

Who Would Have Ruled Over Immortal Gods and Men: The Preservation of Cosmic Order in Hesiod's *Theogony*

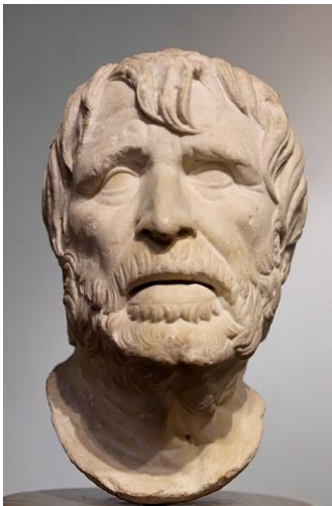
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In the proem of the *Theogony*, Hesiod invokes the Olympian Muses and asks that they:

“. . . glorify the sacred race of immortals always being,
those who were born from Gaia and starry Ouranos
and dark Night, and those whom salty Pontos reared.
And tell how in the first place the gods and earth were born
and the rivers and the boundless sea, seething in its swell,
and the shining stars and the broad sky above.
and those who were born from them, the gods givers of good things,
**and how they divided the wealth and how they distributed their honors
and also how first they came to possess many-folded Olympus.**
Tell me these things Muses holding Olympian homes
from the beginning, and tell me which of them came to be first.” (*Th.* 105-14)

As you may know, the ancient Greeks practiced polytheistic religion; they prayed to a multitude of gods each of whom has his or her own individual powers and areas of dominion. They are organized and exercise their communal powers under the supreme leadership of the ruler Zeus, in the stable political order known as the Olympian pantheon. The *Theogony* is one of the many oral poems composed by the ancient Greeks to celebrate and propitiate these gods. Its composition is credited to Hesiod, a poet from the 8th century BC thought to be roughly contemporary with Homer.



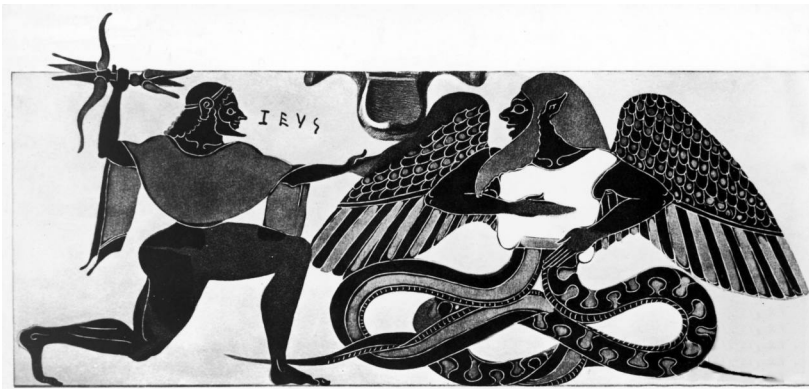
The poet, Hesiod.

I begin with Hesiod's invocation of the Olympian Muses because it is an incredibly telling representation of both the compositional and thematic structure of the poem. It clearly outlines the project of the poem itself: to provide an account for the genesis of the gods and the establishment of the Olympian pantheon.

Further, this invocation demonstrates that within Greek pantheistic ideology and the *Theogony* itself, genealogical and political narratives are intertwined. When Hesiod asks that the Muses tell how the gods were born and “how they divided the wealth and distributed their honors” he makes clear that in the discussion of cosmic order familial relationships double as political.

If then, familial relationships influence the political dynamic, how do the powers of female deities, specifically their reproductive and maternal powers affect and function within the Olympian pantheon? Is their ability to give birth to and train new deities threatening to the existing cosmic order? These questions have been the focus of my research this summer.

I have been performing close textual analyses of the *Theogony*, the *Homeric Hymns*, and portions of *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in order to understand the role of female deities within the divine power structure. In particular, my research focuses on a sequence within the *Theogony* known as the Typhonomachy which depicts a battle between Zeus and a monster Typho, the last born son of the earth goddess, Gaia.



