younger associates imitating, in however debased a fashion, his characteristic style of argumentation,³ a phenomenon to which Plato alludes in his *Apology* (Pl. *Ap.* 23c–d). But the depiction of Alcibiades as youthful practitioner of a bastardized Socratic dialectic would seem especially ill suited to *Memorabilia* 1.2, which is intended as a compendious defense against the charge that Socrates exerted a corrupting influence on young men.⁴ In contrast to the prevailing interpretation, I wish to suggest that Xenophon's purpose in relating this exchange between Alcibiades and Pericles is precisely what one would expect from the context, namely, to disassociate Socrates from Alcibiades' behavior and so to absolve him of responsibility for it.

I

The tendency to see in the exchange between Alcibiades and Pericles a characteristically "Socratic" style of argumentation reflects in part a common conflation of two largely distinct portraits of Socrates. Admittedly, the mere substitution of the name "Socrates" for "Alcibiades" throughout *Memorabilia* 1.2.41–46 would almost suffice to make the exchange seem at home in an early Platonic dialogue. Generally overlooked in discussions of this passage, however, remains the simple fact, frequently noted by commentators in other contexts, that Xenophon's own portrait of Socrates differs markedly from that of Plato's early dialogues, not least in matters of philosophical methodology. The use of the elenchus, so closely identified with Plato's Socrates, is virtually, if not entirely, absent from Xenophon's writings of Socrates reducing an interlocutor to ἀπορία by means of an elenchus is the conversation with Euthydemus recorded in *Memorabilia* 4.2. But even that exchange resembles Alcibiades' reported conversation with Pericles in neither tone nor tenor. Importing elements of Plato's portrait of Socrates that are at odds with Xenophon's own seems a particularly suspect methodology for interpreting the *Memorabilia*, and yet it is hard to imagine anyone looking solely to Xenophon's Socratic writings ever developing the impression that Alcibiades' behavior in this episode is intended to be somehow imitative of Socrates.

Alternative models are not hard to come by. The "Socratic dialectic" of Plato's early dialogues is virtually indistinguishable in form from sophistic antilogic or eristic.⁶ As Pericles' ward, Alcibiades would have had no shortage of exposure to the variety of

3. See, e.g., Smith 1903, 32; Gigon 1953, 65; Strauss 1972, 14–15; Gray 1998, 116; Dorion 2000, CLVIII–CLXIX; Johnson 2003, xiii.

4. Gabriel Danzig (2005) has called the interpretation of this reported conversation between Pericles and Alcibiades "[t]he biggest challenge . . . to any coherent reading of *Memorabilia*."

5. So Dorion 2006, 96: "Socrates^X [i.e., Xenophon's Socrates] almost never uses the elenchus and calls on a different kind of *logos* to make his companions better; while Socrates^P [Plato's Socrates], in the early dialogues, subjects most of his interlocutors to the elenchus"; cf. Wellman 1976, 307. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, use of the elenchus is associated with Antisthenes rather than Socrates.

The starting point for most modern discussions of the Socratic elenchus in Plato remains Vlastos 1994, 1–37.

6. Kerferd (1981, 59–67) further distinguishes between antilogic and eristic as technical terms, while noting that the two have long been treated synonymously by others writing on Plato. On the resemblance between the methodology of the sophists and Plato's Socrates generally, see, e.g., Robinson 1953, 84–88; Irwin 1992, 65; and Beversluis 2000, 39.

sophists and intellectuals drawn to Athens during his guardian's rule,⁷ for many of whom a keen interest in νόμος and related subjects is well attested.⁸ Plutarch reports that Pericles held meetings of sophists in his own home (Plut. *Per.* 36.4), and various sources link him directly to a number of leading fifth-century intellectuals, including Anaxagoras, Damon, and Protagoras.⁹

Near the conclusion of the conversation with Alcibiades reported in *Memorabilia* 1.2, Pericles even claims to recognize in Alcibiades' behavior the same kind of "sophistic quibbling" in which he and his friends engaged as young men (Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.46):

μάλα τοι, φάναι τὸν Περικλέα, ὃ Ἀλκιβιάδῃ, καὶ ἡμεῖς τῆλικοῦτοι ὄντες δεινοὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἤμεν· τοιαῦτα γὰρ καὶ ἐμελετῶμεν καὶ ἐσοφίζόμεθα οἷάπερ καὶ σὺ νῦν μοι δοκεῖς μελετᾶν.

