

I: Myth and divinity

1. The union with Metis and the sovereignty of heaven

Jean-Pierre Vernant (1974)

Having consummated his marriage with Metis ('Resource'), Zeus takes the Titan Themis ('Order') to his second wife.¹ These two marriages complement one another, each helping to guarantee the supremacy of the new king of the gods, just as the two goddesses compose a pair both compound and contrastive. Each of them has oracular powers, her knowledge comprehending the whole sweep of time. Each, by virtue of her relation with earth and water, the primal elements, enjoys powers that antedate the reign, the very birth, of Zeus. Themis, born of Gaia ('Earth'), is patron of oracles on land; Metis, daughter of Oceanus and Tethys, represents — like various Old Men of the Sea — divination by water (Vernant, 1963: xvii–xviii; Detienne, 1967: 29–50). But the omniscience of Zeus's first two wives takes different forms; which accounts for his marrying Themis only after he has digested the special powers of Metis, and made himself *mētieta* ('metisized') — by swallowing her.

The omniscience of Themis relates to an order which is conceived as already inaugurated, once and for all settled and fixed. Her utterance has assertive or categorical force: she states the future as though it already were. Because she pronounces what shall be in the present indicative, she frames not advice but directives: she says 'Do this', 'Do not do that'. Metis on the other hand has to do with the future understood as a risk. Her utterance has a hypothetical, problematic cast: she advises what should be done so that things may turn out in one way rather than in some other way. She tells the future not as something already determinate but as a possibility — either good or ill; and at the same time she offers the use of her stock of wiles to make it turn out for the better rather than for the worse.

Themis represents, in the world of the gods, stability, continuity, regularity, the permanence of order, the cycle of recurring seasons (she is the mother of the *Hōrai*: Hesiod, *Theogony* 901–2), the fiat of fate (she is also the mother of the *Moirai* 'who distribute to mortal men good fortune and ill': *Theogony* 904–6). She it is who marks pro-

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hibitions, boundaries which may not be crossed, the gradations which must be respected if everyone is to be kept always within his proper rank and sphere. By contrast, Metis makes her presence felt when the divine world is still fluid, or when its balance of forces is momentarily out of kilter – in disputes over succession, struggles for sovereignty, wars and rebellions, the rise of a new power. At these moments, things get dramatic and disconcerting in heaven; if they are to triumph, the powers that be in the world beyond must display not merely courage and strength, but intelligent planning, cunning and resource.²

In marrying Metis, Zeus – who has just overthrown Cronus and upset the old order – is not simply recognizing the services she rendered him; he is also providing himself with the wherewithal to establish an entirely new order. In marrying Themis, he renders permanent and sacrosanct the rules he has just decreed and his redistribution of honours and privileges. His double marriage both sets the seal upon the fall of Cronus and his own accession, and precludes the possibility of subsequent change.

Wily Metis is a threat to any established order. Her intelligence works in the realm of feint and disconcertion the better to turn the tables, to upset the seemingly most settled system. This comes out in the realm of myth in the motif that her children are dangerous: they inherit from their mother her devious cunning. Thus armed, her son is bound to challenge his father's supremacy, overthrow his sovereign, establish a new dispensation. By marrying, mastering and swallowing Metis, Zeus reveals that he is not a king like other kings; he becomes more than a mere king, he becomes sovereignty itself. All the *mētis* in the world, all the reserves of disconcertion hidden in cunning time, are now inside Zeus. And so sovereignty ceases to be the prize in a perpetual struggle; it becomes a stable, enduring state. The king of the gods may now celebrate his marriage with Themis, give her fine children, the Seasons and the Fates. He has fixed irrevocably both the pattern of things to be and the hierarchy of functions, ranks and honours. He has set them hard. Whatever now comes to pass, it will now always have been entirely foreseen and ordained in the beginning by the mind of Zeus.