A portrayal of the Typhonomachy on an Attic Black Figure Vase. Typho is the snakey, bearded fellow.

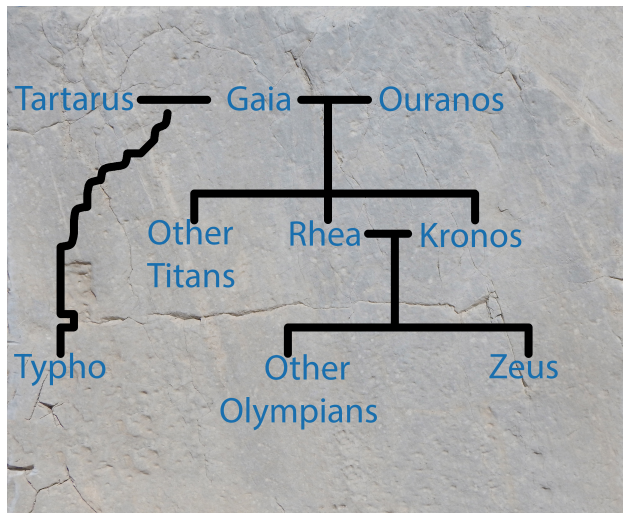
I was interested in using this passage as the launch point for my research because the motivations for Gaia’s behavior are unclear; it is not revealed why she gives birth to the monster at this moment or what effect she hopes to have on cosmic order in doing so. Until the latter half of the 20th century many classical scholars thought Gaia’s actions to be so inconsistent with her behavior earlier in the *Theogony*, that they dismissed the passage as an interpolation. But, as I’ve come to find out this summer, the Typhonomachy is immensely important to the structure of the *Theogony* precisely because of the way in which it confronts the individual authority of female deities.

In fact, my working supposition now is that the Typhonomachy presents Zeus in conflict with female speech. His battle with Typho is the process of subduing and reworking threatening female speech so that within the established pantheon, goddess speak and behave in a way that reinforces his supreme rule. Over the next few minutes I will show you the methods I used to reach this preliminary conclusion.

My method is fairly straight forward. I perform careful translations of each text alongside relevant commentaries. As I read I make note of verbal parallelism; I keep track of words that repeat and the contexts in which they appear. I also look more broadly for recurring thematic motifs.

One motif I watched for is succession.

This is an overly simplified family tree of the Greek divinities. Gaia and Ouranos are the primordial powers who give birth to the Titans, two of whom are Rhea and Kronos who then give birth to Zeus and the remaining Olympians. Typho's lineage deserves a squiggly line because his parents are Gaia and Tartarus who is at once a divinity and a region of the underworld. These are important genealogical relationships to keep in mind as I move forward in describing the motif of succession.



Overly simplified family tree of the Greek divinities.

Succession is when a new, more powerful deity is born and usurps the cosmic kingship from the existing supreme deity. Due to the conflation of familial and political relationships, often succession narratives portray a son overthrowing his father. As an examination of recurring motifs will show; however, succession, is largely related to maternal powers of female divinities, and within the *Theogony*, closely linked to Gaia herself.

Early on in the *Theogony* Gaia urges her children, Kronos and the Titans, to overthrow their father Ouranos:

“My children of a shameless father, if you should wish
to obey me, we should repay your father’s wicked outrage.
For he contrived shameful deeds first.” (*Th.* 163-5)

Gaia’s words incite Kronos to overthrow his father and take control of the cosmos. Later when Rhea is about to give birth to Zeus, Kronos’s last child, she seeks the help of her parents, Gaia and Ouranos. It is Gaia’s advice that Rhea flee, and ultimately Gaia’s clandestine nurturing of Zeus that allows him to grow strong enough to overthrow his father. Once again Gaia’s words assist in succession.

Now we reach the Typhonomachy. Immediately after Zeus deposes Kronos and the Titans, and just before he establishes the pantheon, Gaia gives birth to the monster, Typho. The poem reveals that:

“And on that day, there would have been a deed past help,
And he [Typho] would have ruled over mortals, at any rate, and immortals
If, to be sure, the father of men and gods had not sharply perceived.”

