

Herodotus, Dionysus, and the Greek death taboo. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the construction of the “chthonic” in Greek literary tradition.

Herodotus’ explicit avoidance of the mentioning of divine names and matters in the second book of the *Histories* counts in most cases as instances of the Greek taboo concerning the relation of gods to the impurity of death, which the Egyptian death cult of Osiris transgresses in an obvious manner. In 2.171.2–3, Herodotus’ reticence may have concerned Persephone, whose name was taboo for the same reasons. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the *Theogony*, the *Eumenides*, and other works featuring underworldly deities, construed the Chthonian category of the divine as an attempt to justify and explain the nature of these ancient agricultural gods and rituals in a manner acceptable to the aristocratic religious tendency, which had come to regard death as impure: a tendency which justifiably may be called Olympian and traced its ideological origins back to the Homeric epos.¹

One of many contentious problems in Herodotus concerns the religious attitudes expressed, purportedly as his own, in the second book of the *Histories*, in particular those attitudes which indicate a taboo in operation. On a number of occasions, Herodotus claims that it is forbidden or sacrilegious for him to mention something, usually the name of a god. A couple of times he states that the mention of something of a religious character would be unpleasant or improper. There are also some passages which have been taken as implicit expressions of the same or a similar attitude.

I render here the examples which will be subject to discussion, together with Godley’s (1926) English translations, modified in a couple of instances for terminological consistency and precision.

Forbidden and unholy matters:

2.61.1. *The festival of Isis.*

ἐν δὲ Βουσίρι πόλι ὡς ἀνάγουσι τῆ Ἴσι τὴν ὀρτήν, εἴρηται πρότερόν μοι. Τύπτονται [μὲν] γὰρ δὴ μετὰ τὴν θυσίην πάντες καὶ παῖσαι, μυριάδες κάρτα πολλαὶ ἀνθρώπων· τὸν δὲ τύπτονται, οὐ μοι ὀσιόν ἐστι λέγειν.

I have already described how they keep the feast of Isis at Busiris. There, after the sacrifice, all the men and women lament, in countless numbers; but **it is not pious for me to say who it is for whom they lament.**

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2.86.1–2. *The embalming of the dead.*

Εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ ἐπ’ αὐτῷ τούτῳ κατέαται καὶ τέχνην ἔχουσι ταύτην. Οὗτοι, ἐπεὰν σφι κομισθῆ νεκρός, δεικνύουσι τοῖσι κομίσασι παραδείγματα νεκρῶν ξύλινα, τῆ γραφῆ μεμιμημένα. **Καὶ τὴν μὲν σπουδαιοτάτην αὐτέων φασι εἶναι τοῦ οὐκ ὄσιον ποιεῖναι τὸ οὖνομα ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ πρήγματι ὀνομάζειν**, τὴν δὲ δευτέραν δεικνύουσι ὑποδεεστέραν τε ταύτης καὶ εὐτελεστέραν, τὴν δὲ τρίτην εὐτελεστάτην.

There are men whose sole business this is and who have this special craft. When a dead body is brought to them, they show those who brought it wooden models of corpses, painted likenesses; **the most perfect way of embalming belongs, they say, to One whose name it would be impious for me to mention in treating such a matter**; the second way, which they show, is less perfect than the first, and cheaper; and the third is the least costly of all.

2.132.2. *A golden cow, in which Pharaoh Mycerinus' daughter lies buried.*

Ἔστι δὲ ἡ βοῦς οὐκ ὀρθὴ ἀλλ’ ἐν γούνασι κειμένη, μέγαθος δὲ ὅση περ μεγάλη βοῦς ζωή. Ἐκφέρεται δὲ ἐκ τοῦ οἰκήματος ἀνὰ πάντα ἔτεα, ἐπεὰν τύπτωνται Αἰγύπτιοι **τὸν οὐκ ὀνομαζόμενον θεὸν ὑπ’ ἐμέο ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ πρήγματι.**

It does not stand, but kneels; it is as big as a live cow of great size. This image is carried out of the chamber once every year, **whenever the Egyptians mourn the god whose name I omit in speaking of such a matter.**

2.170.1–2. *The grave of Osiris.*

Εἰσὶ δὲ καὶ αἱ ταφαὶ τοῦ **οὐκ ὄσιον ποιεῖναι ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ πρήγματι ἐξαγορεύειν τοῦνομα** ἐν Σάϊ, ἐν τῷ ἰρῷ τῆς Ἀθηναίης ὀπισθε τοῦ νηοῦ, παντὸς τοῦ τῆς Ἀθηναίης ἐχόμεναι τοίχου. Καὶ ἐν τῷ τεμένει ὄβελοι ἐστᾶσι μεγάλοι λίθινοι, λίμνη τέ ἐστι ἐχομένη.

