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Deviant Origins: Hesiodic Theogony and the Orphica

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Deviant Origins: Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Orphica

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Abstract and Keywords

Hesiod's *Theogony* provides one of the most widely authoritative accounts of the origin of the cosmos, but his account has always been challenged by rivals claiming to be older, wiser, and better, and the name of Orpheus has always been privileged in the evidence for ancient rivals to Hesiod. The Orphic accounts play their variations on the Hesiodic themes, riffing in different ways on the idea of the ultimate origin of the cosmos; the processes of reproduction by which subsequent entities were generated; the conflicts between these divinities that created the changes from the original state to the current one; the way in which humans entered the story; and the final resolution of the conflicts and changes that created the current, normal order of Zeus. The shocking innovations they introduce in the images of the theogonic narrative serve to bolster the authority of their often less shockingly innovative cosmological ideas.

Keywords: cosmos, Hesiod, *Theogony*, Orphic, innovations, reproduction, conflicts, shocking

For all the accounts written among the Greeks about the ancient origins, although there are many others, two have pride of place, Orpheus and Hesiod.

(Rufinus, *Recognitions* X.30)

WHEN the Christian apologist Rufinus looks back at the tradition of Greek cosmogonies and identifies Hesiod and Orpheus as the two most important figures to attack, he enters into the long-standing competition for authority in matters cosmological between these rival figures. Hesiod's *Theogony* (hereafter *Th*) provides one of the oldest, best known, and most widely authoritative accounts of the origin of the cosmos, but for that very reason his account has always been challenged by rivals claiming to be older, wiser, and

better. While we know of cosmogonies by Epimenides, Pherekydes, and Akousilaos, the name of Orpheus has always been privileged in the evidence for ancient rivals to Hesiod.

The name of Orpheus, however, is simply a label attached to a text by someone hoping to add the authority of that most ancient of mythical poets, the name-famed hero, Orpheus, to his own account of the cosmos and its origins (cf. Edmonds 2013: esp. 3–88). Such Orphicists started forging poems in Orpheus's name in the archaic period and continued through late antiquity, borrowing verses from older poems to validate the authenticity and antiquity of their innovations. The legitimacy of such claims was doubted from early on, however, and Herodotus directly denies that any authors provided theogonies earlier than Homer and Hesiod (Herodotus 2.53). Orpheus is the foremost of these supposedly earlier poets whose accounts claim priority over Hesiod in setting out the origin of the gods, their names and forms, and the hierarchy of honor and power that exists among them in the order of the cosmos.

(p. 226) **The Problem of Evidence**

Modern scholars have a strong basis for their study of Hesiod's *Th*, since the text of Hesiod was well known and commented upon in antiquity, but the evidence for Orphic accounts of the origin of the cosmos and the gods is far more problematic, since no actual texts survive. We have only a collection of scattered fragments that must be untangled from the agendas of the authors who quote them, bits that are hard to assign to any particular era or even text. M. L. West (1983) ventures a virtuosic reconstruction of the evidence in *The Orphic Poems*, but his manuscript stemma model is too reductionistic to capture the complexity and fluidity of the hubbub of books composed under the name of Orpheus over the centuries. Later Orphicists borrowed verses from earlier Orphic poems to authenticate their new creations, and the compilers of the accounts were not always as sensitive as modern scholars like West to inconsistencies and contradictions within their accounts (cf. Betegh 2004: 151–52).

One of the most important sources for understanding the Orphic theogonies is the summary in the treatise on first principles by the fifth-century CE Neoplatonist Damascius (*de principiis* 123–24 = i.316–19 Ruelle), who refers to accounts he found in two earlier sources, the fourth-century BCE Peripatetic philosophers Eudemos and Hieronymos, as well as to the “usual” Orphic theogony of his day, found in the Orphic *Rhapsodies* (on Hieronymos, see Edmonds 2013: 18–20; Edmonds forthcoming). Damascius, however, fits all the accounts he discusses into a series of Neoplatonic ontological triads, even assuming that one element of the triad must have been present but “passed over in silence” if it was not explicitly mentioned. Similar caution must be taken in making use of Damascius's quotations from the Orphic *Rhapsodies*, which, along with those of his predecessor Proclus and his successor Olympiodorus, make up over 80 percent of the extant fragments of Orphic poetry. Damascius's Peripatetic sources, however, seem to

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derive their classifications of accounts of origin ultimately from the work of fifth-century BCE sophists such as Hippias (and perhaps Hellanikos), so the late Neoplatonist does preserve valuable evidence from a full millennium earlier.

The earliest quotations of Orphic poems appear in Plato, but the discovery of the fourth-century BCE Derveni papyrus provides quotations from an Orphic poem that must have been circulating even earlier. This papyrus, miraculously preserved on a Thessalian funeral pyre, preserves a text in which the author makes allegorical interpretations of a poem by Orpheus that narrates Zeus's rise to the sovereignty of the cosmos by subsuming all the earlier entities within himself. The text is full of gaps, often at the most tantalizing points, but the quotations from the Orphic poem nevertheless help fill in the fragmentary accounts of the Neoplatonists.

The most complete accounts of Orphic theogonies appear in early Christian apologists, such as the second-century CE Athenagoras or the texts under the name of Clement, preserved in the Greek *Homilies* and Rufinus's Latin version of the *Recognitions*, both of which probably date to the end of the fourth century CE. These (p. 227) sources provide more complete and coherent narratives than other sources, but since they were assembled to attack the perverse and shocking pagan theology of which Orpheus is the chief representative, they too must be treated with caution.

