

Neoplatonic Influences in Nonnus'
Dionysiaca: Aesthetics, Allegory, and
Inspiration

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

University of Dublin
Trinity College

2021

Declaration

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Summary

The primary aim of my research is to explore various facets of Nonnus' engagement with Neoplatonism in his 5th-century epic poem, the *Dionysiaca*. Neoplatonism was the dominant form of philosophy in the Eastern Roman Empire, and had a profound impact on early Christian philosophy and literature. However, its impact on contemporaneous poetry has been largely neglected. My objective, therefore, is to situate Nonnus more firmly in his intellectual context. My methodology is primarily based on intertextual analysis, to identify verbal and thematic resonances between the *Dionysiaca* and Neoplatonic writings. This begins with revisiting scholarship on the Neoplatonic and Orphic inspiration behind Zagreus, Dionysus' first incarnation. The *Dionysiaca* features three 'Dionysoi,' which I argue are presented as a 'trinity' based on the Neoplatonist Proclus' triadic schemas, particularly the demiurgic triad of Zeus-Poseidon-Hades.

The *Dionysiaca*, in the long tradition of 'divinely inspired' epics, also draws upon Neoplatonic ideas regarding madness, inspiration, and ecstatic union. This is elucidated through case studies and intertextual analyses. Madness and intoxication characterise one of Nonnus' primary tensions as a poet, between ecstasy as an elevatory experience and source of inspiration, and madness as an uncontrolled, chaotic experience that results in figurative violence and death.

My research shows that Nonnus employs the Platonic concept of mimesis ('imitation') throughout his work as a metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic principle, inspired by Neoplatonic writings. Many of the *Dionysiaca*'s visual artefacts, characters, and physical forms, can be demonstrably shown to 'imitate' and participate in pre-existing or even transcendent models. How Nonnus conceives of mimesis appears to be inspired by the works of Plotinus, although Christian ideas of mimesis, especially those relating to the relationship between mankind and God, and the Son and the Father, also play a role. I argue that mimesis is a central theme of the *Dionysiaca*, and a fundamental principle of Nonnus' Dionysiac poetics, second only to *poikilia* which he invokes in his first proem.

My approach focuses heavily on models from ancient literary criticism, particularly allegoresis as a mode of reading and an agent in the construction meaning. This involves

taking ancient allegorical models and interpretive techniques and demonstrating how Nonnus alludes to and reworks well-known Platonic allegories to create almost meta-allegorical episodes. This technique is showcased in *Dionysiaca* 6, where Nonnus transposes several popular allegories relating to cosmogony or the destiny of the soul as it ascends to the Intelligible or descends into material bodies. These allegories include Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs from Odyssey 13*, and Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. Nonnus' reworking of these allegorical texts demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of Neoplatonic allegoresis and its place in ancient literary criticism.

Finally, I argue that Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* evokes many of the themes and motifs which Neoplatonic commentators identified in their mystic exegeses of Homer's *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* was read by Neoplatonists and some Christian sects as an allegory for the soul's wanderings through the sea of generation, as it strives to purify itself from the vices and vicissitudes of corporeal life, and arrive home at its natural condition in the transcendent, Intelligible world. Homer himself was widely considered by the Neoplatonists to be a theologian who expressed ineffable truths about the universe and the nature of the soul. Similarities between the *Dionysiaca* and the *Odyssey* suggest that Nonnus invites similar mystical exegeses. It is inconceivable that Nonnus would have been unaware of the preeminent Homeric criticism of the time. I argue, therefore, that to write epic poetry in the mould of Homer, it is not enough to use Homeric themes and diction; to write Homeric poetry requires one to be a theologian, to be open to the kind of allegorical interpretation that Homer was subjected to.

The world of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* is dominated by mimesis, and the materiality of the sense-perceptible universe (in contrast with the transcendent, Intelligible universe) making it a suitable analogue for the *Odyssey's* sea of generation. To secure his 'homecoming' amongst the Olympians, Dionysus must battle against agents of materiality – the earthborn Indians, Pentheus, and the Giants – to earn his final ascension on Mount Olympus, mimicking his father Zeus' victories over the Titans and Typhon. Dionysus' journey can also be compared with Neoplatonic writings on the ascension of the soul, where the soul's ultimate goal is to become 'like god,' to 'become

unified,' and to assimilate itself to the divine. This chapter has major implications for how Nonnus' audience might have approached his poetry.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Irish Research Council, the Government of Ireland Department of Education and Trinity College Dublin for their financial support of my doctoral research. I would also like to express my deep and heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Martine Cuypers. It seems a cliché to say that this thesis would not exist without you, but in this case, it also happens to be true. I do not think I would have had the confidence and the self-belief to even apply for a PhD without your encouragement and support. I certainly would not have been able to continue without the Irish Research Council Postgraduate Scholarship, and I know that my successful application primarily came down to your feedback and guidance. Thank you for all of your kindness, your insightful feedback, and for being a mentor as well as a supervisor.

I would like to thank my examiners Prof Tim Whitmarsh and Prof Ahuvia Kahane for their detailed reading and discussion of my dissertation, in addition to their encouragement and advice in regard to its wider dissemination in the future. I would also like to thank the Classics Department at Trinity College Dublin, especially Dr Ashley Clements for his kind, insightful, and incisive feedback during my annual reviews. Thank you also to Dr Rebecca Usherwood for the coffees, the chats, and for encouraging me to get involved in the wider world of Late Antiquity, something that has enriched my PhD even more than I could have hoped.

To my mum and dad, thank you for all the sacrifices you made to help me get where I am today, and so that I could have opportunities which you never had. Thank you for supporting me unconditionally, and reminding me that fulfilment is more important than success. Thank you to my partner Katherine for supporting me in my dreams, and in my realities, whether that be emotionally, financially, or in the form of chilli, beer, or hugs. Thank you for picking me up when I am down, dusting me off, and reminding me that every cloud has a silver lining. Thank you to my cat, Luna, for keeping me company throughout the final stretch of this thesis, and for her unwelcome edits which kept me on my toes.

Thank you to my friends, Dr Ellen Finn, Susie Ashton, Sean McGrath, Bernadette Casey, and my brother Rob for their feedback and recommendations, and for helping me make this project as good as it could be. Thank you especially to Ellen and Susie, my Classics crew, for the deep, meaningful, chats about embodiment over pints, which helped me think about my research material in a new light.

To my friend and British Library companion Tom Roberts, thank you for the voice recordings, and for being a friend I could die on the barricade with. Thank you to my old fellow triumvirs, Tom Wilson and Nick Bramston for always offering me a place to stay whenever I travel to London for library books or conferences. Finally, I would like to thank all of my friends and family who have supported me in ways, big and small, particularly those who sent me messages of encouragement and support in the final weeks of my PhD, who helped me get this project over the finish line.

Abbreviations

Aeschylus:

<i>Edon. TrGF</i>	<i>Edonoi, Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta</i>
<i>Pers.</i>	<i>Persae</i>

Apollonius:

<i>Arg.</i>	<i>Argonautica</i>
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Aristophanes:

<i>Th.</i>	<i>Thesmophoriazusae</i>
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Callimachus:

<i>Del.</i>	<i>In Delum (hymn 4)</i>
<i>Jov.</i>	<i>In Jovem (hymn 1)</i>

Cicero

<i>De Nat.</i>	<i>De Rerum Natura</i>
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Clement of Alexandria:

<i>Protrept.</i>	<i>Protrepticus</i>
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromata</i>

Cyril of Jerusalem:

<i>Mystag.</i>	<i>Mystagogiae</i>
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Damascius:

<i>In Parm.</i>	<i>In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria</i>
<i>In Phd.</i>	<i>In Platonis Phaedem Commentaria</i>

Dio Chrysostom:

<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orationes</i>
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Diodorus Siculus:

<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Historica</i>
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Euripides:

<i>Bacch.</i>	<i>Bacchae</i>
<i>Cycl.</i>	<i>Cyclops</i>
<i>El.</i>	<i>Electra</i>
<i>Hec.</i>	<i>Hecuba</i>

Hel. *Helena*

Tro. *Troiades*

Eusebius:

PE *Praeparatio evangelica*

Eustathius:

Ad Il. *Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem*

Ad Ody. *Commentarii ad Homeri Odysseam*

In Dionys. Perieg. *Commentarium in Dionysii periegetae orbis descriptionem*

Heraclitus:

Hom. Quest. *Quaestiones Homericae*

Hermias Apol.:

Irr. *Irrisio gentilium philosophorum*

Hermias Phil.:

In Phdr. *In Platonis Phaedrum Commentaria*

Herodas:

Mim. *Mimiambi*

Hesiod:

Op. *Opera et Dies*

Theog. *Theogonia*

Himerius :

Or. *Declamationes et orationes*

Homer:

Il. *Ilias*

Od. *Odyssea*

Horace:

Epist. *Epistulae*

Hyginus:

Fab. *Fabulae*

Iamblichus:

De Myst. *De Mysteriis*

Theol. Arith. *Theologoumena arithmeticae*

VP. *De Vita Pythagorica*

Julian (emperor):

Or. *Orationes*

Justin the Martyr:

Dial. *Dialogus cum Tryphone*

Macrobius:

Comm. Somn. Scip. *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*

Maximus of Tyre:

Diss. *Dissertationes*

Nonnus:

Dion. *Dionysiaca*

Para. *Paraphrasis sancti evangelii Joannei*

Olympiodorus:

In Alc. *In Platonis Alcibiadem Commentaria*

In Gorg. *In Platonis Gorgiam Commentaria*

In Phd. *In Platonis Phaedem Commentaria*

Oppian:

Hal. *Halieutica*

Orphica:

OF *Orphica Fragmenta*

OH *Orphei Hymni*

Ovid:

Met. *Metamorphoses*

Philo of Alexandria:

De Opif. Mundi *De Opificio Mundi*

De Somn. *De Somniis*

Spec. Leg. *De Specialibus Legibus*

Philostratus:

V. Apoll. *Vita Apollonii*

Pindar:

Pyth. *Pythia*

Plato:

Crat. *Cratylus*

<i>Crit.</i>	<i>Critias</i>
<i>Gorg.</i>	<i>Gorgias</i>
<i>Parm.</i>	<i>Parmenides</i>
<i>Phd.</i>	<i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Phdr.</i>	<i>Phaedrus</i>
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Res publica</i>
<i>Soph.</i>	<i>Sophista</i>
<i>Symp.</i>	<i>Symposium</i>
<i>Theaet.</i>	<i>Theaetetus</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>

Plotinus:

<i>Enn.</i>	<i>Enneades</i>
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Plutarch:

<i>Adol. poet. aud.</i>	<i>Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat</i>
<i>Adv. Col.</i>	<i>Adversus Colotem</i>
<i>De E</i>	<i>De E apud Delphos</i>
<i>De Iside</i>	<i>De Iside et Osiride</i>

Porphry:

<i>De Abst.</i>	<i>De Abstinencia</i>
<i>De Antro</i>	<i>De Antro Nympharum</i>
<i>De Styg.</i>	<i>De Styge</i>
<i>VPlot.</i>	<i>Vita Plotini</i>

Probus:

<i>In Verg. Buc.</i>	<i>In Vergilii Bucolica</i>
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Proclus:

<i>De mal. sub.</i>	<i>De malorum subsistentia</i>
<i>In Crat.</i>	<i>In Platonis Cratylum Commentaria</i>
<i>In Eucl.</i>	<i>In Primum Euclidis elementorum librum commentarii</i>
<i>In Parm.</i>	<i>In Platonis Parmenidem</i>
<i>In Remp.</i>	<i>In Platonis Rem Publicam Commentarii</i>
<i>In Tim.</i>	<i>In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria</i>

Theol. Plat. *Theologia Platonica*

Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite:

Cael. Hier. *De caelesti hierarchia*

De Div. Nom. *De divinis nominibus*

De Myst. *De Mystica*

Eccl. Hier. *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*

Ep. *Epistulae*

Ps.-Oppian:

Cyn. *Cynegetica*

Psellus, Michael:

Theol. *Theologica*

Stobaeus:

Anth. *Anthologium*

Statius:

Theb. *Thebaid*

Synesius:

De Ins. *De Insomniis*

Ep. *Epistulae*

Theocritus:

Id. *Idyllia*

Theodoret:

Cur. *Graecarum affectionum curatio*

Standard Works:

LSJ H.G. Liddell/R. Scott/H.S. Jones (1996), *A Greek-English Lexicon*, with a Revised Supplement edited by P.G.W. Glare, with the assistance of A.A. Thompson (Oxford, 1996).

P.Vindob. gr *Papyrus Vindobonensis Greek*

TrGF B. Snell/R. Kannicht/S. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 5 vols. (Göttingen, 1971–2004).

Introduction

The *Dionysiaca* is a multifarious confluence of ideas and influences. Nonnus' Dionysiac poetic has been described as 'baroque'¹ and 'voyeuristic',² and the *Dionysiaca* itself has been likened to a 'tapestry' and a 'bricolage' that draws together elements or 'spolia' from the Hellenistic tradition. It is no surprise that Nonnus adopts the shapeshifter Proteus as his patron and poetic persona for such a metamorphic epic. The effect of the plethora of intertexts, images, and influences is dizzying, and threatens to disturb the poem's cohesion as each piece adds to the whole.³

Commentators have produced comprehensive studies on Nonnus' relationship with his poetic forebears, like Homer⁴ and Pindar.⁵ Recent scholarship has also made great strides in locating the *Dionysiaca* within its Late Antique context,⁶ with comparative studies on the relationship between Dionysus and Christ,⁷ and the poem's appeal to the Late Antique experience of visual art and materiality.⁸ Nonnus' relationship with the philosophical schools of the time, however, has received comparatively less attention.

The present study aims to identify and contextualise Neoplatonic influences on Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*. This is not to say that Nonnus himself was, or should be classified as a 'Neoplatonist.' By 'Neoplatonist,' we primarily mean someone who was writing within a permeable Platonic tradition as it had been re-conceived following Plotinus.

¹ For the evaluation of Nonnus' style as baroque see Keydell 1936: 911–2 and more recently Agosti 1995: 134, 150–1.

² Winkler 1974: 1–68; Newbold 2016: 206–7.

³ Segal 1984: 332 says of Nonnus' baroque style that 'individual actions lose their sharpness of outline by being repeated in slightly varied form.'

⁴ For instance, Vian 1991; Hopkinson 1994; Frangoulis 1995 and 2011; Shorrock 2001; De Stefani 2011; Verhelst 2013 and Bannert & Kröll 2016.

⁵ Piccardi 2018.

⁶ As evidenced by the recent Nonnus of Panopolis in Context conference series, which has so far produced two edited volumes, Spanoudakis 2014b and Bannert & Kröll 2018. Also the recent volume on Nonnus in the Brill Companions series, Accorinti 2016a.

⁷ See especially Shorrock 2011.

⁸ Agosti 2014; Faber 2016.

This means that it was possible for individuals to be educated in Neoplatonism, or to engage with it in some way, without necessarily being termed a 'Neoplatonist.' This approach avoids making any supposition about a writer's self-identity or their personal philosophical adherence. Neoplatonism, aside from being a philosophical school, provided Late Antique society with a mode of thinking about the divine and the universe, and a mode of discourse for discussing the theological issues of the time. Neoplatonic ideas, and earlier ideas that had been mediated through Neoplatonism, had suffused the fabric of Late Antique society in the Mediterranean and the Near East. Influential Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea had incorporated Platonic ideas into Christian doctrine, particularly as a basis for Christian Trinitarianism. Neoplatonism had also had an irrevocable influence on aesthetics, art, and architecture. This meant that writers like Nonnus could write within a Neoplatonic mode of thinking, consciously or otherwise, without being Neoplatonic philosophers themselves.

Previous studies have established a basis for Nonnus' engagement with Neoplatonism. Hernández de la Fuente (2014) looks at Neoplatonic form and content in Nonnus, with a view to gaining a new understanding of Nonnian poetics. His research identifies three pillars based on Neoplatonism's aesthetic principles: 1) the metaphysical transition from the One to the Many through imitation, reflection and continuous change and metamorphosis; 2) the circular motion of the universe, the soul (through a cyclic death and rebirth), divinity and noetic or prophetic thought;⁹ and 3) the effects of prophecy as a sign of the divine Unity in our material world. Gigli Piccardi (2016) also discusses the relationship between the *Dionysiaca* and Neoplatonic poetics, particularly in the mental mechanisms of inspiration and the psychological mechanisms of the imagination. Gigli Piccardi (2016) also manages to reconcile Nonnus' programmatic principle of *poikilia* (variety) with Neoplatonic thought, which generally considered unity to be a higher principle than multiplicity.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Miguélez

⁹ For the motif of circularity as a Neoplatonic influence on Nonnus, see also Piccardi 1985: 217-20; Hernández de la Fuente 2011.

¹⁰ Gigli Piccardi 2016: 458-60. For a different attempt at interpreting Nonnus' *poikilia* in relation to Neoplatonic thought, see Agosti 1996.

Cavero and Gigli Piccardi have noted the influence of Neoplatonism on the wider 'Nonnian School.'¹¹

There is also a clear precedent for Nonnus' use of Neoplatonic material in his other surviving poem, the *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John*. The *Paraphrase* makes use of exegetical and theological content from Cyril of Alexandria's commentary on John's Gospel,¹² and Cyril himself displays Neoplatonic influences in various works.¹³ Nonnus' choice of John's Gospel as the subject for his metaphrasis may also have been motivated by its philosophical context; Clement of Alexandria had labelled John's Gospel the 'spiritual gospel,' as opposed to the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It was also viewed as the most 'Greek' of the Gospels.¹⁴ The Johannine doctrine of the Logos had potential predecessors in the immanent Stoic Logos, and the Logos of Philo of Alexandria, making John's Gospel a privileged text in Nonnus' Alexandria. Although it was a Christian text, John's Gospel also acted as a middle ground for discussions of theology and more secular philosophy, as can be seen from the interest it provoked among non-Christian commentators. Accordingly, Nonnus' *Paraphrase* has been shown to capitalise on the Gospel's openness to philosophical interpretation,¹⁵ and uses Neoplatonic material in its composition.¹⁶

Although this study focuses primarily upon Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, the *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John* is an important comparandum given the two poems are mutually referential, and were likely composed simultaneously. Unfortunately, a comprehensive analysis of Neoplatonic influences on the *Paraphrase* is beyond the scope of this project. This is partly due to the sheer scale of the material. Furthermore, Neoplatonic resonances and motifs in the *Paraphrase* are at times different in nature from those in the *Dionysiaca*, partly because of the need to faithfully expand upon the Gospel in hexameter verse. The *Paraphrase* also already possesses a recognised philosophical framework owing to centuries of Christian interpretation of the Bible.

¹¹ For a general overview, see Miguelez-Cavero 2008: 3-35; also Gigli Piccardi 2014 (John of Gaza)

¹² Golega 1930: 127-30; Livrea 1989: 25.

¹³ Young 1971; Meijering 1974; McCoy 1977: 362-91.

¹⁴ Spanoudakis 2016: 604.

¹⁵ John's Gospel generated significant interest among Neoplatonists in the third and fourth centuries.

¹⁶ Cf. Livrea 1989: 31; 2000: 54-55; De Stefani 2002: 14-26; Gigli Piccardi 2003: 82-83; Cutino 2009; Spanoudakis 2015.

With Neoplatonic influences on the *Paraphrase* established as proof of concept, this thesis will demonstrate evidence of Neoplatonic influences in the *Dionysiaca*, illustrating a fundamental relationship between text and context. Key topics will include the character of Dionysus himself, the use of mimesis as an aesthetic and philosophical principle, the role of divine inspiration, and the transposition and reworking of Neoplatonic allegories. This introduction shall sketch out Nonnus' intellectual environment, particularly in Alexandria. It will also outline key methodological issues regarding Nonnus, the Christian/pagan dichotomy, and the handling of Neoplatonic material. Examples from the *Paraphrase* will be used throughout the project where possible to support research hypotheses. This is particularly the case in Chapter 2, which focuses primarily on mimetic vocabulary and aesthetic themes, both of which appear frequently in the *Paraphrase*.

Nonnus in Context

Almost nothing is known about Nonnus, the author of the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase*, except that he was Egyptian, most likely from Panopolis (present day Akhmim) in the Egyptian Thebaid. Despite Nonnus' struggle for recognition in Anglophone scholarship in the 20th century, he remains perhaps the most distinguished among a host of writers from Panopolis active between the 4th and 6th centuries CE, which included the poets Triphiodorus, Cyrus, and Pamprepus. According to scholarly consensus, it is likely that Nonnus spent some time in Alexandria, and that his forty-eight book *Dionysiaca* was written there. This is based on 1) the proem of the *Dionysiaca*, in which Nonnus invokes Proteus, the shapeshifter god and oracle of Pharos; 2) an anonymous epigram from Alexandria, *AP* 9.198, that professes to be from the hand of the poet;¹⁷ 3) an 'affectionate' mention of the river Nile (*Dion.* 26.238).¹⁸ In addition,

¹⁷ Livrea 1987: 110-3 and 1989: 32-5, *contra* Vian 1976 lvi-lvii, who suggests that the epigram may have been authored as a book inscription by the first editor of the *Dionysiaca*, who likely inserted the *Perioche* too. See also Vian 1994: 229-9, n.169; Piccardi 2003: 46-50. Collart 1930: 3 and Wifstrand 1933: 168 favoured an attribution to a pupil of Nonnus.

¹⁸ Accorinti 2016b: 23.

Alexandria was the centre for intellectuals in Egypt, being a multicultural centre of learning and the seat of the Patriarch.

Nonnus and his poetry can be reliably dated to the fifth century. The dating of Nonnus and his work is crucial for this project, as it allows us to further contextualise Nonnus' work within its intellectual milieu. It allows us to distinguish between diachronic and synchronic allusions and intertexts. It allows us to establish precursors and dependencies for ideas in the *Dionysiaca*. In some instances, it even allows us to identify concrete allusions.

Nonnus likely knew the Egyptian poet Claudian's *Gigantomachy* (prior to 394) and his *De Raptu Proserpinae* (396-402), which gives us a possible *terminus post quem* for the *Dionysiaca*.¹⁹ Others have argued that the *Dionysiaca* demonstrates an awareness of Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, which provides us with another, later *terminus post quem* of c. 438.²⁰ An epigram by Cyrus of Panopolis, AP 9.136 (441-442 CE) offers a third potential *terminus post quem*, as Nonnus appears to imitate the opening line (cf. *Dion.* 16.321, 20.372). The historian Agathias (536-582 CE) offers us a *terminus ante quem*, as he mentions Nonnus among the 'new poets' at *Histories* 4.23.5-6, and quotes *Dion.* 1.42-3 without reference.²¹ Menander Protector implies that Agathias died before completing his *Histories*, dating the document towards the end of his life (*Men. Prot.* fr. 1 = *Suda* M591).

Nonnus' poems would go on to have a profound impact on the metre and style of later poets, once referred to collectively as the 'Nonnian school.' Although this label has largely fallen out of favour, Nonnus' influence on later literature can be used to date his poetry more securely than the rather late *terminus post quem* offered by Agathias. The first poems that appear to be influenced by Nonnus' metre and style are the *Encomium on Theagenes*, attributed to Pamprepus (*P.Vindob. gr.* 29788 A-C, c. 473),

¹⁹ Cameron 1970: 1-29; Whitby 1994: 126; Accorinti 2016b: 28; *contra* Schmitz 2005: 198. On the date of Claudian's *Gigantomachy* and *De Raptu Proserpinae*, see also Livrea 1998: 197-99 and Onorato 2008: 11-28.

²⁰ Tissoni 1998: 13; Accorinti 2003: 205. *Dion.* 44.131 uses *OF* 120 Kern, retooling a comment on the ungodly behaviour of the Titans and their hostility to the Olympians and instead using it to describe Pentheus' blind opposition to Dionysus. Proclus cites the same Orphic fragment at *In Tim.* 1.187.8-9 as a metaphor for the conflict between the ancient Athenians and Atlantis. Given that Proclus cites these lines in a similar context, it is probable that Nonnus followed his example.

²¹ Accorinti 2016b: 29.

and the anonymous *Encomium on Heraclius of Edessa* (*P.S.I.* III 253, c. 471). These two poems suggest that sections of the *Dionysiaca* were in circulation as late as 470.²² Cameron prefers an earlier date of 450, to account for its impact on Pamprepicus towards the later years of the 5th century,²³ although this does not take into account that the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* were probably decades in the making, and that Nonnus would no doubt have made sections available in various forms and settings to listeners and readers. Nonnus himself is presumed to have lived approximately between 400 and 470 CE.²⁴

The relative chronology and priority of Nonnus' two poems have caused some debate. If one reads both poems, the apparent interlocking intertextuality makes establishing chronological priority extremely difficult. Francis Vian's analysis on Nonnus' use of the term *μάπτuς* in both poems concluded that the concept was developed in the *Paraphrase* and then applied to the *Dionysiaca*. This would establish the *Paraphrase* as the earlier poem of the two.²⁵ This stance, however, has been recently challenged by Sieber, who attributes the use of *μάπτuς* in the *Paraphrase* to a dependency on the Gospels that is entirely distinct from its use in the *Dionysiaca*.²⁶ Vian's conclusions have also been called into question by the *Paraphrase's* recent Italian editors, who tend to date both poems to the same period. More recent publications mostly concur that the poems were written contemporaneously (430-450).²⁷ In light of this, we can expect correspondences between the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* with different temporal priorities.

The dating of Nonnus' life and poetry has often been set against developments in poetic metre and style, or as previously discussed, to formulate arguments on textual priority, rather than to situate Nonnus within his intellectual context. This project will explore this with particular focus on Neoplatonism. This is not to argue definitively that Nonnus attended Neoplatonic lectures or received a comprehensive philosophical

²² Miguélez Caverio 2008: 72-4 (no. 54) and 68-9 (no. 46) respectively.

²³ Cameron 2016: 45.

²⁴ Accorinti 2016b: 30.

²⁵ Vian 1997.

²⁶ Sieber 2018: 159-162.

²⁷ Livrea 2000: 56; Whitby 2007: 201; Tisconi 2008: 78-79; Shorrock 2011: 51; Agosti 2012: 367.

education in Alexandria. This certainly might have been the case, but it is impossible to prove one way or the other. In the absence of such knowledge, we can only sketch out the intellectual environment in which Nonnus no doubt lived.

To help situate Nonnus in the context of Neoplatonism, a tentative dating of Nonnus' life from 400 to 470 would make him a contemporary of the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (c. 410-485). Proclus was head of the Platonic Academy in Athens until his death in 485 CE. Prior to his arrival in Athens in 431, he spent some time in Alexandria under the tutelage of Olympiodorus the Elder. While it is uncertain that Nonnus ever visited Athens (the city's appearance in *Dionysiaca* 47.1-33 seems to be a purely 'literary reminiscence' of the first stasimon of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*),²⁸ there was a strong tradition of Neoplatonism in Alexandria, the capital of his native Egypt. Within his lifetime, Nonnus would have been a contemporary of Alexandrian Neoplatonists like Hermias (c. 410 – c. 450) and his son Ammonius (c. 440 – c. 520). The city had also been home to Neoplatonic icons such as Hypatia (born c. 350-70, died 415), and would continue after Nonnus' death to host philosophers like Olympiodorus the Younger (c. 495 – 570) through to the Christian philosopher Stephanus in the 7th century. Although the Platonic Academy in Athens would be closed by the Emperor Justinian in 529, the Platonic tradition would endure in Alexandria for many years. Many of the philosophers who were active at the turn of the 5th century were fundamentally committed to the idea of principled civic engagement and worked to educate members of their respective communities in philosophy.²⁹ Neoplatonists like Hypatia and Hierocles also admitted Christian students into their classes, and taught a philosophy that appealed to such students.³⁰

For our purposes, it is relatively easy to identify influences from Plotinus, the 'founder' of Neoplatonism in the 3rd century CE. Plotinian ideas formed the fabric of the Neoplatonic tradition and are easily demonstrable in philosophical and theological traditions in both the East and the West. The influence of Plotinus on the Cappadocian

²⁸ Accorinti 2004: 25-36.

²⁹ Watts 2017: 137.

³⁰ Watts 2017: 137. For the teaching of Hypatia and Hierocles see Watts 2006: 194–7 (Hypatia) and 205–7 (Hierocles).

Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea) has already been noted.³¹ Augustine of Hippo even read Plotinus' texts in Latin translation.³²

Identifying ideas and influences from Neoplatonic contemporaries of Nonnus is more difficult. Proclus was active at the Academy in Athens, and there is no evidence that he ever admitted Christian students into his lectures. His stance was uncompromising and so unapologetically polytheistic that John Philoponus wrote a refutation of Proclus' *On the Eternity of the World* as a centrepiece of his program to define Alexandrian Christian Platonism.³³ Towards the end of the 5th century, there was also a marked shift in the teaching of Alexandrian Platonism that diminished many of Proclus' developments. The *Parmenides*, which had been the Platonic theological text *par excellence*, was eventually replaced by Plato's *Timaeus*, as its depiction of the divine was more familiar and acceptable to Christian audiences.³⁴

By the time of Olympiodorus the Younger, it appears that a significant portion of his students were Christians, who were perhaps looking for a particular kind of Christian Hellenism, with its philosophical modes of reasoning. The uncompromising polytheistic systems of theology proposed by Proclus were instead reworked in ways that allowed them to be used and understood by Christian audiences.³⁵ For example, in his commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades*, Olympiodorus follows Proclus' commentary but strikes a conciliatory tone with Christianity.³⁶ He is careful to elide theological content, and broaches the names of the gods and their cult titles primarily as symbols. His manner of accommodating Christianity led Westerink to attribute to him 'a pliability so extreme indeed that it might be more correct to speak of a teaching routine than a philosophy.'³⁷ Olympiodorus' demonstration of the malleability of Proclus' texts, however, no doubt paved the way for future Christian Neoplatonists like Ps.-Dionysius

³¹ Emillson 2017: 375.

³² Iozzia 2015: 14.

³³ Watts 2017: 137. On Philoponus's engagement with Proclus see Watts 2006: 237–46.

³⁴ Tarrant 2017: 36–41.

³⁵ Tarrant 2017: 33–44.

³⁶ Griffin 2015: 3–7.

³⁷ Westerink 1976: 23.

the Areopagite, whose philosophy was directly inspired by Proclus, and was a significant departure from Plotinus and the Cappadocian Fathers.³⁸

Proclus' work would have no doubt been disseminated in Alexandria in some form, particularly considering his student Ammonius would later become head of Alexandria's Platonic school. To further complicate matters, Proclus also shows a clear reliance on his teacher Syrianus, and often does not signal to the reader when he is quoting Syrianus directly.³⁹ This can make disentangling Proclus and Syrianus a daunting task.⁴⁰ Therefore, Neoplatonic ideas in Nonnus that appear in Proclus' writings could in fact reflect the influence of Syrianus on both authors. In general, it should be borne in mind that ostensibly 'Proclan' ideas in Nonnus could have come to him via different avenues and intermediaries.

Nonnus' contemporaries also included prominent Christian intellectuals such as Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376 – 444), who was the city's Patriarch from 412. Cyril was a prominent voice at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the ensuing Nestorian controversy. The influence of his commentary on John's Gospel on Nonnus' *Paraphrase* has already been noted. Although Cyril was no philosopher, he had a good knowledge of Aristotelian and Porphyrian logic,⁴¹ and was acquainted with Platonic exegetical methods,⁴² although it is unclear whether he was formally educated in them.⁴³ He also uses some Neoplatonic concepts in his theological expression.⁴⁴ Later in life, however, he presented himself as an anti-Hellenist, and was ultimately held responsible for the febrile climate in Alexandria which led to the death of Hypatia, a prominent Neoplatonist in the city.⁴⁵ Despite this 'anti-Hellenic' position, Cyril was certainly widely read in 'Hellenic' literature, although Christian writers were his first port of call to find

³⁸ Wear & Dillon 2007; Perl 2007; Iozzia 2015: 14.

³⁹ Lamberz 1987: 6.

⁴⁰ See Wear 2011.

⁴¹ Siddals 1987; Boulnois 1994: 181–227.

⁴² Boulnois 1994: 85, 186–7.

⁴³ McKinion 2000: 17.

⁴⁴ Young 1971; McCoy 1977: 362–91.

⁴⁵ Socrates *HE* 7.15; Philostorgius 8.9; Malalas 13–39.

what he needed.⁴⁶ His works also echo those of Church Fathers like Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea,⁴⁷ both of whom display Platonic influences.⁴⁸

Alexandria itself had long been a centre for intellectual syncretism, partially due to its cosmopolitan nature. The city was home to Greek, Jewish, and Egyptian communities, along with other native Africans, and Romans. Philo, a Jewish philosopher based in Alexandria, has been recognised as an important contributor to Alexandrian Platonism.⁴⁹ Later Christian figures like Clement of Alexandria drew heavily on Plato and other Greek philosophers to augment their own writings on the Bible.⁵⁰ Some scholars have claimed that the Church Father Origen wrote at times within the Platonic tradition,⁵¹ although it should be noted that he was first and foremost a Christian, who made use of Greek philosophy in the service of allegorical exegesis and in the defence of the ecclesiastical tradition.⁵² It is no surprise, then, that Nonnus' texts reflect the diversity of thought of Alexandria, and draw upon long-standing Alexandrian intellectual traditions.

Christians and Pagans

With the limited biographical information on Nonnus, scholars have been forced to direct their biographical inquiries at the texts themselves. The coexistence of the ostensibly 'Christian' *Paraphrase* and the 'pagan' mythological *Dionysiaca* puzzled scholars in the early 20th century. How were we to reconcile these two seemingly incompatible texts? Two main explanations were proposed: 1) that Nonnus was a Late Antique example of pagan-Christian syncretism;⁵³ 2) that Nonnus composed the *Dionysiaca* first, then converted to Christianity and wrote the *Paraphrase*.⁵⁴ While it is

⁴⁶ Grant 1964: 269-79.

⁴⁷ Russell 2000: 5-6. Also Beeley 2009 (Gregory of Nazianzus).

⁴⁸ Moran 2000: 166-8; Iozzia 2015: 39.

⁴⁹ Boyancé 1963; 1967. Dillon 1977, 139-183 offers the first systematic analysis of Philo as a 'Middle-Platonist.' See recently Dillion & Birnbaum 2020.

⁵⁰ Outler 1940; Jugrin 2016.

⁵¹ E.g. Ramelli 2009; 2017.

⁵² Edwards 2017.

⁵³ Golega 1930: 80-81.

⁵⁴ Bogner 1934: 320-333; Keydell 1936: 905, 910-911, 915-916.

now widely accepted that Nonnus was a 'Christian,' the labels 'Christian' and 'pagan' require further interrogation for our present study. As Maijastina Kahlos writes:

One of the frontiers demarcated and constantly rectified in the Christian polemical and apologetic literature was the one between Christians and pagans. Christian opinion leaders implanted and then polarized the Christian–pagan dichotomy in order to strengthen the Christian *Selbstverständnis*. They bundled up a large variety of diverse religions, cults and practices into the overall term paganism. This simpleminded division of the world into two opposing segments turns out to be problematic because there were individuals (as well as places, practices and festivals) that did not fit into this simplified categorisation.⁵⁵

Using the classification 'pagan,' therefore perpetuates ancient Christian attempts to conceptualise and clarify Christian self-identity by reducing a myriad of religions with complex interactions to a seemingly homogenous religion. It also adopts a Christian perspective that was devised for a specific polemical context. Previous attempts to move away from this simple binary opposition have categorised individuals occupying a space between hard-line Christianity and hard-line 'paganism' as Christianised/Christianising pagans, paganised/paganising Christians, crypto-pagans, or nominal Christians, among many other labels. Many of these labels characterise the phenomenon they (attempt to) describe as marginal and transitional, implying a teleological movement towards a final state: a 'complete Christianity.'⁵⁶ These terms also replace the idea of binary opposition with that of a linear scale with two extremes. Scales and spectra, however, still retain the Christian/pagan dichotomy in imagining that any 'ambiguous' individuals move bidirectionally along a flat plane, with movement between no more than two points, pagan and Christian. To more accurately capture the variety of religious identities and expressions in Late Antiquity, future attempts at classification must be visualised in three, or even four dimensional space to include the concept of time.

Over the course of the 4th century, however, there had been a fundamental change in the self-consciousness of people whom Christians termed 'pagans.' Due to

⁵⁵ Kahlos 2007: 2.

⁵⁶ Kahlos 2007: 26.

their interaction and competition with Christians, ‘pagans’ became more conscious of themselves as a group, and began to operate within and redraw the lines that had been marked out for them. This can be seen clearly in the emperor Julian’s revised vision of pagan Hellenism in the 360s.⁵⁷ The Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus’ writings also represent a 4th-century attempt to present Graeco-Roman paganism as a coherent system, and this approach is continued by Proclus in the 5th century. However, it is clear that poets like Nonnus and Ausonius were able to write within such circumscribed ‘pagan’ systems, with full command over the instruments and registers of Classical literature, without needing to subscribe to the surface features of religious expression.⁵⁸

By the fourth century, the Greek term ‘Hellene’ had become the standard overall term for pagans, designating those who belonged to Greek culture but were neither Christians nor Jews. The term carried a dual sense over a long period; some authors, like Tatian in his *Against the Hellenes*, use it pejoratively, while others like Clement of Alexandria saw Hellenism as Greek culture, and thus in a far more favourable light.⁵⁹ The term likely meant different things to different people. For example, the emperor Julian emphasised the religious practices of Hellenism over its cultural and ethnic aspects. For Synesius, however, Hellenism was above all, a culture.⁶⁰ This makes it a problematic classification to use, unless it is specifically used of a figure’s self-expression (whether it be religious, ethnic, or cultural), because ‘Hellene’ could mean different things to different people at different times.

A monotheistic/polytheistic opposition is also sadly inadequate for thinking about later antiquity. In addition to henotheistic cults, some philosophically-minded ‘pagans’ had a relationship with the divine that was more monotheistic than the average Christian, whose cult practices could tend towards the polytheistic, with prayers to the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary and the saints.⁶¹ Plotinus, who is generally considered the founder of Neoplatonism, put forth a theology that has been described as ‘mystical monotheism,’ because the One remains his ineffable First Principle and the only real

⁵⁷ Kahlos 2007: 18-19.

⁵⁸ See Stenger 2016: 130-6.

⁵⁹ Kahlos 2007: 20.

⁶⁰ Kahlos 2007: 21; Vinzent 1998: 37-8; Bowersock 1990: 9-10

⁶¹ Kahlos 2007: 17 & chapter 6. For more on ‘pagan’ monotheism, see Athanassiadi & Frede 1999.

deity in his system, despite any 'polytheism' admitted at the level of religious observance.⁶² His writings had a fundamental influence on the Cappadocian Fathers, particularly Gregory of Nyssa and his reflection on union with the divine.⁶³

Neoplatonism and its location in the Christian/pagan dichotomy has also been problematic. In the past, Neoplatonism has been imagined as a normatively 'pagan' school, that stood in opposition to the fledgling Christianity. The antagonism of Neoplatonic thinkers like Porphyry and the emperor Julian towards Christianity became emblematic of the school as a whole, rather than instances of individual expression. Modern reception has also transformed figures like Hypatia into figureheads of rational atheism who stood against Christian suppression.⁶⁴ Conceptualised within a Christian/pagan dichotomy, Neoplatonism became a last bastion of pagan resistance.

The idea that 'Christians' and 'pagans' lived only in opposition to one another has not held up to scrutiny. Recently, scholars have explored various models to account for what appears to have been a largely peaceful coexistence. Neoplatonism, however, has yet to fully escape from the Christian/pagan dichotomy. Locating motifs and ideas from the *Dionysiaca* within the intellectual history of Neoplatonism would, in the recent past, have raised questions about Nonnus' education, philosophical allegiance and religious beliefs. If Nonnus' poetry includes motifs and ideas from Neoplatonism, did he follow a particular philosopher (e.g., Ps-Dionysius with Proclus, or Gregory of Nyssa with Plotinus) or a particular strand of Neoplatonism? Or, was his knowledge and experience of Neoplatonism more eclectic, drawn from different philosophers and manuscripts? Was his knowledge obtained directly through schooling and the reception of certain texts, or was it absorbed indirectly through a form of socio-cultural osmosis?

In analysing Nonnus' use of Neoplatonic material, it is easy to fall into anachronistic classifications, and even revert to the Christian/pagan dichotomy. If we call philosophers like Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus 'pagan Neoplatonists,' we classify these philosophers under a label that was essentially created by Christians as part of a programme to formulate their own identity in opposition to an Other. If we

⁶² Kenney 1991: 155; Uždavinys 2009: 35-6.

⁶³ Iozzia 2015: 13.

⁶⁴ A survey can be found in Watts 2017: 135-47.

call them simply 'Neoplatonists,' we imply that so-called 'pagan' Neoplatonists were the norm. Meanwhile writers who engaged with Platonic material whose religion is identifiably Christian have been classed as 'Platonising Christians,' 'Christianising Platonists,' and 'Christian Platonists.' This suggests that Christian thinkers in the Platonic tradition believed perhaps in a secondary, diluted, or debased form of Platonism, or a form that was distinguished primarily by their religious views. To complicate matters further, the label 'Platonising Christians' implies that the main source of philosophical wisdom for these Christian writers was Plato himself, whereas 'Christian Neoplatonists' implies that they viewed Plato through the mediating lens of contemporary Neoplatonic thought. Ultimately, these inadequate categories all attempt to express a key problem: that the Christian/pagan dichotomy was devised primarily for religious classification, and although philosophy and religion often overlap and intersect, they are not coterminous.

These issues of identity and classification are particularly important for the purposes of the present study, which charts the intersections between poetic output (that has been characterised within the Christian/pagan dichotomy) and the Platonic tradition, which includes philosophers who have been categorised as hard-line Christians and hard-line 'pagans', but also undoubtedly includes figures who do not fit neatly into either category.

Recent attempts to challenge these dichotomies have exciting implications for our understanding of the cultural context of Late Antiquity. One compelling example of this is Maijastina Kahlos' concept of the *incerti*:

I have developed a concept of *incerti* to describe these individuals in between – in the grey area between the Christians and pagans ... The simplified distinction introduced by late antique Christians has lived on in the Western culture dominated by Christianity and consequently also in modern research.⁶⁵

Kahlos' concept of *incerti* has already been applied to Nonnus and the religious identities of Late Antique poets by Robert Shorrock in his 2011 monograph *The Myth of*

⁶⁵ Kahlos 2007: 2.

Paganism.⁶⁶ The concept captures the broad ambiguity of Late Antique figures who do not fit neatly into the rigid demarcations between pagan and Christian.

A compelling example of this phenomenon within the Platonic tradition is Synesius of Cyrene (370-413 CE). Synesius is generally classified as a 'Christian' due to the monotheistic sentiments expressed in his writings, and the fact that he accepted the bishopric of Cyrene and the Pentapolis at the request of the metropolitan of Alexandria. At the time of this request, however, he was not actually a baptised Christian, and his writings show a clear influence from Neoplatonism, owing to his philosophical education in Alexandria under Hypatia. In a letter to his brother, Synesius cites the caveats he gave Theophilus, the metropolitan of Alexandria, for accepting the bishopric of Cyrene (*Ep.* 105.79-92):

There is one point, however, which is not new to Theophilus, but of which I must remind him. I must press my point here a little more, for beside this difficulty all the others are as nothing. It is difficult, if not impossible, for doctrines to be shaken which have entered the soul through knowledge and proof. You know that philosophy in many ways opposes these doctrines that are on everyone's lips. To be sure, I will never think it right to consider the soul to be generated after the body. I will not say that the cosmos and its parts will perish. The resurrection that everyone speaks about I consider to be something sacred and inexpressible and I am far from agreeing with the ideas held by the masses. The philosopher's mind which has a vision of the truth can agree to a necessary lie.⁶⁷

Elsewhere in his writings, Synesius rarely mentions Scripture or even the name of Christ, and he even claims that he will speak as a Christian in public, and as a philosopher in private (*Ep.* 105). He was, however, accepted as a Christian by later generations.⁶⁸ As Kahlos says, 'pagan philosophy and Christian theology are mixed in Synesius in such a way that it would be useless to try and clarify this concoction.'⁶⁹ The question as to whether Synesius was a Christian or a Hellene is rendered irrelevant because for Synesius himself there was probably no such distinction to be made. Platonic and

⁶⁶ Shorrock 2011: 123-4.

⁶⁷ Transl. Fitzgerald 1926: 200.

⁶⁸ Cameron 1994: 128.

⁶⁹ Kahlos 2007: 119. This statement also strongly applies to Gregory of Nyssa.

Christian modes of thinking were entwined in such a way that for modern commentators, disentangling these strands risks imposing artificial and outmoded dichotomies on Synesius' philosophical thought. During his three years as an ambassador in Constantinople, there is no sign that his political speeches, which dealt with the idea of political power in highly rhetorical and classicising terms, were frowned upon as 'pagan' or deemed unsuitable for a predominantly Christian court.⁷⁰

The ambiguous Synesius gives us an interesting example against which to compare Nonnus. Nonnus' writings demonstrate that he was able to comfortably write in two different modes: 1) a Christian mode inspired by the Gospels (exemplified by the poems of Gregory of Nazianzus); 2) a classicising mode inspired first and foremost by Homer, with influences from the entire canon of Greek Classical literature. If Nonnus indeed worked on the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* simultaneously, as many scholars now believe, he must have been able to switch between these two compositional modes with ease. The fact that both modes are expressed in dactylic hexameters means that both poems are written in the verse structure of Homer, and of oracular poetry. This demonstrates that, in Late Antiquity, dactylic hexameter was first and foremost a metre for inspired poetry, making it appropriate for both epic and for paraphrasing the word of the Gospels.

From a classical perspective, the *Dionysiaca* offers a bricolage of elements drawn from mythology (e.g. Homer), mystery cults (e.g. 'Orphism,' the Eleusinian mysteries, and the mysteries of Samothrace), obscure and regional cult titles, and even myths that appear to contradict one another (e.g. the uncertain continuity between Zagreus and Dionysus, addressed in Chapter 1 of my study). These mythological and religious elements are interwoven with philosophical influences (e.g. Neoplatonism, Stoicism) and a plethora of genres drawn from the Classical tradition. The syncretic hymn to Herakles Astrochiton in Book 40 assimilates him to 'just about every god you could imagine'⁷¹ (including Zeus, Cronos, Mithras, Helios, and Apollo to name only a few). However, the *Dionysiaca* also includes several reminiscences from the Gospels,⁷² just as

⁷⁰ Cameron 1994: 128.

⁷¹ Lightfoot 2016: 631.

⁷² For instance, at *Dion* 5.442-4, the ghost of Actaeon appears to his father in a dream and begs him not to punish his dogs, using the words of Christ on the Cross (cf. Luke 23:34a). At *Dion*. 35.21-78, in a

the *Paraphrase* includes elements that would be familiar to audiences well versed in Greek mythology.⁷³

In *The Myth of Paganism* (2011), Shorrock rejects the use of ‘pagan’ and ‘secular’ to describe poetry that does not engage explicitly with Christian themes. Instead, he considers poets who write in an explicitly Christian mode as ‘poets of Christ’; those poets who engage with Classical themes and seek to locate themselves within the Classical literary tradition he considers ‘poets of the Muses.’ The concept applies nicely to poets like Ausonius, who alternate between traditional Classical and Christian modes at different times.⁷⁴ For Nonnus, however, it is possible to modify this classification, for not only is he a poet of the Muse, but he explicitly situates himself as a ‘son of Homer’ (see the appeal for the shield of ‘father Homer’ - ἀσπίδα πατρός Ὁμήρου, 25.265). Shorrock argues that ‘it is quite possible for one poet to write in two different modes as both ‘poet of the Muses’ and ‘poet of Christ,’ without making any assumptions about religious convictions.’⁷⁵ However, this argument is perhaps a bit reductive. Poets like Nonnus are clearly capable of writing in either mode; however, by the 5th century, Christianity has become the normative mode of religious identification and expression. A Christian poet might adopt the ‘poet of the Muses’ persona because of its cultural authority. However, it is less likely that a poet without Christian convictions would want to pose as a ‘poet of Christ.’ While educated individuals like Synesius may have philosophical convictions that prohibited them from fully adopting popular Christian ideas, Christianity is still the primary point of departure. Although Shorrock’s dyad of poetic personas captures the Janus-like nature of Nonnus’ model far better than other models, this caveat should caution against applying the concept too widely. Shorrock’s model cannot be transposed to the intellectual history of Neoplatonism, or to Nonnus’ engagement with Neoplatonic material. This is because Neoplatonic language and

reworking of Achilles’ love for Penthesileia, a Bacchant addresses an Indian soldier who speared her with the words the risen Christ speaks to Mary Magdalene at *Par.* 20.72-5. For more on ‘Christian’ themes in the *Dionysiaca*, see Shorrock 2016.

⁷³ See, e.g., Spanoudakis 2014a; 2016.

⁷⁴ Shorrock 2011: 21.

⁷⁵ Shorrock 2011: 8.

paradigms could be used by both ‘poets of the Muses’ and ‘poets of Christ,’ forming an ideological common ground.

It is worth remembering that Neoplatonism was a highly eclectic school of philosophy. Individual Neoplatonists appealed to different texts and writers as sources of wisdom and universal truth. They could also quote literature antagonistically, to dismantle and argue against. Writers like Porphyry were capable of quoting Genesis as a source of wisdom while also writing anti-Christian polemics. Amelius, one of Plotinus’ ‘pagan’ students, wrote a commentary on the Prologue of John’s Gospel.⁷⁶ Plotinus’ ‘mystic monotheism’ had a profound influence on the Christian Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), all of whom have in the past been subject to aforementioned labels like ‘Platonising Christians’ that tried, inadequately, to classify and reconcile their Platonic and Christian convictions. From a certain perspective, Plotinus has more in common with the Cappadocian Fathers than with Proclus, another so-called ‘pagan’ Neoplatonist. Despite Proclus’ unapologetically ‘pagan’ doctrine, his thought would go on to inspire the ‘Christian’ Ps.-Dionysius. By looking beyond religious self-expression, we can see that Neoplatonism had in fact become a complex mode of discourse in Late Antiquity, that writers of different and uncertain religious expression could write within when discussing the philosophical and theological issues of the time. We can see that some writers have more in common despite their religious expression than because of it.

In light of these issues, the present study will attempt as much as possible to avoid imposing artificial or anachronistic distinctions on Nonnus and the other ancient intellectuals to whom his work shows affinities. Most importantly, I will seek to avoid: 1) imposing Christian/pagan dichotomies; 2) establishing or inferring that a particular strand of Neoplatonism is some way canonical or normative, with the inherent consequence that other strands become deviations; and 3) assuming that the development of the Neoplatonic tradition is in any way teleological.

Instead, I aim to: 1) take a de-canonised and decentralised view of the Neoplatonic tradition; 2) approach Neoplatonic ideas and influences in Nonnus as non-

⁷⁶ Eusebius, *PE* 11.18.26–19.2. See Dörrie 1972; Brisson 1987: 840–843.

systematic, individual strands in a multifarious Platonic tradition, with Christian and non-Christian contributors; 3) show through Nonnus' use of Neoplatonic material that Neoplatonism existed as a mode of thinking and discourse that could be used for different ends by Late Antique writers. These include the elucidation of difficult or problematic texts, to support different theologies, and to establish a common philosophical ground for the debates of the time.

Classifying Neoplatonism

One problem scholars face when dealing with Platonic influences is, how are these to be classified? Neoplatonism as a term is necessarily anachronistic, an invention of the 19th century that carries subliminal implications. As a category, it demarcates the tradition from what came before, predicating the novelty of Plotinus over continuity. It also functions as a historical category, whereby the majority of Platonic thinkers thereafter are classified by the proximity of their beliefs to Plotinus rather than Plato. In actuality, Late Antique thinkers, particularly Christians, could revert directly to Plato and appropriate his writings, while eschewing the Platonic tradition's more recent developments (e.g. Theodoret of Cyrus).⁷⁷ This raises questions of methodology. When Nonnus refers to Plato's tripartite division of the soul at *Dionysiaca* 10.25, is this to be interpreted as a direct allusion to Plato, or must it by necessity be contextualised within recent Platonic discourse?

By contrast, so-called Middle Platonists, whose influence is still felt in Late Antiquity through the Gnostics and revelatory texts like the *Chaldean Oracles*, are relegated to a transitional phase in Platonism. Middle Platonists like Plutarch had identifiable influences, not just on Neoplatonists like Porphyry and Proclus,⁷⁸ but also on early Christians like Eusebius, Cyril of Alexandria, and the Cappadocian Fathers.⁷⁹ This shows that there were avenues of exposure to Platonic ideas aside from Neoplatonic texts and schooling. Therefore, unmediated influences in the *Dionysiaca* that come

⁷⁷ See Siniosoglou 2008.

⁷⁸ Simonetti 2019.

⁷⁹ Betz 1975; 1978; Avdokhin 2019; For Plutarch's influence on Basil of Caesarea in particular, see Orphanos 1976.

directly from Plato, and, for a lack of a better term, from Middle Platonism will be noted wherever they are identifiable. Neoplatonism, as it has been termed, however, does represent the dominant reading of Plato in Alexandria in the 5th century, and the context from contemporary discourse would be difficult to avoid.

Identifying an influence, allusion, or motif as ‘Neoplatonic’ can be difficult to justify; Neoplatonic writers could quote and appeal to diverse and eclectic sources, each according to their own aims. As a result, Neoplatonic writings preserve wealth of material from other cultures, theologies, and strands of philosophy. These sources include materials from Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism, Orphism, Judaism, Christianity, and even astrological and alchemical treatises. To what extent does being used or quoted by Neoplatonists make material Neoplatonic?

This question has particular relevance to Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*, which features a large amount of what some commentators have characterised as ‘Orphic’ material.⁸⁰ The death of Zagreus, the first of the poem’s Dionysoi, appears to be an important myth for the Neoplatonists, appearing in some form in Plotinus, Proclus, and Olympiodorus. The myth is also pivotal in reconstructions of ‘Orphic’ cosmogonies. Does its appearance in Nonnus and in Neoplatonic writings make it by necessity a Neoplatonic influence? It is quite possible that Nonnus approached Neoplatonist writings only as an esoteric source of lesser-known mythology, and that the conclusions drawn from these myths about the nature of the universe and the gods were entirely secondary. However, it is very likely that 5th-century intellectuals who encountered ‘loose’ Orphic texts, with no accompanying Neoplatonic content (e.g., the *Orphic Hymns*), would interpret them in according to a Neoplatonic framework, because Neoplatonism was their primary context for Orphic-Dionysiac material. Therefore, it becomes difficult to stage Orphic material in a poem without evoking Neoplatonic readings.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Hernández de la Fuente 2014; Otlewska-Jung 2014; Bernabé & García-Gasco 2016.

Nonnus the Theologian

A primary goal of this project is contextualising Nonnus' relationship with Neoplatonic material and exegetical methods. In addition to Plato, Neoplatonic authors often appealed to a variety of writings to formulate and justify their own philosophical doctrines, some of which were quite esoteric. The Homeric epics were a privileged source of wisdom for Neoplatonists, as allegorical reading transformed Homer into a theologian (θεόλογος) who expressed ineffable yet fundamental truths about the universe and the divine through his poetry. This provided Homer with an enduring cultural capital.⁸¹ My project contends that for Nonnus, in line with well-established Late Antique modes of reading Homer, writing epic poetry in the mould of Homer goes far beyond the use of Homeric metre, language, and diction. To imitate and rival Homer, one must aspire to also be a θεόλογος.

Nonnus is acutely aware of his relationship with Homer, and, as we have seen, even characterises him as his literary father in the *Dionysiaca*'s second proem in Book 25. As we will see, Nonnus' relationship with Homer mirrors the various Father-Son relationships throughout the poem (e.g. Zagreus-Zeus, Dionysus-Zeus, Herakles-Zeus, Phaethon-Helios), relationships which can all be conceptualised within a mimetic framework, drawn from Neoplatonic and Judaeo-Christian thought.

For Nonnus, composing 'Homeric' poetry in Late Antique Egypt required a mode of composition that was receptive to the hermeneutic techniques of the time. Nonnus could achieve this by using existing exegeses and commentaries as source texts in his re-workings of preceding poetic traditions, in addition to the poems themselves. Nonnus, then, did not consciously include Neoplatonic ideas because he was a Neoplatonist, but because Homeric epic had become inseparable from its commentary tradition, a tradition that, as standard, viewed Homer through a Neoplatonic lens. Nonnus' use of Neoplatonic material is in itself an answer to the Neoplatonic ideas found in Homer by those who would search for them. To imitate Homer in language but not in wisdom would be to produce a watered-down and slavish imitation of Homeric

⁸¹ See, for example, Lamberton 1986; Lamberton & Keaney 1992; MacDonald 1994; Brisson 2004; Struck 2010.

poetry. It would mean that the poet had misunderstood why Homer was still popular and relevant among the educated elite in Late Antiquity: because Homer had become a spiritual poet. Nonnus' use of Neoplatonic material can therefore be seen as part of his aspiration to imitate and rival his poetic Father.

Modern scholars have previously explored the *Dionysiaca* to search for underlying or secondary structures of meaning. Viktor Stegemann argued that Nonnus had embedded an elaborate astronomical allegory in the *Dionysiaca*, centred on the Iranian figure of Aion-Kronos-Time and the signs of the zodiac. According to Stegemann, the life of Dionysus was meant as a symbol for the advent of a new golden age.⁸² Stegemann's theories have received a lot of criticism,⁸³ and it is generally accepted now that although several episodes show traces of an astrological schema, this schema is not sustained across the entirety of the poem. Lindsay, who takes a negative view of the poem, argues that the *Dionysiaca's* narrative of the Indian war is utterly devoid of meaning, but concedes that 'at best it is an allegory of the wars between east and west from Alexander to early Byzantine days, with their Persian threat.'⁸⁴

More recent studies on the *Dionysiaca* and allegory have been more fruitful. Shorrock has shown how wine functions as a symbol for the *Dionysiaca* itself.⁸⁵ Other scholars have offered analyses of individual episodes. Konstantinos Spanoudakis has explored the images on Dionysus' shield, arguing that the shield acts as a staging ground for allegory and metapoetics in the same way as the Homeric shield of Achilles from the *Iliad*, or Jason's cloak from Apollonius' *Argonautica*. He argues that the symbols on Dionysus' shield and its numerous intertexts combine to form a universal history, and to reflect on the salvation of the soul.⁸⁶ Elsewhere, Hernández de la Fuente has discussed allegorical interpretations of the murder and dismemberment of the first Dionysus, named within the *Dionysiaca* as Zagreus,⁸⁷ suggesting that Nonnus was aware of the myth's significance to Neoplatonic thinkers.

⁸² Stegemann 1930.

⁸³ Lind 1938: 75; Keydell 1961; Fauth 1981: 180-4.

⁸⁴ Lindsay 1965: 393.

⁸⁵ Shorrock 2001: 115-6.

⁸⁶ Spanoudakis 2014a.

⁸⁷ Hernández de la Fuente 2014.

That Nonnus might have composed parts of the *Dionysiaca* allegorically is not surprising; the world of Late Antiquity was obsessed with hidden meanings and allegorical interpretation in both literature and art, Christian or pagan.⁸⁸ As Jaś Elsner says, by the sixth century ‘images had an exegetic, a scriptural relationship with what they represented. Indeed, everything was an ‘image’ – the emperor was an image of Christ, the state of the divine economy, the good Christian life of the lives of the saints.’ Underlying this conceptual framework was a typological system whereby everything in the world could be explained as an allegory or symbol of the transcendent world where God dwelt.⁸⁹ Not only would Nonnus and his audience have access to allegorical commentaries; symbolic exegesis of visual art would also have been part of his lived experience.

Modern scholars have analysed the diverse exegetical techniques and practices that flourished in Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian intellectual circles.⁹⁰ The idea that poetry could express fundamental truths about the nature of the universe and the divine was pervasive in Late Antiquity, and it had a long tradition. That a Greek poet could self-consciously adopt a prophetic persona to express wisdom and fundamental truth has a long tradition, as can be seen from poets like Theognis and Pindar.⁹¹ The Latin tradition expressed a similar phenomenon through the term *vates*, which could simultaneously mean both poet and prophet. The assimilation between the two is unsurprising, given that Apollo was the god of poetry and prophecy; both are expressed in hexameter verse, and utilised similar mechanics of divine inspiration. Oracular poetry in hexameter verse was particularly popular in Late Antiquity with the *Chaldean* and *Sibylline Oracles*.

The idea that poetry contained valuable wisdom for the trained reader had formed the basis of ‘defensive’ allegories since the Classical era. Plato refers to an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy in *Republic* 10, 607b-c, and infamously

⁸⁸ Shorrock 2001: 23, n.48.

⁸⁹ Elsner 1995: 9.

⁹⁰ The term has its origins in Greek: *allos* (other) and *agoreuein* (to speak in public), combine to produce the sense of “other speaking.” Its central concepts are represented under the terms: “*symbolon*” (“symbol”), *hyponoia* (“deeper sense” or “covert meaning”), and *aenigma* (“riddle”).

