

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Introduction: Definitions old and new

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER ONE

The name of Orpheus

Orpheus' name: that is what it all comes down to. It is a name that no amount of trivial application or cold-blooded scholarship robs of its fascination. (West 1983: 263)

Name-famed Orpheus, ὀνομάκλυτον Ὀρφεην (*PMGF* 306 Davies) (*OF* 864 B) – one of the earliest textual witnesses we have for the mysterious figure of Orpheus paradoxically indicates how much of the tradition we are missing. Orpheus' name is already famous in the Archaic age of Ibykos, but nothing remains of what that name signified – the poems composed by that famous poet or the tales that told of his adventures. Even in the Classical period, the evidence remains scant and fragmentary; the name of Orpheus is invoked in a passing allusion or attached to a brief quotation. Later eras expand upon the sentimental story of his lost love or credit him with the invention of all the most holy rituals of the Greek religious tradition, but the name of Orpheus remains mysterious to us – just what did this poet's name mean to the Greeks and Romans who invoked it?¹

Orpheus himself is a mythical character, not a historical person, so any deeds belong to the realm of story, invented to fit with the name.² Likewise, any poems or rituals credited to him – Orphica, as the Greeks referred to them – bear the name of Orpheus, but the one thing of which we can be certain is that some long-ago Orpheus was not the author; rather some other author from a historical period has borrowed the name of Orpheus

¹ Harrison 1903: 471 rhapsodizes on the mysteriousness of Orpheus. "Always about him there is this aloof air, this remoteness, not only of the self-sufficing artist, who is and must be always alone, but of the scrupulous moralist and reformer; yet withal and through all he is human, a man, who Socrates-like draws men and repels them, not by persuading their reason, still less by enflaming their passions, but by sheer magic of his personality. It is this mesmeric charm that makes it hard even now-a-days to think soberly of Orpheus."

² As Bernabé 2004: viii astutely points out, the task of collecting and editing the testimonies to and fragments of Orpheus need not be concerned with the issue so crucial for other collections of fragments, the distinction between true and spurious pieces of evidence: *editori autem fragmentorum Orphicorum nihil interest utrum fragmentum Orphicum genuinum an spurium sit, cum omnia spuria haberi possint quandoquidem Orpheus numquam fuerit.*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

The Name of Orpheus

for his work (or has had it attached by another). There is no Orpheus to whom we can look; only the name of Orpheus.

Why would anyone label a text or rite with the name of Orpheus? What criteria would validate that labeling? Modern scholars of religion, always seeking to define ancient religions in the abstract category of “ism”s, have fabricated an Orph-ism, a category for all the religious phenomena associated with the name of Orpheus. This modern Orphism, I argue, distorts in important ways the evidence of the way the ancient Greeks used the name of Orpheus. It is the purpose of this study to redefine the category of ancient Orphism by identifying the criteria for this “Orphic” label that were used by the ancient Greeks (and Romans).

Ancient Orpheus

The people of the ancient Greco-Roman world attributed to the mythical poet Orpheus a number of poems in the dactylic hexameter and poetic language most familiar from Homeric poetry, as well as crediting him with the foundation of a number of rituals. Orpheus was the child of a Thracian king and a Muse, or of some similar semi-divine background, and his skill at poetic song was unrivaled by any – even the beasts and the trees drew near and listened when he played.³ As a member of the Argonauts, he took part in one of the earliest heroic ventures, several generations before the war at Troy, so his poetic authority preceded even that of Homer. As Redfield has pointed out, to connect the name of Orpheus to a story or ritual is “to bypass tradition and claim (as it were) a fresh revelation,” to claim the authority, not of the familiar cultural tradition, but of a specially privileged individual.⁴ Such authority provided the incentive for many poets to circulate their poetry under the name of Orpheus, just as