Orphic Variations on a Hesiodic Theme

The fragments of other Orphic accounts, however, ranging from the Derveni papyrus to the *Rhapsodies*, make clear that shocking details and bizarre narratives were characteristic of the Orphic cosmogonies from the beginning. Advocates for the authority of Orpheus, from the Derveni Commentator to Proclus, all insist that the apparently scandalous elements indicate the profound wisdom concealed beneath the surface of the text—the most ancient wisdom of Orpheus that just so happens to coincide with their own philosophical and cosmological tenets. The creators of Orphic poems in every era include such deviant elements, creating strikingly memorable variations upon the traditional story of Hesiod to serve as markers of the special authority of their accounts.

Whether they express their ideas in theogonic myth or philosophical prose, Greek cosmological thinkers, as Cornford (1912: 71) points out, are all trying to resolve some common basic problems: "(1) the primary *physis*, (2) the disposition or structure into which this living stuff is distributed, (3) the process by which the order arose." The Orphic accounts play their variations on the Hesiodic themes at each of these points, riffing in different ways on the idea of (1) the ultimate origin of the cosmos; (2a) the processes of reproduction by which subsequent entities were generated; (2b) the conflicts between these divinities that created the changes from the original state to the current one; (2c) the way in which humans entered the story; and (3) the final resolution of the conflicts and changes that created the current, normal order of Zeus. The shocking

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innovations they introduce in the images of the theogonic narrative serve as rhetorical devices to bolster the authority of their often less shockingly innovative cosmological ideas. The Orphic poems tend to follow the pattern of Hesiod's cosmology, rather than creating radically different structures, and the variations they introduce in the ideas of how the cosmos came to be are often less striking than the mythic images with which they express them.

First principles: the ultimate origin of the cosmos

Hesiod's Chaotic Beginning

In the beginning, for Hesiod, was Chaos, the yawning chasm that provides the open space for the cosmos to come into existence. Out of this gap arise the solid Earth and (p. 228) the airy Tartara, as well as the principles of darkness, Night and Erebus. Out of Chaos comes also one of the principles of cosmic formation, Eros. For Hesiod, then, the first beginning of the cosmos is the opening up of space in which the solid earth can appear, but this beginning takes place in darkness, without any light, and even the appearance of Tartara/Tartaros is defined as a space within the solid earth, rather than some other form of substance itself.

The absence of other elements among the primary principles in Hesiod's account worried later thinkers accustomed to seeing the cosmos begin with something less solid than Earth, and Plutarch, in his essay on the primacy of fire or water, attests to a long-standing interpretation of Hesiod's Chaos as water. "It seems to most people that he named water in this fashion [as Chaos] because of its flowing (*chysis*)" (*Aquane* 955e). Hesiod was thus grouped with Homer among those who put water first, since the line from the *Iliad* (14.201) that names Okeanos and Tethys as the origin of all the gods was interpreted to indicate a Homeric cosmogony beginning with these water principles. This grouping, as Betegh (2002) has shown, probably goes back as far as the work of the fifth-century BCE sophist Hippias, who collected and distilled the wisdom of the poets (starting with Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod, and Homer), but Damascius, a millennium later, nevertheless rightly categorizes Hesiod's starting principles as the indeterminate space of Chaos followed by the Earth.

Obscure Beginnings in the Orphica

While there are traces of some Orphic cosmogonies that begin with Chaos, the starting point of all creation becomes a major point of variation within the cosmogonic accounts that circulate under the name of Orpheus. Different accounts begin with water, with

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Night, with Chronos (Time), or even by stacking various of these primary principles in sequence. The variation of the starting point serves as a way to assert the authority and originality of the Orphic account over the traditional Hesiodic one.

The earliest Orphic cosmogonies for which evidence exists seem to start with Night; indeed, the only thing Damascius relates about the Orphic cosmogony catalogued by the fourth-century BCE Peripatetic Eudemos is that it begins with Night. Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 12.1071b) refers to the cosmologists who say everything begins from Night, and this same first principle seems to appear in the Orphic cosmogony in the Derveni papyrus (cf. Aristophanes's *Birds* 693–703). In col. 14.6, the first ruler of the cosmos is Ouranos, the first-born (Protogonos) son of Night, and his matronymic epithet, Euphronides, suggests that Night (euphemistically referred to as “Euphron,” the beneficently minded) has no male consort with whom she produces Ouranos. In this way, this first entity in the Orphic text resembles the first entity in the Hesiodic story, Gaia the Earth, who produces Ouranos by herself in the first generation. Like the Hesiodic Gaia, the Derveni Night does not rule the cosmos herself but remains around to provide help and counsel to the later generations. Just as Gaia assists both Kronos and Zeus to wrest control of the cosmos from their respective fathers, so too does Night provide the (p. 229) oracular advice that enables Zeus to take control of the entire cosmos in the Derveni Orphic theogony.

By contrast, Alexander of Aphrodisias, commenting on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, claims that Orpheus begins with Chaos (*in Ar. Met.* 1091b, p. 321), and the cosmogonies ascribed to Orpheus in the *Homilies* and the *Recognitions* attributed to Clement (perhaps third century CE) also begin with Chaos just as Hesiod does, saving their variations for later stages of development. The Clementine Chaos seems to flow and swirl like the watery Chaos Plutarch describes, and the speaker, Appion, even adduces the authority of Homer (*Iliad* 7.99) to argue that the elements this primordial Chaos comprises are earth and water ([Clement] *Homilies* 6.3–4; cf. Rufinus *Recognitions* 10.17.2–4).

