

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

REDEFINING ANCIENT ORPHISM

This book examines the fragmentary and contradictory evidence for Orpheus as the author of rites and poems to redefine Orphism as a label applied polemically to extra-ordinary religious phenomena. Replacing older models of an Orphic religion, this richer and more complex model provides insight into the boundaries of normal and abnormal Greek religion. The study traces the construction of the category of “Orphic” from its first appearances in the Classical period, through the centuries of philosophical and religious polemics, especially in the formation of early Christianity and again in the debates over the origins of Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A paradigm shift in the scholarship of Greek religion, this study provides scholars of classics, early Christianity, ancient religion, and philosophy with a new model for understanding the nature of ancient Orphism, including ideas of afterlife, cosmogony, sacred scriptures, rituals of purification and initiation, and exotic mythology.

RADCLIFFE G. EDMONDS III is the Paul Shorey Professor of Greek and Chair of the Department of Greek, Latin and Classical Studies at Bryn Mawr College. He is author of *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the “Orphic” Gold Tablets* (2004) and editor of *The “Orphic” Gold Tablets and Greek Religion: Further Along the Path* (2011).

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

REDEFINING ANCIENT ORPHISM

A Study in Greek Religion

RADCLIFFE G. EDMONDS III

Bryn Mawr College



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion
 Radcliffe G. Edmonds III
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107038219

© Radcliffe G. Edmonds III 2013

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2013

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Edmonds, Radcliffe G. (Radcliffe Guest), 1970–

Redefining ancient Orphism : a study in Greek religion / Radcliffe G. Edmonds III.

pages. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-03821-9 (hardback)

1. Dionysia. 2. Dionysus (Greek deity) – Cult. 3. Cults – Greece. I. Title.

BL820.B2E36 2013

292.9 – dc23 2013012164

ISBN 978-1-107-03821-9 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Note on abbreviations</i>	xii

PART I INTRODUCTION: DEFINITIONS OLD AND NEW

1	The name of Orpheus	3
	Ancient Orpheus	4
	Age old new age	5
	Redefining ancient Orphism	6
2	Orphism through the ages: A history of scholarship	11
	The Classical category	14
	The Hellenistic category	16
	Roman period	24
	The crystallization of the category among the Christians and Neoplatonists	27
	The Christian apologists' construction of Orphism	30
	The Neoplatonic construction of Orphism	37
	Orphism as a systematic religion	43
	Orpheus in the middle ages	47
	The Renaissance of Orpheus	49
	From the Renaissance to the nineteenth century	51
	The impact of new evidence: The "Orphic" gold tablets	55
	More new discoveries: The Linear B tablets, gold tablets, and the Derveni papyrus	59
	Orphism in the twenty-first century	63
	Redefining ancient Orphism: Rejecting the Orphic exception	68
3	The problem of definition	71
	Cue validity	72
	Beyond Linforth: A new definition	73
	Emic vs. etic definitions	76

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

Contents

Valid cues: Extra-ordinary purity, sanctity, antiquity, and strangeness	77
Consequences of the new definition	82
Conclusion: Redefining ancient Orphism	88
PART II ORPHIC SCRIPTURES OR THE VAPORINGS OF MANY BOOKS?	
4 Orphic textuality: A hubbub of books	95
Orphic textuality	96
The hubbub of books in Classical Athens	111
The epideixis of exegesis: The Derveni author and his text	124
The name of Orpheus	135
5 Orphic <i>hieroi logoi</i> : Sacred texts for the rites	139
Sacred texts: Myth and ritual again	139
The form of Orphic poems	144
The nature of the Rhapsodic collection	148
6 Orphic mythology: The content of Orphic poems	160
Cosmogony	163
Poems for the sacred rites	172
Tales from the life of Orpheus	188
Exotic myths	190
PART III ORPHIC DOCTRINES OR THE PURE FROM THE PURE?	
7 Orphic purity: Piety or superstition?	195
Introduction: Pure from the pure	195
An absence of Orphics	198
Ritual experts and their clients	200
The works of Orpheus: <i>Teletai</i> and <i>katharmoi</i>	208
Conclusion: The Orphic label for rites and people	244
8 Life in the afterlife: The initiates' privilege and the mythic tradition	248
Life in the afterlife	248
The Homeric afterlife	252
Orpheus and eschatology	267
Orphic ideas of the soul	269
Conclusions	291
9 Original sin or ancestral crimes: Zagreus and the concern with purification	296
The web of Penelope	296
Recompense for the ancient grief	304

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

<i>Contents</i>		vii
	That old Titanic nature	326
	Misreading the eating	334
	The playthings of Dionysos	345
	The blood of the earthborn	360
	Olympiodorus' innovation	374
10	Conclusions: Redefining ancient Orphism	392
	Blunting Occam's Razor: Some methodological considerations	392
	Orphica within Greek religion	395
	<i>Bibliography</i>	400
	<i>Index</i>	423
	<i>Index locorum</i>	426

Illustrations

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| 1 Alabaster bowl (3rd–6th century CE), with details of the inscriptions. | <i>page</i> 84 |
| 2 Etruscan mirror, <i>Corpus Speculorum Etruscorum</i> , U.S.A. 2:14. | 104 |
| 3 Line drawing of bone tablet from Olbia. | 199 |