³ Bernabé has compiled all the testimonies to the life of Orpheus in the ancient materials as fragments 864–1095 in his recent edition of the Orphic fragments, the second volume of his edition of *Poetae Epici Graeci* (Bernabé 2004, 2005, 2007a), surpassing the collection in the older edition of Kern 1922. References to Bernabé’s collection will be, e.g., OF 867 B, with corresponding references to Kern’s edition, either OT 5 K for the testimonia, or OF 317 K for the fragments. References to the *Orphic Argonautica* (OA) are from Vian 1987, to the *Orphic Hymns* (OH) from Morand 2001. Although the official *editio princeps* of the Derveni papyrus has come out in Kouremenos *et al.* 2006, I cite the text and translation in Betegh 2004.

⁴ Redfield 1991: 106. Of course, the potential for putting forth a new claim to religious authority was assisted by the medium of writing, which allowed for the multiplication of poems under the name of Orpheus, each of which could present a new alternative to the current norms. The caricature in Plato (*Resp.* 364b2–365a3) (OF 5731 B = OF 3 K) and Euripides (*Hipp.* 948–957) (OF 627 B = OT 213 K) of the hubbub of books connected with Orpheus attests to the impression that this use of texts made on the contemporary audience. Since written texts attributed to an authority such as Orpheus were a useful device for religious innovators (or deviants) to urge their claims, such texts

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Age old new age*

5

the work of many poets went under the name of Homer. Later scholiasts identify authors, starting around the sixth century BCE, who wrote works under the name of Orpheus (Orphicists, we might call them), and, over a millennium later in the fifth century CE, the *Orphic Argonautica* styles itself as a work of Orpheus. Certain features of the verses, such as an address to Mousaios, the pupil of Orpheus, or the familiar *sphragis* (the poetic seal of authenticity) line, “I speak to those of understanding; close the doors of your ears, ye profane,” serve as evidence within the text that it comes from Orpheus.⁵

Age old new age

Not only can a pseudepigrapher thus apply the label of Orphic to his own text, but, even without such self-labeling, others might also attribute a text or ritual to Orpheus. Whereas modern scholars have tended to make such attributions on the basis of supposed Orphic doctrines (of the immortality of the soul, of its stain by an original sin of the Titanic murder of Dionysos, and of its purification through a cycle of reincarnations), the ancients made no such doctrinal classifications.⁶ Rather, the ancient label Orphic was more like the contemporary term “new age,” which is associated, not specifically with particular religious ideas or organizations, but more vaguely with a set of ideas loosely defined by their distance from mainstream religious activity, especially by claims to extra-ordinary purity, sanctity, or divine authority.⁷ Like “new age,” the association with Orpheus can be positive, indicating special inspiration that goes beyond the ordinary, but often is negative, implying a holier-than-thou attitude that is either ludicrous or hypocritical. Euripides’ Theseus accuses his son, Hippolytos, of being a fraud, pretending to extreme purity while secretly making advances on his stepmother:

could be associated with deviants or innovators like Hippolytos even though he did not make use of such books. See further ch. 4 below.

⁵ Bernabé has collected the uses of the seal line in *OF* 1 B. Addresses to Mousaios appear in *OA* 7, 308, 858, 1191, 1347; *OH* proem. 1; *The Testament of Orpheus* (Διαθήκαι) – [Justin] *Coh. Gr.* 15.1 (*OF* 372, 377i B = *OF* 245 K); Clem. Al. *Protr.* 7.74.3 (*OF* 375, 377iii B = *OF* 246 K); Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 13.12.4 (*OF* 378 B = *OF* 247 K); *Ephemerides* – Tzetz. *Prol. ad Hes.* 21 (Gaisford) (*OF* 759 B = *OF* 271 K); *Orphic Seismologion* (*OF* 778 B = *OF* 285 K); cp. fragments of Mousaios in Bernabé 2007a.