Other Orphic cosmogonies do begin explicitly with water, shifting both Chaos and Night to later generations. The second-century CE Christian apologist Athenagoras recounts an Orphic cosmogony in which water swirling with other “stuff” (either *hilus*, mud, or *hylê*, matter) is the first principle. Athenagoras quotes Orpheus as referring to “Okeanos, who indeed arose as the origin of all things” and describes water as the first principle (*archê*) of all things, out of which mud/matter was established (*pro Christianis* 18.4). This Orphic cosmogony resembles the one that Damascius attributes to Hieronymos (and Hellanikos), which likewise starts with water and matter (or mud), out of which comes Earth. No trace of Okeanos remains in Damascius's account, however, whereas Athenagoras claims that Homer follows Orpheus in making Okeanos the origin of the gods (citing the familiar line from *Iliad* 14.201). The demythologized elements of water and mud in both accounts suggests the intervention of an allegorical interpretation that reduced Okeanos (or Chaos?) to water and Gaia to the muddy earth that coagulates from it; it remains uncertain where this allegorical interpretation crept in—in the sophistic or Peripatetic

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cataloging or in the Orphic text itself. In any case, in both Athenagoras and Damascius's Hieronymos, the primordial water and earth produce another primary entity, Chronos or Time, which itself produces both Chaos and the cosmic egg.

The Orphic account that seems to have been put together the latest comes from the Orphic *Rhapsodies*, most likely stitched together in the first or second century CE from older pieces of Orphic poetry. The *Rhapsodic* account, which Damascius refers to as "the usual" Orphic account, is actually less complicated than the accounts in Athenagoras and Hieronymos. The first stage of water is not present; the first principle is Chronos, unaging Time. As in Athenagoras's account, Chronos generates Chaos and the cosmic egg, from which is born Phanes. In the *Rhapsodies*, Phanes first generates and then mates with Night to produce the succeeding generations of divine beings.

This multiplication of primary entities in both the *Rhapsodic* account and the accounts in Athenagoras and Hieronymos suggests an attempt to produce a cosmogony even more fundamental and authoritative than rival versions. Hesiod may think that Chaos and Earth come first, but Orpheus knows what came before these, the limitless span of Time and the egg from which both Heaven and Earth will be generated. The accounts in Athenagoras and Hieronymos take this a step further. Others (such as Pherekydes of Syros, the Persian Magoi, and the Sidonians, all mentioned in Damascius's summary of Eudemos) may think that Time was the first principle, but Orpheus knows even how (p. 230) Time itself was first generated. The choice of the ultimate first principle as water, however, suggests an attempt to conform with the mass of other authoritative cosmogonies, from Homer to Thales, that put water first. All these Orphic accounts deviate from Hesiod's starting point, providing an account that goes further back to Time or that places a watery flux at the origin instead of solid Earth manifesting in the yawning gap of Chaos.

The Genesis of the Cosmos: Reproduction

After Earth emerges from Chaos, much must still come into being if the world is to resemble the familiar current world of humans, and these processes of generation and change may be divided into processes of (a) (re)production, (b) conflict and conquest, and (c) the creation of humans (cf. Plato, *Sophist* 242cd). The first generates new divine entities in the cosmos, while the second creates changes in the power structure. The final stage produces mortal human beings, but Hesiod notoriously elaborates less on this phase than on the first two, providing only an allusion in the *Th* and the myth of the five successive races of mortals in the *Works and Days* (hereafter *WD*). For Hesiod, the focus in the *Th* is upon the succession of the generations of the gods, the power struggle that culminates in the reign of Zeus.

Reproductive Processes: Hesiod's Genealogies

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Although Eros is among the primal forces of the cosmos, the first reproductions in Hesiod's genealogy are asexual; Earth generates first Heaven (Ouranos) and then Sea (Pontos) "without delightful love," and Chaos brings forth Erebus and Night, the powers of darkness (116–23). Since Eros is present from the first, however, sexual reproduction does begin quickly, as Night, mingling in love with her brother Erebus, produces Day and Aither, the bright shining air, while Earth takes her sons, Pontos and Ouranos, as mates (124–36). Sexual reproduction then becomes the norm for the generation of new divine entities, although it is worth noting that Night produces a brood of offspring on her own, and her daughter, Strife (Eris), likewise generates a set of personified troubles, presumably simply as a consequence of her nature. The asexual reproduction brings about these abstract horrors—Toil, Murders, Quarrels, Lies, etc.—entities that have no real personality or character (211–32).

The other lines of genealogy proceed through sexual reproduction, the children of Pontos and the children of Ouranos. The children of Ouranos who themselves reproduce, the Titans, do so through orderly brother-sister marriages, while the children of the sea form a family marked by intergenerational pairings and monstrous births (cf. Clay 2003: 151–61). The pattern of generation in the dominant forces of the cosmos (p. 231) moves swiftly toward the familiar mode of sexual reproduction and even, insofar as it is possible for a limited family of gods, toward exogamy, since intergenerational incest ceases in the line of Ouranos after the first generation of Earth and Heaven, and in the following generation, only Zeus mates with his sisters. The more closely the pattern of sexual reproduction resembles the current human practices, the closer the cosmos draws to the normal, current order of things.

Reproductive Processes: Orphic Perversions

In the Orphica the pattern of reproduction remains more abnormal; there are both more variations of asexual reproduction and more perverse sexual couplings throughout the entirety of the account. Intergenerational incest continues even to the generation of Zeus, and the couplings are often explicitly violent rapes, rather than the epic "mingling in love." In the earlier stages of the cosmogony, different types of asexual generation abound, from the coagulation of solid matter out of the primordial chaos of waters to the famous cosmic egg.

The Orphic account Damascius gets from Hieronymos (and Hellanikos), like that recounted by Athenagoras, makes the first generation a coagulation of matter out of the primordial maelstrom, and that matter then forms into the monstrous triformed being called by various names, Kronos or Chronos and Herakles. This dragon with the heads of a lion, a bull, and a man then produces an egg without sexual reproduction (cf. Edmonds 2013: 164–68). The Clementine Orphic cosmogonies have the egg generated directly from the primordial maelstrom, forming like a bubble in the swirling waters rather than being laid by a monstrous dragon, while the *Rhapsodies* seem to have Chronos (unaging Time,

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perhaps in serpentine or draconic form) produce the egg, possibly by forming it from the aither.