There is also at Saïs the burial-place of **one whose name I think it impious to mention in speaking of such a matter**; it is in the temple of Athena, behind and close to the length of the wall of the shrine.

Moreover, great stone obelisks stand in the precinct; and there is a lake nearby.

2.171.1. *The Passion of Osiris dramatized.*

Ἐν δὲ τῇ λίμνῃ ταύτῃ τὰ δείκηλα τῶν παθέων Αὐτοῦ νυκτὸς ποιεῖσι, τὰ καλέουσι μυστήρια Αἰγύπτιοι. Περὶ μὲν νυν τούτων εἰδότε μοι ἐπὶ πλέον ὡς ἕκαστα αὐτῶν ἔχει, **εὔστομα κείσθω.**

[3|4]

On this lake they enact by night the story of the god's sufferings, a rite which the Egyptians call mysteries. I could say more about this, for I know the truth, but **let me preserve a discreet silence.**

2.171.2–3. *The Hellenic Thesmophoria.*

Καὶ τῆς Δήμητρος τελετῆς πέρι, τὴν οἱ Ἕλληνες Θεσμοφόρια καλέουσι, καὶ ταύτης μοι πέρι **εὖστομα κείσθω, πλὴν ὅσον αὐτῆς ὅσιη ἐστὶ λέγειν**· αἱ Δαναοῦ θυγατέρες ἦσαν αἱ τὴν τελετὴν ταύτην ἐξ Αἰγύπτου ἐξαγαγοῦσαι καὶ διδάξασαι τὰς Πελασγιώτιδας γυναῖκας.

Let me preserve a discreet silence, too, concerning that rite of Demeter which the Greeks call Thesmophoria, **except as much of it as is pious to mention.** The daughters of Danaus were those who brought this rite out of Egypt and taught it to the Pelasgian women.

Improper matters:

2.46.2. *Pan.*

γράφουσί τε δὴ καὶ γλύφουσι οἱ ζωγράφοι καὶ οἱ ἀγαλματοποιοὶ τοῦ Πανὸς τῶγαλμα κατὰ περ Ἕλληνας αἰγοπρόσωπον καὶ τραγοσκελέα, οὔτι τοιοῦτον νομίζοντες εἶναι μιν ἀλλ' ὅμοιον τοῖσι ἄλλοισι θεοῖσι· **ὄτεο δὲ εἵνεκα τοιοῦτον γράφουσι αὐτόν, οὗ μοι ἡδιδόν ἐστι λέγειν.**

Now in their painting and sculpture, the image of Pan is made with the head and the legs of a goat, as among the Greeks; not that he is thought to be in fact such, or unlike other gods; **but why they represent him so, it is not pleasant for me to say.**

2.47.2. *The sacrifice of pigs.*

Τοῖσι μὲν νυν ἄλλοισι θεοῖσι θύειν ὅς οὐ δικαιοῦσι Αἰγύπτιοι, Σελήνη δὲ καὶ Διονύσῳ μούνοισι τοῦ αὐτοῦ χρόνου, τῇ αὐτῇ πανσελήνῳ, ὅς θύσαντες πατέονται τῶν κρεῶν. **Δι' ὅ τι δὲ τοὺς ὅς ἐν μὲν τῆσι ἄλλῃσι ὀρτῆσι ἀπεστυγήκασιν, ἐν δὲ ταύτῃ θύουσι, ἔστι μὲν λόγος περὶ αὐτοῦ ὑπ' Αἰγυπτίων λεγόμενος, ἐμοὶ μέντοι ἐπισταμένῳ οὐκ εὐπρεπέστερός ἐστι λέγεσθαι.**

Nor do the Egyptians think it right to sacrifice swine to any god except the Moon and Dionysus; to these, they sacrifice their swine at the same time, in the same season of full moon; then they eat the meat. **The Egyptians have an explanation of why they [45] sacrifice swine at this festival, yet abominate them at others; I know it, but it is not proper to relate.**

Possibly improper or forbidden matters:

After a digression about rites and stories concerning Heracles and Zeus (Amun), including the mention of Zeus wearing a ram's head and fleece, and of Heracles slaying the Egyptians who were about to sacrifice him to Zeus, Herodotus makes the following averting formula (2.45):

καὶ περὶ μὲν τούτων τοσαῦτα ἡμῖν εἰποῦσι καὶ παρὰ τῶν θεῶν καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἡρώων εὐμένεια εἶη.

