

From Zeus to Q: Generational Conflict in a Theogonic Universe
12th Paper Session, Section D: Receptions in Myth and History
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Abstract:

As science fiction grew in popularity over the course of the 20th century, its practitioners routinely wrote essays trying to establish an ancient pedigree for their genre ranging back to ancient Greece (Aldiss 1973; Derleth 1950; Gunn 1977). The compilations they published almost always began with Plato's proto-utopia of Atlantis and Lucian's satirical *Icaromenippus* and/or *True History*, both of which feature interstellar travel. By including intermediary works echoing these themes, such editors have sought to establish a continuity of tradition that persists straight through to the present day. While this paper seeks neither to defend nor attack this position, it nevertheless acknowledges that themes from Greco-Roman antiquity are both intentionally and unintentionally co-opted in modern SF and that productive study can and should be made of such echoes.

In the vein of the essays in Rogers and Stevens' *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction* (2015), then, this paper will present evidence linking the immortal entities known in the *Star Trek* universe as Q to the gods of the Greek pantheon. More specifically, it will demonstrate that the Q Continuum's anxiety in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode *Hide and Q* that, given enough time, humankind will surpass even the Q's own omnipotence is rooted firmly in the Greeks' conception of their gods as having been themselves born into the universe rather than having created it, and thus always in danger of losing primacy. Greek myth is littered with such stories about various generations of immortals, each being supplanted in turn by the next.

I will begin with a consideration of the Q in light of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Through the stories of Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus, these works establish not only precedent for the temporary nature of divine primacy in the Greek pantheon, but also - and more importantly - each of these once-supreme powers' constant preoccupation over losing power in the same manner he himself usurped it. The story of Prometheus, in particular, and the threat that his technology, fire, could eventually present in the hands of humans, is central. Although presented in the form of a satire, Lucian's *Icaromenippus* portrays a Zeus likewise concerned at the threat represented by the title character's (pseudo-)scientific ascent to Olympus. Given the special status Lucian's work has been granted by SF anthologists working to establish an ancient pedigree for their genre, this latter bond, in particular, is most satisfying.

Presenting evidence from Hesiod and Lucian, then, this essay will acknowledge the debt the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode *Hide and Q* owes to the ancient Greek conception of a theogonic universe in which supreme power is ineluctably temporary.

(1) "Tell now how did the gods and the earth first come into being, / Rivers as well, and the limitless sea with its storm-driven swells, and / Also the twinkling stars and the widespread heaven above all. / Tell then how the gods divided wealth and appointed their riches, / How they at first got hold of the heights of wrinkled Olympus." (Hesiod, *Th.* 105-109)

(2) "Heaven and Earth bore, last of their children, intelligent Cronus, / Their most redoubtable offspring, who hated his vigorous father." (Hesiod, *Th.* 132-133)

(3) "Earth gave birth to the Cyclopes, superabundant in life force.../ Physical strength, brute force, and mechanical cunning their works showed. / Three other sons were engendered by Heaven and Earth, who were very / Mighty and powerful, not to be lightly or frequently mentioned, / Cottus, Briareus, Gyges, unruly and troublesome children... / A strength irresistible went with their awful appearance. / Such were the terrible children begotten by Heaven and Earth and / loathed from the first by their very own father, who, when they were infants, / Tucked them away in a hole in the earth and prevented their coming / Up to the light; and Uranus rejoiced in his own evildoing." (Hesiod, *Th.* 134, 141-144, 147-151)

(4) "Rhea, submitting to Cronus, bore splendid / Offspring: Hestia, also Demeter and Hera, whose sandals are golden, / Powerful, strong-armed Hades, who under the earth makes his dwelling - / Pitiless his disposition - and smashing and seismic Poseidon, / As well as Zeus, the far planner, father of gods and humans..." (Hesiod, *Th.* 428-432)

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(5) “These every one great Cronus gobbled down whole as they issued / Each from the womb of their sacred mother to sit on her lap, for / thus he intended that no one else of the children of heaven / Should wield regal authority ever among the immortals. For he had learned from Earth and from star-spangled Heaven that he was / Doomed to be overcome by his very own son, namely Zeus, / Strong as he was, through the wiles of the same, though as yet unconceived, god.” (Hesiod, *Th.* 436–441)

(6) “They foretold to her everything that was fated to happen / Soon to his majesty Cronus as well as his strong-minded son.” (Hesiod, *Th.* 449–450)