Hesiod does not describe in detail the manner in which Zeus overcame Metis and swallowed her to make himself the 'Cunning One', *ὁ μητιέτα, ὁ μητιώεις*.³ He merely says that when Metis was about to give birth to Athena, Zeus 'deceived her mind by a trick, by dint of cunning words, and put her in his belly' (*Theogony* 889–90). It cannot have been easy: a scholiast on the passage tells us that Metis could transform herself into any shape she liked; Zeus swallowed her 'after confusing her and making her small', *πλανήσας οὖν αὐτήν ὁ Ζεὺς καὶ μικρὰν ποιήσας κατέπιεν* (Scholiast on Hesiod, *Theogony* 886, p. 110

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di Gregorio).⁴ There is here an obvious folklore motif: a witch or magician has the power to change shape, thus becoming invincible. On the pretext of testing their power, the hero gets them to run through the repertoire until they turn into some creature small and weak enough to be safely overcome.

The story of Periclymenus and his fight with Herakles seems to draw on the same pattern. The story is known first from Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, in a passage quoted by the scholiast on the *Argonautika* of Apollonius of Rhodes [completed by a papyrus] and also known from the Iliadic scholia (frg. 33 a,b Merkelbach–West).⁵ This account, which seems to have fixed the legendary tradition, presents Periclymenus as the most formidable of the sons of Neleus. His grandfather Poseidon has granted him the power to change into any shape during a fight. Periclymenus boasts that he will by such magic be able to worst great Herakles, the son of Zeus. As it turns out, Herakles kills him at the time of his sack of Pylos; but he has need of all of Athena's cunning when she offers him her sharp-eyed help to defeat this slippery customer. Periclymenus turns into an eagle, a lion and a gigantic snake, one after the other; on Athena's advice, Herakles waits till he turns into a fly, and then swats him with his club. There is a slightly different version which Hesiod develops (cf. Schwartz, 1960: 346–7), in which Herakles takes advantage of a moment when Periclymenus has turned into a bee and is resting right in the centre of his chariot-yoke: again following Athena's bidding, Herakles kills him with an arrow. In each case it is the goddess's *mētis* which creates the critical moment and brings the incident to a successful conclusion. It is her resourcefulness which causes his own power to recoil against the magical warrior, the power of metamorphosis that he has inherited from his forebear, the god of the sea. She does not merely tell Herakles the right moment to strike; she does not simply point his opponent out in whatever shape; she sets up the chance which Herakles siezes, for it is she who treacherously suggests to Periclymenus that he become a fly or a bee so that he can startle his opponent's horses.

So we can say that Athena in Hesiod's version turns on Periclymenus and his auto-metamorphic power the very same trick employed by Zeus against Metis in the *Theogony* to prevent her from giving birth to a daughter endowed no less than himself with her mother's terrible cunning.

A theogony mentioned by Chrysippus the Stoic philosopher (*SVF* 2, 256 [frg. 908] = Galen, *De Hippocratis et Platonis placitis* 3,8 [5, p. 351 Kühn]) differs somewhat from Hesiod's account in the *Theogony*.⁶ For it places the marriage of Zeus and Metis not at the beginning of the god's matrimonial career but during a quarrel between him and his law-

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ful wife Hera.⁷ Yet the variant does confirm Hesiod in a crucial point: it mentions that Metis was swallowed by a deception. Zeus escapes to a safe remove from Hera in order to make love to Metis; and then ‘deceiving her despite all her knowledge (or, by an alternative reading, ‘for all her turning’⁸), laid hands on her and set her deep in his belly for fear that she might give birth to a child mightier than the thunderbolt; so the son of Cronus who sits enthroned on the peak of the aether in an instant swallowed her up. She was then carrying Athena to whom Zeus gave birth from his head on the steep banks of the river Triton. And Metis remained hidden within his belly.’

The scholiast to Hesiod links this theme of the transformations of Metis to her swallowing by Zeus.⁹ But Apollodorus introduces it right at the start of their affair: according to him, Zeus ‘had intercourse with Metis, who took on all sorts of shapes to escape him, and when she became pregnant he took her by surprise and swallowed her’ (*Bibliotheca* 1.3.6). Marriage and absorption appear here as two aspects of a single encounter with Metis which Zeus must win: courtship, sex and total assimilation. Fly and fluid, Metis raids her magic-trick box to try and elude Zeus’s embrace, making use of the self-same ‘skilled trickery’ (*δολίη τέχνη*) that Thetis employs against Peleus, Proteus against Menelaus, and Nereus against Herakles.¹⁰