Out of this egg hatches an entity, called variously Eros, Metis, Erikepaios, and other names, whose epithet Phanes marks the idea that it is the first to appear (*phainein*), while the epithet Protogonos marks it as the first born.¹ In the *Rhapsodies*, as in the versions known to Hieronymos, Athenagoras, and the Clementine authors, this being is bisexual or hermaphroditic, with both male and female genitalia, which it uses to copulate with itself and produce offspring, a mode of reproduction that is neither entirely asexual nor yet quite normal sexual reproduction. In the *Rhapsodies*, Phanes does progress to sexual intercourse with Night, however, and this coupling, whether it is incest with his mother or his daughter, seems to produce Ouranos and Gaia, the Heaven and Earth that become the progenitors of the later divinities. Athenagoras, by contrast, has Chronos/Herakles coil around the egg and break it into separate pieces that become Earth and Heaven, an account that resembles the Clementine versions, in which the portions of the egg settle into three realms of earth (Pluto), sea (Poseidon), and sky (Zeus), after Phanes hatches from it. This production of material elements resembles the first principles of water and matter with which these cosmogonies begin, rather than the personified entities of Time and Night that appear in the other Orphic accounts.

(p. 232) Sexual reproduction continues in the later generations of all the accounts, with Ouranos and Gaia producing the Titans as well as the Cyclops and the Hundred-Handers, as in Hesiod. Presumably the Titans engage in their familiar pairings as well, but it is the sexual activities of Zeus that draw focus in the Orphic accounts, especially from the Christian commentators who recount the shocking perversions in painstaking detail. Phanes may have “robbed his own daughter of the flower of her maidenhood” (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 148B = 98K), but Zeus rapes not only his daughter, but his sister and his mother as well. Athenagoras recounts the horrible tale:

how he pursued his mother Rhea when she was refusing to wed him, and, when she became a she-dragon, he himself changing into a dragon, bound her up with what is called the Heraklean knot, and had intercourse with her (the rod of Hermes is a symbol of the form of this intercourse); and again, how he had intercourse with his daughter Persephone, also violating her in the form of a dragon, and from her the child Dionysus was born to him.

(Athenagoras *pro Christianis* 20.3; cf. Clement *Protrepticus* 2.15)

The violence of these incestuous rapes is emphasized, as it is in his assault upon his sister, Demeter, of whom the Derveni Commentator says (Derveni papyrus col. 22.13) she is called Deio because she was torn (*edêiôthê*) in the violent sexual intercourse.

The presence of such motifs in the earliest Orphic account, the Derveni papyrus, shows that sexual violence and perversions are by no means a later variation, but a recurrent theme in Orphic cosmogonies. The Christian apologists are merely echoing the critiques of earlier Greek thinkers who see the Orphica as marked by such perversions; such

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strangeness often characterizes things labeled as Orphic, a sign that the Orphic material cannot be taken literally but conceals hidden wisdom beneath its surface appearance that must be read allegorically.² Indeed, the Derveni Commentator makes this point explicitly: "His poetry is strange and riddling for people. But Orpheus did not intend to tell captious riddles but momentous things in riddles."³ The Orphic theogonies proliferate the strange modes of reproduction beyond the levels in the Hesiodic account to advertise the profundity they want to claim lies beneath the peculiar surface. While the Hesiodic narrative progresses from asexual reproduction to sexual relations within and then outside the family, the Orphic accounts multiply the levels of asexual reproduction and extend the perverse sexual relations beyond the first generations into the activities of Zeus himself.

The Genesis of the Cosmos: Conflict and conquest

War in Heaven: Hesiod's Succession Myths

Although Hesiod's *Th* focuses on the births of gods, the conflicts between them play an even more important role in the story of how the current world order came to be. The (p. 233) myth of the succession of the kingship of heaven forms the "backbone," as West calls it, of the *Th* (1966: 31). The offspring of Ouranos, led by Kronos, overthrow their father on the advice of their mother, Earth, leading to the permanent separation of Earth and Heaven through the castration of Ouranos. Kronos is in turn overthrown by his son Zeus, again with the assistance of the female powers of Rhea and Gaia, who conspire to save the infant Zeus from the attempts of his father to secure his own throne against any future claimants (cf. Arthur 1982). In order to secure his own power, Zeus must then engage in conflicts both with the previous generation in power, the Titans led by Kronos, and with new claimants who arise to challenge him.

Hesiod describes the Titanomachy in detail (*Th* 617–735), and he dwells on the challenge that Typhoeus brings to the new reign of Zeus (*Th* 820–80), but he only barely alludes to the other great challenge to Zeus's reign that appears in other mythological sources, the Gigantomachy. The earth-born Giants (*gêgeneis*, *gigantes*) spring up when the blood from the castrated Ouranos sprinkles the Earth (*Th* 183–85), and they are mentioned along with the race of men in the Muses' prologue (*Th* 50), but their great uprising against the power of Zeus is not mentioned, unless the reference to Herakles's "great labor" (*Th* 954) refers to his crucial aid to the gods in the Gigantomachy. The Titanomachy begins by Zeus tricking Kronos, with the aid of Earth, into vomiting back up the children he swallowed (*Th* 624–28), but Zeus's force and the power of his lightning provide the end to the Titanomachy, and the same power is on display in the Typhonomachy, when the lightning of Zeus destroys the last child that the Earth produces to try to topple his power. Hesiod does not mention any other children of Earth, such as the famous Gigantes, whom Earth sent against Zeus, nor is there any hint of Zeus using cunning against Typhoeus, as appears in other versions of the tale (cf. Apollodorus 1.6.1–3; Nonnus 1.481). In recounting the conflicts of the gods that shape the cosmos, Hesiod focuses on the injustices of Ouranos and Kronos that lead to their downfall and on the way Zeus recruits his allies and promises to establish a just division of the honors and authority in the cosmos.

