

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies Faculty
Research and Scholarship

Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies

2021

Review of Chrysanthou, Anthi. "Defining orphism: the beliefs, the teletae and the writings."

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III
Bryn Mawr College, redmonds@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/classics_pubs



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Citation

Edmonds, R. G., III. 2021. "Review of 'Chrysanthou, Anthi. Defining orphism: the beliefs, the teletae and the writings.'" *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2021.03.13.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/classics_pubs/134

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

BMCR

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2021.03.13

Defining orphism: the beliefs, the teletae and the writings

Anthi Chrysanthou, *Defining orphism: the beliefs, the teletae and the writings. Trends in classics. supplementary volumes; volume 94*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2020. Pp. xi, 415. ISBN 9783110678390 \$137.99.

Review by

Radcliffe Edmonds, Bryn Mawr College. redmonds@brynmawr.edu

Preview

This book, whose title, *Defining Orphism*, indicates the author's intent to get a firm handle on the problematic category, unfortunately represents a step backward in the study of Orphism.^[1] Although an increasing number of studies have begun to explore the complexities and contradictions presented by the evidence for Orphica, Chrysanthou's work seeks to simplify, to explain away the contradictions, and to reduce the scope of the field to a limited number of texts divorced from the rich contexts in which they are embedded. Scholars such as Meisner or Brisson have explored how the fragments of Orphica quoted by the Neoplatonists are complexly imbricated in the theological and philosophical theories of these thinkers, while others, such as Herrero and Jourdan, have shown how the early Christian apologists used the Orphica in polemical ways to suit their own theological agendas.^[2] By contrast, Chrysanthou bases her reconstructions on fragments taken out of context, arranging them in a neat order of her own devising. Although the *Orphic Hymns* have received renewed attention as a corpus by scholars such as Morand and Graf, Chrysanthou excludes the *Hymns*, along with the *Orphic Argonautica*, from serious consideration as "relatively late sources," despite the fact that the Rhapsodic collection may be roughly contemporary with them and is certainly closer in date to these works than to the Derveni Papyrus or the gold tablets.^[3] Other texts, like the *Orphic Lithika*, are ignored entirely, perhaps on the same grounds, but there is no explanation for the exclusion of the *Testament of Orpheus*, which probably dates to the Hellenistic period. Indeed, Chrysanthou gives no indication that she is aware of the text's existence. Although Chrysanthou's study presents itself as an overview introduction to the study of Orphism, this book cannot be recommended for any audience, neither for newcomers to the field nor for those with more background and experience with the pitfalls of studying the Orphica.

The first chapter begins with a literature review. Bernabé's collection of the fragments of Orphica forms the basis of Chrysanthou's study, even if Chrysanthou does not examine the principles on which that collection is compiled. Chrysanthou indeed gives short shrift to the massive 1600+ page collection edited by Bernabé and Casadesús, as well as my own, briefer (400 page) study.^[4] The second chapter wanders through the references to people associated with Orpheus or to Orpheus himself or to verses associated with Orpheus in an order that is neither chronological nor thematic, hopping from Plato to Euripides to Herodotus to Plutarch to the Derveni papyrus. Chrysanthou concludes that there must have been a group of people associated with Orpheus characterized by their use of texts for secret rituals. A similar survey of references to rites associated with Orpheus or Kore/Persephone or Dionysos or Rhea/Kybele likewise is taken as evidence for a widespread influence of Orphic cult. In short, treating complex, situated texts unproblematically as data, Chrysanthou takes the mix of positive and negative references to Orphica not as an indication of different perspectives and agenda among the ancient authors, but rather as proof of the existence of two different kinds of Orphism, one authentically pure and holy

and the other a debased charlatanism for sordid gain. She sees both sorts, however, as associated with a set of specific cosmological and eschatological ideas, particularly the airy nature of the soul and a cycle of reincarnations for its punishment. On who these Orphics might be, she comments, “Considering, the discussion in this section, we can see that very few firm conclusions can be extracted on the authorship of the Orphic works” (p. 82, sic).