⁹¹ Piccardi 2016: 424.

banished poetry from the ideal city.⁹² For Plato, poetry contained many passages that were problematic from an ethical and moral standpoint.⁹³ Poetic descriptions of the divine that presented the gods with human flaws and vices were particularly egregious. Apologists of poetry, therefore, resorted to allegory to liberate Homer and the other poets from criticism. This tradition of allegorical interpretation can be traced back as far as Theagenes of Rhegium in the 6th century BCE, and by Late Antiquity, it had become a key part of Homeric literary criticism.

One of the best known examples of allegorical interpretation is the Neoplatonic exegesis of the *Odyssey*, which interpreted Odysseus' wanderings as the journey of the human soul across the sea of generation towards its true home in the Intelligible. This interpretation is preserved by the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry in his commentary, *On the Cave of the Nymphs from Odyssey 13*. Porphyry's work owes much to second-century Platonists and Neopythagorean thinkers like Numenius, suggesting that the spiritualisation of the *Odyssey* occurred much earlier.⁹⁴

Nonnus' contemporary Proclus also wrote two essays in defence of Homer in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*. Proclus claimed that poets had adapted eternal and transcendent truths, translating them by necessity into human language and the medium of storytelling because truth required a screen that could both mask the truth and reveal it to initiates.⁹⁵ In his own hymns, Proclus asks the gods 'harken and reveal to me ... the secret rites and initiations of the holy words' (*Hymn* 4.12-5).⁹⁶ According to the *Chaldean Oracles*, inspired texts could kindle 'elevating fires' in the soul, enabling it to contemplate the Intelligible realm, the transcendent world of Plato's Forms, and the place of the soul's natural condition (*Chaldean Oracles* fr. 126, 190).⁹⁷ Proclus writes that the Plato's theology kindled such a fire, and showed the soul how it might ascend

⁹² See for example Murdoch 1977; Ferrari 1989; Gould 1990: 4-69; Rosen 1993: 1-26; Nightingale 1995: 60-7; Kannicht 1996: 189-91; Murray 1997: 14-19; Levin 2001: 127-67; Moss 2007.

⁹³ Examples include Hera's deception of Zeus (*Il.* 14.153-351), and Demodocus' song of Ares and Aphrodite (*Od.* 8.266-366).

⁹⁴ Other famous allegories include the shields of Agamemnon and Achilles from the *Iliad*. In the Latin tradition, the rivers of the underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid* (6.126-29) were interpreted allegorically by the 5th century CE commentator Servius as the nine spheres of the universe.

⁹⁵ Lamberton 1986: 245-6.

⁹⁶ Transl. Van den Berg 2001: 228.

⁹⁷ For a recent edition, see Majercik 2013.

towards God (*Theol. Plat.* 3.1. p.5, 15-16). Proclus' beliefs in this regard were also adopted by Ps.-Dionysius, who applied them to Christian texts (*Cael. Hier.* 121b; *Eccl. Hier.* 476b; *De Div. Nom.* 592b; *Ep.* 8.1098a, 9.1108b).⁹⁸

The rise of Christianity also offered Christ as a new source of inspiration and divine knowledge. Like many allegorists before them, Christian exegetes felt it necessary to justify and clarify uncomfortable passages in Judaeo-Christian texts, such as the 'cannibalism' of the Eucharist.⁹⁹ As well as developing their own hermeneutic methods, they were able to adopt allegorical techniques from Jewish apologetics, and from Stoic and Platonic exegeses of Greek myth and early poetry. These techniques could be used to defend Christian scripture and belief against hostile polemicists, like Porphyry or the 2nd-century Platonist Celsus, and were deployed according to the beliefs and aims of individual exegetes. For Biblical commentators like Origen, all Scripture held a deeper, non-literal meaning. Nonnus' compatriot Cyril of Alexandria, however, only occasionally resorts to allegorical interpretation in his commentaries and homilies on the New Testament.

For modern commentators, identifying the presence of allegoresis throws up numerous methodological issues. The Greek term allegoresis can refer to both a mode of reading (to interpret allegorically) and a mode of composition (to write allegorically). Ancient exegetes normally assume that any meaning they have discovered was inserted by the author deliberately; they speak allegorically (*ἀλληγορεῖν*) or in riddles (*αἰνίττεσθαι*), to express otherwise ineffable truths, or truths that need to be concealed from the uninitiated. They could also express truths as a conduit for a higher power. Although ancient readers might not consciously distinguish between allegory as a mode of reading or of composition, modern scholars must be wary not to conflate them.

In certain cases, allegorical frameworks are easily detectable. Robert Lamberton has called personifications examples of 'obtrusive' allegories: symbolic elements where the key to their interpretation is provided immediately by the text. In the presence of such elements, the so-called 'secondary' level of meaning takes on greater importance

⁹⁸ Lamberton 1986: 246, n46.

⁹⁹ Kahlos 2012: 529.

than the narrative action itself.¹⁰⁰ In the absence of 'obtrusive' elements, however, or testimonies of allegorical commentaries, it becomes difficult to argue that a text was composed with an allegorical programme in mind. Consequently, many modern attempts to read Late Antique poetry allegorically remain contested.¹⁰¹

These difficulties arise partly because the surviving criteria used by Neoplatonists to justify their allegorical interpretations are frustratingly vague. In Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, it is the text's 'many obscurities' which signpost that Homer is being intentionally enigmatic; elements which *prima facie* cannot be explained or seem contradictory and must be understood allegorically.¹⁰² Modern scholars clearly cannot use obscurity as evidence of a mode of composition. However, Porphyry's method offers modern scholars some guidance on whether or not a text might have been *read* allegorically in antiquity.

One strand of my approach in this study involves identifying evidence within the *Dionysiaca* that Nonnus was aware of allegorical interpretations of other texts. As mentioned, it has been conclusively demonstrated that Nonnus was aware of Cyril of Alexandria's Neoplatonically influenced commentary on John's Gospel, and that he made use of Cyril's text in composing his own *Paraphrase*. In the *Dionysiaca*, I will show, Nonnus was similarly aware of allegorical commentaries, particularly those of the Neoplatonists, and he alludes to these at critical junctures of the poem. Elsewhere, I will use other allegorised texts as comparanda for the *Dionysiaca*, to illustrate how similar texts were being read in Late Antiquity, and how these might have shaped Nonnus' audience in their reading of the *Dionysiaca* itself.

From the evidence, however, it will become clear that the *Dionysiaca* does not adhere strictly to any specific philosophical doctrine. The poem's universalist and encyclopaedic aspirations would be fundamentally undermined by any single paradigm other than the metamorphoses of Proteus. Nonnus is often, by twists and turns, playful and even irreverent. His use of Neoplatonic material is always on his own terms,

¹⁰⁰ Lamberton 1986: 146.

¹⁰¹ Piccardi 2014: 343, n.66, citing as examples Gelzer 1975: 297–302, 316–322 and 1993 (Musaeus' *Hero and Leander*), Schelske 2011 (Ps.-Orpheus' *Argonautica*), and Livrea 2014b: 25–6 (Pamphrepius' *Descriptio diei autumnalis*).

¹⁰² Struck 2010: 60.

unrestricted by the confines of dogma. Furthermore, given the Protean and *poikilos* nature of the *Dionysiaca*, we should not expect the poem's diverse Neoplatonic themes and motifs to coalesce into a consistent and coherent philosophical system, any more than one would expect the poem's Dionysiac and Hellenic elements to come together into a monolithic religious system. The Neoplatonic dimension is but one among many, and while it enhances Nonnus' theologian credentials, it does not necessarily dominate his new and multifarious Dionysiac poetics.

Chapter Structure

This project has been divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the figure of Dionysus. The first incarnation of Dionysus, named Zagreus within the poem, has attracted commentators for Nonnus' use of so-called Orphic and Neoplatonic material.¹⁰³ My chapter offers a reappraisal of this material, and reveals further connections that have not been previously noted. The chapter also delves into the relationship between the three different Dionysoi in the poem (Zagreus, Dionysus, and Iacchus). I argue that these Dionysoi act as a 'trinity' comparable to Christian Trinitarian theology and Neoplatonic triadic schemas of divinities, particularly Proclus' demiurgic triad of Zeus-Poseidon-Hades at the level of the hypercosmic gods.

Chapter 2 introduces the theme of mimesis (μίμησις). The chapter catalogues key terms related to mimesis and includes a simple frequency analysis across comparable poetic traditions preceding, contemporary with, and following Nonnus. Results suggest that Nonnus makes use of mimetic vocabulary more than the majority of his fellow poets (the closest parallel is perhaps the theological poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus). Following this frequency analysis, Chapter 2 investigates the deployment and use of mimetic vocabulary across the poem through various case studies. Mimesis was central to Platonic theories of art, which could nowadays be termed 'aesthetics.' Platonic concepts of art as mimesis are inextricably tied up with sense-perception, intellection, and epistemology. By instilling his poem with mimetic vocabulary, Nonnus

¹⁰³ Hernández de la Fuente 2014; Bernabé & García-Gasco 2016: 98-9, 102-4.

creates a complex Dionysiac world of materiality that reflects Neoplatonic metaphysics and epistemological concerns.

Chapter 3 looks at the language and dynamics of divine inspiration in the *Dionysiaca*. Characters within the poem frequently experience madness, frenzy, and altered states of perception (Βακχεία, λύσσα, μανία) brought about by the gods, the consumption of wine, war, and the power of music and dance. Following Shorrock's analysis of wine in his 2011 monograph, *The Myth of Paganism*, wine can be seen as a symbol for the poem itself. The experience of wine in the *Dionysiaca*, while not always positive, also has the capability for miraculous healing, and can be used to induct characters into Dionysus' thiasos, bringing them closer to union with the god himself. The chapter also looks at other case studies within the *Dionysiaca* that evoke divine inspiration, including the second proem at Book 25, and the Lydian priest's battle with Typhon using only his inspired voice in Book 13. By exploring episodes such as these, Chapter 3 looks at how Nonnus engages with Late Antique and Neoplatonist discourse on divine inspiration to reflect on his role as a poet, and the initiatory and revelatory power of poetry.

Chapter 4 is the first of two chapters to deal with allegory in the *Dionysiaca*. In particular, this chapter focuses on the cave of Persephone in Books 5 and 6. Nonnus constructs his cave with conscious allusions to the cave of the nymphs from *Odyssey* 13, a passage with a long exegetical history, and the subject of a short allegorical commentary by the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry. Many of Porphyry's comments appear drawn from earlier thinkers like Numenius, who has been variously described as a Middle Platonist or a Neopythagorean. My fourth chapter establishes that Nonnus was aware of the cave's commentary tradition and used exegetical details preserved in Porphyry in his reworking of the Homeric cave. These details style the *Dionysiaca's* cave of Persephone as a place of corporeal and cosmic generation. I then compare the remaining scenes of Book 6 (the punishment of the Titans, the conflagration, and the flood) against Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, identifying numerous points of contact between the two. In light of these readings, Book 6 emerges as a bricolage of popular Neoplatonic allegories.

Chapter 5 continues to delve into the relationship between the *Dionysiaca* and allegory. The chapter revisits the ekphrasis of Dionysus' shield in Book 25 that was the subject of an excellent contribution by Konstantinos Spanoudakis. His chapter 'The Shield of Salvation,' catalogues many of the shield's embedded allusions and salvific imagery. My chapter notes a few more allusions that contribute to the shield's soteriological framework. The shield's sophisticated and large-scale allegories concerning salvation and the fate of the soul appear inspired by Neoplatonic allegorical exegeses.

Elsewhere, the *Dionysiaca* also includes cosmological details (e.g. in the description of the palace of Harmonia) that appear inspired by exegetical commentaries. In these instances, Nonnus does not appear to be composing allegorically. Instead, I argue that these details could be interpreted as an attempt to train the audience to be an ideal reader of the *Dionysiaca*, or a playful nod to the commentary tradition.

Finally, this chapter highlights intersections between the *Dionysiaca* and allegories of the *Odyssey*. With the *Odyssey* as a comparandum, and against the prolific backdrop of Neoplatonic literary criticism, it is possible to theorise how ancient audiences might have interacted with and interpreted Nonnus' text. The *Odyssey* was interpreted by Numenius and many commentators thereafter as an allegory for the journey of the soul in the material world. Odysseus wanderings across the sea of generation lead him to his homecoming in the Intelligible realm. Numenius' interpretation is reported by Porphyry in his commentary *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, which Chapter 4 establishes was likely read by Nonnus. It is also inconceivable that Nonnus would have been unaware of the preeminent Homeric criticism of the time: that of the Neoplatonists. Homer was widely considered by the Neoplatonists to be a theologian who expressed ineffable truths about the universe and the nature of the soul. I argue that to write epic poetry in the mould of Homer, it is not enough to use Homeric themes and diction; to write Homeric poetry requires one to be a theologian, and their poetry must be permeable to the hermeneutic processes of the time.

The world of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* is dominated by mimesis and materiality: an obsession with the physical and sensory properties of material bodies dependent on

pre-existing archetypes or higher principles, making it a suitable analogue for the *Odyssey's* sea of generation. Dionysus himself must battle against agents of materiality – the earthborn Indians, Pentheus, and the Giants – to earn his final ascension on Mount Olympus. This journey can also be compared with Neoplatonic writings on the ascension of the soul: that the aim of the soul is to become 'like god,' to 'become unified,' and to assimilate itself to the divine. As the chapter shows, Dionysus' journey can be contextualised within a framework of mimesis, whereby Dionysus must positively emulate his father Zeus, avoiding exempla of negative or inappropriate mimesis.

1. Dionysus: The One and the Many

The term *poikilia* (variety) has long dominated discussions of Nonnus' Dionysiac poetics. In the *Dionysiaca's* prologue, the poet makes a direct appeal to Proteus, the famous shapeshifter from the *Odyssey* and Nonnus' divine compatriot who had made his home on the isle of Pharos. Nonnus' poem goes on to imitate its shapeshifting patron through a polyphony of genres, styles, and ideas. In answer to Proteus' multiform appearance (ποικίλον εἶδος, *Dion.* 1.15), Nonnus will sing a multiform hymn (ποικίλον ὕμνον); his *Dionysiaca* will have a transformative, multiform nature of its own.¹⁰⁴ In many ways, Proteus also offers a paradigm for understanding the *Dionysiaca's* other shapeshifters, in particular the subject of Nonnus' epic encomium, the god Dionysus himself.

Dionysus, as befitting a shapeshifter, is capable of appearing in an array of different forms and shapes. He also appears in multiple incarnations. The most prominent of these, besides the Bacchic Dionysus himself, is the infant god Zagreus, whose birth and death are the subject of an extended digression in Book 6 of the *Dionysiaca*. Elsewhere in the poem, Nonnus also mentions Osiris (the 'Egyptian Dionysus'), and Dionysus' son Iacchus, who is otherwise referred to as the 'third Dionysus.' The primary goal of this chapter is to analyse how Nonnus utilises these different Dionysoi, and how they are connected, particularly in light of Neoplatonic theological material.

The Zagreus episode is framed as an extended reminiscence by Zeus, and takes place outside of the poem's main chronological arc. The episode proceeds as follows: the goddess Demeter visits the house of Astraeus, the god of divination, to inquire about the future of her daughter, Persephone. Astraeus performs a divinatory rite using an astrolabe, and tells Demeter that her daughter will be raped and impregnated by a

¹⁰⁴ The rhetor Himerius (c. 315-386 CE) advocated *poikilia* as a rhetorical technique in his *Speech* 68, and used Proteus as an allegory for a performer and an exemplary sophist. Schlapbach 2018: 258: 'Proteus had long been known as a paradigm for the 'flexibility, variety, versatility of a performer, especially a sophist and, later, a pantomime.' E.g. Philostratus *V. Apoll.* 1.4; *Him. Or.* 28.7; 31.14. See also Vian 1976: 9; Tissoni 1998: 79-85. Giraudet 2009: 314 cites Himerius' *Speech* 68 as a possible inspiration for Nonnus' use of Proteus.

divine serpent. In an effort to avert this future, Demeter conceals Persephone inside a cave, and appoints two dragons to guard her. Zeus, however, assumes the shape of a dragon and manages to bypass the cave's guardians by lulling them to sleep. Inside, he consummates his union with Persephone, and she gives birth to a son, named Zagreus.

Zagreus is specifically identified as 'the older born Dionysus' (παλαιγενής Διονύσος, 5.564). Even as an infant, he climbs upon the throne of Zeus, and is gifted the rare honour of wielding his father's thunderbolts. Hera, however, is understandably upset by yet another of Zeus' extramarital affairs, and convinces the Titans to murder Zagreus out of vengeance. The Titans disguise their faces with gypsum, and distract Zagreus with a mirror. While distracted by his own reflection, the Titans dismember him with a knife.

Previous scholars have noted a connection between the Zagreus episode and Neoplatonic writings. Numerous Neoplatonists mention the myth, directly or indirectly, and it is commonly subjected to allegorical interpretation (e.g. Plot. 4.3.12; Procl. *In Crat.* 133; *In Tim.* 2.146.9, 3.80.20-5 Diehl; Dam. *In Phd.* 2-5; Olymp. *In Phd.* 1.4-5). The story's prevalence among Neoplatonic writings suggests that it was in fact a popular myth, and its mutability allowed it to be recast and retooled according to each writer's needs. Hernández de la Fuente's 2014 analysis remains the most comprehensive attempt to establish Nonnus' Zagreus episode in its philosophical context. In revisiting this material, however, I will present a more holistic reading that examines the problematic continuity between Zagreus and the poem's other Dionysoi in light of Neoplatonic (particularly, Proclan) triadic schemas, to better contextualise the episode within Book 6 and the *Dionysiaca* as a whole. This chapter will argue that Nonnus' use of this myth constitutes a 'Neoplatonic influence,' beyond the mere use of Neoplatonic sources as repositories of obscure mythological details.

1.1 Neoplatonism and Orphism

Nonnus' Zagreus appears to have much in common with the Orphic Dionysus, known from the *Orphic Hymns* and the Orphic Rhapsodies. Both are born from the union of Zeus and Persephone, and both are torn to pieces by the Titans. The name Zagreus,

however, is not attested in surviving Orphic literature, despite the corpus' large collection of Dionysiac pseudonyms, epithets, and cult titles.¹⁰⁵ The oldest surviving and explicit association of Zagreus with Dionysus comes from a fragment of Callimachus preserved in the *Etymologicum Magnum* (fr.43.117 P). Callimachus had a profound influence on Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, and so it is possible that this fragment inspired Nonnus' use of the name.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, however, we lack any further context for the fragment.

Euripides' *Cretans* records a further attestation, although there is no obvious association with Dionysus. A fragment from the play, which is quoted by Porphyry, references the 'feasts of raw-flesh' (ὠμόφαγος δαίτη, fr. 472.12 Nauck) and mysteries of 'night-ranging Zagreus' (νυκτιπόλος Ζαγρέυς, 11). These rites appear alongside those of the 'Mountain Mother' (μήτηρ ὄρεια, 12) and the Idaean Zeus,¹⁰⁷ which Ghidini equates with the triad of Zeus, Mother Rhea and Dionysus from Euripides' *Bacchae* (120-36).¹⁰⁸ Ghidini's comparison is compelling, particularly given Dionysiac cult's long-standing association with omophagy and night-time rituals. Elsewhere, Zagreus appears alongside Ge in Alcmeonis fr. 3, and as a son of Hades in a fragment of Aeschylus' *Sisyphus* (fr. 5.228), suggesting that, although the name could be associated with other gods, it still retained a chthonic significance.

Although there appears to be no Orphic tradition behind Zagreus' name, his clear connections with the Orphic Dionysus have in the past provoked scholars to use Nonnus' account in reconstructions of the Orphic myth, an enterprise that draws on a broad textual corpus, including the Orphic Rhapsodies, the *Orphic Hymns*, Neoplatonic writings, and even Christian polemics.¹⁰⁹ Nonnus himself often retools and reworks existing myths into new frameworks and contexts. It is entirely possible that the name

¹⁰⁵ This was first noted by Linforth 1941: 311.

¹⁰⁶ Most recently discussed in De Stefani & Magnelli 2011. Keydell 1935 quotes Callimachus 147 times in the *apparatus fontium* of his edition of the *Dionysiaca* (the evidence is collected in Montes-Cala 1994-5: 68). Other parallels can be found in Schneider 1870-3; in modern Callimachean commentaries (cf., e.g. Massimilla 1996 *passim*; Hollis 2009: 389-90, 426); Vian's Budé editions, as well as their Italian counterparts (Gigli Piccardi 2003; Gonnelli 2003; Agosti 2004; Accorinti 2004).

¹⁰⁷ Porph. *De abst.* 4.19.

¹⁰⁸ Ghidini 2013: 146. She also compares these gods to the Lesbian triad of Zeus Antaios, Hera, and Zonussos Kemelios attested in Alcaeus fr. 129 Voigt.

¹⁰⁹ See Edmonds 1999 for a critique of this practice, particularly related to the idea of an 'Orphic original sin.' Cf. Comparetti 1879.

‘Zagreus’ reflects the poet’s principle of *poikilia* and the *Dionysiaca*’s general eclecticism, and did not derive from Orphic material.

However, an important consideration remains. Does the use of an Orphic myth widely attested in Neoplatonic sources constitute an influence by Neoplatonism as a philosophical school? While it is entirely possible that Nonnus was influenced by Neoplatonic writings as texts rather than doctrines, and that he used them merely as a source of esoteric material on Dionysus, this fails to consider the role of the audience as a point of reception and the final agent in the construction of a text’s meaning. Neoplatonic accounts of the Orphic Dionysus act as intertexts, associated works of literature whose interrelation can be conceived of and exist solely in the mind of the reader, without conscious allusion on the part of the poet. This means that even if Nonnus referenced the myth as he found it in Neoplatonic accounts, but did not consider himself beholden to Neoplatonic philosophical doctrine, his audience would not necessarily arrive at the same conclusion. Given the myth’s rich Neoplatonic context, and the elaborate exegetical methods Neoplatonism had afforded to ancient literary critics, it is entirely possible that members of Nonnus’ audience would see any reference to the Orphic Dionysus as a conscious allusion.

The Neoplatonists themselves did not always reference Orphic material and retain its Orphic context. Often they referenced Orphic material as a means of appealing to Orpheus as a source of wisdom, often to justify and legitimise their more esoteric interpretations of Plato’s dialogues, and other canonical texts that were believed to hold ancient wisdom for those who knew how to interpret them.¹¹⁰ It is questionable whether Orphism even existed as a phenomenon independent of Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity, or whether it was possible for the educated elite to experience Orphic material through anything other than a Neoplatonic lens.

¹¹⁰ Rappe 2007: 143.

1.2 Dionysus' Mirror

The earliest allegorisation of Dionysus' dismemberment can tentatively be traced back to Plato's *Laws*. According to Plato, Hera once incited Dionysus to madness (*Laws* 672b). He was later healed and purified by the goddess Rhea, who also taught him mystic rituals (Apoll. *Bibliotheca* 3.5.1). When describing the madness imposed upon Dionysus, Plato uses the periphrasis that Dionysus 'was torn apart in the intelligence of his soul' (διεφορήθη τῆς ψυχῆς τὴν γνώμην). As Seaford notes, the use of the verb here is rare, and usually has a physical dimension. As he demonstrates, it is used three times in Euripides' *Bacchae* to refer to the frenzied tearing apart of animals (739, 746) and of Pentheus (1210). Seaford, therefore, quite rightly infers that Plato's periphrasis reflects a mystic interpretation of Dionysus' dismemberment as the dismemberment of the soul, i.e. madness (the Titans are mentioned at 701c).¹¹¹ The myth also appears obliquely in Plotinus (4.3.12):

Ἀνθρώπων δὲ ψυχὰι εἶδωλα αὐτῶν ἰδοῦσαι οἷον Διονύσου ἐν κατόπτρῳ ἐκεῖ
ἐγένοντο ἄνωθεν ὀρμηθεῖσαι, οὐκ ἀποτμηθεῖσαι οὐδ' αὖται τῆς ἑαυτῶν ἀρχῆς τε καὶ
νοῦ. Οὐ γὰρ μετὰ τοῦ νοῦ ἦλθον, ἀλλ' ἔφθασαν μὲν μέχρι γῆς, κάρα δὲ αὐταῖς
ἐστήρικται ὑπεράνω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ.

And the souls of men, seeing their images as if in the mirror of Dionysus, have come into that realm by leaping downward from above, but they are not cut off from their origin, or from Intellect. For they have not come bringing Intellect, and although they have descended as far as earth, their higher part is fixed firmly above the heavens.

Here, the 'mirror of Dionysus' is the only direct reference to the dismemberment myth. This single motif, without any mythological context, suggests that Dionysus' mirror was a well-known symbol for Plotinus' intended audience. Plotinus uses mirrors elsewhere as metaphors, but by referencing Dionysus' mirror, Plotinus introduces an allegory rather than metaphor. For Plotinus, at least, Dionysus' dismemberment can be interpreted as an allegory for the immortality of the soul. The soul has its eternal origin in the realm of Intellect or Nous, otherwise known as the realm of Plato's Forms. Even though the soul descends into the physical universe and becomes ensouled in matter,

¹¹¹ Seaford 2006: 114.

its 'higher part' remains transcendent. This means that even when the mortal body is subjected to physical dismemberment, the soul remains indivisible and immortal.

The idea of the mirror occurs frequently in Plotinus as a symbol for the transition of the soul from the transcendent Intelligible realm (the world of Plato's Forms, which can only be partially comprehended through the soul's contemplation) to the physical universe (which is apprehended through sense-perception). As Plotinus says, the soul's presence 'will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated ... something reproducing it, or representing it, and serving like a mirror to catch it.' (4.3.11). This metaphor also captures Platonism's idea of the ephemerality of the physical universe, where material bodies are likened to transient 'reflections' on the surface of a mirror.

Elsewhere, Plotinus uses the analogy of the mirror to explain the relationship between the Forms or Intelligible archetypes, their sensible images, and matter. The Forms or archetypes are analogous to a statue; their sensible forms are their mirror images; matter is the mirror itself.¹¹² This is because Neoplatonists believed that matter was formless and constituted the lowest level of existence; the features and qualities that appear in matter fail to belong to matter in the same way that colours appearing in a mirror fail to be genuine properties of the mirror.¹¹³ This metaphor expands and elucidates Plato's own metaphor of the 'Line,' in which he mentions the reflections 'on close-packed, smooth and bright materials,' and makes clear how all forms of image and reflection have a low metaphysical status, while what reality they do possess derives from the archetypes which they represent (Plat. *Rep.* 6.509d6-510a3).

In addition to ontology, Plotinus uses the symbol of the mirror to meditate on the ethical concerns that arise from the misguided pursuit of beauty in material forms. He directly references Narcissus, the youth who famously fell in love with his own reflection. For Plotinus, the physical universe is an inferior level of reality, an

¹¹² Stamatellos 2012: 136.

¹¹³ Rist 1961: 157: 'Matter then for Plotinus is the formless, indeterminate substratum of things (2.4.6). It is compared with a mirror (3.6.13), but has not the 'real' existence that a mirror has over and above appearances in it. The qualities of bodies that appear in it only enter it 'falsely and into falsity' (ψευδῶς εἰς ψεῦδος). It is not visible like a mirror, and must not be thought of as an object in the way that a mirror is an object. The mirror is an analogy only so far as it too is the 'receptacle' in which images appear.'

insubstantial reflection upon a mirror. When Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection, he fails to understand that the reflection is not real, and that true beauty is internal and transcendent (Plot. 1.6.7; 5.8.2).

Many of these ideas can also be found in Nonnus (*Dion.* 6.164-73):

αἰθερίων δὲ δρακοντείων ὕμεναίων	164
Περσεφόνης γονόεντι τόκῳ κυμαίνεταιο γαστήρ,	163
Ζαγρέα γειναμένη, κερόεν βρέφος, ὃς Διὸς ἔδρης	165
μοῦνος ἐπουρανίης ἐπεβήσατο, χειρὶ δὲ βαιῇ	
ἀστεροπὴν ἐλέλιξε νεηγενέος δὲ φορῆος	
νηπιάχοις παλάμῃσιν ἐλαφρίζοντο κεραυνοί.	
Οὐδὲ Διὸς θρόνον εἶχεν ἐπὶ χρόνον· ἀλλὰ ἐ γύψῳ	
κερδαλέῃ χρισθέντες ἐπίκλοπα κύκλα προσώπου	170
δαίμονος ἀστόργοιο χόλῳ βαρυμήνιος Ἥρης	
Ταρταρίῃ Τιτῆνες ἐδηλήσαντο μαχαίρῃ	
ἀντιτύπῳ νόθον εἶδος ὀπιπεύοντα κατόπτρῳ.	
ἔνθα διχαζομένων μελέων Τιτῆνι σιδήρῳ	
τέρμα βίου Διόνυσος ἔχων παλινάγρετον ἀρχὴν	175

By this marriage with the heavenly serpent
 Persephone's womb swelled with fruitful offspring,
 and she bore Zagreus, the horned baby, who climbed
 onto Zeus' heavenly throne by himself, and brandished
 his lightning in his little hand, and although newly-born,
 he lifted and carried thunderbolts in his infant fingers.
 But he did not hold the throne of Zeus for long.
 By the fierce resentment of the heartless goddess Hera,
 the Titans cunningly smeared their round faces with
 disguising gypsum, and while he contemplated
 his counterfeit image in a reflective mirror,
 they slew him with an infernal knife.
 Then, when his limbs were being divided by Titan iron,
 the end of his life was a new beginning as Dionysus.

There are numerous points of correspondence between Narcissus and Zagreus. Like Narcissus, Zagreus is captivated by his own reflection. He fails to understand that his reflection is not real. His captivation also ultimately leads to his death. Both Narcissus and Zagreus also undergo fundamental change, leading to a continuation of life in a new form.

As is evident, Nonnus' retelling features many of the same elements from the Orphic myth of Dionysus: 1) Dionysus is Zeus' heir in the divine succession; 2) Dionysus is distracted by a mirror; 3) he is torn apart by the Titans; 4) his death leads to a new life. Martin West suggests that Nonnus' retelling mirrors the ritualistic death, dismemberment, and reconstitution of an initiate,¹¹⁴ a ritual practice unattested in surviving Orphic texts, but congruent with what we know of Dionysiac mystery cult. The use of gypsum, for instance, is paralleled in *Dion.* 27.204-5, where Dionysus encourages his Bacchantes to whiten the Indians' faces with 'mystic gypsum' (μύστιδι γύψω).¹¹⁵

In other versions of the myth, Dionysus is distracted by a set of ritual toys (Clement *Protrept.* 2.17.2-18.2; cf. *OF* 578 F Bernabé = 31 K), in addition to the mirror in Nonnus' version. The toys are also absent from surviving Neoplatonic allegorical readings, where emphasis is placed primarily upon the mirror. This suggests that Nonnus was indeed inspired by Neoplatonic sources. The text also has several ambiguous features that may support this. When Zagreus looks into the mirror, he is captivated by his 'νόθον εἶδος.' Νόθος is a common word in the *Dionysiaca*, and it employs a multitude of different meanings in a variety of different contexts. Pierre Chuvin identifies various possible senses, including illegitimacy (45.259), an admixture of two natures (30.89), the result of metamorphosis (5.331, 528), the result of hallucination

¹¹⁴ West 1983: 143-50. West also believes that the reference to the Titans coating their faces with gypsum strongly suggests that the myth reflects a genuine ritual practice in which the 'death-dealing ancestral spirits were impersonated by men'. The participle χρισθέντες (170) is frequently used in Homer to mean 'anoint', usually with oils or ointments after bathing (*Od.* 3.466, 4.252, 19.320), or with dead bodies (*Il.* 23.186), or suppliants (Berl.Sitzb.1927.170 Cyrene), and would, to a Late Antique or Christian audience, inevitably be evocative of Χριστός.

¹¹⁵ Gypsum has a similar use at 30.122-23, and 47.733. See Cordero 2011 for a full overview. Gypsum funerary masks have also been found in Egypt, and throughout the Roman Empire, suggesting a possible link between gypsum and funerary ritual. The Homeric commentator Eustathius (*ad Il.* 2.735, 332.23-28) explains that the name of the titans comes from τίτανος, meaning gypsum. This is why the titans were known as 'sons of the earth.'

(10.12, 35), and a false mark (27.230, 35.126).¹¹⁶ It can also imply anything from ‘usurpation,’ to describing something ‘that belongs to others.’¹¹⁷ Crucially, it does not appear to be synonymous with terms like ψευδήμων that always entail falsehood or deception.¹¹⁸ Often, it carries a sense of ‘substitute’ or ‘counterfeit,’ and therefore a (generally negative or deficient) correspondence with a putative original, model, or archetype. It is not surprising, then, that there has been some disagreement over how to translate this phrase. Rouse’s 1940 English translation renders ‘νόθον εἶδος’ as ‘changeling countenance.’ The adjective νόθος seems to be taken as an attribute of Zagreus due to his nature as a shapeshifter, rather than of the reflection he perceives upon the mirror.¹¹⁹ Pépin and Chuvin, however, translate ‘νόθον εἶδος’ as ‘l’image déformé’ (distorted image)¹²⁰ and ‘l’image illusoire,’ (illusory image) respectively, taking νόθος instead as an attribute of the reflection,¹²¹ rendering it as an insubstantial image that is less real than the subject or archetype to which it owes its being. This means that Zagreus contemplates his unreal reflection in much the same way as Narcissus. In the end, both die as a result of their captivation with unreal images, Narcissus by starvation, Zagreus at the hands of the Titans.

As Chapter 2 will further demonstrate, the *Dionysiaca* is incredibly preoccupied with unreal or misleading images. Νόθος and εἶδος appear frequently together, and form part of a programme of vocabulary that Nonnus uses to express mimesis (loosely, and perhaps problematically translated as ‘imitation’) or deception. Rouse’s translation of νόθος as ‘changeling’ feels inadequate, because an audience would not necessarily know that Zagreus was a shapeshifter until several lines later, when the god launches into a series of metamorphoses as a form of self-defence, much like Homer’s Proteus, the mythological paradigm for Nonnus’ Dionysiac poetry. Zagreus’ series of transformations appears concordant with *De E* 388f-389a, where Plutarch links the dismemberment to Dionysus’ numerous metamorphoses. This Middle Platonic allegory, particularly Dionysus’

¹¹⁶ Chuvin 1992: 151. Cf. Newbold 2010: 103, n.38.

¹¹⁷ Chrétien 1984, at *Dion.* 9.77.

¹¹⁸ For more on νόθος see Chapter 2, pages 105-6.

¹¹⁹ Rouse 1940: 227.

¹²⁰ Pépin 1970: 313. Gigli Piccardi also follows Pépin with her translation of ‘falsa immagine’ (false image). See Gigli Piccardi 2003: 483-5.

¹²¹ Chuvin 1992: 52, 151. He also argues that Nonnus’ use of νόθος in these lines is consistent with the language of possession.

transformations, seemingly falls out of favour under the Neoplatonists, who tend to interpret the god's dismemberment more directly and more generally as the division of matter. In extant sources, the importance of the god's transformations is only restored with Damascius (*In Phd.* 4), who is likely writing several decades after Nonnus, although damage to the manuscript leaves practically all the text's details in doubt. Given the relative silence on the god's transformations from contemporary accounts, it is therefore unlikely that the *Dionysiaca*'s audience would have inferred Zagreus' ability to shapeshift from νόθος alone.

If we accept Chuvín's translation of 'illusory image,' then Nonnus' Zagreus episode features similar themes to the myth's Neoplatonic commentators. Chuvín's translation is perhaps more convincing because Nonnus has already laid the groundwork for these themes in the *Dionysiaca* through the introduction of an earlier mirror that almost directly precedes Zagreus' own. This mirror belongs to Persephone, Zagreus' mother (*Dion.* 5.594-600):

καί ποτε χαλκὸν ἔχουσα διαυγέα τέρπετο κούρη	
κάλλεος ἀντιτύποιο δικασπόλον, αὐτομάτῳ δὲ	595
σιγαλέῳ κήρυκι τύπον πιστώσατο μορφῆς	
ψευδαλέον σκιάοντι δέμας κρίνουσα κατόπτρῳ,	
μιμηλὴν δ' ἐγέλασεν ἐς εἰκόνα· Περσεφόνῃ δὲ	
αὐτοχάρακτον ἄγαλμα διοπτρεύουσα προσώπου	
ψευδομένης νόθον εἶδος ἐδέρκετο Περσεφονείης.	600

Once she was amusing herself with a shining bronze plate
which reflected her face like a judge of beauty, and she
confirmed the image of her shape by this voiceless herald,
testing the unreal form in the shadowy mirror,
and smiling at the mimic likeness. Thus Persephone gazed
into the self-graved portrait of her face, and beheld the
self-impressed aspect of a false Persephone.

The elaboration of the mirror's reflection is far more extensive here than in the subsequent Zagreus episode. Like Zagreus, Persephone beholds her νόθον εἶδος. The extended passage also features a plethora of terms relating to appearance and mimesis.

Terms like ἀντιτύποιο (595), τύπον (596), μορφῆς (596), μιμηλὴν (598), εἰκόνα (598), and ἄγαλμα (599), which will all be discussed at length in Chapter 2, all express ideas of imitation and representation, drawing attention to the insubstantiality of Persephone's reflection. Mimesis was a key development in Plato's philosophy, and its role in aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics only became more pronounced with Plotinus' re-envisioning of the Platonic tradition. It is no surprise, then, that many of these terms possess a philosophical dimension. Since the material world depended on the transcendent and Intelligible realm of Plato's Forms for its being, the relationship between original and copy, representation and archetype, was expressed in terms of mimesis. Nonnus describes Persephone's reflection and her interactions with it in extensive detail, and great emphasis is placed on the reflection's imitative qualities. The passage has an almost ekphrastic quality, only instead of describing a physical artefact, it describes a transient and ephemeral reflection.

The passage also features language related to falsehood and deception: ψευδαλέον (597), ψευδομένης (600), and νόθον (600). This introduces a possible ethical dimension; like Neoplatonist readings of the Narcissus myth, the search for truth and beauty in the world of images is presented in negative terms. Persephone's mirror is also described as 'σκιόεντι' (shadowy), which captures the reality of bronze mirrors in antiquity, which were often not smooth enough to produce a clear reflection. It also potentially intersects with Plotinus' thoughts on sensible substance, which he describes as 'a shadow, and upon what is itself a shadow, a picture and a seeming' (Plot. 6.3.8.36-7).¹²²

Nonnus clearly invites us to read his two mirrors alongside one another, given that the passages evoke similar themes, and both present their respective viewers with a νόθον εἶδος. Both viewers are led to distraction. Persephone uses her mirror as if it were a toy, fulfilling the role of the ritual toys from the Orphic myth of Dionysus' dismemberment. Instead of dying at the hands of the Titans, however, Persephone is spied on by Zeus who takes pleasure in her beauty. Although the god's gaze is enslaved

¹²² Plot. 6.3.8.31-37: καὶ οὐ δυσχεραντέον, εἰ τὴν οὐσίαν τὴν αἰσθητὴν ἐξ οὐκ οὐσιῶν ποιοῦμεν· οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ ὅλον ἀληθὴς οὐσία, ἀλλὰ μιμούμενον τὴν ἀληθῆ, ἥτις ἄνευ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν περὶ αὐτὴν ἔχει τὸ ὄν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐξ αὐτῆς γινομένων, ὅτι ἀληθῶς ἦν· ὥδὲ δὲ καὶ τὸ ὑποβεβλημένον ἄγονον καὶ οὐχ ἱκανὸν εἶναι ὄν, ὅτι μὴδὲ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἄλλα, σκιά δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ σκιά αὐτῇ οὖσα ζωγραφία καὶ τὸ φαίνεσθαι.

by the sight of the goddess' breast (ἐπ' εὐκόλπῳ δὲ θεαίνῃ Ζηνὸς ἐρωμανέοντος ἐδουλώθησαν ὀπωπαί, *Dion.* 5.592-3), Zeus does not necessarily follow the example of Narcissus in his misguided pursuit of sensible beauty. When he looks upon Persephone from afar, he sees her nature (φυή, 587). This line is quickly juxtaposed with Persephone's interest in her unreal reflection. In contrast with the mimetic vocabulary cited previously, φυή or φύσις designates how things are, versus how they appear. In Plotinus' thought, φύσις could also designate the lower soul, which exists as an image of the higher soul (otherwise known as the λόγος).¹²³ In contemporary Christian usage, φύσις could also be used as a synonym for οὐσία (Being) or sometimes ὑπόστασις (Essence, or substance).¹²⁴ This establishes a contrast between Persephone's viewing of her reflective beauty, and Zeus' viewing of her real beauty.

1.3 Dionysus' Dismemberment

Leaving aside Dionysus' mirror for now, it is crucial to consider the other myth's other primary symbol: the dismemberment itself (or sparagmos). Although the dismemberment is implied in Plotinus, it does not play a primary role. Over time, however, the dismemberment became the primary focus of later Neoplatonists.

Macrobius comments on the myth in his *Commentary on the dream of Scipio in Cicero's Republic* (1.12.12):

Members of the Orphic sect believe that material mind is represented by Bacchus himself, who, born of a single parent, is divided into separate parts. In their sacred rites they portray him as being torn to pieces at the hands of angry Titans and arising again from his buried limbs alive and sound, their reason being that Nous or Mind, by offering its undivided state to the indivisible, both fulfils its worldly functions and does not forsake its secret nature.¹²⁵

Macrobius is difficult to contextualise within the chronology or geographical influence of Neoplatonism, although most scholars place him in the late 4th/early 5th centuries

¹²³ Zwollo 2018: 98.

¹²⁴ Russell 2002: 40.

¹²⁵ Transl. Stahl 1990: 136.

CE.¹²⁶ His focus in this passage lies not only on the dismemberment but also Dionysus' eventual resurrection. Macrobius also identifies Dionysus as *Nous*, or 'Material Intellect': the 'reflection' of the Intelligible world upon matter.¹²⁷ His commentary, therefore, offers us an allegory of the dismemberment myth: Dionysus is torn to pieces after seeing his reflection, paralleling the transition in Neoplatonism from the One to the multiplicity of the material world.

Although Macrobius' commentary includes an account of Dionysus' resurrection, Zagreus' resurrection is not quite so straightforward in the *Dionysiaca* (*Dion.* 6.174-83):

ἐνθα διχαζομένων μελέων Τιτῆνι σιδήρῳ	
τέρμα βίου Διόνυσος ἔχων παλινάγρετον ἀρχὴν	175
ἄλλοφυῆς μορφοῦτο πολυσπερὲς εἶδος ἀμείβων,	
πῇ μὲν ἄτε Κρονίδης δόλιος νέος αἰγίδα σείων,	
πῇ δὲ γέρων βαρύγουνος ἄτε Κρόνος ὄμβρον ἰάλλων·	
ἄλλοτε ποικιλόμορφον ἔην βρέφος, ἄλλοτε κούρῳ	
εἵκελος οἰστρηθέντι, νέον δέ οἱ ἄνθος ἰούλων	180
ἀκροκελαινιόωντα κατέγραφε κύκλα προσώπου·	
πῇ δὲ χόλῳ δασπλῆτι λέων μιμηλὸς ἰάλλων	
φρικαλέον βρύχημα σεσηρότι μαίνεται λαίμῳ,	

Then, when his limbs were being divided by Titan iron,
the end of his life was a new beginning as Dionysus.
He appeared in another shape, and changed into many forms:
now young like crafty Cronides shaking his aegis cape,
now as ancient, heavy-kneed Kronos, pouring rain.
Sometimes he was a curiously formed baby, sometimes
like a mad youth with the flower of the first down

¹²⁶ Although writing in Latin, Macrobius appears to have been well versed in Greek literature, leading some scholars to speculate that Macrobius was either part of the Eastern elite prior to the reign of the emperor Justinian and the establishment of Greek as the primary language of Eastern Rome, or that he was a provincial from the West, potentially North Africa. Proposed dates for his work rely entirely upon attempts to identify Macrobius with people mentioned by the same name in the *Codex Theodosianus*. See Stahl 1990: 4-9.

¹²⁷ Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 236.

marking the curve of his face with black.

Again, as a mimic lion he uttered a terrible roar,

in a furious rage with a wild snarling throat.¹²⁸

Following this passage, Zagreus continues to transform, first into horse (187-90), then a serpent (91-5), a tiger (96-7), and finally a bull (97-9). In terms of prominence, Nonnus devotes more lines to Zagreus' transformations than he does to Zagreus' mirror. The effect is almost Ovidian, in that elements from contemporary, authoritative versions of the myth are reduced, and alternative elements are introduced and expanded upon. With the bull as his final shape, Zagreus is finally killed:

καὶ ψυχῆς προμάχιζεν, ἔως ζηλήμονι λαίμῳ	200
τρηχαλέον μύκημα δι' ἥερος ἔβρεμεν' Ἡρη,	
μητρειῇ βαρύμηνης, ἰσοφθόγγῳ δὲ θεαίνῃ	
αἰθέριον κελάδημα πύλαι κανάχιζον Ὀλύμπου,	
καὶ θρασὺς ὤκλασε ταῦρος· ἀμοιβαίῃ δὲ φονῆες	
ταυροφυῇ Διόνυσον ἐμιστύλλοντο μαχαίρῃ.	205

And so he fought for his soul, until Hera with a

jealous throat bellowed harshly through the air

– that heavy-resentful stepmother! – and the

gates of Olympus rattled in echo to her jealous throat.

Then the bold bull collapsed: the murderers each eager for his turn

with the knife chopped the bull-shaped Dionysus piecemeal.

Although Zagreus' transformations do not have an explicit cosmogonic function in the *Dionysiaca*, they would certainly have been read as such by Middle Platonists and audiences well versed in Plutarch's *De E* (388f-389a):

If, then, anyone asks, 'What has this to do with Apollo?', we shall say that it concerns not only him, but also Dionysus, whose share in Delphi is no less than that of Apollo.

Now we hear the theologians affirming and reciting, sometimes in verse and sometimes in prose, that the god is deathless and eternal in his nature, but, owing forsooth to some

¹²⁸ Transl. Rouse 1940.

predestined design and reason, he undergoes transformations of his person, and at one time enkindles his nature into fire and makes it altogether like all else, and at another time he undergoes all sorts of changes in his form, his emotions and his powers, even as the universe does to-day; but he is called by the best known of his names. The more enlightened, however, concealing from the masses the transformation into fire, call him Apollo because of his solitary state, and Phoebus because of his purity and stainlessness. And as for his turning into winds and water, earth and stars, and into the generations of plants and animals, and his adoption of such guises, they speak in a deceptive way of what he undergoes in his transformation as a tearing apart, as it were, and a dismemberment. They give him the names of Dionysus, Zagreus, Nyctelius, and Isodaetes; they construct destructions and disappearances, followed by returns to life and regenerations—riddles and fabulous tales quite in keeping with the aforesaid transformations.¹²⁹

In this passage, Plutarch describes Dionysus' dismemberment as an allegory, using one of the key terms for allegorical expression, αἰνίττομαι ('to speak in riddles'); the dismemberment is, according to Plutarch, a symbol for the god's adoption of disguises, and his transformations are the creation of life in its plurality, the generations of plants and animals, and the elements themselves. According to Plutarch, the theologians constructed myths of Dionysus' destructions and disappearances, and his resurrections and regenerations, as 'enigmas' or 'allegories' (αἰνίγματα). Nonnus appears to be aware of Plutarch's account, or one very similar, and integrates and entwines both the dismemberment and the god's transformations together into his narrative. Additionally, Plutarch's *De E* 388f-389a offers us a glimpse at how Nonnus' audience might have interpreted Zagreus' metamorphoses, whether Nonnus intended for the passage to be interpreted allegorically or not.

The extended passage in Nonnus, however, has also posed other problems for critics. In Rouse's translation, Zagreus is killed at two separate points in the text, lines 172 and 204-5.¹³⁰ This hinges upon the translation of ἐδηλήσαντο, which can be translated as 'wounded' or 'killed.' Gigli Piccardi offers the same proposition, and interprets

¹²⁹ Transl. Babbitt 1936.

¹³⁰ Rouse 1940: 227-9.

Zagreus' metamorphoses as evidence that he survives his initial death in line 172.¹³¹ She notes the similarity between line 172 and line 11.164 from Nonnus' *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John* (ἀθρήσας μετὰ τέρμα βίου παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν, cf. *Dion.* 6.175 τέρμα βίου Διόνυσος ἔχων παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν), which depicts the resurrection of Lazarus, suggesting that the two scenes are in dialogue with one another. This interpretation is challenged by Enrico Livrea, who says that Lazarus' resurrection 'cannot be invoked as a parallel for the nine metamorphoses of Dionysus, for these constitute the continuation of Zagreus' life under different forms.'¹³² However, Gigli Piccardi's argument should not be dismissed, given that Nonnus uses a similar expression later to refer to the resurrection of Tylus in Book 25 (καὶ νέκυς ἀμφιέπων βιοτῆς παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν, 25.545). The similarity between the two lines invites comparison, even if Tylus experiences a physical, bodily resurrection, and Zagreus' resurrection is perhaps more figurative.¹³³ Numerous scholars have noted the verbal connections and reminiscences between Nonnus' Tylus and Lazarus episodes,¹³⁴ so it seems strange to exclude Zagreus from this debate entirely. The 'new life' of Dionysus inherently evokes ideas of resurrection, even if the resurrection itself differs from the spiritual rebirth of Lazarus, and the physical, bodily rebirth of Tylus.

Addressing Zagreus' two deaths, Livrea says, 'it is hardly likely that Zagreus is slain a second time by the Titans in line 205 ταυροφυῆ Διόνυσον ἐμιστύλαντο μαχαίρῃ: this is an allusion to a definitive σπαραγμός.'¹³⁵ He endorses Chuvín's translation: '...les Titans le mettent à mal d'un coutelas venu du Tartare, alors qu'il observe dans un miroir l'image illusoire que celui-ci lui renvoie. Là, tandis que ses membres se divisent, sous le fer Titan, Dionysos, faisant du terme de sa vie le début d'une vie recommencée, se transforme en êtres divers, prenant tour à tour l'apparence de multiples créatures...' ('...the Titans hurt him with a blade from Tartarus, but he sees an illusory image in the mirror, which reflects back at him. There, while his limbs are divided under Titan iron, Dionysus, making the end of his life the beginning of a new one, transforms into diverse

¹³¹ Gigli Piccardi 2003: 458-9, 482-90.

¹³² Livrea 2014a: 60.

¹³³ Bernabé & García-Gasco 2016: 105.

¹³⁴ Vian 1990: 267-8; Spanoudakis 2013.

¹³⁵ Livrea 2014a: 60.

beings, taking the appearance of multiple creatures...').¹³⁶ Livrea continues, saying 'in truth, the god, being immortal, never dies, but transforms himself constantly, like the material of the cosmos.'¹³⁷ However, it would not be out of character for Nonnus to describe Zagreus' death twice, in two different forms. Nonnus' helical style often regresses or doubles back on itself to expand on events that have already been briefly narrated. The same can be said of Actaeon's metamorphosis and death, which is presented in summary by the poet at 5.301-2, and then immediately expanded upon in more detail (5.303-69).

Although Neoplatonic commentators interpreted the Orphic Dionysus and his dismemberment as an allegory for the immortality of the soul, Nonnus does say explicitly what becomes of Zagreus' soul after the moment of death. In the canonical version of the myth, Athena saves Dionysus' heart before the Titans consume his corpse. She then gives it to Apollo, who either buries it, or uses it to restore Dionysus to life. In other versions, Apollo himself rescues Dionysus' limbs from the Titans and buries them (Clement of Alexandria, *Protrept.* 2.17.2-18.2).

1.4 Parallel Dismemberments: Zagreus and Actaeon

Nonnus does, however, provide us with a potential key to the fate of Zagreus' soul in Book 5, with the dismemberment of Actaeon, Dionysus' cousin. Although we can infer the fact that Zagreus' soul lives on after dismemberment from Neoplatonic sources, Actaeon provides a more immediate comparandum. Actaeon and Zagreus both continue a trend in Dionysiac myth and Orphic cult, whereby characters associated with Dionysus undergo a sparagmos. Other examples include Orpheus, the canonical founder of many Greek religious rituals, who is torn apart by the maenads after creating the Dionysiac rites, effectively mirroring the dismemberment of his divine patron. In addition to Actaeon (*Dion.* 5), the theme of dismemberment continues through Dionysus' family and the royal family of Thebes with the dismemberment of Pentheus (*Dion.* 46). The fates of Actaeon and Pentheus are explicitly contrasted by Cadmus in Book 46, in his lament that Mount

¹³⁶ Chuvín 1992: 52.

¹³⁷ Livrea 2014a: 60.

Cithaeron – the site of the two deaths – has killed the two men who would care for him in his old age (46.252-64).

Actaeon's death proceeds as follows. He is hunting with his dogs on Mount Cithaeron, when he comes upon a spring where the goddess Artemis and some naiad nymphs are bathing. Actaeon climbs a tree so that he might spy on the virgin goddess. He sees her 'whole body' (ὅλον δέμας, 5.304) which is expressly forbidden (ἀθήητος, 305). While Actaeon has his transgressive gaze focused on the goddess, a nymph spots him and cries out in horror, alerting Artemis to his presence. Artemis conceals her body by sinking deeper into the water and punishes Actaeon's transgression by transforming him into a stag. His manly shape (μορφή ἀνδρομέη, 316-7) is lost, exchanged for the counterfeit shape of a fawn with dappled limbs (στικτοῖς μελέεσσι νόθη ποικίλλετο μορφή, 321).¹³⁸

Crucially, the only part of Actaeon that Artemis does not transform is his mind (εἰσέτι μοῦνος ἔην νόος ἔμπεδος, 323).¹³⁹ His transformation is not all-pervading. It is enough however, that his dogs no longer recognise him as their master. They hunt him and tear him to pieces. As he dies, Actaeon recalls the parallel story of Tiresias and Athena, and laments that Artemis did not change his mind along with his form (αἶθε νόον μετάμειψεν, ἅ περ δέμας, 346). Indeed, this appears to be a central part of his punishment, as he suffers his slow dismemberment with the awareness of a human being.

Throughout the passage, Nonnus places great emphasis on Actaeon's nous (νόος, loosely 'mind' or 'intellect'). Nous is an extremely loaded philosophical term in Greek philosophy, that originated with Pre-Socratics such as Anaxagoras (e.g., fr.12 DK),¹⁴⁰ and was reconceived and re-contextualised by philosophers like Plato,¹⁴¹ all the

¹³⁸ The occurrence of ποικίλλετο here is significant given the term's connection with *poikilia*, one of the major themes and poetic principles behind the *Dionysiaca*. Given the connotations of weaving and poetic composition inherent in *poikilia*, the description of Actaeon's new form is styled as a work of art, with Artemis as the originating artist. This styles her almost as a poetic surrogate for Nonnus, capable of taking an original character or myth and metamorphosing it into a new form.

¹³⁹ The distinction between Actaeon's metamorphosed form and human mind is, throughout our surviving attestations of the myth, only made explicitly in Ovid's *Met.* 5.138ff.

¹⁴⁰ For more on Anaxagoras' development of 'nous,' see Silvestre 1989.

¹⁴¹ Menn 1995; Mason 2013.

way through to the Imperial and Late Antique Neoplatonists.¹⁴² Indeed, Nonnus' contrast between Actaeon's misleading physical form and his nous invites comparison to Neoplatonic metaphysical frameworks: Actaeon's representation in the physical realm fails to accurately represent his nous, his intellect. Actaeon's mother Autoonē searches for him on the mountainside, but is unable to recognise her son from the dismembered remains of a fawn. Actaeon then appears to his father Aristaeus in a dream, wearing the shadowy form of a dappled stag. Actaeon's sparagmos, like that of Zagreus, does not threaten or disturb the unity of his soul. Any process of separation or division at the level of the corporeal body is not reflected at the level of soul or intellect.

This episode is further complicated by the presence of Athena. Initially, Nonnus specifies that Actaeon climbs an oak tree to better spy on Artemis (φηγός, 303). However, when Actaeon appears to his father in a dream, he claims that he climbed an olive tree (ἐλαίης, 474), the sacred tree of Athena (Παλλάδος φυτόν, 479).¹⁴³ Actaeon explains that when he was spotted, he drew the ire of both virgin goddesses (ὄθεν βαρύμηνης ἀπειλή ἔχραεν Ἀκταίῳ καὶ Ἀρτέμιδος καὶ Ἀθῆνης, 480-1). However, Athena's precise role in Actaeon's punishment is never explicitly mentioned. In fact, her presence is not mentioned in any extant version of the myth.¹⁴⁴ According to Porphyry's commentary *On the Cave of the Nymphs from Odyssey 13*, the presence of an olive tree is enough to symbolise the presence and role of Athena as the divine intellect in the act of creation.¹⁴⁵ It is possible that the olive tree has a similar function here, symbolising that the goddess played some role in the preservation of Actaeon's human nous even after his physical metamorphosis.

Actaeon's death appears as a narrative digression at a strange juncture of Nonnus' poem. We are told in Book 5 that Actaeon dies chronologically after Dionysus' Indian War

¹⁴² For instance, Plotinus made nous his second hypostasis, and equated it with the demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*. See *Ennead* 3.2.2. For a modern appraisal of the evidence, see Sabo 2015.

¹⁴³ Actaeon describes the grove as ὁ μὲν φυλῆς, ὁ δ' ἐλαίης, which is reproduced from *Od.* 5.477, and describes the bush that Odysseus takes shelter beneath when he arrives on Scherie. It is the same bush that he will look out from and spy upon Nausicaa.

¹⁴⁴ Cf., e.g. Aes., fr.135; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.30; Paus., *Geog.* 9.2.3.; Diod. Sic., *Hist.* 4.81.3-5; Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 180 & 181; Ovid, *Met.* 3.138ff. The only surviving connection between Actaeon and Athena comes from Callimachus, who relates the story in his *Hymn to the Bath of Pallas* (106ff.), to contrast the fates of Tiresias and Actaeon.

¹⁴⁵ At *Crat.* 407b, Plato etymologises Athena's name as Ἀθεονόα, meaning god's mind (*theos* + *nous*).

(Ἰνδῶν μετὰ δῆριν, 302), which does not begin in earnest until Book 14. This anachronistic chain of events makes sense given that the *Dionysiaca* is loosely structured around a royal encomium, where Book 5 serves to detail the god's royal family. However, it has the effect of placing two dismemberments in consecutive books, suggesting that the two scenes are indeed in dialogue with one another.

Parallels between the two scenes are supported by Nonnus' playful use of allusive puns and wordplay. According to the *Etymologium Gudianum*, Zagreus was etymologised as 'the great hunter' (ὁ μεγάλως ἀγρεύων).¹⁴⁶ In Book 5, Nonnus introduces the character of Aristaeus, the son of Apollo and Cyrene, whose epithets are the 'hunter' and the 'herdsman' (νόμιος καὶ ἐπώνυμος ἀγρεύς, 5.215) following Pindar *Pyth.* 9.64.¹⁴⁷ Aristaeus marries Cadmus' daughter Autonoe, and Actaeon, their son, is repeatedly said to possess the 'blood of the Hunter' (ἀγρέος αἷμα, *Dion.* 5.289, 466).

The epithet Ἀγρεύς is occasionally attributed to Apollo,¹⁴⁸ although such cross-pollination of cult titles and epithets between divinities and their progeny is not unusual (for example, Phaethon is especially common as a title for Helios in Nonnus and in Late Antique poetry in general). However, it is also used to describe Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae* (1189-92). A potential connection, or even conflation, between Apollo-(Z)agreus-Dionysus is strengthened further by Plutarch, who lists both Zagreus and Dionysus as alternative names for Apollo (*de Ei*, 388e). Although the connection between Apollo and Dionysus has been in some ways artificially strengthened by modern revisionism in philosophy and comparative mythology, the two gods remained popular henotheistic deities in Late Antiquity, and were undoubtedly linked by their joint worship at Delphi and Mount Parnassus.

¹⁴⁶ West 1983: 153, n.39 attributes the name to *zagrē*, a pitfall for trapping animals, as well as other derivations.

¹⁴⁷ The epithets Ἀγρεύς and Νόμιος are later personified by Nonnus as two sons of Hermes: Agreus, who is 'well-versed in the sport of the beast-slaying hunt', and Nomios (14.87-95). In a bizarre passage in Book 27, Zeus urges Apollo to fight alongside 'Agreus and Dionysus both, and as a herdsman (Nomios), fight for the generation of Satyr herdsman' (264-5). The personified Agreus is referenced, but his brother's name is actually an epithet transferred to Apollo, and Aristaeus, who bore both epithets in Pindar, lurks behind this passage due to the mention of his mother Cyrene in the preceding line.

¹⁴⁸ Aesch. fr. 332.4; Herodas *Mim.* 3.34; Trag, *Fragmenta* 197b.