In talking so much about this, may I keep the goodwill of gods and heroes!

Four more passages are usually cited in this context, in which Herodotus mentions the existence of a ἱρὸς λόγος, a “sacred story” concerning an Egyptian custom which he has just described, but which he then, without further comment, refrains from relating. They are 2.48.2–3 (concerning Dionysus' phallus), 2.51.4 (Hermes' phallus), 62.1–2 (the Feast of Lamps in Saïs), and 2.81 (restrictions against woollen clothing).²

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At the beginning of the second book, Herodotus offers a kind of policy statement, which has been taken as central to the understanding of these passages, though it may well be thought to mystify things rather than explain them (2.3.2):

Τὰ μὲν νυν θεῖα τῶν ἀπηγημάτων οἷα ἤκουον, οὐκ εἰμὶ πρόθυμος ἐξηγέσθαι, ἔξω ἢ τὰ οὐνόματα αὐτῶν μοῦνον, νομίζων πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἴσον περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπίστασθαι· τὰ δ' ἂν ἐπιμνησθῆω αὐτῶν, ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου ἐξαναγκαζόμενος ἐπιμνησθήσομαι.

Now, such stories as I heard about the gods I am not ready to relate, except their names, for I believe that all men are equally knowledgeable about them; and I shall say about them what I am constrained to say by the course of my history.

A similar statement is found at 2.65.2, where Herodotus mentions “matters of divinity, which I am especially averse to treating; I have never touched upon such except where

necessity has compelled me”. These passages have been adduced as evidence that Herodotus’ approach is one of agnosticism, empiricism or scepticism, by for instance Linforth, Lloyd, and most recently Scullion: “Herodotus ... aligns himself with the intellectual tradition of scepticism about the gods going back to Xenophanes”.³ This intellectual tradition is perhaps not so religiously uncontaminated as some would hope, though (we will take a brief look at Xenophanes towards the end of this article, where the first “policy[5]6) statement” will also be further treated), —and in the case of the present passages, where an explicit taboo forbids Herodotus the mention of certain religious matters and names, I cannot understand to what possible use any talk of “scepticism” or “agnosticism” could be.

One scholar who has made a positive contribution towards the understanding of these passages is Sourdille (1925), who suggested that the taboo concerned matters which Herodotus identified with the Greek Mysteries and therefore was forbidden to utter (cf. especially 2.171.1, cited above). This explanation is in fact accepted by Lloyd, albeit grudgingly: “Sourdille’s suggestion ... is quite untenable as a general rule, though in some cases it does operate (II, 61, 86, 132, 170, 171; ...)”.⁴ But these happen to be the very cases that interest us—the ones where Herodotus *explicitly* states that it is forbidden for him to utter something. For certain reasons, which I will come back to, I believe that Sourdille’s suggestion is incorrect, or at least comes into play only as a secondary explanation.

Robert Parker, seemingly unaware that there was a problem, cites Hdt. 2.86 as an example of it being “sacrilegious to mention Dionysus *in connection with death*” (my italics).⁵ He further adduces Demosthenes 60.30 and Plato, *Menexenus* 238b, both of which are examples of funerary orations. The latter passages are also cited, together with E. *Hel.* 1307, by Thomas Harrison as examples of a “taboo concerning the naming of gods in certain contexts”.⁶ Harrison declines to discuss which contexts this is, however. The passage from *Helen* mentions an ἄρρητος κόρη, an unspeakable girl: this is Persephone,⁷ about whom more later. The passages from Demosthenes and Plato read as follows:

οὐκ ἐλάνθανεν Οἰνεΐδας ὅτι Κάδμου μὲν Σεμέλη, τῆς δ' ὄν οὐ πρόπον ἐστὶν ὀνομάζειν ἐπὶ τοῦδε τοῦ τάφου.

It was not unknown to the Oeneidae that Semele was the daughter of Kadmos, **her son he whose name it is not proper to mention by this grave.**

θρεψαμένη δὲ καὶ ἀξίησασα πρὸς ἥβην ἄρχοντας καὶ διδασκάλους αὐτῶν θεοὺς ἐπιγάγετο· ὧν τὰ μὲν ὀνόματα πρέπει ἐν τῷ τοιῷδε ἔἶναι – ἴσμεν γάρ – οἱ τὸν βίον ἡμῶν κατεσκεύασαν πρὸς τε τὴν καθ' ἡμέραν δίαιταν, τέχνας πρώτους παιδευσάμενοι, καὶ πρὸς τὴν ὑπὲρ τῆς χώρας φυλακὴν ὄπλων κτήσιν τε καὶ χρῆσιν διδασκόμενοι.