(7) “Zeus, being angry, spoke thus, with a deathless intention in mind, and, / Ever recalling the trick that was played on him, would not entrust the / Fierce inexhaustible fire to the hands of men, who must perish... / But Prometheus, Iapetus’s brave son, thoroughly fooled him, / for he stole inexhaustible fire, whose blaze can be seen from / Far, in a hollow cane, which offended profoundly the mind of / Zeus, who thunders aloft, and his fond heart grew very angry / Seeing the twinkle of fire from afar among men, who are mortal. Straightway, Zeus prepared for them evil in place of purloined fire.” (Hesiod, *Th.* 533–535; 537–542)

(8) “Then, after Zeus had expelled the Titans from heaven, prodigious / Earth gave birth to the last of her children, Typhoeus... Then would a deed beyond any recourse have been done on that same day, / And this Typhoeus would surely have ruled the immortals and mortals / Had not the father of gods and men been sharp to take notice... / Zeus, when he’d gathered his strength and taken hold of his weapons, / Thunder and lightning contained in a bright-burning thunderbolt, leaping / Down from Olympus impulsively, struck at Typhoeus and set on / Fire all the marvelous heads of the monster that sprouted all over / Him... / Into broad Tartarus Zeus, being angered, ejected Typhoeus.” (Hesiod, *Th.* 777–778; 792–794; 809–813; 823)

(9) “For they instructed him thusly, in order that none of the other / Gods whose race is eternal should get royal power but Zeus. / All too intelligent children were destined to come out of Metis; / First was the gray-eyed maiden Athena... / Afterward, Metis was going to bear him a son of a reckless / Character, larger than life, future king of the gods and of men, too; / But Zeus, before she could do so, swallowed her into his belly, / So that the goddess might teach him the meaning of good and evil.” (Hesiod, *Th.* 847–850; 852–855)

(10) “Plainly the gods keep secret from humankind the means of survival; / Otherwise, you in a day could easily do enough work to / Last you a whole year long, and without any exertion... / No, Zeus kept it a secret because in his heart he was angry, / Seeing how the devious-minded Prometheus once had fooled him; / Therefore did almighty Zeus plot sorrows and troubles for mankind. / He hid fire, which, however, then Iapetus’s great-hearted son, to / Benefit humankind, pilfered from Zeus, the purveyor of counsel, / Hid in a hollowed-out stalk to baffle the lover of thunder.” (Hesiod, *W&D* 42–44; 47–52)

(11) “If you prefer, an alternate story I’ll summarize also / well and expertly, and lay it up in your mind and preserve it - / Namely, the common origin shared by immortals and mortals.” (Hesiod, *W&D* 103–105)

(12) “Nor were they willing to serve the immortals / Or make sacrifice using the Blessed Ones’ sacrosanct altars, / As it is lawful for humans to do and according to custom. / Thereupon, Zeus, son of Cronus, suppressed them all in his anger, / Seeing that they did not worship the gods who inhabit Olympus.” (Hesiod, *W&D* 130–134)

(13) “The son of Cronus decided to grant a / Dwelling place far from men at the furthest ends of the earth, and / there they continue to live, their consciousness perfectly carefree, / There in the Isles of the Blessed, beside deep-eddying Ocean, / Distant from the immortals; and Cronus was king of that kingdom / after the father of gods and men freed him from his bondage.” (Hesiod, *W&D* 161–166)

(14) “Hermes: The poet Homer tells us that the sons of Aloeus, two of them as we are, when they were still small children decided to heave Ossa up from its base and place it on Olympus, and then to put Pelion on that, thinking that this would provide a suitable ladder to get into heaven. Well, those two lads were punished for being presumptuous; but as we two aren’t planning this to hurt the gods, why shouldn’t we also make a similar structure, rolling the mountains on top of each other, to give us a clearer view from higher up?” (Lucian, *Charon* 3)

(15) “So remember to tell Zeus all this, and say also that I can’t possibly remain in my place unless he crushes the natural philosophers, gags the logicians, destroys the stoa, burns down the Academy, and stops the peripatetic lectures. Only then could I get any peace, and have a rest from being measured every day by them.” (Lucian, *Icaromenippus* 21)

(16) “Hermes answered my knock, asked my name, and hurried off to tell Zeus. Soon I was admitted in great fear and trembling, and I found them all sitting together and showing signs of concern themselves. For my unexpected visit had caused them mild anxiety, and they were expecting that almost any minute the whole human race would arrive similarly equipped with wings. But Zeus, giving me a fierce look like a Titan’s, said in a really terrifying voice:

‘What is your name among men, and where are your city and parents?’