"When we were your age, Alcibiades," said Pericles, "we were also terribly clever about such matters. We used to pursue and quibble about them in the same way that you now seem to me to pursue them."¹⁰

These remarks in particular strongly suggest the sophists, rather than Socrates,¹¹ as Alcibiades' source of inspiration. The choice of the verb σοφίζομαι, which occurs nowhere else in Xenophon's Socratic writings, seems especially telling. One of Pericles' own earliest instructors was the music teacher Pythocles of Ceos,¹² whom Plato's Protagoras includes in his list of prominent crypto-sophist predecessors (Pl. *Prt.* 316e). Given that Socrates was nearly a generation younger than Pericles, he would have been at most a baby when Pericles was a young man of Alcibiades' age. Pericles' response to Alcibiades at *Memorabilia* 1.2.46 therefore makes it perfectly clear that Pericles himself did not regard Alcibiades' style of argumentation as Socratic in origin.

II

Underappreciated details of the surrounding context provide additional cause for exonerating Socrates. In *Memorabilia* 1.2.15–16, Xenophon emphasizes that Critias and Alcibiades initially sought out Socrates not from a desire to emulate his character or lifestyle but in the hopes of becoming "adept in both speech and action" (ικανωτάτω λέγειν τε καὶ πράττειν) as a means to facilitate their respective rises to political power. The fact that political ambition, rather than any personal regard for Socrates, was the true motive behind Critias' and Alcibiades' decision to associate with him is a recurring theme throughout *Memorabilia* 1.2. Its recurrence in the sections both immediately preceding and immediately following the report of Alcibiades' exchange with Pericles (= *Mem.* 1.2.39 and 1.2.47 respectively) is especially noteworthy for present purposes. In each of these sections, Xenophon reiterates that Critias and Alcibiades did not find Socrates personally agreeable,¹³ but that an antecedent interest in politics

7. On Pericles' prominent role in attracting the sophists to Athens, see Kerferd 1981, 15–23.

8. The relation between νόμος and φύσις, in particular, features prominently in much fifth-century B.C.E. thought; see Heinemann 1945; Guthrie 1971, 55–134; and Kerferd 1981, 111–30.

9. In addition to Kerferd 1981, see Wallace 2007, 225–26.

10. For citations from *Mem.* 1, I use the Greek text of Bandini and Dorion 2000. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

11. Perhaps one would do better to say "sophists *other than* Socrates." But while Socrates may have been popularly, and perhaps rightly, regarded as belonging to the larger "sophistic movement" of the fifth century B.C.E., it is also true that Xenophon attempts to maintain a clear distinction between Socrates and his sophistic predecessors and contemporaries.

12. See Pl. *Alc.* 118c and the scholium ad loc.

13. οὐκ ἀρέσκοντος αὐτοῖς Σωκράτους, *Mem.* 1.2.39; οὐτε γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἄλλως ἤρεσκεν, *Mem.* 1.2.47.

motivated their association with him.¹⁴ By framing the reported conversation between Alcibiades and Pericles in such a way, Xenophon gives clear indication that the episode is intended to illustrate this critical theme in his defense of Socrates.

As is typical of conversations related in the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon is spare in setting the scene for Alcibiades' conversation with Pericles. There is, for example, no indication of where the conversation takes place nor of who else might have been present to witness and subsequently report it. Nevertheless, Xenophon does introduce the story by giving us some indication of when the reported exchange occurred, namely, before Alcibiades was twenty years old (πρὶν εἴκοσιν ἐτῶν εἶναι, *Mem.* 1.2.40). This detail bears upon the subject of Alcibiades' political precocity. By at least the fourth century B.C.E., and perhaps earlier, twenty was the age at which citizens were first allowed to participate in meetings of the Assembly.¹⁵ In the Platonic (or, perhaps, pseudo-Platonic)¹⁶ *Alcibiades*, the eponymous youth is said to be both on the cusp of twenty and mere days away from his first appearance in front of the Assembly.¹⁷

In the case of Alcibiades, however, twenty may also have enjoyed a special significance with respect to his well-known role as Socrates' ἐρώμενος. The same *Alcibiades* opens with Socrates' declaration that, despite his long-standing affection, he had previously been prevented by his "divine sign" from so much as speaking with Alcibiades (Pl. *Alc.* 103a–b).¹⁸ Even the most distinguished critics of this dialogue's authenticity ascribe the work, which enjoyed great popularity and influence in later antiquity, to the early Academy.¹⁹ Authentic or not, therefore, *Alcibiades* constitutes a notable source, presumably from the fourth century B.C.E., that fixes the *terminus a quo* for any intimate relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades around the time the latter was roughly twenty years old.