Typho has tireless feet, his one hundred snake heads shoot fire and alternately hiss, roar, bellow and only occasionally utter words that the gods can comprehend.

Zeus and Typho engage in a long one-on-one battle in which Zeus emerges victorious. He burns off the monster's heads and hurls him to the murky depths of the Tartarus, an ambiguous region of the underworld. Meanwhile Gaia burns and melts like metal in a crucible. Hesiod then narrates the establishment of the pantheon and lists the catalogue of Zeus's wives and children.

Though Zeus is not yet the established leader of the pantheon, and Typho is not his son, Gaia's actions here seem to be aligned with her subversive behavior in the two prior instances; it is apparent that the motif of succession threat is here too. For the third time, she is involved in a power struggle for supreme control of the cosmos.

An examination of the verbal parallelism within the poem lead me to think about Gaia's threat as specifically related to acts of subversive speech. At the close of the Typhonomachy, as Zeus hurls Typho into Tartarus, he grieves. This act is uncharacteristic of victors in Archaic Greek poetry.

ῥῖψε δέ μιν θυμῷ ἀκαχῶν ἐς Τάρταρον εὐρύν.

And he hurled him to broad Tartarus while grieving in his heart. (*Th.* 868)

I used the Thesaurus Lingua Graecae, a concordance of Greek words, to find other instances of the verb ἀχέω "to grieve" within the Theogony. This helps me understand the usage of the word within its context. It appeared only two other times, one of which contained other striking verbal parallels.

Within the proem, Hesiod describes the power of the Olympian Muses to inspire song in the singer and ultimately to ease the heart of men who hear the singer's song.

εἰ γάρ τις καὶ πένθος ἔχων νεοκηδεί θυμῷ
 ἄζηται κραδίην ἀκαχήμενος, αὐτὰρ ἀοιδὸς
 Μουσῶν θεράπων κλεῖα προτέρων ἀνθρώπων
 ὑμνήσει μάκαράς τε θεοὺς οἳ Ὀλυμπον ἔχουσιν,
 αἴψ' ὄγε δυσφροσυνέων ἐπιλήθεται οὐδέ τι κηδέων
 μέμνηται· ταχέως δὲ παρέτραπε δῶρα θεᾶων.

For if someone is both holding pain in his newly pained heart
 and dries up his heart while grieving, but a singer,
 attendant to the muses, sings the famous deeds of earlier men
 and of the blessed gods who hold Olympus
 and straight away he forgets his anxieties, at any rate, and
 not in any way does he remember his cares.

For swiftly the gifts of the goddesses (the muses) divert him. (*Th.* 98-103)

In comparing the two, it's easy to substitute Zeus for the grieving man within the hypothetical situation. The purpose of grief within this proposed situation is to demonstrate the power of the song to alleviate it. A song that celebrates the established Olympian order is able to make one's heart carefree. Zeus's grief too, perhaps, is proleptic. That is to say, Zeus's moment of

grieving here could actually be looking forward to and emphasizing what will alleviate it: the establishment of the pantheon and the catalogue of his wives and children that occur only a few lines after the close of the Typhonomachy.

So how does this relate to female deities? It seems that the Muses are exemplars of positive and powerful female speech; they reinforce the stability of the pantheon insofar as they celebrate its establishment with their song and cause mortals to do the same. While the nine Olympian Muses are able to sing one ordered song together, Typho's hundred heads only produce cacaphony. Could Typho, then, who seems to be the cause of Zeus's grief represent threatening female speech? Is Typho comparable to Gaia's first speech to her children in which she urged them to overthrow their father?

My working conclusion is, yes, but in the coming semester I will focus my research in particular upon the relationship between modes of speech and reproductive powers of the female deities. I would like to read larger portions of the Iliad in Greek and perform close analyses of the way in which Aphrodite, Hera and Athena (three major Olympian goddesses) speak and how this relates to their political status.

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All translations and family tree graphic are my own.