

Rivista di poesia comparata

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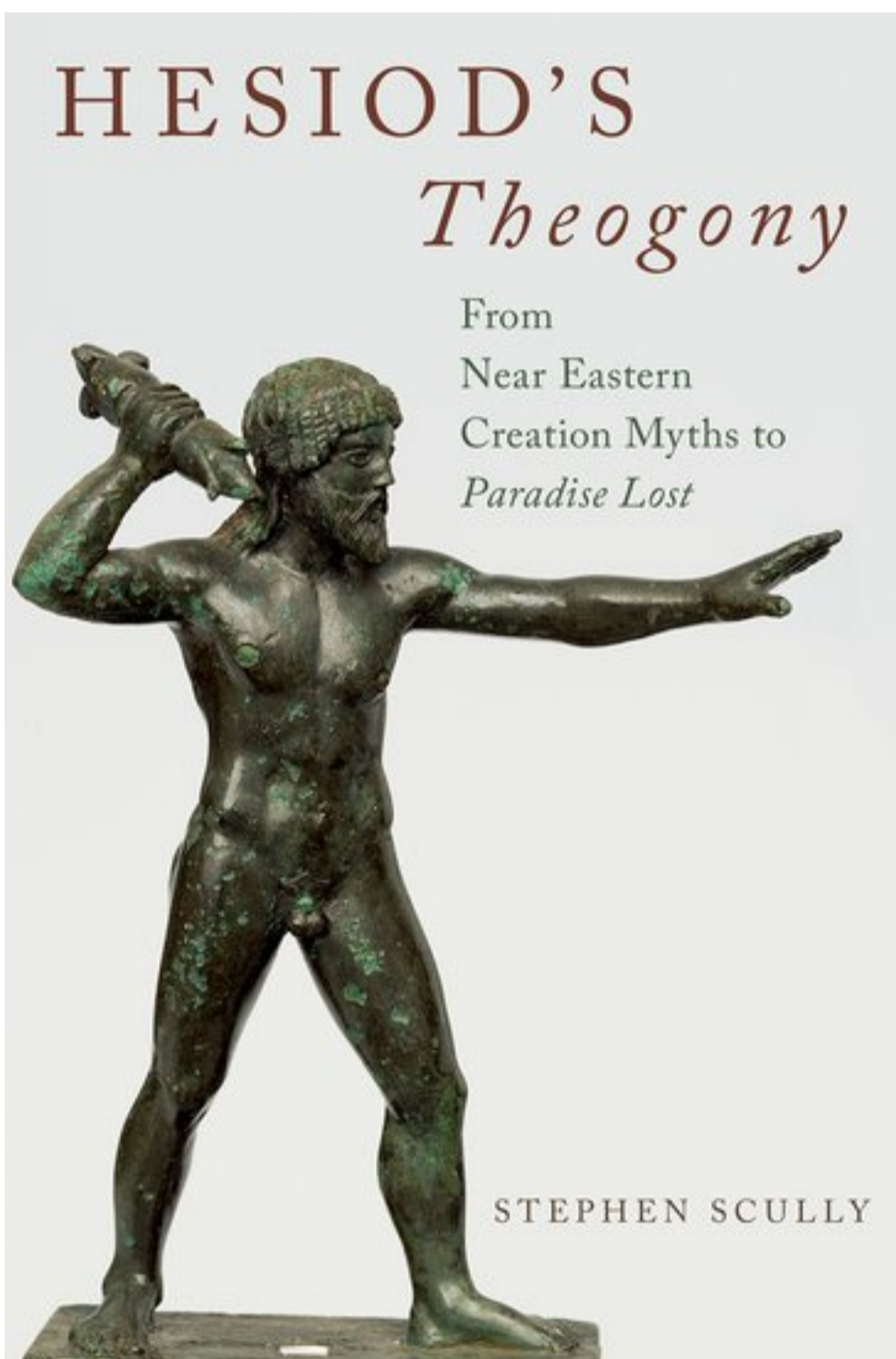
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HESIOD'S THEOGONY, REVISITED