The mythical setting in each of these incidents is essentially the same. Different they may be, but all these sea-gods share with Metis not only a metamorphic capacity but devious cunning and knowledge of the future. Those who confront them have always to surprise – by dodge, stratagem, ambush or disguise – someone of extraordinary cunning and wariness and vigilance; and hold him fast in an unbreakable grip come what may. His magic neutralized by this binding, when he has rung every metamorphic change, the monster must surrender to his captor: the trickster tricked, the cunning conned, the knotter knotted. The god who could pass through every shape finds his way barred and blocked; for his captor, this obscure and riddling being now becomes forthright and clear. The price these polymorphous divinities have to pay, fluid, ambiguous and contradictory as they are, is the compulsion to make known whatever route, solution or expedient their adversary is searching for.

It is nevertheless only Zeus who pushes the struggle against this creature of the waters embodying all the powers and privilege of cunning intelligence to the ultimate point: he does not merely grip Metis in his arms, as does Peleus to force Thetis to sleep with him, or Herakles Nereus and Menelaus Proteus to force them plainly to reveal a secret essential to an enterprise; he binds her in his belly so as to make her a prisoner for ever: he shuts her up inside him so that she may be part

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and parcel of him, and so provide him at all times with that foreknowledge of future risks which will give Zeus control of the shifting and uncertain course of things.

The struggle with the metamorphic god dramatizes his captor's accession to the privilege of *mētis*, his acquisition of that nimble-wittedness which enables one to get out of hopeless predicaments. The struggle's reversed fortunes serve to highlight the transition from the fluid/mobile to the stable/static; from opacity to clarity; from the contrary to the direct; from uncertainty to good hope: in short and in plain Greek, from the hero's initial *aporia* ('helplessness') to a *poros*, an ingenious dodge that he learns in the end and which will enable him to carry out his ultimate purpose. The god is taken by surprise. To get free, he assumes the most disconcerting, disparate and frightening shapes, becoming by turns running water, burning fire, wind, tree, bird, tiger, snake. But the series cannot continue indefinitely: there is a repertoire of shapes; when one has run through it, one must come back to the beginning. If his adversary has been clever enough not to let go, the metamorphic god has to give up and go back to his usual, his original shape and stick with it. This is Chiron's advice to Peleus: Thetis may turn herself into fire, water or into some wild animal, but he is not to let go until he sees her return to her 'old shape', her *ἀρχαία μορφή* (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.13.5). So also with Idothea's advice to Menelaus about her father Proteus's tricks:

. . . that will be
 the time for all of you to use your strength and your vigor,
 and hold him there while he strives and struggles hard to escape you.
 And he will try you by taking the form of all creatures that come forth
 and move on the earth, he will be water and magical fire.
 You must hold stiffly on to him and squeeze him the harder.
 But when at last he himself, speaking in words, questions you,
 being now in the same form he was in when you saw him sleeping,
 then, hero, you must give over your force and let the old man
 go free, and ask him which one of the gods is angry with you . . .
 (*Odyssey* 4.415–23, tr. Lattimore)

And Proteus, surprised by the double ruse of ambush and disguise,¹¹ does indeed attempt to escape by running through all his dirty tricks, his *ὀλοφώια* (410, 460), by using all his *doliē technē* (455). He changes into a lion first, then into a dragon, a panther, a giant hog. He turns into running water and a mighty tree. All in vain. The grip never slackens. His range of magic exhausted (460), he comes back to his true form and turns into an Old Man of the Sea, truthful and explicit; the trial of strength and cunning turns into an open discussion in which both sides speak quite frankly, without evasion or deceit (*atrekeōs*, 486; cf. Hesiod, *Theogony* 233).

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So one gets control over the deception embodied in the metamorphic god and his fluent variegation by suddenly laying hold of all his different forms, gripping him undaunted like a vice. The texts are quite explicit. Menelaus wonders to Idothea how a mere mortal like himself is to impose his will upon a god like Proteus; the sea-nymph tells him that the secret is to pounce on her father before he gets suspicious and hold him tight. So at the opportune moment, Menelaus and his friends rush the Old Man of the Sea, and Menelaus throws his arms around him and holds on (*ἀμφὶ δὲ χεῖρας βάλλομεν*: 419, 455). Chiron tells Peleus to get Thetis in a bear-hug (*συλλαβεῖν*) and hold tight (*κατασχεῖν*) (Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.13.5). Herakles gets Nereus into a bear-hug (*συλλαβών*) and grips him (*ἔδησε*) and will not release him (*οὐκ ἔλυσε*) until he is told the information he wants (Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 2.5.11). And representations of such scenes in art are even more explicit: the hero, whether Herakles versus Nereus or Triton, or Peleus raping Thetis, is always shown holding his opponent in a bear-hug, left hand locked in right.