War in Heaven: Orphic Variations

The accounts of the Orphic theogonies preserve fewer details of the ongoing conflicts that lead to the shifts of authority in the cosmos, but the same basic story of Kronos overthrowing Ouranos, to be overthrown in turn by Zeus who then establishes his rule against further uprisings, seems to occur in them all. Characteristically, however, the most shocking elements of the story in Hesiod are multiplied or elaborated in the Orphic sources; Zeus's binding of Kronos is told in more detail, and Kronos's castration of his father may be doubled in some accounts by Zeus castrating Kronos. Both the

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Titanomachy and the Gigantomachy appear in Orphic accounts, with the familiar slippage between the two that appears in the evidence for these battles outside the Orphica, but the Typhonomachy, the ultimate battle in the Hesiodic account, seems absent.

(p. 234) Athenagoras recounts (*pro Christianis* 18) that Ouranos learned (probably from the oracle of Night) that his children would overthrow him, so he imprisoned them in Tartarus; the Orphic account thus provides a motive for Ouranos's repression of his offspring, which seems in Hesiod almost an unintended consequence of Ouranos's unceasing desire to mate with Gaia. The Titans are conceived to avenge the imprisonment of their siblings, and Kronos not only castrates Ouranos but hurls him out of his seat in the sky; as in Hesiod, his bleeding genitalia generate Giants and Aphrodite in earth and sea. Kronos then proceeds to swallow his children, as in Hesiod, to prevent his own overthrow.

Whereas in Hesiod Zeus receives advice from Gaia about a drug that will make Kronos vomit back up the gods he has swallowed, in the Orphic accounts Zeus seems to receive oracular advice from Night.⁴ Night advises him to ambush and bind Kronos, "when you see him beneath the high-topped oaks drunk with the works of loud-buzzing bees."⁵ Taking vengeance one shocking step further than in Hesiod, Zeus castrates Kronos in his turn, so that the cutter is himself cut, and then imprisons him in Tartaros.⁶

The absence of coherent and continuous narratives in the Orphic accounts makes it difficult to determine how the story proceeded from this point, but there are sufficient allusions to Orphic accounts of a Titanomachy and Gigantomachy to conclude that at least some Orphic poems narrated these events, even if there were not continuous narratives that went from the first principles through to the end in the manner of Hesiod. Of the Typhonomachy, however, there is no real trace in the Orphica, even if various combats involving serpentine figures appear at earlier points in the narrative; the final conflict that is so important in Hesiod as the last attempt of the Earth to topple the ruler of the cosmos has no place in cosmogonies in which Earth's fundamental role is replaced by Night or some other power.⁷

Athenagoras (*pro Christianis* 20) mentions in passing that Zeus fought with the Titans for hegemony, but he has abandoned the continuous narrative by this point and is merely recounting a string of horrible things attributed to the Greek gods by Orpheus. The battles of Zeus and the Olympians as related in Hesiod seem hard to reconcile to the culminating event that appears in several of the Orphic accounts (Zeus's swallowing of Protogonos and giving birth again to the entire cosmos), yet references to Orpheus's tales of battles against the Titans and the Giants suggest that such inconsistent accounts appeared as separate tales that were probably later assembled as different parts of the *Rhapsodies* (cf. Edmonds 2013: 144–59). The similar tales of the Titanomachy and Gigantomachy were conflated and confused in many sources, and it is often difficult to tell which rebellion a particular fragment of Orphic poetry may be describing, but the proem to the *Orphic Argonautica* refers to the destructive deeds of the Earthborn as one of the previous tales of Orpheus, and the *Etymologicum Magnum's* entry for Giant locates

the tale in the eighth book of the *Rhapsodies* (Etymologicum Magnum s.v. γίγας = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 188B = 63K). References to the generation of humans from the remains of the Giants or Titans suggest that both tales appeared in various Orphic texts and were often conflated, especially by Neoplatonists, who saw their allegorical meaning as indistinguishable.

(p. 235) **The Genesis of the Cosmos: Anthropogony**

The Human Race: Hesiod's Absent Anthropogonies

After all the monsters spawned by Earth or the descendants of Pontos, the final inhabitants of the cosmos come into being, the humans. Hesiod, however, surprisingly provides no details about the generation of humans in the *Th*, despite the Muses' prologue that calls for the poet to sing of the race of humans and strong giants. Later scholia suggest that the Meliai, the ash-tree nymphs who are generated along with the Gigantes from the blood of Ouranos, are the ancestors of mortal men or that the Gigantes themselves are the first mortal men, born from the earth like the autochthonous Athenians or Theban Spartoi.⁸ In the *WD* Hesiod provides the elaborate Myth of the Five Races (*WD* 106–80) to explain the generation of humans, how mortal men and gods sprang from the same source (108). The gods made (*poiêsan*) first a golden race in the time when Kronos ruled; these perished peacefully, to be replaced by the silver race made by the gods. These in turn were destroyed by Zeus, who created the bronze race from ash trees (like the Meliai in the *Th*) and then the race of heroes, both of whom perished in war. Finally, Zeus made the iron race, the current mortals who must work and suffer in the current order of life. All these races in the *WD* are made intentionally by the gods or by Zeus himself, in contrast to the accidentally generated humans of the *Th*, even if scholars ancient and modern try to connect the Meliai and Gigantes of the latter with the bronze race of the former (cf. Clay 2003: 81–99).