⁶ Bernabé 1998a: 172: “El creyente órfico busca la salvación individual, dentro de un marco de referencia en que son puntos centrales: el dualismo alma-cuerpo, la existencia de un pecado antecedente, y el ciclo de trasmigraciones, hasta que el alma consigue unirse con la divinidad.” Cp. Bernabé 1997: 39, Bernabé 2002d: 208–209. Guthrie 1952: 73 puts the same ideas in less guarded terms: “The Orphic doctrines included a belief in original sin, based on a legend about the origin of mankind, in the emphatic separation of soul from body, and in a life hereafter.”

⁷ For a study of the “New Age” in the twentieth century, see Sutcliffe 2003.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Do you, then, walk with the gods, as an extraordinary man? Are you so chaste and undefiled by evil? I would not believe your boasting, vilely attributing to the gods such ignorance in thinking. All right then, vaunt and puff yourself up through your vegetarian diet of soulless foods, and taking Orpheus as your leader engage in Bacchic revels, honoring the smoke of many books. For you have been caught now. I sound the warning for all to flee such men as you. For they do their hunting with reverent words while they devise evils.⁸

Therefore, whenever something is labeled as Orphic, it is always important to determine who is applying the label and in what context, whether it is self-applied or applied by another. The label may signal something extra-ordinarily good and authoritative, since Orpheus is the most ancient and divinely inspired poet, famous for his purity and rites that bring men closer to the gods. However, as for Euripides' Theseus, the label may be for something extra-ordinarily bad, either revolting or ineffectual, but, whether positive or negative, it always indicates something out of the ordinary.⁹

The Greek mythic tradition works by *bricolage*, to use Lévi-Strauss' metaphor of the rag-bag man who takes old pieces of things and patches them together to make new creations,¹⁰ and the pieces used by the authors of the Orphic poems come from the same stock that every other mythmaker uses. Of course, not every subject found in the whole mythic tradition appears in Orphic poems, but every subject found in Orphic poems also appears elsewhere in the mythic tradition. It is the way the pieces are combined and the way the construct is framed that marks them as Orphic.

Redefining ancient Orphism

In this study, I am attempting to redefine ancient Orphism, that is, to come up with a way of defining the category of things the ancient Greeks

⁸ Eur. *Hipp.* 952–957 (*OF* 627 B = *OT* 213 K): σὺ δὲ θεοῖσιν ὡς περισσὸς ὦν ἀνὴρ ξύνει; σὺ σῶφρων καὶ κακῶν ἀκήρατος; οὐκ ἂν πιθοίμην τοῖσι σοῖς κόμποις ἐγὼ θεοῖσι προσθεὶς ἀμαθίαν φρονεῖν κακῶς. ἤδη νυν αὖχει καὶ δι' ἀψύχου βορᾶς σίτοις καπήλευ' Ὀρφέα τ' ἄνακτ' ἔχων βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν καπνοῦς· ἐπεὶ γ' ἐλήφθης. τοὺς δὲ τοιοῦτους ἐγὼ φεύγειν προφρονῶ πᾶσι· θηρεύουσι γὰρ σεμνοῖς λόγοισιν, αἰσχροῖα μηχανώμενοι. Redfield 1991: 106 notes the unusual collection of elements in Theseus' condemnation: "Probably the Greeks themselves were vague about the category; Theseus assumes that since Hippolytus claims to be chaste (a claim not characteristic of the Orphics) he must also be a vegetarian and read Orphic books. All three would be tokens of a rejection of the world, and therefore mutually convertible." The vague associations are particularly striking here, since Hippolytus the obsessive hunter most certainly never displays any hint of vegetarianism. Nevertheless, vegetarianism is one of the peculiarities often linked with Orphic things, and Euripides' audience would have understood the kind of categorizing that lumps all of Theseus' charges together.

⁹ See further Edmonds 2008a. ¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss 1966: 16–36.