Such a chronology is consonant with our knowledge of same-gender relationships during the Classical period generally. The persistent stereotype of Greek homosexuality as essentially pedophilic is potentially misleading in several respects.²⁰ At the very least, it conveys a distorted impression of the age range of ἐρώμενοι. Scholars with markedly divergent views regarding the minimum age for an ἐρώμενος nevertheless agree that young men could function in this role beyond the end of their teenage years.²¹

14. εὐθὺς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὀρηκότε προεστάναι τῆς πόλεως, *Mem.* 1.2.39; τὰ δὲ τῆς πόλεως ἔπραττον, ὧν περ ἔνεκεν καὶ Σωκράτει προσῆλθον, *Mem.* 1.2.47.

15. See Hansen 1991, 88–89 and 129. It is also worth noting, however, that Xenophon's own account (*Mem.* 3.6) of how Socrates dissuaded Plato's brother Glaucon from attempting to address the Assembly "although not yet twenty years old" (οὐδέπω εἴκοσιν ἔτη γεγονώς) so as to prevent him from "appearing ridiculous" (καταγέλαστον ὄντα) would seem to indicate that to do so at this point in the fifth century B.C.E. might be ill-advised, but not illegal.

16. Against authenticity, see de Strycker 1942 and Bluck 1953. In support, see Friedländer 1964, 214–26 and 331–35 (= Friedländer 1969, 231–43 and 348–52); and Denyer 2001, 14–26.

17. Pl. *Alc.* 123d6–7 (οὐδέπω γεγονώς σφόδρα εἴκοσιν) and 105a7–b3 (ἐὰν θάπτον εἰς τὸν Ἀθηναίων δῆμον παρέλθης—τοῦτο δ' ἔσεσθαι μάλα ὀλίγων ἡμερῶν) respectively. As Denyer (2001, 94) points out in his commentary on the latter passage, *παρέρχομαι* is the standard term for a speaker coming forward to address the Assembly.

18. On the role of Socrates' *daimonion* in governing his associations with others, cf. Pl. *Thet.* 151a and Pl. *[Thg.]* 129e–30a.

19. In addition to de Strycker 1942 and Bluck 1953, see Burnet 1924, 37–38.

20. Cf. Davidson 2007, 68–98, esp. 68–71.

21. In addition to Davidson 2007, see also, e.g., Cantarella 1992, 36–42 and the references adduced in Hubbard 2003, 5–6. On the basis of the available evidence, Hubbard himself goes so far as to suggest a general preference among philosophers for older youths.

As for Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades in particular, two passages from other Platonic dialogues, the authenticity of which is not disputed, are of direct relevance. The first is the opening of Plato's *Protagoras*, in which Socrates and an unnamed companion banter playfully about the former's pursuit of Alcibiades. Socrates' companion emphasizes the fact that Alcibiades, while still youthful,²² fully merits the appellation "man" (άνήρ), as evidenced by the relative fullness of his beard (πώγωνος ἤδη ὑποπιμπλόμενος, Pl. *Prt.* 309a). Both the deliberate choice of the term άνήρ and the reference to facial hair surely point to someone at least old enough to have passed the "scrutiny" (δοκιμασία) that preceded an Athenian male's official enrollment on the register of his deme at the age of eighteen,²³ for which physical appearance seems to have served as the principal evidence of eligibility.²⁴ James Davidson's recent work on ancient Greek age terms suggests that twenty is in fact the minimum age at which an Athenian male could properly be called άνήρ, as opposed to παῖς, μειράκιον, or νεανίσκος.²⁵ And while it remains a matter of some controversy whether Plato intends any specific, temporal setting for the *Protagoras*, it should be noted that advocates of a consistent dramatic date generally regard the dialogue as set sometime in the early 430s B.C.E.²⁶ This estimate would make the setting of *Protagoras* roughly contemporaneous with that of *Alcibiades*.²⁷

Also relevant is the speech Plato attributes to Alcibiades in the *Symposium* (215a–22b). The failed attempts to seduce Socrates recounted by Alcibiades therein turn the conventions of the relationship between an έραστής and his έρώμενος on their head. Here it is the much younger member of the pair, Alcibiades, who repeatedly seeks to initiate a sexual relationship with his elder, Socrates, albeit in vain. Apropos of when the various events described took place, however, Alcibiades states only that they occurred prior to the siege of Potidaea, during which he and Socrates served together as soldiers (Pl. *Symp.* 219e);²⁸ how long before, he does not say. Certain details of the events related—Alcibiades' ability to meet Socrates privately, without a slave attendant present; to wrestle with him alone in the palaestra; and to invite him not only for dinner but also to spend the night together afterward in Alcibiades' home—certainly suggest that Alcibiades was no longer a mere παῖς at the time in question.²⁹ Since the

