

Overcompensation or Purification? Tracing Ritual Action through the *Orphic Hymns*

The Orphic ritual, characterized by a heightened importance of esoteric knowledge and hyper purity, has bedeviled those attempting to understand these rites, both in Antiquity and today. Only recently, have scholars turned their attention towards the *Orphic Hymns* as clues for this long-desired understanding. While some scholars still argue that the *Orphic Hymns* present no coherent religion. (Linthorpe 1941; Edmonds 2013) I follow Fritz Graf (2009) in arguing that the *Hymns* indeed serve a liturgical purpose and should be read under such assumptions. Graf (2009) has shown the likelihood of a nocturnal ritual to accompany the *Hymns*. This paper seeks to answer the question that remains: how do the hymns underscore their ritual context and in what way do they refer to the Orphic cult practice?

In this paper, I argue that the *Hymns* reveal three performative ritual actions: incense burning as an offering to the god in place of animal sacrifice, some sort of Bacchic like revel, and the accompaniment of sound. Each of these ritual actions fulfills the purificatory, chthonic purpose of the Orphic ritual, as outlined by Graf and Johnson. (2013)

Paratextual notes on performance, namely the specified incense attached to many of the hymns, provide insight on what kind of offerings to the gods replaced the otherwise commonplace practice of animal sacrifice, which has no place in the Orphic cult. These frankincense attachments can be divided into three categories: those shared by multiple gods, those specific to one god, and finally the gods who do not receive any stated incense offering. From these groupings, I conclude that the only connection between the gods who share offerings is the ritual action of burning the specified incense. Likewise, gods with their own offerings are not of a greater importance just as gods who lack an explicitly stated offering are no lesser.

Building on the claim of Graf and Johnson (2013) I examine the infiltration of Dionysiac worship into the ritual action of the *Hymns*, particularly for its purificatory nature. I argue that the Dionysiac worship of the Orphic *Hymns* is less manic than we may expect from Bacchic revel. For this, I adduce requests that ask for benevolent epiphany from the gods (OH 1,6,7,19,25, 27, 35, 42, 43, 49, 52, 53, 79) and those that request protections against madness. (OH3,11,37,38,39,65,69,86,87) I argue that the *Hymns* obviously pay special attention to the manic, frenzy that characterizes Bacchic revel, though they do so cautiously. Further, the overwhelming presence of frenzy in the hymns suggest a presence in the ritual, at least in some form.

The final aspect of ritual action is sound, and in some cases, music. We can imagine that the recitation of the hymns may have resembled incantation, or at the very least, the hexameter would produce some sort of rhythmic utterance. (Athanasakis/ Wolkow 2013) The *Hymns* refer to two different sounds: the eerie howling or shrieking associated with Bacchic cult and harmonious sounds of music. I argue that the overwhelming presence of cacophonous, jarring sounds suggests that these unharmonious tones are more likely present in the ritual than the harmonious, euphonic music mentioned in some hymns. This paper builds on the work of previous scholars, who have all read the Orphic *Hymns* for their liturgical value and augments previous reconstructions of the ritual with new examinations.

Bibliography:

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