Stephen Scully, *Hesiod's Theogony: From Near Eastern Creation Myths to Paradise Lost*, Oxford University Press, 2015, 268 pp. (\$85.00). Review by Helaine L. Smith (helaine.smith@verizon.net)



In "*Hesiod's Theogony: From Near Eastern Creations Myths to Paradise Lost*" Stephen Scully argues that Hesiod, rather than having created in the *Theogony* a catalogue of divine genealogies, now largely irrelevant and dismissible, with perhaps the exception of its glorious description of the Muses, has instead composed a Homeric Hymn, grand in scale and conception, and dedicated to Zeus. It is a startling, and ultimately convincing, thesis.

The Zeus of Hesiod's hymn, Professor Scully argues, is the Zeus who through his own actions and gifts to mankind, imagines, models, and safeguards civilization in the form of the orderly city, the *polis*. Scully has long been interested in the *polis*, as his excellent 1990 study, *Homer and the Sacred City*, demonstrated, and this new volume about Hesiod's *Theogony* is, in a sense, an extension of that interest.

An equally exciting aspect of this comprehensive study is its clear and full discussion of Hesiod's until-now overlooked literary methods, in which personification reflects psychological reality, or flows from action, and in which common nouns, in their shifting meanings, follow the narrative arc of the poem.

Professor Scully also establishes beyond a doubt the *Theogony's* influence and profound effect upon great literary works of other cultures and subsequent centuries. Scully has

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studied with great care everything from the Akkadian *Enuma elish*, “the story of Marduk’s victory over Tiamat and his creation of a stable and harmonious political order,” to Pindar and Plato, Callimachus and the Alexandrian scholars, Ovid and Lucian, the Church fathers, Milton, and even Freud. His discussions of the *Oresteia* and of *Paradise Lost* are particularly splendid. He revitalizes the *Theogony* for us in every way, making both the *Theogony* and his discussion of it essential reading for every classicist and every lover of literature.

The Theogony as a Homeric Hymn

What Homeric Hymns¹ do is present, either through direct praise or narrative, the magnificent deeds and gifts of the god to mankind. It is Scully’s contention, amply proven in this rich volume, that the *Theogony* of Hesiod conforms to the pattern of the greatest of those Homeric Hymns, that its subject is Zeus, and that through primary and secondary narrative it presents Zeus’ preeminent gift to mankind: the polity itself.

Hesiod begins the *Theogony* not with Zeus himself, but with Zeus’s and Mnemosyne’s nine daughters, the Muses *Thaleia*, *Eratō*, *Melpomenē*, *Kleiō*, *Kalliopē*, *Polyhymnia*, *Ouraniē*, *Euterpē*, and *Terpsichorē* [Θάλεια, Ἐρατώ, Μελπομένη, Κλειώ, Καλλιόπη, Πολύμνια, Οὐρανία, Εὐτέρπη, Τερψιχόρη]. This passage, coming at the beginning of the *Theogony* and therefore out of chronological order—Zeus, who fathers the Muses, has not himself yet been created, since after this passage Hesiod tells of the beginnings of creation itself—is, Scully argues, deliberate rather than digressive, its proleptic placement by Hesiod indicating that Zeus’s kingship will bring harmony out of chaos. The Muses sing of what was, what is, and what will be, and they sing of the laws and gracious customs of the gods, so that men, too, may learn of those laws and customs. Law and custom are Zeus’s gifts to the world, then, as is the comfort and joy “sweet song” brings, as is sweet song itself. The daughters teach Hesiod, a character in his own poem, that Zeus fairly apportioned honors among the gods, such apportionment itself being a civilized and civilizing act. And the daughters, Hesiod adds, inspire rulers of men with wise words to settle disputes and quarrels. Thereby Zeus, from whom the Muses spring, gives to kings and princes political wisdom. And the daughters inhabit high Olympus, the realm Zeus creates for the gods, in which the gods now live secure, whereas, in the first and second generation of gods, the gods lived in chaos. Here the Muses sing and dance forever. And so, Zeus creates the first *polis*, a place of harmony and a model for the cities of men.²