The dismemberment of an ἄγρεύς, who is hunted (ἀγρεύεται) by Artemis and his own hunting dogs, is then closely followed by the dismemberment of Ζαγρεύς, the ‘Great Hunter.’ These puns create verbal resonances between the two scenes in addition to their thematic connections.

1.5 The Division of Matter

As Hernández de la Fuente argues, the myth has a determinant cosmological role in Proclus’ *Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus*.¹⁴⁹ Proclus mentions that the mirror was forged by Hephaestus, and identifies Dionysus with the cosmic Intellect, or Nous (*In Tim.* 3.80.20-5 Diehl). Nous was said to be entirely undivided, and comprehend all intelligible things in one act of intelligence. Although it is merged with the soul, it remains always superior to it. When Dionysus looks into the mirror, he proceeds ‘into the universal divisible creation’ (*In Tim.* 2.146.9 Diehl).¹⁵⁰ The mirror, therefore, represents the reflection of the Intelligible Forms into encosmic nature and the dispersal of these reflections into matter.¹⁵¹ Dionysus’ death and dismemberment becomes a symbol of the creation of the material universe, and the differentiation of matter. This metaphysical interpretation of Dionysus’ myth helps to explain and elucidate the paradox that the intelligible exists as a unity shared by many separate individuals.¹⁵²

Later Neoplatonists continue to frame the myth within ideas of unity and division. Damascius (c. 458 to c. 538) uses the myth to explain Plato’s prohibition of suicide in the *Phaedo* (Dam. *In. Phaedem* 4 Westerink):

ἐπεὶ καὶ ὁ Διόνυσος ἐν μὲν τῷ θρόνῳ τοῦ Διὸς ἀμέριστος [.....] εἰς τοὺς Τιτᾶνας μερι[.....]ρακῶς μεταμορφοῦται, κ[.....] ἀλλὰ Τιτανικῶς. ἀμέλει καὶ [.....] μεριζόμενος ὁμῶς συμφύεται [.....] μᾶλλον πεφυκῶς. Λέγε τοίνυν [.....] τὰ εἶδη ἢ τοῦ ὅλου, εἰ καὶ μόνου [.....] τὸν ἑαυτοῦ ὡς Τιτανικά [.....] τῷ διεσπασμένα ἢ μέσα εἶναι καὶ τὸ πᾶν συμπληροῦν, ἀλλ’ οὐ τὸ ὅλον ὡς Διονυσιακά.

¹⁴⁹ Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 236.

¹⁵⁰ Elsewhere, Proclus identifies the mirror as a symbol of the capacity of the universe to be filled up with Intellect, which is torn into a multiplicity of fragments by the Titans (*In Tim.* 3.80.20f., 145.9f).

¹⁵¹ Meisner 2019: 266.

¹⁵² Seaford 2006: 115.

διὸ καὶ ἀμέριστος ἅμα καὶ μεριστός· τοιοῦτον γὰρ τὸ πᾶν οἷον ἀθροίσματι μᾶλλον
ἐοικὸς καὶ ὁλότῃ διακεκριμένη τοῖς μέρεσι συνεχόμενον.

Indeed, as long as Dionysus [sits] upon the throne of Zeus he is undivided.....to the
Titans that he is divided.....and undergoes a metamorphosis in the way of
but in the Titanic way. Of course.....when he is divided he is still made whole
.....and is more according to his nature. Let us say therefore.....the forms or of
the whole, though only.....his own as Titanic.....because they are dispersed
or intermediate and constitute the universe, but not whole, as belonging to the sphere
of Dionysus. Hence he can be said to be at the same time indivisible and divisible, for
such is the nature of the universe, which has rather the character of an aggregate and
is held together by a totality whose parts are distinct.¹⁵³

Although the passage has several lacunae, the general idea can still be reconstructed.
By murdering and dismembering Dionysus, the Titans initiate a mode of creation that
extends beyond the boundaries of Dionysus' multiform continuity (πολυειδοῦς
συνεχείας, *In Phaed.* 5). Dionysus comes to rule over divided nature after he is subjected
to a process of division, because Nature is twofold (either indivisible or divisible), in
contrast to Zeus who rules over the undivided (3). Damascius also asserts that the Titans
who plot against Dionysus are subordinate to him (οἰκεῖον), but also belong to a
different divine character, 'because no manifold opposes or destroys its own monad,
otherwise it would destroy itself also' (4). Proclus' expresses a similar view: nous is
Dionysiac, and therefore to transgress against nous, to tear asunder its undivided
nature, is to act like the Titans who tore apart Dionysus' body (*Procl. In Crat.* 133).
Iamblichus expresses a similar concern through the Pythagorean maxim that one 'must
not pull apart the god within oneself' (*Iambl. VP* 85, 240).

Damascius' successor Olympiodorus (born c.475)¹⁵⁴ demonstrates the myth's
mutability, and its potential to serve its commentators' agendas. For Olympiodorus, the
divine succession of the gods (Ouranos, Kronos, Zeus, and Dionysus) can be read

¹⁵³ Transl. Westerink 1977: 30.

¹⁵⁴ Watts 2008: 233 n2: Olympiodorus is thought to have been born around 475 CE. He was a disciple of Ammonius Hermiae, and the last pagan to maintain the Platonic tradition in Alexandria. He was certainly still writing in 565 CE, judging from his mention of a comet that appeared that year in his commentary on Aristotle's *Meteorology*.

allegorically as degrees of virtue that can be practiced by the soul.¹⁵⁵ These virtues are contemplative, purificatory, civic and ethical, respectively. These virtues coexist and are co-temporal, with their mythological succession denoting their hierarchy rather than their temporal sequence (Olymp. *In Phaed.* 1.4-5). When Dionysus is murdered and dismembered, it signifies that physical and ethical virtues are not necessarily consistent with one another.¹⁵⁶ The Titans then chew Dionysus' flesh, with 'mastication standing for extreme division, because Dionysus is the patron of this world, where extreme division prevails because of 'mine' and 'thine' (In *Phd.* 1.5). This would seem to allude to Plato's assertion in both the *Republic* and the *Laws* that property is a major cause of strife.

Due to his death and rebirth, Dionysus becomes the 'patron of genesis of life and death' (Olymp. *In Phd.* 1.5). In Olympiodorus, Dionysus' death is intrinsically linked to what has been interpreted as an 'Orphic' anthropogony, in which Zeus kills the Titans for the god's murder and for devouring his flesh, and the sublimate from the vapours produces the matter from which mankind is formed (1.3 = *OF* 220).¹⁵⁷ In essence, Olympiodorus' account is an alchemical allegory for the formation of the human spirit. The devouring of Dionysus, and the resulting anthropogony from the Titans means that mankind possesses a dual nature that is both Dionysiac and Titanic. Commentators have argued that this myth functions as a kind of Orphic 'original sin,' although more modern

¹⁵⁵ Olympiodorus, however, omits Phanes and Night from the Orphic line of succession. His exegesis is generally more concerned with appropriating Orphic elements to justify his own exegetical innovations. It is worth noting also that not all early Orphic theogonies consisted of six generations. See Meisner 2019: chapters 2 & 3.

¹⁵⁶ Edmonds 2009: 515.

¹⁵⁷ This exegesis has been used to explain the *Orphic Hymn to the Titans* (*OH* 36), in which the Titans are addressed as those 'from whom began the afflicted, miserable race of man' (ἀρχαὶ καὶ πηγαὶ πάντων θνητῶν πολυμόχων, 4). *Contra* Linforth 1941: 330, who claims that, rather than a central doctrine of the Orphic tradition, Olympiodorus' interpretation is an idiosyncratic innovation, arguing that, 'he does not say that he found the idea in that the body of man is Dionysiac in an Orphic poem, nor does he present it as if he had.' Brisson 1992: 493-94 suggests that Olympiodorus' version was founded in contemporary alchemical allegory: man is created from the sublimate (αἰθάλη) produced from the vapours (ἀτμός) of the Titans. The word τίτανος also means quicklime, which is produced by burning limestone; Brisson cites two definitions from alchemical lexica which appear in Berthelot 1888 II: 14.2, 10.2: titanos is the lime of the egg (τίτανος ἐστὶ ἀσβεστος ὡοῦ) and the stone of Dionysus is lime (λίθος Διονύσιου ἐστὶν ἀσβεστος). Therefore, the Dionysiac and Titanic elements, subjected to Zeus' flames, produce a sublimate which was equated by the 3rd Century alchemist Zosimus with the πνεῦμα which animates human body. See Berthelot 1888 II: 5:15,1. The presence of the verb 'ἀπογεύω' (to take give a taste of) also seems to suggest Christianising elements and a potential reference to the Eucharist in Olympiodorus' text.

critics have argued that Olympiodorus' account reflects his personal interests and innovation, and dismissed attempts to reconstruct an Orphic anthropogony as modern fabrications based on Christian ideas.¹⁵⁸

Nonnus does not include any hint of an anthropogony in his Zagreus episode. He also deviates from tradition by avoiding any explicit reference to the Titans' cannibalism beyond a few veiled hints. The Titans use a μάχαιρα (*Dion.* 6.172, 205), a knife sometimes used for meat carving or sacrifice.¹⁵⁹ Nonnus also uses the verb μιστύλλω (205), 'to cut up,' which in Homer is always used for the cutting of meat before roasting.¹⁶⁰ If these are allusions to the Titans' devouring of Dionysus' flesh, they would constitute a tacit acknowledgement of the myth, while also diminishing its prominence in Nonnus' version, potentially due to the Christian sensibilities of his audience.¹⁶¹ Nonnus' 2nd-century compatriot Clement of Alexandria preserves a version of the myth in his polemic against 'pagan' myth, the *Protrepticus*, where he compares the mysteries of Orpheus unfavourably with those of Christ. The omophagy of the Titans was seen by Clement as one of the most morally reprehensible features of the myth of Dionysus' dismemberment. It is interesting, then, that Christian versions of the myth retain these problematic elements, while the majority of Neoplatonists make no direct mention of the Titans' cannibalism.¹⁶² This might suggest that Nonnus drew more inspiration from Neoplatonic versions than he did from Christian polemics.

Nonnian commentators have seen the allusions to sparagmos in the Zagreus episode as an allusion to Neoplatonic commentaries on the sparagmos myth. Livrea argues that, if Nonnus intends ἐδήλησαντο to mean 'wounded' rather than killed, then '[Zagreus]' severed limbs are the origin of the μεταβολαί [changes/transitions] of

¹⁵⁸ This reconstruction began with Comparetti 1879 in his discussion on the gold tablets recovered from Thurii, but has been challenged more recently by Linforth 1941: 359-60; Ellinger 1978: 7-35; Edmonds 1999: 44-7; 2013b: 193.

¹⁵⁹ *LSJ*: μάχαιρα

¹⁶⁰ E.g. *Il.* 1.465, cf. 9.210, al.; *Od.* 14.75. The use of μιστύλλω however in the Homeric sense as a precursor to roasting would preclude the Titans from partaking in true 'omophagia,' the eating of raw flesh. 'Omophagos' or 'raw-eater' was one of Dionysus' many epithets, and the devouring of raw meat is sometimes attributed in mythology to maenads. Its potential role in Dionysiac mystery cult is still unclear. See Henrichs 1978 and Taylor-Perry 2003.

¹⁶¹ Livrea 2014a: 60 sees these lines as an allusion to a definitive sparagmos.

¹⁶² The notable exception here would be Olympiodorus' *In Phd.*

creation.’¹⁶³ Livrea’s interpretation strays close to an extrapolation from an extremely enigmatic passage, using Neoplatonic source material. If Nonnus alludes to the division of the material intellect and the dispersal of matter, it only appears periphrastically through Zagreus’ metamorphoses.

When Zagreus transforms himself, he takes the form of Zeus, then Kronos (identified respectively as an adult and an elder by Bernabé and García-Gasco),¹⁶⁴ a baby and then an adolescent (the most frequent image of Dionysus), transitioning through the four stages of human life. By acquiring all these different forms, Nonnus’ Zagreus represents ‘a multiplex representation of a god who is and encompasses everything.’¹⁶⁵ After these four transformations, Zagreus metamorphoses into different animals, all presumably symbolic in nature. The lion, serpent, tiger and bull are all traditional images in Dionysiac cult. Collectively, many of these forms evoke the primordial god Phanes, who, according to Proclus, was composed of elements of lion, serpent and bull (*In. Tim.* 1.427.20, 429.39 and 111). This display of metamorphic ability by a god is the first of its kind outside of the prologue, and neatly recalls Proteus from the *Odyssey*, who metamorphoses into a lion, a serpent, a panther, a boar, and even into water and a tree in order to escape the clutches of Menelaus (*Od.* 4.456-458). Both deities undergo a rapid series of transformations in response to danger.

Proteus’ transformations were subject to rather elaborate allegorical interpretation in antiquity,¹⁶⁶ and it is tempting to suggest that Nonnus might have composed his Zagreus episode in light of Homeric scholarship and the Alexandrian tradition of Homeric literary criticism. Neoplatonists allegorised Proteus as a being that contained all the forms of the world (*Iambl. Theol. Arith.* 7.20-23, *Procl. In Remp.* 1.112.28-9). This is comparable to the Stoic tradition, and Heraclitus’ allegory of Proteus as a symbol of the primordial origin of the universe, an image of shapeless matter that

¹⁶³ Livrea 2014a: 60.

¹⁶⁴ Bernabé and García-Gasco 2016: 103.

¹⁶⁵ Bernabé and García-Gasco 2016: 103 tentatively suggest that this is a poetic allusion to the simultaneous and ambiguous form of an adult and a child used in certain Orphic settings to worship Dionysus, citing the peculiar term ANDRIKEPAIDOTHYSON attested on a gold tablet from Pherae (OF 493), which is apparently composed by ἀνὴρ, πᾶις and θύρσος. This cult title devolved into Erikepaios, which appears as an epithet both of Phanes in the Rhapsodies, and of Dionysus (*Procl. In Tim.* 1.336.15).

¹⁶⁶ Buffière 1956: 179-86.

had yet to acquire form. Proteus' daughter, Eidothea was allegorised as the vision (*thea*) of every form (*eidos*):

This is why Proteus, originally a single being, was divided into many forms, being so fashioned by providence ... It is reasonable then that formless matter should be called Proteus, that the providence which formed everything should be called Eidothea, and that everything which derives from these two principles, once separated out, should be divided into continuous masses which are constitutive of the universe (*Homeric Problems* 66, on *Od.* 4.456-58)

Heraclitus' allegory of Proteus is uncannily similar to Neoplatonic allegories of the Orphic Dionysus: both are single beings that are divided into many forms, which then constitute the physical universe. This similarity appears not to have escaped Nonnus, who unites these two figures – through Proteus' metamorphoses and Dionysus' dismemberment – in the character of Zagreus. Nonnus explicitly references process of division and separation three times throughout the passage (διχαζομένων μελέων, *Dion.* 6.174; ἐμιστύλλοντο, 205; προτέροιο δαϊζομένου Διονύσου, 206). By subjecting Zagreus, who contains all the forms of human experience as well as the forms of the world, to a process of division, these forms can be seen to be differentiated and dispersed.

Nonnus must have known the critical Homeric scholarship on Proteus prior to choosing the shapeshifter as a symbol for his Dionysiac poetry. The fact that Zagreus' metamorphoses are given more attention than even the mirror suggests that they are key to the interpretation of the passage. If Nonnus is inviting us to compare Zagreus and Proteus as shapeshifters, an educated audience with knowledge of Stoic or Neoplatonic allegories of Homer would likely interpret Zagreus according to pre-existing intellectual frameworks and their own internal libraries of texts.

1.6 Triadic Schemas: Zagreus-Dionysus-Iacchus

One of the many enigmas Nonnus presents his audience is the continuity and coexistence of the *Dionysiaca's* multiple Dionysoi. As mentioned previously, the continuity of existence between Zagreus and Dionysus is never clearly expressed.

Zagreus begins a new life as Dionysus, but the precise mechanics of that change remain unclear.

Nonnus had plenty of mythological models at hand if he wanted to express a direct continuity of the body or of the soul. Clement of Alexandria describes the myth as follows (*Protrepticus*, 2.17.2-18.2 = *OF* 588 i):

The mysteries of Dionysus are perfectly inhuman. While he was still a child, the Kouretes danced around with clashing arms, and the Titans crept up by stealth and deceived him with childish toys. Then these Titans dismembered Dionysus while he was still an infant, as the poet of this mystery, the Thracian Orpheus, says: “top, and spinner, and limb-moving toys, and beautiful golden apples from the clear-voiced Hesperides.” And it is not useless to put forth to you the useless symbols of this rite for condemnation. These are the knucklebone, ball, hoop, apples, spinner, looking-glass, tuft of wool. So, Athena, who abstracted the heart of Dionysus, was thus called Pallas, from the palpitating of the heart. The Titans, on the other hand, who tore him limb from limb, set a cauldron on a tripod and threw into it the limbs of Dionysus. First they boiled them down and, then fixing them on spits, “held them over Hephaistos.” But later Zeus appeared; since he was a god, he speedily perceived the savour of the cooking flesh, which your gods agree to have assigned to them as their portion of honour. He assails the Titans with his thunderbolt and consigns the limbs of Dionysus to his son Apollo for burial. And Apollo, for he did not disobey Zeus, bearing the dismembered corpse to Parnassus, deposited it there.¹⁶⁷

It is very likely that Nonnus would have been aware of and read Clement’s *Protrepticus*, given its place in Christian Alexandrine literature, and Nonnus’ potential time in the city.¹⁶⁸ Clement’s work records numerous quotes from ‘Orpheus,’ as Clement seeks to compares the ancient bard and founder of Greek ritual with Christ, the founder of the new Christian mysteries, in an extended exhortation for ‘pagans’ to convert to Christianity.

The version of the myth presented by Clement shows signs of Middle Platonic influence and allegory. Athena’s cult title ‘Pallas’ is given an *aition* from Dionysus’

¹⁶⁷ Transl. Edmonds 2013a: 418.

¹⁶⁸ Accorinti 2016b: 23-4.

palpitating heart, which she safeguards. This aetiology is also attested in Proclus' Neoplatonically inspired *Hymn to Athena* 14-24. Apollo's role in gathering Dionysus' dismembered limbs was likely a Platonic innovation,¹⁶⁹ and Plutarch interprets Dionysus' sparagmos and reconstitution as the cosmic procession from the One to the Many, since Apollo, read as *a-pollon*, 'Not Many,' is the principle that restores Unity.¹⁷⁰

As we have seen, these events are conspicuously absent from the early books of the *Dionysiaca*. The second incarnation of Dionysus is also conceived without inheriting any single body part or substance from his predecessor Zagreus. Later, however, Nonnus explicitly references the version preserved in Clement and Plutarch, when the Indian river Hydaspes beseeches Dionysus, saying: 'You were born from the heart of the first Dionysus' (ἀρχηγόνου γὰρ ἐκ κραδίας ἀνέτελλες ἀειδομένου Διονύσου, 24.48-9), a clear display of Nonnus' *variatio*, where he effectively rewrites his poem's internal narrative.¹⁷¹

Nonnus is clearly aware of this Middle Platonic version, but chooses to deliberately suppress it during Book 6, avoiding any suggestion of continuity of substance. This appears to reflect a shift in inquiry from Middle Platonic to Neoplatonic commentators. The roles of Apollo and Athena in restoring Dionysus to life are absent from the later Platonic accounts, with the exception of Proclus' *Hymn to Athena* (which represents more of a poetic enterprise than a serious philosophical treatise) and an oblique reference to the myth at *In Crat.* 109.20-1. This is presumably because Middle Platonic accounts placed emphasis on the corporeal body of Dionysus, and its reconstitution from sensible matter. Neoplatonists, on the other hand, considered matter to be the lowest ontological level of existence: a privation of form and quality, that, at least for Plotinus, could even be considered 'evil.'¹⁷² Neoplatonist accounts of

¹⁶⁹ Diodorus 3.62.6 (*OF* 301 K = *OF* 59iii B) credits Demeter with collecting his severed limbs, and claims that this version agrees with the Orphica (cf. Cornutus 30 = *OF* 39iv B).

¹⁷⁰ Edmonds 2011: 87. Cf. Plutarch, *de E* 388e.

¹⁷¹ García-Gasco 2011: 377 notes the rhetorical function of this passage, whereby the Hydaspes asserts the relationship between Zagreus and Bacchus as part of an appeal to the god's benevolence.

¹⁷² In Plotinus 1.8 and 2.4, matter is theorised as 'evil' or as 'negativity.' Elsewhere it is a kind of non-being, although it is still existent. It is utterly devoid of Form and quality. Rist 1961: 160 likens Plotinus' metaphysics to a descending series of numbers from infinity to zero, where the One is infinite, and matter is zero. Although zero is nothing, it is not non-existent.

the myth instead shift their focus onto the metaphysical analogy of the mirror, and the fate of the soul as opposed to the physical body.

Nonnus appears to mirror the concerns of the Neoplatonists, and as a result there is no bodily or corporeal connection between Zagreus and Dionysus in the *Dionysiaca*, with the sole exception of the Hydaspes' comment much later in Book 24. The Hydaspes' comment cannot be taken as authoritative, as the river god is just one of several characters that attempts to conceptualise the relationship between Zagreus and Dionysus, and collectively these attempts appear to enter into contradiction. Elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca*, their relationship is explained in terms of 'succession', 'family', and 'mimesis'.

In terms of succession, Zagreus is described as 'the first Dionysus,' (10.294; cf. also Ζαγρῆι παλαιότερω, 39.72); The second incarnation, the son of Zeus and Semele, is therefore conceived as 'a new Dionysus' (νέον Διόνυσον, 5.562). In Book 47, the Euan chant of Zagreus is performed for Dionysus (47.65), and an Athenian Bacchant lights two torches for the god, one for each incarnation (47.28-9), further underscoring the connections between the two. Dionysus also navigates his own relationship with Zagreus in his address to Selene-Persephone, where he calls Zagreus his ancient namesake (ὄφρα γεραίρης ἀρχεγόνου Ζαγρῆος ἐπωνυμίην Διονύσου, 44.212-3).

Hera, however, exploits the general uncertainty surrounding Zagreus' and Dionysus' relationship for her own polemical purposes, and stresses the differences between the two incarnations in her speech to Persephone (31.33-6, and 44-8):

οὐ Σεμέλην ἐνόησας ἔσω ναίουσαν Ὀλύμπου.
 δείδια, μὴ Διόνυσον, ὃν ἀνδρομέη τέκε γαστήρ,
 ἀστεροπὴν κρατέοντα μετὰ Ζαγρῆα νοήσω 35
 ἢ χθονίαις παλάμησιν ἐλαφρίζοντα κεραυνούς.

You have not seen Semele at home on Olympus.
 I fear that I may see Dionysus, born of a mortal womb,
 master the lightning after Zagreus,
 or lifting thunderbolts with earth-born hands.

οὐδέ οἱ ἐχραίσμησεν ἐμὸς πόσις οὐράνιος Ζεὺς,
 ἀλλὰ τόκον Σεμέλης φλογερῶν ἐρρύσατο πυρσῶν, 45
 καὶ βρέφος εἰσέτι Βάκχον ἀνεζώγρησε κεραυνοῦ,
 ἡμιτελῆ νόθον υἱᾶ· δαΐζομένου δὲ μαχαίραις
 Ζαγρέος οὐ προμάχιζεν ἐπουρανίου Διονύσου.

Nor did my husband, heavenly Zeus, help [Ares],
 but he rescued Semele's son from the blazing fire,
 and saved baby Bacchus from the thunderbolt,
 his bastard son, half-finished. But he would not defend
 heavenly Zagreus when he was cut up with knives. (44-48)

Hera's speech convinces Persephone to send her Furies against Dionysus. Nonnus, however, casts Hera's speech in unfavourable terms. Her speech is 'mind-bewitching' (δολόφρονι, 31), and her plan is a 'crafty trick' or 'artifice' (δολίη τινὶ τέχνῃ, 28). In the end, Persephone's mind is disturbed by Hera's fake tears and deceitful prattling (δάκρυσι ποιητοῖσι διαινομένοιο προσώπου, αἰμύλα κωτίλλουσα, 71-2). This patently suggests that Hera's attempt to contrast the two Dionysoi, Zagreus and Bacchus, is misleading. However, in Book 10, Dionysus himself recognises the differences and inequities between himself and his predecessor, when he complains that Zeus gave lightning to Zagreus, but will not return his beloved Ampelus to life (10. 292-320).

In Book 44, the two gods appear as potentially separate entities, related by a familial bond (44.255-7):

τόφρα δὲ καὶ Ζαγρῆι χαρίζομένη Διονύσῳ
 Περσεφόνη θώρηξεν Ἑρινύας, ἀχνυμένῳ δὲ
 ὀψιγόνῳ χραίσμησε κασιγνήτῳ Διονύσῳ.

And even then Persephone was arming her Furies
 for the sake of Dionysus Zagreus, and
 defended the grieving Dionysus, his later born brother.

The adjective κασίγνητος, when used substantively as a noun, can mean brother or sister, or more generally cousin, and its use here seems to suggest a familial tie between

Zagreus and Dionysus, likely via Zeus, their shared father. It seems clear, however, that this passage should not be interpreted as a sign that there are two coexistent gods, with Zagreus in the underworld and Dionysus in the land of the living. Zagreus appears nowhere else in the poem as a current figure after his death in Book 6. He is firmly located in the past in the poem's internal chronology, and any honours that were bestowed upon him in life and in death are transferred to his new incarnation. Persephone's actions, therefore, appear motivated by a desire to honour Zagreus' memory.

In Book 5, the relationship between Dionysus and Zagreus is expressed in terms of mimesis: the Bacchic Dionysus is explicitly described as 'a bull-shaped copy of the older' (ταυροφυῆς μίμημα παλαιγενέος Διονύσου, 5.564). Zagreus also acts as an exemplum and a cautionary tale for Dionysus. In Book 38, Hermes tells Dionysus the story of Phaethon, who rode in his father's chariot of the sun, and lost his life as a result. Hermes warns Dionysus not to follow Phaethon in longing for his father's domain, suggesting that if Dionysus should claim the thunderbolt of Zeus, he might share in Zagreus' fate.

In Book 7, Zeus impregnates Dionysus' mother Semele whilst imitating Dionysus' appearance, even though he is yet to be born (7.319-21):

πῇ μὲν ὑπὲρ λεχέων βοέην μυκώμενος ἤχῳ,
 ἀνδρομέοις μελέεσσιν ἔχων κερόεσσαν ὀπωπὴν,
 ἰσοφυῆς μίμημα βοοκράϊρου Διονύσου

And Zeus leaned over the bed, lowing with the voice of a bull,
 with a horned head on human limbs,
 the very likeness of bull-horned Dionysus

The term μίμημα is especially common in Nonnus. Like μίμησις, a key term in discussing Nonnus' poetry, it is derived from μῖμος.¹⁷³ If μίμησις is the action of imitation, representation, or reproduction, then μίμημα is the result of mimetic action.¹⁷⁴ The term was used rather broadly, extending to all manner of artistic production, including

¹⁷³ Gebauer & Wulf 1995: 27.

¹⁷⁴ Gebauer & Wulf 1995: 27.

sculpture, painting, and poetry. Here, μίμημα (imitation, copy) and ἰσοφυής (like in character)¹⁷⁵ indicate that Zeus has undergone or undertaken a process of imitation, resulting in a mimetic appearance that in some way imitates that of Dionysus. The confluence of vocabulary here is intriguing. Nonnus uses μίμημα to describe Zeus' appearance with respect to Dionysus, and at 5.564 to describe the relationship between Dionysus and Zagreus. This suggests that the bull-headed appearance of Dionysus is a divine aspect that can be assumed, either on a permanent basis, or as a fleeting divine appearance. This is paralleled by numerous occasions where the gods imitate and disguise themselves as one another, as with Hermes, who in Book 9 assumes the μορφή (141) and the εἶδος (157) of Phanes in order to smuggle the infant Dionysus past Hera to Mount Ida.

While mimesis offers an explanation for Zagreus' and Dionysus' physical similarities, as a framework it fails to encapsulate their differences. Most notably, the Bacchic Dionysus appears to possess his own determinant role. When Kronos foretells the birth of Bacchus to Zeus, he says that the primeval world will suffer until Zeus delivers a child (7.78-9), the bringer of a glorious gift (ἀγλαόδωρος, 85) that will heal pain (ἀκεσσίπνονος, 86): Dionysus' gift of wine. The child will become the protector of the human race (ἀνδρομέης Διόνυσον ἀλεξητῆρα γενέθλης, 96), but will have to earn his throne on Mount Olympus, where he will have equal honour with the other gods (103). This prophecy contrasts sharply with Zagreus, who inherits Zeus' thunderbolts and climbs upon Zeus' throne while still a child. Although Zagreus is a precursor to the Bacchic Dionysus, he otherwise has no association with the vine or with the alleviation of mankind's sufferings. The two incarnations are ultimately different in genealogy, function, and history.¹⁷⁶

In addition to Zagreus, Nonnus mentions two other Dionysoi. Firstly, there is Osiris, the 'Egyptian Dionysus' (Αἰγυπτίου Διονύσου, 4.269-70), whose Euian rites and mystic arts are learnt by Cadmus over the course of his wanderings in Egypt. There is also Iacchus, the 'third, late-born Bacchus' (ὀψιγόνου τριτάτοιο Κυβηλίδα μητέρα Βάκχου, 1.27), who also happens to be Dionysus' son, born in Book 48 at the culmination

¹⁷⁵ LSJ - ἰσοφυής: 'of equal growth, i.e. symmetrical.'

¹⁷⁶ García-Gasco 2011: 369.

of the poem. Despite this, Iacchus also appears in Book 31 as the 'Eleusinian Dionysus,' a separate and pre-existing god (31.66-9):

Let not Athens sing hymns to a new Dionysus,
let him not have equal honour with Eleusinian Dionysus,
let him not take over the rites of Iacchus who was there first,
let not his vintage dishonour Demeter's basket

Rather than an inconsistency, this passage appears to be another example of Nonnian *poikilia*, where the poem varies itself in its own telling. At the end of the poem these three Dionysoi – Zagreus, Dionysus and Iacchus – are celebrated by the Athenians in a triad. Collectively, these multiform identities and aspects of Dionysus evoke syncretic confluences of gods and goddesses, such as Selene-Hecate-Artemis-Persephone. However, unlike Zagreus-Dionysus-Iacchus, these goddesses have no temporal priority within myth and coexist simultaneously.

A triad of Zagreus-Dionysus-Iacchus would no doubt have provoked comparisons with Christian Trinitarian beliefs and the proliferation of triadic schemas in Neoplatonic theology and metaphysics. Plotinus had envisaged a triadic metaphysical system of the One, Intellect, and Soul, in which Intellect was identified with the Platonic Demiurge. Later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus introduced a triplicate Demiurge which served as the third monad in a seventh, purely intellectual triad, occupying a space between the created world and what he believed to be three triads of intelligible-intellectual gods and three triads of intelligible gods. Such triadic structures within the second hypostasis were also integral to the *Chaldean Oracles*, which were frequently quoted by Proclus and Damascius to support their own metaphysical schemas.¹⁷⁷ For illustration, I have quoted Van Den Berg's excellent tabulation showing Proclus' schema of the gods (Fig. 1).¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Rappe 2007: 140.

¹⁷⁸ Van Den Berg 2001: 40.

Figure 1: Proclus' Schema of the Gods (in Van den Berg 2001: 40)

I. The One II. The Henads III. Being: the nine noetic gods IV. Life: the nine noetic-and-noeric gods V. Nous: the noeric gods	• Pure Nous (Kronos) • Noeric Life (Rhea) • Demiurgical Nous (Zeus) Monad, which separates these gods from the lower ones. Triad of Kouretes
VI. The Hypercosmic Gods (also known as Leader-Gods)	Demiurgical triad (Zeus): • Zeus • Poseidon • Pluto Life-making triad (Kore): • Artemis = Hecate • Persephone • Athena Elevating triad: Apollo = Helios immaculate triad: Corybantes
VII. The Hyper-Encosmic Gods	Demiurgical gods: • Zeus • Poseidon • Hephaestus Guardian gods: • Hestia • Athena • Ares Life-making gods: • Demeter • Hera • Artemis Elevating gods: • Hermes • Aphrodite • Apollo
VIII. The Encosmic gods	
IX. Lower Gods (not discussed in the <i>Theol. Plat.</i>)	

Proclus' *Platonic Theology* provides a basic structure for his theology. As Rappe shows, this involves a production of a series of monads (unities made up of pluralities, each of them a 'One-Many') where each one replicates itself so that its individual members reflect the contents of the entire structure. The effect becomes that of a hall of mirrors. Proclus envisions a triadic structure of Being, Life (or Power), and Mind, that together comprise the second hypostasis, the Intellect that is born from the overflowing of the One in its contemplation of itself.¹⁷⁹

These levels proliferate exponentially in their infrastructure, with the triads exploding into nine, twenty-seven, seventy-two, over one hundred, and, finally, indefinitely many members. Within each successive level, the prior levels repeat themselves by mirroring the basic structure of definite, indefinite, and mixed. This triad reappears in subsequent levels of reality as the paternal, the generative, and perfective orders. Since lower orders are not capable of receiving or reflecting the entire content of the prior orders, each order distinguishes itself as a partial reflection of its cause. At the same time, this rule ensures that there are indefinitely many reflections of every member of the intelligible order and that each one reflects the contents of all the other members.¹⁸⁰

Within the second hypostasis, Proclus, following his mentor Syrianus, envisioned a Demiurge at the lowest limit of the intellectual gods, who both possesses the Intelligibles and extends his creative power to generate the world of souls and ensouled matter (*In Crat.* 148.17-25):

The primal Zeus, because he is the Demiurge of the whole universe, is King at the first, middle and last order. It is of him that Socrates was just saying (396A-B) that he is both Ruler and King of all and that through him there is life and salvation for all. For what stands at the head of everything refers to Zeus before the three. But the Zeus who is ruling principle and a coordinate number of the three sons of Kronos administers the third part of the whole universe, according to the principle that "all things are distributed three ways" (*Il.* 15.189). He is the highest of the three, synonymous with the fontal Zeus, unified with him, and called by the single name Zeus; the second is given two titles, "Zeus of the sea" and "Poseidon"; and the third has three titles, "Zeus of the

¹⁷⁹ Rappe 2007: 185.

¹⁸⁰ Rappe 2007: 185.

underworld”, “Pluto” and “Hades”. The first preserves, creates and engenders life at the highest level; the second performs the same functions at the second order; and the third, with third order creatures. This is why the third is said to abduct Core, in order to animate with her the lower limits of the universe.¹⁸¹

Proclus’ demiurge is therefore both a demiurgic monad, and a demiurgic triad. The triad of demiurgic gods, Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, emanates from the one universal Zeus. The role of the Father within the triad is fulfilled by Zeus, and because of his unity with the universal demiurge, he acquires his name from it (*In Crat.* 150.1-15):

Of the demiurgic triad which divides up all the cosmos and distributes the indivisible, single and universal creation of the primal Zeus, the aspect which is highest and fulfils the role of Father is Zeus, who by reason of his unity with the universal demiurgic Intellect acquired the same name as it, and for this reason has now (402D) been passed over by Plato. Poseidon, however, has been allotted the median aspect, which binds together the two extremes, and while he is filled from the essence of Zeus he himself fills Pluto. For Zeus is the Father of this whole triad, Poseidon is its power and Pluto its intellect - all aspects existing in all, of course, but each one taking on a particular essential characteristic, for Zeus subsists in accordance with being, Poseidon with power, and Pluto with intellect; and yet they are all causes of the life of all creatures, but the one is so in being, the other by life itself, and the other intellectually (νοερῶς).¹⁸²

García-Gasco argues that the inclusion of Iacchus and the completion of the triad would have ‘superficially’ echoed Neoplatonic ideas and the Christian Trinity,¹⁸³ and that the difficulty in establishing the limits between the different components of Nonnus’ triad, can ‘only be, in my opinion, a reflection of the syncretism common of the [sic] Late Antiquity.’¹⁸⁴ However, I argue that these difficulties also reflect Neoplatonic triadic schemas. The example from Proclus’ *In. Crat.* shows a clear precedence for triads governed by monads that, at least nominally, participate within them. Extrapolated onto the *Dionysiaca*, this would give us a triad of Zagreus-Dionysus-Iacchus, governed

¹⁸¹ Transl. Duvick 2007: 84.

¹⁸² Transl. Duvick 2007: 85.

¹⁸³ García-Gasco 2011: 378.

¹⁸⁴ García-Gasco 2011: 378-9.

under the monad of Dionysus. Each participant partakes in the monad according to the Platonic idea of participation (μέθεξις), a term that implies plurality, similarity, relation, and asymmetry all at once,¹⁸⁵ and was used by Plato to account for the unity among things, and to give expression to the way in which many things can warrant the same name (cf. *Rep.* 10.596a6-7, *Phd.* 100b-d). Through participation, each god depends in some way for their being upon a hierarchical emanation from their monad, or the 'idea' of Dionysus, and all participate within one another. This makes Dionysus a One and a Many.

This is not to argue that Nonnus created his triadic structure to perfectly emulate Proclus' demiurgic triad. Dionysus is already a member of his own triad in Proclus' thought. As the head of the encosmic series of gods, Dionysus exists in a triad with the nymph-goddess Hipta (who represents the cosmic Soul), and Nature (consisting of the four elements which constitute the divine body).¹⁸⁶ Instead, Nonnus' Zagreus-Dionysus-Iacchus triad appears to be a loose reflection of the monadic-triadic structures found within Proclus' conception of the second hypostasis. Just as Zeus the Father takes his name from Zeus the monad, and is distinguished from the other Zeus gods (Poseidon and Pluto), Dionysus is one of several Dionysoi (Zagreus and Iacchus), and takes his name from the monad Dionysus. He is in many ways the supreme and highest of the Dionysoi. The fact that Nonnus' epic celebrates him as its subject and patron god testifies to this. His gift of wine also alleviates the sufferings of mankind, further elevating him compared to his counterparts.

From the Christian tradition, there are clear parallels to the Trinity. The 4th-century Roman philosopher and grammarian Victorinus was heavily inspired by Neoplatonic hypostases in his Trinitarian theology. He was particularly interested in the relationship between the One and Intellect, and how Platonic thinking could be used to support the Nicene creed of the Trinity, which conceived of the Father and the Son consubstantial (*homoousios*). By mapping the Trinity onto Neoplatonic hypostases, Victorinus identified the Father as the One, the Son as Intellect, and the Holy Spirit as Life, where all three are of one substance, and each is implied in the other and yet can

¹⁸⁵ Schindler 2005: 1.

¹⁸⁶ Brisson 1995: 67; Chlup 2012: 127; Meisner 2019: 262-3.

manifest individually.¹⁸⁷ The idea of Christ as Intellect had its origins in the thinking of Philo of Alexandria, the 1st-century CE Hellenic-Jewish philosopher, who identified the Platonic Demiurge as the Logos, an image of god and his firstborn son. The Logos would be inextricably linked with Christ in the Gospel of John, and Victorinus would later posit that 'the Logos is the Consubstantial Son because in Him, through Him, for Him are all things' (*Against Arius* 3a).¹⁸⁸

According to Victorinus, the Logos is a receptacle and holder of ideas, a role not too dissimilar from the conception of Proteus as a being who incorporates all the forms of the world (Iambl. *Theol. Arith.* 7.20-23, Procl. *In Remp.* 1.112.28-9). Given that Nonnus directly modelled Zagreus on Proteus, Zagreus could be interpreted as a surrogate for the Pharian god in this regard. Philo affirmed that the Logos held no autonomous power, and instead could only use the powers which had been entrusted to it by the Father. This can be mirrored by Zagreus, who receives the thunderbolts of his father Zeus, but holds no autonomous power of his own. The analogy can only run so far, but it does demonstrate Nonnus' awareness of and an engagement with Trinitarian and Neoplatonic triadic schemas. My tentative suggestion is that, given the multiform continuity between Zagreus-Dionysus-Iacchus (successive, familial, and mimetic), Nonnus intends us to understand the three Dionysoi as consubstantial in three hypostases; a hypostatic union of three gods governed under the monad of Dionysus.

1.7 Conclusion

Established in its intellectual context, Book 6 offers us a perfect case study for Nonnus' engagement with Neoplatonic material. Neoplatonic allegories provided a rich repository for obscure Dionysiac myth. A survey of the evidence, however, shows that Nonnus followed the commentaries of Plotinus and Proclus quite closely, in the elements he selected and emphasised, and the elements which he diminished. He deliberately eschews the version presented by Clement and the Middle Platonists, which focuses on the continuity of matter between Dionysus and his reincarnation.

¹⁸⁷ Smith 2004: 110.

¹⁸⁸ Translation by Clark 2010: 147.

Instead, his Zagreus undergoes a figurative revival, distinguished from the spiritual revival of Lazarus and the bodily revival of Tylus.

Prevalent themes in Neoplatonic commentaries – the insubstantiality of the reflection and its imitative quality, and the indivisible nature of the soul – are diminished in Nonnus' account but relocated elsewhere, to the preceding book with the dismemberment of Actaeon and the mirror of Persephone. In effect, Nonnus has already provided his audience with the interpretive tools required to understand and interpret the Zagreus episode in its Neoplatonic context. As we shall see in Chapter 2, these tools will serve the reader well throughout the *Dionysiaca*, given its obsession with mimesis, and the ontology, epistemology, and ethics of representation.

Nonnus' own innovations – particularly Zagreus' dizzying sequence of metamorphoses – appear at first glance to be novel embellishments, but are actually a work of literary fusion. The cosmogonic allegories of the Orphic Dionysus and Proteus, which are so similar in their interpretation, combine and are subsumed into the character of Zagreus. The process of division and god's flurry of metamorphoses manages to suggest the process at the heart of many of the Neoplatonic commentaries: the division of the cosmic or material intellect and the dispersal of matter. That these events occur in such a cosmically charged book – which features an astrological divination, a conflagration, a flood, and a figurative rebirth for humankind and human civilisation – only heightens their cosmic significance.

Zagreus' uncertain rebirth and relationship with his younger incarnation leaves some lingering questions. However, I believe that the availability and indeed proliferation of theological triadic schemas in Late Antiquity will have no doubt influenced Nonnus' own Zagreus-Dionysus-Iacchus triad, and the three Dionysoi have a close model in Proclus' conception of the demiurgic triad of Zeus-Poseidon-Pluto.

2. Neoplatonic Aesthetics: Mimesis and Metamorphosis

The relationship between literature and the visual arts has been central to our understanding of Late Antique literature for some time now. Late Antiquity in general has also been noted for the increasing importance of materiality, which can be seen through shifts in intellectualism, religion, and even political history.¹⁸⁹ Materiality is especially prevalent in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, a multiform poem that offers a rich and colourful tapestry of sensation and visuality.

Recent scholarly trends have come to accept that literary output from the 3rd to 6th centuries CE as based on its own aesthetic principles and cultural context. Studies of the *Dionysiaca* and its own visual aesthetics have elucidated Nonnus' style, including elements such as chromatism, insistence on light and colour, fragmentation of focus, miniaturisation, and the brilliance of individual units over the organic whole.¹⁹⁰ Our study of Late Antique literature in general has also been reshaped by our developing understanding of ekphrasis and its rhetorical principles.¹⁹¹ Analyses of the *Dionysiaca*'s ekphrases have shown how Nonnus was particularly inspired by the visual culture of Late Antiquity, and by the audience's experience of artistic beauty through sense-perception. This effect has been likened by Faber to synaesthesia: the commingling of perceptions as literature sought to appeal more broadly to the five senses.¹⁹²

It is this aesthetic sensibility and appeal to sense-perception that has invited comparison to Neoplatonic ideas of beauty and *eikasia* (εἰκασία, 'imagination'), the lowest stage of 'knowing' in Plato's analogy of the divided line. Although the study of aesthetics crystallised with the term's coining in the early modern period with

¹⁸⁹ Elsner 2002; Liebeschuetz 2004; Bravi 2015.

¹⁹⁰ Agosti 2014: 157.

¹⁹¹ Agosti 2014: 141.

¹⁹² Faber 2016: 443.

Baumgarten, it now represents a philosophy of art whose precursors in the Western tradition can be found as far back as Plato and his theorisation of art as mimesis.¹⁹³

It was not until the Imperial and Late Antique periods that mimesis would emerge as a fully-fledged framework for understanding the universe, from the world of transcendent Forms to their sensible images in matter. As Halliwell says, 'the mimetic theories of Neoplatonism, above all those of Plotinus in the third century and Proclus in the fifth, deserve to count as the most radical and important developments in the ancient mimeticist tradition after the foundational work of both Plato and Aristotle.'¹⁹⁴ Mimesis would remain, through all its variations, the most enduring and 'intellectually accommodating' of all theories of art in the West,¹⁹⁵ and would only wane in importance during the Byzantine period, when art shifted from mimetic representation to the abstract and symbolic, which depended on transcendent reality and attempts to convey hidden and divine meaning.¹⁹⁶

As Hernández de la Fuente notes, the *Dionysiaca* features an impressive catalogue of mimetic vocabulary that engages with this cultural and philosophical context: τύπος (114), εἰκών (34), ἰνδαλμα (28), φάσμα (15), μίμημα (46).¹⁹⁷ To this list, I would add ἀντίτυπος (63), μιμηλός (54), and μιμέομαι (29). Nonnus' use of these terms has yet to be fully contextualised within his intellectual context. As a theory, mimesis raises complex concerns regarding ontology: from where do representations and images derive their being? How is this being manifested in relation to originals and archetypes? Mimesis also introduces epistemological issues. How do we distinguish between original and reproduction, between true and false, authentic and imposter?

Such issues inevitably introduced an ethical dimension, and the question over the ethics of representation and symbolism in art accordingly pervade the writings of Neoplatonists like Plotinus and Proclus. The same questions troubled early Christian

¹⁹³ Halliwell 2002: 13: 'No greater obstacle now stands in the way of a sophisticated understanding of all the varieties of mimeticism, both ancient and modern, than the negative associations that tend to color the still regrettably standard translation of mimesis as "imitation," or its equivalent in any other modern language.' For this reason, I have opted to use mimesis as a technical term without translation.

¹⁹⁴ Halliwell 2002: 313.

¹⁹⁵ Halliwell 2002: 5-6.

¹⁹⁶ Schibille 2014; Elsner 1995, chapter 3; Koortbojian 2005.

¹⁹⁷ Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 244.

writers such as Paul, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ps-Dionysius the Areopagite. Against this intellectual backdrop, it is perhaps no surprise to see that Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* at times wrestles, and at other times plays, with conundrums of authenticity and imitation.

This chapter will evaluate the importance of mimesis to Nonnus' Dionysiac aesthetics. This will include a basic statistical survey of key terms across the *Dionysiaca* and other epic poems, both in the preceding epic tradition, and in poems that were either contemporaneous with, or postdate Nonnus. This survey will include Nonnus' *Paraphrase*. Results will show that even though Nonnus uses many of these mimetic terms in the *Paraphrase*, he does so with less frequency, suggesting that Nonnus consciously adapted his language for the *Dionysiaca*'s composition. Results also show that Nonnus' use of mimetic language has no precedent in the epic tradition, nor does his use of mimetic themes and language appear to have influenced those who wrote after him. By contrast, it is perhaps no surprise that these terms and themes appear frequently in Late Antique philosophical and theological prose. Results suggest that the closest poetic parallel can be found in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Carmina*.

Statistical surveys can reveal trends, but do little to contextualise mimetic vocabulary within its intellectual milieu, or to show how Nonnus engages with such vocabulary. To this end, this chapter will also attempt to carve out a brief intellectual history for these terms to set them in their Late Antique context, and assess how Nonnus' audience might have engaged with such vocabulary. The final part of this chapter will turn from mimesis to metamorphosis, and demonstrate how both themes display Neoplatonic influences. As we shall see, the two themes are inextricably linked, as both pose similar quandaries over epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics.

2.1. Mimesis: A Statistical Survey

Before the results of the survey, there are a number of important caveats. First and foremost, a survey is only as representative as its sample. I have chosen to compare Nonnus to several different corpora, based on theme, genre, metre, chronology, and the ease of presenting the information. These corpora are 1) the preceding epic tradition; 2) the 'Nonnian School'; 3) other poems and hexameters from the Imperial

and Late Antique periods (including hymnic and oracular poetry); 4) philosophical and theological prose. These individual corpora are obviously only representative of literature that survives, and not of literature that Nonnus and his audience may have had access to. Many hexameter poems have been lost, including the majority of the epic cycle. Perhaps more pertinent for Nonnus is the loss of poems such as the 2nd-century CE *Bassarica* by Dionysius, the earliest known poem on Dionysus' conquest of India, which survives only in fragments.

The survey also includes a finite number of terms, which have an explicit (but not universal) mimetic dimension. That Nonnus is using these items of vocabulary within their mimetic semantics will be argued in the subsequent, more micro-level analyses. To select which terms would be surveyed, I have used both Hernández de la Fuente's 2014 chapter on Neoplatonic form and content, and Newbold's 2010 article on mimesis and illusion, as starting points.¹⁹⁸

A further caveat lies in the development of the Greek language. Although Nonnus is a learned student of Homer, their respective poems are separated by more than a millennium. It goes without saying that many of the terms discussed in this survey would have changed in meaning and semantic range over time, with definitions almost in a state of flux as they are used, abandoned, redefined, and re-contextualised over time. Nonnus uses some terms that were invented or coined long after texts in the surveyed corpus were written, making their absence a matter of course. Even so, diachronic statistical analyses such as these can still be indicative of trends, and form the basis for more extensive contextual inquiry.

Finally, it is important to note that mimesis can come in many forms. Halliwell distinguishes between five basic categories:¹⁹⁹

1. Visual resemblance (including figurative works of art)
2. Behavioural imitation/emulation
3. Impersonation (including dramatic enactment)
4. Musical or vocal production of significant or expressive structures of sound

¹⁹⁸ Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 244; Newbold 2010: 90.

¹⁹⁹ Halliwell 2002: 15.

5. Metaphysical conformity

The common thread running through these five categories is ‘an idea of correspondence or equivalence-correspondence between mimetic works, activities, or performances and their putative real-world equivalents.’²⁰⁰ It is important to note, however, that these categories are not exclusive. One may imply another; for instance, metaphysical conformity, like the relationship between the material cosmos, its creator, and its intelligible model, could be likened to a painting, a painter, and its subject (cf. Plato, *Tim.* 55c).

Nonnus includes examples of each type in the *Dionysiaca*: e.g., the visual resemblance of a statue at (4.102-5); the Satyrs’ behavioural imitation of Dionysus at the winepress (12.351-62); the dramatic enactment of myth in Maron and Silenus’ mime contest (19.198-294); and the vocal production of birds, half-mimicking a human war cry (12.45-6). The final category, metaphysical conformity, will form the basis for enquiry in the second part of this chapter. Halliwell’s categories do illustrate, however, that even a limited selection of terms can appear throughout the poem in extremely different contexts.

With these caveats in mind, we can see that a simple frequency analysis of Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* compared to the preceding Greek epic tradition has stark results:

²⁰⁰ Halliwell 2002: 15.

Figure 2: Frequency analysis of mimetic vocabulary in Nonnus and the preceding epic tradition

	<i>Iliad</i>	<i>Odyssey</i>	<i>Argonautica</i>	<i>Posthomerica</i>	<i>Triphiodorus</i>	<i>Dionysiaca</i>	<i>Paraphrase</i>
εἰκῶν, -όνος, ἡ	0	0	0	0	1	34	1
τύπος, -ου, ὁ	0	0	0	0	0	114	7
ἀντίτυπος, -ον	0	0	0	0	1	63	11
μίμημα, -ματος, τό	0	0	0	0	0	46	12
μιμηλός, -ή, -όν	0	0	0	0	0	54	1
μιμέομαι	0	0	0	0	0	29	2
φάσμα, -ματος, τό	0	0	0	0	0	15	0
ἰνδαλμα, -ματος, τό	0	0	0	0	0	28	0
εἶδωλον, -ου, τό	4	9	2	1	0	5	0

With the exception of εἶδωλον, which appears throughout the corpus with a uniquely high frequency in the *Odyssey*, the other terms are not attested at all until Nonnus and his Panopolitan countryman Triphiodorus, in the 3rd or 4th centuries CE. Many of these terms were in circulation at least as early as the 5th century BCE, and several were introduced as philosophical *termini technici* by Plato. This suggests that, at least from a vocabulary perspective, Nonnus is innovating compared to his epic predecessors.

The use of this vocabulary does not appear to be a staple of Nonnus' style. These mimetic terms are statistically more prevalent in the *Dionysiaca* compared to the *Paraphrase*. We can see this by adjusting the figures based on the size of the *Dionysiaca* in proportion to the *Paraphrase*. The *Dionysiaca* contains 127,745 words. The *Paraphrase* contains 22,761 words. By dividing these two figures, we can ascertain that the *Dionysiaca* is approximately 5.61 times the size of the *Paraphrase*. If we divide the word frequencies from the *Dionysiaca* by this figure, we can calculate on average, the expected number of times these words would appear per length of the *Paraphrase*:

Figure 3: Mimetic vocabulary in the *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* (adjusted)

εἰκῶν, -όνος, ἡ	6.06	1
τύπος, -ου, ὁ	20.31	7
ἀντίτυπος, -ον	11.23	11
μίμημα, -ματος, τό	8.20	12
μιμηλός, -ή, -όν	9.62	1
μιμέομαι	5.17	2
φάσμα, -ματος, τό	2.67	0
ἄγαλμα, -ματος, τό	3.03	0
ἱνδαλμα, -ματος, τό	4.99	0
εἶδωλον, -ου, τό	0.89	0

As we can see, adjusting for relative length shows that Nonnus uses these terms more frequently on average in the *Dionysiaca* than in the *Paraphrase*. This is perhaps not unexpected. After all, the theme of mimesis lends itself more readily to the *Dionysiaca*'s changeable world with its metamorphosing mortals, allophanic gods, and its patron shapeshifters. It does demonstrate, however, that far from being an immutable feature of Nonnus' style, his use of these terms is conscious and meditated. We can compare these results against those derived from subsequent hexameter poets, including those traditionally identified as part of the 'Nonnian School':

Figure 4: Frequency analysis of mimetic vocabulary in Nonnus and the 'Nonnian School'

	<i>Dionysiaca</i>	<i>Paraphrase</i>	<i>Pamphilius</i>	<i>Christodorus</i>	<i>Colluthus</i>	<i>Musaeus</i>	<i>Paul the Silentiary</i>	<i>John of Gaza</i>
Total Word Count	127,745	22,761	1,575	2,755	2,334	2,176	8,140	5,223
εἰκῶν, -όνος, ἡ	34	1	0	0	0	0	2	4
τύπος, -ου, ὁ	114	7	0	5	0	0	6	4
ἀντίτυπος, -ον	63	11	0	0	0	0	1	0
μίμημα, -ματος, τό	46	12	0	0	0	0	0	1
μιμηλός, -ή, -όν	54	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
μιμέομαι	29	2	0	0	0	0	2	0
φάσμα, -ματος, τό	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ἱνδαλμα, -ματος, τό	28	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
εἶδωλον, -ου, τό	5	0	0	0	0	0	2	0

As we can see, this adoption of mimetic vocabulary does not appear to have been continued subsequent hexameter poets, with the exception of Paul the Silentiary and John of Gaza. We cannot, however, draw too many close comparisons in this manner. The *Dionysiaca* is the longest extant poem from antiquity, and Nonnus outstrips all of these poets in terms of extant material. In the case of poets like Pamprepicus, we have only have fragments. These frequencies, therefore, represent only a small sample of a poet's total output, and are not necessarily representative in most cases. Furthermore, adjusting the results based on the relative size of the poems in the corpus is inadvisable. With such little material, single and potentially anomalous occurrences of a word are likely to carry far greater weight in any average than they otherwise should. The frequencies in Paul the Silentiary and John of Gaza, however, offer compelling parallels given their poems' relative lengths and repeated occurrences of mimetic vocabulary: 8,140 (Paul the Silentiary) and 5,223 words (John of Gaza).

Aside from these corpora, we can also compare against other poems from the Imperial and Late Antique periods. I selected hexameters and poems with different metres from a variety of sources:

Figure 5: Frequency analysis of mimetic vocabulary in Nonnus and Imperial and Late Antique verse

	<i>Dionysiaca</i>	<i>Paraphrase</i>	<i>Chaldean Oracles</i>	Gregory of Nazianus' <i>Carmina</i>	Synesius' <i>Hymns</i>	Eudocia's <i>De martyrio sancti Cypriani</i>	Proclus' <i>Hymns</i>	<i>Argonautica</i> of Ps-Orpheus	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>
Total Word Count	127,745	22,761	2,425	89,968	4,151	5,490	1,158	8,945	29,220
εἰκῶν, -όνος, ἡ	34	1	0	86	0	1	1	0	6
τύπος, -ου, ὁ	114	7	1	26	1	2	0	0	9
ἀντίτυπος, -ον	63	11	0	2	0	0	0	0	3
μίμημα, -ματος, τό	46	12	1	1	0	1	0	0	4
μιμηλός, -ή, -όν	54	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
μιμέομαι	29	2	0	10	0	1	0	0	2
φάσμα, -ματος, τό	15	0	1	14	0	6	0	1	0
ἰνδαλμα, -ματος, τό	28	0	0	6	1	1	0	0	0
εἰδῶλον, -ου, τό	5	0	1	17	5	7	0	0	23

Nonnus' use of mimetic vocabulary has no comparison in the more immediately Neoplatonically influenced hymnic poetry of Proclus and Synesius. Likewise, there are few parallels in the 2nd-century CE *Chaldean Oracles*, despite their Middle Platonic

influences and their popularity amongst the Neoplatonists. Among oracular hexameters, the *Sibylline Oracles* offer a more compelling point of comparison. Although the oracles survive in an edition from the 6th or 7th century CE, many were in circulation throughout the Imperial period, and were popular amongst Christians due to their mutability and capacity for revision and embellishment.

Perhaps most notable in this corpus, however, are the 4th-century *Carmina* of Gregory of Nazianzus. The *Carmina* represent the most comparable text from Late Antiquity in terms of their overall size and show a similar level of mimetic vocabulary. Gregory of Nazianzus was considered a Church Father, and had had a significant impact on the development of Trinitarian theology. In the Byzantine period he would become the most widely imitated Christian author,²⁰¹ and there is a strong case to be made that his poems were part of the Byzantine school curriculum.²⁰² Gregory has in the past been labelled a 'Platonising Christian' or 'Christian Platonist' in an effort to classify his *incertus* use of Graeco-Roman imagery, as well as Platonic ideas and content in his Christological writings. Gregory's influence on Nonnus has also long been noted by scholars,²⁰³ and a comparative study on their use of mimesis as a theme might prove a worthy avenue for future research.

In addition to Gregory's *Carmina*, the mimetic vocabulary surveyed here appears frequently in his prose writings, as well as in the theological writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria, whose commentary on John's Gospel informed Nonnus' *Paraphrase*. The same vocabulary was used often by Plato, and by Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proclus:

²⁰¹ Mango 2002: 103.

²⁰² Simelidis 2009: 7.

²⁰³ Ludwig 1887: 233-6; Golega 1966: 9-11; D'Ippolito 1994; Simelidis 2016: 298-307.

Figure 6: Frequency analysis of mimetic vocabulary in Nonnus and philosophical and theological texts

	<i>Dionysiaca</i>	<i>Paraphrase</i>	Plato	Plotinus	Iamblichus	Proclus	Gregory of Nysa	Gregory of Nazianzus	Cyril of Alexandria
εἰκῶν, -όνος, ἡ	34	1	107	89	37	647	464	106	1011
τύπος, -ου, ὁ	114	7	43	70	24	119	120	56	1390
ἀντίτυπος, -ον	63	11	3	9	3	12	25	11	15
μίμημα, -ματος, τό	46	12	54	26	6	64	19	2	12
μιμηλός, -ή, -όν	54	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
μιμέομαι	29	2	155	49	14	438	131	64	74
φάσμα, -ματος, τό	15	0	6	0	4	29	5	6	8
ἰνδαλμα, -ματος, τό	28	0	0	22	1	26	2	7	3
εἰδῶλον, -ου, τό	5	0	60	125	32	160	84	27	438

As we can see, the selected items of mimetic vocabulary are widely attested in Platonic and Christian prose texts, with the exception of μιμηλός, which appears only sparingly before Nonnus, and never with the same level of frequency. This not only shows the intellectual context of the *Dionysiaca*, but the potential connotations and semantics which might have been understood by an educated Late Antique audience. It seems unlikely that Nonnus could have used this collection of mimetic terms without engaging in some way with the philosophical and theological issues of his time. Taken together, the results of this survey suggest that, at least within the sphere of epic poetry, Nonnus was consciously innovating, investing his Homeric inspired poetry with ideas drawn from his intellectual context.