The Human Race: Orphic Anthropogonies

The same conflict of intentional artifice and accidental generation as the model for anthropogony appears in the Orphic sources, even if Orphic accounts have only three created races, instead of the Hesiodic five, and the accidental generation comes variously from the Titans or the Giants. Despite the idea among earlier scholars that the anthropogony must have been the culminating point of the Orphic cosmogonies, the event that gave meaning and purpose to the whole account, the testimonies to anthropogonies are few and far between, mostly appearing in Neoplatonic allegorical interpretations about the One and the many.

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Proclus claims that Orpheus, presumably in the *Rhapsodies*, describes three races: a golden race under the reign of Phanes, a silver race ruled over by Kronos, and a Titanic race, formed from the limbs of the Titans.⁹ The silver race under Kronos may have been described as living as long as the palm tree, but it is hard to imagine the life of the golden race, since it is not clear that Heaven and Earth would yet exist if Phanes were in charge, and the Orphic myth of the races may be as inconsistent with the theogonic narrative (p. 236) as Hesiod's five races are with his *Th.*¹⁰ Proclus explains the golden race under Phanes as an allegory for the life of those who connect fully with the intelligibles, in contrast to the others, who either curve back (like crooked-counsel Kronos) toward the higher realms or occupy themselves with the manifold sensible world. It is unclear, however, whether the Orphic verse Proclus discusses actually concluded with a Titanic race or if it had a sequence of metallic races, ending perhaps in iron, which Proclus read as Titanic because of his allegorical interpretation of the Titans as representative of the manifold sensible world.

Most of the references to the generation of humans in Orphica appear in the context of Neoplatonic allegories of the One and many, so it is worth noting that the references mentioned above to the generation of humans from the blood of the Giants spilled in the Gigantomachy do not come from Neoplatonic contexts, whereas the Neoplatonists seem to refer to the Titanomachy instead, making use of the etymologies of Titan from *ti*, some particular thing, to connect the Titans to the manifold realm of the sensible particulars.¹¹ The exception is the sixth-century CE Olympiodorus, who brings together the idea of the generation of the human race from the blood of the Giants (understood as Titans) at the end of their war upon Zeus and the Olympian powers with the other tale that the Neoplatonists understood as an allegory for the division of the One into many, the Titans' dismemberment of Dionysos. Olympiodorus crafts a complex allegory of the embodiment of the soul in the human body, engaging in bricolage with all these pieces of the mythic tradition, but his narrative cannot be taken (as it too often has been) as a transparent witness to a single crucial episode of the Orphic cosmogony, one that must have been present in all the Orphic texts from the earliest instances in the sixth century BCE until the sixth century CE of Olympiodorus (cf. Edmonds 1999, 2009, 2013: 296-391). Anthropogony is hardly more important in the Orphic texts than in the Hesiodic account, despite the Neoplatonists' interest in its allegorical significance; the real emphasis in both the Hesiodic and Orphic cosmogonies lies not in how humans came into existence, but rather in the hegemony of Zeus.

The Cosmos of Zeus: The Final Structure and Order of the World

Cosmos: Zeus in Hesiod as the King Who Brings Justice

Deviant Origins: Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Orphica

Hesiod's *Th* begins with the Muses praising Zeus, and "they sing, both in the beginning and in the end of the song, how much he is the most excellent of the gods and greatest in power" (*Th* 48–49). Zeus's excellence is made manifest through contrast with the previous rulers of the cosmos, Ouranos and Kronos, who abuse their power and treat the other deities unjustly, whereas Zeus establishes his rule as one of justice, in which all the gods receive their own fair shares of honor and authority. Hesiod's narrative of how (p. 237) Zeus harnesses both force and cunning in balance to maintain his dominant place in the cosmos emphasizes the agreements that Zeus makes to obtain and retain his power.

Whereas Ouranos dominates by simple brute force as the most powerful entity in the cosmos, repressing all others, and Kronos succeeds by cunning in replacing him at the top but still keeps the rest suppressed, Zeus, as the youngest born deity, must negotiate with the older powers of the cosmos in order to win his place, promising that whoever is without power under Kronos's regime will gain their rightful honors, while anyone who holds authority under Kronos will retain that place if they fight on Zeus's behalf (*Th* 395–96). Zeus makes a deal with the underworld power of Styx, granting her new honors and thereby obtaining the support of her children, Kratos and Bie, Might personified, and he confirms the whole range of privileges in earth, heaven, and sea that Hekate had from the beginning. His treatment of these two goddesses, narrated in detail by Hesiod (*Th* 383–452), is emblematic of his method of obtaining power, just as he frees the Hundred-Handers, Obriareus, Kottys, and Gyes, from Tartarus (where they had been confined first by Ouranos and then by Kronos) and enlists their aid against Kronos, giving them nectar and ambrosia, the prerogatives of the immortal gods (*Th* 617–86), and even rewarding Obriareus after the battle with marriage to his niece (*Th* 817–19). Such promises of power to the disenfranchised, of stability to those already well off, and particularly the creation of marriage alliances to bind allies even closer, are characteristic of the kinds of strategies employed by the archaic Greek tyrants, the scions of aristocratic families who schemed their way to power through the support of some combination of those in the polis who wanted a larger share of authority and those who wanted to ensure that they were securing their own.¹²

After defeating the Titans (and Typhoeus), Zeus sets about securing his regime through a series of marriage alliances with important goddesses, both within his own family (Hera, Demeter) and among the offspring of the Titans (Themis, Eurynome, Mnemosyne, Leto). His union with Metis is particularly noteworthy because he manages to prevent her from producing a son who will overthrow him by swallowing her whole and then giving birth to her daughter Athena from his own head. This crucial short-circuiting of the succession of generations is, however, the only real deviation in Zeus's tactics from his general method of securing supporters by negotiating a redistribution of honors and authority.