But when the struggle is over, the arms open and the god capable by *mētis* of changing shape is released. By contrast, Metis 'hidden in the belly of Zeus' remains for ever locked in his belly-grip, the prize of treachery.

Zeus overcomes Metis by turning against her her own weapons, cunning, surprise, deceit. In the same way Menelaus, in order to overcome Proteus, must counter his 'tricks' with the *doloi*, ambush and disguise, which the god's own daughter has devised for his ensnarement. And even that does not suffice: it is only in his sleep, when his usual wariness fails and his vigilance nods, that the polymorphous god can be surprised and overcome; his *mētis* must momentarily have quit. Herakles jumps Nereus while he sleeps.¹² Idothea outlines to Menelaus her clever plan for delivering her father quite helpless: Menelaus must watch for the moment when Proteus falls into heavy sleep; the god has hardly got himself stretched on the sand for a snooze than he is all but strangled (*Odyssey* 4.414, 453).

Hypnos, Sleep, is a formidable and powerful god: he casts his magic net over all that breathes, over the fastest thought, the quickest mind. At whim, he fetters anything that moves with invisible chains like those his twin brother *Thanatos*, Death, locks round mortals and never unfastens.

The vitality and exceptional mobility of the gods do not permit them to elude this paralysing power of *Hypnos*: they too get trapped in his snares and stay there as long as he wishes, diminished, reduced, their erstwhile vigour dimmed, their silvery quickness dulled. In these moments of rest, during which their inherent *mētis* is clouded, they can

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be taken unawares. In Homer, *Hupnos* can modestly say that he can easily send to sleep any of the immortal gods, even the tireless circulation of Oceanus, the father who engendered all creatures (*Iliad* 14.243–6); against only one divinity is his power of binding useless, because his *mētis* never rests or fails: ‘But Zeus the son of Cronus not even I can approach or put to sleep, unless he himself command me’ (247–8). By virtue of his intestine *mētis* that sovereign god is perpetually wakeful; unfingered by sleep, his ever-open eye keeps him always on guard. No attack, no wile, no *mētis* can ever again surprise him. While Cronus, for all his cunning, for all his mastery of snares born of crooked *mētis*, fell into bondage; deposed from heaven’s throne, he ekes out a life merely the shadow of a god’s, the ghost of real sovereignty. And in that distant exile, now he sleeps for evermore.

The counterpart in the world of the gods of the human instruments of *mētis* – hunting-nets, fishing-nets, snares, ropes, pits, anything plaited, woven, cooked, engineered or fixed (Detienne and Vernant, 1978: 45–7) – is this invisible, irrefragible, magical bond. Such a binding has several implications. First, the god loses one of his main privileges, the power instantly to change place, the gift of ubiquity which enables him to appear, faster than lightning or the swiftest thought, wherever in the universe he chooses to make manifest his power. The binding of a god dooms him to the very margin of the cosmos, or even to the impenetrable Beyond; the pit of Tartarus whose mouth is forever sealed; or a cave on an island lost to the world. Even when he is bound within the organized universe, his immobility – his range of action reduced to zero – so diminishes his power and his being that he is weakened, helpless, wasted in that demi-death sleep is for gods.¹³

An Orphic tradition can thus imagine Cronus snoring supine after munching the ‘food of deception’ which Zeus persuaded him to try after baiting it with honey (*OF* p. 190, frgs. 148–9); or his head nodding on his vast neck, snared by *Hupnos* who tames all creatures (Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 16, p. 18 Arethusa).¹⁴ Two passages in Plutarch also describe this state: in one, Cronus has been banished to an island where he sleeps guarded by Briareus (*De defectu oraculum* 18, 420a); and in the other, he lies fast asleep inside a deep cave (*De facie in orbe lunae* 26, 941f). But in both, sleep is ‘the prison Zeus devised for him’.¹⁵

Between the somnolence of Cronus unthroned and almighty Zeus’s unflagging wakefulness are many gradations. These degrees of divine stir and wakefulness are exploited by the myths of sovereignty to suggest the dangers which might at certain moments even threaten Zeus’s own sovereignty: the struggle which Zeus has still to under-

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take against Typhoeus/Typhon after defeating the Titans is an especially apt example.