2.2 Collocation

Many of the terms identified above possess broad semantic ranges. For instance, ἀντίτυπος can mean ‘counterpart’ when two things share common attributes, if not equivalence. It can also designate spatial relation, meaning ‘opposite’ or ‘corresponding.’ A high number of instances of a given word does not mean that that word is used uniformly or with an exclusive definition throughout a text. In linguistics, words are not defined solely by dictionary definition, but by the words around them.

On a macro-level, the use of words and meanings can be partially shown through analysis of collocation: series of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance. The table below shows the frequency of collocation of any two mimetic terms in an n -gram analysis (defined in computational linguistics and probability as a contiguous sequence of n items from a given sample of text or speech), where n is equal to 10:

Figure 7: Collocation of mimetic vocabulary in the *Dionysiaca*

	εἰκών, -όνος, ἢ	τύπος, -ου, ὁ	ἀντίτυπος, -ον	μίμημα, -ματος, τό	μιμηλός, -ή, -όν	μιμέομαι	φάσμα, -ματος, τό	ἵνδαλμα, -ματος, τό	εἴδωλον, -ου, τό
εἰκών, -όνος, ἢ		9	4	1	8	0	1	0	1
τύπος, -ου, ὁ	9		3	2	10	3	1	0	0
ἀντίτυπος, -ον	4	3		9	2	2	1	2	2
μίμημα, -ματος, τό	1	2	9		0	0	0	0	0
μιμηλός, -ή, -όν	8	10	2	0		2	2	2	0
μιμέομαι	0	3	2	0	2		0	0	0
φάσμα, -ματος, τό	1	1	1	0	2	0		0	1
ἵνδαλμα, -ματος, τό	0	0	2	0	2	0	0		0
εἴδωλον, -ου, τό	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	

This 10-gram analysis shows how many times words that potentially relate to mimesis appear within 10 words of each other.²⁰⁴ Multiple instances of collocation of two or more of these words would heavily imply that Nonnus is using them due to the shared semantic and thematic associations. As we can see, the surveyed terms are frequently collocated in the *Dionysiaca*, suggesting shared semantic associations. A similar survey across the so-called ‘Nonnian school’ and the preceding epic tradition is not useful, given the scarcity of even individual items of vocabulary. A general 10-gram analysis using the proximity function of the TLG shows that outside of Nonnus, these terms are frequently collocated in Platonic writings, such as those of Plato, Plutarch, Plotinus and Proclus, as well as Judaeo-Christian writers like Philo of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, Athanasius, and the Cappadocian Fathers.

2.3 The Aesthetics of Mimesis

Following on from the statistical analyses, this section will look at the *Dionysiaca*’s use of mimetic vocabulary on a more micro level to establish how far Nonnus’ treatment of mimesis is influenced by Neoplatonic writings. To date, Newbold’s 2010 article on mimesis and illusion remains the most comprehensive analysis of mimesis in the *Dionysiaca*. Newbold traces a link between mimesis and the prevalence of deception and falsehood throughout the poem, although he deals only sparingly with Neoplatonic and Christian material.

The link between mimesis and deception can be traced all the way back to Plato, who has typically been seen as the ‘founding father’ of mimeticism as a philosophical theory, although his attitude towards mimesis has perhaps been oversimplified by commentators until relatively recently.²⁰⁵ Early Christianity also maintained a deep

²⁰⁴ In computational linguistics, smaller contiguous sequences will often be used in *n*-gram analyses. I have used 10 to account for the flexible use of word order in Greek poetry in general.

²⁰⁵ Halliwell 2002: 41 notes the trends among modern commentators to highlight Plato’s ambivalence and even hostility towards mimesis and its capacity for visual reproduction and representation. In reality, Halliwell argues, his writings on the subject are far more complex, and are often difficult to condense into a single, unified point of view. Plato introduces the idea of mimesis in a wide range of

distrust of mimesis, and placed a spiritual premium on discerning authentic from imitation, truth from falsehood, and orthodoxy from heterodoxy and heresy. The consequences of disbelief or incorrect belief became more fraught in Late Antiquity against the backdrop of religious controversies, where salvation and the ascent of the soul depended upon being able to discern truth from falsehood, and good from the evil which could masquerade itself as otherwise.²⁰⁶

In this cultural context, early Christians often struggled with their cultural heritage; Late Antique literature had inherited numerous examples and models of metamorphosis, phantom apparitions, and allophanic deities looking to corrupt and mislead mortals. Early Christianity saw mimesis as a tool for metamorphic demons and fallen angels, who used shadowy dreams and hallucinations, or even sensual allure to deceive and manipulate the unwary, or to imprison the soul.²⁰⁷ Graeco-Roman myths, of the kind showcased in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, became emblematic to Christians of the peril and immorality of 'paganism,' with its fickle, deceptive gods characterised by human vices over divine virtue.

By the time of the 4th century CE, this early hostility towards religious imagery and iconography had mollified. Instead, religious imagery could inspire salvific imitation, ultimately opening a path to god.²⁰⁸ Neoplatonists following Plotinus had also expanded and developed mimesis into a foundational principle for the ongoing creation and maintenance of the material universe.

different contexts: epistemology, ethics, psychology, politics, and metaphysics, and applies it to musicopoetic and visual art forms, as well as other human practices, including philosophy itself.

²⁰⁶ Newbold 2010: 84.

²⁰⁷ Newbold 2010: 84. See also Reed 2004.

²⁰⁸ Newbold 2010: 84; Bravi 2015: 142: 'Iconophile priests were careful to balance the demands of theology and aesthetics. The artistic merit of ornaments, their being the result of great skills (ars, techne), was linked to the exemplary character of their subject matter. Both the form and the content of these artifacts enabled viewers to attain a deeper understanding of the reality represented (St. Nilos, Letters PG 79.577–580). The truth contained in the representations of martyrdoms created a set of beliefs to be cultivated in the minds of the devout and those not yet converted. The images depicted on walls and mosaics on the ceilings and floors of churches took on multiple functions and values: they exemplified the feats of saints and martyrs, they imparted Christian dogma, and they modeled Christian paideia for the illiterate masses. These images also built a common identity in harmony with the content of the sermons, which in turn guided new social practices and stressed the consensus between the charitable aristocracy, the middle classes, and the paupers.'

The theme of mimesis in Nonnus interfaces with this cultural context. Although Shorrock has noted the *Dionysiaca*'s Janus-like qualities with respect to its Christian and 'pagan' faces,²⁰⁹ Newbold captures another Janus-like quality, the poem's dualist approach to mimesis:

The paradox posed by Nonnus' poem is that, on the one hand, it is a paean to the sensate nature of Dionysism, is positive about the technological advances that empiricism enables, extols the virtuosity of mimetic, naturalistic craftsmanship and, appropriately for a poem about Dionysus, celebrates joyful dancing, clever acting, and loud, rhythmic music ... It celebrates the descent of spirit into form and the Many ... On the other hand, the poem appears deeply distrustful of the sensory, material, and manifest world, uncertain of the value or replication, obsessed with interpreting signs, and discovering hidden meanings as forms dissolve and reform. Like many Christians of his time, Nonnus appears drawn to the philosophical and theological antithesis of the immanent sensate, that is, the ideational and ascetic, which devalues form and privileges ascent to the One.²¹⁰

Examples of deceptive appearances or metamorphoses are pervasive in the *Dionysiaca*, and are often expressed in mimetic terms: e.g., the Greek gods assume imitative winged shapes when they flee from Typhon to Egypt (2.707); Hermes assumes the appearance of Phanes to smuggle the infant Dionysus past Hera (9.140-1); Athena deceives Deriades by taking the form of his cousin Morrheus (40.78). Alongside the theme of mimesis, Newbold catalogues incidences of vocabulary relating to deceit and disguise. These include δόλος (60 occurrences), δόλιος (29), δολόεις (36), plus eleven *dolo*-compounds, which together appear 48 times; ἀπατήλιος (39), ἀπάτη (2), ἀπαφίσκω (7), ἐπικολπή (5), ἐπικόπος (17), ἡπεροπεύω (5), ἡπεροπεύς (17), ψεύδομαι (35), ψευδαλέος (20), ψευδήμων (22), ψεῦδος (2), ψεύδορκος (1), ψευδώνυμος (1), αἰόλος (30), plus nine *aiolo*-compounds that appear 32 times. Altogether, these words occur 407 times – 8.5 times per book on average – although not every occurrence denotes a separate episode of deceit. These terms are also used for denials, false accusations, wishes, fears, and fantasies concerning deceit.²¹¹ The sheer prevalence of vocabulary related to deceit and

²⁰⁹ Shorrock 2011.

²¹⁰ Newbold 2010: 82-3.

²¹¹ Newbold 2010: 85.

disguise clearly reflects an intellectual and cultural milieu that placed great importance on the discernment of truth from falsehood.²¹²

Mimesis, however, as Newbold alludes to with the *Dionysiaca*'s celebration of visual culture, can occur within the poem without conscious imitation or representation, and without duplicity or pretence. As Halliwell has shown, mimesis has a broad semantic range and can take many forms. Fittingly, the *Dionysiaca* explores this theme in many different ways. For example, Nonnus makes frequent use of behavioural mimesis: where a person or animal imitates the behaviour of a model for the purposes of learning, emulation, or proof of legitimacy. Semele mimics the bellow of a bull while pregnant, not to deceive, but as an indication of her induction into the Dionysiac sphere (8.23). The gestating Dionysus, still 'half-made,' mimics his mother's dancing whilst in her womb (8.27); his imitation begets learning, and the act offers an aetiology for his patronage over Bacchic dancing. After Dionysus discovers wine, his Satyrs imitate him by trampling on grapes, primarily as a means of learning viticulture (12.352). In each of these examples, mimesis involves a conscious behavioural assimilation towards a model or teacher. The primary aim is not deception, and deception does not arise naturally as a consequence. These behavioural implications of mimesis predate even Plato. In Thucydides 1.95.3, the Spartan general Pausanias is recalled because his actions are judged to be closer to those of a tyrant than those of a general. His fault lies not in pretending to be a tyrant, but in acting like one. Behavioural assimilation, in a sense, begets 'becoming.'²¹³

Behavioural mimesis is key to Plato's objections against Homer in Book 2 of the *Republic*, which is particularly concerned with education. One of Plato's chief concerns is that young people who are invited to take part in mimesis will follow bad examples and adopt negative ways of life. The moral status of mimesis is based upon how good or bad the original is that is being imitated. The young soul was imagined to have a degree of plasticity or malleability, upon which carriers of '*tupoi*' (stamps, images) could impress their models upon the soul (*Cratylus* 337b). It is therefore imperative that young

²¹² Newbold 2010: 89.

²¹³ Woodruff 2015: 230.

people in early stages of education should be exposed to and learn only from models of virtuous behaviour.²¹⁴

The behavioural mimetic relationship between model and emulator can be seen throughout the *Dionysiaca*, particularly with regard to parents and children. Semele's dancing, which inspires her unborn baby, is but one example. The theme of paternity is central to the *Dionysiaca*.²¹⁵ Accordingly, Dionysus' primary model for imitation is his father, Zeus. When Dionysus concedes a wrestling match to his beloved Ampelus, his actions are a 'μίμημα' of Zeus conceding to Herakles (10.374). In Book 18, Dionysus is urged to follow the example of his father in his capacity as the protector of guests (18.39). At the climax of the poem and Dionysus' war against the Giants, Dionysus wields a torch that is described as an 'earthly image' of Zeus' thunderbolt (48.66). Dionysus' efforts throughout the poem serve as a repudiation of others' doubts regarding his parentage, and an attempt to prove himself a worthy and legitimate son of Zeus.²¹⁶ In many ways, this struggle reflects Nonnus' own attempts to emulate Homer, his own literary 'father'.²¹⁷ In these examples, the mimetic relationship between father and son is expressed in favourable terms, and seems to have no moral or ethical ramifications.

The positive Father-Son model parallels Christological beliefs regarding the relationship between the Father and Christ. Humans were made in the image or likeness of God, just as Christ was the image of the Father.²¹⁸ Christians were encouraged to imitate Christ's example. Gregory of Nyssa believed that because man was made in the image of God and had fallen from grace due to original sin, anagogical ascent could only be achieved by assimilation to the divine through mimesis.²¹⁹ This belief was fundamental to Gregory's definition of Christianity as 'the imitation of the divine nature' (*De Professione Christiana*, GNO VIII/1.136.7-8). Father-Son mimesis has also been shown to play an important role in Johannine literature,²²⁰ and divine emulation

²¹⁴ Juan-Navarro 2007: 101.

²¹⁵ Shorrock 2001: 182.

²¹⁶ Other examples of Father-Son imitation include Hephaestus, who hopes that his wife, Aphrodite, will bear him a son as a 'μίμημα' of himself (5.141).

²¹⁷ For more on how Nonnus navigates his relationship with his 'father' and epic predecessor, see Shorrock 2001.

²¹⁸ Schibille 2014: 216.

²¹⁹ Mateo-Seco 2010.

²²⁰ Bennema 2017: chapter 3.

(θεομιμησία) would continue as a key model for anagogical ascent in the 6th century writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, who writes that God is inimitable (ἀμίμητος), and defined human attempts at divine assimilation as inimitable imitation (ἀμίμητον μίμημα, *Ep.* 2, 1068a-69a).²²¹

The *Dionysiaca* also presents us with the dangers of negative mimesis, even in the relationships between father and son. Lycurgus is described as a ‘μίμημα’ of his own father, Ares, but his model in this instance is decidedly negative (20.150); Lycurgus’ warmongering and arrogance lead him to transgress against Dionysus, for which he is punished and blinded. Hermes uses the story of Phaethon as a cautionary tale against behavioural mimesis. As the son of Helios, Phaethon attempts to drive his father’s chariot of the sun to prove his divine parentage. However, he loses control of the chariot, killing himself and scorching the Earth in the process. Hermes is clear in his message: Dionysus must not long for his father’s domain. Dionysus is Zeus’ successor, and must navigate their relationship and imitate his father in positive ways, while also carving out his own legacy and identity.

The positive mimetic relationship between Dionysus and Zeus can also be contrasted with Typhon. Typhon styles himself as a successor of Zeus, although as a *theomachos* rather than a son. His usurpation is one of imitation: he strives to forge his own thunderbolts, and become a new cloud-gatherer. It is an act of hubris that transgresses against the natural order. Typhon’s attempts at mimesis are deliberate and calculated, not to deceive others, but rather to assimilate himself to the divine. As a consequence, he ultimately deceives himself by believing that he could possibly rival Zeus. Shorrock notes Typhon’s ‘limitless capacity for self-deception,’²²² recalling the monster’s role in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where self-knowledge and rectification are impossible in the case of the Typhonic soul, with its unbridled hubris and complexity.²²³ The monster’s complicated multiform appearance becomes a metaphor for the complex soul.

²²¹ Schibille 2014: 216 explains this seeming contradiction in Gregory and Ps.-Dionysius as reflecting a Plotinian spirit, whereby likeness between entities belonging to different metaphysical hierarchies is non-reciprocal.

²²² Shorrock 2001: 123.

²²³ Griswold Jr. 2007: 40.

Dionysus, on the other hand, becomes a ‘μίμημα’ through subconscious and un-meditated assimilation. His goal is not to usurp his father, but to retrace his steps and ultimately become similar to the divine through imitation, and thereby take his rightful place on Mount Olympus. The Father-Son model also synergises well with the poem’s Orphic trappings, whereby Dionysus follows his father Zeus as the culmination of the divine succession. These models of behavioural mimesis offer an alternative to the examples of misleading and deceptive mimesis identified by Newbold, and adhere to Plato’s thoughts on behavioural mimesis in *Republic* 2: imitation is only as good as the model being imitated.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, Dionysus, the poem’s subject and central protagonist is himself a ‘μίμημα’ of the older-born Zagreus. Zeus also becomes a ‘μίμημα’ of Dionysus during his son’s conception (7.319-21):

πῇ μὲν ὑπὲρ λεχέων βοέην μυκώμενος ἤχῳ,
 ἀνδρομέοις μελέεσσιν ἔχων κερόεσσαν ὀπωπὴν,
 ἰσοφυὲς μίμημα βοοκράϊρου Διονύσου

And above the bed lowing with the voice of a bull,
 with a horned head on human limbs,
 the very likeness of bull-horned Dionysus.

The scene appears as a paradox. Dionysus has yet to be born, but Zeus is able to assume his shape. Yet Zeus does not assume his son’s appearance to deceive Semele. Rather, it appears designed to genetically manipulate Semele’s offspring. Ps-Oppian records a similar practice among breeders of Orynxes horses, which were known for their dappled skin. In some cases, the breeders would tattoo the spots directly onto the foals while still young (*Cyneg.* 1.326-7). Other times, the breeders would select a male and tattoo him with spots of colour; they would then lead him to his ‘bride,’ who, after their union, would conceive a ‘many-patterned’ foal (3.335-48). Ps-Oppian gives another example at 355-7 regarding fowlers who breed purple doves. In both examples, Ps-Oppian describes a form of genetic manipulation that is achieved through a visual stimulus. When perceived by the mother, the stimulus informs the physical properties of the future child.

This process of genetic manipulation is never expressed as a form of mimesis within the *Cynegetica*, but it is clearly envisioned as such by Nonnus. Zeus' imitation of Dionysus' appearance is but one in a series of transformations designed to instil desirable traits in his offspring. Zeus metamorphoses into a lion and a panther, 'as one who begets a bold son, driver of panthers and charioteer of lions' (*Dion.* 7.322-4); he then appears as a young bridegroom, the most common image of Dionysus, with his hair bound by the god's divine symbols: snakes, vine leaves and purple ivy (325-8); Zeus shouts 'Euoi,' the Bacchic chant, and intoxicates Semele with nectar so that she might bear a son to hold 'the sceptre of the nectareal vintage' (334-8); finally, Zeus displays Dionysus' future regalia: the grape, the fennel, the thyrsus, and a deerskin cloak (339-43). These symbols, as mentioned in Chapter 1, come to define the Bacchic Dionysus far more than Zagreus.

The positive and negative connotations of mimesis are reflected elsewhere in Nonnus' use of mimetic language. The *Dionysiaca* contains many εἰκόνες (images, icons), that exhibit iconophilic or iconophobic sensibilities.²²⁴ These εἰκόνες can be breathless or lifeless (ἄπνοος, 12.131; 13.218), defined by their status as static images and their privation of life. They can be 'voiceless' (ἄναυδής, 5.105; 19.201; 46.333), often referring to pantomime and performance art. They can be explicitly 'imitative' (μιμηλή, 5.105; 5.598; 22.45-6; 34.289; 37.775; 43.218), even in an abstract sense. Elsewhere, they are 'shadowy' (σκόεσσα, 10.42), 'cunning' (ἐπίκλοπος, 10.42), 'adulterous' (γαμοκλόπος, 36.70), 'wile-weaving' (δολοπλόκος, 9.144), or 'guileful' (ἀπατήλιος, 18.17; 40.77; 44.93).

The deceptive potential of εἰκόνες in the *Dionysiaca* broadly supports the hypothesis that Nonnus was aware of and inspired by Platonic ideas on ontology and epistemology. As Schibille notes, in *Republic* 10, Plato regards mimetic artworks produced by human beings as highly deceptive, because they obscured truth, exploited basic emotional responses instead of appealing to thought and reason, and were

²²⁴ In an *n*-gram analysis of the *Dionysiaca*, εἰκόν is frequently collocated with μορφή (9.144, 10.42, 33.70, 34.289, 40.77, 41.209, 46.333), often in the syntactical arrangement 'εἰκόνα μορφῆς,' meaning 'likeness of a shape.' This formula is frequently collocated in Late Antique Christian and doctrinal texts.

potentially dangerous in that they had the power to corrupt those who were not immunised by knowledge of its true nature (cf. *Rep.* 595a-b; 598d-603b).²²⁵

These epistemological concerns extend to the cognition and perception of the material universe. Plato's middle dialogues express the idea that we cannot know, or possess true knowledge of sensible objects.²²⁶ At *Timaeus* 27d-29a, Plato distinguishes between that which always is (i.e. the Intelligible Forms, which are apprehended by reason) from that which becomes (the material world, which is apprehended by opinion and sense-perception). Sensible objects, the likes of which Nonnus describes in sensate and chromatic detail, are unintelligible (ἀνόητος, *Phaedo* 80b4) and the soul can only comprehend the truth when it avoids the use of the senses (65b9-c3). In *Republic* 476e-480a, all and only Forms are knowable, and this is assumed in the analogy of the sun, the divided line, and the allegory of the cave.²²⁷ Εἰκών is also etymologically linked to the state of *eikasia*, the perception of mere images or reflections. It was the lowest segment of the Platonic Line (*Rep.* 509e), and had a less than complimentary role in Plato's theory of artistic and mimetic representation. This is because εἰκόνες represented material things which were themselves only images of transcendent archetypes. Among the later dialogues, the *Philebus* furthers this thesis: perfect truth is superior to the kind of knowledge which concerns itself with things that come to be and are destroyed (59a-b).

The deceptive quality of images and reflections is perfectly demonstrated in the *Dionysiaca* through the character of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own reflection (48.581-6):

εἶχε δὲ Ναρκίσσοιο φερώνυμα φύλλα κορύμβων
 ἡιθέου χαρίεντος, ὃν εὐπετάλω παρὰ Λάτμῳ
 νυμφίος Ἐνδυμίων κεραῆς ἔσπειρε Σελήνης,
 ὃς πάρος ἡπεροπῆος ἐοῦ χροὸς εἶδεῖ κωφῶ
 εἰς τύπον αὐτοτέλεστον ἰδὼν μορφούμενον ὕδωρ
 κάτθανε, παπταίνων σκιοειδέα φάσματα μορφῆς·

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²²⁵ Schibille 2014: 22.

²²⁶ Ketchum 1987: 291.

²²⁷ Ketchum 1987: 291.

There were the clustering blooms which have the name Narcissus,
 the fair youth, whom horned Selene's bridegroom
 Endymion begat on leafy Latmos, Narcissus,
 who long ago gazed on his own image self-formed in the water,
 that silent image of a beautiful deceiver,
 and died as he gazed on the shadowy phantom of his shape.

This embedded aetiology succinctly recounts the young boy's fixation with his own reflection and eventual death. Nonnus uses mimetic vocabulary: τύπος (585) and φάσμα (586). There are also terms for form, shape, and appearance: εἶδος (584), μορφή (586), and μορφώω (585). In other versions of the myth, Narcissus' gaze is explicitly that of a lover, and the reification of his own reflection introduces a paradox whereby the viewer of an image becomes the image itself. The story is a paradigm for self-deception. Not only does Narcissus believe that the image he perceives and loves is real, but he also fails to recognise that the reflected image is himself.²²⁸

Here in the *Dionysiaca*, the reflection's deficiency and lower status is highlighted by its dull, un-sensing, and mute qualities (κωφός), and its shadowy nature (σκιοειδής). These implications are strengthened by key allusions and intertexts: the phrase 'σκιοειδέα φάσματα μορφῆς' recalls the 'μιμηλῆς ὁρόων σκιοειδέα φάσματα μορφῆς,' of Dionysus' dream of Ampelus at 10.266. Nonnus also uses the bigram φάσματα μορφῆς for Athamas' tormenting hallucinations at 10.19, and for Dionysus' cunning use of shapeshifting at 36.295.

The shadowy nature of Narcissus' reflection recalls Neoplatonic allegories of the myth. For Plotinus, the myth of Narcissus expresses the misguided pursuit of beauty in the sensible world, which is in truth only a reflection of internal and transcendent beauty (1.6.8):

Ἴτω δὴ καὶ συνεπέσθω εἰς τὸ εἶσω ὁ δυνάμενος ἔξω καταλιπὼν ὄψιν ὁμμάτων μηδ' ἐπι
 στρέφων αὐτὸν εἰς τὰς προτέρας ἀγλαίας σωμάτων. Ἰδόντα γὰρ δεῖ τὰ ἐν σώμασι
 καλὰ μήτοι προστρέχειν, ἀλλὰ γνόντας ὥς εἰσιν εἰκόνες καὶ ἵχνη καὶ σκιαὶ φεύγειν
 πρὸς ἐκεῖνο οὗ ταῦτα εἰκόνες. Εἰ γὰρ τις ἐπιδράμοι λαβεῖν βουλόμενος ὥς ἀληθινόν,

²²⁸ Elsner 2007: 136-7.

οἷα εἰδώλου καλοῦ ἐφ' ὕδατος ὀχουμένου, ὁ λαβεῖν βουληθείς, ὥς ποῦ τις μῦθος, δοκῶ μοι, αἰνίττεται, δὺς εἰς τὸ κάτω τοῦ ῥεύματος ἀφανῆς ἐγένετο, τὸν αὐτὸν δὴ τρόπον ὁ ἐχόμενος τῶν καλῶν σωμάτων καὶ μὴ ἀφιεῖς οὐ τῷ σώματι, τῇ δὲ ψυχῇ καταδύσεται εἰς σκοτεινὰ καὶ ἀτερπῆ τῷ νῷ βάθη, ἔνθα τυφλὸς ἐν Ἄιδου μένων καὶ ἐνταῦθα κάκεῖ σκιαῖς συν ἔσται.

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, leaving all that is known by the eyes, turning away forever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When it is necessary to see the good things in the body, let him not pursue. Instead may he know them for icons and imprints and shadows and flee towards that of which these things represent. For if anyone should follow anything like a beautiful shape playing over water – is there not a myth which speaks symbolically of such a fool, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the Intellective-Being, where, blind even in the Hades, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.

In Nonnus, the water receives form (μορφούμενον ὕδωρ) in much the same way as matter, which does not possess independent being, but depends for its shape and the imposition of form upon an emanation from above.²²⁹ Plotinus holds that matter is the lowest level of existence, but it was an infinitely receptive substrate (Plot. 2.4.4). As we can see, Plotinus describes the object of viewing as an icon (εἰκῶν), an imprint (ἵχνος) and a shadow (σκιὰ). However, although sensible objects are deficient in their ability to convey truth and transcendent beauty, the failure lies with the viewer rather than object. Plotinus believed that the sensible world was the best possible representation of its intelligible principles (2.3.16-22; 2.9.4; 3.2.3; 3.8.11, 29-33; 5.8.7-8).²³⁰ However, the soul that is bound by material beauty will, instead of breaking free from the material world, descend deeper into generation like Narcissus.

²²⁹ And it is through matter, the lowest ontological level in Plotinus' metaphysical hierarchy, that we ourselves become evil (1.8.8). Forms impressed upon matter are not the same as they would be if they had remained within themselves; the process of materialisation changes them. However, Plotinus distinguishes clearly between the positive imposition of the Sensible Forms upon matter, and the passive but negative effects of matter upon those Sensible Forms, by contrasting formlessness against form, shapelessness against shape, and excess and defect against that which has been duly measured (1.8.8.18-23).

²³⁰ Cf. Wilberding 2011: 53.

Because the ethical fault lies with the viewer and not the image, Plotinus was able to hold a more positive view of visual representations and material nature. Visual arts should not be disparaged on the basis that they imitated material nature, since natural things also imitate other objects. If the natural world is an image of the Intelligible, then to condemn mimesis is to condemn the very method by which the material universe is produced and maintained.²³¹ Accordingly, the general model of mimesis that pervades Plotinian metaphysics is heavily, if metaphorically, visual and closely correlated with the language of the 'image' or εἰκών.²³² This can be seen from Plotinus' use of visual language to conceptualise the soul as an image of *nous* (Plot. 5.1.3), and the created world as an image of its Father (5.8.12), and matter as an image of being (1.8.3).

The term εἰκών was also important in Christian metaphysics. Gregory of Nyssa uses the term to refer to the reflection on the surface of a mirror, in a metaphor for self-knowledge which draws heavily on Plato's *Alcibiades 1*, 132d-133c.²³³ A person cannot see their own eyes, or perceive their own act of seeing, and must therefore find themselves in a likeness, reflected as if in a mirror. So too, the soul that mirrors her archetype and divine beauty only knows herself through contemplating this reflection.²³⁴ Although Gregory often uses the analogy of the mirror in a positive sense, he also cites the image of an archetype in a mirror (ἡ ἐν κατόπτρῳ εἰκὼν τῆς ἀρχετύπου μορφῆς) as an example of a 'likeness' that is imitative and 'cheats' our senses (παραψεύδομαι, *Refutatio confessionis Eunomii* 146-7), recalling the more iconophobic sensibilities of Platonism and early Christianity.

As we shall see, however, Nonnus' εἰκόνες are not exclusively deceptive. At the wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia, Polymnia, the muse of sacred poetry and dances, conveys a 'silence full of meaning' with the 'voiceless image' (ἀναυδέος εἰκόνα) of her dance, in an episode that evokes the visual performances of pantomime, an art-form

²³¹ Rich 1960: 237.

²³² Halliwell 2002: 320.

²³³ The motif of the mirror is particularly pervasive in Gregory's works. For a detailed survey, see Hart 2002.

²³⁴ Hart 2002: 550.

that was extremely popular in Late Antiquity.²³⁵ This comparison is expanded upon in *Dionysiaca* 19 with the pantomimic contest of Maron and Silenus. Maron's dance (198-224) tells a 'picture of a story' (εἰκόνα μύθων, 201) exclusively with eye movements and silent hand gestures (ἀναυδέι χειρί, 200). Both contestants convey similar stories through their mimes: Maron describes nectar, the drink of the gods; Silenus narrates the quarrel between Dionysus and Aristaeus over the relative benefits of wine and honey (225-262). Their performances are mimetic, but not deceptive. They are capable of conveying characters, meanings, and storylines through their physical movements.²³⁶

As Shorrock has shown, the competition acts as a symbolic debate about how to write a successful epic poem, where Maron and Silenus stand in as potential poetic surrogates for Nonnus.²³⁷ Maron's silence is 'eloquent,' or 'varied in discourse' (ποικιλόμυθος, 200), recalling the *poikilia* of Nonnus' prologue. Maron's performance mirrors the *Dionysiaca* itself, in that it serves as a praise of Dionysus. Furthermore, both contestants 'weave' their stories with their hands (ὑφαίνω, 202; 263), utilising a common metaphor for poetic composition (cf., e.g. Pindar fr. 179). The ability of a solo pantomime dancer to imitate and embody all the characters in the story also led to comparisons with Proteus, the famed shapeshifter and patron of Nonnus' epic (Lucian *Salt*. 19). The pantomime with its Protean nature becomes a fully realised and self-conscious metaphor for Nonnus' poetic undertaking.

The *Dionysiaca* also contains numerous εἰκόνες that represent aspects of the universe. There are images of the cosmos (εἰκόνα κόσμου): e.g., a globe (6.65); Herakles' robe (40.416); and Harmonia's house (41.281). The city of Beirut is built in the image of the heavens (αἰθέρος, 40.351). Dionysus hymns Herakles Astrochiton as 'an image of equal time renewed' (ἰσοτύποιο χρόνου παλινάγρετος εἰκών, 40.397). None of these images appear to be ethically or morally problematic. The globe is used by Astraeus as an astrolabe to predict the future. Herakles' starry cloak is a symbol of the god's initiation into the higher mysteries. Harmonia's house corresponds symbolically

²³⁵ Webb 2009a: 58. This likening of pantomime to an image was prefigured by Libanius in the 4th century, who compared the dancers in their concluding, static pose to an εἰκών (*Or.* 64.164).

²³⁶ According to Plotinus, mime and other mimetic arts such as painting, sculpture, and dance used perceptible models (*paradeigmata*) and were only representative of visible forms and movements, and therefore lacked access to the noetic realm (Plot. 5.9.11.1-6). See Halliwell 2002: 319.

²³⁷ Shorrock 2001: 157.

in many ways to the universe itself: it is self-built (αὐτοπαγής, 278), with four quarters and four gates corresponding to the four cardinal directions (278-80), and forms a round image of the universe (281). Inside, Harmonia weaves her own image of the universe on Athena's loom (294-302). Many of these images appear to reflect a circular conception of the universe, a key Platonic belief.

A clear hierarchical distinction between an εἰκών and its archetype exists in the *Paraphrase*. Although there is only one instance of εἰκών in the poem, its use is particularly revealing. In Book 4, Jesus addresses a Samaritan woman, and refers to her people as 'initiates into an imitative likeness of the true word' (μιμηλὴν τελέοντες ἀληθέος εἰκόνα μύθου, 4.106). The εἰκών here, adjectivally modified by μιμηλὴν, is explicitly mimetic. Jesus then goes on to contrast the Samaritans' beliefs with those of himself and his followers, who perform secret rites, and hymn god with their 'wise word' (ἔμφρονι μύθῳ, 109). The sense is that although the Samaritan woman follows something 'like' the true word, it is divergent or different enough that it fails to *be* the true word.

This almost paradoxical encompassing of 'likeness' with inherent 'dissimilarity' was key to the term's use. A portrait of an object for all its likeness, fails to truly be the object. In Neoplatonic terms, therefore, an εἰκών is not just 'like' its paradigm, but also unlike; an εἰκών is divided and multiform, whereas the Forms were simple, indivisible and uniform.²³⁸ Unfortunately, with only one instance of εἰκών in the *Paraphrase*, we lack any internal comparanda. It is unclear, then, whether the negative associations of mimesis are purely contextual (the narrative result of Jesus' comparison between his followers and the Samaritans), or are imported or strengthened by the adjective μιμηλός, or whether the use of μιμηλός is tautological, and the negative associations are inherent to εἰκών itself.

The *Dionysiaca's* τύποι (images, impressions, patterns or types) are also inextricably linked with mimesis. They can be 'skilful' or 'cunningly wrought' (τεχνήμων, 4.7, 26.302, 28.193), 'skilled' or 'wise' (σοφός, 5.106), and 'right' (ὀρθός, 5.235). Like Nonnus' εἰκόνες, they can be 'imitative' (μιμηλός, 9.187; 19.321, 25.8, 36.36, 36.313).

²³⁸ Van Den Berg 2001: 129.

On the potentially more negative side, they can be ‘shadowy’ (σκιόεις, 6.207, 29.169; σκιοειδής, 8.324), ‘wily’ (δολόεις, 33.302), or ‘unfaithful’ (ἄπιστον, 36.264). Often they can appear without a corresponding adjective. Within the poem, the term can refer to literal images, like statues (e.g., the comparison of Cadmus with a statue of Apollo, *Dion.* 3.102ff). They can also take on a variety of abstractions. Electra beckons her daughter Harmonia with a hand gesture, which is described as a ‘clever image of speech’ (4.7). Τύπος is also used to describe Egyptian hieroglyphics (4.260).²³⁹

The term is central to the Stoic theory of memory, whereby thoughts and experiences imprint themselves upon the subject, like an imprint in wax made by a signet ring.²⁴⁰ The term is also used by Plato to denote ‘general character’ (*Theaetetus* 171e3, *Republic* 402d3, *Philebus* 51d2), and was central to the exploratory thrust of the *Cratylus*, whereby an object’s nomenclature only correctly names the object if it preserves a sufficient ‘outline’ or ‘impression’ of it.

Within Neoplatonism, the term developed to mean the ‘intelligible residue of a higher principle in a lower.’²⁴¹ Even if a τύπος accurately depicts or represents that which it is a τύπος of, it cannot be the truth it represents. This more positive mimetic relationship recalls Plotinus’ view that, even as an image, the material universe is the best possible reflection of the Intelligible. It also captures the more positive role of mimesis in Christian doctrine. Gregory of Nazianzus describes Christ as an imprint of the Father (*Or.* 30.20.16-8), although in this instance τύπος appears to predicate identity and likeness over dissimilarity.²⁴²

Nonnus’ use of τύπος broadly suggests a Neoplatonic worldview, where every aspect of material creation can be conceptualised as an image. In Book 12.158-9, Atropos foretells Dionysus’ discovery of wine, saying ‘you will dispense a drink, a comfort for the human race, an earthly image of heavenly nectar’ (καὶ σὺ ποτὸν

²³⁹ Plotinus envisions hieroglyphics as superior to language, because they provide a more direct and intuitive access to the divine Intellect, because they convey the Intelligible through images (ἁγάλματα) instead of discursive language (5.8.6.1-9). See Schibille 2014: 207. For more on the Egyptian mastery of symbols, see Iamblichus *De Myst.* 7.1.249.13-250.7. cf. Struck 2004: 220-1.

²⁴⁰ Blumenthal & Dillon 2015: 291.

²⁴¹ Dillon & Gerson 2004: 363.

²⁴² Papaioannou 2006: 66.

μεθέπεις, βροτέης ἄμπαυμα γενέθλης, νέκταρος οὐρανίου χθόνιον τύπον). Nectar and wine have different aetiologies; one is the drink of the gods, the other of Dionysus and mortals. Yet Atropos' prediction styles wine as a mimetic image. This metaphor does not seem to suggest a resemblance between the two drinks in appearance or even in taste, but rather in intrinsic quality or character. By using τύπος here, Nonnus creates an explicit hierarchical relationship between the two. This assimilation of wine to nectar appears throughout the poem. Zeus intoxicates Semele with nectar during Dionysus' conception because his son will become the god of the 'nectareal vintage' (5.334-8). Dionysus, upon tasting wine for the first time, hails it as the heavenly nectar (12.207). The mimetic relationship is overtly positive. The status and quality of wine is praised according to its divine comparison and counterpart.

These principles can be seen elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca*, where Nonnus uses τύπος to describe Cadmus' foundation of Thebes (5.85-7):

... καὶ ἱερὸν ἄστυ πολίσσας
Αἰγυπτίης ἐκάλεσεν ὁμώνυμον ἄστεϊ Θήβης,
ποικίλον ἀσκήσας χθόνιον τύπον ἴσον Ὀλύμπῳ.

... And having made his sacred city,
he called it by the name of Thebes in Egypt,
and deck out an intricate earthly image like Olympus

The mimetic dimension of this passage is introduced even earlier, as Cadmus is said to 'imitate seven-zoned heaven with his art' (οὐρανὸν ἐπτάζωνον ἐῖ μιμήσατο τέχνη, 65), primarily through the construction of seven gates, dedicated to the seven planets. The mimetic relationship is a positive one. Cadmus achieves his vision of Thebes by use of his 'art' or 'skill' (τέχνη). The resulting city is 'sacred' (ἱερὸν ἄστυ), precisely because of its likeness to heaven. As an image (τύπος), the city is 'intricate' or 'multiform' (ποικίλος), concordant with Nonnus' poetic principle of *poikilia*, and mirrors the *Dionysiaca* in its aesthetic aspirations. As an artwork, it also complies with Neoplatonic principles, as Cadmus takes the heavens for his model, in particular the planets which exist beyond the materiality of the sublunary realm. Like the sculptor Phidias, who

Plotinus praises for his statue of Zeus at Olympia, Cadmus imitates the ideal world and expresses it through symbolism (cf. Plot. 5.8.1). He acts as a Neoplatonic inspired artist, who uses supra-rational cognition to embody metaphysical insights in works of art,²⁴³ becoming analogous to the divine demiurge.²⁴⁴

Since artistic mimesis is understood as a simulation, the model for mimetic arts must be the cosmos itself.²⁴⁵ The 6th-century Alexandrian Neoplatonist Olympiodorus comments that literature also should resemble the cosmos (*In Alc.* 56.14-8):

A literary composition must resemble a living thing. Consequently, the best composition must resemble the noblest of living things. And the noblest living thing is the cosmos. Accordingly, just as the cosmos is a meadow full of all kinds of living things, so, too, literary composition must be full of characters of every description.²⁴⁶

Cadmus takes the cosmos as his model in designing the city of Thebes. However, here, Olympiodorus applies this simulation of the demiurgic act to directly to literature. The best literary compositions should follow the model of the cosmos,²⁴⁷ and resemble a living creature (cf. *Phaedr.* 264c6-9), and be full of a variety of living creatures (ὥσπερ οὖν οὗτος λειμών ἐστι ποικίλων ζώων), a description that could easily apply to the *Dionysiaca* itself as a ‘varied song’ (ποικίλος ὕμνος).²⁴⁸ Cadmus’ creation of Thebes and mimesis of the cosmos unfolds as a self-conscious reflection on the composition of poetry.

As we have seen, however, Nonnus’ τύποι are not always portrayed in such a positive light. In Book 8, Hera tricks Semele into expressing her dissatisfaction with images and icons (8.290-345). Semele claims she cannot call Zeus her husband, as she believes is her right, because she has only seen him in a dream (319-25):

²⁴³ Coulter 1976: 98; Sheppard 1980: 172-4; Struck 2004: 234-5; Schibille 2014: 212-4.

²⁴⁴ Ladner 1953; Coulter 1976: 30, 95-101; Sheppard 1980: 159; Struck 2004: 211-2.

²⁴⁵ Schibille 2014: 214.

²⁴⁶ Transl. by Coulter 1976: 95. Although the *Alcibiades*’ authenticity as a ‘Platonic’ text has been questioned by modern scholars, the text was accepted as a work of Plato in antiquity, and still stands as a legitimate and influential part of the Platonic tradition. See Renaud & Tarrant 2015: 4-7.

²⁴⁷ Renaud & Tarrant 2015: 196 explains that this analogy between text and cosmos is only implicit in Plato. Cf. *Phaedr.* 276a, 277c1-2; *Tim.* 29d-30a. For more on this analogy see Coulter 1976: 95-101.

²⁴⁸ Although Olympiodorus likely postdates Nonnus, his commentaries aim primarily to preserve the philosophical heritage of his predecessors. See Renaud 2008: 90-2.

νυμφίε τερπικέραυνε, σὺ μὲν πολυφεγγεῖ παστῶ
 ἔνθεον εἶδος ἔχων ἐπὶ δέμνιον ἔρχεαι Ἥρης
 ἀστεροπαῖς γαμίῃσι καταυγάζων σέο νύμφην
 Ζεὺς πυρόεις, Σεμέλη δὲ δράκων ἢ ταῦρος ἰκάνεις·
 κείνη μὲν βαρύδουπον Ὀλύμπιον ἤχον Ἑρώτων
 εἰσαΐει, Σεμέλη δὲ τύπῳ σκιοειδέι μορφῆς
 ταύρου ψευδαλέοιο νόθον μυκηθμὸν ἀκούει.

Thunder-hurling bridegroom, you go to Hera's bed
 In your divine shape, illuminating your bride with
 Nuptial lightning until the chamber shines with many lights,
 Fiery Zeus, but to Semele you come as a dragon or a bull.
 She hears for her love the heavy Olympian boom,
 But Semele hears the counterfeit bellow of a false bull,
 A shape with a shadowy imprint.

Semele uses τύπος in conjunction with terms relating to shadow and deception (σκιοειδής, ψευδαλέος, νόθος) to create a contrast between Zeus' true, divine appearance (ἔνθεον εἶδος), and the appearance she has been allowed to perceive. Throughout her speech, she rhetorically contrasts mortal nuptial symbols with divine symbols. She imagines their relationship as one of dissimilarity. Semele's earthly torches (χθονίους λαμπτήρας, 317) stand in opposition to Hera's lightning and thunderbolts (ἐφαπτομένη δὲ κεραυνοῦ καὶ στεροπῆς ψάφουσα τεῆ νυμφεύεται Ἥρη, 317-8). The counterfeit bellowing of the bull is compared with the sound of rolling thunder (324-5). Where Zeus the Cloud-gatherer mingles with Hera, he comes to Semele soundless and cloudless, in a line that recalls the conflict of Zeus and Typhon in Books 1-2, where the clouds are seen as a symbol of legitimacy (1.299).

Semele's speech is, at its heart, focused on epistemological concerns. Zeus' outer appearance does not reflect his true appearance, and perception of images does not denote true seeing or true knowledge. This means she has no way of knowing whether Zeus is truly her husband and the father of her child. The 'τύπῳ σκιοειδέι' (8.324) that she perceives also neatly recalls the shadowy reflection that Zagreus sees in his mirror (σκιόεντα τύπον, 6.207), which brings about his death at the hands of the

Titans. In the case of Semele, these negative connotations of mimesis appear to be introduced by context, and the presence of negative adjectives.

Nonnus also uses the adjective ἀντίτυπος far more often than many of his peers and predecessors. It has a broad semantic range, with definitions ranging from ‘representing,’ ‘reflective,’ ‘corresponding,’ to substantive uses like ‘image,’ ‘copy,’ or ‘antitype.’ It can designate spatial opposition (6.79). It can be used in more abstract ways, to refer to a corresponding sound, or ‘echo,’ or a corresponding image, or ‘reflection.’ It can designate something that arises as a consequence of something else. It can also mean ‘counterpart’ when two things share common attributes but not necessarily equivalence. Metaphorically, τύπος and ἀντίτυπος could be understood as a seal, and the impression left by that seal, respectively. However, given that both words have broad semantic ranges, and are not often collocated together in Greek literature (50 times in 10-gram analyses), the occurrence of one word in isolation does not necessarily imply the other. In Plato’s *Cratylus*, ἀντίτυπος is used to mean ‘resistant.’ It developed further Platonic connotations by the 3rd century CE with Plotinus, who used it to designate a copy of an original, imperceptible reality.²⁴⁹

The Christian tradition used ἀντίτυπος within a mimetic framework to explain the relationship between symbols and the original which is being symbolised. In the Ps.-Pauline epistle *Hebrews*, ἀντίτυπος and σκιά (shadow) appear to refer to an earthly copy of a heavenly original.²⁵⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem describes Chrism, a holy oil used for anointing the faithful, as an antitype or symbol of the Unction of Christ by the Holy Spirit during his baptism (*Mystag.* 3.1.14). In the same work, Cyril uses τύπος and ἀντίτυπος to describe the relationship between bread and wine and the body of Christ in the Eucharist (5.20.5-6).²⁵¹ He also uses ἀντίτυπος to describe the relationship between Christian worshippers and Christ: ‘now you have all been made Christs, having received the antitype of the Holy Spirit, and this has been wrought in you by imitation, since you are icons of Christ’ (Χριστοὶ δὲ γεγόνατε, τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος τὸ ἀντίτυπον δεξάμενοι,

²⁴⁹ Lincoln 2006: 43.

²⁵⁰ Ribbens 2016: 91. Although this does not necessarily carry the Platonic notion of a sensible copy of a transcendent form, and *Hebrews* avoids distinctively Platonic vocabulary elsewhere.

²⁵¹ Jean-Yves Lacoste 2005: 187.

καὶ πάντα εἰκονικῶς ἐφ' ὑμῶν γεγένηται, ἐπειδὴ εἰκόνες ἐστὲ Χριστοῦ, *Mystag.* 3.1.7-9). The Second Epistle of Clement, now attributed to Pseudo-Clement and dated to the 2nd century CE, contrasts ἀντίτυπος with αὐθεντικός (authentic, principal), claiming that 'no one then who corrupts the copy shall partake of the original' (2 Clem. 14.3).

John Chrysostom addresses the metaphysical status of antitypes in his *In epistulam ad Hebraeos*, demonstrating a more iconophile attitude to the antitypes of the Tabernacle (63.153.6-14):

And he said well that the antitypes are these: for they have the figure (τύπος) only, and not the power. Just as in images, the image has the figure of a man, but not the power. So that the reality and the figure have [something] in common with one another. For the figure is equally in both, but not yet the power. And indeed it is the same with respect to heaven, and to the tabernacle. For the figure was equal, for it was holy. But the power and the other things are not the same.

Collectively, these passages demonstrate the varied strands of philosophical and theological discourse conceptualising ἀντίτυπος. As in the Christian tradition, the ethical and moral implications of Nonnus' use of ἀντίτυπος appear to be differentiated based on context and surrounding vocabulary. Nonnus uses ἀντίτυπος to describe: the properties of mirrors (5.595, 6.173); spatial relation, as 'against' (3.408) or 'opposite' (6.79); corresponding (3.127); the properties of dreams (7.142); hallucinations (10.44); disguises (e.g. 8.39, 20.189); and imitations/μμήματα (e.g. 18.115, 21.204, 40.507, 44.33, 48.66, 48.387). This collocation of ἀντίτυπος and μίμημα occurs also in the *Paraphrase*, offering a concrete link between ἀντίτυπος and Late Antique concepts of mimesis. When used for disguises, Nonnus usually also employs vocabulary for deceit and falsehood.

In other instances, ἀντίτυπος can appear in a more positive sense. For instance, in Book 2 of the *Dionysiaca*, Typhon describes the lightning bolts he plans to forge as 'late-born copies of thunderbolts' (ἀντιτύπους δὲ κρέσσονας ὀψιγόνους, 2.344), as part of a wider speech boasting of his lineage and future achievements. It is unlikely that Typhon uses ἀντίτυπος to describe his own lightning in a negative sense, especially as he imagines that it will exceed and burn brighter than Zeus' own. Instead, the antitypical

quality of Typhon's lightning appears rooted in its characteristics and qualities owing to its archetype. In this instance, then, ἀντίτυπος conveys a sense of 'correspondence' or positive mimesis.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Nonnus explores both positive and negative aspects of mimesis throughout his poem, with negative connotations usually introduced on a contextual basis, or through the use of negative adjectives relating to deceit, falsehood, trickery, and shadow. However, Nonnus does not just allow for positive mimesis; he appears to celebrate it. Central figures and relationships are partially defined by positive mimesis, including his protagonist Dionysus, and his relationship with his father Zeus.

Nonnus' Dionysiac world is also populated by deceptive appearances and misleading shapes that do not make explicit use of mimetic vocabulary, but where the theme of mimesis is heavily implied. Nonnus achieves this through an emphasis on appearance (εἶδος) and shape (μορφή), and poses questions about how these relate to perception and inner intelligibility. Here is an example from Book 47 (*Dion.* 47.716-18):

οὐδὲ μὲν αὐτόθι μίμνεν ἐπὶ χρόνον Ἀργολίς Ἥρη·
ἀλλὰ μεταστρέψασα νόθην βροτοειδέα μορφήν
θέσκελον εἶδος ἔχουσα πάλιν νόστησεν Ὀλύμπῳ.

Nor did Argive Hera remain long in that place;
but putting of her counterfeit mortal-seeming shape
and holding her divine form she returned home to Olympus.

The collocation of εἶδος, βροτοειδέα, and μορφή draw attention to Hera's appearance, and her ability to transition between shapes. εἶδος in particular has a Homeric pedigree, where it means simply 'what one sees,' the 'appearance,' 'look,' or 'shape' of a person. This usage, rooted in sense-perception, continued throughout pre-Socratic philosophy.²⁵² In Homer, the term almost always refers to the appearance of a mortal individual,²⁵³ and appears frequently alongside δέμας, a term which comes closest in

²⁵² Peters 1967. See Empedocles frs. 98, 115, as well as Democritus, cited in Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1110.

²⁵³ The one exception is Odysseus' dog, Argos, indicating a degree of humanisation at his moment of death on the part of the poet. See Herrmann 2007: 100-101.

Homer to designating the human body as a whole.²⁵⁴ In stark contrast to mortals, Homer describes divine disguises and metamorphoses by their δέμας rather than their εἶδος.²⁵⁵ Since εἶδος is subjective, requiring the presence of an audience or onlooker, δέμας may be distinguished as objective;²⁵⁶ Clay suggests that Homer avoids the use of εἶδος for immortals because it might suggest that divine transformations are mere illusions.²⁵⁷ This contrasts sharply with Nonnus, who uses εἶδος frequently for both mortal and divine transformations, e.g. the ‘multiform appearance’ of Proteus (ποικίλον εἶδος) in the poem’s prologue. Unlike εἶδος, μορφή has comparatively little Homeric pedigree, only appearing twice in the *Odyssey* (8.170, 11.367), and in both instances has a meaning closer to ‘beauty,’ or a pleasing ‘shape’ of words.

In the Platonic tradition, εἶδος is sometimes distinguished from μορφή, as transcendent form (or ἰδέα), and its physical manifestation in the material world. This distinction was integral to Neoplatonic ontology. In the Neoplatonic ontological hierarchy, each level of reality depends upon an emanation from the level above it; sensible shape relies upon an emanation from the transcendent Form in which the shape participates. Knowledge derives not from perceiving the shape with sense-perception, but in apprehending it through intellection. Plotinus, however, often uses εἶδος and μορφή interchangeably to refer to Sensible Forms (cf., e.g. 6.4.12, 11, where μορφή is used to denote what in Plot. 4.5.2, 48-9, and in 2.8.1 is called εἶδος).²⁵⁸ These Sensible Forms, otherwise known as images in sense-perception, are also referred to as εἰκόνες and described by Plato as ‘shadows, then reflections in water and other close-packed, smooth, and polished surfaces’ (*Rep.* 6.510).

Nonnus appears to use the two terms interchangeably in the *Paraphrase*. For example, at 14.67-83:

²⁵⁴ The equivalent of σῶμα in later Greek. See Snell 1946: i9. Cf. Ps.-Plutarch, *De vita et poesi Homeri* 2, 124, who equates the living body with δέμας, the corpse with σῶμα; see also Eustathius 666, 24. Exceptions include the adverbial use of δέμας in the *Iliad*: 2.596; 13.673; 17.366; 18.1. Δέμας is used of non-humans only in *Od.* 17, 307 (Argos) and 10, 240 (Odysseus’ men turned into pigs).

²⁵⁵ Clay 1974: 129-30.

²⁵⁶ Treu 1968: 175.

²⁵⁷ Clay 1974: 130.

²⁵⁸ Emilsson 1988: 162 n.24. This potential equivalence between εἶδος and μορφή also appears in the Aristotelian tradition; Philoponus’ commentary on *De Anima* distinguishes between εἶδος *qua* μορφή (form *qua* shape) and εἶδος *qua* οὐσία (form *qua* essence or substance). See Wisnovsky 2003, chapter 4. The two terms appear synonymous in the *Suda*, the 10th century Byzantine lexicon.

ἐσαθρήσητε δὲ μοῦνοι
 ὑμεῖς ἔνθεον εἶδος ἀθηήτιο προσώπου,
 ὅτι μεθ' ὑμείων μενέει καὶ ὁμόστολον ἔσται
 ὑμῖν, πάντας ἔχων νοερὸν δόμον. οὐ γὰρ ἐάσω 70
 ὑμέας οὐρανίης ισόζυγος ἐκτὸς ἀρωγῆς
 ὀρφανικούς· ταχινὸς δὲ πρὸς ὑμέας αὖτις ἰκάνω.
 βαίος ἔτι χρόνος ἐστίν, ἐμὴν ὅτε θέσπιδα μορφήν
 οὐκέτι κόσμος ἄπιστος ἐσόψεται, ἀλλὰ με μοῦνοι
 λεύσσετε, καὶ μετὰ γαῖαν αἰεὶ ζώων ὅτι μίμνω, 75
 καὶ δι' ἐμὲ ξύμπαντες ὅτι ζώοιτε καὶ ὑμεῖς.
 ὅστις ἔχων πραπίδεσιν ἐμὰς τελέσειεν ἐφετμάς, (79)
 οὗτος ἀνὴρ φιλέει με καὶ εὐαγέως ἀγαπάζων (80)
 ἔσται ἐμῷ γενετῇρι θεῷ πεφιλημένος ἀνὴρ.
 τοῦτον ὁμοστόργω καὶ ἐγὼ προσπτύξομαι ἀρθμῷ
 καὶ οἱ θέσκελον εἶδος ἐμοῦ χροὸς αὐτίκα δείξω.

Only you can see a sacred likeness of the unseen face,
 because he lives among you and will be with you
 having all as his intellectual house. I, equal-yoked,
 will not let you be like orphans, far away from heaven's care;
 And I will come back swiftly unto you again.
 There is a little time yet, when this faithless world
 will no longer look upon my sacred shape with adoration,
 but you alone will see me, and living forever after earth will
 I dwell, and through me you all will live as well.
 Whoever has me in their heart and follows my command
 this man loves me, and loving purely,
 he will be a man loved by God, my Father.
 I will embrace him with the same feeling and friendship
 and I will show him the sacred appearance of my body.

Christ refers to his divine appearance three times in this passage, at lines 68 (εἶδος), 73 (μορφήν) and 84 (εἶδος). The positive qualities of his appearance are introduced through the use of adjectives (ἐνθεον, θέσπιδα, and θέσκελον respectively). This divine

appearance is only visible to his disciples and those who have welcomed him into their hearts.

Appearances and shapes can also be negative. In the *Dionysiaca*, Deriades mocks a Satyr who Dionysus sends as a messenger (21.216-21):

οἷους Δηριάδη διδυμόχροας ἄνδρας ἰάλλει
 ταυροφυῆς Διόνυσος, ἀθύρματα δηιοτῆτος,
 ἄλλοφυεῖς, οὐ φῶτας ὅλην βροτοειδέα μορφήν,
 θηρῶν εἶδος ἔχοντας, ἐπεὶ διδυμάωνι μορφῇ
 εἰσὶ νόθοι ταῦροι τε καὶ ἄνδρες· ἀμφότερον γὰρ 220
 καὶ βοὸς εἶδος ἔχουσι καὶ ἀνδρομέοιο προσώπου.

Bull-formed Dionysus sends such multi-coloured men
 to Deriades, these strange, playthings for a soldier,
 men not wholly human-like in shape,
 that have the appearance of monsters, since
 they are bastard bulls and men with two-formed shape.
 They have both the appearance of a bull and of a human face.

The speech above does not feature mimetic vocabulary, but still places great emphasis on outward appearance and its epistemological concerns. The Satyr messenger has an admixture of physical signifiers, both bull and human. This hybridity leads Deriades to ridicule it. The passage introduces a sense of deficiency or fraudulence through the adjective νόθος, which, as we have seen in Chapter 1, is used frequently in Nonnus to undermine an image or appearance's authenticity.²⁵⁹ The adjective's purpose does not appear to denote active deception or concealment. Rather, νόθος appears consistent with its use in *PHib*.1.32.15, where it refers to the cross-breeding of animals.

In addition to νόθος, we have already noted Nonnus' use of language related to disguise and deception. It is interesting, then, that although νόθος can modify both εἶδος and μορφή, the adjective ψευδήμων (false) is only ever found with μορφή (*Dion*.

²⁵⁹ Chuvin 1992: 151 identifies νόθος as denoting illegitimate (45.259), an admixture of two natures (30.89), the result of metamorphosis (5.331, 528), the result of hallucination (10.12, 35), and a false mark (27.230, 35.126). Newbold 2010: 91 adds a further, more general sense as simply a 'substitute.'

5.530, 568; 8.39; 10.54; 14.59; 31.53; 34.143; 34.286). Evidently, while an εἶδος can be in some way counterfeit, substituted, or deficient, it cannot be patently false. Shape (μορφή), however, can. This suggests that Nonnus does, in fact, see a distinction between the two terms.

Euripides' *Bacchae* presents a possible model. In the play's prologue, Dionysus explains to the audience that 'on account of these reasons, once transformed, I have a mortal appearance, and have changed my shape into the nature of a man' (ὧν οὐνεκ' εἶδος θνητὸν ἀλλάξας ἔχω μορφήν τ' ἐμὴν μετέβαλον εἰς ἀνδρὸς φύσιν, 53-4). Peters argues that Euripides is precise in his choice of words: Dionysus' appearance is his εἶδος; he has achieved that by changing his shape (μορφή). This establishes that 'appearance,' in the realm of physical objects, depends *inter alia* on physical 'shape.'²⁶⁰

If appearance is dependent on shape, then εἶδος is dependent on μορφή. This means that in Nonnus, μορφή is concrete and binary: physical characteristics that give rise to that appearance (aka, shape) can be true, or false if they do not accurately reflect that object's inner being and true identity. Appearance, however, requires a subjective viewer and relies upon the viewer's sense-perception. A viewer's perception of an object's appearance cannot be false per se, but it can be wrong or misleading. Because appearance depends on shape, false shapes result in misleading appearances. Yet, even appearances that arise from true shapes might be misconstrued or misinterpreted by one viewer, while another viewer might believe an object's appearance appropriately reflects its identity.

In addition, the *Dionysiaca* often calls the totality of its transformations into question, beyond the simple occurrence of εἶδος. Divine transformation is inherently temporary and reversible, and dependent upon the divinity's agency, often featuring a description of their return to their original state. Human transformations are rarely complete, in that some aspect of their original selves often remains. In the case of Actaeon, it is his human intellect. Niobe's stone possesses attributes and abilities beyond that of a normal stone, including her mind and her tears.

²⁶⁰ Herrmann 2007: 181-2. Dunkle 2009: 81 identifies an allusion to these lines in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Carmina Dogmatica* (θείην ἡλλάξατο μορφήν, 480.2), presenting a parallel between the incarnation and mythological accounts of Graeco-Roman deities taking on human appearances.

Collectively, the evidence suggests that mimetic appearances are a key motif, and one of the *Dionysiaca*'s unifying themes. Nonnus presents us with a hall of mirrors, where original forms risk being lost amongst the images and reflections. Appearances and images can be assumed and discarded, created and destroyed, imitated and distorted, or even subjected to a state of flux. This exploration of mimesis and the sense-perceptible world is perhaps not unexpected, given that Dionysus, the poem's patron god and subject, rules over the Encosmic material world, and exists as a μιμήμα himself. Nonnus draws on the language of mimeticism established by Plato, which underwent further development in the works of the Neoplatonists and early Christians. Nonnus does not do this to simply evoke Plato or his successors, but because mimesis cuts to epistemological dilemmas at the heart of the *Dionysiaca* as a whole. If the relationship between nature – or truth – and image is not one of perfect reduplication, how can the viewer truly 'know' anything?