The third chapter, on the supposedly central myth of the dismemberment of Dionysos, lists the sources for various elements in the composite myth, but the list provides a misleading impression of the sources, which have at times only one part of the plot element listed. The unspoken underlying assumption is that the evidence all points to a single narrative that included all the elements, rather than to a variety of related stories, some of which had some elements and some others. If one were to make a similar assumption for a story for which more of evidence survives, for example, the myths of the Trojan War or the stories of the wars between Thebes and Argos, one might similarly construct a single coherent narrative, but only by disregarding the contradictory versions in the epic, lyric, and tragic evidence, each constructed with its own significance. Chrysanthou admits that the story of the dismemberment may have been known “in non-Orphic circles or interpreted in different ways” (p. 90) but nevertheless concludes without argument, “that it was attributed to Orpheus and interpreted in a specific way by them [the Orphics] seems more probable” (p. 94).

Chapter four reviews the scholarship on the various types of gold tablets that have been classified as Orphic, using the edition in Edmonds 2011, before turning to a textual and ritual analysis.^[5] Chrysanthou sees the gold tablets as the *legomena* of a mystery rite and adopts Riedweg’s controversial reconstruction of an Ur-text that includes all the different types of tablets. Chrysanthou wanders through the discussion of various details before drawing the conclusion that the reference to the deceased as the child of Earth and starry Heaven means that “the Orphic religious eschatology and philosophy was elemental and related to astronomy” (p. 143). Disregarding the complex historical development of astral symbolism in Greek religion, she implausibly relates features of the gold tablets to the Milky Way and the particular constellations of Auriga, Taurus, and Aries, relying on evidence from Macrobius and other Neoplatonic sources. Chrysanthou also compares the gold tablets to the so-called Eighth Book of Moses (*PGM XIII*), but its cosmogony through laughter, contrary to Chrysanthou’s claims, is notably quite different from anything attested in the cosmogonies attributed to Orpheus.^[6]

The next chapter is devoted to the Derveni Papyrus, with a brief excursus on the Gurôb Papyrus. After a review of the scholarship, a summary of the contents of the papyrus follows, with commentary ad hoc on particular points. On the much-vexed question of the *aidoion*, for example, Chrysanthou sides (rightly, in my opinion) with those who read it as the adjective ‘revered’ rather than as the noun meaning ‘phallus’, but she seems unaware of the most important argument in favor of that reading by Santamaria.^[7] The Derveni Author’s allegorical interpretation of everything as air seems to be an important pillar in her argument that all Orphic doctrine held the soul to be air or aether, and she sees the Derveni Author as explaining the secrets of the religion to the initiates through his exegesis of the Orphic poem. The Gurôb papyrus, on the other hand, is dismissed as a text “written by an itinerant priest and used during purification rituals for people who wanted to be free of wrongdoings without necessarily living the demanding Orphikos Bios” (p. 272), reinforcing her division between good and bad Orphics.

The sixth chapter contains the heart of the study, Chrysanthou’s reconstruction of the Orphic Rhapsodies from the fragmentary quotations preserved in various authors. Because, as she says, “I realised how difficult it was to make sense of it without having a continuous narrative available, but rather through disentangling [sic] hundreds of fragments,” (p. 274) she stitches together a continuous narrative of her own from the pieces. Chrysanthou’s collection and translation of the fragments provides a nice update from that of Guthrie. Indeed, if it were truly necessary to make a single story out the extant quotations leaving as little space as possible in between, Chrysanthou’s reconstruction would certainly be possible (although even less plausible than the deeply learned reconstruction of West, whose attempt has been rightly critiqued).^[8] But contemporary method in the study of religion urges against such acts of simplification, not least for their failure to respect the contexts of their evi-
Hence, by excluding from her reconstruction any fragments that might have ‘post-Hellenistic elements’,

Chrysanthou can, in a circular argument, place the Rhapsodies as an early witness to an enduring and unchanging Orphic tradition. What is more, on this basis she claims that Pre-Socratic philosophy in Ionia was influenced by these ideas, as were well known elements of the Homeric epics such as the Shield of Achilles and the Odyssey Nekyia. She postulates a didactic section at the end of the Rhapsodies that made clear the secrets:

The elemental eschatology proclaims that aether is the primal substance which encompasses everything and its purest essence is the stars which constitute the Isles of the Blessed. The soul has an airy nature and is rooted in the aether, and corporeality's substance is earth. The soul has two watery paths after death: the one leads to the aether and immortality and the other leads back to the cycle of rebirths which could also include pre-rebirth punishments. (pp. 349-350).

