

A Curious Concoction: Tradition and Innovation in Olympiodorus' Creation of Mankind
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Olympiodorus' recounting (*In Plat. Phaed.* I.3-6) of the Titan's dismemberment of Dionysos and the subsequent creation of humankind has served for over a century as the linchpin of the reconstructions of the supposed Orphic doctrine of original sin. Olympiodorus' account is the only evidence to connect explicitly the dismemberment of Dionysos with the creation of human beings, although he does not draw the conclusion from his myth that has become standard in the scholarship on Orphism, that the guilt of the Titans' murder of Dionysos descended upon the human beings who were created from their fragments. Even if Olympiodorus draws a different meaning from the myth, scholars such as West 1983 and Bernabé 2002 have argued, he nevertheless preserves essentially unchanged an Orphic myth that was told more than a millennium earlier. Despite his original interpretation, he leaves the narrative sequence of the myth unaltered, since (it is argued) he is a scholarly Neoplatonist making an allegorical interpretation of the sacred Orphic Rhapsodies, not a mythmaker crafting a new version of a traditional mythic story to suit his purposes.

I argue that, on the contrary, Olympiodorus is innovating, not merely in his interpretation of the tale of Dionysos' dismemberment by the Titans, but also in the ways he recounts the tale, altering the details of the story the better to fit the meaning he finds in it. Olympiodorus engages with a variety of sources that describe the murder of Dionysos, as well as with other sources that recount the punishment of the Titans for their rebellion in the Titanomachy and the subsequent creation of new races from them. These sources, however, include not only poetic treatments of the subjects but also allegorical recountings of the myths, especially those by his predecessors Proclus and Damascius.

In the Greek mythic tradition, the interpretation of the myth cannot be kept separate from the way the narrative is recounted, since the author retelling a traditional tale always adapts the details of the story to fit the ideas he is trying to convey and the audience to which he is recounting the tale. In this process of bricolage, the author strives to render his version authoritative for his audience by engaging with previous versions of the tale, especially the best known or most authoritative renditions. Olympiodorus adopts many of the same gambits used by earlier tellers of myth in the Greek tradition (including Plato), concealing his own innovations by starting with references to previous versions and then diverging from the earlier accounts. Specifically, he grounds the authority of his tale by his quotation of Orpheus' sequence of kingships in heaven, but then moves to a more general reference to the mythic tradition. Olympiodorus adapts a number of particular details of the story to fit the meanings he finds in the tradition. Although several Orphic cosmogonies seem to recount six generations that succeed one another in the kingship of heaven, Olympiodorus includes only four, to fit with his interpretation of each reign representing a degree of virtue. The actions of Dionysos, Zeus, Hera, and the Titans are each tailored to fit his interpretation of their meanings, and he attaches the story of the creation of human beings to add a cosmological level to the individual ethical level of meaning he has shown in the tale. The tales of the Titans' dismemberment of

Dionysos and of the 'Titans' war against the gods had been interpreted (at least since Proclus *In Remp.* I.90.7-13) as having the same meaning – the conflict of the One and the Many. Olympiodorus could therefore easily transfer to the dismemberment myth the creation of mankind, which formed the sequel to some variants of the Titanomachy or Gigantomachy in the poetic tradition. Moreover, as Brisson 1992 has pointed out, Olympiodorus tweaks the details of the creation of humans from the ashes of the Titans to fit with an alchemical process of the fabrication of pneuma.

Olympiodorus crafts his myth to argue for a conclusion surprising for a Neoplatonist, that suicide is forbidden because the body contains divine elements. Olympiodorus' mythic innovations allow him to provide a new and startling explanation of a crux in the *Phaedo* that Damascius had tried to explain earlier. By drawing on the previous interpretations of Damascius and Proclus to provide a better and more authoritative version of the myth, Olympiodorus is engaging in the same kind of agonistic myth-telling that is characteristic of the Greek mythic tradition from the earliest evidence. Olympiodorus is not pedantically preserving an ancient Orphic myth, he is rather making use of the authority of Orpheus among the Neoplatonists to support his own philosophical ideas, concocting a curious new version of the traditional tale of the dismemberment of Dionysos to explain Socrates' puzzling prohibition of suicide.

References:

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