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Typhoeus is a dire monster (*pelōr*, 856), the ultimate offspring of Gaia's coupling with Tartarus. Near-Eastern models there may indeed be for this Greek character (Vian, 1960: 17–37; Walcot, 1966: 9–16); but in Hesiod Typhoeus displays original features which warrant full description. Through Gaia his mother, he is a chthonic power set over against the gods in heaven. Through his father Tartarus, whom Hesiod calls *ἠερόεις*, 'dark and misty', he is related to Erebus and Night, the immediate issue of Chaos: he is an aboriginal power by double inheritance. Late-born, younger than Zeus, he carries on the line of the 'firstlings', the primal beings set by Hesiod at the roots of the world, into a universe now differentiated and reduced to order. By his ancestry Typhoeus is endowed with extraordinary force and fury; but the very character of his energy turns him into an agent of confusion and disorder, a minister of chaos. Hesiod mentions the strength of his arms, and a number of notable features besides: in particular, his feet are never at rest. The Hittite monster Ullikumi, with whom he has often been compared, is a threat to the King of Heaven because his monstrous bulk cannot be moved.¹⁶ But Typhoeus is always moving: his feet are *akamatoi*, just keep on going (*Theogony* 824); whatever speed they move at, they never tire, never rest. The excessive violence of his nature also reveals itself in the heads milling monstrously on his shoulders: atop his trunk there writhe a hundred serpent heads, a hideous multitude of eyes darting their coruscating gaze at every point at once (826–7). He has, not one voice matched to his own self, but a thousand different proper noises: now he speaks with the voice of a god; now imitates animals – bull, lion, dog; now whistles like a kettle (829–35). This cacophony of voices, this kaleidoscope of noise,¹⁷ replicates in sound his monstrous polymorphism, manifest also in Nonnus's quite traditional conception of him as fusing the whole gamut of animal species into composite form, or in the idea to be found in the scholiast on Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* that his hundred heads compose a gallery of all wild animals.¹⁸

Energy, movement, vigilance, flaming stare multiplied a hundredfold – all this makes Typhoeus truly in his essential chaos Zeus's fitting adversary. As Hesiod says,

Surely that day a thing beyond all help
 Might have occurred: he might have come to rule
 Over the gods and mortal men, had not
 The father of gods and men been quick to see
 The danger . . .

(*Theogony* 836–8, tr. Wenham)

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Aeschylus is Hesiod's true heir in presenting Typhon's assault on Zeus as a struggle for mastery of the world, a struggle between the fire flashing from the monster's numberless eyes and the sleepless thunderbolt in the hand of Zeus, possessor of *mētis* (*Prometheus Bound* 356–8; cf. Detienne and Vernant, 1978: 78–9). The same theme, as we have seen, appears in Epimenides's version too: Sleep has closed Zeus's eyelids and Typhoeus seizes his chance to slip into the palace; he is all ready to make himself master of the throne when, just as everything seems lost, Zeus opens his eyes: the monster collapses, blasted (*FVS* 2, p. 34, frg. B8; cf. Detienne and Vernant, 1978: 79–80). It is only in Apollodorus that we find Zeus momentarily defeated, his sovereign power temporarily eclipsed.

Apollodorus's Typhon, like those of Plutarch and Nonnus of Pano polis, incorporates features which recall the Hurro-Hittite Ullikummi and the Egyptian god Seth. So it is all the more instructive that despite these influences the myth's logic and purport remain true to the Greek tradition as expressed in Hesiod. In Apollodorus, Typhon is the son of Gē and Tartarus, and he is the most powerful, most gigantic of all the creatures engendered by Mother Earth (*Bibliotheca* 1.6.3). Half-man, half-beast, he plants his feet on the earth that gave him birth; his head overtops the mountains to graze the highest heaven. When he extends his arms, one hand scrapes the sunset, the other sunrise. His bulk thus fuses high and low, East and West, confounding all the cardinal points, just as in Hesiod the most utterly different sounds meet in him, those of the wild beasts which inhabit the earth and those of the gods who dwell in heaven. And we may pursue the comparison.