22. He is referred to as ό νεανίας at Pl. *Prt.* 309b.

23. Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 42.1–2 offers the most detailed ancient account of this species of δοκιμασία. The extent to which practices attested for the late fourth century B.C.E. can be read back into the fifth century is disputable, but in defense of regarding the δοκιμασία of potential citizens in particular as rooted in regulations dating from the initial establishment of the demes in the time of Cleisthenes, see Whitehead 1986, 34–35; for procedural aspects of the δοκιμασία, see also 96–109.

24. Failure in such scrutiny meant being relegated once again to the class of "boys" (παῖδες); see Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 42.1. On the primacy of physical inspection in judging a candidate's maturity, see Robertson 2001 (though Gagarin 2001 faults Robertson precisely for ignoring the role facial hair presumably played as relevant, physical evidence).

25. The evidence for the conclusions stated in Davidson 2007 receives fuller discussion in Davidson 2006; cf. the discussion of the term νεανίσκος in Cantarella 1992, 29–31.

26. For a brief discussion and relevant bibliography, see Nails 2002, 309–10.

27. So Nails (2002, 309–11), who gives the dramatic date of the *Protagoras* as "± 433/2," writes that "[l]ate 433 would suit as well as early 432" for the dramatic date of the *Alcibiades*. Nails' entry on Alcibiades himself (2002, 10–20) also contains a discussion of the general difficulties in determining the precise date of his birth.

28. The siege of Potidaea lasted from 432–420 B.C.E. For a concise, chronological summary of specific events associated with the siege, see Planeux 1999.

29. The fact that Alcibiades was able on his own authority to send away his customary "attendant" (τόν ακόλουθον) in order to meet privately with Socrates (Pl. *Symp.* 217b) suggests that the slave in question was not a παιδαγωγός, part of whose job it would have been to prevent any such private meetings between an Athenian boy of Alcibiades' standing and a prospective έραστής. Similarly, the evidence of Aeschin. *In Tim.*

Athenians apparently refrained from sending men younger than twenty on campaigns outside of Attica proper,³⁰ Alcibiades had also presumably attained this age prior to his participation in the expedition to Potidaea. Hence, nothing in the vague timeline offered by Alcibiades in the *Symposium* clashes with the more specific chronology claimed in *Alcibiades* for the start of his relationship with Socrates.³¹

This more specific timeline itself suggests a previously unrecognized motive for the explicit reference to Alcibiades' age at the time of the conversation recorded in *Memorabilia* 1.2.40–46. Alcibiades' relatively advanced age is one of the most prominent features of the scant surviving evidence regarding his reported role as Socrates' ἐρώμενος. While this evidence is almost entirely Platonic or Academic in origin, there is no reason to suppose that the tradition to which it attests was restricted to Academic circles,³² nor that Xenophon's intended audience would need to be versed in specific Platonic or pseudo-Platonic dialogues in order to be cognizant of this notable feature of the relationship between two of classical Athens' most prominent public figures. Against the background of a tradition that made Alcibiades already a grown man—that is, already twenty years old—at the start of his relationship with Socrates, Xenophon's use of the words πρὶν εἴκοσιν ἐτῶν εἶναι in *Memorabilia* 1.2.40 assumes special significance. Anyone steeped in this tradition would naturally understand the subsequent exchange between Pericles and Alcibiades to antedate Alcibiades' relationship with Socrates. Consequently, Alcibiades' reported conduct could not be viewed as a reflection of anything he had learned from Socrates. Instead, what Xenophon offers his readers in *Memorabilia* 1.2.40–46 is an illustration of what Alcibiades was like before he became Socrates' companion.

III

It remains to discuss a potential grammatical obstacle to my proposed interpretation of *Memorabilia* 1.2.40–46. At issue is the relationship between the beginning of *Memorabilia* 1.2.40 and the conclusion of the immediately preceding section. For the sake of convenience, I first cite here *Memorabilia* 1.2.39 in its entirety, together with the opening words of 1.2.40:

[39] φαίην δ' ἂν ἐγωγε μὴδενὶ μὴδεμίαν εἶναι παιδευσιν παρὰ τοῦ μὴ ἀρέσκοντος. Κριτίας δὲ καὶ Ἀλκιβιάδης οὐκ ἀρέσκοντος αὐτοῖς Σωκράτους ὠμίλησάτην ὃν χρόνον ὠμίλειτ' αὐτῷ, ἀλλ' εὐθὺς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὥρμηκότε προεστάναι τῆς πόλεως. ἔτι γὰρ Σωκράτει συνόντες οὐκ ἄλλοις τισὶ μᾶλλον ἐπεχείρουν διαλέγεσθαι ἢ τοῖς μάλιστα πράττουσι τὰ πολιτικά. [40] λέγεται γὰρ Ἀλκιβιάδην, πρὶν εἴκοσιν ἐτῶν εἶναι . . .