Hearing this I nearly died of fright, but I stood my ground, though stupefied and thunderstruck by his tremendous voice. After a while I pulled myself together and told him everything clearly from the beginning...” (Lucian, *Icaromenippus* 22-23)

(17) “Zeus smiled and relaxed his frown a bit, with the words, ‘What can you say about Otus and Ephialtes, even when Menippus has ventured to come up to heaven? Well, be our guest now; but tomorrow, when we have dealt with the reasons for your visit, we shall send you away.’ (Lucian, *Icaromenippus* 23)

(18) “Tell me, Menippus, what views do men have about *me*?’ I replied, ‘My lord, what views could they have but the most pious, that you are the king of all the gods?’ ‘You will have your fun,’ he said, ‘but I am fully aware of their love of novelty, even if you don’t tell me. There was a time when they thought me a prophet and a healer, and I was everything to them...’ (Lucian, *Icaromenippus* 24)

(19) “During the meal Apollo played his lyre, Silenus gave us a comic dance, and the Muses got up and sang us an extract from Hesiod’s *Theogony* and the first song from Pindar’s *Hymns*.” (Hesiod, *Icaromenippus* 27)

(20) “So there you have these creatures, gods. And what’s more, some of them, called Epicureans, are exceedingly insolent and attack us violently (ὄβρυσταί εἰσι), saying that the gods have no care for human affairs and pay no attention whatever to what is happening. So now is the time for you to be considering that if they once manage to persuade the world, you will be extremely hungry. For who would go on sacrificing to you if he didn’t expect a return for it?” (Lucian, *Icaromenippus* 32).

(21) Q: “We of the Q have studied our recent contact with you and are impressed. We have much to discuss, including, perhaps, the realization of your most impossible dreams.”

Picard: “At our first meeting, you seized my vessel; you condemned all humans as savages, and, on that charge you tried us in a post-atomic 21st-century court of horrors where you attacked my people. You again seized my vessel...You interfered with our Farpoint mission. You threatened to convict us as ignorant savages if, while dealing with a powerful and complex life-form we made the slightest mistake. And when that didn’t happen...”

Q: “The Q became interested in you! Does no one here understand your incredible good fortune?”

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- (22) Riker: "You're still fascinated with the human past? Perhaps you're not that original."
Q: "Au contraire; it's the human future which intrigues us. And it should concern you the most. You see, of all the species, yours cannot abide stagnation. Change is at the heart of what you are. But change into what? That's the question."
- (23) Q: "Shall it be a test of strength? Meaningless, since you have none. A test of intelligence, then? Equally as meaningless. But it needs risk! Something to win...and something to lose."
Riker: "If we must play a game, what would we win?"
Q: "The greatest possible future that you could imagine."
- (24) Picard: "You seem to have some need for humans."
Q: "Mmm... concern regarding them."
- (25) Picard: "Oh, I know Hamlet. And what he says with irony, I say with conviction: "*What a piece of work is man? How noble in reason? How infinite in faculty, in form, in moving, how express and admirable. In action, how like an angel; in apprehension, how like a god...*"
Q: "Surely you don't see your species like that, do you?"
Picard: "I see us one day becoming that, Q. Is it that which concerns you?"
- (26) Riker: "What do you need, Q?"
Q: "Need?"
Riker: "You want something from us, desperately. What is it?"
Q: "Want something from you foolish, fragile non-entities?"
"After Farpoint, I returned to the where we exist, the Q Continuum...the limitless dimensions of the galaxy in which we exist...At Farpoint, we saw you as savages only. We discovered instead that you are unusual creatures, in your own limited ways - ways which, in time, will not be so limited."
Riker: "We're growing. Something about us compels us to learn, explore."
Q: "Yes, the human compulsion. And unfortunately for us, it is a power which will grow stronger century after century, eon after eon."
Riker: "Eons. Have you any idea how far we'll advance?"
Q: "Perhaps in the future that you cannot yet conceive, even beyond us. So, you see: we must know more about this human compulsion. That's why we've selected you, Riker, to become part of the Q. So that you can bring to us this human need and hunger, that we may better understand it."
- (27) Yar: "What we represent to the Q, Commander, are lowly animals, tormented into performing for their amusement."
Riker: "Actually, they think very highly of us, Tasha. We have a quality of growth which they admire."
LaForge: "Or fear."

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