The poem’s narrative that follows the gorgeous proem about the Muses details the strife between the first, second, and third generation of gods, the murders and maimings, the terrible monsters unleashed and then contained, and the story of the eventual victory of Zeus and the benefit of perpetual order his rule bestows. That the *Theogony* ends with acts of marriage by Zeus, replicated by other gods, is not, Scully argues, a random detail. Instead, the marriage sequence is expressive of the movement from anarchic *Eros* to the containment of desire within the social order.³ And so Scully concludes that when we read the *Theogony* we are reading a complex Hymn to Zeus.

Literary methods of the Theogony

That the *Theogony* is filled with names of deities which are also abstract qualities is obvious to even the most casual reader. But what most of us miss, and I have a cura di Pietro Deandrea, Gregory Dowling, Antonella Francini, Francesco Stella, Fabio Zinelli LIV 01/2016 *Poesia classica* what Professor Scully shows us, is that these names flow from prior actions described in the text. It is as if “being” gives rise to “identity.” That interplay is particularly lovely in the passage that precedes the naming of the Muses and instead describes where they live and what they do. In rough translation, with the underlined words transliterated (*Th.* 62-71):

*They dwell a little beneath the peak of
snow-capped Olympus,
There lie their shining dancing ground
and beautiful dwellings.
Next to them the Graces and Desire
have their homes in bloom (thaliēis
[θαλίης]).
From their mouths, a lovely (eratēn
[ἐρατήν]) voice they send forth
As they dance and sing (melpontai [μέλπονται]), and tell (kleiousin
[κλειουσιν]) of laws and honored customs
Of all the immortals, on Olympus, in
voice (opi [ὀπί]) that is beautiful (kal
i [καλή]), and
In ambrosial dance (molpēi [μολπηῖ]).
The black Earth resounded about
them
As they hymned (hymneusais
[ὑμνεύσαις]), and a lovely (eratos
[ἐρατός]) sound rose under their feet
As they went to their Father who
reigns as true king in heaven (ouranōi
[οὐρανῶ]).*

Just two lines later Hesiod names the nine daughters—*Thaleia*, *Eratō*, *Melpomenē*, *Kleiō*, *Kalliopē* (reversing the words *opi* and *kalēi* of line 68), *Polyhymnia* (adding a prefix to line 70), *Ouraniē*, and then two more, *Euterpē* (“Fine Delight”) and *Terpsichorē* (“Delight in the Chorus”). As song here flows from their mouths, so, Scully reveals, these names “flow” from description, and action and identity become one, a literary harmony as harmonious as

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song. *Terpsichorē* ("Delight in the Chorus") and *Melpomenē* ("Dance and Sing") refer directly to the choral song and movement in which dancers hold each other by the wrist as they move in unison, such unison itself an emblem of social harmony. Rather than being tedious, the repetition of "lovely," "beautiful," and "song" in the names of the Muses and the use of a single collective noun to identify all nine representations, Scully suggests, of the harmony these daughters of Zeus embody. In other words, the *Theogony's* repetitions are deliberate.

In summarizing the way this and other passages work, Scully very beautifully says, "In the story's movement from narrative to genealogical list we sense commonplace words leaping into divine beings," just as all creation in this myth "leaps" suddenly into "being."

Many of Hesiod's deities are personified qualities, and their offspring are the consequences of those qualities. Discord (*Eris* ["Ἔρις"]) gives birth to Pain (*Ponos* [Πόνος]), as discord always does, and to Forgetfulness (*Lēthē* [Λήθη])—of, presumably, laws, oaths, and obligations, just as persons forget past kindnesses or promises when they fall out with others. Between cities, Discord's consequences ("children") include Battles and Slaughter; within cities, Quarrels, Lies, and *Amphi-Ilogiai* [Ἀμφιλλογίαι] "words with double meanings," that is, falsely-framed or equivocal political discourse. In other words, Hesiod does not, Scully realizes, simply create genealogies that are random collations of good or evil qualities, but psychological realities, consequences "bred" by the action named.