2.4 The Aesthetics of Metamorphosis

The Neoplatonic aesthetics of the *Dionysiaca* have another dimension, one that can be explored through the poem's metamorphoses. The *Dionysiaca* presents us with an unstable and ever-changing world, where appearances are rarely static; they are continually transformed or displaced, often by divine agency. Metamorphosis is not only one of the *Dionysiaca*'s dominant themes; it is also a structural and programmatic principle, and a symbol for Nonnus' Dionysiac poetic, and the most distinctive characteristic of Nonnus' Dionysiac world.²⁶¹ When Nonnus invokes the shapeshifter Proteus in the prologue, he establishes a symbol for his metamorphic and multiform hymn. Like Proteus, Dionysus is a polymorphic god (πολύμορφος θεός). In this way, the poem reflects its subject matter. The two gods' metamorphoses represent the perfect

²⁶¹ Franchi 2016: 254; Gigli Piccardi 1985: 181, n163; Gigli Piccardi 2003: 47-8, 74-9; Shorrock 2011: 116-123.

unification of form and content, bringing together the poem's thematic, literary, stylistic and structural aims.²⁶²

Metamorphosis also expresses the changeable nature of the sensible world.²⁶³ As Clarke argues, 'the metamorphosis of the individual bodies of persons demonstrates is a tacit reversal or alteration of cosmogonic morphogenesis, a demonstration that however potent its origin, no created form is absolutely fixed or durable.'²⁶⁴ We can add from Mikkonen that, 'if metamorphosis problematizes the boundaries between the subject and its other, between language and non-language, it also challenges limits of conception. Thus, many studies of metamorphosis underscore epistemological and ontological questions regarding the subject's relationship to the world and to others, as well as the subject's knowledge of itself and the world.'²⁶⁵

In general, there are three discrete categories of transformation: allophany, in which a god or a mortal appears as something or someone other than what they are; metamorphosis which entails a more fundamental change;²⁶⁶ and finally, shapeshifting, in which the agent enters an almost constant state of flux.²⁶⁷ Although Nonnus often uses the same vocabulary to frame each type of transformation, we can still maintain a methodological distinction. In allophany, the subject appears as something or someone else as a result of their own agency. The agent has a greater sense of freedom and control, and achieves a more complete identification with their new form.²⁶⁸ This change of appearance is always fleeting and reversible. Metamorphosis, however, is often forced upon mortals, depriving them of agency. Mortal metamorphosis is also often irreversible and to some degree incomplete, as transformed individuals must retain elements of their original nature.²⁶⁹ The final category, shapeshifting, appears as a series of continuous transformation, and its ability appears limited to only a select number of divinities, notably Proteus and Dionysus.

²⁶² Faber 2016: 445; Paschalis 2014: 101.

²⁶³ Piccardi 2016: 441.

²⁶⁴ Clarke 1995: 32.

²⁶⁵ Mikkonen 1996: 309-10.

²⁶⁶ Zgoll 2004: 133-41, 175-9, 217-33.

²⁶⁷ Thumiger 2014: 388.

²⁶⁸ Thumiger 2014: 388.

²⁶⁹ Thumiger 2014: 388.

Our first case study is Deriades' speech from Book 40.37-60. Athena has taken the shape of his brother Morrheus, and reproaches Deriades for not challenging Dionysus. Deriades replies:

Spare me your words. Why do you reproach me, fearless Morrheus?

This is no soldier, no soldier who is always changing shape.

Indeed, I am at a loss who I am fighting or who I strike.

Seeking to shoot Dionysus with a feathered arrow,

or to cut through his neck with a sword, or desiring to cast a spear

and pierce his belly – instead of Lyaios

I find a speckled panther charging upon me ...

A lion is fighting and I hasten to cut his neck,

and then I see a bold, frightful serpent instead of a lion;

I attack, and ... instead of a serpent I behold a bear's back;

I cast my furious spear at its curving neck,

but I hurl the long missile in vain; for instead of a bear

a flame appears, flickering up into the air uninjured!

After I see a boar rushing, I hear a bull's bellow,

And instead of a boar, I see a bull lowering his head sideways

and stabbing our elephants with flashing horns. I swing my sword

against all sorts of beasts, and cannot overcome that one beast.

I behold a tree and aim my shot, but it is off and I

see a sprout of water curving into the path of the sky.

Therefore, I tremble at the bewitched miracles of his art,

and shrink from the changeable warfare of Dionysus.

But I will confront Bromios again, until I lay bare the cunning

enchantments of Dionysus, the fumbler of guile.

Here, Nonnus avoids the use of mimetic vocabulary, or terms related to outer appearance to characterise Dionysus' shapeshifting. He has, in effect, dispensed with the subjective vocabulary used to characterise metamorphoses elsewhere. This is in part due to the narrative frame. Nonnus does not speak to the audience here as a narrator capable of distinguishing between outer appearance and inner nature, but as the character Deriades. From the Indian leader's perspective, Dionysus does not just

‘appear’ as a panther or a lion; because Dionysus achieves complete verisimilitude, he might actually be one. Rather than employing language of polymorphism to rationalise Dionysus’ almost perpetual state of change, Deriades refers to the ‘widespread beasts’ (πολυσπερέες θῆρες) and the one beast (εἷς θήρ) behind them, expressing Dionysus as a One-Many.

Dionysus’ series of transformations are clearly modelled on those of Proteus from *Odyssey* 4.455-61, who transforms into a lion, a snake, a leopard, a boar, a fountain of water, and finally a tree in his attempts to escape Menelaus. Deriades describes Dionysus’ miracles as πολυφάρμακα (knowing many drugs or charms), an adjective associated with witches in epic, particularly Medea (Apoll. *Arg.* 4.1677) and Circe (Hom. *Od.* 10.276; Hes. fr. 302.15; Opp. *Hal.* 2.498). The term also recalls Proteus’ reception as a γόης (sorcerer).²⁷⁰ Additionally, Circe’s use of φάρμακα to metamorphose sailors led allegorists to count her among the younger demiurges responsible for generation (Procl. *In Crat.* 53). In the *Dionysiaca*, Deriades frames Dionysus’ shapeshifting in negative terms: Dionysus is ‘trick-stitching’ (δολορραφής, *Dion.* 40.60), and uses charms and enchantments (μάγγανον, 60). Shapeshifting is, in addition to a literary metaphor, a means of deception through artifice, and has ramifications for our understanding of Nonnus’ *poikilia*.

Continuing on, human metamorphosis has, from its earliest attestations in Greco-Roman culture, been open to symbolic or allegorical interpretation due to its ability to reflect on the boundaries of human identity.²⁷¹ It is no wonder, then, that the trope of metamorphosis can be employed to pose complex questions of ontology, as well as the problematic relationship between exterior appearance and inner nature, and the heterogeneity of the two identities involved. As a result, many of the metamorphoses in the *Dionysiaca* result in misapprehension or failure of recognition.

²⁷⁰ Fuhrer 2004: 11-2.

²⁷¹ Clarke 1995: 2 states that within numerous examples of metamorphosis across Western literature, there are ‘grave matters of gender construction and sexual conflict; familial and class identity; economic, social, and cosmological structures; moral affects and intellectual ideals.’ For ancient allegories of human metamorphosis and its exploration of human nature, see, for example, see Ps.-Plutarch *VHom.* 26 and Porphyry in Stob. *Anth.* 1.49.60.5-22 on Circe’s transformation of Odysseus’ men. For more recent studies of the trope of metamorphosis, see Forbes Irving 1990; Skulsky 2013. With a particular focus on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, see Segal 1998; Hardie 1999.

The Actaeon episode presents us with one such transformation. Actaeon's act of transgressive viewing leads to his metamorphosis, whereupon his hounds are unable to discern their master from a stag. He is 'changed in shape' (ἄλλοφυής, 325-6), and his hounds are led astray by his false appearance (ψευδομένη δ' ἐλάφοιο παραπλανηθέντες ὀπωπῆ, 330). They slowly tear him to pieces, while he retains his rational mind (ἔμφρονι θυμῷ, 333). Actaeon, in possession of his νοῦς (346, 350), presents the viewer with a dichotomy between his inner intelligent nature, and his outer, physical form.²⁷² His attempt at speech produces only the sounds of a beast (θηρείη φωνῇ, 367). The reader is able to distinguish Actaeon's human mind and fundamental identity through the medium of Nonnus' narration. The hounds, however, have no interpretive aid to help them decipher the relationship between outward appearance and identity.

Although Rumour brings tidings of Actaeon's death to the palace of Thebes, his family are initially left none the wiser about his transformation. When his mother and father, Autonoë and Aristaeus, search the mountainside for the remains of their son, Autonoë sees her son, but does not recognise him (εἶδε καὶ οὐ γίνωσκεν, 390). Sensory perception is insufficient, even when Autonoë notices and handles his metamorphosed remains. Nonnus' narrative, by contrasting his physical remains with Actaeon's once identifiable human features, maintains a problematic link between old and new, and between appearance and identity.

When the soul of Actaeon (ψυχή, 411) appears to his father in a dream, he wears the shape of a stag, but pours forth tears of understanding (ἔμφρονα δάκρυα) and speaks with a human voice (ἄνδρομέη φωνῇ, 414). He acts as a guide or interpreter for the viewing of his own remains, a role that ironically subverts the topos of the guide or interpreter of literary descriptions which occurs frequently in the Second Sophistic and Late Antiquity.²⁷³ Actaeon guides his father, and focalises the reader's gaze by use of

²⁷² Although Nonnus presents Actaeon's intellection and possession of nous as a twist on a metamorphosis contrived by Artemis, this transformation follows the model established by Homer in *Od.* Circe's transformation of Odysseus' men into pigs sparked a long discussion in Pythagoreanism and Platonism as to whether Homer's episode should be read literally or metaphorically, and whether a rational soul could truly enter the body of an animal. See, e.g. Procl. *In Tim.* 2.309.28ff; 3.294.22ff.

²⁷³ For ekphrasis in the Progymnasmata, see Bartsch 1989: 31; for the practice in Philostratus' *Imagines*, see Webb 2006: 117-136.

signs (e.g., σημήιον, 504), not unlike an allegorist. Afterwards, he begs his father to erect an unusual tomb for his remains:

ζωοτύπον δ' ἰκέτευε πολύτροπον, ὄφρα χαράξῃ
 στικτὸν ἐμὸν νόθον εἶδος ἀπ' αὐχένος εἰς πόδας ἄκρους·
 μοῦνον ἐμοῦ βροτέοιο τύπον τεύξειε προσώπου,
 πάντες ἵνα γνῶσιν ἐμὴν ψευδήμονα μορφήν.
 μὴ δέ, πάτερ, γράψειας ἐμὸν μόρον· οὐ δύναται γὰρ
 δακρυχέειν ἐμὸν εἶδος ὁμοῦ καὶ πότμον ὁδίτης.

And plead a skilful artist to carve my dappled,
 Changeling appearance from neck to feet,
 But let him make only my face of human form,
 That all may recognise my shape as false.
 Do not inscribe my fate, father, for the wayfarer
 Cannot weep for my fate and appearance together.

As Pierre Chuvin remarks, Nonnus' description of this statue has no parallel in the iconographic record, imaginatively blending man with beast in a monstrous hybrid that has no parallel.²⁷⁴ Furthermore, the oblique final sentence has long puzzled commentators, and even an epigram attributed to John of Gaza that seems to partly imitate this passage (*Anth. Pal.*, 15.1.) offers no aid in deciphering it.²⁷⁵

Actaeon imagines a grotesque statue that effectively translates the nature of his transformation from textual to visual. Read holistically with the wider episode, it establishes a framework for the interpretation of images by internal and external viewers. As far as we can tell, the statue does not capture a snapshot from a process of transformation. His transformation earlier in Book 5 is instantaneous (αὐτίκα) according to Nonnus (316), and according to Actaeon himself (492-6). Actaeon's sudden transformation in Nonnus is in clear contrast to the durative process described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A mimetic representation of his physical form would mislead viewers, in the same way that his hounds were misled by his physical, transformed appearance,

²⁷⁴ Chuvin 1976: 191. For a survey of the iconographic record of Actaeon's transformation and/or death, see Schlam 1984.

²⁷⁵ Chuvin 1976: 191.

presupposing inner nature based on external appearance or shape. This passage, Actaeon's final act, is an attempt to take control of an imagined internal audience's cognitive and interpretive processes. Actaeon's apparent solution to this epistemological conundrum is to create a visual and grotesque hybrid, mixing both human and stag signifiers to create an artefact that is not reflective of material reality, but rather is symbolic of inner truth: although not physically representative of his metamorphosed form, and not purely mimetic in its capacity as reproduction, the statue is able to symbolically convey the problematic relationship between outer appearance and inner nature. The statue, therefore, is symbolic of reality even if it is not strictly reflective of it.

The passage's preoccupation with appearance, demonstrated by εἶδος, μορφή, and τύπος, therefore displays a philosophical dimension, concerned with the ontology of outer, physical appearances and the production of images, and their relation to inner intelligibility. Actaeon's funerary statue could be said to reflect a more positive appraisal of art than can be found in Plato, in that it visually communicates the dichotomy between Actaeon's inner and outer nature through symbolism, effectively elevating the ontological status of the statue as art.

Actaeon forbids any inscription or epigram, although his reasoning is unclear. His imagined funerary statue attests to both his transformation and his death by its proximity to his desired tomb. A funerary epigram would otherwise stand as a written medium through which the viewer could be led to 'read' and correctly interpret the statue's meaning. Rather than stating its meaning, however, interpretation is for the viewer to achieve through its symbolism, and every viewer should have the capacity to be able to interpret it (πάντες ἵνα γνῶσιν). The craftsman who carves the statue should be πολύτροπος (versatile), but the term carries deep literary significance. Odysseus is the πολύτροπος ἀνὴρ (complicated man/the man of many-wiles) in the *Odyssey*, and Nonnus uses the term to describe the shapeshifter Proteus (*Dion.* 1.14) due to his capacity for multiple metamorphoses. Given Proteus' role as a symbol of the *Dionysiaca's* aesthetic principles, the use of πολύτροπος here for an artist suggests that Nonnus uses the statue of Actaeon to reflect on his own role as poet and creator.

Human metamorphoses such as Actaeon's, and the *Dionysiaca's* problematising of their epistemological framework, resonate with contemporary Neoplatonic concerns over the nature of the soul, and the interpretation of human and divine transformation. That human souls could enter the bodies of animals through transmigration appears to have been accepted by the Platonic tradition as a literal possibility up until Plotinus (cf. Plot. 3.4.2). This was rejected by Porphyry and Iamblichus, who took transmigration as a metaphor. Both made a firm distinction between rational and irrational souls, and therefore refused to allow for the transmigration from one kind to another.²⁷⁶ Proclus quotes the opposing views at *In Tim.* 3.294.22ff.:

It is customary to enquire what is meant by the descent of souls into irrational animals: some consider that the so-called bestial lives are mere assimilations of men to beasts (for it is not possible that a rational substance should become the soul of a beast), others even concede that this substance enters irrational beings (for, they assert, all souls are the same in kind, so that these become wolves and leopards and jellyfish).

Afterwards, Proclus presents his own opinion, offering a compromise between the two opposing arguments: 'the true account says that although the human soul enters into beasts, they retain their own appropriate life which the entered soul, as it were, transcends, while at the same time bound by affinity to it.' Proclus' solution, therefore, allows that a human soul can enter the body of a beast, but the soul remains rational and transcendent. The human soul does not actually inform the body of a beast (*In Remp.* 2.309.28ff.):

Let us state, then, that at any rate according to the opinion of Plato the soul transfers into irrational animals on account of similarity in way of life, a position which we too affirm, but not that the soul inhabits their bodies (for the differentiations in natural structure militate against such a reduced status) but solely by condition of life is tied to their soul which has animated its own body and has no additional need of the human soul.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ O'Neill 1971: 168, n.473. cf. Dorrie 1957: 423-4.

²⁷⁷ Transl. by O'Neil 1971: 168.

Although Nonnus' account of Actaeon could invite comparison to Neoplatonic writings on transmigration, it is not unique in this regard. Ovid's Actaeon also retains his human mind after his transformation. However, Nonnus' account does possess other unique features. In Ovid's account, Actaeon is an unwitting offender who stumbles into Diana's grove accidentally. In the *Dionysiaca*, Actaeon glimpses the goddess through the trees. He has the chance to turn back, but consciously makes the decision to spy on the goddess. Where Ovid's Actaeon is an innocent victim, unfortunate to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, Nonnus' Actaeon is deliberate and meditated in his transgression. His resulting metamorphosis therefore triggers moral and existential reflection. In his confession to his father, Actaeon admits that he hoped to win Artemis as his bride, and he expresses regret for his actions.

The moralistic dimensions of Nonnus' account are expanded upon by the modern Neoplatonist, Thomas Taylor. Taylor interprets the myth as an allegory for the conversion of the rational soul (Actaeon) to the nature life (symbolised by Artemis, or the moon), which subsists in Actaeon 'according to a lascivious habit.' By a conversion of this kind, the soul becomes changed, undertaking a lascivious life symbolised by the stag, which was considered a lascivious animal.²⁷⁸

Crucially in Nonnus, Actaeon's metamorphosis does not only result in his descent into an animal befitting his nature; moral reflection on his crime offers a chance for learning and moral rectification after death. These moralistic themes in Nonnus' account have parallels in Neoplatonic readings of other transformations, and would likely have been subjected to the same reading strategies by sections of his audience. One key example is Circe's transformation of Odysseus' men at *Od.* 10.212ff. The most detailed philosophical commentary on the Circe episode is an excerpt by Porphyry, preserved in Stobaeus' anthology (1.49.60.5-22):

Clearly, this myth is a riddle concealing what Pythagoras and Plato have said about the soul: that it is indestructible by nature and eternal, but not immune to experience and change, and that it undergoes change and transfer into other types of bodies when it goes through what we call "destruction" or "death." It then seeks out, in the pursuit of

²⁷⁸ See Taylor 1824: 308.

pleasure, that which is fitting and appropriate to it because it is similar and its way of life is similar in character. At this point, by virtue of what each of us gains through education and philosophy, the soul, remembering the good and repelled by the shameful and illicit pleasure, is able to prevail and watch itself carefully and take care lest through inattention it be reborn as a beast and fall in love with a body badly suited for virtue and impure, nurturing an uncultivated and irrational nature and encouraging the appetitive and passionate elements of the soul rather than the rational. Empedocles calls the fate and nature that preside over this transformation a *daimon* “wrapping souls in an alien tunic of flesh” (fr. B 126 DK) and giving them new clothes. ...

After a few comments relating to Circe and her island of Aeaea in the *Odyssey*, Porphyry says that it is pleasure that causes souls to fall into generation (33-43):

The urge for pleasure makes them long for their accustomed way of life in and through the flesh, and so they fall back into the witch’s brew of *genesis*, which truly mixes and brews together the immortal and mortal, the rational and emotional, the Olympian and the terrestrial. The souls are bewitched and softened by the pleasures that lead them back into *genesis*, and at this point they have special need for great good fortune and self-restrain lest they follow and give in to their worst parts and emotions and take on an accursed and beastly life.²⁷⁹

Even in Homer, the sailors’ metamorphosis appears to have a deeper significance: once they have endured their time as pigs, the sailors are returned to human form more youthful and more beautiful than before (*Od.* 10.388-400), hinting that outer transformation has in some way brought about fundamental change. Allegorical readings of this passage no doubt in some way inspired works such as Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*, a novel that consciously draws on Middle Platonism.

Moralistic interpretations of the Circe myth predate Neoplatonic accounts. Heraclitus wrote a moralising allegory in the 2nd century CE, where Odysseus is saved from Circe’s powers by his use of reason. Neoplatonic allegories place more emphasis, however, on the fate of the soul and its descent into generation. That Nonnus uses some of his metamorphoses to reflect on the descent of the soul into generation can be seen

²⁷⁹ Transl. Lamberton 1986: 115.

ποντοπόροι δελφῖνες· ἀμειβομένου δὲ προσώπου
εἰς φύσιν ἰχθυόεσσαν ἐμορφώθη γένος ἀνδρῶν.

The Tyrrhenians shrieked and rushed wildly about
goaded by fear. Plants were sprouting in the sea:
the rolling waves of the waters put out flowers;
the rose grew there, and reddened the foaming
swell upon it as if it were a garden, and
lilies gleamed in the surge. As they beheld these
false meadows their eyes were bewitched.
the place seemed to be a hill thick with trees,
and a woodland pasture, companies of countrymen and
shepherds with their sheep, and they thought they saw
a tuneful herdsman playing a tune on his shepherd's pipes;
they thought they heard the melody from the loud pipes' holes
and saw land while still sailing on the boundless sea;
then, deluded by their madness, they leapt into the deep,
and danced in the quiet water, now
dolphins of the sea –for the race of the men
was changed into the nature of fish.

This metamorphosis itself represents a departure from the standard vocabulary that Nonnus uses for metamorphoses. The transformation is not expressed in terms of, 1) mimesis, or 2) appearance, although the sailors still 'receive shape' (ἐμορφώθη). Instead, the pirates' metamorphosis is expressed primarily in terms of 'nature' (φύσις) and 'race' (γένος). There is no comparable collocation of these terms elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca*, marking this passage as potentially unique among Nonnus' metamorphoses. The use of nature and race suggests a more objective and fundamental transformation. Unlike Actaeon, who experiences outer transformation and inner continuity, the pirates' very race and nature is changed to that of a fish.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Nonnus' account of the Tyrrhenian pirates, however, is not the transformation itself, but the hallucinations the pirates experience beforehand. Although the pirates are driven mad and see phantom animals on the deck

of their ship in multiple accounts, Nonnus' version presents us with a further hallucination that takes place on the sea itself: the illusory gardens and meadows.

These hallucinations appear to be Nonnus' own innovation upon the traditional myth, and they are given particular prominence in his narrative, even more so than the transformation of the pirates themselves. Structurally, the hallucinatory meadows in place of the sea mirrors the activities of the pirates themselves, which take place upon the sea and the land (105-119). From Numenius onward, the sea became a popular allegory for genesis and the material world (Porphyry, *De Antro* 16, cf. Procl. *In Crat.* 86.11; 88.22-3). Odysseus' wanderings across the sea were read allegorically as a symbol for mortal life, and the soul's wanderings across a 'sea of generation,' the cause of 'the most tragic of sufferings' (*De mal. sub.* 24.23-4). The resulting plight of every soul is to flee 'the cycle of generation, the long wandering and the useless life' (*In Tim.* 3.296.7-11), and ascend towards its natural condition.²⁸⁰

Elsewhere, the Neoplatonist Hermias envisions material life as a meadow, which Proclus reports (*In Remp.* 2.159.21-160.11):

'Gladness' signifies the affection of each [group of souls, one from the heavens and one from Hades] for genesis. For if the meadow is indeed the source of generation, and if they come upon the meadow with 'gladness', it is clear that both groups have an ardent desire for generation and wish to participate in this life which is implicated in matter: for there is much activity in this place. And so, for the heavenly souls, just as for the chthonic souls, the change of life is gladdening, as they have grown tired of their former activities, some indeed with good reason, as they endured much hardship, while some, even if they existed in a state of comfort, nevertheless grew weary of the life there above. For they could not act with their entire self but only with that part of themselves able to remain above. It was therefore their head that yearned for the life in the heavens. But the rest of them, however much each soul has of the life which loves generation, remaining inactive there above, and desiring to act, made the whole soul weary and weak with regard to a certain part of itself, and, being weary, it gave way to that which throbbed within it, and, giving way, it gladly arrives at the meadow, which places the prospect of generation before its eyes.

²⁸⁰ Fortier 2018: 325.

According to Hermias, the soul descends and turns from the Intelligibles because it is unable to remain forever in the company of its god, and cannot maintain a perpetual mastery over the irrational aspect of their selves. The influence of the irrational life, therefore, causes the soul to grow weary of the life above.

Nonnus explicitly describes the Tyrrhenian pirates as wanderers (πλωτῆρες, 106), a term heavily associated with Odysseus, and a metaphor for the soul's embodied life in the material world. Other details also recall the *Odyssey* and Odysseus' journeys. The pirates are ξεινοφόντοι, murderers of strangers or guests, evocative of the ξεινοδαίτης, or stranger-devouring, Cyclops (cf. Eur. *Cycl.* 658). The Cyclops Polyphemus was the son of Poseidon, the god of the sea and of matter. In his commentary on Homer's *Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry alludes to Odysseus' blinding of the Cyclops, saying 'for one cannot simply be rid of this sensory life by blinding it, and striving to be free immediately' (*De Antro* 80.11-3). In this allegorical reading, the Cyclops, then, becomes a symbol of Odysseus' own sensory life in the material world. The Cyclops' blinding becomes a metaphor for suicide, and an attempt to flee material existence.²⁸¹ Nonnus also mentions the Arethusa at line 116, a Sicilian spring, that suggests the ancestral home of the Cyclopes.

In addition to seeing a meadow upon the waves, the pirates hear a shepherd's song, played on a set of pipes (σῦριγξ). On first glance, this recalls Cadmus' song to Typhon in Book 1 of the *Dionysiaca*, which bewitches Typhon's soul and lures him to his doom.²⁸² Yet, there are further parallels with the *Odyssey's* Sirens.²⁸³ Nonnus' tale of the Tyrrhenian pirates is framed by the prophet Tiresias as a 'Sicilian story' (Σικελόν τινα μῦθον, 45.104), recalling the 'Sicilian song' of Book 22, which Nonnus compares to the 'hymns which the minstrel Sirens pour forth from their honey-tongued

²⁸¹ Lamberton 1986: 130-1.

²⁸² The shepherd's pipes could also represent another allusion to the Cyclops, in particular the bucolic Cyclops of Theocritus *Idyll* 11.

²⁸³ The two myths (Odysseus and the Sirens, Dionysus and the pirates) were, perhaps coincidentally, the subject of two separate mosaics found in the same house at Dougga, northern Tunisia. The Sirens are also depicted with musical instruments, marking a distinct break from the poetic tradition. See Knutson 2007. An Etruscan oil lamp from Camucia, currently in Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca depicts the Sirens with syringes.

throats' (22.10-12). The Sirens themselves were believed to live on the Tyrrhenian sea (Lyc. *Al.* 648ff.; 712ff.). In the *Odyssey* itself, they stand in a flowery meadow on the coast, surrounded by the bones of their victims (*Od.* 12.45-6). Dionysus fulfils a similar role in the *Dionysiaca*, standing upon the shore in disguise, wearing rich clothing and jewellery, luring the pirates to their ruin.

Neoplatonists often read the Sirens allegorically. Proclus distinguishes between three species of Siren: 1) heavenly Sirens who belong to Zeus; 2) hypochthonic Sirens belonging to Hades; 3) Sirens belonging to Poseidon who relate to generation (*In Remp.* 2.239.7-12). Their song is contrasted with that of the Muses. The Muses' harmony is 'soul-saving and rooted in the gods;' the Homeric Sirens' harmony, however, 'causes generation and attaches to matter' (*In Remp.* 2.68.3-10). Hermias interprets the Sirens as an obstacle that the soul must overcome to attain its *nostos*, its return to the noetic realm (*In Phaedr.* 3.224.8-15).

The intersections between Dionysus' encounter with the Tyrrhenian pirates and the Sirens from the *Odyssey* suggest that Dionysus fulfils a similar role to that of the Sirens, especially given the importance of the sea and the meadow as symbols of generation. As we have seen in Chapter 1, Dionysus occupies the position of the Encosmic or Material Intellect in Neoplatonic metaphysical hierarchies; he 'indivisibly presides over the creation of individuals' (Procl. *In Crat.* 171), demonstrating his links with generation. Collectively, the evidence suggests that Nonnus was aware of Neoplatonic allegories and theories regarding metamorphosis, particularly the descent of the soul into material creation, and that these theories had an influence on his reshaping of the myth of the Tyrrhenian pirates.

2.5 Conclusion

Taken together, mimesis and metamorphosis are two important strands for understanding the aesthetic principles of Nonnus' Dionysiac world. Both themes reveal Nonnus' obsession with the visual, the material, and sensate worlds. Both create tensions between form and identity, allowing for an exploration of ontological and epistemological issues. The sheer volume of vocabulary relating to mimesis (τύπος,

ἀντίτυπος, εἰκὼν, ἴνδαλμα, φάσμα, μίμημα, μιμηλός, and μιμέομαι) is striking in comparison with his epic models, the subsequent 'Nonnian School,' and other Late Antique poems. The frequency analyses demonstrate the closest parallels: John of Gaza, Paul the Silentiary, and the *Carmina* of Gregory of Nazianzus. These analyses show definitively that, in terms of mimetic language, Nonnus is an innovative force in the epic tradition. Furthermore, comparisons between the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* demonstrate that these features are not simply a staple of Nonnus' poetic style, but a unique feature and self-conscious adoption for the purpose of composing the *Dionysiaca*. This suggests that, despite the prevalence of mimetic vocabulary and theorisation in Christological writings, Nonnus decided that mimetic themes and vocabulary were more appropriate for his Dionysiac enterprise than his paraphrastic poetry.

These themes are clearly appropriate to the character of Dionysus himself: notably, the god is a μίμημα, and his identity as a shapeshifter offers him incredible mimetic capabilities that continually question the relationship between identity and form; he is also the Encosmic Intellect, who presides over the material world, a world characterised in Neoplatonic terms by mimesis and division. Plotinus had irrevocably changed the face of Platonism by creating a metaphysical and ontological schema in which nearly everything in existence could be conceived of as mimetic, and participating non-reciprocally in higher principles. Nonnus' Dionysiac world appears to have been constructed according to this Plotinian worldview, where, like the tapestry-based *poikilia* it imitates, the poem proceeds through a parade of images and μιμήματα. Even where mimetic vocabulary is absent, in descriptions of visual appearances and discussions of being and identity, the theme and epistemological issues of mimesis are never far beneath the surface.

Although mimesis can often be linked to the wider proliferation of deception and falsehood in the *Dionysiaca*, the two are not universally interlinked. Mimetic terms can appear independent of vocabulary relating to deception and falsehood. They can also appear without any apparent ethical implication or consequence. Behavioural mimesis can beget learning, and assimilation to pre-existing models, positive or negative. Behavioural mimesis also offers a paradigm for Father-Son relationships:

Dionysus' positive imitation of Zeus is reminiscent of Christian conception of the Father and Christ, as well as of Christianity more generally, with Gregory of Nyssa's definition of Christianity as an imitation of the divine nature. Father-Son mimesis also offers a compelling paradigm for Nonnus' relationship with his literary father, Homer.

In conjunction with mimesis, the *Dionysiaca's* metamorphoses also pose questions related to ethics, metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology. The trope of metamorphosis simultaneously establishes and then destabilises boundaries between previously discrete entities, eliding heterogeneous identities and underscoring the changeable nature of the sensible-perceptible world. The capacity of appearance to convey perfect knowledge of inner truth is called into question, and a premium is placed upon recognition, knowledge, and discernment.

These metamorphoses engage closely with the Greco-Roman mythological tradition, but such transformations had been radically re-contextualised by Neoplatonic allegory, and traces of these intellectual discussions can be found in Nonnus. The episode of the Tyrrhenian pirates in particular dispenses with Nonnus' standardised metamorphic vocabulary and his preoccupation with appearance to signify a more complete transformation in the nature of the pirates themselves. The episode includes multiple intertexts with the *Odyssey*, and intra-textual allusions that recall the Cyclops and the Sirens, both symbols or agents of materiality. In conjunction with the hallucinatory meadows, Nonnus appears to engage with Neoplatonic allegories of the sea and of meadows as places of generation into which the soul descends, recasting this traditional tale in a Neoplatonic light.

Undoubtedly, the poem has a greater and more consistent focus on the epistemological issues of metamorphosis than perhaps other records of Graeco-Roman myth. These quandaries over the ethics, ontology and epistemology draw upon, and appear rooted in, contemporary Christian and Neoplatonic discourse. Furthermore, because metamorphosis and mimesis offer clear connections between the *Dionysiaca's* form and content, these issues suggest a degree of self-reflection on the part of the poet, and pose questions to the audience about the nature of the *Dionysiaca* itself. The relationship between outer form and inner nature is complicated; appearance can obfuscate the pursuit of truth, or ultimately aid in its deciphering through symbolism.

3. Madness and Ecstatic Union

By appealing to the Muses in his opening lines, Nonnus appeals to a long-standing tradition of poetic inspiration, which had been further developed and re-contextualised within Late Antiquity. Even for Christian poets, the Muses remained an important literary motif, rather than an indicator of religious identity. The wisdom (σοφία) the Muses were believed to bestow granted the poet the knowledge of truth necessary to compose their narrative, and this process of divine inspiration invited elision between the roles of poet and prophet.²⁸⁴

Although Nonnus eschews some of the explicit *topoi* of poetic inspiration espoused by other poets, the connection between poet and prophet is central to Nonnus' self-representation as a poet and narrator. Over the course of this chapter, I intend to look at the role of poetic and divine inspiration within the *Dionysiaca*. Part of this analysis will hinge on the *Dionysiaca*'s representation of its poet, and its self-conscious reflection on inspired poetry.

The precise mechanics of divine inspiration, how it functioned, and how its effects manifested in the recipient, were of interest and highly debated among Neoplatonic thinkers. With the rise of Christianity across the empire, a new source of divine inspiration emerged in the figure of Christ, that could contest the poetic landscape and challenge traditional claims on truth and communion with the divine. As Shorrock writes:

The coming of Christ as a new source of inspiration and divine knowledge presented a profound challenge and stimulus to the poets of the age. In the face of such a challenge, poets found themselves at the forefront of a far-reaching debate on such questions as

²⁸⁴ Gigli Piccardi 2014: 403. Latin poetry had long made explicit the connection between *poeta* (poet) and *vates* (prophet). The conflation between the two is unsurprising, given that Apollo was the god of poetry and prophecy; both are expressed in hexameter verse, and utilised similar mechanics of divine inspiration. See Miller 2009: 221, 222, 235, 245, 297, 315, 317, 325, 368.

the relationship between the realms of the human and the divine, and between Christianity and traditional culture; about the communication, negotiation and control of knowledge and power. As such, the poetry of late antiquity emerged as a dynamic arena of contestation through which the distinctive discourses of a new Christian world would be forged.²⁸⁵

As Shorrock has persuasively shown, Nonnus is able to adopt two poetic personae, as a poet of the Muses, and as a poet of Christ.²⁸⁶ Given his ability to draw upon two sources of poetic inspiration that were undoubtedly in dialogue with one another, it is not surprising that Nonnus' poetry reflects contemporary cultural discourse, whether from Christian theologians, Neoplatonic philosophers, or *incertus* figures whose influences are impossible to disentangle.

Given the connections between inspired poetry and divine madness in antiquity, particularly in the Platonic tradition, this chapter will also look at madness and altered states of consciousness within the *Dionysiaca*, and situate them within their Platonic context. It will show that, although Nonnus explores the positive and negative effects of madness and possession, there are avenues for ecstatic union that facilitate the ascent of the soul. This will include looking at characters who are subjected to or experience frenzy, madness, or altered states of perception (βακχεία, λύσσα, μανία) brought on by the divine, the consumption of wine, or exaltation due to music and dance.

Unsurprisingly, vocabulary relating to Dionysiac frenzy and worship is pervasive throughout the *Dionysiaca*. Afflicted characters actively rage (βακχεύω),²⁸⁷ and occasionally participate in rituals suggestive of Dionysiac worship (ὄργια). However, such language is not exclusively and contextually limited to the Dionysiac sphere. Characters rage with Ares, as if inspired by the war-god himself (βακχεύω, e.g. 1.227, 13.197, 14.338, 17.321, 23.57). 'Bacchic' madness can also be inflicted by numerous gods (e.g. Pan, Hera, Persephone). Vian argues that this contributes to a process of secularisation in the poem in which religious terms lose their precise religious

²⁸⁵ Shorrock 2011: 15.

²⁸⁶ See Shorrock 2011.

²⁸⁷ In addition to being a *terminus technicus* to denote Bacchic worship, the verb βακχεύω could be used figuratively to describe any state of frenzy. Jiménez San Cristóbal 2009: 46-7; Doroszewski 2016: 340.

connotations.²⁸⁸ The term βακχεύω, for instance, although traditionally used to refer to Dionysiac ecstasy, could, via metonymy and allegory, mean ‘to be under the influence of wine’ or ‘to be intoxicated.’ This process of secularisation, and indeed, allegorisation, can perhaps be seen not just as a divestment of religious significance. Instead, it can be seen as a Dionysiac cross-pollination of terminology, whereby any and all madness can be traced back etymologically to the poem’s patron and central figure, thus creating an elision between madness, inspiration, and the Dionysiac sphere.

Mystery terminology etymologically linked to Bacchus is also present in the *Paraphrase*. At *Par.* 2.12-20, Nonnus recounts the Wedding at Cana (John 2.1-11), in an episode that has received much attention for its Dionysiac imagery.²⁸⁹ The wineless wedding table is described as ἀβάκχευτος, a relatively rare adjective meaning ‘uninitiated into Bacchic mysteries.’²⁹⁰ The adjective ἀβάκχευτος, although not intended as a literal reference to Dionysiac cult, references a traditional comparison between Judaeo-Christian rites and Bacchic celebrations. For instance, Philo of Alexandria compares the ecstasy of Hannah to intoxication and Bacchic inspiration (*De Ebr.* 143-52). As Mackie argues, a number of Graeco-Roman mystical motifs converge in Philo’s text, including ‘Bacchic ecstasy, sober intoxication, and Platonic contemplative ascent.’²⁹¹ Plutarch also draws a link between the Jewish Sabbath and Bacchic orgies (*Quest. Conv.* 671f). The first known Christian author to use ἀβάκχευτος was Clement of Alexandria who, in *Strom.* 4.25.126.3, quotes lines 470-2 from Euripides’ *Bacchae*, reimagined as the words of Christ (Euripides’ text in italics):²⁹²

The Saviour Himself, then, plainly initiates us into the mysteries (μυσταγωγῇ), according to the words of the tragedy: *Seeing those who see, he also gives the orgies* (ὄργια). And if you ask, *these orgies, what is their nature?* You will hear again: *It is forbidden to mortals uninitiated in the Bacchic rites (ἀβακχεύτοις) to know.*²⁹³

²⁸⁸ Vian 1994: 218.

²⁸⁹ Kuiper 1918: 247; Golega 1930: 62; Livrea 2000: 84; Shorrock 2001: 57.

²⁹⁰ Doroszewski 2016: 336. The adjective is taken as an explicit reference to Dionysiac worship in Eur. *Orest.* 319 and the relevant scholia. Also Luc. *Symp.* 3.5; Philost. *Imag.* 2.7.

²⁹¹ Mackie 2014: 155

²⁹² Doroszewski 2016: 337.

²⁹³ Trans. Wilson 1885.

This quotation from the dialogue of Dionysus and Pentheus is transformed: the once Bacchic ὄργια become an allusion to the teachings and mysteries of Christ, and the ἀβάκχευτοι become those who have yet to be introduced to them. Combined with similar attestations in Julian (*Or.* 7.222a–b) and Theodoret, bishop of Cyprus (*Cur.* 1.86), this suggests that Nonnus' ἀβάκχευτος τράπεζα ('un-Bacchic table') can be framed within wider discussions of the symbolic and theological nature of wine in Christianity. In this light, *Par.* 2.12-20 symbolises the separation between the wedding guests and Christ, and their limited ability to participate in Christ's salvation.²⁹⁴ If Bacchic terminology in the *Paraphrase* has not been entirely divested of its semantics regarding communion with and participation in the divine, then we should not assume that it has been in the *Dionysiaca*.

3.1 Earlier Concepts of Inspiration

Bacchic frenzy has long been associated with poetic inspiration. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Tiresias explains that the worshippers of Dionysus are granted the power of prophecy (*Bacch.* 298-9). Despite the fact that prophecy normally fell under the influence of Apollo, Dionysus had oracles in Greece and was said to inhabit the Oracle at Delphi during the winter months when Apollo was said to be among the Hyperboreans.²⁹⁵ Poetic inspiration was also clearly associated with ecstasy and altered states of consciousness among Greek poets even before the often-touted developments in Democritus and Plato. As Piccardi demonstrates, such connections can be seen, for example, in the 'frenetic sonority' of Pindar's Dionysiac *Dithyramb*, as well as Dionysus' epithet Μουσόμαντις ('Of prophetic song') in Aeschylus (*Edon. TrGF* 60), and Archilochus' image 'stricken in the mind with wine' (οἶνω συγκεραυνωθείς φρένας, *IEG* 120) which describes the poet's mind when he is about to sing the Dithyramb.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁴ Doroszewski 2016: 338.

²⁹⁵ Hershkowitz 1998: 41; Fearn 2007: 182.

²⁹⁶ Gigli Piccardi 2014: 403. *contra* Hershkowitz 1998: 16, who argues that, prior to Plato, the Muses were believed to provide assistance to inspired poets in terms of knowledge and memory, but that such inspiration was not characterised in terms of mania or frenzy. Hershkowitz instead credits the earliest developments in the conceptualisation of inspiration as madness to Plato and Democritus.

Plato speaks of divine inspiration in terms of ἐνθουσιασμός (frenzy, inspiration, possession) at *Ion* 533d-f, etymologically ‘to be entered/filled with the divine’ (Cf. *Apology* 22a-c, *Meno* 99c-e, *Phaedrus* 245, *Laws* 682a, 719c-d and *Ion* passim), and in terms of μανία (frenzy) at *Phaedrus* 245a. As Piccardi shows, such terminology was in essence taken from the Dionysiac sphere: the poets are ‘inspired and possessed’ (ἐνθεοὶ καὶ κατεχόμενοι, *Ion* 533e); they behave ‘as if they were Corybantes’ (ὥσπερ οἱ κορυβαντιῶντες, 534a); they are ‘out of their minds/frenzied’ (ἐκφρονες, 534a) and they ‘speak or act with frenzy’ (βακχεύουσι, 534a) as if they were possessed like Bacchants.²⁹⁷ Although prior poets had characterised poetic inspiration as an altered state of consciousness or frenzy, one of Plato’s key innovations seems to have been in his development of the Muses and the precise mechanics of divine inspiration.

When Homer appeals to the Muses for aid in recounting the wrath of Achilles, the Catalogue of Ships, or the wanderings of Odysseus, he does not self-consciously characterise his poetic inspiration in terms of madness.²⁹⁸ Homer’s inspiration would, however, be re-contextualised by later writers. Horace, while satirising the connection between manic poets, elevated poetry, and wine, explains how Homer ‘because of his praise of wine, is accused of being a drunk’ (*Epist.* 1.19.6) and says that ‘Father Ennius never leapt forth to sing of war, except when drunk’ (1.19.7-8). In his *Odes*, Horace describes his own poetic inspiration as Bacchic ecstasy (*Odes* 2.19.1-8).

The Roman epic poet Statius offers a compelling comparison for Nonnus. His *Thebaid* embodies many of the same general ideas around poetic inspiration, and parallels are particularly resonant given that his *Thebaid* takes place at the ancestral home of Dionysus, and sets the trials and tribulations of the royal family within a framework of *mania*. In the opening lines Statius, conceptualises himself as a poet incited by the fire of divine inspiration, and uses the imagery of a frenzied poet to express the meta-narrative role of madness (*Theb.* 1.1-4).²⁹⁹ In the case of the *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus innovates on this connection by assimilating the Muses to the Mimallones, Macedonian Bacchants who received their name due to their imitation of

²⁹⁷ Gigli Piccardi 2014: 403.

²⁹⁸ Hershkowitz 1998: 63.

²⁹⁹ Hershkowitz 1998: 63.

men (cf., e.g. Polyaeus 4.1.1). The narrator then asks them to grant him the Bacchic symbols necessary to transform him into a Dionysiac narrator, including the fennel (νάρθηκα, *Dion.* 1.11) and the thyrsus (θύρσον, 12).

3.2 Bacchants

For the Neoplatonists, Bacchic frenzy was a state of perfection of the human soul. The fallen human soul, they believed, was characterised by multiplicity and therefore incapable of contemplating the perfect and unified noetic entities, otherwise known as the Forms.³⁰⁰ In order to contemplate the Intelligible world at the level of Intellect, the soul must therefore purify itself of this multiplicity and strive to become as unified as possible. According to the Neoplatonists, this perfect state of unity in the human soul is brought about through Bacchic madness, and its mythical counterpart is Dionysus.³⁰¹ The soul that achieves this state of unity is called a ‘Bacchant,’ following Plato’s *Phaedo* 69c-d³⁰²:

So it actually seems that those people who established the rites for us are no ordinary people, but in reality have long been setting a riddle when they say that whoever comes to Hades without initiation and the rites will lie in filth, whereas someone who arrives there purified and initiated will dwell with gods. For in fact, as those involved in the rites put it, “many carry the thyrsus, but few are Bacchants.” The latter, in my opinion, are none other than those who have pursued philosophy correctly.³⁰³

The *Phaedo* was a popular dialogue in Late Antiquity. We know of firmly attested but non-extant commentaries on the dialogue as a whole, or on parts thereof, by Porphyry,

³⁰⁰ Van den Berg 2001: 219.

³⁰¹ Van den Berg 2001: 219; Gigli Piccardi 2014: 406.

³⁰² Plato *Phaedo* 69c-d: καὶ κινδυνεύουσι καὶ οἱ τὰς τελετὰς ἡμῖν οὗτοι καταστήσαντες οὐ φαῦλοί τινες εἶναι, ἀλλὰ τῷ ὄντι πάλαί αἰνίττεσθαι ὅτι ὃς ἂν ἀμύητος καὶ ἀτέλεστος εἰς Ἄιδου ἀφίκηται ἐν βορβόρῳ κείσεται, ὁ δὲ κεκαθαρμένος τε καὶ τετελεσμένος ἐκεῖσε ἀφικόμενος μετὰ θεῶν οἰκήσει. εἰσὶν γὰρ δὴ, ὥς φασι οἱ περὶ τὰς τελετὰς, ‘ναρθηκοφόροι μὲν πολλοί, βάκχοι δὲ τε παῦροι.’ οὗτοι δ’ εἰσὶν κατὰ τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν οὐκ ἄλλοι ἢ οἱ πεφιλοσοφηκότες ὀρθῶς.

³⁰³ Transl. in Sedley & Long 2011: 56, with minor changes

Iamblichus, Paterius, Plutarch of Athens, Syrianus, and Proclus.³⁰⁴ Two commentaries survive from Damascius and Olympiodorus. Socrates' exegesis of the term 'Bacchants' as 'true philosophers' is also frequently referenced by later Platonists. Proclus hails his teacher Syrianus as a Bacchant akin to Plato who was filled with divine truth (ὁ τῷ Πλάτῳ μὲν συμβακχεύσας ὡς ἀληθῶς καὶ ὁμέστιος καταστάς τῆς θείας ἀληθείας, *In Parm.* 618), and Proclus is lauded as a Bacchant in turn by his pupil Marinus (*Vita Procli* 22):

Provided with such kind of virtues without effort, and with a steady stride making constant progress in following the order of the degrees of mystic initiation, he achieved greater and higher virtues, as if being guided by the hand by his nature and a scientific method. He had already been purified from and risen above the world of genesis and looked down on those upon it who carry the thyrsus (ναρθηκοφόρων), and he intoxicated himself (ἐβάκχευε) concerning the first entities. So he had himself achieved seeing directly the really beatific visions from beyond, establishing his assured science not on apodictic and discursive syllogisms, but on what he could contemplate with his eyes, on the intuitions of intellectual activity, on the models contained within divine reason. So he acquired this virtue whose true and proper name is not intelligence, but rather wisdom, sophia, or any other if possible more reverend name.³⁰⁵

The Neoplatonists in particular used *Phaedo* 69c-d as a source for their allegorical exegeses of the murder and dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans. The god's physical dismemberment becomes symbolic of the descent into multiplicity and the generation of the material world, and his later rebirth a symbol of the salvific return to unity.³⁰⁶ As discussed in Chapter 1, although the *Dionysiaca's* Zagreus episode preserves

³⁰⁴ Gertz 2011: 4-5.

³⁰⁵ Marinus *Vita Procli* 22: Ἐκ δὲ τῆς τοιαύτης ιδέας τῶν ἀρετῶν ἀλύπως καὶ εὐηνίως καὶ οἰονεῖ κατὰ βαθμόν τινα τελεστικὸν προκόπτων, ἐπὶ τὰς μείζους καὶ ὑπὲρ ταύτας ἀνέτρεχε, φύσει τε δεξιᾷ καὶ ἀγωγῇ ἐπιστημονικῇ ποδηγετούμενος. ἤδη γὰρ κεκαθαρμένος καὶ τῆς γενέσεως ὑπερανέχων καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ ναρθηκοφόρων ὑπερορῶν, περὶ τὰ πρῶτα ἐβάκχευε καὶ αὐτόπτης ἐγένετο τῶν ἐκεῖ μακαρίων ὄντως θεαμάτων, οὐκέτι μὲν διεξοδικῶς καὶ ἀποδεικτικῶς συλλογιζόμενος αὐτῶν τὴν ἐπιστήμην, ὥσπερ δὲ ὄψει, ἀπλαῖς ἐπιβολαῖς ταῖς $\leq \tau \epsilon \geq$ νοεραῖς ἐνεργείαις θεώμενος τὰ ἐν τῷ θείῳ νῶ παραδείγματα καὶ ἀρετὴν προσλαμβάνων, ἣν οὐκέτ' ἂν τις φρόνησιν κυρίως ἐπονομάσειεν, σοφίαν δὲ μᾶλλον προσερεῖ ἢ καὶ τινα σεμνοτέραν ταύτης ἐπωνυμίαν.

³⁰⁶ Damascius references Porphyry's assertion that creation can be divided into the divisible and indivisible, which are governed by Dionysus and Zeus respectively. To each god, there is a set of subordinate deities: the Olympians under Zeus, and the Titans under Dionysus (Dam. *In Phd.* 1.3). Damascius, however, disagrees with Porphyry by referencing the myth of Dionysus' murder, stating that

many of the features of the myth, Dionysus' restitution and return to unity is not present and only alluded to.

These Neoplatonic texts offer us a glimpse at an exegetical praxis that would have been extremely familiar to Nonnus' readers. Of course, it would be inconceivable to compose a poem about Dionysus without referencing the Bacchants as part of Dionysus' thiasos, and Nonnus does on occasion present them as if divinely inspired or even possessed by the god, for example, at 29.276-81:

ἀλλ' ὅτε Βασσαρίδων ὀδύνας πρη῏νατο τέχνη
 θυρσομανῆς Διόνυσος, ἐμάρνατο μείζονι χάρμη.
 καὶ τις ἀμερσινόοιο κατάσχετος ἄλματι λύσσης
 Βασσαρὶς Ἰνδὸν ἄρῃα μετέστιχε θυιάς ἐνυῶ,
 ἀμφὶ σέ, Λύδιε δαῖμον· ἀπὸ πλοκάμοιο δὲ Βάκκης (280)
 ἀφλεγέος σελάγιζε κατ' αὐχένος αὐτόματον πῦρ.

But after he had soothed the pains of the Bassarids by his art,
 thyrsus-mad Dionysus fought with still greater fury.
 One wild Bassarid, possessed by the throes of sense-stealing madness
 was harrying the Indians in the conflict for your honour, O Lydian god!
 And from the Bacchant's hair shone a self-kindled flame
 about her neck which did not burn her.

The juxtaposition and sudden transition between Dionysus, shown here tending the Bassarids' wounds, and the Bacchant's frenzy in battle suggests divine inspiration and the direct possession of the Bacchants by Dionysus, as if the god himself was fighting through them.³⁰⁷ The Bacchant fights in an altered state of consciousness

no manifold opposes or destroys its own governing monad. Dionysus, therefore, must possess both a divisible and indivisible nature, whereby he is indivisible while upon the throne of Zeus, and divisible when proceeding into the multiplicity of the universe (*In Phd.* 1.4). According to Damascius, humanity is created from the ashes of the Titans after their punishment for murdering and devouring Dionysus (*In Phd.* 1.2). Because humanity arises from the Titans who had recently ingested Dionysus, we partake of both natures: when we are irrational and partake in multiplicity, we are Titanic; when we come together and partake in unity, we become Dionysi (ὅταν δὲ εἰς ἐκεῖνο συμβῶμεν, Διόνυσοι γινόμεθα τετελειωμένοι ἀτεχνῶς, *In Phd.* 1.9). The anthropogonic elements in Damascius' version are controversial. See Edmonds 1999.

³⁰⁷ Geisz 2018: 241.

(ἀμερσινόοιο ... λύσσης), suggesting that her mind has been taken over by Dionysus. The motif of the flaming hair has a long epic pedigree dating back to the *Iliad*, where Athena creates a flame that burns on Diomedes' helmet and shield as a physical manifestation of the strength bestowed upon him by the goddess (*Il.* 5.4-8):³⁰⁸

δαῖέ οἱ ἐκ κόρυθός τε καὶ ἀσπίδος ἀκάματον πῦρ
 ἀστέρ' ὅπωριν' ἑναλίγκιον, ὅς τε μάλιστα
 λαμπρὸν παμφαίνῃσι λελουμένος ὠκεανοῖο·
 τοῖόν οἱ πῦρ δαῖεν ἀπὸ κρατός τε καὶ ὤμων,
 ὥρσε δέ μιν κατὰ μέσσον ὅθι πλεῖστοι κλονέοντο.

She made tireless fire blaze from his shield and helmet
 like that star of the waning summer who beyond all stars
 rises bathed in the ocean stream to glitter in brilliance.³⁰⁹
 Such was the fire she made blaze from his head and his shoulders
 and urged him into the middle fighting, where most were struggling.

An allegorical exegesis of this passage is attested in the anonymous *Peri Apiston*, a rationalising text from the 5th century CE or later that likely recycled earlier material.³¹⁰ According to the author, the flames on Diomedes' shield and helmet are symbols of intellectual inspiration (*PA* 20):

What is that incessant fire which could flash from the weapons of Diomedes? Athena is traditionally known as the 'light-bringer' and she is the patron of intellectual activity and true wisdom. She lit a fire in Diomedes' soul, and took away the mist, that is to say, his ignorance in the presence of which the soul is blind.³¹¹

By characterising his blazing Bacchant as mad, Nonnus appears to be 'updating' a prototypical Homeric scene with elements drawn from a Late Antique perspective on divine inspiration, based perhaps on a similar allegorical reading of the passage. Although Diomedes is perhaps the earliest model for the inspired Bacchant, there are

³⁰⁸ Geisz 2018: 241.

³⁰⁹ Identified as Sirius, the dog-star in the scholia. The same comparison is made twice of Achilles at *Il.* 22.25-32 and 316-21.

³¹⁰ Ogden 2017: 129.

³¹¹ Transl. Hawes 2014: 247.

notable divergences between the *Iliad* and the *Dionysiaca* in character, context, and agency. Firstly, the recipient of inspiration in the *Dionysiaca* is not a named hero like Diomedes, but an anonymous member of the god's thiasos. Secondly, while Diomedes' is the recipient of might and courage from Athena (μένος καὶ θάρσος, *Il.* 5.2), the focus of the *Dionysiaca* passage is primarily on the Bacchant's madness as altered state of consciousness.

Furthermore, in the *Iliad*, the verb δαΐέ ('she kindled') signifies Athena's agency behind the fire. In the *Dionysiaca*, however, the fire is the subject of the sentence, and it is αὐτόματον ('self-kindling'), therefore autonomous and self-fulfilling.³¹² The flame's miraculous nature, however, is not only due to its spontaneity, but its capacity to shine (σελάγιζε) without burning the Bacchant's neck (ἀφλεγέος ... κατ' αὐχένος). This 'unburning' quality was particularly associated with celestial fire.³¹³ The fire must logically possess an 'unburning' quality even in Homer, or else we would expect Diomedes to be alarmed and in some discomfort. The fact that Nonnus explicitly states several times that the fire is ἀφλεγής, when this would have been logically inferred by his readers based on context and their awareness of Homer, suggests that he is consciously invoking one of the qualities of celestial fire in this passage.

Nonnus uses the same expression in an almost identical verbal and thematic context at *Dion.* 43.356-7 to describe a Bacchant's hair during the battle between Dionysus and Poseidon (ἀπὸ πλοκάμοιο δὲ νύμφης / ἀφλεγέος σελάγιζε κατ' αὐχένος αὐτόματον πῦρ). Here, the influence of Dionysus is not as clearly indicated as at 29.276-81, but an apostrophe preceded by ἀμφί σε ('for your sake' or 'around you') seems to underline either the closeness of the relationship between Dionysus and his Bacchants, or their spatial proximity, locating Dionysus at the heart of the Bacchants' activities.³¹⁴

Significantly, in both instances, it is not the flame itself which is un-burning (ἀφλεγής), but the Bacchant's neck. Iamblichus offers a possible explanation for this resistance to injury at *DM* 3.4. In this section, Iamblichus argues that those who are truly

³¹² The use of αὐτόματος, in conjunction with Nonnus' extensive use of αὐτο-compounds, contributes to the *Dionysiaca*'s self-generating, parthenogenic world. See Newbold 1993: 90.

³¹³ Philoponus, *Contra Aristotelem* fr.3.52 = Simplicius *De Caelo* 81.7-9.

³¹⁴ Geisz 2018: 241-2.

possessed by the gods are not conscious of themselves in the sense of using personal knowledge or experience (*DM* 3.4, 109.1-110.3).³¹⁵ As evidence, Iamblichus lists a series of signs that demonstrate that those who are divinely inspired do not utilise normal human sensation or consciousness, which includes anaesthesia and resistance to injury. In particular, many people experiencing possession remain unburnt on account of their divine inspiration, even when subjected to fire (110.4-9). These correspondences between Iamblichus and Nonnus suggest a shared understanding of divine inspiration.

3.3 The Madness of the Muses

The madness bestowed by the Muses upon poets receives its earliest detailed explanation in Plato's delineation of the different forms of mania: 'Third comes the possession and the madness of the Muses. This madness falls on a soft and pure soul (ἀπαλὴν καὶ ἄβατον ψυχὴν, lit. soft and untrodden), wakes it up and brings it to ecstasy (ἐκβακχεύουσα) under the influence of songs and other poetry, teaches posterity by ordering (κοσμοῦσα) the innumerable deeds of the ancients' (*Phdr.* 245a).³¹⁶ Commenting on this passage, Hermias argues that the softness of the poet's soul indicates an impressionable quality receptive to inspiration by the Muses, in contrast to sober and therefore hard souls (cf. Hermias *In Phdr.* 103).³¹⁷ Proclus elaborates that such souls are unreceptive to divine illumination, and filled with a reasoning that is ever-shifting and divorced from the divine (Procl. *In Remp.* 1.181.7-12).

Plato's catalogue and stratification of the four forms of divine mania (the prophetic mania of Apollo, the telestic or initiatory of Dionysus, the poetic of the Muses, and the erotic of Aphrodite) was not understood as a strict polychotomy. Hermias says that Plato's use of ἐκβακχεύουσα in reference to poetic mania 'should not concern us on the ground that it is a Dionysiac word. After all, the [various] kinds of inspiration are

³¹⁵ Addey 2016: 218.

³¹⁶ Plato *Phdr.* 245a: τρίτη δὲ ἀπὸ Μουσῶν κατοκωχὴ τε καὶ μανία, λαβοῦσα ἀπαλὴν καὶ ἄβατον ψυχὴν, ἐγείρουσα καὶ ἐκβακχεύουσα κατὰ τε ᾠδὰς καὶ κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην ποίησιν, μυρία τῶν παλαιῶν ἔργα κοσμοῦσα τοὺς ἐπιγιγνομένους παιδεύει·

³¹⁷ Lier 2019: 51.

interlinked' (ἐπιπλέκονται, Hermias *In Phdr.* 103).³¹⁸ Indeed, Hermias suggests that Plato intended for each level of mania to be arranged hierarchically, where each level depends in some way on an emanation from the level immediately above it (Herm. *In Phdr.* 103):

One might also say that he wants the kinds of inspiration to depend on one another, telestic on mantic, Muse-engendered on telestic, [and so on] and hence uses terms that are appropriate to the higher kinds [of inspiration] of those [coming] next [before them]. Hence in the case of telestic he said: *madness appearing amongst them and speaking prophetically* (244D7) (*speaking prophetically* is actually a term proper to mantic). And, again, in the case of the Muse-engendered [madness] he said *stimulating to Bacchic frenzy*, which is proper to telestic. He wants the [different] kinds of inspiration to be interconnected in this way. And he will [moreover] state explicitly in what follows (265B2-3) that telestic is the gift of Dionysus.³¹⁹

A comparable cross-pollination occurs in Euripides, where the prophetic powers of Apollo's priestesses are seemingly transferred to the maenads (*Bacch.* 298-9). A reciprocal relationship can also occur with the transfer of maenadic behaviour from Dionysus' worshippers to Apollo's prophetic priestesses to characterise the ecstatic nature of Apollo's mantic inspiration (Eur. *Tro.* 307, 468; *Hec.* 676; *El.* 1032).³²⁰

Like other forms of madness, poets must be touched by poetic mania because art or skill (τέχνη) alone is insufficient. As Socrates says, 'he who approaches the gates of the poetic arts without the mania of the Muses, and has been persuaded that he will be a sufficient poet from skill, is uninitiated, and both he himself and his poetry of the sound mind are overshadowed by that of the mad' (Plat. *Phdr.* 245a). Poetry composed under the inspiratory mania of the Muses corresponds to the highest form of poetry described by Proclus in his sixth essay on Plato's *Republic*. According to Proclus, the three types of poetry relate to the three Forms of Life (ζωαί) or Conditions (ἔξεις) of the human soul. The highest form of poetry is that which is 'full of divine goods,' and

³¹⁸ Transl. Baltzly & Share 2018: 150.