Cosmos: Zeus in the Orphica as the Supreme Power

Deviant Origins: Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Orphica

By contrast, the Zeus of the Orphic cosmogonies is the lone supreme power of the cosmos, relying on the support of no one but rather subsuming everyone and everything under his own control. This difference from the Hesiodic account of the generation of the cosmos is perhaps the most striking departure that Orphic accounts provide, and this adaptation resolves the problem with mythic cosmogonies that Aristotle (*Metaphysics* xiii. 1091b) points out: the first power chronologically is not the same as the first hierarchically. Although Zeus is the last power to rise in the cosmos, in the Orphic (p. 238) theogonies he also becomes the first, so that he is not only the *telos* of all creation but its *archê* as well.

The Orphic poems are forged by Orphicists in each era through a process of stitching together old verses with new, and this process is most clearly demonstrated with the praise of Zeus as the supreme lord, which appears in ever-expanding versions from the earliest witnesses to the latest. Plato, our earliest source for Orphica, alludes to the idea of Zeus as first, last, and middle of all things, and the verse appears in the Derveni papyrus: “Zeus is the head, Zeus is middle, and out of Zeus all things are fashioned.”¹³ Later texts expand this idea, attributing to Zeus not just the opposites of beginning and end but all the pairs of opposition: male and female, fire and water, earth and air, and so forth. A version appears in the Aristotelian treatise *On the World*; it turns up in a papyrus handbook of quotes about Zeus; Plutarch refers to it; Porphyry quotes it at great length in his treatise *On Images*; and it is transformed into a paean of monotheism in the Hellenistic Jewish Testament of Orpheus, where Orpheus, having learned from his teacher Mousaios (Moses), proclaims his rejection of the many gods of the Gentiles and his adoration of the one supreme god.¹⁴

Zeus can encompass all these opposites because he encompasses the entirety of the cosmos; all things come into being again through him. Like the snake that swallows its own tail, Zeus consumes his own beginning, that is, the first principle that began all things—or rather, the first-born entity, since Zeus never consumes the actual first principle, be it Night or Chaos or Water, but rather the divinity designated as Protogonos, the first born (whatever its other names may be).

Although the image of Zeus swallowing Protogonos is mentioned in Athenagoras, the clearest witness to this process comes in the fragments the Neoplatonists quote from the *Rhapsodies*, since they are particularly interested in citing Orpheus's authority for the idea that all comes from one single entity who also continues to rule over all. The same motif, however, appears in the earliest theogony, the Orphic poem in the Derveni papyrus, although it is even harder to put together the precise story from the lacunose papyrus than from the fragmentary quotes of the Neoplatonists.

In the *Rhapsodies*, Zeus goes to the oracle of Night to ask how he can obtain dominion in the cosmos, inquiring, “How will all things be for me both one and each separate?” (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 237B = 164, 165, 166 K). Following her advice, he then swallows the first-born of all creation and recreates the cosmos within himself (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 241B = 167K). Whereas Kronos swallows his own offspring and

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falls because he fails to gulp down the last, Zeus swallows his own first progenitor and everything that progenitor had produced. Again, the Orphic accounts take a monstrosity in Hesiod's account and both make it greater in scope and attribute it, not to an earlier savage generation, but to the current ruler of the cosmos, Zeus himself.

This idea of Zeus swallowing the first begetter of all things in order to beget them himself seems to go back to the earliest Orphic cosmogonies, since some version of it appears in the Derveni papyrus. Many scholarly controversies hinge on how "*aidoion*" is understood in the poem; Zeus swallows either the first-born god or his generative phallos, but the idea remains the same in any reading: Zeus incorporates the originary (p. 239) power of generation and brings the cosmos to birth anew from himself.¹⁵ It is perhaps a moot point whether the image of Zeus swallowing a phallos is more shocking than the image of Zeus gulping down an entire god (as his father Kronos had done with Zeus's siblings or as Zeus does with Metis), but Zeus's final act to secure his supremacy is at any rate markedly different from the kind of negotiations and alliances that the Hesiodic Zeus undertakes.

Conclusions: Weirder, Wilder, Older—Better

The writings of [Orpheus and Hesiod] are divided into two kinds of interpretation, that is, the literal and the allegorical, and indeed the literal interpretations have confused the ignorant masses. But for those interpretations, in truth, which are in accord with the allegorical, every expression is admired by the philosophical and erudite.

(Rufinus, *Recognitions* X.30)

The Zeus of the Orphic theogonies is more supreme than the Zeus of Hesiod's *Th*, more transcendent and yet more transgressive, raping and castrating his relatives with a savagery very alien to the dealmaker of the *Th*. Not only does this scandalous behavior characterize the final phase of the Orphic cosmogonies, but even from the first phases these accounts provide weirder and wilder versions of the similar stages in Hesiod. The cosmogonic process starts even earlier and more abstractly, abnormal and asexual reproduction characterizes more generations of the gods, the conflicts over succession are more violent, and the final victory is more absolute. At every step the Orphic theogonies present an account that marks itself as more extraordinary than Hesiod's, more shocking on the surface and therefore more profound in its hidden meanings (for the "extraordinary," see Edmonds 2008, 2013: 77–82). The extraordinary aspects of the narrative are meant to correlate to the extraordinary authority the account claims, just as the supposed greater antiquity of Orpheus should justify the greater authority of his accounts to the latecomer, Hesiod.