And when she had nurtured and reared them up to man's estate, she introduced gods to be their governors and tutors; **the names of whom it behoves us to pass over in this discourse**, since we know them; and they set in order our mode of life, not only in respect of daily business, by instructing us before all others in the arts, but also in [\[6/7\]](#) respect of the guardianship of our country, by teaching us how to acquire and handle arms.

(Bury 1929)

τὰ μὲν ὀνόματα πρέπει ἐν τῷ τοιῷδε ἔἶναι, says Aspasia in the *Menexenus*. The language is the exact equivalent to that of Herodotus: τοῦ οὐκ ὄσιον ποιεῦμαι τὸ οὔνομα ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ πρήγματι ὀνομάζειν (2.86), τὸν οὐκ ὀνομαζόμενον θεὸν ὑπ' ἐμέο ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ πρήγματι (2.170). Accordingly, there can hardly be any question that this, the pollution of death, is the sacrilege with which Herodotus is primarily concerned in each case where he says that the mention of something is forbidden or profane (οὐκ ὄσιον). In all cases cited above under the heading *Forbidden and unholy matters*, except one, which I shall discuss later in this article, the narrative concerns the rites of Osiris, which re-enact the myth of his death, embalment and resurrection.

What concerns Herodotus is not, which is often claimed, “the name of Osiris”—he mentions Osiris four times in the *Histories*—, but that name which he would naturally use referring to the god, which is Dionysus. Herodotus mentions Dionysus twenty times in the second book, in 2.42 and 2.144 stating that his Egyptian name is Osiris. But he cannot mention him ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ πρήγματι, in the context of the Egyptian death cult.

The prohibition against letting the gods and the divine have anything to do with death is such a central feature of the Greek religion of the Classical period that it is

remarkable that none of the commentators on Herodotus mentions it in connection with these passages. Not even Gilbert Murray (1927), who discusses, within Jane Harrison's theoretical paradigm of the "Year Spirit", the motif of the dying and resurrected god as a ritualistic basis for Greek tragedy—and at pp. 342–34 mentions Herodotus and the Egyptian lacerated Dionysus (*v. infra*) as something ἄρρητον, unutterable—has anything to say about the Greek death taboo in general.⁸

For comprehensive surveys of this taboo with full references to instances in ancient literature and documents, see Nilsson (1967), 95–98, Parker (1983), 32–73. Here, a well-known example from Euripides' *Hippolytus* will suffice as an illustration, together with Barrett's commentary. Hippolytus, the favourite of the goddess Artemis, lies dying; she, who has been standing next to him, must leave (vv. 1437–39):⁹

καὶ χαῖρ'· ἐμοὶ γὰρ οὐ θέμις φθιτοὺς ὄραῖν
οὐδ' ὄμμα χρáινειν θανασίμοισιν ἐκπνοαῖς·
ὄρω δέ σ' ἤδη τοῦδε πλησίον κακοῦ.

Farewell. It is unlawful for me to see a corpse,
for my eye to be touched by the breath of death.[7|8]
I see that you are close to this evil now.

Death is unclean, and the holy places of the gods must be kept free from pollution: the dead and the dying must be kept away (from Delos, Th. 3.104.2; from the Epidaurian Asklepeion, Paus. 2.27.1; from Athenian holy places in general, *IG* ii². 1035, 10 f., Th. 2.52.3), and even a man who has been in contact with death must keep away until purified. Now if the gods' holy places must thus be kept clean of death, so *a fortiori* must the gods themselves; hence Art.'s οὐ θέμις, and hence at *Al.* 22 Apollo must leave the house where Alkestis is dying μὴ μίασμά μ' ἐν δόμοις κίχῃ. (Editors sometimes talk as though this abhorrence of death ... is peculiar to these two; I see no reason for supposing this to be true. Cf. Ael. fr. 11 ap. Suid. Φιλήμων: on the night before he died the comic poet Philemon had a dream in which nine young women left the house, saying that it was not θεμιτόν for them to remain; they were the Muses.)¹⁰

Our passages from Herodotus as well as Demosthenes 60.30, cited above, strengthen Barrett's last argument, being concerned with Dionysus (the son of Semele). In the case of Herodotus, the profanity is not so moderate as that concerned with in the reference material. In the Egyptian customs described by Herodotus, the god in question, Dionysus,

is *himself dead*. How should a religious belief, according to which “death’s breath may not touch the eye of a god”, react before the idea of cutting Dionysus in nine pieces, putting him together again, embalming, and burying him? Much as Herodotus does: he will not mention the god’s name in such a context (ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ πρήγματι).