³¹⁹ Transl. Baltzly & Share 2018: 150. Cf. also Plato *Ion* 533e-534a and *Laws* 3.700d-e where Socrates equates poetic inspiration with of Dionysiac ecstasy experienced by Corybantes and Bacchic worshippers.

³²⁰ Hershkowitz 1998: 41.

‘establishes the soul in the very causes of being.’ It ‘produces one divine bond between that which is participated and that which participates ... establishing the lesser part as a whole in the power of the greater.’ It is a ‘madness greater than self-control’ (*In Remp.* 1.178.10-25).³²¹

Such a madness could also have an initiatory effect on the listener or reader. Plato’s Ion, as a rhapsode and student of Homeric poetry, is said to also partake in divine madness (542a-b).³²² In fact, the poet seems to stand in a chain of universal sympathy that proceeds from the Muses. Proclus writes: ‘[Plato] says that inspired poetry is established simply as an intermediary of the divine cause, which he has called the Muse ... So he has placed the madness of the poets as an intermediary, between this very first principle of the movements of divine inspiration and the last echoes of that inspiration seen among the rhapsodes by [universal] sympathy. This madness is moved and moves others in turn’ (*In Remp.* 1.184.25-185.4). Texts by inspired philosophers like Plato were supposed to evoke the same Bacchic frenzy in the souls of their readers (e.g. Procl. *Theol. Plat.* 1.1, p.6, 23-p.8, 15).³²³ Hence, Proclus does not restrict the domain of the Muses to merely poetry; they can also inspire authors and students of different sorts of holy texts with Bacchic frenzy.³²⁴

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that scholars have likened the experience of reading the *Dionysiaca* to a ritual initiation. Shorrock writes: ‘the only way ... to read the *Dionysiaca* is to become a Dionysiac reader. One must therefore allow oneself to be initiated into the mysteries of the *Dionysiaca*.’³²⁵ The interpretation of poetry was transformed in the mind of Proclus from a literary and poetic experience to a mystical one, in which myths are symbols of hidden truth, and the exegetical journey through the interpretation of poetry is perceived as initiation into the mysteries.³²⁶

In *Dionysiaca*’s second proem, in Book 25, the narrator describes the personification of Thebes dancing around him, for whom he will ‘mix a song’ (κράσω

³²¹ Transl. Baltzly, Finamore & Miles 2018: 290.

³²² Van den Berg 2001: 219.

³²³ Van den Berg 2001: 220.

³²⁴ Van den Berg 2001: 223.

³²⁵ Shorrock 2001: 212. See also Franchi 2016: 259

³²⁶ Gigli Piccardi 2014: 405.

μέλος, 25.11). Thebes dances around the narrator in a frenzy (βακχευθεῖσα περιτρέχει, 12), granting the narrator pride of place as the central figure and leader of the dance, and assimilating him further to his divine patron. Just as Dionysus was believed to lead his followers in ecstatic dance, bringing them into a state of perfection, the narrator strives to attain an analogous status through mimesis. It is worth recalling Proclus' description of Bacchic frenzy as 'a divinely inspired movement and an indefatigable dance around the divine, which perfects those who are possessed' (ἡ δὲ βακχεῖα κίνησις ἔνθεος καὶ χορεία περὶ τὸ θεῖον ἄτρυτος, τελεσιουργὸς τῶν κατεχομένων, *In Remp.* 1.181.26-7), and allows for the inspired to contemplate the Intelligibles at the level of Intellect.³²⁷ The *Dionysiaca's* second proem signals the type of poetry the *Dionysiaca* aspires to be.

3.4 Nonnus' Proems: A Tale of Two Prologues

Furley and Bremer, discussing the genre of the hymn, suggest that by following the example set by their patron god, a narrator can begin to identify with the god they are praising:

It is not simply that the gods (...) provide a divine precedent for human celebrations in their honour; an additional aspect to be considered is that humans, in performing worship which they believe imitative of a divine precedent, feel subsumed into divine company for the brief span of their celebration. This is the purpose of the various aspects of mimesis in religious ceremonial (...); the congregation sing the words which they trust will fall on receptive ears: the god's name, pedigree, areas of power and heroic deeds.³²⁸

Even in the genre of epic, the *Dionysiaca* can be seen on one level as a hymn to Dionysus, in the same way that Apollonius' *Argonautica* is a hymn to Apollo.³²⁹ As Camille Geisz has demonstrated, the *Dionysiaca's* narrator self-consciously and innovatively transforms himself into a character of his own epic, becoming one of the followers of

³²⁷ Van den Berg 2001: 219.

³²⁸ Furley & Bremer 2001: 16.

³²⁹ Albis 1996; Cuypers 2004; Morrison 2007.

the gods whom he will hymn.³³⁰ Throughout his first prologue, the narrator directs a variety of imperatives at the Muses: ἄξατέ μοι, τινάξατε (1.11), δότε (12) and στήσατέ μοι (14), establishing the persona of a narrator-worshipper.³³¹ He asks the Muses for Bacchic regalia: the fennel (νάρθηκα) and the thyrsus (θύρσον). For Geisz, these elements mark the narrator's transformation into a member of Dionysus' thiasos.³³²

In lines 34-8 of the proem, after invoking Proteus, Nonnus rejects the heavy-smelling seal skin of Menelaus in favour of a dappled fawn skin (νεβρίς ποικιλόνωτος) that instead smells of Maronian nectar, and embodies the quality of ποικιλία, the *Dionysiaca's* programmatic principle. While the Homeric seal-skin serves as an ad hoc disguise for Menelaus to infiltrate Proteus' herd, the fawn-skin cloak fulfils an analogous purpose for the narrator, allowing him to infiltrate the followers of Dionysus and approach the god unobserved, successfully accomplishing what Euripides' Pentheus tried and failed to do. Unlike Pentheus, however, the narrator's impulse is not solely voyeuristic, as Nonnus successfully assimilates himself into the god's thiasos. The νεβρίς from the prologue also recurs several times throughout the *Dionysiaca* as a ritual garment associated with Dionysus' relatives, companions, or favourites.³³³

The νεβρίς also interfaces with the *Dionysiaca's* cosmological imagery. Dappled and spotted clothing symbolises the heavenly cosmos, and could represent poetic staging grounds for cosmological allegory. The fawnskin gifted by the Muses to the narrator mirrors the starry cloak gifted to Dionysus by Herakles Astrochiton, which symbolises divine investiture and prefigures his ascension to the heavens.³³⁴ These two robes create a further syncretism between poet and subject. Parallels can be seen in the dressing of Phaethon by Helios (38.291-300), and the punitive metamorphosis of Actaeon into a dappled fawn (5.325-67) that simultaneously depict divine investiture but also presage punishment for transgression. Both the narrator and the god are destined for ascension and immortality, but must beware of overreaching or indulging in the transgressive voyeurism of Actaeon and Pentheus.

³³⁰ Geisz 2018: 247.

³³¹ Geisz 2018: 247.

³³² Geisz 2018: 247.

³³³ Paschalis 2014: 107.

³³⁴ Gigli Piccardi 2016: 428.

At first glance, it might seem unusual that the poem's narrator never explicitly conceptualises his connection with his god in terms of Bacchic frenzy or inspired union. The narrator's imperatives addressed to the Bacchic Muses in his proem seek to endow him with the trappings and iconographic symbols of Dionysus, but as Geisz argues, the narrator remains independent and largely self-reliant, eschewing any need for ecstatic union.³³⁵ Comparisons with the ecstatic poetry of Statius or the Neoplatonically-inflected poetry of John of Gaza provide clear points of contrast.³³⁶ The self-described and conceptualised experience of the *Dionysiaca*'s narrator appears far more sober by comparison. In this, however, the narrator seems to further emulate his patron god. In Book 12, Rhea, the mother of the gods, gifts Dionysus with an amethyst, the stone that was believed to inoculate against drunkenness. It allows Dionysus to share his gift of wine with his worshippers while he himself resists its intoxicating effects.

The narrator continues to navigate and conceptualise his relationship to his god in *Dionysiaca*'s second proem at the opening of Book 25, which opens with another invocation to the Muse. There is also a lengthy section comparing the achievements of Dionysus to other demigod sons of Zeus (25.27-252): Perseus, Minos, and Herakles. As shown by Shorrock, this section 'exploits and advances the narratives of *auctor* and *actor*,' as the literary syncrisis comparing Dionysus with other heroes 'blurs into a poetic syncrisis between Nonnus and Homer.'³³⁷ The narrator declares 'I will set up the toils and sweat of Dionysus in rivalry with both new and old,' and this rivalry appears to refer to competing poets as well as heroes.³³⁸

In addition to this literary syncrisis, the narrator uses the second proem to lay out the inspiration necessary for composing a narrative of war. The Muse is asked to fight instead of sing, transposing the traditional image of the goddess into a new, Dionysiac context.³³⁹ The narrator also must seek help from Homer, as Greek literature's

³³⁵ Geisz 2018: chapter 3.

³³⁶ Gigli Piccardi 2014.

³³⁷ Shorrock 2001: 172. Nonnus declares that he will not compare Dionysus to Achilles, or Deriades to Hector (25.255-6), a claim that Shorrock rightly finds disingenuous given that the *Dionysiaca* itself sometimes explicitly demands that we make such comparisons, e.g. at 22.385-9, where Aeacus' fight beside the river Hydaspes is called a precursor to Achilles' battle against the Scamander in the *Iliad*.

³³⁸ Shorrock 2001: 172, n.214.

³³⁹ Although Geisz 2018: 251 suggests that the Muse of Book 25 does not undergo any transformation into a Bacchant, such as occurs in Book 1, the martial imagery and the Muse's wielding of a Bacchic

most famous poet of war. Although at times the narrator levies direct criticism at Homer,³⁴⁰ the narrator also appeals to him directly for inspiration (253), asking him, 'breathe into me your inspired breath' (πνεῦσον ἐμοὶ τὸν ἄσθμα θεόσσυτον, 261). This apostrophe co-opts the pneumatic concept of inspiration and supplants the Muses in their traditional role with Homer. The dynamics of inspiration are re-contextualised. Where before, poets in the Homeric mode appealed to the Muses for aid in recalling details about their story, the Nonnian narrator appeals to Homer for form rather than content: 'I need your ability to compose epic well' (ὑμετέρης γὰρ δεύομαι εὐεπίης, 262-3).

The narrator's syncretism and appeal to Homer perfectly encapsulate the shifting duality of their relationship, which oscillates between emulation, admiration and rivalry. To this end, the narrator fosters a paradigm of father and son between himself and Homer, and the dynamics of their relationship are equally applicable to the father-son relationship at the heart of the poem: that of Zeus and Dionysus. The vocabulary of inspiration used here also has a clear point of correspondence with the first proem. In the second line of the *Dionysiaca*, the narrator describes the 'breath of the thunderbolt' (ἄσθμα κεραυνοῦ) that destroys Semele. Shorrock identifies this line as 'an ironic (and fatal) contrast to the positive inspiration that appears to emanate from Homer and Dionysus.'³⁴¹

As Geisz demonstrates, the narrator temporarily assumes a role within his narrative, becoming an active character: he interacts with other characters, and he and Homer shall fight alongside Dionysus and Zeus in the war against the Indians.³⁴² The narrator also lists the ritual implements and symbols that are required for the inspiration to continue the narrative, paralleling the Dionysiac ritual regalia bestowed to the narrator in the first proem: the 'intelligent thyrsus' of the Muse (ἔμφρονι θύρσῳ, 25.1), and father Homer's 'inspired spear and shield' (ἔμπνοον ἔγχος ἔχοντα καὶ ἀσπίδα

thyrsus are, I believe, enough to contrast the Muse with the Bacchantes and Bassarids who fight in Dionysus' army.

³⁴⁰ e.g. Nonnus' statement that 'your Muse should have sung of so great and might a struggle, how Bacchus brought low the Giants,' at *Dion* 25.257-8.

³⁴¹ Shorrock 2018: 83.

³⁴² Geisz 2018: 251.

πατρός Ὀμήρου, 265).³⁴³ The same weapon appears again 5 lines later as the ‘noeric spear’ (νοερῷ δορί, 270). This spear and the Muse’s thyrsus bookend the second proem, framing its programmatic material in which the narrator celebrates the supremacy of his patron god and epic subject matter, and creates his syncrisis between himself and his literary father.

The use of ἔμφρων and νοερός are, arguably, charged with philosophical significance. As Lightfoot observes, both the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* place ‘a high premium on the notion of inspiration, which is connected with a rich vocabulary, partly neo-Platonic in inspiration, for sentience, inspiritedness, and animation (ἔμφρων, ἐχέφρων, νοήμων, νοερός).’³⁴⁴ In the *Dionysiaca*, these terms tend to appear paradoxical, either referring to animals endowed with rational intelligence (e.g. *Dion.* 3.174, 7.124), or humans subjected to transformations into animal forms (e.g. Actaeon at 5.333, 414, 418; Callisto at 36.72). They can also be used to endow inanimate objects with seemingly human intelligence (25.1, 270).

The inclusion of ἔμφρων and νοερός at such a critical juncture in the poem and their placement framing the proem suggests a strategic function.³⁴⁵ The thyrsus belongs to the Bacchic Muse; the spear to Homer. Both figures are associated with poetry, and within the *Dionysiaca*, appear capable of bestowing divine inspiration upon the narrator. The term νοερός appears frequently in Orphic and Neoplatonic writings, where the noeric and noetic realms constitute the lower and higher parts respectively of the World Mind, the realm of the Intelligible Forms.³⁴⁶ Νοερός has a similar use in the *Paraphrase*, where it frequently refers to the thought or intellectual activity of God and the Holy Spirit.³⁴⁷ Although Vian argues that this philosophical meaning is absent in the

³⁴³ Homer is explicitly referenced previously in the proem and at 13.50-1, where he is invoked to help recall the catalogues of Dionysus’ army, and to tell the tale of the Indian campaign. For more on the relationship between Homer and Nonnus as conceptualised within the *Dionysiaca*, see Shorrock 2001: 170-2.

³⁴⁴ Lightfoot 2018: 141; Caprara 2005: 182-3, and 198-9 on *Par.* 4.67 (νοερός), 252 on *Par.* 4.150 (νοήμων), 262 on *Par.* 4.166 ἐχέφρων).

³⁴⁵ *contra* Vian 1990: 254, who argues that ἔμφρων and νοερός are used paradoxically, or anthropomorphically.

³⁴⁶ Uždavinys 2004: 302. At the noetic level, the Forms exist in a state of mutual interpenetration (κοινωνία). At the noeric, the Forms retain their eternal and universal nature, but operate at an intermediary level where they are articulated into distinct archetypes, namely, the traditional gods.

³⁴⁷ Vian 1990: 254.

Dionysiaca,³⁴⁸ the collocation of ἔμφρων and νοερός with a proem that emphasises and explores the role of inspiration is no coincidence.

The use of instruments like Nonnus' 'intelligent thyrsus' and 'noeric spear' as aids or vehicles of divine inspiration has a poetic antecedent in Hesiod's laurel sceptre, which is given to him by the Muses (σκῆπτρον ... δάφνης, *Theog.* 30).³⁴⁹ Yet, it also has parallels with Neoplatonic theurgical beliefs.³⁵⁰ Theurgy was often performed with the use of symbols (σύνθημα/σύμβολον).³⁵¹ Symbols are divine, and are sown throughout the universe by the Paternal Demiurge. They represent the seeds of the gods, and therefore have an ontological link with the divine through divine love (*philia*) or sympathy (*sympatheia*). In Iamblichus' discussion on the Oracle of Didyma, he records that the priestess would give oracles by sitting on an axle, or dipping her feet into the spring water or inhaling its vapours, or by holding a staff which had been given by the god (*De Myst.* 3.11, 127.4-9). These ritual preparations were meant to enhance the receptivity of the prophetess' soul and prepare her to act as a receptacle in receiving the god 'from without.'³⁵² The use of the axle is apparently without parallel, except in Nonnus, who attributes its use to the oracle at Delphi (*Dion.* 2.697, 4.290, 7.72, and 27.252).³⁵³ Nonnus, then, was very likely aware of this passage, or a similarly esoteric source on divination and inspiration.

The 'intelligent thyrsus' and the 'noeric spear,' although figurative, appear to symbolise either divine inspiration themselves, or increase the receptivity of the narrator's soul, much like the axle or staff from the Oracle at Didyma, or the symbols used by theurgists. The conferral of ritual instruments also mirrors the narrator's request for Dionysiac regalia and musical instruments in the first proem. He bids the Muses to 'rattle the cymbals' (τινάξατε κύμβαλα, 1.11), and asks them to give him the tambourine (εὐϊά μοι δότε ρόπτρα). Both instruments were associated with Dionysiac

³⁴⁸ Vian 1990: 254.

³⁴⁹ Crowther 1979: 2.

³⁵⁰ Theurgy (meaning 'divine action') refers to a set of ritual practices which was meant to aid in contemplation of the Intelligible realm and enable anagogic ascent, bringing devotees into union with the divine.

³⁵¹ The basis and potential origin for this idea appears in the *Chaldean Oracles*, where it is said 'the Intellect of the Father has sown symbols (σύμβολα) into the cosmos' (fr. 108.1).

³⁵² Addey 2016: 257.

³⁵³ Lightfoot 2016: 630.

cult, and were said by Iamblichus to induce a state of receptivity in the human soul, therefore enabling divine possession.³⁵⁴

3.5 Theurgy and the Lydian Priest

The second proem does not develop its dynamics of inspiration in a vacuum, nor does it merely pick up the torch from the poem's opening lines. Perhaps the most striking example of divinely inspired voice comes from Book 13, in the form of a digression within the *Dionysiaca*'s catalogue of the mortals that come to join Dionysus' campaign against the Indians (13.474-498):

καὶ Στατάλων κεκόρυστο πολὺς στρατός, ἦχι Τυφωεύς
 θερμὸν ἀναβλύζων πυριθαλπέος ἄσθμα κεραυνοῦ 475
 ἔφλεγε γείτονα χῶρον, ἀελλήεντι δὲ καπνῷ
 αἰθομένου Τυφῶνος ἐτεφρώθησαν ἐρίπναι,
 γυιοβόρῳ σπινθῆρι μαραιομένων κεφαλάων·
 ἀλλὰ Διὸς Λυδοῖο θυώδεα νηὸν ἐάσας
 ἀρητῆρ Ἀσίδηρος ἐμάρνατο κέντορι μύθῳ, 480
μύθῳ ἀκοντιστῆρι, καὶ οὐ τμητῆρι σιδήρῳ,
 γλώσση ἐρητύων πειθήνιον υἱὸν Ἀρούρης,
 ἔγχος ἔχων στόμα θοῦρον, ἔπος ξίφος, ἀσπίδα φωνήν,
 τοῦτο θεοκλήτῳ προχέων ἔπος ἀνθερεῶνι.
 „στηθι, τάλαν“· φλογόεις δὲ Γίγας ὑπὸ μύστιδι τέχνῃ 485
 ἀρραγέος μύθοιο σοφῷ στηρίζετο δεσμῷ
 ἀνέρα δειμαίνων κεκορυθμένον ἔμφρονι λόγῳ,
 γυιοπέδην Ἀσίδηρον ἔχων ποινήτορι μύθῳ·
 οὐδὲ τόσον τρομέεσκεν οἰστευτῆρα κεραυνοῦ
 αἰνογίγας πολὺπηχυς, ὅσον ῥηξήνορα μύστιν 490
 γλώσση οἰστεύοντα λάλον βέλος, εἶχε δὲ κάμνων
 ἔλκεα φωνήεντα πεπαρμένος ὀξεί μύθῳ·
 καὶ πυρὸς ἔλκος ἔχων, τετορημένος ἔγχει θερμῷ,
 ἄλλῳ θερμότερῳ νοερῷ πυρὶ κάμνε Τυφωεύς,

³⁵⁴ Addey 2016: 222.

καὶ στατὸν ἀστυφέλικτον ἐνερρίζωσεν ἀνάγκη 495
 ταρσὸν ἐχιδνήεντα πεπηγότα μητέρι Γαίῃ,
 οὔτηθεις ἀχάρακτον ἀναιμάκτῳ δέμας αἰχμῇ.
 ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν προτέροισιν ἐν ἀνδράσιν ἤγαγεν αἰών.

Also a great army came armed from Stataloi, where Typhon
 spouting the hot breath of the fiery thunderbolt 475
 was once burning the neighbouring country, and as Typhon
 blazed amidst clouds of smoke, the mountains were burnt to ashes,
 while his heads melted in the limb-devouring flame.
 But the priest of Lydian Zeus left the fragrant temple
 redolent of incense, without steel, fought with barbed words, 480
 a word instead of a spear, no cutting steel,
 and he brought the Son of Earth to obedience with his tongue.
 His bold mouth was his spear, his word a sword, his voice a shield,
 and this word issued forth from his inspired throat:
 ‘Stand, wretch!’ By his mystic art, the flaming giant 485
 was held by the ingenious chains of the unseen word,
 and he stood in awe of a man armed with a spear of the mind,
 holding steel-less fetters with his avenging word.
 The terrible many-armed giant, trembled not so much at
 the Archer of Thunderbolts, but at that magician, 490
 a breaker of armed ranks, shooting arrows of speech from his tongue.
 He was held suffering vocal wounds, pierced by sharp words.
 Already with a wound from the flames, thrust through with a scorching spear
 Typhon suffered another hotter, noeric flame,
 his snaky feet were planted firm and unmoving 495
 by force, fixed in Earth, his mother,
 his unmarked body wounded by a bloodless spear.
 But all these things were done in time gone by, among more ancient men.

The Lydian priest confronts Typhon using only his voice, resembling a prophet from the Old Testament who wields God the Word. The priest leaves his temple, which is ‘fragrant,’ and ‘redolent with incense,’ recalling of the use of incense in Christian churches, as well as in theurgy to make the soul more receptive to divine inspiration.

Nonnus also employs a wide variety of terms related to divine inspiration: the words issue from the Lydian priest's 'inspired throat' (θεοκλήτω προχέων ἔπος ἀνθερεῶνι, 484). The adjective θεόκλητος is a Nonnian creation, meaning literally 'speaking with the voice of the god,' and carries the sense of invitation or invocation of the gods.³⁵⁵ Typhon is held fast by the priest's 'mystic art' (μύστιδι τέχνῃ, 485), and fears the priest who is an 'initiate who breaks through armed ranks' (ῥηξήνορα μύστην, 490) evoking the idea that the priest has been initiated into the higher mysteries, and that such an initiate has been granted great power. The power of the priest's inspired voice is more fearful to Typhon than even Zeus and his thunderbolts (489-91). Typhon, impaled with a red-hot spear, is in the end cut down, not by material thunderbolts, but by 'noeric fire' (νοερῷ πυρί, 494).

Iamblichus associates noeric fire with Helios, the greatest theurgic σύνθημα, because the sun symbolises the One. Noeric fire also appears in Proclus, and the Neoplatonists appear to have borrowed the concept from the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr. 3.2, 37.4, 39.4, 81.1), where it is the ultimate essence of the Chaldean Supreme Being.³⁵⁶ The *Chaldean Oracles* were themselves inspired texts, and the product of theurgic rituals. Their influence upon Nonnus has been noted by numerous scholars, and they offered a rich corpus of spiritualising language to draw upon.³⁵⁷ *Chald. Or.* fr. 81 is particularly noteworthy, as it attests to the compulsive power of the noeric fire.³⁵⁸

Τοῖς δὲ πυρὸς νοεροῦ νοεροῖς πρηστῆρσιν ἅπαντα
εἴκαθε δουλεύοντα πατρὸς πειθινίδι βουλῇ.

All things yield to the intellectual lightning-bolts of
the intellectual Fire, serving the persuasive will of the Father.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁵ Ypsilanti & Franco 2018: 170 n21: 'The adjective is used elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca* to qualify the marriage of Cadmus and the subsequent feast (ὑμεναίους 5.92, τραπέζης 46.298), magical incantations (ἐπαοιδαῖς, 22.77 and 36.345), voice (35.68), altar (βωμῷ, 44.86), Bacchic dance (χορείῃ, 47.730).'

³⁵⁶ In the Chaldean canon, the Father, or Supreme Being, is transcendent, and dwells in the Intelligible realm separated from the lower Intelligibles.

³⁵⁷ See Gigli Piccardi 1985: 220-3; 2009; Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 232, 248-9; Spanoudakis 2016: 618-20.

³⁵⁸ Majerick 1989: 173 notes that δουλεύω is used in fr. 80 in connection with the Connectors, a set of divinities in the Chaldean system that commentators have found difficult to define. See Spanu 2020: 48.

³⁵⁹ Transl. Majerick 1989: 81. The intellectual, or noeric, Fire here is apparently the Father or First Intellect in the Chaldean system. See Majerick 1989: 173 for commentary.

Noeric fire's persuasive quality, that compels all things to yield, is showcased in the *Dionysiaca's* episode of the Lydian priest, who, while divinely inspired, is capable of commanding or coercing a demon or a god through the use of his voice, acting in the manner of a theurgist.³⁶⁰ As Vian notes, this episode has a parallel at *Par.* 18.34-8, where Christ commands the Pharisees' soldiers by the sole virtue of his voice.³⁶¹ Noeric fire was also capable of purifying the soul, suggesting that the *Dionysiaca's* Lydian priest had undergone some form of ritual purification. The power of his inspired voice is the product of anagogic ascent and contemplation of the transcendent world of Intellect rather than the mundane, material world. With his 'noeric fire,' the priest composes his words just as the demiurge crafts the universe, imitating his patron Zeus who was often equated with the Neoplatonic demiurge. This process of imitation reflects the fundamental aim of theurgy: to contact and assimilate oneself to the divine.³⁶²

The Chaldean resonance of this passage appears to undermine Vian's assertion that *voερός* is divorced of its Neoplatonic context in the *Dionysiaca*. Although the *Chaldean Oracles* and their philosophical content are more firmly rooted in Middle Platonism, they were frequently cited by Neoplatonic thinkers from the Imperial period through Late Antiquity, and were considered from Porphyry to Damascius to be authoritative revelatory texts equal in importance only to Plato's *Timaeus* (cf., e.g. *Marinus Life of Proclus* 32).³⁶³

The Lydian priest's voice functions in lieu of various weapons in an extended metaphor that invites comparison with the *Dionysiaca's* second proem. His mouth is a lance (*ἔγχος ἔχων στόμα*), his words either a spear (*μύθῳ ἀκοντιστήρι*) or a sword (*ἔπος ξίφος*), and his voice a shield (*ἀσπίδα φωνήν*). His 'inspired spear' (*ἔμφρονι λόγχῃ*) resembles and anticipates the 'inspired thyrsus' wielded by the Muse of the second proem (*ἔμφρονι θύρσῳ*, 25.1).³⁶⁴ Although these objects are figurative (the narrator does not call upon the Muse to physically fight in the Indian war, but to

³⁶⁰ Gigli Piccardi 1985: 221-4.

³⁶¹ Vian 1995: 247.

³⁶² Addey 2016: 3.

³⁶³ Dodds 1947: 285-9; Majercik 1989: 2.

³⁶⁴ Vian 1990: 239.

help wage the ‘poet’s war,’ i.e., compose the *Dionysiaca*’s war narrative), this suggests that the Lydian priest is endowed with a power almost analogous to that of Homer and the Muses.

These intratextual links colour our interpretation of an anonymous epigram preserved in the *Palatine Anthology* (AP 9.198):

Νόννος ἐγὼ Πανὸς μὲν ἐμὴ πόλις, ἐν Φαρίῃ δέ
ἔγχεϊ φωνήεντι γονὰς ἤμησα Γιγάντων.

I am Nonnus, and the city of Pan is mine; but in the Pharian land
I mowed down the offspring of Giants with the spear of my voice.

The epigram’s authorship is disputed, however it appears to be an epitaphic homage, similar to others found in the Palatine corpus.³⁶⁵ Regardless of authorship, the epigram underscores the assimilation between the power of the poet and the Muse, and offers a tempting allusion to the Lydian priest; just as the priest of Zeus assails Typhon with the power of his inspired voice, Nonnus lays low the Giants in his *Dionysiaca*, which presents the Typhonomachy and Gigantomachy as parallel cosmic episodes that bookend the epic. Dionysus vanquishes the Giants with his flaming torch, emulating his father Zeus’ victory over Typhon with the thunderbolt. If the priest of Zeus overpowers Typhon with his voice, and Nonnus achieves the same feat against the Giants, this casts Nonnus as an inspired poet and priest of his own patron, Dionysus.

Gigli Piccardi relates Nonnus’ ‘speaking lance’ (ἔγχεϊ φωνήεντι) with the ‘noeric spear’ of the second proem (νοερῷ δορί, *Dion.* 25.270), and asserts that the image is the same, ‘but using the adjective νοερός, Nonnus seems to accentuate the incorporeal and intellectual nature of the weapons used in his personal battle against entities that

³⁶⁵ According to Accorinti 2016b: 23, the epigram was ‘probably from the pen of the poet himself.’ See also Livrea 1987: 110-13; also 1989: 32-5; *contra* Vian 1976: lvi-lvii, who suggests that the author of the epigram may have been the first editor of the *Dionysiaca*, given its applicability as a book inscription. The same editor would have most likely added the *Perioche* too. Collart 1930: 3 and Wifstrand 1933: 168 suggested that it could be attributed to a pupil of Nonnus. Writing an epitaph for a famous poet was a common rhetorical exercise, however, and there are many such epitaphic homages in the Palatine Anthology. There is currently no evidence to assume that this epigram was written by Nonnus himself.

threaten to plunge mankind into the abyss of materiality.³⁶⁶ Her comments reference a well-attested allegory that interpreted the Giants as agents of materiality, primarily due to their earthborn nature. This is exemplified by Proclus' *Hymn to Athena*, where the battle between Athena and the Giants symbolises how the intelligent prevails over the irrational, and the immaterial over the material.³⁶⁷ If the Pharian epigram was in fact a rhetorical exercise, it suggests that these dimensions and connotations of Nonnus' work were readily identifiable and intelligible by ancient readers.

A further parallel with the Lydian priest exists in the *Paraphrase*, with an equally Neoplatonic resonance. There, the narrator claims that John the Baptist 'was not himself the noeric light, but he alone disclosed his god-inspired mouth to all' (οὐ μὲν κεῖνος ἔην νοερὸν φάος, ἀλλ' ἵνα μοῦνον / πᾶσιν ἀναπτύξειε θεηγόρον ἀνθερεῶνα, 1.20-1). These lines create an opposition between John and God; John is not himself the source or embodiment of the noeric light, which issues forth from the Father and is incarnate in the Son, but John is an inspired recipient of the light. In Proclus, noeric light emanates from the Demiurgic Nous and elevates all things to it (Procl. *Theol. Plat.* 6.12, p.64, 23-6), and also engenders harmony within the universe (6.12, p.68, 7-10). According to Proclus, noeric light was also associated with Helios, the Sun (6.12, p.61, 7 and 15), because the Demiurge himself gave the sun its light (6.12, p.57, 5-10). Helios, therefore, 'shows and announces noeric light to all inferior beings, and fills everything with complete truth and leads them to the Nous of the gods' (6.12, p.64, 26). *Para.* 1.20-1, then, casts John the Baptist as an inspired prophet with his mind orientated towards the higher realities, comparable to the inspired Lydian priest of *Dionysiaca* 13. Van den Berg also draws an explicit comparison between noeric light and noeric fire: 'admittedly, light is not fire. However, the sun emits light because it consists of fire, and it seems plausible to assume that it is noeric fire, i.e. fire originating from the Demiurgic Nous, which emits the noeric light.'³⁶⁸ This connection further underscores the similarities between the two priests, and how their divine inspiration is expressed.

³⁶⁶ Gigli Piccardi 2018: 264.

³⁶⁷ Van den Berg 2001: 98.

³⁶⁸ Van Den Berg 2001: 153-4.

3.6 Wine

The final avenue for madness and ecstatic union that this chapter shall discuss is, perhaps, the *Dionysiaca*'s most striking symbol: Dionysus' gift of wine, and its ability to inspire ecstasy, or uncontrolled frenzy. Scholars have variously discussed the role of wine, and its presentation in the poem appears multifaceted, and at times, inconsistent. The use of wine in the poem as a symbol for the *Dionysiaca* has been most comprehensively detailed by Shorrock:

The *Dionysiaca* should not merely be seen as a poem about wine, but as an equivalent of that same substance; as such, it provides readers with an analogous experience. For modern critics this experience has generally been negative, reminiscent of the madness of Dionysus, where the text swirls chaotically in front of them in a blur of images and narratives. There is, however, another version of the Dionysiac experience which leads not to madness but to revelation: a chance to see the world (of the text) without rigid divisions and boundaries, where Nonnus and Dionysus, Achilles and Hector, Alexander and Christ all form part of one vast syncretistic whole.³⁶⁹

It is unsurprising that Nonnus should approach his poetic composition as analogous to wine, given the polemic between water and wine poetics common in the Hellenistic poets. The precise details of this poetic antagonism are complex, but the cold and sober technique of Callimachean water-drinkers was associated with lyric and elegy, while the intoxication of the elevated wine-drinkers was associated with the 'higher' genres.³⁷⁰

Nonnus' use of wine as a symbol, however, does more than situate himself within generic discourse. The narrator's investiture in the proem as a Dionysiac poet suggests that his own role is in some way complementary or analogous to that of Dionysus, the god of wine himself. As Shorrock demonstrates, throughout the poem, both poetry and wine are sweet. Both are described as tricks/deceptions (δόλοι), and capable of beguiling the mind of the recipient. Wine and poetry appear together in sympotic environments, and they encourage dancing, erotic sentiments, and leave the recipient thirsting for more. Tellingly, at the start of the programmatic second proem,

³⁶⁹ Shorrock 2001: 5. See also Toohey 1992: 223. *contra* Braden 1974: 873.

³⁷⁰ Crowther 1979; Knox 1985; Batinski 1991; Hershkowitz 1998: 64.

they support your fruit as slave-women their mistress,
 while you climb over the shoulder of your maids
 with your tendrils pushing and winding and quivering,
 while the wind blows in your face the delicate
 many-coloured leaves of so many neighbouring trees
 with their widespread clusters, as if you slept, and they
 cooled you with gentle breath. So the serving woman
 waves a light fan as in duty bound, and makes a cool wind for her king.

The prominence of the apple, fig, and palm trees in this passage clearly echoes the arboreal metapoetics that were of particular interest to Hellenistic poets.³⁷⁴ The ancient palm's key intertext is Odysseus' likening of Nausicaa to a young palm tree in *Odyssey* 6. Handmaidens are also prominent in both passages. The ancient palm, therefore, likely symbolises Homeric poetry. The precise meaning and the allusions behind the apple and fig trees remain obscure, although both feature prominently in the Garden of Eden, suggesting a possible Judaeo-Christian resonance.

Nonnus' metapoetic use of trees to reflect on the nature of his poetry displays similarities with Horace's *Odes* 1.1, where Horace exploits the connotations of three different types of trees (palm, arbutus, and ivy) to define his own lyric persona. He eventually rejects the palm and arbutus in favour of the ivy, which symbolises Bacchus and the sympotic nature of Horace's lyric. The remaining trees in *Odes* Book 1 are also used to downplay other genres, or to enhance the sympotic character or stylistic ideals of Horace's poetry.³⁷⁵ Unlike Horace, Nonnus does not reject the other trees outright. His vine crawls over the other trees, and embraces them to provide the structure and form that the vine otherwise lacks.³⁷⁶ Nonnus' poetry, much like its patron god, transcends boundaries, weaving together multiple genres and subordinating them. These genres cease to exist as discrete entities and instead pay reverence to Nonnus' mastery over all other literary forms.³⁷⁷ Given wine's initiatory power and its potential for spiritual elevation, the assimilation of wine and viticulture to Nonnus' poetry and

³⁷⁴ Heerink 2015.

³⁷⁵ Scanlon 2014: 72-3.

³⁷⁶ Shorrock 2001: 136.

³⁷⁷ Shorrock 2001: 136.

composition have exciting implications for our understanding of Nonnus' poetic aspirations.

The link between wine and divine inspiration is showcased in Book 17, with Dionysus' visit to the shepherd Brongus. The poor shepherd entertains Dionysus in his home,³⁷⁸ and becomes 'driven by the divine inspiration of Bacchus' (δαμονίω δεδονημένος ἄσθματι Βάκχου, 17.68) and puts on an impromptu performance for his guest. His inspiration prefigures the breath of Homer which Nonnus seeks to inspire his own poetry (πνεῦσον ἐμοὶ τεδὸν ἄσθμα θεόσσυτον, 25.261). Dionysus is pleased with his host's music, and teaches him the 'flower-loving work of the vine' (φιλάνθεμον ἔργον ἁλῶῃς, 17.83) in return for his hospitality. The episode is also a metaphor for Dionysiac, and by extension, Nonnian poetry. Brongus, the shepherd, has been inspired by the breath of Dionysus, and like Nonnus himself is now capable of composing Dionysiac poetry. He trades his flock and his occupation, which since Hellenistic times had been associated with pastoral poetry, for viticulture and new Dionysiac poetics.

Wine in the *Dionysiaca* is also capable of inducing a state of intoxication similar to madness. The Indians in Book 14-15 become drunk from drinking the waters of Lake Astacid, and later, the Indian general Orontes describes their state as a kind of 'intelligent frenzy' (ἔμφρονα λύσσαν ἔχοντες, 17.114). After their frenzy, the Indians fall asleep and are led off into servitude. The actual nature of this servitude, however, differs depending on the characters' point of view. Orontes portrays the capture and imprisonment of his troops as slavery. Dionysus, however, inducts the captured Indians into his thiasos; they can now spread the word of Dionysus and join in the Bacchic 'Euoi' chants. The expression 'intelligent frenzy' is also used elsewhere to describe the Cabeiroi, the chthonic deities and patrons of the mysteries of Samothrace (ἔμφρονα λύσσαν, 3.74).

Wine and intoxication, however, do not always result in positive, revelatory experiences. Dionysus' gift may offer freedom and liberation, but its effects are often far from harmonious. Wine is characterised twice as 'deceiving water' (16.364, 385). It leads to the rapes of Nicaea and Aura, and overcomes various protagonists and

³⁷⁸ Cf. Callimachus' *Hecale* (*Hecale*), Molorchos (*Aetia*), Ovid's Philemon and Baucis (*Metamorphoses*).

antagonists within the poem, apparently without any 'salvific vision of Dionysism.'³⁷⁹ Pentheus observes that 'what wine always does is to drag drunken men into lust; what wine does is to excite an unstable man's mind to murder' (45.83-4). This is especially prescient given the murder of Icarius at 47.106-23, who is killed by Attic farmers in a drunken frenzy after he introduces them to Dionysus' gift. Such negative experiences seem to reflect an alternative story regarding the invention of wine preserved in Plato's *Laws*, according to which wine was given to man in revenge, in order to afflict them with madness (*Laws* 2.666). In the case of the Attic farmers, however, their excessive consumption is emphasised: they drink 'cup after cup ever faster' (ἐπασσύτεροισι κυπέλλοις, 47.106-7).³⁸⁰ Given the metapoetic significance of wine, the excessive intoxication of the Attic farmers warns us that the *Dionysiaca*, like wine, should be enjoyed in moderation.

Plutarch uses as similar metaphor. In his *How a Young Man Should Listen to Poetry* (*Adol. poet. aud.*), Plutarch advocates teaching the young to pursue what is useful and salutary in poetry, since attempting to eliminate pleasure and forbidding the youthful from enjoying poetry is a futile endeavour (14f). Rejecting poetry on the grounds that its mythologies contained morally and theologically problematic doctrines, as Plato sought to do in the *Republic*, is as fruitless as Lycurgus' attempt to eliminate Dionysus and his gift of wine (15e, citing *Il.* 6.130): Plutarch states 'not even Lycurgus ... had sound sense, because, when many became drunk and violent, he went about uprooting the grapevines instead of bringing the springs of water nearer.'³⁸¹ According to Plutarch, just as wine should be mixed with water and enjoyed in moderation, so too should we temper poetry with philosophy (ἐνταῦθα φιλοσοφίαν εἰσάγωμεν καὶ καταμινύωμεν, 15f).

Nonnus reflects on the need for temperance and the dangers of excessive consumption in a similar way. The mime contest of Book 19 sheds further light on these themes, where the controlled success of Maron triumphs over the chaotic failure of

³⁷⁹ Franchi 2016: 250.

³⁸⁰ The Icarius episode has a striking intertextual relationship with the wedding at Cana in the *Paraphrase*. See Spanoudakis 2007: 38.

³⁸¹ Friesen 2015: 124.

Silenus.³⁸² Both characters are Bacchic figures, and both acts as storytellers, using their hands to trace stories in the air.³⁸³ Yet while Maron's mime is characterised by restraint and self-control, Silenus loses himself in a chaotic frenzy that eventually brings about his death. The metapoetic meaning of the passage is clear: the ideal Dionysiac poet and reader must exercise some degree of caution and restraint in their revelatory intoxication.

In addition to its dangers, wine's soteriological role has been called into question. In their study on Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic religion, Alberto Bernabé and Rosa García-Gasco state that 'Nonnus is interested in neither an ordered exposition of the succession in the heavenly kingdom, nor in its repercussions on the possibilities of salvation for humanity.'³⁸⁴ Chuvín notes that the word σωτήρ (saviour) is not used at all within the poem, and the verb σώζω is only used to say 'farewell.'³⁸⁵ He suggests that this is part of a deliberate strategy to avoid reminding the audience of the saviour *par excellence* in Christ.³⁸⁶ Franchi further contrasts the role of wine in the two poems; while wine has apparently no salvific function in the *Dionysiaca*, in the *Paraphrase* wine has symbolic value as the *antitype* (ἀντίτυπος) of Christ, and the instrument of his passion and resurrection (*Par.* 2.50-4, 13.111-2).³⁸⁷

Shorrock, however, has recently shown that the ambivalent representation of wine in the *Dionysiaca* can also extend to the *Paraphrase*, and the resulting interplay between Christian and Dionysiac discourse frustrates any attempt to treat the wine of Dionysus and the wine of Christ as separate entities. Instead, the *Dionysiaca* represents the multiplicity of responses to wine in Late Antiquity, ranging from wine's incompatibility with the leading of a spiritual life, to its powerful connections with inspiration.³⁸⁸

³⁸² Shorrock 2001: 157-8.

³⁸³ Shorrock 2001: 157.

³⁸⁴ Bernabé & García-Gasco 2016: 99.

³⁸⁵ Liebeschuetz 1996: 82.

³⁸⁶ Chuvín 2014: 13. This interpretation seems unlikely given the comprehensive catalogue of syncretic elements in the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase*. See Shorrock 2014.

³⁸⁷ Franchi 2016: 250; cf. also Livrea 2000: 86.

³⁸⁸ Shorrock 2011: 119.

Wine in the *Dionysiaca* can be connected with miraculous and spiritual healing. The description of Dionysus' shield, for example, is closely preceded by a miracle, in which Dionysus heals the sight of an Indian man who had been born blind by sprinkling his eyes with droplets from the river Hydaspes, a river which, at that point in the poem's narrative, is flowing with healing wine (*Dion.* 25.281-91).³⁸⁹ After the Indian man's sight has been restored by this 'evil-averting stream' (ἀλεξικάκου ποταμοῖο, 25.287), he dedicates an altar to Zeus and Dionysus as an expression of gratitude, offering a prototype of Dionysiac conversion. This passage in particular has a strong gospel resonance, and is presented with expressions that recur in Christ's healing of the blind man in *Paraphrase* 9 (*Dion.* 25.282: ἀγλυόεσσαν ἔχων ἀλαωπὸν ὁμίχλην, cf. *Par.* 9.73: Χριστὸς ἀπὸ βλεφάρων ἐλάσας ἀλαωπὸν ὁμίχλην).³⁹⁰

Wine can bring about bodily resurrection, as showcased in the story of Tylus in the ekphrasis of Dionysus' shield (25.451-552). When Tylus is attacked and killed by a snake, his sister, the nymph Moira, enlists a local giant, Damasen, to avenge his death. Although the snake is killed, it is miraculously resurrected by its mate after she administers an unnamed plant. Moira witnesses this miracle and applies the same herb to her dead brother's body (541-52). Although the healing herb remains unnamed within the shield ekphrasis, it receives exactly the same epithets that characterise wine in the *Dionysiaca* and resurrection in the *Paraphrase*: ὀδυνήφατον ... ποίην ('herb that alleviates the pain' *Dion.* 25.528 cf. *Par.* 4.242, 5.10), ἀλεξήτειραν ὀλέθρου ('that dispels death,' 529 cf. *Par.* 15.51), φερέσβιον ('life-bringing,' 540 cf. *Par.* 5.105, 6.99, 18.132), ζεῖδωρος ('salvific,' 541 cf. the 'living water' at *Par.* 4.54 and the 'Father' at *Par.* 8.148), and ἀκεσσιπόνιοι κορύμβοις ('saving' or 'healing tendrils,' 541 cf. the Lazarus episode at *Par.* 11.99).³⁹¹

Restoration and revivification through wine also appears in Book 29, with Dionysus' healing of Hymenaeus. Dionysus rubs the wound on Hymenaeus' thigh with the 'Euoi-loving flower' (φιλεύιον ἄνθος, 29.153), and revives the wounded youth by sprinkling him with 'healing ivy' and 'averting wine' (κοῦρον ἀνεζώγρησεν ἔῳ παιήονι

³⁸⁹ Spanoudakis 2013: 207-8.

³⁹⁰ Hernández de la Fuente 2013: 475.

³⁹¹ Vian 1990: 267-8; Hernández de la Fuente 2013: 480; Spanoudakis 2014a: 355.

κισσῶ, οἶνον ἀλεξητῆρα περιρραίνων Ὑμεναίῳ, 29.155-6). Elsewhere in Book 29, Dionysus heals his Bacchantes after a battle by sprinkling them with vine leaves, wine, myrtle, and gypsum, while reciting spells and incantations (29.267-74).³⁹² A Christian parallel can be found in Christ's declaration in John 15, 'I am the true vine,' and it is through Christ that salvation is made possible.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the *Dionysiaca* describes wine in a positive sense as the 'earthly' version of heavenly nectar (*Dion.* 12.38-40, 14.435-7, 17.76, 24.227-9, 31.238-9, 47.78). This designation hints at further elevatory possibilities. In Plotinus' development of Plato's *Phaedrus*, he insists that the Intellect should be in a state of drunkenness from nectar (Plot. 3.5.7, 6.5.35), which exists before the sensible world comes into being.³⁹³ If the *Dionysiaca* posits wine as a mimetic image of nectar, it suggests that the qualities and the experience of these two substances are in some way analogous. By imbibing wine, we imitate the drunkenness of Intellect, albeit at a lower metaphysical level.

3.7 Conclusion

Wine's status as a symbol for the *Dionysiaca* opens up various possibilities for reading Nonnus' epic. Wine in the *Dionysiaca*, although not always positive, has potential for miraculous healing, for induction into the cult and thiasos of Dionysus, and at times, a chance for elevation of the soul. Shorrock's interpretation of the *Dionysiaca* as analogous to the experience of wine, compares the poem to a mystery cult in which the reader is initiated through consumption of the poem and brought into a state of intoxication.³⁹⁴ The idea of text as mystery cult already had capital in Late Antiquity. Proclus expanded the domain of the Muses to the inspiration of students of holy texts,

³⁹² *Dion.* 29.267-74: κλήματος ἀμπελόεντι περισφίγξας πόδα δεσμῶ· / Εὐπετάλης δ' ἰχῶρα νεόσσουτον ἔσβεσεν οἶνω, / καὶ Σταφύλης χυτὸν αἶμα κατεπρήνυνεν ἀοιδῇ· / Μυρτοῦς δ' οὐταμένην παλάμην ἰήσατο μύρτω, / καὶ Καλύκην ἐσάωσεν ἀνειρύσσας βέλος ὦμου, / ἔλκεϊ φοινήεντι περιρραίνων πόμα ληνοῦ· / Νύσης δ' ἄλγος ἔπαυσε νεοιότητιο προσώπου, / χρίσας ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα παρηίδα λευκάδι γύψω·

³⁹³ Clark 2016: 97.

³⁹⁴ Shorrock 2001: 212.

allowing for inspired commentators.³⁹⁵ Inspired texts such as those of Plato were believed to show the ways of ascent towards God and ‘kindle fires in the souls’ (*Theol. Plat.* 3.1, p. 5.15-16). In Proclus’ fourth hymn, divine books themselves grant wisdom through illumination. The consumption of wine in the *Dionysiaca* is also an initiatory stage in becoming part of Dionysus’ thiasos, and thereby drawing nearer to the god himself.

Although the inspiration of the poet is explored through wine, it also manifests through more explicit appeals to the divine. The Bacchants inspired by Dionysus in battle exhibit various signs associated with divine inspiration in Neoplatonic texts, such as shining light and immunity to burning. In Book 25, Nonnus’ characterisation of his own relationship with the Muses and Homer echoes the extended digression on the Lydian priest of Zeus in Book 13, where the priest and his inspired word overpower Typhon in the manner of a theurgist compelling the gods. The priest’s noeric fire has suggestive links with the noeric light of the *Paraphrase*, which inspires John the Baptist to spread the divine word of God.

These various manifestations of divine inspiration echo poetic convention from Homer, through Pindar, down to the Roman period, but they also display an accretion of details and dimensions inherited from Late Antique discourse. The idea that texts contained ‘truth’ beyond knowledge, although not a new phenomenon, became of paramount importance in Late Antiquity with the prevalence of inspired texts, from the Gospels to the *Chaldean Oracles* and Neoplatonic hymns. Neoplatonists sought to express and define the mechanics of divine inspiration within their metaphysical schemas. Christian commentators on the Bible sought to do the same, often utilising Neoplatonic exegetical methods (e.g. Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Ps-Dionysius, etc.). By situating himself as an inspired poet, Nonnus faces a different challenge and cultural landscape to many of his epic predecessors. He must situate himself within the contemporary discourse, and he does so syncretically, appealing to both Neoplatonic and Christian sources.

³⁹⁵ Van den Berg 2001: 223.

4. Cosmic Models in *Dionysiaca* 6

Dionysiaca Books 5-6 offers us another locus for Neoplatonic influence. Besides the influence of the Orphic Dionysus, the most prominent Neoplatonic motif in these books is perhaps the Cave of Persephone. Nonnus' conception of Persephone's cave was inspired by the Cave of the Nymphs in *Odyssey* 13, an unusual passage with a rich exegetical tradition, which includes an extant commentary by the Neoplatonist Porphyry. Porphyry's commentary includes testimonia for various lost works, and would itself enjoy a rich afterlife in the imagination of commentators through the Homeric scholia (especially the D Scholia), until even to the Byzantine period, where the commentary was eventually republished in summary by Michael Psellus (1018-79).³⁹⁶ Although scholars have previously noted Nonnus' allusions to the Homeric cave,³⁹⁷ commentators have not yet set the cave within its Neoplatonic context. As this chapter will show, Nonnus' reworking of Homer's cave shows an awareness and nuanced understanding of Porphyry's commentary.

Porphyry's commentary interprets the cave as an allegorical space associated with *daimons*, through which souls may ascend into the heavens, or descend into genesis. The cave's cosmic significance is contextualised within mystic Neopythagorean and Middle Platonic interpretations of the *Odyssey* as a whole, which saw Odysseus' wanderings across the sea as the soul's journey through the material world. Odysseus' labours became the passions and travails of the soul, and his yearning for his *nostos* (homecoming) reflected the soul's desire to return to its natural condition in the Intelligible.

³⁹⁶ Michael Psellus earned the title 'Chief of the Philosophers,' and staged a Neoplatonic revival in Byzantium with the help of Constantine IX. Although Psellus' primary influence is Proclus, he quotes and references Porphyry on numerous occasions, sometimes antagonistically. Miles 2017: 83 suggests that Porphyry's anti-Christian polemic and negative reputation among Christians might have motivated Psellus' antagonism. However, there are occasions where Psellus appears appreciative of Porphyry, even referring to him as 'the Great' at *Theol.* 1.12.110-18.

³⁹⁷ Chuvin 1992: 147; van Opstell 2019: 22-4.

By including details from Porphyry, Nonnus not only showcases his erudition in Homeric scholarship; he also instils his own cave with cosmic importance. Learned readers would no doubt have recognised features and motifs from such a frequently allegorised passage, inviting them to read the text on an allegorical level. By doing this, Nonnus effectively transposes Porphyry's allegorical interpretation of Homer's cave into a new context. Accordingly, I argue in this chapter that, by investigating Porphyry's commentary as a model for *Dionysiaca* 6, it is possible to shed more light on the *Dionysiaca*'s cosmic aspirations. Many of these aspirations are already on display on a narrative level in *Dionysiaca* 6, which can be summarised as follows:

1-14	The gods court Persephone
15-102	Astraeus prophesies to Demeter about her daughter's future union with a heavenly serpent, and the birth of a god who will alleviate humankind's sufferings
103-154	Demeter hides her daughter in a cave to avert this prophecy
155-168	Zeus infiltrates the cave in the form of a serpent and impregnates Persephone
169-205	Zagreus is born and then murdered by the Titans
206-228	Zeus banishes the Titans to Tartarus and exacts vengeance upon their mother, Gaia. A conflagration covers the Earth
229-370	Zeus quells the firestorm with a flood
371-388	The flood subsides, and humankind restores civilisation

The aspirations of Book 6 go far beyond the use of cosmic episodes from Greek mythology (e.g., the Titanomachy, conflagration, and a flood). On a thematic level, Nonnus displays his keen appreciation for astrology: the movements of celestial bodies provide oracles, and herald change upon the Earth. *Dionysiaca* 6 also showcases the

poem's obsession with circularity,³⁹⁸ which has invited comparisons with Platonic conceptions of the universe.³⁹⁹ For modern scholars, the centrepiece is no doubt the Zagreus episode, inspired by the myth of the Orphic Dionysus, the heir of Zeus and the culmination of the Orphic divine succession. As this project and other scholars have already shown, the death and dismemberment of the Orphic Dionysus was extremely popular among Neoplatonic allegorists.

Accordingly, the final part of this chapter will look at Nonnus' possible engagement with Plato's *Timaeus* and its commentary by Proclus, with particular focus on the story of the Egyptian priest and the myth of Atlantis (*Tim.* 22b-27d; Procl. *In Tim.* 104.18-116.21, 171.24-178.10). The Egyptian priest's description of cyclical processes of generation and destruction have numerous points of contact with Nonnus' conflagration and flood, and the myth of Atlantis and its exegeses complement allegorical readings of the Orphic Dionysus' murder by the Titans. That Nonnus would rework two popular allegories – the Orphic Dionysus, and the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs – in a single extended episode offers us a compelling case study for Nonnus' advanced literary knowledge, and the compositional methods behind the *Dionysiaca*. Collectively, these readings reveal Book 6 to be a masterful bricolage of prominent allegories, all of which feature prominently in Neoplatonic texts. Taken together, these interwoven allegories elevate the cosmic significance of Book 6, making it perhaps the most cosmically charged episode in the *Dionysiaca*.

4.1 Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*

Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* (Περὶ τοῦ ἐν Ὀδυσσεΐᾳ τῶν νυμφῶν ἄντρον in Greek, *De Antro Nympharum* in Latin; hereafter, *De Antro*), a mystical exegesis of *Odyssey* 13.102-12, is perhaps the best surviving example of Neoplatonic allegoresis.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Collart 1930: 59; Newbold 1999; Shorrock 2001: 10-12.

³⁹⁹ Hernández de la Fuente 2011: 319.

⁴⁰⁰ Porphyry also wrote the *Homeric Questions*, although this work is strictly philological and devoid of any hint of Neoplatonic mysticism. Lamberton 1986: 109-11 argues that these separate approaches do not inherently mean that these two works belong to different stages of Porphyry's career. Akçay 2019: 18-9, however, argues that the *De Antro* belongs to a stage of Porphyry's life between his admission to Plotinus' school and his death, based on connections between the *De Antro* and Porphyry's mature works, the *De Abstinencia* and *Sententiae*.

The passage from the *Odyssey*, despite its mere 11 lines, clearly attracted numerous commentators in antiquity, but Porphyry's essay remains our best source for the passage's interpretive tradition.⁴⁰¹ Porphyry quotes works by Numenius and Cronius, who both reflect Neopythagorean and Middle Platonic views.⁴⁰² Porphyry's exegesis was popular and relevant enough as a source of mystic wisdom in the Byzantine period to receive a summary by Psellus, and it has also attracted numerous modern commentators.

Porphyry introduces his subject with a quote from Cronius, that it is evident 'not only to the wise, but also to the layman that [Homer] is speaking allegorically and in riddles' (τοιαῦτα τοίνυν ὁ Κρόνιος προειπὼν φησὶν ἔκδηλον εἶναι οὐ τοῖς σοφοῖς μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἰδιώταις ἀλληγορεῖν τι καὶ αἰνίττεσθαι διὰ το τῶν τὸν ποιητὴν, *De Antro* 3.1-3). Porphyry is keen to reject any possibility that the cave Homer describes is created by poetic license (2.4-8). He begins from a premise that perceived obscurities in the text actually signal the presence of a secondary level of meaning concealed beneath the text. This premise stands in clear contrast to the rhetorical tradition of literary criticism, which considered obscurity to be a flaw of style.⁴⁰³ Porphyry's approach instead reflects an exegetic theory, according to which divinely inspired authors would encode hidden meanings in their texts in the form of symbols, which, when correctly interpreted could reveal wisdom about the nature of the universe.⁴⁰⁴

This exegetical tradition was initially developed by the Stoics (particularly Cornutus) and could take a word, image, or group of images and build a set of associations from different registers of cultural experience, past and present.⁴⁰⁵ Although Porphyry inherits this methodology, his exegesis displays clear influence from

⁴⁰¹ Lamberton 1986: 55.

⁴⁰² Lamberton 1986: 35; Dillon 1996: 375-6. Numenius' commentary was likely included in a larger commentary on the myth of Er, as Proclus connects the two passages in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*. Akçay 2019: 12 shows that Numenius and Cronius had a recognised influence on Plotinus and his school in antiquity. Some of Plotinus' contemporaries accused him of simply plagiarising them both (*VPlot.* 17.1-2). Amelius, one of Plotinus' disciples, allegedly collected and copied Numenius' works and learned most of them by heart (*VPlot.* 3.44-5) and wrote a treatise called *The Difference between the Doctrines of Plotinus and Numenius*, which he dedicated to Porphyry (*VPlot.* 17.5-6).

⁴⁰³ Struck 2010: 60.

⁴⁰⁴ Brisson 2004: 85-6.

⁴⁰⁵ Struck 2010: 60.

Neoplatonic metaphysical developments in its interpretations.⁴⁰⁶ The essay itself has numerous internal and implied contradictions, and Porphyry's various levels of interpretation are at times incompatible. Praechter argues that this is due to Porphyry's attachment to ethics and moral allegory, even when this contradicts his other assertions about the passage.⁴⁰⁷ Lamberton, however, argues that 'for an exegete who is committed to articulating the meaning of a text in all its richness, and who, having accepted the presence of a second level of meaning behind the first, is quite willing to multiply those levels, the fact that the various levels of meaning begin to enter into contradiction is relatively unimportant. All enhance the text.'⁴⁰⁸ This leads us to two considerations regarding Nonnus' engagement with Porphyry. Firstly, that if Nonnus expects his audience to be well versed in Porphyry's exegetical method, then we can aspect some degree of obscurity in his own text. Secondly, if Nonnus alludes to Porphyry's essay, he can interface with various secondary levels of meaning, even if they appear contradictory or mutually incompatible.

4.2 Persephone's Cave of the Nymphs

This section will cover correspondences between *Odyssey* 13.102-12 and *Dionysiaca* 6. The *Odyssey* passage comes in Homer's description of a harbour in Ithaca, where Odysseus first makes landfall with the help of the Phaeacians. After Odysseus sits beneath a nearby olive tree, Athena appears to him in disguise and advises him to hide his identity when on Ithaca and to conceal his treasure within the cave.

