

The Belly of Hesiod and the Womb of Zeus:
The Authority of Male Pregnancy in the *Theogony*.
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The *Theogony* begins with an invocation of the Muses and their famous rebuke: “uncouth shepherds, shameless wretches, mere bellies (γαστέρες)/we know how to tell many falsehoods resembling the truth,/but we know how to utter True things when we wish.” (*Th.* 26-28). Unbound by physical and mortal constraints, only the gods have access to knowledge of past, present, and future events, and it is to the Muses that the human poet must turn for his inspiration. In this paper I argue that the Muses’ reproach to Hesiod as a “belly” inaugurates a series of birth images whose shifting meanings in the course of the narrative ultimately assert Hesiod’s own poetic authority while allowing him to remain within the bounds of the cosmic framework outlined in the poem itself.

As Arthur (1983) has observed, the term γαστήρ, which denotes both the stomach and the womb, functions as a “floating signifier” of the physicality of human existence: Humans must eat and reproduce in order to survive, whereas gods may do either if they wish but depend on neither. On one level, this image of the poet as a “mere belly”, a passive vessel impregnated by the Muses’ divine words, is compatible with the poem’s characterization of the power differential that distinguishes gods from humans. Representations of pregnancy contained within the poem, however, are imbued with connotations of a self-actualizing power. Zeus’ control over reproduction and his appropriation of female procreativity with the birthing of Athena, is characterized as a crucial factor in the establishment of his divine authority and the emergence of a stable cosmic order. Hesiod’s impregnation with and re-production of the virgin Muses’ song is thus retroactively exposed as an inverse parallel to Zeus’ birthing of the virgin Athena.

The divine/mortal divide is kept intact, however, by the divergence in the terms used to designate the belly/wombs of gods and humans. In the *Theogony*, the term νηδύς, used for Rhea’s womb and the belly/womb of Kronus and Zeus, only appears in the narrative of the gods and evokes the receptive and productive properties of both the belly and the womb. By contrast, γαστήρ is only used to refer to humans or animals, and is characterized by its capacity to consume rather than reproduce. The γαστήρ of humans is, thus, restricted while the νηδύς of the gods performs its full semantic range. By identifying his poetic persona with the γαστήρ at the start of the poem and highlighting the importance of the νηδύς within it, Hesiod constructs a model of poetic creativity that is at once properly subordinate to the literal self-sufficiency of Zeus yet is linked to the creativity and authority of his νηδύς. The human body may be unable to resist death, but the production of cultural artifacts, like poetry, can approximate the gods’ immortality.

The terms νηδύς and γαστήρ are, thus, markers of two separate realms of existence in which female reproductive power may be harnessed by men—a divine one in which Zeus may literally impregnate himself in order to establish his authority, and a mortal one in which cultural continuity is perpetuated by the male poet’s figurative re-birthing of the Muses’ divine song. This ‘separate but equal’ semantic strategy enables Hesiod to articulate a cosmic hierarchy that acknowledges the ontological differences between gods and men yet nonetheless valorizes the poetic mechanisms by which humans may mimic the gods. That is, by thematizing procreation as a form of power and a means of establishing authority, he is able to envision an alternative hierarchy based on a performance of reproductive agency rather than the fact of mortality.