Chrysanthou's final chapter restates the conclusions from the previous chapters, especially her reconstruction of elemental and eschatological doctrines and the distinction between virtuous and charlatan Orphics.

The study is difficult to peruse. The argumentation rambles over the texts with little indication of its focus before producing conclusions that don't clearly follow. Better editing might have helped to tighten the structure and to clarify the arguments, but there seems to have been little editorial intervention by the press. Even on technical matters, the author is not well served by the editors at de Gruyter. The continuous numbering of footnotes across the whole volume (up to 1138) is cumbersome. More troubling, errors of grammar and spelling abound, and the erratic placement of commas makes reading sentences jarring. It is inexcusable to find such a poor standard of editing from a respectable press such as de Gruyter.

Nevertheless, the weakness of the basic assumption is the greatest problem. Chrysanthou's study shows the harmful consequences of assuming a coherent Orphism with distinct doctrines from deepest antiquity. According to her account, Pre-Socratic philosophy in Ionia must have developed in response to this already existing set of ideas; Homeric poetry must have incorporated scenes like the Odyssey Nekyia that reflect these specifically Orphic doctrines of the soul; the images of an afterlife among the stars that appear in later sources, along with astrological concerns about specific constellations, must have been drawn from the Orphic ideas that go back even to the Mycenaean period. So too, she claims that the impulse toward monotheism that appears in the identification of deities with one another can be traced back to an Orphic theology whose roots lie at the earliest points of Greek culture. This relentlessly reductive search for a single, simple solution does a grave disservice to some of the most rich and complex phenomena in Greek culture. Chrysanthou's simple and simplifying account could mislead others who venture into the study of the Orphica, causing them to ignore the materials that Chrysanthou elides instead of plunging more deeply into the complexities of the wide and varied range of evidence.

Fortunately, new work in the field indicates that scholars are continuing to explore the complexities of texts and contexts. Whereas Chrysanthou's study is reactionary, seeking to draw back into a limited set of evidence excerpted from its complicated contexts, recent unpublished dissertations by scholars such as Mark McClay, Luisina Abrach, and James Inman explore the gold tablets, the Orphic Hymns, and the Orphic Argonautica as embedded in complex cultural interactions, seeking to move beyond the older paradigms to shed new light on these materials. Many knotty issues remain to be untangled, and many disputes persist about the best ways to reconstruct the fragmentary evidence, but Chrysanthou's work contributes little to those conversations.

Notes

[1] Chrysanthou makes it clear (p. 4, n. 14) that she began her work on this project, including choosing the title *Defining Orphism*, before the appearance of my own *Redefining Ancient Orphism*, and her book shows only limited engagement with my 2013 study.

- [2] Brisson, L. 1995. *Orphée et l'orphisme dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine*. Meisner, D. 2018. *Orphic tradition and the birth of the gods*. Herrero, M. 2010. *Orphism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*. Jourdan, F. 2010-2011. *Orphée et les chrétiens*.
- [3] Graf, F. 2009. "Serious Singing: The Orphic Hymns as Religious Texts." *Kernos* 22: 169-182. Morand, A.-F. 2001. *Études sur les Hymnes orphiques*.
- [4] Bernabé, A. 2004-2007. *Orphicorum et Orphicis similibus testimonia et fragmenta*. Bernabé, A. and Casadesús, F. eds. 2008. *Orfeo y la tradición órfica: Un reencuentro*. Edmonds, R., 2013. *Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion*.
- [5] *The Orphic Gold Tablets and Greek Religion: Further Along the Path*, 2011. Riedweg's essay is published in the same volume.
- [6] As I have argued in Edmonds, R., "Deviant Origins: Hesiodic Theogony and the Orphica," in *Oxford Handbook of Hesiod*, (2018), pp. 225-242.
- [7] Santamaria, M. "A Phallus Hard to Swallow: the Meaning of ἀιδότος/-ον in the Derveni Papyrus." *Classical Philology* 111 (2016): 139–164.
- [8] Guthrie, W. K. C. 1952. *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement*. West, M. L. 1983. *The Orphic Poems*.