Language itself, we are told, reflects Hesiod's argument, for commonplace words evolve in meaning from anarchic to societal as the *Theogony* proceeds. For example, *mēdea* [μήδεα] can mean either "genitals" or "plans." In the story of the violent castration of Ouranos, it is used as a synonym for "genitals" (*Th.* 180). Later, reflective of social progress *mēdea* takes on its other meaning of "plans" (*Th.* 545). *Philotēs* [φιλότης] can mean either "sexual intercourse" or "social intercourse, alliance." By *Th.* 651 Hesiod uses it to describe the "alliance" between Zeus and the "Hundred-Handers" who fight with him against the Titans. Anarchic nouns are likewise supplanted, as when *Th.* 902 echoes and replaces the name of the goddess Lawlessness (*Dus-nomia* [Δυσνομία], child of Discord (*Th.* 226-232), with the name of the goddess Good Law (*Eunomia* [Εὐνομία]).

The Influence of *Theogony* in Later Literature

Among the most exciting comparisons of literary works in this book is that between the *Theogony* (700 B.C.) and the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, composed almost 250 years later, in 458 B.C. Arguing that "Aeschylus recasts the myth [of Agamemnon and Orestes] as a trilogy," and citing as evidence earlier texts such as the *Odyssey* and vases of the period⁴, none of which presents the Eumenides as a part of the Agamemnon story, Scully argues that, like Hesiod, Aeschylus reconfigures "a familial and dynastic story into an idealized polis-myth, modeled in broad outline according to the polis-centered ideology of the *Theogony*." "The *Oresteia* is a political play in the sense that it sees the polis as the only setting where humankind can break free from . . . a [familial] cycle of violence . . . by the creation of civic law."

Scully locates smaller *Theogonic* echoes in the *Oresteia* as well—the splattering of Ouranos's blood upon Gaia and the splattering of Agamemnon's blood upon Clytemnestra, like "a dark shower of crimson dew" on fertile earth as her axe falls. Unable to persuade the Erinyes to be merciful, Athena enlists the aid of the Hesiodic goddess Persuasion (*Peithō* [Πειθώ]) (*Th.* 349) who not only figures in the *Theogony* but, like the Muses who "pour sweet dew on the tongue" of Zeus-nurtured kings "that those rulers may settle great quarrels, gives to Athena's "tongue" "soothing and charming power" to persuade the Eumenides. The *Oresteia's* final word *ismolpais* [μολπαῖς], its root identical to the root of *Melpomenē*, an echo of the Muses and their "like-minded song and dance" and the heritage of civic harmony of the *Theogony*. The *Oresteia* ends in the justice that "comes from a well-run polity" and "This," the author suggests, "is the *Theogony's* most lasting contribution to fifth- and fourth-century thinkers and writers about polity and justice."

Scully also discovers borrowings from the *Theogony* in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's invocation, "Sing, Heav'nly Muse," his initial reference, in content and sequence like Hesiod's, to a "Shepherd" on a mountain, his own ambition as poet to "soar above th' Aonian Mount," the hurling from Heaven of "he [Satan] and his horrid crew," who fall "Nine times the Space that measures Day and Night," distance in "time" being measured as Hesiod measures it and using the same number of days⁵—all these bespeak *Paradise Lost's* debt to the *Theogony*. "Sin" describes herself to her father Satan as a latter-day and malignant Athena: "a Goddess arm'd/ Out of thy head I sprung" (ii.757-758), and, like Hesiod's monstrous *Echidna* (*Th.* 298-299), is "womanly and fair to the waist, but ending foully in scaly folds and serpent tail" (*PL*, ii.650-653).