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

This project has been many years in the making, and the people to whom I owe debts of gratitude are too many to name. Bruce Lincoln, Jonathan Z. Smith, James Redfield, and Chris Faraone aided and encouraged me in graduate school when I first encountered the problem of Orphism, introducing me to the scholarship and teaching me how to analyze it critically. It has become a cliché in scholarship to speak of standing “on the shoulders of giants” (even appearing as a trite acronym, OTSOG), but there is a profound truth in it nonetheless. I started my researches into Greek religion with the works of Burkert, Bremmer, Graf, Parker, and Sourvinou-Inwood, beginning with the conclusions they had drawn as they were changing the very way Greek religion is understood. Likewise, my study of Orphism began with Burkert, Graf, Brisson, and Detienne, so my understanding of it was shaped from the outset by the innovations of these giants in the field and the vision of it I have come to depends upon the point from which I started.

This work would not have been possible without Alberto Bernabé, whose monumental studies of the Orphic fragments have provided scholars in the twenty-first century with an invaluable resource. Although I disagree fundamentally with many of his conclusions, I have been fortunate indeed to have a scholarly opponent so friendly and courteous as well as so erudite. Many of my ideas have been honed in conversation with him, whether in print, at conferences, or even across the dinner table, and, while he will assuredly not agree with many of the conclusions I draw in this study, I am grateful nonetheless for his stimulating opposition.

My thanks are due as well to Fritz Graf and Sarah Johnston, who for many years have discussed matters Orphic with me (along with a plethora of other fascinating things); their kindness and conversations have been important to me. Claude Calame and Jan Bremmer have likewise provided helpful critiques and discussions, sharing their advanced researches with me as I embarked upon my own. Luc Brisson has generously given of his

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Acknowledgments

time and encouragement; I am indeed grateful to him as one of the giants without whom I could never have begun my own labors. His vast erudition has been a valuable resource for me, and his scholarly clarifications of the complex Neoplatonic tradition have been essential for the development of the study of Orphica in the twenty-first century. My progress along the way has been much aided by discussions with Miguel Herrero and Fabienne Jourdan, whose researches into the early Christian tradition have taught me much and for whose collegial conversations I remain very grateful.

The shape of this project owes much to my reading of several studies in the history of religions that have profoundly shaped my approach here. First and foremost of these is J. Z. Smith's *Drudgery Divine*, which I encountered early in my scholarly career and which first taught me to examine the history of scholarship with the same attention as the texts themselves. Michael Williams' *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* and Karen King's *What is Gnosticism?* likewise provided me with models for thinking about Orphism as a category within the history of scholarship rather than a "thing" that existed in antiquity. Bruce Lincoln's *Theorizing Myth* (and the graduate seminar from which it stemmed) remains profoundly influential in my thinking.

This book is the result of many years of working, and different pieces of it have been published in various venues along the way. I have learned much from the conversations sparked by the responses to those publications, and most of the material previously published appears here in somewhat altered form, some bits with only the most superficial of changes and others with profound revisions. An earlier version of Chapter 6 appeared as "Orphic Mythology" within the Blackwell *Companion to Greek Mythology*, while sections of Chapter 8 are appearing as "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond: The Soul in Plato, Homer, and the Orphica," in a forthcoming volume of *Les Etudes Platoniciennes* entitled *Platon et ses prédécesseurs – Psukhê*. A version of one section of Chapter 9 appeared as "A Curious Concoction: Tradition and Innovation in Olympiodorus' 'Orphic' Creation of Mankind" in the *American Journal of Philology* 130 (2009): 511–532, while large portions of Chapters 9 and 10 were published online through the Center for Hellenic Studies as "Recycling Laertes' Shroud: More on Orphism and Original Sin" (<http://chs.harvard.edu/chs/redmonds>).

This project was begun during my time as a Fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies, and I am grateful to the director, Gregory Nagy, and to my fellow Fellows for making my time there so fruitful and enjoyable. Bryn Mawr College made the work possible by supporting my research leaves at the beginning and end of the process. I am grateful too to my students

Cambridge University Press

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

Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

xi

over the past few years, who (mostly) refrained from rolling their eyes when I once again dragged the Orphica into discussions in class. I particularly want to thank Edward Whitehouse and Abbe Walker, whose sharp eyes and keen awareness were invaluable in putting together the indices and keeping the citations straight. My thanks also go to Michael Sharp and the editorial team at Cambridge University Press, who have shepherded this project through the many stages of its development. Finally, my love and gratitude to my wife and children, for their patience and support as I wrestled with this project for so many years.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03821-9 - Redefining Ancient Orphism: A Study in Greek Religion
Radclyffe G. Edmonds III
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Note on abbreviations

Abbreviations of ancient authors and works follow those of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn. (Oxford 1999), making use of the abbreviations in the *Greek Lexicon* of Liddell, Scott, and Jones for works not in the *OCD*. *BNP* refers to the entries in the electronic edition of the *Brill's New Pauly*, which are cited by the author's name and nd (no date).