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Typhoeus's blasted body is hurled by Zeus to the bottom of Tartarus. From the monster are born the howling gales, the whirlwinds unleashed from dark Tartarus to spring surprise attacks by land or sea, blustering wildly here, there and everywhere, confounding all the rules of space in incoherent tumult. Evil would have come of Typhoeus's victory for universe and for gods, disorder restored, a world turbulent as Tartarus, the blank hollow beneath the earth, void in perpetual vertigo, no up, no down, no left, no right.¹⁹ And the monster's children, the wild winds, stand henceforth for men on the face of the earth as symbols of that same 'incurable' evil: 'Mortal men have no remedy against this scourge' (*Theogony* 876). Hesiod contrasts these nocturnal, chaotic winds from below with the ordinary winds, Boreas, Notos, Zephyr, whose origin is heavenly, of the gods. They are the sons of *Eōs* (Dawn) and *Astraios* ('Star-strewn'), brothers of the Morning Star and of all those heavenly bodies that shimmer in the night and stud with beacons heaven's dark dome, night after night tracing their fixed and constant paths (378–82). These ordinary winds blow always in the

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same directions, scoring routes for ships across the sea's back; and they impart to the visible world direction and order by establishing bounds and granting coherence to its several parts.

The relation between Hesiod's Typhoeus and the whirlwinds, which reduce human space to a confusion reminiscent of primal chaos, both widens and specifies the burden of Apollodorus's description of Typhon, highlighting the monster's enduring character in Greek mythological thinking as a 'chaotic power'. And Apollodorus's text, in developing the *Theogony*, confirms the rôle of devious intelligence in the exercise of sovereignty in another respect also: the motif of *dolos*, of ruse or deception, is crucial to the whole story. Battle is first joined at a distance. Typhon shoots flames from mouth and eyes. He hurls incandescent rocks. Zeus from afar launches his thunderbolts. But Typhon advances on heaven — they struggle at close quarters. Zeus lands a blow with Cronus's sickle (*harpē*), and tackles his wounded foe hand to hand. But Typhon catches Zeus in his snake-coils, rendering him helpless, snatches away the sickle and cuts out the tendons from his arms and legs; then, slinging Zeus paralysed over his shoulder, he takes him to Cilicia, and leaves him in the Corycian cave, hiding the tendons in a bearskin. He sets a snake-woman, Delphynē, to guard them, just as Zeus once bade Briareus watch over the Titans, and Cronus *Kampē* ('Curve'), over the Hundred-Arms (cf. Detienne and Vernant, 1978: 85–6). All is apparently over. Zeus is defeated, is now in that very bondage to which he reduced Cronus. He languishes helpless deep in a cavern, robbed of the strength in arm and leg which made Typhoeus in the *Theogony* a match for the King of the gods, so long as he eluded the thunderbolt and escaped mutilation (cf. *γυιοθείς*: *Theogony* 858).

But Zeus is saved, and his royal power restored, thanks to the intervention of two 'tricksters',²⁰ cunning Hermes and his crony Aigipan, whose rôle in Apollodorus's story corresponds exactly to that of Metis in Hesiod and of Prometheus in Aeschylus. The pair manage to steal Zeus's tendons without being seen and to fit them back into his body. Re-equipped with arms and legs, Zeus regains all his native strength (*τῆν ἰδίαν ἰσχύν*). Suddenly he appears before the astonished Typhon, who turns and flees. Zeus, mounted in his chariot, pursues him with his thunderbolt. But even now neither would have been victorious had the Fates not devised a new trick, a second stratagem. They fool Typhon with the same ploy that Zeus used in the Orphic story to trap Cronus, the 'food of deception'. They persuade him to bite into a fruit which they promise will make him invincible. But the alleged 'invincibility drug' is in fact an *ephēmeros karpos* ('fruit of a day'), the opposite of a food of immortality: it inevitably brings upon any who eat of it exani-