What is perhaps even more splendid than the echoes and arguments of influence we find in Scully's text is his insight into Milton's dual purpose in which Milton makes use of powerful images and motifs from Hesiod and at the same time uses those images and motifs to indicate how far the power of the Father and Son exceeds that of the ancient gods. Both Eve and Persephone, Scully muses, once inhabited paradise—Eve Eden, Persephone "the fair fields of Enna." Both, and here he quotes C. S. Lewis, are "ravished by a dark power risen up from the Underworld" that brings Death into the world, and both are restored, Persephone immediately by Demeter, Eve, "by God's Grace at the end of time."

Yet, Scully writes, "[I]t is Hesiod's personified abstractions, sometimes coupled with genealogies, that I feel most captured Milton's poetic imagination." Pointing to the passage in *PL*, Book ix in which "Discord" overwhelms Adam and Eve,

*They sat them down to weep, nor
only Tears*

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Rain'd at their Eyes, but high winds
worse within
Began to rise, high Passion, Anger,
Hate,
Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord, and
shook sore
Their inward State of Mind, calm Region once
And full of Peace, now tost and turbulent,

Scully continues, "Discord is personified after the Fall, but the prefix dis- has been present from the beginning: 'Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree . . .'" and this, Scully says, is "another feature of learnt Hesiodic poetics, namely, the endless play between personified abstractions and lower case nouns, adjectives, and verbs."

To hear again the magnificent Miltonic lines Scully selects, in which thematic weight is placed on prefixes, as here,

Venial ["lovely"] discourse unblam'd: I
now must change
Those notes to Tragic; foul distrust,
and breach
Disloyal on the part of Man, revolt,
And disobedience,

or here, as Adam speaks of Eve as "defac't, deflow'r'd, and now to Death devote," is to revel in the beauty of Milton's lines and at the same time to recall the brilliance of Scully's analysis of Hesiod's.

Endnotes

¹ The greatest of those hymns are the "Hymn to Demeter" (the story of Demeter and Persephone), the "Hymn to Aphrodite" (the story of the birth of Aeneas) and the "Hymn to Delian Apollo" (the story of the birth of Apollo on Delos). For discussions of the complex beauties of these hymns, see Helaine L. Smith, *Homer and the Homeric Hymns: Mythology for Reading and Composition*. For a comparison of the "Hymn to Delian Apollo" to Callimachus's later "Hymn to Delos," see Smith, *Semicerchio*, XLVI (2012/1), "They Sang Beyond the Reach of Envy."▲

² Whenever the Olympians are described as dwelling "within Olympus" (*Th.* 37, 51, 408), the word for "within," Scully notes, is *entos* [ἐντός], which in epic refers to "walls" and hence to Olympus as a "walled city," a *polis*.▲

³ Referring to Hesiod's unusual use of the verbs *theto* [θέτο] ("made") and *poiēsai* [ποιῆσαι] ("made") at *Th.* 886 and 921, respectively, to describe Zeus's "making" first Metis and later Hera his "wife," Scully argues that such verbs "impl[y] a social gesture or public proclamation . . . absent from all of Zeus's other sexual couplings" and that "Zeus's invention of marriage is a crucial step in the socialization of Eros." Zeus's "most decisive taming of Eros" is, however, "thoroughly mythic in nature: Zeus's swallowing of Metis and becoming the parthenogenic father of Athena," who is born from his head. But for a city to survive, Eros must be tamed.▲

⁴ On the superb red-figured calyx krater by the Dokimasia Painter in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Aegisthus strikes Agamemnon; on the opposite side, Orestes, in precisely the same posture, and with the same arrangement of secondary figures, stabs Aegisthus: the narrative of retributive justice, in which "the plunderer is plundered; the killer pays the price," as the Chorus sings in the *Agamemnon*, is complete. The krater dates from 470-460 B.C., and the myth seemed not yet to include the magnificent 458 B.C. resolution of the third play, the establishment of the *polis* as the home of law and justice.▲

⁵ The *Theogony* speaks of the *ennea* . . . *hēmata* [ἐννέα . . . ἡμέρα "nine days"] a bronze anvil would take to fall from heaven to earth and then from earth to Tartarus (*Th.* 722-723).▲

Da *Semicerchio* LIV (2016/1), pp. 114-116

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