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However, gods have died in Hellas. In this very context: the motif of the dead and dismembered Dionysus inhabits some of the obscurer regions of Greek religion. I will not here try to unravel the threads of Orphic and Dionysiac syncretism;¹¹ but according to one such thread, followed by Gilbert Murray among others,¹² the *sparagmos*-motif, the tearing of the limbs from the body by raging maenads, which Dionysus is said to have imparted on Orpheus ([Apollod.] 1.15) and Pentheus (E. *Bacch.* 1043 ff.)—was incurred on Dionysus himself, by Titans. The oldest sources date from the Hellenistic era,¹³ but according to Martin P. Nilsson and others, this motif belongs to the ancient core mythology of the Orphic religion.¹⁴ “Pi.” fr. 133 has been interpreted as referring to this myth.¹⁵

Herodotus’ identification of the Osiris-passion as the secret knowledge of Dionysus revealed to the initiates in the mysteries is also professed by George Hinge as the reason for the “silences” in 2.48.3, 2.61.1, 2.86.2, 2.170–171, 2.47.2, 2.132.2.¹⁶ I am not positively convinced—the *sparagmos* of Dionysus may be a late syncretistic borrowing from Egyptian religion. Surely the language of “Pi.” fr. 133 makes it clear that it is not by Pindar, but most likely Hellenistic as well,¹⁷ and the tone of Herodotus in 2.171.1[8|9] τὰ δείκηλα τῶν παθέων ..., τὰ καλέουσι μυστήρια Αἰγύπτιοι, “the spectacle of the suffering ... which the Egyptians call mysteries”, could be interpreted as condescending, suggesting that the Egyptian “mysteries” are nothing like the real, i.e. Greek, ones.

It remains a possibility that the myth of the lacerated Dionysus is ancient and known to Herodotus. If so, this part would still have to be suppressed during the Classical period, when the death taboo operated at its strongest.¹⁸ Accordingly, if the Dionysiac

death and resurrection featured in the Eleusinian mysteries, this may have been one of the main reasons for the secrecy concerning them.

Let us take a look at another one of Herodotus' religious suppressions of detail, the only one of the explicit references to a strong taboo which does not concern Osiris–Dionysus. This is 2.171.2, where Herodotus says about the Hellenic Thesmophoria: εὔστομα κείσθω, πλὴν ὅσον αὐτῆς ὅσῃ ἐστὶ λέγειν (translation above). Herodotus had not been initiated in the Thesmophoria, which admitted women only; how could he know what he was allowed to utter and what not? At least in this case one is tempted to write off his hint at forbidden knowledge as vacuous showmanship. But maybe there is more to it than that. About as much of the Thesmophoria was known to Herodotus' male contemporaries as to us, but among the things we know is that Demeter and her daughter Persephone featured in a central role. Regarding the latter, a Greek taboo existed concerning the mention of her name.¹⁹

The exact details of why and when this prohibition operated are unclear, but it certainly concerned Persephone's function as Queen of the Underworld, seeing that similar prohibitions existed regarding other Chthonian deities.²⁰ In Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone is not mentioned, by this name or any other, nor any details about her fate. μὴ μὴ ταῦτα λέγωμες ἃ δάκρυον ἄγαγε Διῶϊ, he writes (v. 17). This is a strongly voiced negation; rather the prohibitive “we may not mention” than the negative hortative “let us not”.²¹ In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* on the other hand, Persephone's name and the central mythological themes are retold (vv. 1–3):

Δήμητρ' ἠΰκομον σεμνὴν θεὰν ἄρχομ' αἰεῖδεν,
αὐτὴν ἠδὲ θύγατρα τανύσφυρον ἦν Αἰδωνεύς
ἤρπαξεν, δῶκεν δὲ βαρύκτυπος εὐρύοπα Ζεύς.

I begin to sing of Demeter, the holy goddess with the beautiful hair.

And her daughter [Persephone] too. The one with the delicate ankles, whom Hadês seized. She was given away by Zeus, the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide.

(Gregory Nagy 2000)

[9|10]

The rape takes place when Persephone is gathering flowers on the Nysian plain. She happens to light upon the most beautiful flower of all, the narcissus:

ἡ δ' ἄρα θαμβήσασ' ὠρέξατο χερσὶν ἅμ' ἅμφω 15
 καλὸν ἄθυρμα λαβεῖν· χάνε δὲ χθῶν εὐρυάγρια
 Νύσιον ἅμ' πεδίον τῆ ὄρουσεν ἄναξ πολυδέγμων
 ἵπποις ἀθανάτοισι Κρόνου πολυώνυμος υἱός.
 ἀρπάξας δ' ἀέκουσαν ἐπὶ χρυσεόισιν ὄχοισιν
 ἦγ' ὀλοφυρομένην· ἰάχησε δ' ἄρ' ὄρθια φωνῆ 20
 κεκλομένη πατέρα Κρονίδην ὕπατον καὶ ἄριστον.