The cave itself is described as follows (*Od.* 13.102-12):

αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ κρατὸς λιμένος τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη,
 ἀγχόθι δ' αὐτῆς ἄντρον ἐπήρατον ἡεροιδές,
 ἱρὸν Νυμφάων, αἷ Νηϊάδες καλέονται.
 ἐν δὲ κρητῆρές τε καὶ ἀμφιφορῆες ἔασι
 λαῖνοι· ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτα τιθαιβώσσουσι μέλισσαι.
 ἐν δ' ἱστοὶ λίθιοι περιμήκεες, ἔνθα τε Νύμφαι

⁴⁰⁶ Struck 2010: 60.

⁴⁰⁷ Praechter 1910: 243.

⁴⁰⁸ Lamberton 1986: 121. See also Pépin 1966: 243-9.

φάρε' ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι·
 ἐν δ' ὕδατ' ἀενάοντα. δύω δέ τέ οἱ θύραι εἰσίν,
 αἱ μὲν πρὸς βορέαο καταβηταὶ ἀνθρώποισιν,
 αἱ δ' αὖ πρὸς νότου εἰσὶ θεώτεραι· οὐδέ τι κείνη
 ἄνδρες ἐσέρχονται, ἀλλ' ἀθανάτων ὁδός ἐστιν.

At the head of the harbour, there is an olive tree with spreading
 leaves, and nearby is a cave that is obscure, and pleasant,
 and sacred to the nymphs who are called Naiads.
 There are mixing bowls and amphorae inside it,
 all of stone, and there the bees deposit their honey.
 And therein also are looms that are made of stone, very long,
 where the nymphs weave their sea-purple fabrics, a wonder to behold,
 and inside there are ever-flowing waters. There are two doors,
 one of them facing the North Wind, where people can enter,
 but the one towards the South Wind is more divine. Nor do
 men enter that way, as that path is for immortals.

Nonnus' cave in *Dionysiaca* 6 is described in strikingly similar terms (6.128-34):

καί, Κυανῆς ὄθι πυκνὰ ῥόος χυτλώσατο κούρην
 κρηναίῳ στροφάλιγγι χέων ὀπτήριον ὕδωρ,
 γείτονα κόλπον ὅπωπεν ἰσοσταθέοντα μελάθρῳ,
 λαϊνέης ὀρόφοιο περιστεφθέντα καλύπτρῃ,
 ὃν φύσις ἐθρίγκωσε χαραδραίῳ πυλεῶνι
 λάινον ἱστὸν ἔχοντα μεμηλότα γείτοσι Νύμφαις

And, in the place where that river had often bathed the maiden Cyane,
 pouring his water in fountain-showers as a bridal gift,
 [Demeter] saw a neighbouring grotto like a grand hall,
 and concealed by a roof of polished stone,
 which nature had veiled with a rocky gateway
 and a loom of stone tended by the neighbouring Nymphs.

Several correspondences are immediately clear: both caves feature flowing water (*Dion.* 6.128-9; *Od.* 13.109), nymphs (*Dion.* 6.134; *Od.* 13.105, 108), and stone looms (*Dion.*

6.134; *Od.* 13.108). Both are also spaces of concealment: Demeter intends to hide her daughter within; Odysseus conceals his treasure. Caves, Porphyry tells us, are symbols of the invisible powers (*De Antro* 7.1-7). The ancients consecrated caves and grottos to the sensible cosmos (*De Antro* 5.1-7.7),⁴⁰⁹ because the stone symbolises the matter that constitutes the material world. Stone, like matter, is inert and resistant to form.

Nonnus, however, embeds further allusions for his audience to decipher. For instance, aspects of Demeter's flight across the Mediterranean consciously reflects the orientation of the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs. Her direction of flight is never explicitly stated, and the audience can only draw inference from the mention of landmarks, landmasses, bodies of water, and the direction of the winds. As Demeter crosses the Mediterranean, she hears the sound of Cretan troops around Mount Dicte, and then comes upon Sicily, suggesting an east-west trajectory. However, she also flies across the Libyan Ocean (*Dion.* 6.119), and Boreas, the north wind, roars against her passage (116), suggesting that Demeter approaches Sicily from the south, the direction reserved for immortals in Homer's cave.⁴¹⁰

Chuvin attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction, suggesting that Nonnus includes Crete and Sicily in the geography of Demeter's flight because, according to tradition, both were possible sites for the rape of Persephone.⁴¹¹ The most important detail, he says, is that the goddess approaches from the south, evoking the Cave of the Nymphs of *Odyssey* 13.⁴¹² However, Porphyry's commentary on *Od.* 13.102-12 offers us a further explanation. The north and the west – Demeter's two trajectories – are both associated with *daimons* and genesis.

The direction is important because Porphyry identifies the cave's orientation in the *Odyssey* as one of the obscurities that signals a secondary level of meaning. He asks 'why does Homer allocate the direction of the North to humans, and the direction of

⁴⁰⁹ In particular, Porphyry mentions the cave that Zoroaster dedicated to Mithras (*De Antro* 6).

⁴¹⁰ During her flight, Demeter hears the sound of Cretan troops around Mount Dicte, suggesting that she should approach Sicily by its eastern coast (*Dion.* 6.120-2). Chuvin 1992: 144-5 convincingly interprets the mention of Crete as an allusion to a variant tradition regarding the location of Persephone's rape (cf. Bacchylides fr. 47), that does not contradict the other details regarding Demeter's direction of flight.

⁴¹¹ For Crete: Bacchylides fr.47; For Sicily: Apollonius Rhodius, *Arg.* 4.892ff.; Strabo, *Geog.* 6.1.5; Oppian, *Hal.* 3.485ff.

⁴¹² Chuvin 1992: 144-5.

the South to gods, rather than using the East and West for this, since the statues and entrances in almost all temples face the East, and those who enter face the West when they stand in front of the statues to offer prayers and honour the gods?' (*De Antro* 3.21-4.1). This is because eastern regions, he adds, are more appropriate to gods (*De Antro* 29.1-3).

Porphyry explains Homer's decision to have his cave entrances face the north and south through several different astrological allegories using information from his predecessors, Numenius and Cronius. The entrances are in fact the tropic of summer (of which there is nothing more northern) and the tropic of winter (of which there is nothing more southern), otherwise known as the Gates of Cancer and Capricorn. Or, they are the Mithraic solstitial gates, through which souls ascend or descend through the seven planets in sequence, with each planet representing a stage of Mithraic initiation.⁴¹³ Porphyry also relates the cave entrances to the gates of the sun at *Od.* 24.12, through which the souls of Penelope's suitors descend into Hades. Then, he compares them with the gates of the Sun and Moon.

Through this cluster of images, Porphyry interprets the northern and southern entrances not as paths for humans and gods, but as paths for souls. The northern region he associates with genesis, the descent of souls into generation. The southern region he associates with more divine souls who have passed through every stage of genesis and return to their home and natural condition in the Intelligible realm (*De Antro* 34.1-10; *Plot.* 1.6.8.16-20). These associations are traditional and based on observations of the natural world. Northern climes were considered 'cold' and 'wet,' and Greeks commonly believed that living beings were generated from 'wetness' (e.g. *Hes. Op.* 61).⁴¹⁴ Southern climes, by contrast, were considered 'hot' and 'dry.' Fire and heat was associated with the upward reversion of souls to the Intelligible. Heraclitus says that 'dry souls are wisest.'

When Nonnus has Demeter fly headlong into Boreas, the north wind, he does not just imply the direction of the goddess' flight. He also evokes the concept of genesis.

⁴¹³ Akçay 2019: 146.

⁴¹⁴ This idea is also found in the opening lines of the *Dionysiaca*, where Dionysus is born 'still wet' (*Dion.* 1.4).

Not only is Boreas traditionally ‘cold’ and ‘wet’ like the northern climes, he was conceived as generative, and ‘amorous’ by Porphyry because of his union with the twelve mares of Erichthonius in the form of a stallion (*Il.* 20.219-25) and his rape of Oreithyia (*De Antro* 26.6-7). This foreshadows the sexual violence that will come to dominate the Persephone myth, echoing Boreas’ attempts to court her in Book 5, and presaging her eventual rape by Zeus.

In his discussion of the regions and their assignments, Porphyry adds that the western regions are appropriate to *daimons* (δαίμοσι δὲ τὰ δυτικά, *De Antro* 29.15). The reason behind this is not immediately clear, nor is the precise distinction Porphyry makes between souls descending into generation from the north and the *daimons* he places in the west. As Akçay demonstrates, the west could also be associated with ‘wetness’ (cf. Ptolemy *Tetrabiblos* 1.11.3-4.1).⁴¹⁵ The assignment of western regions to *daimons* is also reminiscent of Porphyry’s commentary on the story of Atlantis in Plato’s *Timaeus*, which is preserved by Proclus (*In Tim.* 1.77.6-24).⁴¹⁶ The city is located in the west, and Porphyry interprets the war between Athens and Atlantis as an allegory for the conflict between souls who try to ascend to the Intelligible, and corrupt *daimons* that wage war on souls during their descent into generation (77.21-2):

For he hands down the tradition that, before they come into physical bodies, there is rivalry between souls and the enmattered daimons that he assigned to the West; for the West, as Egyptians say, is the region of harmful souls.

Akçay links the hostile *daimons* of the Atlantis allegory to the Naiads in the Cave of the Nymphs.⁴¹⁷ The Naiads, who takes their name from flowing waters (ναίω), could, according to the ancients, refer to souls descending into generation. This is based off their association with water, which was a common symbol for the material world. Porphyry also notes the etymology of ‘nymph,’ which could refer to nubile women or brides (*De Antro* 12.1-4; 19.8-10).⁴¹⁸ The stone looms they work at in the Homeric cave symbolise bones and the creation of material bodies, while the sea-purple garments

⁴¹⁵ Akçay 2019: 98-9.

⁴¹⁶ Sodano 1964: 6-7; Edwards 1990: 259.

⁴¹⁷ Akçay 2019: 100-101.

⁴¹⁸ Akçay 2018: 145.

signify the flesh woven from blood (14.8-11). Not only are these features present in Nonnus, but Porphyry's exegesis appears to explain Demeter's seemingly contradictory westward and northward flight path. Both directions are associated with *daimons* and genesis.

In light of these details, Demeter's flight from westwards from Crete towards Sicily takes on a new dimension. In his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, Proclus says that 'the theologians usually make Crete stand for the intelligible,' because according to Orpheus, 'Zeus is required to bring the purgatives from Crete' (*In Tim.* 1.118.24-6).⁴¹⁹ Persephone's journey from Crete to Sicily, where she is eventually ensconced in a cave, could therefore symbolise Persephone's descent into generation from the Intelligible. Her journey can then be read as a form of *katabasis*, analogous to her mythological descent into the underworld.

Nonnus' description evokes ideas of birth and generation in other ways. He describes his cave as a κόλπος, which is usually translated as 'bosom' or 'lap,' although in poetry more generally, it can also refer to a womb.⁴²⁰ It also comes to mean any 'bosom-like hollow,'⁴²¹ and complements Porphyry's κοῖλος (5), which also means 'hollow.' Although Nonnus employs the full gamut of meanings of κόλπος throughout his poem,⁴²² he uses it for womb on several occasions, including Book 3 when Electra consoles Cadmus, and recalls the seven girls that her mother bore in labour (τῶν ποτε μήτηρ θηλυτέρας ὠδῖνας ἔῳ μαιώσατο κόλπῳ, 3.332-3). This ambiguous word therefore emphasises the cave as a place of generation, and it mirrors Persephone's womb which will soon bear Zagreus.

Given the Cave of the Nymphs' prevalence in ancient literary criticism, it seems likely that these details would 'prime' educated readers, tuning them into a more

⁴¹⁹ Transl. Tarrant 2007: 214.

⁴²⁰ Eur. *Hel.* 1145 (lyr.), Call. *Jov.* 15: sg., Id. *Del.* 214; δεσποίνης ὑπὸ κόλπον ἔδυν Orph. *Fr.* 32c.8; θεὸς διὰ κόλπου ib. 31i24: metaph., of the grave, σῶμα σὸν ἐν κόλποις . . . γαῖα καλύπτει IG2.3839, cf. 3412, *Epigr.Gr.* 214.7 (Rheneia); κ. ἡμερῶν, of the womb of time, *Ezek. Exag.* 39. See *LSJ* - κόλπος.

⁴²¹ This can refer to the sea, or in a half literal sense, a sea-goddess (e.g., of Thetis, *Il.* 6.136, or more generally, 18.140, 21.125; *Od.* 4.435, 5.52). It can also refer to other geographical features, such as a bay or a gulf (e.g. *Il.* 2.560; Aesch. *Pers.* 486), or even a vale (e.g. Pindar *Pyth.* 4.49).

⁴²² For example, meaning bosom (*Dion.* 1.30, 3.85, 3.284, 338, 345, 379), the sea (1.206, 3.49), a bay (1.273, 2.241), or the fold of a gown (3.401).

interpretive level of reading. Nonnus' transposition and transformation of the Homeric cave does not appear entirely comprehensive, however, making his use of Porphyry's commentary even more conspicuous. The stone-mixing bowls and amphorae, in particular, are conspicuously absent. Porphyry's commentary insists that these vessels would under normal circumstances be symbols of Dionysus (13.6). However, the mixing-bowls and amphorae of Dionysus are usually 'testaceous' and made from baked earth, corresponding to the vine which achieves maturity through the celestial fire of the sun (13.6-9). Homer's mixing-bowls and amphorae are made of stone, and appropriate to the Naiad nymphs who preside over waters which flow from rocks (13.5, 14.1-2). It seems likely that Nonnus deliberately omitted these features to avoid any confusion, because the world of the *Dionysiaca* is still awaiting the birth of Dionysus and his gift of wine. The mixing-bowls and amphorae are also not especially prevalent in either Homer or Porphyry, and their absence in Nonnus also reflects this.

Nonnus' cave of Persephone also deviates from its Homeric model by only explicitly including one entrance (singular *πυλεών*, *Dion.* 6.132), which Demeter leaves her dragons to guard (136-9). Porphyry explains that the double entrance in Homer is symbolic of nature, because nature arises out of adversity. In the *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus justifies his cave's single entrance by making explicit what is absent in Homer, and supplied only by Porphyry's exegesis: that nature is responsible for fashioning the cave's entrance, as well as the stone loom inside (132-3). That Nonnus explicitly includes only one entrance, however, demonstrates his willingness to deviate from pre-existing models. Through the lens of Porphyry's commentary, a reader would also be challenged to contemplate and formulate new meanings, while still utilising existing interpretive strategies either to inform their approach or as a point of departure. The one entrance would signal to a learned audience that Persephone's cave does not fulfil an identical cosmogonic function to the Cave of the Nymphs; namely, it does not allow for both the ascent and descent of souls.

The most compelling evidence, however, that Nonnus used Porphyry's commentary to help rework the Homeric cave, is the prominence of Persephone in both works. Porphyry mentions Persephone several times to substantiate his interpretations of *Od.* 13-102-12. First and foremost, he takes Persephone's cave as a natural

comparandum for the Homeric cave. Assertions about the Homeric cave are elucidated through reference to Persephone. Nonnus in effect reverses this textual relationship. He starts from Persephone's cave, and uses details from Homer as a key to deciphering his own text.

When Porphyry says that caves are symbols of invisible powers, he cites the cave that Demeter hides Persephone in as evidence. Likewise, when Nonnus describes Persephone's cave in the *Dionysiaca*, he emphasises his cave's ability to conceal: it is a καλύπτρη, a 'veil,' and Demeter hides Persephone (ἐγκρύπτω), who is ἀθήητος, 'that which must not be seen.' Then, when Porphyry explains that the stone looms in Homer's cave symbolise the body-creation process, he cites Persephone's loom in the Orphic tradition as evidence (*De Antro* 14.11-14):

The body is the garment of the soul which it clothes, a wonder to behold, whether one considers its composition or the nature of the soul's connection with the body. So too, in Orpheus, Kore [Persephone], who watches over everything that is sown, is described as working at the loom.

Shortly after Demeter hides Persephone within the cave, Nonnus describes Persephone working at the loom within (*Dion.* 6.145-52):

ἀμφὶ δὲ καρχαρόδοντα γένυν πεπόνητο σιδήρου
 εἰροκόμῳ ξαίνουσα περὶ κτενὶ λήνεα κούρη,
 ἡλακάτῃ δ' ἐνέλισσε· πολυστροφάδεσσι δὲ ῥιπαῖς
 εἰλυφόων ἄτρακτος ἔλιξ βητάρμονι παλμῶ
 νηθομένων ἐχόρευε μίτων κυκλούμενος ὀλκῶ·
 καὶ ποσὶ φοιταλέοισι παλίνδρομος ἄκρον ἀπ' ἄκρου
 πρωτοπαγῇ ποίησε διάσματα, φάρεος ἀρχήν,
 ἱστῶ δ' ἀμφὶς ἔλισσεν· ὕφαινε δὲ κερκίδι κούρη
 πηνίον ἐξέλκουσα παρὲκ μίτον, ἀμφὶ δὲ πέπλῳ
 γνωτὴν ἱστοτέλειαν ἐὴν ἐλίγαινεν Ἀθήνην.

The girl busied herself in carding fleeces of wool
 around the sharp teeth of an iron comb.
 She wound the wool on the distaff, and the
 twirling spindle with many a twist and jerk ran

round and around in dancing step as the
 threads were drawn through her fingers.
 She fixed the first threads of the warp which
 begins the cloth, and gave them a turn round the beam,
 moving from end to end to and fro with un-resting feet.
 She wove away, plying the rod and pulling the bobbin
 along through the threads, while she sang over
 the cloth to her cousin Athena, the clever webster.

The scene is divided into two parts, each consisting of five lines. In the first part, Persephone prepares the thread through carding and spinning. In the second part, we see her weaving. Gigli Piccardi suggests that the emphasis on whirling, circular movement in this passage relates to the Spindle of Necessity at Plato's *Rep.* 10.616c, which turns the heavenly spheres (cf. Proclus *Hymn* 1.48).⁴²³

The image of Persephone at the loom was extremely popular in Late Antiquity. She weaves a robe (*peplos*) portraying the universe for her mother in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae* (1.246-72). A fragment from the Orphic Rhapsodies describes the *peplos* as 'a heavenly robe like a garment of the heavenly gods' (Porph. *De Antro* 14.13-6 cf. *OF* 228, 286, 288).⁴²⁴ Evidence suggests that the Rhapsodies might also have included an ekphrasis of the *peplos*. Other testimonia indicate that the robe may have featured a scorpion, Ocean, and a depiction of the Gigantomachy.⁴²⁵ Neoplatonic accounts suggest that Persephone's robe depicted a procession of the Hypercosmic deities (who are responsible for the creation of essence, life, and soul, and exist at the level of the transcendent World-Soul), followed by the Hypercosmic-Encosmic deities (who rule over nature but remain detached from the world itself), then Dionysus as the

⁴²³ Gigli Piccardi 2003: 480. Cf. Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 246, which links the passage to the *Dionysiaca*'s general obsession with circularity, which is explored variously through descriptions of the cosmos, episodes that feature divinities and prophecy, and references to the fate of the soul.

⁴²⁴ Meisner 2019: 262; cf. Pherecydes of Syros (*fr.* 68-9 Schibli = 7 N2 D-K); West 1983: 244-5; Bernabé 2004: 237. Clement of Alexandria also mentions a lost work of Epigenes that ascribes a *Peplos* poem to the Pythagorean writer Brontinus (*Strom.* 1.21.131.5).

⁴²⁵ Meisner 2019: 262. For Ocean, see Schol. Dionys. *Perieg.* 1 (*GGM* II 430.23 Müller); Eustathius, *in Dionys. Perieg.* 1 (*GGM* II 217.17 Müller) (*OF* 287 I-II B = 115 K); West 1983: 157n68. For the scorpion, see Proclus, *In Remp.* 2.62.9 Kroll (*OF* 290 B = 196 K). For its connection with the zodiac, see West 1983: 244-5; Brisson 1995: 66n27. For the Gigantomachy, see Proclus, *In Tim.* 1.85.14-6 Diehl and Tarrant ad loc.

Encosmic or Material Intellect at the head of the Encosmic deities (who exist within the sensible world).⁴²⁶

The robe's cosmic imagery appears to have provided rich material for Late Antique exegetes.⁴²⁷ Damascius says that the Hypercosmic robe-making of Kore produces the orderly arrangement of the cosmos, a process which is ἀφομοιωτικός ('imitative/assimilative'), because 'the imitation of Intelligible images is woven in as a pattern' (Damascius *In Parm.* 339 = 3.123.14 Westerink = *OF* 286 VI B = 192 K). Proclus interprets the robe as an allegory for how Persephone 'weaves the order of life' (*In Crat.* 22.1 Pasquali = *OF* 271 I, 286 III B = 192 K).

There is no suggestion of what Persephone is weaving in Nonnus, however. The emphasis is entirely on the process of weaving, as opposed to the articulation of the final product. This is perhaps not surprising, given that in other sources, Persephone never finishes her work, symbolising the imperfection of creation (Proclus *In Tim.* 3.223.7 = *OF* 288 II B = *OF* 192 K). By focusing on the process rather than the product, Nonnus reflects the traditional Platonic belief of the eternity of the universe, and its ongoing process of creation and generation from higher principles. Circularity is a prominent cosmic motif in the *Dionysiaca*,⁴²⁸ and it seems inevitable that Nonnus was well aware of contemporary interpretations of the myth of Persephone's loom. This is partially due to the presence of other Orphic material in Book 6.

Furthermore, any description of the cosmos that unfolded from Persephone's weaving would only be restated later in *Dionysiaca* 6, with Nonnus' account of the conflagration and inundation. There Nonnus describes the four corners of the Earth (Bactria, the Assyrian, Caspian and Red Seas, and the Indian mountains in the east; the

⁴²⁶ On the Hypercosmic, Hypercosmic-Encosmic, and Encosmic deities, see Proclus, *In Crat.* 55.5 Pasquali (*OF* 299 I B = 208 K); Brisson 1995: 82–84, 186; cf. Chlup 2012: 126–127. For their depiction on Persephone's woven *peplos*, see Meisner 2019: 262.

⁴²⁷ Edmonds 2013b: 280, n112 suggests that Porphyry's allegorical interpretation of Persephone's weaving as the goddess' oversight over the process of genesis may have been inspired by an exegesis of a scene from a *Peplos* poem, which discussed the formation of material bodies and perhaps even the physical universe itself in terms of weaving a garment, similar to Pherecydes fr.2, where Zas gives a robe to Chthonie as a wedding gift that transforms her into the physical manifestation of the Earth. Cf. West 1983: 87.

⁴²⁸ Riemschneider 1957; Gigli Piccardi 1985: 217–20. Newbold 1999: 41–4 catalogues the frequencies for terms related to circularity in the *Dionysiaca*, e.g., κύκλος, 'circle' (146); κυκλάς, 'encircling' (49); ἑλιξ, 'spiral/coil' (60).

Atlantic Ocean in the west; the Northern Sea in the north; and the snowy climes of Capricorn in the south), Oceanus, and concludes with Zeus' arrangement of the celestial bodies in the zodiacal signs. If Nonnus included a similar description earlier as an ekphrasis, it would have risked diminishing the universal scope of the book's climax.

However, Nonnus does include a cosmic textile later in the *Dionysiaca* that appears to echo Persephone's *peplos*. At *Dion.* 41.294-302, Harmonia weaves a tapestry depicting the Earth with its rivers, sky, and ocean. The two episodes are clearly in dialogue with one another. Both Persephone and Harmonia weave on Athena's loom (Persephone, 5.608; Harmonia, 41.294). Harmonia herself is characterised as a goddess of cosmic harmony.⁴²⁹ Her circular palace is shaped like the universe (εἴκελον οἶκον ἔναϊε τύπῳ τετράζυγι κόσμου αὐτοπαγῇ, 41.278; περίτροχον εἰκόνα κόσμου, 41.281). Its entrances are aligned with the four cardinal directions, and the guardians of the east, south, and west are named for the path of the sun: Anatolia (Rising), Mesembrias (Midday), and Dysis (Setting). Harmonia's house is, therefore, in many ways a counterpart to Persephone's cave as a representation of the universe. Harmonia's palace is located in the vault of heaven (ἡερίην ἀψῖδα, 276), allowing her an encompassing and almost omniscient view of the universe below,⁴³⁰ while Porphyry imagines Homer's cave as the bottom of the universe.⁴³¹ Both cosmic representations appear to be self-fulfilling (although the adjective αὐτοσυμφυῆς in the *De Antro* is subject to some textual uncertainty).⁴³² Both locations are home to goddesses engaged in weaving with cosmic significance. When Aphrodite journeys to Harmonia's palace, she approaches from the east, the region allocated to immortals in Porphyry's *De Antro*, suggesting that Nonnus follows Porphyry's assignment of the regions here too.

Both passages also display strong resonances of weaving as a metaphor for poetic composition.⁴³³ Weaving stands as a metaphorical confluence for many of the *Dionysiaca's* expression of performance art. ὕφαινω ('weave') occurs 32 times throughout the poem, and can be achieved through song, music, dance, and gesture.⁴³⁴

⁴²⁹ Vian 1993: 41-3.

⁴³⁰ Fincher 2018: 131.

⁴³¹ Akçay 2018: 4.

⁴³² *De Antro* 5.8.

⁴³³ Fincher 2018: 131.

⁴³⁴ Newbold 1999: 42.

To illustrate this point, Nonnus has his Persephone sing to Athena as she weaves. These simultaneous acts represent an elision between composition and performance, where the act of poetic composition that takes place in the bard's mind becomes physically actualised in the weaver's hands. Persephone's circular weaving, therefore, can be seen as a *mise en abyme* for Nonnus' circular poem, as well as a metaphor for cosmic creation.

By having his Persephone sing while weaving, Nonnus draws on models like Helen (Theoc. *Id.* 18.33-7) and the nymph Calypso (*Od.* 5.61-2). Of these two, Calypso appears to be the primary model, given that, like Persephone, she sings and weaves within a cave. Like Persephone, Calypso was also the subject of allegorical interpretation in antiquity. Her name was etymologised from 'καλύπτρα' (veil) or 'καλύπτω' (to conceal), thus allegorising Calypso as a goddess relating to material nature who looks to keep Odysseus from his homecoming.⁴³⁵

The fact that Nonnus' Persephone weaves on Athena's loom and sings to her reinforces the passage's interaction with allegorical texts. The art of weaving is said to originate from Athena and 'proceeds to the life-bearing series of Kore' (Procl. *In Crat.* 22.1 Pasquali = *OF* 192 K). Proclus posits Athena and Persephone in a triad of life-giving gods through which living beings are animated and perfected.⁴³⁶ Athena was also integral to Porphyry's exegesis of the Homeric cave. Porphyry identifies the olive tree at the head of the harbour as a plant of Athena, who signifies practical wisdom (φρόνησις, *De Antro* 32.12). Because Athena was born from the head of Zeus, her tree at the head of the harbour signifies that the cosmos is the product of intelligent nature and wisdom, as opposed to spontaneous or irrational chance (32-33).⁴³⁷ The olive occupies a similar position in both the spatial and the interpretive landscapes of the cave as the Sun in Plato's famous allegory of the cave in *Republic* 514a-520a. Porphyry quotes Glaucon's

⁴³⁵ Calypso was also associated with 'representational faculty' (*phantasia*) and the fascination it exercises. See Kalligas 2014: 214, citing Plot. 1.8.18-20, Procl. *In Eucl.* 55.20-3 and Olymp. *In Phd.* 6.2.7, 97. Kalligas also notes an intriguing parallel in the *Exeg. Soul* = NHC II 6, 136.27-35, a Gnostic treatise that likely precedes Plotinus by a few decades, which offers a similar allegorical interpretation for the Calypso episode in the *Odyssey*.

⁴³⁶ Rangos 2000: 58.

⁴³⁷ Cf. Apuleius' *On the God of Socrates* 24, which compares Socrates' *daimon* with Homer's Athena, who acts as a companion and guiding *daimon* for Odysseus during his journey home.

response – ‘what a prodigious *eikon*!’ (*Rep.* 514a, *De Antro* 62.4), which Edwards describes as the ‘hermeneutic crux’ of the *De Antro*, reflecting man’s progression from the observation of shadows cast by *eikones* to the direct observation of the Sun.⁴³⁸

When Odysseus sits under the tree, he learns from Athena that he must leave his worldly possessions in the cave. Their conversation is considered by Porphyry to be as important as the tree itself. He says: ‘one is required, having stripped oneself naked, dressed as a beggar, withered in body, having cast off all that is superfluous, and turned away from the senses, to take counsel with Athena, sitting with her underneath the olive tree, to learn how one might eliminate the treacherous passions of one’s soul’ (*De Antro* 34.1-6). For Porphyry, this symbolises the journey and exile of the soul, where ascent is only possible if the soul purifies itself from the labours and passions of the material world.

The olive tree also acts as a ‘lodestar of philosophy,’ a guide in the search for truth in nature, and in the derivation of meaning from a text.⁴³⁹ In this way, both Odysseus and the reader are suppliants at the olive tree, where the latter must supplicate not only Athena, but also his natal *daimon* (*De Antro* 35.6-17).⁴⁴⁰

The seat beneath the olive is also appropriate to him both as a suppliant to Athena and as one whose supplication appeases his natal demon. For one cannot be rid of this sensory life forthwith by blinding it [as Odysseus blinded the Cyclops, son of Poseidon], and striving to be free at once. The one who attempts this is followed by the wrath of marine and material deities, who should first be appeased by sacrifices and beggars’ toils and endurances, sometimes fighting the passions, sometimes charming and deceiving and adopting all changes towards them, in order that, stripped of one’s rags, one may destroy them all; and not even thus be free from toils, but only when one is absolutely remote from the sea and ignorant of the works of sea and matter.⁴⁴¹

That Nonnus’ Persephone weaves on Athena’s loom, and has Athena present to oversee her generative weaving demonstrates Nonnus’ transformation of the Homeric cave

⁴³⁸ Edwards 1996: 96.

⁴³⁹ Edwards 1996: 98-9.

⁴⁴⁰ Edwards 1996: 99.

⁴⁴¹ Transl. Edwards 1996: 99.

using Porphyry's exegesis as a hypertext. It is a process not dissimilar to Nonnus' use of Cyril's exegesis for his versification of John's Gospel. Elements in the original texts are elaborated upon or reworked using information contained within commentaries. The commentaries themselves become lenses that colour the interpretation of the original texts beneath them.

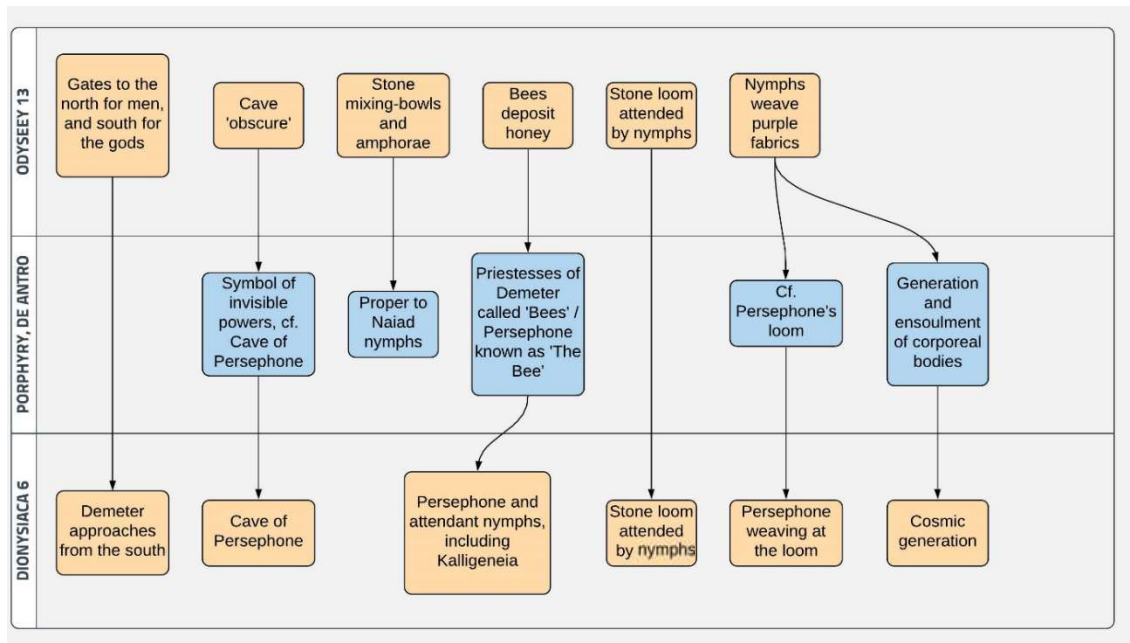
This phenomenon also appears in the final mention of Persephone in the *De Antro*, in connection with the bees and honey from the Homeric cave (*Od.* 13.106). Porphyry explains that Demeter's priestesses were called 'bees' by the ancients, and that Persephone was called the 'Honey-sweet' (Μελιτώδη), and sometimes the 'Bee' (*De Antro* 18).⁴⁴² Homer includes these symbols in the cave because Persephone is associated with Selene.⁴⁴³ As the goddess of the moon, she presides over the process of genesis. Therefore, although Nonnus does not explicitly include bees and honey in his rework of Homer's cave, he can be seen to include them symbolically through the presence and character of Persephone.

To summarise, then, Persephone represents a confluence between *Odyssey* 13.102-12, the *De Antro*, and *Dionysiaca* 6.128-34. Porphyry uses Persephone as evidence for his interpretations, and Nonnus takes these details as suggestions for his rendition of the Cave of the Nymphs. Through engagement with Porphyry, Nonnus' cave reworks not only the original text, but also imports its allegorical significance. The intersections between *Odyssey* 13, Porphyry's *De Antro*, and *Dionysiaca* 6 traced out thus far can be illustrated as follows:

⁴⁴² Porphyry notes that Persephone-Selene could also be called the 'bull.' As a result, both bees and souls descending into generation are called 'ox-born' (βουγενεῖς), and the 'god who secretly furthers creation' is called the 'ox-stealer' (βουκλόπος). Βουκλόπος is used in Nonnus as an epithet of Hermes, due to the god's theft of Apollo's cattle (1.337). Its only other attestation is in the *Orphic Argonautica* (1057), where it describes Helios and his creation of the Cimmerian Bosphorus. Beck 2006: 198-9 identifies the 'cattle-stealing god' of *De Antro* 18 with Mithras. Cf. Edwards 1993: 122-5, who argues that 'cattle stealing god' refers to Hermes.

⁴⁴³ This association also exists in Nonnus, exemplified by the syncretic hymn to Selene at *Dion.* 44.191-216.

Figure 8: Model of intellectual transmission between *Od. 13*, *De Antro*, and *Dion. 6*



Given how widely read Porphyry's essay appears to have been, and that much of it is reproduced in the Homeric D Scholia (which are based on Late Antique compilations of Homeric criticism), it seems inconceivable that Nonnus would have been unaware of the preeminent Homeric literary criticism of the time, especially given his own demonstrable debt to Homer elsewhere. The visualisation above (Fig. 8) shows clearly that, while some elements are directly imported from *Odyssey* 13 with minimal changes, others are transformed using cues from Porphyry's commentary.

4.3 Etymologies

That Nonnus is crafting his cave as a locus for allegorical interpretation can be supported by two etymologies. Ancient etymology was an accepted form of allegoresis, practiced particularly by the Stoics, and could be used to support broader allegorical interpretations. Identifications such as Hera as 'Aer' (Air) or Kronos as 'Chronos' (Time) were commonplace.⁴⁴⁴ Nonnus is especially fond of personifications and wordplay elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca*. He renames Dionysus' nurse, Hipta (cf. *OH* 48, 49; Procl. *In*

⁴⁴⁴ E.g., Ps.-Arist. *De Mundo* 401a15; Cicero *De Nat.* 23; Plut. *De Iside* 32; Procl. *In Crat.* 115.

Tim. 1.407, 22 Diehl = *OF* 199 Kern) as Mystis to provide an aetiology for the god's mystic rituals (*Dion.* 8.111-31).⁴⁴⁵ Dionysus' later entourage are metamorphosed into elements of the Dionysiac sphere, creating a host of new personifications and aetiologies (e.g. Ampelus 'Vine' at 10.175, or Methe 'Drunkenness,' Staphylos 'Cluster of Grapes' and Botrys 'Grape' at 18.5-305; 18.327-20.141).⁴⁴⁶

Within the context of Book 6, there are two names with etymological associations that broadly support the allegorical framework of the Cave of the Nymphs: the nymphs Cyane and Calligeneia. Cyane is the Naiad nymph that bathes in the nearby stream. According to myth, she is one of Persephone's playmates. After Persephone is kidnapped by Hades, Cyane metamorphoses into a spring out of grief. Her mention in Nonnus is primarily a geographic detail, locating the cave near Syracuse, but the name's etymology can be traced back to the adjective *κυάνεος*, meaning 'dark blue,' 'dark,' or 'black,' suggestive of the darkness associated with caves and matter. Her presence also foreshadows the sexual violence of the Persephone myth, although it will be her rape by Zeus, rather than Hades, which will feature in Nonnus.

Then there is Calligeneia, who is appointed as Persephone's nurse. The name can be etymologised as 'beautiful-birth,' strengthening the cave's association with the generation of material forms. Elsewhere, the name designates the third and final day of the Thesmophoria festival in Athens, and could be invoked as an epithet of Demeter (*Ar. Th.* 299, *Alciph.* 2.4, cf. *IG* 14.205), or the Moon (*Hymn. Mag.* 5.31). Both are associated with generation; Demeter as a fertility goddess, and the Moon as the boundary of the sublunary realm and a gateway for souls descending into genesis. Calligeneia also appears as Demeter's nurse (*Ar. ap. Phot.*). Rigoglioso, commenting on Calligeneia's presence in Nonnus, proposes that the motif of Calligeneia overseeing Persephone's weaving refers to the maiden goddess's own 'cosmic apprenticeship' in learning about parthenogenesis.⁴⁴⁷ Taken together, Cyane and Calligeneia's etymological associations appear to support the Cave of the Nymph's original allegorical framework as established by Porphyry.

⁴⁴⁵ For more on Mystis, see García-Gasco 2014: 211-27; Bernabé and García-Gasco 2016: 108-9.

⁴⁴⁶ For more on personification in the *Dionysiaca*, see Miguélez Caverio 2013.

⁴⁴⁷ Rigoglioso 2010: 109-10.

4.4 The Titans and the *Timaeus*

This final section will look at the connections between Nonnus' cave and its models from Plato's *Timaeus*. As we have seen, Book 6 already features many cosmic associations: Astraeus, the god of prophecy, is a practitioner of astrology; Persephone's cave is a transposition of the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs, which was allegorised as a space where souls ascend to the Intelligible or descend into corporeality. As we have seen, Zagreus, who is born from Persephone within the cave, could be read as an allegory of the Material Intellect, that must undergo a process of division to create the sensible universe.⁴⁴⁸

The influence of the *Timaeus* is keenly felt, particularly in the *Dionysiaca*'s obsession with circular motion (Plato *Tim.* 34a-b, 36e-37a), which in Platonic thought characterises the revolutions of the cosmos and the voyages of the soul (cf. also *Phaedr.* 247b-d, *Rep.* 616b-617d, *Laws* 897c).⁴⁴⁹ Furthermore, Nonnus certainly knew Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, and various scholars have used its publication in 438 as a *terminus post quem* for the *Dionysiaca*.⁴⁵⁰ Yet, there are other cosmic associations that have not been fully realised.

After the Titans murder Zagreus in *Dionysiaca* 6, Zeus imprisons them in Tartarus. Their imprisonment follows the Hesiodic model, but Nonnus has deviated significantly from the *Theogony*, in that the Titans' transgression is no longer their war against the Olympians. In the *Dionysiaca*, once the Titans are imprisoned, Zeus lays waste to the Earth, the Titans' mother. His thunderbolt causes a great conflagration, an ironic reversal of the conflagration at Hes. *Theog.* 820-68, which Zeus causes to prevent Typhon's (almost successful) attempt to overthrow him. The *Dionysiaca*'s conflagration has numerous intersections with the destructive firestorms described in Plato's *Timaeus* 21e-23c. After wreaking havoc with his lightning bolt, Zeus takes pity on the Earth, and

⁴⁴⁸ cf. Plot. 4.3.11-12; Procl. *In Tim.* 3.80.20f.; Olymp. *In Phd.* 1.3; Dam. 1.3; Clem. *Protrept.* 2.17.2-18.2; Macrob. *In Somnium Scipionis* 1.12.12

⁴⁴⁹ Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 231.

⁴⁵⁰ Tissoni 1998: 13; Accorinti 2003: 205.

arranges the heavens to produce a Deluge and a great, cosmic flood. Disasters of this kind are also described in *Timaeus* 21e-23c.

Timaeus 21e-23c immediately precedes the myth of Atlantis, which tells of an ancient war between Athens and Atlantis, which Proclus states was symbolically analogous to the conflict between Dionysus and the Titans. Proclus is our best source for this alternative allegory, which he records in his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. He cites three schools of thought on the legendary conflict: those following Amelius read the Atlantis myth as an allegory for the conflict between the fixed stars and the planets, respectively, which arises from their counter-revolution, with Athens' victory assured by the single turning-motion of the universe; those following Origenes interpreted it as a conflict between *daimons*; the third school claimed to combine the views of Origenes and Numenius, and read the myth as a conflict between soul-polluting *daimons* that waged war on souls during their descent into generation (Procl. *In Tim.* 1.76.32-77.23):

οἱ δὲ εἰς δαιμόνων τινῶν ἐναντίωσιν, ὡς τῶν μὲν ἀμεινόνων, τῶν δὲ χειρόνων, καὶ τῶν μὲν πλήθει, τῶν δὲ δυνάμει κρειπτόνων, καὶ τῶν μὲν κρατούντων, τῶν δὲ κρατουμένων, ὥσπερ Ὀριγένης ὑπέλαβεν. οἱ δὲ εἰς ψυχῶν διάστασιν καλλιόνων καὶ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς τροφίμων καὶ γενεσιουργῶν ἄλλων, αἱ καὶ τῷ τῆς γενέσεως ἐφόρῳ θεῷ προσήκουσι. καὶ ἔστι τῆς ἐξηγήσεως ταύτης προστάτης Νουμηνίος. οἱ δὲ καὶ μίξαντες τὴν Ὀριγένους, ὥσπερ οἶονται, καὶ Νουμηνίου δόξαν ψυχῶν πρὸς δαίμονας ἐναντίωσιν εἶπον, τῶν μὲν δαιμόνων καταγωγῶν ὄντων, τῶν δὲ ψυχῶν ἀναγομένων· παρὰ οἷς ὁ δαίμων τριχῶς· καὶ γὰρ εἶναι φασὶ τὸ μὲν θείων δαιμόνων γένος, τὸ δὲ κατὰ σχέσιν, ὃ μερικαὶ συμπληροῦσι ψυχὰς δαιμονίας τυχοῦσαι λήξεως, τὸ δὲ πονηρὸν ἄλλο καὶ λυμαντικὸν τῶν ψυχῶν. τοὺς οὖν ἐσχάτους δαίμονας τὸν πόλεμον τοῦτον συγκροτεῖν καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς ἐν τῇ εἰς τὴν γένεσιν καθόδῳ· καὶ ἅπερ οἱ παλαιοί, φασί, θεολόγοι εἰς Ὅσιριν καὶ Τυφῶνα ἀνήγαγον ἢ εἰς Διόνυσον καὶ Τιτᾶνας, ταῦτα ὁ Πλάτων εἰς Ἀθηναίους καὶ Ἀτλαντίνους ἀναπέμπει δι' εὐσέβειαν· πρὶν δὲ εἰς τὰ στερεὰ σώματα κατελθεῖν, $\leq$ ἐναντίωσιν $\geq$ παραδίδωσι τῶν ψυχῶν πρὸς τοὺς ὕλικούς δαίμονας, οὓς τῇ δύσει προσωκείωσεν· ἐπεὶ καὶ ἡ δύσις, ὡς ἔλεγον Αἰγύπτιοι, τόπος ἐστὶ δαιμόνων κακωτικῶν· ἐπὶ δὲ ταύτης ἐστὶ τῆς οἰήσεως ὁ φιλόσοφος Πορφύριος, ὃν καὶ θαυμάσειεν ἂν τις, εἰ ἕτερα λέγει τῆς Νουμηνίου παραδόσεως.

Others interpret it as a conflict of *daimons*, with some being better and others worse, the one side superior in numbers, the other in power, with the one being victorious and the other vanquished, as Origenes supposed. Others interpret it as a dispute between the finer souls – the foster-children of Athena – and others who work at generation and who belong to the god presiding over generation [Poseidon]. Others combine (or so they believe) the views of Origenes and of Numenius and say that it is a conflict between souls and *daimons*, with the *daimons* being a down-dragging force and the souls trying to come upwards. Their view is that there are three kinds of *daimons*, a divine type of *daimon*, a type now in that condition (*kata schesin*) which is made up of individual souls who have received a *daimonic* lot, and the other corrupt kind – the soul polluters. So *daimons* of the final type strike up this war with souls on their descent into generation. And they claim that, just as the ancient theologians refer this to Osiris and Typhon or to Dionysus and the Titans, Plato attributes it to Athenians and Atlantines out of reverence. For he hands down the tradition that, before they come into three-dimensional bodies, there is rivalry between souls and the enmattered *daimons* that he assigned to the west; for the west, as the Egyptians say, is the region of harmful souls. The philosopher Porphyry is of this view, and one would be surprised if he is saying anything different from the view authorized by Numenius.⁴⁵¹

The Atlantis section of the *Timaeus* (24e-25d) and its commentaries were popular enough in antiquity. We know for certain, prior to Proclus, that Porphyry and Iamblichus commented upon it in some detail (Procl. *In Tim.* 204.25-9). Proclus also mentions Crantor, Amelius, Origenes and Numenius as interpreters in a lengthy section between 75.27-204.29.⁴⁵² The equating of Dionysus and the Titans with Osiris and Typhon is traditional. Osiris was identified as the ‘Egyptian Dionysus,’ and this connection is explicitly made by Nonnus (*Dion.* 4.270-1). Like the Orphic Dionysus, Osiris is murdered and dismembered, and eventually resurrected, leading to similar eschatological connections. The culprit, the Egyptian god Set, was associated with Typhon from an early period (Herod. 2.144.2 = Hecataeus *FGrH* 1 F300).

The comparison between the Titans and the Atlantines is perhaps more surprising, but the two myths have several points of contact. Like the Titans and Set-

⁴⁵¹ Transl. Tarrant 2007: 169-70.

⁴⁵² Tarrant 2007: 75.

Typhon, the Atlantines are punished for their transgressions (Plato *Crit.* 121b-c), and their continent sinks beneath the sea amidst tidal waves and earthquakes. Atlantis was located far in the west, beyond the Pillars of Herakles, the region associated with *daimons* and generation. Etymologically, Atlantis is connected with the Titan Atlas, who was forced after the Titans' war against the Olympians to stand in the western regions holding up the heavens (Procl. *In Tim.* 1.173.1-6). The Titans were also themselves associated with generation due to their earthborn nature (γηγενής, e.g. Antimachus fr. 44.2, 52.6; *Dion.* 18.212, 35.350). Evidence suggests, therefore, that Nonnus' Zagreus episode could be read as an allegory for the war between souls and soul-polluters, especially given that the previous allegorical frameworks in Book 6 would likely trigger a more semiotic level of reading in the audience.

Proclus, however, does not directly endorse these parallel readings of the Atlantis myth. Rather, he lauds the views of Iamblichus and his teacher Syrianus in his discussion of Socrates' constitution, and how it relates to the organisation of heaven (*In Tim.* 1.77.24-78.27).⁴⁵³

Both [Iamblichus] and my own teacher [Syrianus] preferred to explain this conflict not [at the expense of] setting aside of the surface meaning, but on the contrary, in the conviction that these things have happened in every sense. However, as we are accustomed to refer what precedes the primary discussions to the same target as the discussions, so we prefer to take this rivalry also from the human realm and to distribute it, in this same way and according to a similar pattern, across the whole cosmos and particularly among generated things, so giving it widespread meaning to all things, and studying how they partake of this rivalry in accordance with their variety of powers. I mean that since everything is from the One and the Dyad that comes after the One, and they are somehow brought into unity with each other and have acquired opposing natures, just as there is also an opposition among the Kinds of being, of Same against Other and of Motion and against Rest, and everything in the cosmos participates in these Kinds, it would make sense to study the rivalry that runs through everything.

Moreover, assuming that we have observed the analogue of [Socrates'] constitution in the entire cosmos, we must surely also take note of this 'war' that is embedded in the

⁴⁵³ For more on Socrates' constitution, see Tarrant 2007: 53-60; Stegman 2015.

whole of nature. For the constitution is analogous to being and the substances, while the war is analogous to their powers and their unvarying motions. And one should say that the former, the constitution that makes all things in common, is assimilated to the total unification, while the latter is assimilated to the ascendancy of strife. So if you bisect the whole into incorporeal and corporeal, and then the incorporeal into the more intellectual and the more enmattered parts, and the corporeal into heaven and generation, and the heaven into the opposing revolutions but generation into the contrasting properties – or however you understand this contrasting life either among gods or among daemons or among souls or among bodies – you would in every case be able to bring analogies that begin with humans to bear upon things.⁴⁵⁴

Iamblichus' position goes on to postulate a column of opposites, inspired by the Pythagorean column, according to which tension and conflict pervades every metaphysical level below the Neoplatonic One.⁴⁵⁵ Many of these opposites are developed from Homer, who sets, for example, Apollo against Poseidon, Ares against Athena, and the Scamander against Hephaestus (*In Tim.* 1.78.28-79.17). Proclus continues (1.79.18-28):

As for Aphrodite [Iamblichus] leaves her all by herself so that she may be the light behind all unification and harmony, fighting as an ally of the weaker powers, because in the things of this world the one is weaker than plurality. For all rivalry is properly studied along with the one, for it (the one) is either prior to it, or naturally implanted in it, or somehow supervenient upon it. It is this that Plato like the theologians has noticed when before the single cosmology he rightly hands down the multiple one, and before the whole the parts. And discovering all this in images before their paradigms, he studies in the human realm this rivalry that exists also in a corresponding form within the universe, requiring no battles with Titans or Giants.⁴⁵⁶

Iamblichus' position, then, is that the conflict symbolised by the war between Athens and Atlantis is not only perpetuated at every metaphysical level, but is, like Empedocles' concept of Love and Strife, necessary for the creation and maintenance of the cosmos.

⁴⁵⁴ Transl. Tarrant 2007: 184-5.

⁴⁵⁵ Tarrant 2007: 81-2.

⁴⁵⁶ Transl. Tarrant 2007: 186.

Proclus again connects this with the image of the Titans (and the Giants) as symbols of opposing forces that drive conflict.

Proclus later makes the connection between the Titans and the Atlantines again, more explicitly (1.172.24-173.6):

So, through the parallel between humans and things divine, he teaches us even of this war before the origin of the cosmos, adopting the Athenians to represent Athena and the Olympian gods and the people of Atlantis to represent the Titans and Giants, for it is possible to study the same things in images as one can in universals. And, so as to remind us of the parallel, he refers his listeners through the name of the Athenians to the Olympian column under Athena's generalship, and through the people of Atlantis to the Titanic gods. For presumably, among the Titanic gods, the very great Atlas is also one. In fact, the theologians too say that after the dismemberment of Dionysus, who shows the divisible procession into the All from the indivisible creation, the other Titans were given a different allotment by Zeus, whereas Atlas was stationed in the western regions holding up the heaven.⁴⁵⁷

Proclus also compares the respective fates of the Titans and Atlantis. When Atlantis sinks beneath the sea, that region of ocean becomes impassable because of shoals of mud just beneath the surface (Plat. *Tim.* 25c-d). Proclus notes (1.188.19-189.8):

And [Aristotle] tells that there is mud in the outside sea beyond the mouth, and that that place is full of shoals, so if 'mud ... just below the surface' signifies 'full of shoals' it is not that remarkable. For even now they call submerged rocks with water over the top 'surface-reefs.' So why would anybody be bothered making out a detailed case for this? But we seek proof that these words offer an amazing indication of the whole cosmic arrangement by reminding ourselves of the 'en-tartarization' [καταταρτάρωσις] spoken in Orpheus' writing [cf. *OF* 122 K]. For he too, when he has given the account of the rivalry-in-creation between the Olympians and the Titans, brings to an end the whole account of cosmic arrangement down to the final things of the All, giving even them a share in the immaculate providence of the gods. So knowing this Plato too carries on teaching about the universe through images, consigns these two races to the realm of

⁴⁵⁷ Transl. Tarrant 2007: 286.

darkness, and through causing them to disappear in this way imitates the Orphic 'en-tartarization.'

For Proclus, their punishments are analogous. Both the Atlantines and the Titans are enclosed beneath the earth, according to a process referred to in the Orphic fragments as 'en-tartarization' (καταταρτάρωσις). It seems likely that Nonnus was aware of or in some way influenced by this analogy, given that his banishment of the Titans to Tartarus, like the fall of Atlantis, is then associated with a series of natural disasters, the likes of which have already been discussed by Plato in *Timaeus* 21e-23c.

According to the dialogue, a priest tells Solon during his visit to Egypt that 'there have been, and will be again, many destructions of mankind arising out of many causes. The greatest have been brought about by the agencies of fire and water' (22c). Porphyry also links the concepts of Atlantis and disasters by fire and water explicitly. As Tarrant says 'Porphyry does not restrict discussion of souls to his treatment of Atlantis, but also takes the general material about destruction by fire and flood as referring to the destruction of souls by inner forces, the conflagration of the passions and the floods of matter (116.27-117.18).'⁴⁵⁸ This offers a precedent for the conceptual linking of the Titans (as analogies of the Atlantines) to conflagrations and floods.⁴⁵⁹

Accordingly, Nonnus' conflagration and flood occur on a cosmic level. His Zeus lays waste to the Earth, up to the four corners of the known world: Bactria, Assyria and India in the east; the Atlantic Ocean in the west; the 'frozen sea' in the north; and, the clime of snowy Capricorn in the south (*Dion.* 6.212-23). When Zeus summons a Deluge, 'the seven-zones of watery heaven are opened' (αἰθέρος ὑδατόεντες ἀνωίχθησαν ὀχῆες, 250-1), referring to the celestial spheres. The rainwater breaches the terrestrial boundaries of the Earth, 'mixing with the starry battalions' and making 'the Milky Way whiter with foam' (ἀστραίη δὲ φάλαγγι μεμιγμένον ὄμβριον ὕδωρ λευκοτέρην ποίησε Γαλαξαίην ἵτυν ἀφρῶ, 337-8). Deucalion's journey across the flood is called a 'sky-walking voyage' (πλόον ἡεροφοίτην, 368). The flood then almost causes cosmic

⁴⁵⁸ Tarrant 2007: 92.

⁴⁵⁹ Proclus, likewise, links the concepts of conflagration and inundation to the perpetual cycles of destruction and generation that pervade existence (*In Tim.* 1.105.4-12).

dissolution ('the cosmos would have fallen into disorder, and all-nurturing Time would have dissolved the structure of the unsown generations of humankind,' καί νύ κε κόσμος ἄκοσμος ἐγίνετο, καί νύ κεν ἀνδρῶν ἄσπορον ἀρμονίην ἀνελύσατο πάντροφος Αἰών, 371-2), if not for Zeus and Poseidon's intervention.

Conflagrations and floods are well attested in Graeco-Roman literature. There are the floods of Ogyges, Deucalion (mentioned above), and Dardanus (*Dion.* 5.229-79). Phaethon's fall to Earth in the Chariot of the Sun was often rationalised from Plato onward as an allegory for conflagration (*Tim.* 22c-d; Ps-Aristotle *De Mundo* 6, 400a 23-34; Dio Chrysost. *Or.* 36.48),⁴⁶⁰ which Proclus says should be studied from historical, physical, and philosophical angles (*In Tim.* 1.109.7-9). As the Egyptian priest explains to Solon in Plato's *Timaeus* (22c-d):

For in truth the story that is told in your country as well as ours, how once Phaethon, son of Helios, yoked his father's chariot, and, because he was unable to drive it along the course taken by his father, burnt up all that was upon the Earth and himself perished by a thunderbolt. That story, as it is told, is in the form of a myth, but the truth of it lies in the alternation of motion of the bodies in the heavens which move round the Earth, and a destruction of the things on the Earth by fierce fire, which recurs at long intervals.

This passage suggests an astrological belief that the movement and relative position of the planetary spheres could produce elemental forces upon the Earth (cf. Procl. *In Tim.* 1.106.14-23, where Proclus says that 'destruction and birth occur as a result of the heavenly figures, and these are enactments (*mimēmata*) of the divine intellections').⁴⁶¹ Nonnus clearly shares this astrological belief, because when Zeus summons a Deluge, he does this by re-ordering the celestial bodies and placing them in astrological houses appropriate to the element of water (*Dion.* 6.229-48):

The Rainy Zeus covered the whole sky with clouds and flooded all the earth. Zeus's heavenly trumpet bellowed with its thunderclaps, while all the stars moved in their appointed houses: when the Sun in his four-horse chariot drove shining over the Lion's back, his own house; the Moon of threefold form rolled in her on-running car over the

⁴⁶⁰ Gigli Piccardi 2003: 491.

⁴⁶¹ Transl. Tarrant 2007: 201.

eightfoot Crab; Cypris in her equinoctial course under the dewy region had left the Ram's horn behind, and held her spring-time house in the heavenly Bull which knows no winter; the Sun's neighbour Ares possessed the Scorpion, harbinger of the Plow, encircled by the blazing Bull, and ogled Aphrodite opposite with a sidelong glance; Zeus of nightfall, the twelvemonth traveller who completes the lichtgang, was treading on the starry Fishes, having on his right the round-faced Moon in trine; Cronos passed through the showery back of Aigoceros drenched in the frosty light; round the bright Maiden, Hermes was poised on his pinions, because as a dispenser of justice he had Justice for his house.

As Stegemann has shown using information from Dorotheus of Sidon, a 1st-century BCE Hellenistic astrologer-poet (who possibly composed his horoscopic *Pentateuch* in Alexandria), Nonnus' astrological schema is arranged with the celestial bodies in the appropriate position for deluge, while still preserving traces of a schema which would have heralded an conflagration.⁴⁶²

Stoic astrology posited a similar idea that a conflagration (ἐκπύρωσις),⁴⁶³ or a flood (κατακλυσμός) would be responsible for destroying the universe at long intervals, beginning a new cycle where everything is born anew. This rebirth was referred to as ἀποκατάστασις (restoration), and was envisioned as a repeat of everything that had happened since the previous destruction.⁴⁶⁴ The concept of ἐκπύρωσις, especially, was short-lived and never universally accepted by Stoics.⁴⁶⁵ Conflagrations and floods were also believed to occur at the end of great cosmic cycles, rather than consecutively. However, there is precedent for the combination of ἐκπύρωσις and κατακλυσμός (with reference to the myths of Phaethon and Deucalion) attested by Hyginus *Fab.* 152a-153 (cf. also Jupiter's refusal to unleash a conflagration to provoke a flood at Ovid *Met.*

⁴⁶² Stegemann 1930: 88-94, summarised in Rouse 1940: 243: '[Nonnus] puts the Sun in Leo, the Moon in Cancer, Saturn in Capricorn and Mercury in Virgo. He thus gets traces of a conflagration-scheme, for the Sun in Leo brings heat, and is supported by Mars in Scorpius, and therefore in quadratile aspect with him. Mars is also regent of the triangle Cancer-Scorpius-Pisces. But the opposite triangle, Taurus-Virgo-Capricorn is of a cold and earthly nature, and is the stronger because Venus and Saturn are respectively moist and cold, while Saturn is further strengthened by being in diametrical opposition to the Moon, which is moist. Thus the deluge is provided for.'

⁴⁶³ Plutarch attributes the concept of *ekpyrosis* to Chrysippus (Plut. *Against the Stoics* 1053b).

⁴⁶⁴ Rose 1940: 242-3.

⁴⁶⁵ Jaap 1983: 219-20.

1.253-61).⁴⁶⁶ Proclus also, in his commentary on the Phaethon myth, argues that deluges immediately follow conflagrations, and this is symbolised by the tears of Phaethon's sisters, the Heliades (*In Tim.* 1.110.15-22).⁴⁶⁷

Proclus reads these disasters allegorically as processes of destruction and generation: 'what then are the cycles of things in the cosmos? One must indeed postulate that there is always generation and always destruction in the totality. For that which is perceptible is 'coming to be and passing away, but never really real' [Plat. *Tim.* 28a] (1.105.4-7). The myths therefore become symbols of the ongoing processes of destruction and generation that occur in the sensible universe, as material forms are made and unmade.