[39] I myself would argue that no one learns anything from anyone he finds disagreeable. It was not because Critias and Alcibiades found Socrates agreeable that they associated with him for as long as they did, but rather because they had in mind from the very start to run the State. Even during the time they associated with Socrates, they tried harder to

7–12, for example, would seem to preclude interaction at a public gymnasium of the sort Alcibiades describes between a man of Socrates' age and anyone still properly called a παῖς.

30. See Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 42.2–5 and the commentary ad loc. in Rhodes 1993.

31. Pace, e.g., Gribble (1999, 261), who stresses the alleged inconsistency between *Alcibiades*, on the one hand, and *Protagoras* and *Symposium*, on the other.

32. A number of other Socratics, including Aeschines, Antisthenes, Euclides, and Phaedo, reportedly wrote dialogues entitled *Alcibiades*. Unfortunately, the few surviving fragments from or about these works (for specific references, see Denyer 2001, 5) have nothing to contribute on the issue of Alcibiades' age at the start of his relationship with Socrates.

converse with people deeply engaged in politics than with anyone else. [40] The story is told that when Alcibiades was not yet twenty years old . . .

Given that the concluding sentence of *Memorabilia* 1.2.39 explicitly refers to the period in which Alcibiades and Critias were Socrates' companions (ἔτι γὰρ Σωκράτει συνόντες), the use of γάρ in the first clause of *Memorabilia* 1.2.40 might seem to imply that the ensuing exchange between Pericles and Alcibiades took place during, not prior to, the latter's association with Socrates. In fact, the grammar of the passage implies nothing of the sort. The centerpiece of *Memorabilia* 1.2.39, both literally and figuratively, is the reiteration of one of the entire chapter's recurring themes, namely, that Alcibiades and Critias were "from the very start" (εὐθὺς ἐξ ἀρχῆς) committed to careers in politics, and that this interest, rather than any personal regard for Socrates, motivated their association with him. The final sentence of *Memorabilia* 1.2.39 follows immediately. Though linked grammatically by yet another γάρ, the relationship of this sentence to the preceding one is neither straightforwardly explanatory nor illustrative. The fact that Alcibiades and Critias displayed a preference for conversations with politicians during their association with Socrates certainly indicates that their interest in politics continued unabated, but the point of the preceding sentence was rather that this interest both antedated and inspired their association with Socrates. Only in the subsequent conversation between Alcibiades and Pericles do we find evidence of the precocity of the political interests said to have been behind Alcibiades' and Critias' decision to seek out Socrates in the first place.

Examples of other passages in which the second of successive γάρ clauses looks back beyond the first, which is itself parenthetical, are well documented.³³ Such, I suggest, is the structure evinced by the final two sentences of *Memorabilia* 1.2.39 and the first sentence of 1.2.40. Of these three sentences, the first makes the claim that Alcibiades and Critias were motivated to seek out Socrates by an antecedent interest in politics. The second adds a largely parenthetical remark to the effect that this interest also proved abiding. The third resumes the thread of the first and provides a paradigmatic illustration of its central assertion. Properly understood, then, nothing about the grammar of *Memorabilia* 1.2.39–40 implies that the reported conversation between Pericles and Alcibiades should be dated to the latter's association with Socrates.³⁴

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33. See, e.g., Denniston 1950, 65, where Xen. *An.* 5.6.6 is among the many passages cited. Lys. 2.3–4 offers one of the closer parallels to our present passage; see Todd 2007, 168–69 for both text and translation.

34. An embryonic version of this paper was delivered in July 2009 at the "Xenophon: Ethical Principle and Historical Enquiry" conference at the University of Liverpool. I would like to thank the conference organizers, Fiona Hobden, Graham Oliver, and Christopher Tuplin, as well as the many participants who offered helpful comments and criticisms. I would also like to acknowledge a special debt of gratitude to Gabriel Danzig, David M. Johnson, and David Sansone for their generosity and patience in reading through and commenting on various drafts.

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