Redefining ancient Orphism

7

would have labeled Orphic. As recent scholarly efforts in reconstructing the ancient category of “magic” have shown, the reconstruction of the ancient category of “Orphic” must begin with the recognition that the label “Orphic” is also, in some sense, an ancient cultural classification as well as a modern scholarly category.¹¹ The ancient Greeks recognized a category of things that could be labeled *orphika* (texts and rituals credited to Orpheus) and people who could be labeled *Orpheotelestai* (practitioners of rites) or even *Orphikoi* (authors of Orphica). However, to limit the ancient category of Orphic only to those things “sealed with the name of Orpheus,” as Linforth did, would be to exclude people and things that the ancient Greeks would have classified together.¹² In my process of redefinition, I start with Linforth’s single criterion of the name of Orpheus to delineate evidence labeled as Orphic by the ancient witnesses, but I derive from this class of explicitly labeled evidence a set of criteria that characterize the material in different ways as extra-ordinary religious phenomena.

Although I agree with Linforth’s conclusion more than half a century ago that there is no consistent list of criteria which define all the evidence for the Orphica, nevertheless, rather than conclude that the absence of any consistent criteria over the range of data means we must abandon the label of “Orphic” or apply it indiscriminately to anything that relates to Greek mystery religion, I suggest that Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblances” permits us to construct a polythetic definition in which evidence characterized by any of several criteria may be labeled Orphic.¹³ In this polythetic definition, there is no single feature, be it the name of Orpheus or some particular doctrine of the soul, that makes something Orphic. Rather, if something – person, text, or ritual – boasted of extra-ordinary purity or sanctity, made a claim to special divine connection or extreme antiquity, or was marked by extra-ordinary strangeness, perversity, or alien nature, then that thing *might* be labeled Orphic, classified with

¹¹ This idea is developed at greater length in Edmonds 2008a.

¹² Linforth 1941: xiii. Linforth rightly warns of the slippery slope encountered once one goes beyond this single criterion; however, attention to ancient (“emic”) acts of classification, rather than to (“etic” categories of) doctrines or mythic motifs, provides a more secure methodology. Certain myths include the name of Orpheus as a character (e.g., his journey on the Argo, or his journey to the Underworld in search of his wife), but such myths are only Orphic when they are explicitly framed as the tellings of Orpheus himself.

¹³ Wittgenstein 1958: 66–67. Alderink 1981: 20 also suggests that such a polythetic definition is useful for approaching Orphism, but his components differ from mine in that they are doctrinal. He defines Orphism as “characterized by a monistic tendency, an inclination to view the world as a created reality, and a disposition towards soteriological ideas of post-mortem existence” (Alderink 1981: 23). Ideas of monism, the creation of the cosmos, and soteriology, while they do appear in some evidence labeled “Orphic” in the ancient evidence, appear in far too many other contexts to make them valid indicators of what the ancient Greek considered “Orphic”.

other Orphic things, and perhaps even sealed with the name of Orpheus. This polythetic definition permits us to include even material that is not sealed with the name of Orpheus but is classified as extra-ordinary in the same ways as other evidence that does bear Orpheus' name.

Moreover, whether something is labeled as Orphic depends, in the ancient evidence, not on the presence of particular mythic motifs or religious doctrines, but upon the act of classification by a particular classifier in a specific context; it is, therefore, always a polemical definition, not a disinterested one. Therefore, in my definition, I argue that:

a text, a myth, a ritual, may be considered Orphic because it is explicitly so labeled (by its author or by an ancient witness), but also because it is marked as *extra-ordinary* in the same ways as other things explicitly connected with the name of Orpheus and grouped together with them in the ancient evidence. The more marked something is by claims to extra-ordinary purity or sanctity, by claims to special divine connection or extreme antiquity, or by features of extra-ordinary strangeness, perversity, or alien nature, the more likely it is to be labeled Orphic in the ancient evidence.

Such a definition provides modern scholars with a better idea of how the ancient Greeks thought about their religion, both ordinary and extra-ordinary, and makes better sense of the varied evidence from antiquity.