She was filled with a sense of wonder, and she reached out with both hands
 to take hold of the pretty plaything. And the earth, full of roads leading every which way, opened up under her.
 It happened on the Plain of Nysa. There it was that the Lord who receives many guests made his lunge.
 He was riding on a chariot drawn by immortal horses. The son of Kronos. The one known by many names.
 He seized her against her will, put her on his golden chariot,
 And drove away as she wept. She cried with a piercing voice,
 calling upon her father [Zeus], the son of Kronos, the highest and the best.
 (Nagy 2000)

Later, Demeter becomes upset and cancels the harvests. At last a compromise is reached which lets Persephone visit her mother and the Olympus during part of the year (vv. 387–404). Anthropologists of the early twentieth century have identified the death and resurrection of an archetypal agricultural deity at the core of this myth, corresponding to the changing of the seasons and the growing and harvesting of the crops.²² Less attention has been paid to the fact that the *Homeric Hymn* as well as all other versions of the story found in Greek and Latin literature²³ present an *ameliorated* version of such a core myth. The original nucleus of the ritual and the tale must have been that the goddess dies and comes back to life, just as the crops seem to do—and as Osiris does in the Egyptian context.

Hence, returning to Herodotus' taboo concerning the naming of dead gods, we find that in the case of the Greek Thesmophoria at 2.171.2, a dead god may also have come into play, namely Persephone. We should note that Herodotus claims that the Hellenic Thesmophoria were imported from Egypt by the Danaids, possibly an implicit explanation on Herodotus' part for the unspeakable content of the myth.

She gave birth to white-armed Persephone, whom Hades
robbed from her mother: All-wise Zeus gave her.

I suggest that it is possible to read Hesiod as well as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as part of a literary apologetic tradition. In this particular case the apology would answer to objections to the traditional myth of Persephone, which had arisen as the dominant classes of Greek society became increasingly anxious about the issue of sacral purity and the pollution of death, a concern which is identical with the tendency of Greek religion which traditionally has^[11|12] been called “Olympian”, taking its peak in the Classical age of Greek history. Homer’s aristocratic perspective on the divine is a very important, perhaps the most important, source of the Olympian tendency, and we may note that the so-called Chthonian deities play a very negligible role in the Homeric epos—as does Chthonian ritual (libations, blood-sacrifice).²⁴ On the other hand, the Homeric gods exhibit a very acute sense of the realities of hierarchy and power, which are central to the Olympian understanding of the divine. The gods are powerful and pure: they are *high* (ὕπατοι). The dominant classes, the powerful, slave-owning, leisurely classes, have come to see as absolutely preposterous the idea of gods and divinity having anything to do with the earth, with the dirt and the manure—and dead gods as not only preposterous but sacrilegious. Gods are power, power such as they have, only greater. Earth is low and dirty, a matter for peasants and slaves. Gods do not die and decompose: death is utter uncleanness and the ultimate weakness. How should a mode of social and religious thought such as that relate to the old traditions and agricultural rites that came before it, to the dying and resurrected gods, blood sacrifices, libations, lowly concerns with the earth, —in short, with the entire “chthonic” complex of agricultural religion?

With this question in mind, the bright and pious minds of high poetry attempted to explain and defend the divinities of the earth and death and as far as possible bring them in line with the dominant aristocratic ideology. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is one of several literary attempts to come to terms with the problem. Here, Persephone does not die, she is abducted; Hades is not so ugly, he is the brother of Zeus; and Zeus is ultimately responsible for the installation of Persephone in the underworld. A well-

known, equally ambitious apology is found in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, where the old Athenian Erinyes, demon goddesses of fear, death and revenge, are transformed, through a purifying process involving Athena, Apollo and the judicial congress of the Aeropagus, into the Eumenids, the Kindly ones, protectresses of Athens. The myth about the Olympian revolt against the Titans is another part of this apologetic literary tradition, as is the Gigantomachy (*v.infra*).