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Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Hesiod's account always remains the standard from which the deviations are made—an indicator of the real authority of the Hesiodic *Th* in the face of all its competitors. The Orphic accounts' adherence to the structure of the Hesiodic model stands out when contrasted with other innovative cosmogonies, such as that in the "Eighth Book of Moses." Two versions of this same theogony appear in the midst of a magical spell for obtaining the secret name of the supreme god on a fourth-century CE Egyptian papyrus in Greek.¹⁶ In this narrative, eight pairs of gods are produced by the seven laughs of the supreme god and an echo: Light and Radiance, Earth and Water, Mind and Wits, Generation and Procreation, Fate and Hermes, Kairos or Sun and Moon, Psyche and Python, and Fear and Iao. The primary principle, the (p. 240) formation of earth, sea, and heaven, the succession of generations—all of these elements are radically different from the narrative of Hesiod, showing that innovative cosmological thinkers could use other models to work out their ideas mythically. The thinkers who chose to put the name of Orpheus on their poems, however, stuck close to the traditional narrative of Hesiod, deviating ostentatiously in their efforts to outdo the authoritative *Th*.

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Notes:

- (1.) Cf. *Orphic Argonautica* 15 = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 126B = 75K. Bernabé catalogs the various epithets in *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 138–43.
- (2.) E.g., Isocrates *Busiris* 39 (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 26iiB = 17K); Diogenes Laertius 1.5 (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 1046ii, 8iiiB = OT 125K). Cf. Edmonds (2013: 80–81).
- (3.) Derveni Papyrus 7.4–7 (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 669iB) trans. Betegh. Cf. Plutarch fr. 157 Sandbach = Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 3.1.1 (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 671B).
- (4.) Derveni Papyrus 8.4; 11.1; for the account in the *Rhapsodies*, cf. Proclus, in *Platonis Cratylum Commentaria* 391 a (27.21 Pasqu.) = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 155K.
- (5.) Porphyry, *de Antro Nympharum*, 16. Descriptions of Kronos asleep are quoted in Proclus, in *Platonis Rem Publicam Commentaria* I 138.23 Kr. = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 224B = 148K; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI 2.26.2 = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 223B = 149K.
- (6.) Proclus, in *Platonis Cratylum Commentaria* 55.12, cf. Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* V.5 and Proclus, in *Platonis Timaeum Commentaria* II.208.30 (= *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 225i–iiiB = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 137, 154, 220K).
- (7.) Some of the Neoplatonic accounts (see *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 299–300B, along with Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*) mention a plan by Zeus to hand over the rulership to Dionysos, but the plan never comes to fruition, and Zeus remains the ruler of the cosmos.
- (8.) With the scholia at 187, cf. scholia T at *Iliad* 22.126; Palaephatus 35, and Hesychius s.v. μελιάς καρπός. Cf. Clay (2003: 95–99).
- (9.) Proclus, in *Platonis Rem Publicam Commentaria* II.74.28–75.12 = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 140; cf. Brisson (2002: 449).
- (10.) Plutarch, *Quaestionum convivialium* 8.4.2 = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 218B = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 225K. It is worth noting that Lactantius (*Institutiones Divinae* 1.13.11 = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 363b + 139K) claims that Kronos was the first to rule over men on earth, which is also inconsistent with either of the other versions of the anthropogony, so there must have been several accounts in different texts.
- (11.) Olympiodorus, in *Platonis Phaedonem commentaria* 1.5.11–13. Westerink (1976: 44) compares Proclus, in *Platonis Cratylum Commentaria* 62.3 Pasquali (*Orphicorum Fragmenta* 240i B = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 129 K), in *Platonis Rem Publicam Commentaria* 1.90.9–13 Kroll, and Damascius, *de principiis* 57 (ii.52.20–23 Westerink = i. 120.1–5 Ruelle).

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(12.) Herodotus's account of Pisistratus in Athens (I.59–64) provides a particularly apt parallel. See Clay (2003: 22) and Loney (2014: 522–28) for more on Zeus's "politics of co-optation."

(13.) Plato, *Laws* 715e = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 21K, to which the scholiast quotes the Orphic lines found in the Derveni papyrus (P. Derv. 17.12).

(14.) [Aristotle] *de mundo* 401a25 (cf. Apuleius, *de Mundo* 37); *P. Soc. Ital.* xv 1476 = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 688aB; Plutarch, *de defectu oraculorum* 48 436d; Plutarch, *de communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos* 31 1074d; Porphyry fr. 354 = Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 3.8.2 = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 243B; Testament of Orpheus = *Orphicorum Fragmenta* 377, 378 B.

(15.) The Derveni commentator quotes a line from Orpheus, Derveni Papyrus 13.3, αἰδοῖον κατέπνευεν, ὃς αἰθέρα ἔκθορε πρῶτος, which either means "he gulped down the venerable one, who first sprang forth in the aither" or "he gulped down the phallus [of the one] who first sprang forth in the aither." The Derveni commentator himself explains that Orpheus likens the sun to a phallos (αἰδοῖον); Burkert (1980: 32) and, among others, Betegh (2004: 111–24) and Bernabé (2007: 107–12), understand that Zeus swallows the severed phallus of Ouranos, against the arguments of, e.g., West (1983: 84–90) and Kouremenos et al. (2006: 23–28). Santamaria (2016), however, makes a persuasive case that αἰδοῖον is a traditional epic epithet of Protogonos that the Derveni commentator reinterprets in his allegorical interpretations to signify the god in his generative capacity—the god who is swallowed is called αἰδοῖος because he is generative like an αἰδοῖον.

(16.) *Papyri Graecae Magicae* XIII. 161–206, 472–564. The version of the cosmogony from which these two recensions are taken must be several hundred years earlier, putting it close in time to the Orphic accounts in Athenagoras and the *Rhapsodies*. For a discussion of this text, see Smith (1996a and 1996b).

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