My approach here differs from that of earlier scholars, not just Linforth, on whom I build my methodology, but more significantly those such as Kern and Guthrie, who imagined an Orphism with identifiable believers and doctrines. I differ as well from contemporary scholars, such as Bernabé or Parker, who define Orphism more loosely as a current of religious ideas characterized by certain doctrines – of the immortality of the soul, of its stain by an original sin of the Titanic murder of Dionysos, and of its purification through a cycle of reincarnations. Such an approach, I argue, ignores the ancient classifications and labeling in favor of modern paradigms of doctrinal religion centered on belief, models ultimately grounded more in Christian ideas of faith than in the evidence for ancient religious practice.

What does this new way of defining Orphism help explain? By aligning the boundaries of the definition as closely as we can with the ancient notions of what was Orphic, we can get a better sense, not only of what the ancient Greeks thought of as extra-ordinary religion, but also what they saw as ordinary and normative. My definition permits a re-examination of the ancient evidence that takes seriously the model, proposed by Burkert and others, of itinerant religious specialists competing for religious authority among

a varying clientele, like Theophrastus' Orpheotelest and his superstitious client.¹⁴ Rather than looking for a coherent set of sacred texts canonical to people who considered themselves Orphics, texts expressive of doctrines pertaining to sin, salvation, and afterlife, we can look for things pieced together from widely available traditional material to meet the demand of clients looking for extra-ordinary solutions to their problems, the products of *bricolage*. If the texts and rituals are products of *bricolage*, however, and their creators *bricoleurs* competing for authority, we cannot expect to find consistency of either texts or doctrines, merely a loose family resemblance between composites of the same traditional elements. A redefinition of ancient Orphism requires a polythetic definition that accommodates the complexities of the ancient contexts rather than the sort of monothetic definition that identifies Orphism by its scriptures and doctrines.

A redefinition of Orphism along the lines I have proposed may seem a step backwards, jettisoning the conclusions drawn by many scholars in the past century and, to use Bernabé's image, making their labors as fruitless as Penelope's weaving.¹⁵ However, re-examining the evidence with attention to its ancient contexts and making use of the new models for reconstructing these religious contexts provides a more accurate understanding, not only of the evidence itself, but also of the relation of different pieces to one another. The picture may not be as neat and tidy, nor as familiar as an Orphism constructed in the image of a Protestant sect, but this messy and incomplete picture nevertheless offers a less distorted view of ancient Greek religion and the place of Orphism within it. Moreover, much of the work done by scholars using older models need not be abandoned, but merely adapted; their insights contribute to our understanding of the evidence from new perspectives.¹⁶ The disjointed and fragmentary pieces of evidence we have are not the relics of secret canonical doctrines and scripture, but the productions of countless *bricoleurs* in competition with one another for religious authority. Rather than trying to define the doctrines and scriptures crucial to a secret sect, we can try to reconstruct

¹⁴ Cp. Burkert 1982. This idea has been further explored by Calame 1995 (republished in English translation in Edmonds 2011a) and particularly in Calame 2002. Parker 2005 is among those scholars who have taken this model furthest, although he still makes an exception for the Orphics in some regards.

¹⁵ Bernabé 2002a, in which he argues against my arguments in Edmonds 1999, is entitled "La toile de Pénélope". My response, published online in 2008 (Edmonds 2008b) and adapted for this study as chapter 9, is "Recycling Laertes' Shroud", that is, finding a new way to make use of the evidence that has been removed from Bernabé's constructed model.

¹⁶ As Alderink 1993: xiv suggests in his introduction to the reprint of Guthrie 1952, "Scholars love to argue with each other, which is well and good, but if we can reappropriate our predecessors as well as argue with and against them, we honor them as well as benefit ourselves."

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

The Name of Orpheus

the dynamics of this competition, the specialists and clients who were involved, and the traditional elements they used in their texts and rituals. This new way of defining Orphism thus provides a better understanding of the nature of ancient Greek religion in all of the periods from which our evidence for the Orphica comes.