The concepts of Chthonian and Olympian has been subject to scrutiny lately, the most radical opinion being that the structure in its entirety is a romantic 19th-century invention, having nothing to do with the realities of ancient Greek religion. At the very least it has been convincingly demonstrated that a deity cannot be identified as Olympian or Chthonian by the manner of ritual and sacrifice.²⁵ The term Chthonian (χθόνιος) has a demonstrable significance in literature, though, as a polar opposite to Olympian or “high” (ὕπατος). In particular this polarity operates in Classical literature, notably Aeschylean tragedy.²⁶ The distinction between Chthonian and Olympian also remains valid[12|13] in the high poetry of the Hellenistic tradition, but is blurred in primary religious documents such as Orphic poetry and magic papyri.

This conforms with my general thesis: the religious rites and traditions are ancient, agricultural practises, involving the processual methods of libation, blood-sacrifice, and death-and-resurrection mythology. The *concept* Chthonian arises in a literary, intellectual tradition, as a reaction—a counter-reformation, as it were—against the attacks from a new religious tendency. This tendency or ideology, the ideology of purity, takes its roots in the Homeric epos and has become the dominant world-view of the leisurely classes in Archaic and Classical times. The mentioned poetic works, including the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, are examples of constructive, reconciliatory narrative. On the other hand, there are direct attacks from philosophers. These have often been seen as “rationalist” and attributed to the Ionic intellectual tradition. However, to a degree, this may be wishful thinking: even in the case of Xenophanes, the most celebrated theological rationalist, we find that when it comes to gods dying, he is no rationalist all. Xenophanes, too, says that the idea of a dead god is *sacriledge* (T 12 D–K = Arist. *Rh.* 1399b):

οἷον Ξενοφάνης ἔλεγεν ὅτι ὁμοίως ἀσεβοῦσιν οἱ γενέσθαι φάσκοντες τοὺς θεοὺς τοῖς ἀποθανεῖν λέγουσιν.

For instance, it was a saying of Xenophanes that **to assert that the gods had birth is as impious as to say that they die.**

(W. Rhys Roberts 1924)

We do not find a coherent theological system developing, but various attempts to make some order out of the chaos that was the present state of things in the Archaic and Classical ages, an inconsistent and conflict-ridden mixture of the agricultural religious traditions of the peasantry, the haughty aristocratic world-view of the Homeric epos, and Ionic intellectualizing tendencies. In this respect, Hesiod, the *Homeric Hymns* and the Athenian tragedians are more consistent and systematic “theologians” than (for instance) Pindar, who may be suspected, with some reason, of presenting in each poem that tendency which would be most welcome to his patron. Perhaps in principle the same could be said about the tragedians, with the important practical difference that their patron remained the same—the Athenian people—hence allowing for a more consistent philosophical project.

In Egypt, Herodotus encounters the ancient death cults and Chthonian rituals completely unmitigated, indeed in a form which has undergone an opposite development to that of Greek religion, towards *affirming* and *sacralizing* death. Egyptian gods die, they are embalmed in a grisly process (2.86) and their corpses are paraded in the streets with enormous, artificial phalluses (2.48.3). Of course^[13|14] Herodotus cannot mention the name of Dionysus, the god of life and celebration, in such a context. Or, if we want to be as cynical with regard to Herodotus as to Pindar (many want to): privately, the historian shrugged his shoulders at the spectacle, but he knew very well that his audience—the educated Athenian gentry who paid to listen to him reciting his histories—would not appreciate Egyptian blasphemies. The paying audience will appreciate an attitude in the lecturer which concurs with their own attitude—or even better, one which articulates matters which they themselves have only conceived of vaguely, on an emotional plane. Herodotus’ repeatedly violated “policy statement”, where he says that he will not mention anything more on religious matters than the names of gods (2.3.2, cf. 2.65.2),

should not be taken seriously, but is a rationalizing construct intended to appeal to that part of his audience that was less religiously inclined.

Finally, a few words about the passages cited above under the headline *Improper matters*, the language of which suggests a weaker taboo (2.46.2, 2.47.2; cf. Linforth 1924, 281). We may note that both passages, as well as at least two of the instances (2.45, 2.81) cited under *Possibly improper or forbidden matters*, concern gods in relation to animals, which may give us a hint at the nature of this unpleasantness. Pan as the goat Mendes, Zeus as the ram Amun, and the god Seth as the pig attacking the Moon, are all instances of gods taking animal form,²⁷ a matter which seems to have been improper and possibly sacrilegious according to the Olympian religious tendency. For instance we may note that Aeschylus in the *Supplikes* very carefully avoids any hint of Zeus taking animal form while impregnating Io (15–19, 40–48, 313–15, 535, 571–81)—and that semi-animal form in myth usually carries the implication of wild and uncivilized, less-than-human behaviour: for instance in the case of Satyrs, Centaurs (could, for instance, the contrast between Apollo and the Centaurs in the Olympia frieze be greater?), and Giants—Chthonian children of blood and earth, arising as the blood of the castrated Uranus fertilized Gaia—who in the Pergamon frieze are depicted with worm-like lower parts.

[14|16]

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² See Harrison (2000) 182–86 for a collection of instances including these last four.[\[14|15\]](#)

³ Scullion (2006), 200–201; Linfoth (1924); Lloyd (1976), 17. Herodotus’ religious attitudes is an infected matter: see, for instance, “scepticist” Lateiner’s (2002) review of “pietist” Harrison (2000); p. 376 on the controversial “religious silences”.

⁴ Lloyd (1976), 18.

⁵ Parker (1983), 64, n. 108.

⁶ Harrison (2000), 189, n. 24.

⁷ Cf. Call. *Cer.* 17 (v. *infra*, text for n. 21), and Hopkinson (1984) ad loc., citing E. fr. 63 and Carc. junior fr. 5 *TrGF* as other instances of Persephone as the “unspeakable girl”.

⁸ Harrison’s “eniautos-daimon” has been subject to much ridicule, not least as regards the impossible Greek (cf. Beard 2005, 131, text for n. 77, and also p. 113 on William Ridgeway’s critique of the mentioned theory of Murray’s). However, the silly Greek term notwithstanding, the general idea of a dying and resurrected god of vegetation is relevant as a central feature of the religion of agricultural society (v. *infra*, text for n. 22).

⁹ This scene from the *Hippolytus* is in fact reckoned by Murray (1927, 346) as one of the instances of divine *sparagmos* occurring as a motif in tragedy.

¹⁰ Barrett (1964), 414.

¹¹ See Hinge (2003) on this subject, focussing on the fourth book of Herodotus and the Greek population of the Black Sea region (Olbia).

¹² Murray (1927), 342ff.

¹³ Burkert (1997), 140, n. 41, cites Euph. fr. 13, Call. fr. 643 (= *Schol. in Lyc.* 207), fr. 517 (= EM 255, 14–16), Philoch. *FGrH* 328 F 7, Clem.Al. *Protr.* 2.18.2.

¹⁴ Nilsson (1967), 686, text for n. 4; Burkert (1997), 140–42, 197.

¹⁵ Rose (1936). [Pi.] fr. 133: v. *infra* n. 17.

¹⁶ Hinge (2003), text for nn. 17–22.

¹⁷ οἷσι δὲ Φερσεφόνα ποινὰν ἀγαυοί | καὶ σθένει κραιπνοὶ σοφία τε μέγιστοι | ἄνδρες αὖξοντ'· ἐς δὲ τὸν
λοιπὸν χρόνον ἥρωες ἀλγνοὶ πρὸς ἀνθρώπων καλέονται.

¹⁸ Cf. Burkert (1997), 140, text for n. 41: “Die überwiegende Tradition [sc. concerning the contents of the sacred Delphic tripod], auch sie inoffiziell, sektierischem Geheimnis benachbart, nannte ... den getöteten Dionysos”. Burkert cites Call. fr. 643 and other Hellenistic sources (*v. supra* n. 13).

¹⁹ Cf. *supra* text for n. 7.

²⁰ See especially Pulleyn (1994), 24 and Clinton (1986), 44 for interesting observations and discussion.

²¹ See Hopkinson (1984) *ad loc.* (p. 95): “For the disclaimer cf. fr. 75.4–5 Ἥρην γὰρ κοτέ φασι—κῦον, κῦον, ἴσχεο, λαιδρέ | θυμέ, σύ γ' αἰεῖσι καὶ τὰ περ οὐχ ὀσίη”, and cf. *supra*, n. 7.

²² See Richardson (1974), 13ff., for a comprehensive summary; also Allen–Halliday–Sikes (1936), 115ff., for modes of expression closer to those of the Ritualist anthropologists themselves.

²³ A list of references is found in Allen–Halliday–Sikes (1936), 108f.

²⁴ See Kirk (1990), 9 ff., cf. Harrison (1927), 335.

²⁵ See Ekroth (2002), in particular pp. 310–25.

²⁶ Burkert (1985), 202. I have treated the problem in my commentary on Aeschylus *Supplices* 24–25 (Sandin 2003, 50–55), where the transmitted text, uniquely in Greek literature, designates Heroes as χθόνιοι, Chthonian. I believe this reading is probably a corruption for χθονίους (Portus), which is to be taken with θήκας κατέχοντες: “possessing tombs in the earth”.

²⁷ See Lloyd (1976) 189ff., 215f., 218 for details concerning these instances of Egyptian zoomorphism.