Nonnus' flood is not only destructive. It also upends the natural order, and the pastoral world mixes and clashes with the maritime. Land and sea dwellers are forced to occupy a shared space among the hills and mountains. Nereid nymphs become Oreads. Sea-lions leap into mountain lions' dens. Dolphins meet with boars. Echo and Pan, popular bucolic figures, are separated by the flood, and their mythological paradigm shifts to accommodate the sudden intrusion of the maritime world. Echo, as an Oread nymph of Mount Cithaeron, must now swim and fears the sexual predation of Poseidon instead of Pan. Pan himself, the god of shepherds and hunters, and resident of the mountainous countryside of Arcadia, loses track of Echo and his panpipes amongst the waves, and instead must pursue the sea-nymph Galatea. Polyphemus, who traditionally sings and longs for Galatea, sees his wish to be able to cross from his terrestrial world to her maritime world suddenly enacted on a cosmic stage.

The choice of the mountain setting comes about as a logical consequence of a great flood, which is born out in the *Timaeus*: Plato's Egyptian priest explains that 'when the gods purge the Earth with a flood of waters, all the herdsmen and shepherds that are in the mountains are saved, but those in the cities of your lands are swept into the sea by the streams' (*Tim.* 22d-3). Accordingly, in Nonnus, every city is flooded (*Dion.*

⁴⁶⁶ Gigli Piccardi 2003: 491.

⁴⁶⁷ In his explanation of the Phaethon myth, Proclus also says that, like Nonnus' conflagration, it is Zeus that is ultimately responsible for the conflagration, because he hurled the thunderbolt at Phaethon (*In Tim.* 1.114.15-20).

6.326-7), and must eventually be rebuilt (383-6). Unlike the Stoic theory of ἀποκατάστασις, however, the universe does not simply repeat itself, but changes for the better with regards to the fortunes of humankind.⁴⁶⁸

In addition, Nonnus includes several details that appear calculated so that his conflagration and flood exceed the rationalising explanations in the *Timaeus*. Plato's dialogue explains that in times of conflagration, those who dwell on the mountains or in dry places suffer more destruction than those who dwell near to rivers or the sea (*Tim.* 22d). In Nonnus' conflagration, however, the Assyrian waves set the Caspian Sea and Indian mountains aflame, the Red Sea burns, and the normally frozen Northern Sea boils (*Dion.* 6.213-221). Likewise, in the *Timaeus*, Egypt is normally spared from inundation, because water never falls as rain from above, and instead wells up from below the ground (*Tim.* 22e). However, in Nonnus, the Nile overflows and meets the river Alpheus in the Peloponnese (*Dion.* 6.339-40).

Although any single correspondence noted here between *Dionysiaca* 6, the *Timaeus*, and Proclus' commentary might appear inconclusive in isolation, as a catalogue it demonstrates Nonnus' serious and sustained engagement with Plato and Proclus. His conflagration and inundation reflect rationalisations and the cosmic apparatus from Plato's *Timaeus*, with targeted details to further elevate the extent of the poem's cosmic upheaval. Plato's discussion of disasters not only immediately follows the myth of Atlantis; the two sections are both presented by Critias, and are, at least in Proclus, bound by significant connective tissue in the cyclic processes they express: the ascent and descent of souls. The fact that the myth goes hand in hand with natural disaster, and was reframed in Late Antiquity as analogous to the punishment of the Titans, makes this interpretation even more compelling.

4.5 Conclusion

Seen through this lens, *Dionysiaca* 6 appears as a pastiche of cosmically charged myths, along with their exegeses. We can see that *Odyssey* 13, Porphyry's *De Antro*, Plato's

⁴⁶⁸ Rose 1940: 243.

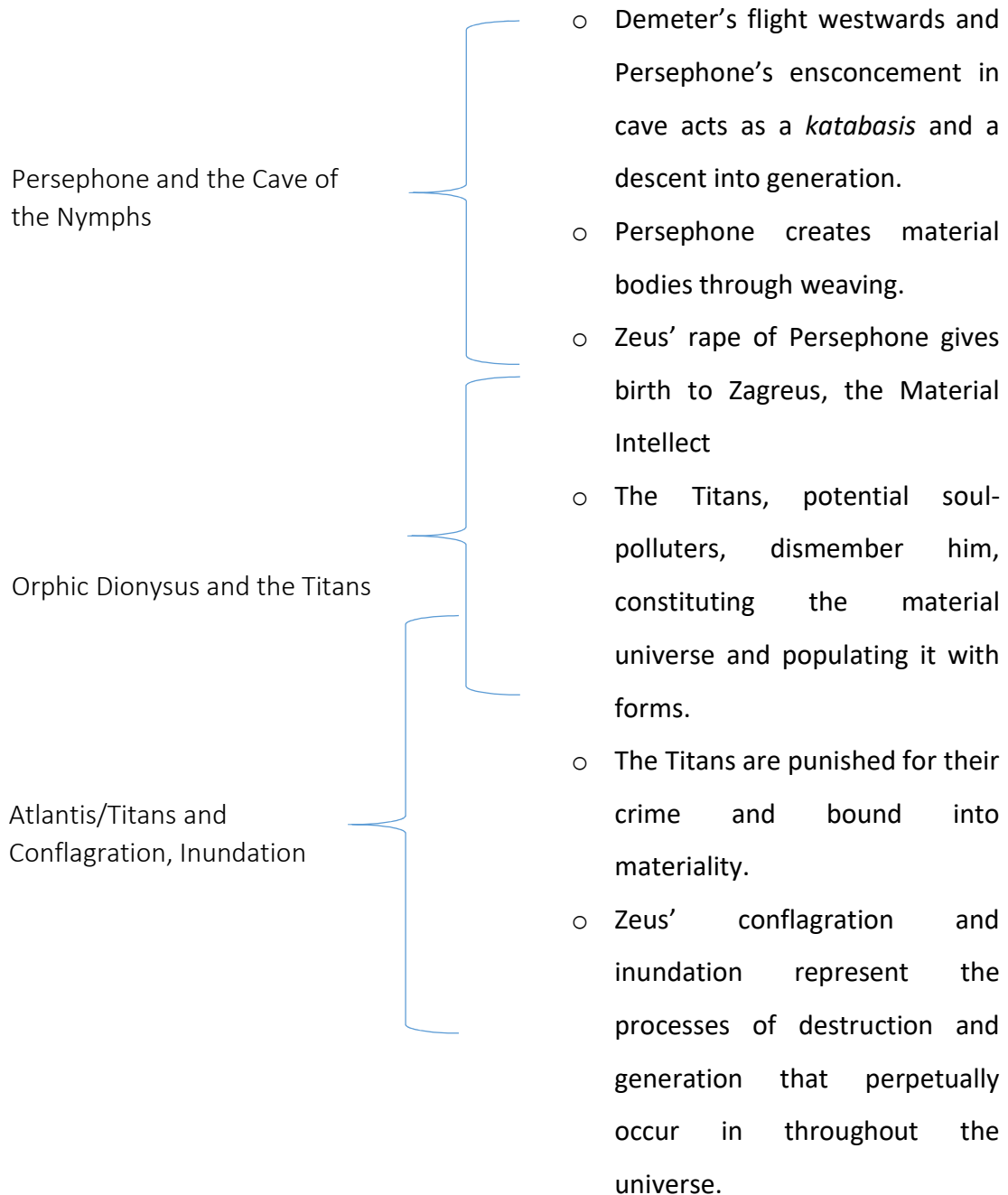
Timaeus, and Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* have greatly informed Nonnus' composition. The idea that Nonnus selected these models precisely for their cosmic implications and allegorical interpretations is particularly compelling. This is in addition to the Orphic and Neoplatonic models that informed his retelling of Dionysus and the Titans. Nonnus' stitching and interweaving of his various models is sophisticated, reflecting a familiarity with Neoplatonic exegetical material, and an apparent ease at envisioning myths in exciting new contexts.

This virtuoso performance leads us to several conclusions about the nature of Nonnus' engagement with Neoplatonic material. At first, one might try to dismiss Nonnus' knowledge of Porphyry's *De Antro* as reflecting his encyclopaedic knowledge of Homer and Homeric literary criticism, rather than a nuanced understanding of Neoplatonism. However, this does not appear to be the case. There is significant engagement with Platonic and Neoplatonic texts throughout the Zagreus episode and the wider context of *Dionysiaca* 6. This is because Neoplatonism likely provided the primary lens for any positive interpretation of Graeco-Roman myth in the intellectual milieu of Nonnus' Alexandria. It is entirely possible that Nonnus reworks Neoplatonic allegories precisely because they were the primary means of reading Homer. Given Nonnus' erudite knowledge of his poetic father, any attempt to imitate and exceed Homer requires his *Dionysiaca* to recreate the same openness and translucency to allegorical exegesis. It is not enough to simply write like Homer, one must ultimately be read like Homer.

The placement of Persephone's Cave of the Nymphs near the beginning of *Dionysiaca* 6, drawing on an allegory that was well-known through to the Byzantine period, would no doubt have triggered Nonnus' audience to tune into a more semiotic mode of reading, which would certainly have continued through the narration of Zagreus' death, through to the conflagration and flood. For modern scholars, it is always precarious to offer our own allegorical explanations, which is why this chapter has focused primarily on exegetical models rather than interpretations themselves. It should not concern us, however, if this pastiche and interweaving of exegetical texts does not produce a compelling, consistent, and holistic allegorical reading of *Dionysiaca* 6. Porphyry's *De Antro* admits multiple levels of meaning that sometimes enter into

contradiction. Like the *De Antro*, a ‘calculated pluralism’⁴⁶⁹ appears to emerge from *Dionysiaca* 6. Any modern allegorical interpretation is surplus to the main body of this chapter, but I can offer a tentative, general framework:

Figure 9: Overlapping allegories in *Dionysiaca* 6



⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Pépin 1966: 243-9 on the coherence of the *De Antro*, despite its discordant elements and mutually conflicting allegories.

This proposition should perhaps not be read as strictly chronological framework, but rather an interwoven series of allegorical vignettes about the constant, ongoing creation and maintenance of an eternal universe, expressed through cycles of ascent and descent, destruction and generation. In effect, *Dionysiaca* 6 can be seen as an allegory symbolising Neoplatonic metaphysical apparatus. This level of allusion and engagement with Neoplatonic allegory cannot possibly be sustained across the *Dionysiaca* as a whole, in much the way that Neoplatonists did not offer sustained exegeses of every single episode in the *Odyssey*. Yet, Nonnus' display here raises the possibility that other episodes or books were constructed with micro-allegorical frameworks, and his familiarity with Neoplatonism was such that we cannot discount Neoplatonic themes and motifs, even on a macro-level.

5. Allegorical Themes and Motifs

It comes as no surprise that Nonnus, whose paraphrastic technique draws inspiration from Cyril of Alexandria's exegesis on John, would appeal to exegetical models for his *Dionysiaca*. As Chapters 3 and 4 have shown, such influences can be readily seen in Nonnus' use of wine as a metaphor for the *Dionysiaca* itself, and in the cosmic models of *Dionysiaca* 6. However, the question over whether the *Dionysiaca* includes recurring allegorical themes or motifs is still fraught. Scholars have, on occasion, suggested allegorical readings for various scenes, motifs, and etymological personifications,⁴⁷⁰ but perhaps the first macro-level interpretation was put forth by Stegemann. He argued that Nonnus had constructed the *Dionysiaca* with an elaborate astronomical allegory centred on the figure of Aion-Kronos-Time and the zodiacal signs, that construed the life of Dionysus as a symbol of the advent of a new golden age.⁴⁷¹ Stegemann's views have understandably received much criticism.⁴⁷² Although the influence of astrology on Nonnus' poetry is undeniable, and several episodes show traces of an astrological schema, the same level of allusion is not sustained across the entire poem. Though Nonnus' astrological system alludes to some extent to a new cosmic world order inaugurated by Dionysus, it is misleading to suggest that this was the primary framework within which Nonnus conceived his poem.⁴⁷³

Recent forays into allegory have proven more fruitful. Most conclusive in this regard is Spanoudakis 2014, which interprets Dionysus' shield within a tradition of shield ekphrases, and shows how the four scenes depicted upon the shield combine to create a universal history through a syncretic mix of Homeric, Graeco-Roman pagan, and Christian motifs. While this chapter will elaborate further on the imagery of Dionysus'

⁴⁷⁰ E.g., Chrétien 1984: 19, 108; Liebeschuetz 1996: 79; Shorrock 2001: 115-16, 207-13; Garcia-Gasco 2014.

⁴⁷¹ Stegemann 1930.

⁴⁷² Lind 1938: 75; Keydell 1961; Fauth 1981: 180-4. Stegemann's general idea of interpreting the *Dionysiaca* within the flexible structure of the royal encomium has been applauded and accepted, if not the rigid framework set out in his work. See e.g., Vian 1976: xx-xxii; Lasky 1975, 1978; Lasek 2009: 131-44.

⁴⁷³ Shorrock 2001: 14.

shield, proposing several new intertexts substantiated through their cultural context, this chapter's primary goal is to identify allegorical themes and motifs on a more macro-scale. A necessary caveat is that this chapter is not proposing a systematic or even consistent framework for the *Dionysiac* akin to Stegemann's astronomical reading. Rather, it proposes a series of themes and motifs that Nonnus weaves in and out of at will. At times these motifs are woven tightly into the fabric of the text and are key to its interpretation; at others, they appear as almost subliminal leitmotifs, reinforcing a sense of thematic unity, but surplus to interpretation. At times they are not consistent at all.

Many of these themes and motifs have identifiable models in Christian and Neoplatonic texts. Some have compelling paradigms in texts that were interpreted allegorically by Christian and Neoplatonic audiences. The central concepts used by ancient allegorists in their readings are represented by a stable cluster of terms: 'symbol' (*symbolon*), 'under-meaning' (*'hyponoia'*), and 'enigma' (*ainigma*). Unfortunately, as we have seen in this project's introduction, ancient exegetes generally made no clear distinction between allegorical interpretation (to *read* allegorically) and allegorical expression (to *compose* allegorically). Ancient allegorical interpretation normally presupposes that a writer has expressed themselves 'allegorically.' However, the criteria required by ancient commentators to interpret texts in an allegorical manner are vague and they are often applied unsystematically. As a critical tool, allegory was applied unevenly across our surviving corpus. This makes it perilous for modern commentators to offer allegorical meanings, because across any interpretive community, a range of (mis-)readings of any text is possible.⁴⁷⁴

However, it is possible to identify intertexts. Since allegory was the preeminent form of Homeric literary criticism in Late Antiquity, close correspondences between Nonnus and allegorically interpreted Homeric passages, along with a shared symbolic vocabulary, may suggest an allegorical mode of composition in the *Dionysiaca*. As Shorrock argues, 'it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the late-Antique world was obsessed by hidden meanings and allegorical interpretations to an unparalleled

⁴⁷⁴ Lamberton 1986: 298.

degree.⁴⁷⁵ Many figures, myths, and motifs had acquired symbolic connotations, and these connotations could be activated in the same way as the semantic and intertextual connotations of words and phrases. This would allow poets like Nonnus to discretely ‘import’ allegorical significance from other texts into their own, which they could represent verbatim or rework according to their own design.

This chapter will address various episodes or themes that appear inspired by allegorical commentaries. These include cosmic imagery, Dionysus’ shield, the Mystis episode, and the theme of light versus darkness. It will then look at the *Odyssey* and its allegorical exegeses as a potential paradigm for the *Dionysiaca*, particularly as a journey of the soul. As Nonnus himself makes clear, as he looks to navigate the relationship between himself and his poetic father Homer, there are positive and negative ways to imitate. It is not enough to assiduously imitate Homer’s style of poetry. Homer had been transformed from a divinely inspired poet to a theologian. To rival Homer, Nonnus must himself become a theologian, encrypting wisdom regarding the soul and the nature of the universe in his poetry, and ensuring that the *Dionysiaca* was open to the same interpretive methods levelled at Homer.

5.1 Cosmic Images

From Homer onwards, images and ekphrases with cosmic imagery have inspired allegorical exegeses. Cosmic imagery is pervasive in Nonnus, given his keen appreciation for astrology, and it is no surprise that the *Dionysiaca* draws upon ekphrastic models and exegetical traditions. Although Stegmann’s idea of a macro-level cosmological framework has been rejected, many cosmological passages in Nonnus appear intricately wrought, with astrological manuals and commentaries as their immediate model. Nonnus’ cosmological schema in *Dionysiaca* 6, for instance, appears to engage with the same cosmological discourse as Heraclitus, who reads of the battle of the gods in *Iliad*

⁴⁷⁵ Shorrock 2001: 23.

20 as an allegory for the conjunction of the planets within one zodiacal sign (*Hom. Quest.* 53). Cosmology was a popular form of physical allegory, with the extensive commentaries on Achilles' Shield in Heraclitus (1st century CE) and Eustathius (12th century CE) as perhaps the most famous examples.⁴⁷⁶ Astrological comments can be found frequently in the Homeric Scholia, and numerous astrological commentaries survive.

This section will look at two of Nonnus' cosmologically charged passages, and show how these ekphrases evoke cosmic exegeses like Achilles' Shield. The first of these has already been mentioned in Chapter 2 in connection with mimesis: Cadmus' building of Thebes in Book 5, which Nonnus says is modelled on the heavenly spheres:

ἐπ' ἀρρήκτοις δὲ δομαίοις
 ἑπταπόρῳ πυλεῶνι περίδρομον ἄστρῳ χαράξας
 οὐρανὸν ἐπτάζωνον ἐῖ μμήσατο τέχνη, 65
 ἐσόμενον ναέταις Ἀμφίονι τεῖχος ἐάσας
 πυργοδόμῳ κιθάρῃ πεφυλαγμένον. οὐρανίοις δὲ
 ἑπτὰ πύλας ἀνέθηκεν ἰσηρίθμοισιν ἀλήταις
 ἰσοτύπους· πρῶτον μὲν ἐς ἐσπέριον κλίμα πήξας
 Ὀγκαίην ἐπένειμε πύλην γλαυκώπιδι Μήνη 70
 ἐκ βοὸς ὀγκηθμοῖο φερώνυμον, ὅττι καὶ αὐτὴ
 ταυροφυῆς κερόεσσα βοῶν ἐλάτειρα Σελήνη
 τριπλόον εἶδος ἔχουσα πέλει Τριτωνίς Ἀθήνη·
 δεύτερον Ἑρμάωνι διαυγεί γείτοني Μήνης
 δῶκε γέρας πυλεῶνα· διαγράψας δὲ τετάρτην 75
 Ἥλεκτρην Φαέθοντος ἐπώνυμον, ὅττι φανέντος
 σύγχροος ἡλέκτροις ἀμαρύσσεται ὄρθριος αἴγλη,
 Ἥελίῳ πυρόεντι πύλην ἀντίπιον Ἥοῦς
 μεσσατίην ἀνέθηκεν, ἐπεὶ μέσος ἐστὶ πλανήτων·
 πέμπτην δ' Ἄρεϊ δῶκε, πόρε τριτάτην Ἀφροδίτῃ, 80
 ἀμφοτέρων ἐκάτερθεν ὅπως Φαέθων μέσος εἶη,
 γείτονα θοῦρον Ἄρηα διατμήγων Ἀφροδίτης·

⁴⁷⁶ Hardie 1985: 15-16 cites Aristotle's *Poetics* 1461b1 as the first extant allusion to a commentary on the Shield of Achilles. The Pergamene scholar Crates of Mallos (2nd c. BCE) likely described the shield as a κόσμου μίμημα, according to a scholion on Aratus (schol. Arat. *Phaen.* 26 = 343.17 Maass).

ἔκτην Ζηνὸς ἄγαλμα φαεινότερῳ κάμε κόσμῳ
 ὑψιφανῇ· πυμάτην δὲ Κρόνου λάχεν ἑβδομος ἀστήρ.
 τοῖον ἔδος ποίησε· καὶ ἱερὸν ἄστὺ πολίσσας 85
 Αἰγυπτίης ἐκάλεσσαν ὁμώνυμον ἄστεϊ Θήβης,
 ποικίλον ἀσκήσας χθόνιον τύπον ἴσον Ὀλύμπῳ.

[Cadmus] marked the outline of a city encircled,
 by walls upon impregnable foundations with seven gates,
 imitating seven-zoned heaven in his art,
 but he left the walls for Amphion to build for future inhabitants
 and to protect with tower-building harp.
 He dedicated seven gates, equal in number to the seven planets.
 First towards the western clime he allotted the Oncaian gate
 to Bright-eyed Mene, bearing the name from the braying of the ox,
 because Selene herself, bull-shaped, the horned driver of cattle,
 having tri-form shape is Tritonis Athena.
 He gave the second gate to Hermaon, Mene's shining
 neighbour. The fourth he traced out and named for Electra,
 Phaethon's daughter, because when he appears,
 Electra's morning light shines with like colour;
 and the middle gate opposite Dawn he dedicated
 to fiery Helios, since he is the middle of the planets.

Nonnus' description is a stark deviation from traditional accounts of Thebes and its seven gates. Nonnus appears to borrow the name for the Oncaia gate from Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (lines 486, 501); the Electra gate appears fairly consistently in poetic and geographical accounts (Aes. *Sept.* 375-652; Eur. *Phoen.* 1104-1138; Paus. 9.8.4-7; Apollod. 3.6.6). However, there is no extant precedent for Nonnus' naming of the other five gates, nor is any cosmological schema for Thebes mentioned by preceding poets and geographers.⁴⁷⁷ This passage, therefore, reads as a Nonnian invention, inspired by models such as the ekphrasis of Achilles' Shield. Περίδρομον designates the new city's circular shape, corresponding to the circular shape of the universe. Instead of

⁴⁷⁷ For a modern survey of the naming and locations of the gates in various sources, see Berman 2002.

the constellations on Achilles' Shield, Thebes' seven gates correspond to the planets. Nonnus' description also recalls John's vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-27), which has twelve gates represented by twelve angels, equal to the number of signs in the zodiac.⁴⁷⁸ This cosmological dimension elevates the significance of Thebes and the importance of Cadmus, Dionysus' maternal grandfather.

In contrast with the general practice of allegorical ekphrases, Nonnus does not evoke cosmology here through σύμβολα and ὑπόνοια. Instead, he incorporates these details into the surface of his text. This is a clear divergence from the method ascribed to Homer by his commentators. Instead of signifying obliquely to the reader that Thebes is a terrestrial image of the heavens, the narrator intertwines text and interpretation in a form of self-exegesis, that collapses the distinction between the semantic and semiotic modes of reading. Primary and secondary levels of meaning become one.

The analogy of a city to the universe is also Platonic. The city as a polity is treated as a microcosm of the universe, and the ideal Constitution should reflect the arrangement of the universe and its laws (Procl. *In Tim.* 1.150.9-18). Cadmus' role in the creation of Thebes in many ways imitates the role of the Platonic demiurge, who fashions the sensible universe from an Intelligible archetype.⁴⁷⁹ From a Neoplatonic perspective, works of art could offer insights into a transcendent reality, so long as the artist's mind was fixed on conceptual and transcendent beauty.⁴⁸⁰ Unlike Nonnus, Homer never expresses Hephaestus' intentions in crafting Achilles' Shield. Interpretation is left solely to the audience. Nonnus, instead, explicitly states the model that Cadmus, the architect, uses to create his city. In many ways, Cadmus' Thebes appears as an actualisation of a thought experiment offered by Plotinus at *Enneads* 5.8.9, where he asks his reader to form a mental picture of the visible universe with all of its parts, including the sun, the celestial bodies, the Earth, and all its creatures organised in a sphere. This 'gleaming representation of a sphere' is informed by an

⁴⁷⁸ The general parallels between Nonnus' Thebes and the Heavenly Jerusalem were first noted by Stegemann 1930: 230-6.

⁴⁷⁹ That artistic production could be an analogue to divine creation through the agency of the human mind was an important Neoplatonic development, and was based on the Platonic concept of participation (μέθεξις). See Barasch 1992: 86; Alexandrakis 2002b.

⁴⁸⁰ Schibille 2014: 200.

image derived from the Intelligible world, as if reflected as if in a mirror.⁴⁸¹ Plotinus then asks us to subtract the magnitude, spatial relations, and matter. In this way, the reader can apprehend the universe in its conceptual organisation, not dependent on physical appearance and sense-perception.⁴⁸² In a similar way, Cadmus assigns the seven gates of Thebes to the seven planetary spheres, without reflecting their motions or spatial relations. Instead, his Thebes acts as a symbol for the universe based on an Intelligible model rather than sense-perception.

Nonnus' Thebes, therefore, is not an allegorical symbol of the universe itself, but its creation reflects the analogy between artist and demiurge. It suggests how ideal forms of art should be created. Spanoudakis notes a similar function in his analysis of the ekphrasis of Dionysus' Shield (25.384-587). One frieze depicts the construction of Thebes' walls by Amphion and Zethus, which functions as an allegory for the creation of the world.⁴⁸³ The founding of a city was a well-known metaphor for the creation of the universe, and appears in the Judaeo-Hellenic tradition as early as Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE – c. 50 CE). At *On Creation* 4:19, Philo suggests that on the first day of creation according to Genesis, the blueprint of the universe came from the concept of the *megapolis* ('the great cosmic city'): 'the conception we have concerning God must be similar to this, namely that when he decided to found the great cosmic city, he first conceived its outlines. Out of those he composed the intelligible cosmos, which served him as a model when he completed the sense-perceptible cosmos as well.'⁴⁸⁴ From a Judaeo-Christian standpoint, Nonnus' Cadmus therefore also mirrors God's role in the Creation: God composes the Intelligible from the outlines of the great cosmic city; Cadmus designs his city's outline from an Intelligible model. As an earthly image of Olympus, Nonnus' Thebes also draws upon Neoplatonic theories of mimesis, and the relationship between archetype and image explored in Chapter 2.

Cadmus as a figure was subject to allegorical interpretation in Late Antiquity. Plato's *Phaedo* discusses Cadmus and his wife Harmonia in its discussion on the

⁴⁸¹ Hendrix 2015: 20-1.

⁴⁸² Hendrix 2015: 21.

⁴⁸³ Spanoudakis 2014a: 359-63.

⁴⁸⁴ Trans. Runia 2001: 50.

harmony and elements of the soul (94e-95b). Damascius' commentary interprets this discussion as follows:

ἢ Κάδμος μὲν ὁ ὑποσέληνος κόσμος ὡς Διονυσιακός· διὸ καὶ Ἀρμονία σύνεστι τῇ θεῷ καὶ τῶν τεττάρων Βακχῶν πατήρ. δηλοῖ δὲ καὶ ὁ Πείσανδρος [fr.21] θεολογῶν τὰ κατὰ Κάδμον ἐν τῷ μύθῳ ἐν ᾧ φησιν τὸν Κάδμον ὑποτίθεσθαι τῷ Διί, πῶς ἂν καταγωνίσαιτο τὸν Τυφῶνα. αἱ δὲ τὰ τέσσαρα στοιχεῖα Διονυσιακὰ ποιοῦσιν, Σεμέλη μὲν τὸ πῦρ, Ἀγαυή δὲ τὴν γῆν διασπῶσα τὰ οἰκεῖα γεννήματα, Ἰνώ δὲ τὸ ὕδωρ ἐνάλιος οὔσα, καὶ Αὐτονόη δὲ τὸν ἀέρα ἢ λουπὴ. 'ἰλάσκεται' δὲ τὸν Κάδμον ἀποδεικνύς τὴν ψυχὴν πᾶμπαν ἀθάνατον καὶ τόδε τὸ πᾶν οὐ θνητῶν μόνων οὐσιῶν οὐδὲ μακραιώνων δεκτικόν, ἀλλὰ καὶ παντάπασιν ἀθανάτων.

Cadmus is the sublunary world as belonging to the domain of Dionysus. Therefore, he is wedded to the goddess Harmony and father of the four Bacchae. This is made clear also by Pisander (of Laranda, fr. 21) who deals with the theology of Cadmus in the myth where he represents Cadmus as advising Zeus how to defeat Typhon. The four Bacchae make the four elements under the power of Dionysus: Semele fire, Agave earth (because she lacerates her own children), Ino, as a Sea-goddess, water, and the remaining one, Autonoe, air. Socrates 'propitiates' Cadmus by proving that the soul is completely immortal, so that this universe is an abode, not of mortal nor even blessed beings, but also of the altogether immortal.⁴⁸⁵

Westerink interprets Cadmus' role in Typhon's defeat as a symbol of how the universal demiurge (Zeus) uses the Material Intellect (Dionysus-Cadmus) to dominate the lowest and most resistant elements in creation.⁴⁸⁶ Cadmus' four daughters as the 'four Bacchae' is unattested elsewhere, and Westerink believes this detail may have been coined for the purpose of Damascius' argument.⁴⁸⁷ Damascius was writing in the late 5th or early 6th centuries CE, and so almost certainly postdates Nonnus. This means that, in the absence of any precedents for this allegory of Cadmus, we cannot say for sure how many details might have been familiar to Nonnus. Nonnus was potentially aware of Pisander of Laranda (3rd century CE),⁴⁸⁸ who Damascius identifies as his source.

⁴⁸⁵ Trans. Westerink 1977: 204-6.

⁴⁸⁶ Westerink 1977: 204.

⁴⁸⁷ Westerink 1977: 205.

⁴⁸⁸ Keydell 1935: 307-8 argues for Pisander's *Heroïcae Theogamiae* as the source for the catalogue of Zeus' twelve liaisons with mortal women, and their corresponding arrows in Eros' quiver. Cf. Vian 1976:

Damascius appears to be doing little more than summarising Pisander here, and the information likely derives from Pisander's *Heroïcae Theogamiae*, and the wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia. That Pisander explicitly 'discourses on the gods' (θεολόγων) raises the possibility that the *Heroïcae Theogamiae* and its Cadmus episode were commonly subjected to allegoresis.

If Nonnus was aware of this material, his decision to not include it is significant. It suggests that Nonnus is selective about the exegetical material he will and will not include, and does not adhere to any particular dogma. His founding of Thebes does not reflect general allegories about Cadmus and his family. He instead places more emphasis on Cadmus' role as the architect and his artwork based on Intelligible models.

Nonnus includes a similar cosmic image in *Dionysiaca* 41, with the ekphrasis of Harmonia's palace (41.275-87):

έσσυμένη δὲ
 ήερίην άψίδά διερροίζησε πεδίλῳ
 εἰς δόμον Ἀρμονίης παμμήτορος, όπόθι νύμφη
 εἴκελον οἶκον ἔναιε τύπῳ τετράζυγι κόσμου
 άυτοπαγή· πίσυρες δὲ θύραι στιβαροῖο μελάθρου
 άρραγέες πίσυρεςσιν έμπτρώθησαν άήταις·
 καὶ δόμον έρρύοντο περίτροχον εἰκόνα κόσμου
 δμῳίδες ένθα καὶ ένθα· μεριζομένων δὲ θυρέτρων
 Άντολίη θεράπεινα πύλην περιδέδρομεν Εϋρου,
 καὶ Ζεφύρου πυλεῶνα Δύσις, θρέπτειρα Σελήνης,
 καὶ Νότιον πυρόεντα Μεσημβριάς εἶχεν όχῆα,
 καὶ πυκινήν νεφέεσσι, παλυνομένην δὲ χαλάζῃ
 Ἄρκτος ύποδρήστειρα πύλην επέτασσε Βορῆος.

With hurrying step, she whizzed through
 the vault of heaven to the home of
 all-mother Harmonia, where the nymph herself
 dwelt in a house self-built shaped like the universe

XLIV-XLV; Chuvín 1992: 75-7; Gigli Piccardi 2003: 515-16. Of Pisander's 60 book epic, only a few fragments remain, however, and so evidence that Nonnus used this poem as a source is still very low.

with four corners in one. Four unbreakable gates
 girdled that stronghold against the four winds.
 And the handmaidens guarded the house on all sides,
 that round image of the universe. Of the allotted doors,
 handmaid Anatolia circled the East Wind's gate,
 and Dysis, the nurse of Selene, the West Wind's;
 Mesembrias held the bolt of the fiery South Wind,
 and Arctos duly attended the North Wind's gate,
 thick with clouds and sprinkled with hail.

Harmonia's palace contrasts in many ways with her husband Cadmus' Thebes. Both are cosmic representations. Cadmus takes the heavens as his model; Harmonia's palace is in heaven's vault (ἡερίην ἀψίδα, 276). The gates of Thebes are assigned to the seven planets; Harmonia's palace gates are assigned to the four cardinal directions and the Winds. The northern gate's guardian, Arctos, is the constellation Ursa Major, located in the northern sky. Horae (personifications of the Hours) guard the remaining three gates, and each one is named for the path of the sun. They are Rising (Anatolia), Midday (Mesembrias), and Setting (Dysis).

Inside, Harmonia weaves a tapestry depicting the Earth, with its rivers, sky, and ocean (41.294-302), just like the Orphic Persephone. Her tapestry also mirrors the central circle on Achilles' Shield (*Il.* 18.484-9), and both are bordered by Ocean's stream (*Dion.* 41.302; *Il.* 18.607-9). The presence of Arctos in both episodes is also noteworthy, as it is the only circumpolar constellation on Achilles' Shield, which does not rise or set with the change of the seasons. The passage from Nonnus, as a cosmic description, stands at the end of a long tradition which undoubtedly begins with Achilles' Shield. Unlike the Homeric shield, however, which was *interpreted* from the Hellenistic period onwards as a microcosm of the universe (κόσμου μίμημα), Harmonia's palace and tapestry are *explicit* images of the cosmos (κόσμου μίμημα). This textual transparency runs counter to the practice of embedding σύμβολα, ὑπόνοια, and αἰνίγματα that were considered integral to allegoresis.

As with the foundation of Thebes, such a transparency could be interpreted as a general ambivalence towards allegory, or as a form of self-exegesis – a gloss on the text

interpolated by its own author – a model for training the reader in the interpretation of the text elsewhere? All texts train their readers in some way. If we subscribe to such a hypothesis, Nonnus' gloss on Harmonia's house as being 'shaped like the universe' would demonstrate to the reader the kind of interpretive processes required for understanding other elements in Nonnus' text. Such a gloss would no doubt trigger memories of exegetical commentaries in the mind of the educated reader, and tune them into a more symbolic mode of reading.

Triggering this response in the reader allows them to make other connections that they otherwise might have missed. Like the building of Thebes, the passage shifts the need for interpretation from the ekphrasis itself to the artist. The reader is not asked to interpret wisdom about the nature of the universe itself, as these details are provided, but rather to meditate on the role of the craftsman in the process of creation.

As we have seen in Chapter 4, Harmonia's tapestry has various intertextual links with the cosmic weaving of Persephone, which was frequently interpreted as an allegory for the creation of the material universe. Harmonia herself, as the daughter of Aphrodite and Ares, had been interpreted within an Empedoclean framework as the product of the union of Love and Strife: the personification of cosmic harmony, because 'the universe is unshakably and harmoniously put together' (Heracl. *Hom. Quest.* 69). Harmonia's weaving of a tapestry depicting the material world therefore acts as a symbol for the harmonious composition of the universe.

Since weaving is often a metaphor for poetic composition, this scene also acts as a *mise en abyme* for the *Dionysiaca* as a whole. Nonnus' programmatic principle of *poikilia* was semantically linked to embroidery, further eliding the concepts of weaving and poetic composition. Harmonia becomes a poetic surrogate for Nonnus, and her tapestry ultimately reflects on the *Dionysiaca*'s cosmic and universalist aspirations.

5.2 The Shield of Dionysus

Shield ekphrases offered clear lodestones for allegorical interpretation, given their dependency on the Homeric shield of Achilles. Hesiod's shield of Herakles, Aeneas' shield, and Quintus of Smyrna's elaboration upon the Homeric shield, all seem to have been written with allegorical frameworks in mind, inspired by exegeses on Achilles' shield.⁴⁸⁹ Ancient commentators believed that the scenes on Achilles' shield conveyed a deeper meaning, and many imitators embedded σύμβολα, ὑπόνοια, and αἰνίγματα for the same purpose. Even by composing a shield ekphrasis, Nonnus is following in a popular tradition. Dionysus' shield also appears at a critical juncture, immediately following the *Dionysiaca's* second proem and an extended literary syncretism which reflects on the paternal relationship between Father Homer and his literary child Nonnus.

Proems offer the poet and the reader a place to engage with programmatics, and Dionysus' shield can be seen as an extension of these. The shield is almost 'hyperbolic' in its obsession with circularity, recalling the shape of the universe, and the circular movement of the soul and discursive thought in Platonism.⁴⁹⁰ Like Achilles' shield, Dionysus' features the heavens, the stars, the sun, and Earth (25.387-412). It is a poetic microcosm of Nonnus' own universal epic.⁴⁹¹ Like its Homeric model, Dionysus' shield is forged by Hephaestus and delivered by a mother figure, Dionysus' surrogate mother Rhea (25.336-8). Unlike its Homeric counterpart, however, Dionysus' shield does not appear intended to be used in battle. The shield never appears again in the *Dionysiaca*, and its purpose has been interpreted instead as more of a 'talisman'.⁴⁹²

The shield ekphrasis contains four scenes: the building of Thebes' walls by Amphion and Zethus; the abduction and apotheosis of Ganymede; the resurrection of Tylus; and finally the violent expulsion of Kronos' children from his stomach, through his wife Rhea's ingenious plot. Thus far, the most thorough holistic analysis on Dionysus' shield is Spanoudakis (2014a). He argues that 'the possibility that the Shield is designed

⁴⁸⁹ See Buffiere 1956: 155–168 for the allegorical interpretations of the shield of Achilles.

⁴⁹⁰ Hernández de la Fuente 2011: 319.

⁴⁹¹ Shorrock 2001: 116-17.

⁴⁹² Spanoudakis 2014a: 333.

to be an allegory is corroborated by the fact that its contents make little or no sense when read at face value.⁴⁹³ As we have seen, the presence of obscure details in Homer's Cave of the Nymphs was enough of an indication for Porphyry and his Middle Platonic/Neopythagorean sources that Homer was engaged in an allegorical mode of composition. Chuvín concurs that the shield is likely symbolic, and cites 'domination over the Universe' and 'invincibility at war' as potential meanings.⁴⁹⁴ Spanoudakis, however, favours a more soteriological interpretation, with the four scenes coalescing into a universal history, and a symbol for the creation of the universe and the fate of the soul.⁴⁹⁵

Shorrock notes several metapoetic elements on the shield. Its elements are πολύτροπα δαίδαλα (25.563), and parallel the programmatic shapeshifting of Proteus, whose metamorphoses are described by Nonnus' prologue as πολύτροπον (1.15) and πολυδαίδαλον (1.23). Since Proteus' shapeshifting acts as a symbol for the *Dionysiaca*, so too does Dionysus' shield. The ekphrasis is also framed in ring composition by scenes in which crowds gather to gaze in wonder at the 'skilfully wrought' shield. This narrative frame evokes the narrator's own poetic art and its wondrous reception in the view of the reader. One art-form becomes emblematic of the other.⁴⁹⁶

In the shield's first scene, Zethus uses his physical strength to move stones to build Thebes' fortifications. Meanwhile, his brother Amphion enchants the stones using his lyre. The immediate model for this scene is Apollonius' *Arg.* 1.735-41, where the myth appears as one of seven scenes on Jason's cloak.⁴⁹⁷ Apollonius uses the Amphion story within an Empedoclean framework of Love and Strife.⁴⁹⁸ Nonnus, however, uses the scene as an allegory for the creation of the world and as a Neoplatonic appraisal on the creation in Genesis. According to this reading, Amphion and Zethus correspond to God and Christ. Creation was commonly perceived as a construction work, in which God fulfils the role of the architect, and Christ ministers the orders of God.⁴⁹⁹ Spanoudakis

⁴⁹³ Spanoudakis 2014a: 333.

⁴⁹⁴ Chuvín 2014: 10.

⁴⁹⁵ Spanoudakis 2014a.

⁴⁹⁶ Maciver 2016: 538-9.

⁴⁹⁷ Vian 2005: 102. Cf. Bulloch 2006; Cassidy (diss.) 2017: 93-144; Koopman 2018: 207-35.

⁴⁹⁸ Cassidy 2017: 126-9.

⁴⁹⁹ Spanoudakis 2014a: 359.

describes this scene as ‘profoundly Christian,’ since this would run contrary to traditional Neoplatonic convictions that the universe was eternal.⁵⁰⁰ However, I disagree that the scene speaks only to a Christian audience. Neoplatonists like Proclus could argue for the eternity of the universe, but still believe in an ongoing process of creation, where sensible forms continually come into being, based on emanations from Intelligible archetypes, and are eventually destroyed. Myths like the dismemberment of the Orphic Dionysus were interpreted as allegories of such processes.

Godwin interprets the myth in a similar framework. For him, the myth shows that ‘nature is ultimately responsible not to the common-sensible laws of cause and effect which seem to rule the material world, but to transcendent principles which have a perpetual existence in a higher order of being.’⁵⁰¹ This can be seen partially through Amphion’s music. Macrobius rationalises the myth of Amphion, along with that of Orpheus, saying that their music evokes the divine music, ‘for the soul carries with it into the body a memory of the music which it knew in the sky’ (*Comm. Somn. Scip.* 2.3.7-8).

Clement of Alexandria notes that the mythological bards, Amphion, Arion, and Orpheus, produce music that is a precedent of God’s harmony, which has now surpassed them (*Protrept.* 1.1). Clement elaborates: ‘because the Word was from the beginning, [God] was and is the divine source of all things; but because He has now assumed the name Christ, consecrated of old, and worthy of power, he has been called by me the New Song’ (1.6.5.). Christ becomes a rival musician whose music brings the universe into harmony. Nonnus would have been well aware of this tradition which associated divine music with the act of creation, where God acts as a musician ‘orchestrating the elements of the universe, like sounds, so as to bring them into harmony, an idea developed from Plato’s *Republic*.⁵⁰²

Commentators on Nonnus have yet to note a potential connection between Amphion and David in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, a fellow lyre player who is

⁵⁰⁰ Spanoudakis 2014a: 359.

⁵⁰¹ Godwin 1987: 13.

⁵⁰² Spanoudakis 2014a: 359. See Pl. *Rep.* 617b; Maxim. Tyr. 13.3g; *Corp. Herm.* 18.1; Clem. *Protr.* 88.3; of Christ healing man Euseb. *DE* 4.13.4 ~ *Laud. Const.* 14.4.

imagined by Augustine as the founder of the city of God. Although David does not use his lyre in the foundation of Jerusalem, his music represents the harmony of the well-ordered city, similar to how Amphion's music represents the harmony of the universe (*City of God* 17.14):

David was a man skilled in songs, who loved musical harmony not for vulgar pleasure, but as a man of faith, for a purpose whereby he served his God, who is the true God, by the mystic prefiguration of a great matter. For the rational and proportionate symphony of diverse sounds conveys the unity of a well-ordered city, knit together by harmonious variety.⁵⁰³

Augustine interprets David's music allegorically, and this passage appears shortly after Augustine's discussion on literal and allegorical modes of communication in sacred scripture (17.3), which includes David's own Book of Psalms.⁵⁰⁴ Augustine later mentions Amphion himself, 'who charmed and attracted stones by the sweetness of his harp' (18.13). David's reign in earthly Jerusalem foreshadows God's rule in heavenly Jerusalem (17.14). This raises a further parallel with Nonnus' Amphion, who raises the walls of Thebes, which in the *Dionysiaca* is the earthly image of heavenly Olympus (*Dion.* 5.86-7). The spirituality of Thebes and its analogy to heavenly Jerusalem in the poem have been noted elsewhere by Stegemann and Spanoudakis.⁵⁰⁵

Within Nonnus' allegorical framework, Thebes' seven gates representing the celestial bodies correspond to the seven strings of Amphion's lyre (25.416, 428). This recalls the harmony of the spheres from Plato's *Republic*, where Plato assigns a Siren to each of the eight concentric spheres of the cosmos, which includes the seven celestial bodies (the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) and the sphere of the fixed stars: 'on top of each of its circles stood a Siren, who was borne along with it, uttering a single sound, a single tone; but from all eight of them there sounded together a single harmony' (*Rep.* 617b6-9). This celestial music constitutes and presides over cosmic order, 'a wordless vocal concert in unison.'⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰³ Trans. Astell 2002: 14.

⁵⁰⁴ Astell 2002: 15.

⁵⁰⁵ Spanoudakis 2014a: 359; Stegemann 1930: 230-6.

⁵⁰⁶ Montiglio 2018: 180.

Spanoudakis notes several points of contact between the scene and Platonic concepts. The enchanted rock on its whirling course (419-21) evokes the dance of the spheres;⁵⁰⁷ ἔλιξ (420) implies the revolution of the planets (cf. *Il.* 23.846, *Dion.* 37.427); the κωφός (lifeless) rock exhibits signs of life through the miraculous external influence of Amphion's music. Amphion's music is so captivating that any spectator would wish to place their ear on the silent lyre to hear its sound (424-8), an allusion to the inaudible cosmic music produced by the motion of the spheres; the rock globe itself is false (ψευδήμονι, 425) because it is a material copy of the original noetic globe conceived by God (cf. Philo *De Opif. Mundi* 16).⁵⁰⁸

The second scene engages with another popularly allegorised figure, Ganymede. The scene presents us with an embedded image. Ganymede pours nectar for Zeus on Olympus, with a painting in the background of Ganymede's abduction. The scene is placed among the stars on the shield (ὅπη χορὸς αἰόλος ἄστρον, 25.429), reflecting Ganymede's catasterism as the cup-bearer of the heavens, and his identification with the constellation Aquarius. This identification paved the way for his role as the cosmic pourer.⁵⁰⁹

Olympiodorus interprets the myth as an allegory for the ascent of man, who can then partake in the divine life (*In Gorg.* 40.3).⁵¹⁰ The scene, therefore, as it appears on Dionysus' shield, offers a prototype for Dionysus' own apotheosis,⁵¹¹ and prefigures Dionysus' role on Earth. Nonnus has already characterised wine as an earthly image of heavenly nectar. While Ganymede pours nectar for the gods in heaven, Dionysus will dispense wine for mankind on Earth.

Modern commentators on Dionysus' shield have not yet noted another allegorical model in Ganymede as the Stoic Logos.⁵¹² Philo of Alexandria reads Ganymede's role as Zeus' wine-pourer (οἰνοχόος) as a symbol for the divine Logos, who

⁵⁰⁷ Plat. *Tim.* 40c2 cf. Cf. Honest. *AP* 9.250.5–6 = *GPh* 2426–27, Philostr. *Imag.* 1.10.5

⁵⁰⁸ Spanoudakis 2014: 361-2.

⁵⁰⁹ 12 *Homil. Clement.* 5.17; Ampelius 2.11; Ps.-Eratosthenes, *Catast.* 26, 30, as mentioned by Dillon 1981: 185, n12.

⁵¹⁰ Spanoudakis 2014a: 364, n103.

⁵¹¹ Vian 1995: 65.

⁵¹² This role was normally filled by Hermes in later Stoicism and Platonism. Cf., e.g. Cornutus *ND* 16, P. 23, 16-22 Lang; Heraclitus *Hom. Quest.* 72.4-19; Plotinus *Enn.* 3.6.19. For Philo of Alexandria, however, Hermes only ever represents the planet Mercury, and never the Logos. See Dillon 1981: 183.

is an outpouring from God. He is 'a constant flow which brings constant order to all creation.'⁵¹³ Ganymede is a High Priest (ἀρχιερεύς), who, 'having received a drink from the eternal graces, then pours forth a full libation of unmixed wine, that is himself' (*De Somn.* 2.183). For Philo, the wine-pouring High Priest is epitomised by Moses, and acts as a mediator between God and man, who represents the Logos immanent in the world.⁵¹⁴ He is both the drink and the pourer. The Logos was therefore imagined as a fountain, that becomes the drink that it pours (e.g. *Spec. Leg.* 1.303).

The Stoic term 'Logos' was adopted by Middle Platonists for the active force that mediated for the One, and Plotinus used the term in ways that drew on both Plato and the Stoics.⁵¹⁵ For Christians, the Logos corresponded to God's Son, Jesus Christ. In Graeco-Roman henotheism, God's Son was Phoebus Apollo or Dionysus.⁵¹⁶ In Neoplatonic terms, God's Son occupied the position of the non-created second hypostasis, otherwise known as the Nous or Intellect. This supports the idea that Ganymede on the shield is supposed to act in some way as a model or analogy for Dionysus.

The third and longest scene in the shield ekphrasis depicts a myth of Lydian origin: the death and resurrection of Tylus. The young man is killed by a δράκων ('snake' or 'dragon') as he walks along the bank of the river Hermus. His sisters, Naias and Moria, see him die and weep for his passing. Moria enlists the help of a benevolent Giant named Damasen, who slays the δράκων with an uprooted tree. A female δράκων appears and revives her mate with a special herb. Moria follows the δράκων's example, and uses the same herb to revive her brother. Although the herb is never explicitly named, it receives the same epithets that characterise wine elsewhere in the *Dionysiaca*, and resurrection in the *Paraphrase*.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹³ Dillon 1981: 184. Cf. Philo *Quod Deus sit Immutabilis* 155-8.

⁵¹⁴ Dillon 1981: 184.

⁵¹⁵ Witts 1931; Dillon 1992: 195. Gurtler 2002: 116-7. Cf. Rist 1967: 84-101, who argues that the term *logos* was interpreted in different ways by Neoplatonists, and that similarities with Philo's concept of the *logos* in particular appear to be accidental.

⁵¹⁶ Hernández de la Fuente 2014: 235.

⁵¹⁷ Vian 1990: 267-8; Hernández de la Fuente 2013: 480. These include ὀδυνήφατον ... ποίην ('herb that alleviates the pain' *Dion.* 25.528 cf. *Par.* 4.242, 5.10), ἀλεξήτειραν ὀλέθρου ('that dispels death,' *Dion.* 25.529 cf. *Par.* 15.51), φερέσβιον ('life-bringing,' *Dion.* 25.540 cf. *Par.* 5.105, 6.99, 18.132), ζειδωρος ('salvific,' *Dion.* 25.541 cf. the 'living water' at *Par.* 4.54 and the 'Father' at *Par.* 8.148), and

The story in its present form has strong Christian parallels. Stories of saints slaying dragons, and slain men or women coming back to life were popular metaphors for sin and salvation (e.g. *Act. Thom.* 31-3).⁵¹⁸ The themes of death and resurrection are clearly displayed on the Tylus ekphrasis. These eschatological themes have a strong affinity with Dionysus, who dies and is reborn, and according to tradition also descended to the underworld to rescue his mother, Semele.⁵¹⁹ The Tylus passage in Nonnus has striking thematic and verbal similarities with the Lazarus episode in *Paraphrase* 11.⁵²⁰ Vian has also identified verbal connections between Nonnus' Tylus ekphrasis and an anonymous Christian epigram about Lazarus (*AP* 1.49). Although the textual priority is uncertain, the epigram sheds further light on the context for many of these verbal connections, and supports the idea that Nonnus invites us to compare Tylus and Lazarus.⁵²¹

Furthermore, Spanoudakis has argued that the giant Damasen's use of a tree as a spear against the serpent recalls Christ's victory over Satan with the Cross.⁵²² The serpent itself is associated with darkness. It curls its 'stormy, trailing darkness' around Tylus (ὄλκαϊν ἐλέλιξε θυελλήεσσαν ὀμίχλην, *Dion.* 25.460), reworking a common motif of a snake bite causing its victim's sight to mist over.⁵²³ Gigli Piccardi connects the darkness issuing forth from the snake's tail to Neoplatonic and Christian dichotomies between darkness and light, and demonstrates that the shadows that issue forth from the snake's tail signify the darkness of sin that keeps man in darkness, separated from the light of God.⁵²⁴ Light is integral to the Platonic idea of the good, because it is related to revelation, epistemological process and truth; darkness is therefore irreconcilable with this idea, and Plotinus typically associates darkness with unshaped matter and evil.⁵²⁵

ἄκεσσιπόνιοι κορύμβοις ('saving' or 'healing tendrils,' *Dion.* 25.541 cf. the Lazarus episode at *Par.* 11.99).

⁵¹⁸ Spanoudakis 2014a: 335. See also Adamik 2001.

⁵¹⁹ Vian 1990: 34.

⁵²⁰ Espinar and Hernández de la Fuente 2002. See Vian 1990: 267-8 for a collection of the close verbal connections and intertextualities.

⁵²¹ Shorrock 2011: 98.

⁵²² Spanoudakis 2014a: 337.

⁵²³ Spanoudakis 2014a: 338.

⁵²⁴ Gigli Piccardi 1987: 140 n9 cf. Macar. *Aeg. Hom.* 27.2; Ps.-Apollin. *Met. Ps.* 43.40.

⁵²⁵ Schibille 2014: 191.

The concept of bodily resurrection, exemplified by the stories of Lazarus and Tylus, might initially appear incompatible with non-Christian Neoplatonism. Plotinus describes true awakening as rising ‘from the body, not with the body’ (3.6.6.71-2). Souls that have been enmattered live not inside themselves, but outside as if in a ‘dream’ (3.6.6.72) or if it were ‘drunk’ (cf. *Phaedo* 79c-d); to ‘get up with the body’ would only mean ‘getting out of one sleep into another’ (Plot. 3.6.6.71-7). This is because, from a traditional Neoplatonic perspective, bodily resurrection only prolongs the soul’s wandering in the material world, preventing its anagogic ascent and a return to its home and natural condition in the Intelligible. For those who followed Platonic teachings, the doctrine of resurrection was one of the biggest impediments before adopting Christianity.⁵²⁶

Even some Christians shared these concerns over the nature of bodily resurrection, and the interpretation of Christ’s rising from the dead. The Christian philosopher and theologian Origen, drawing on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:44), argues that most people do not have a sophisticated understanding of the spiritual domain or the nature of the resurrected body. According to Origen, the resurrected body cannot be of actual flesh and blood. Instead, it must be changed and transformed, an idea that was particularly appealing among *incertus* figures who have been traditionally referred to as ‘Christian Platonists’ (*De Principiis* 2.10.1-4.38).⁵²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa and Synesius of Cyrene are among such figures. In the *Dialogus De Anima et Resurrectione*, Gregory makes himself the mouthpiece for pagan objections, and asks his sister Macrina to offer a philosophical defence of the resurrection doctrine (*De anima* 76c, 108c). He then goes on to describe resurrection as a recovery of the combination of elements and a rebuilding of what has already been destroyed.⁵²⁸ Synesius, the bishop of Cyrene and friend of Hypatia, does not refute resurrection entirely, but considers it ‘an object of common belief’ that is in fact ‘a sacred and mysterious allegory’ (*Ep.* 105.84-90). In his *De Insomniis*, a text with clear Neoplatonic

⁵²⁶ Peroli 1997: 118-9.

⁵²⁷ Dimitrov 2014: 510-11.

⁵²⁸ Dimitrov 2014: 536.

overtones, Synesius does, however, allow for corporeal substance to ascend under certain conditions (*De Ins.* 10 = 141b-c):

But as regards the bodily substance that comes from the Beyond, there is no conceivable way by which, as the soul naturally ascends, it too should not rise from its fallen state, go with it, and be united with the spheres – that is to say be resolved again as it were into its own nature.

This is possible due to *eidōlon*, the ghostly and debased image of the outer soul, or *pneuma*, that even lower physical elements can, with the soul, enter into contact with the divine.⁵²⁹ In light of these sources, the bodily resurrection of Tylus could easily speak to both Christian and *incertus* audiences like Synesius, whose personal beliefs carried a Neoplatonic inflection.

The final and shortest scene on Dionysus' Shield is Rhea's plot against Kronos and his disgorgement of his children. Although Cybele/Rhea and Zeus are mentioned by name, Kronos is unnamed and only obliquely referred to. The episode also continues the theme of perverted paternity which is explored throughout the *Dionysiaca* (e.g., Athamas and Learchus/Melicertes, Helios and Phaethon, Kronos and Zeus, Homer and Nonnus).⁵³⁰ The story is framed elsewhere in Nonnus as a figurative 'rebirth' (cf. *Dion.* 12.47-51; 41.67-76), and as Spanoudakis has shown, has been interpreted as an allegory for eschatological resurrection.⁵³¹ He also introduces Christian intertexts: Christ was a λίθος or a πέτρα (stone, cf. 1 Pt 2.3, 2.4; Just. *Dial.* 113.6), and was envisaged as descending to Hades to forcibly cause the 'vomiting of the dead,' in an image widespread in apocryphal literature.⁵³²

The disgorgement from Kronos' 'pregnant throat' (ἐγκύμονος ἀνθρεῶνος, 25.56) also offers a parallel with Dionysus' own birth. Geisz argues that both Kronos and Zeus undergo a form of pregnancy and childbirth (cf. the 'births' of Dionysus and Athena from their 'mother' Zeus at 1.1-10), although their pregnancies could not be more different. Zeus sews the unborn Dionysus into his thigh to protect him; Kronos ingests

⁵²⁹ Dimitrov 2014: 536.

⁵³⁰ Shorrock 2001: 176.

⁵³¹ Spanoudakis 2014a: 367.

⁵³² Spanoudakis 2014a: 368.

his children in an effort to destroy them. Their eventual 'birth' from Kronos makes the first generation of Olympian gods essentially 'twice-born,' just like Dionysus. Although Dionysus is part of the second generation of Olympians, he can lay claim to the same status as the gods from the first generation.⁵³³ This short scene also self-consciously reflects on Nonnus' relationship with his own literary father, Homer. Will his literary father swallow him up in an attempt to quash a future rival, and will Nonnus avoid this fate through a cunning ploy? Or will their relationship reflect the more positive exemplum of Zeus and Dionysus?

Collectively, the four scenes on Dionysus' Shield display a remarkable thematic unity, and they innovate upon their Homeric model in subtle but surprising ways. The ekphrasis of Achilles' Shield focuses on the artefact's creation rather than the final product. The four metals used by Hephaestus to create the shield were allegorised as the four elements which come together to create the material universe. This reflects a cosmos without any true beginning, that is instead in a constant process of 'becoming' from first principles. This symbolism resonated with Platonic thinkers and their doctrine on the eternity of the universe. Dionysus' Shield, however, is presented as a complete and final product with a finite beginning. This would likely be interpreted by Christian or Platonic thinkers as a reflection of the Christian doctrine on Genesis: that the world, like the shield, had a finite beginning.

Spanoudakis shows how the combination of the four scenes, along with the ekphrasis of the earth, rivers, heavens, and ocean, produces a poetic microcosm with a universal history equal to Christian salvation. The shield begins with creation of the world, expressed through the construction of Thebes' walls, and ends with the installation of a new world and era of cosmic order, with Zeus' victory over his father Kronos. These scenes together prefigure Dionysus and Zeus, even though their fulfilment in them is largely subjective, and likely would have depended upon Nonnus' audience.⁵³⁴ The multifarious allusions and symbols in the shield ekphrasis manage also to encapsulate and epitomise the syncretic culture of the Late Antique Mediterranean. Nonnus succeeds in reworking Graeco-Roman mythology within a soteriological

⁵³³ Geisz 2016: 184-5.

⁵³⁴ Bernabé & García-Gasco 2016: 107; Spanoudakis 2014a: 370-71.

framework that evokes the salvation of the soul that was central to Christianity and Neoplatonism. His allusions and symbols flow seamlessly from Hellenic to Christian, and likely would have appealed to audiences with knowledge of Biblical hermeneutics and Neoplatonic mystic exegeses. The ekphrasis arguably becomes an *incertus* poetic symbol, reflecting the *incertus* figure of the poet. Platonic and Christian modes of thinking are entwined in such a way that disentangling them risks imposing artificial modern dichotomies and making distinctions that Nonnus and his audience may never have made. Instead, the shield appeals to the polyvalent interpretive faculties of a Late Antique audience.⁵³⁵

The shield also tells us about the emulative dynamics of Nonnus. For him to equal or surpass his poetic rival and father, it is not enough to produce an aesthetically pleasing shield ekphrasis. Like Homer, his shield must act as a staging ground for symbolic interpretation, using a familiar symbolic language that yields universal truths when pressured and scrutinised by the hermeneutic processes of his time. The shield retains cosmic elements from its model in Homer, however, Nonnus also finds the room to depart significantly in terms of the shield's significance. The Homeric shield offered truths about the universe to its exegetes; Quintus' shield placed a premium on virtue and philosophical truth. Nonnus', however, offers wisdom on the nature of salvation and the immortality and destiny of the soul.

Spanoudakis' catalogue of intertexts is overwhelming Christian in inflection, even though the four myths originate from Graeco-Roman paganism. Nonnus' approach to these myths, therefore, is strongly evocative of the Neoplatonist exegetes who sought to liberate canonical myths and poems from Plato's condemnation. His method would have appealed to Christian apologists who saw how Graeco-Roman heritage could be re-contextualised within a new Christian framework. For discussions of Nonnus' audience, it may be useful to think of *incertus* figures, or to speak in terms of 'inflection.' As a metaphor, inflection is the self-expression of different categories that a figure might belong to. Every reader will bring their own particular inflection, or set of inflections, along with their own internal library of texts. Any educated reader would

⁵³⁵ Kahlos 2007: 119 applies this line of thinking to Synesius as an *incertus* figure.

likely read a shield ekphrasis as an invitation to read allegorically. Readers with a 'pagan' or 'Neoplatonic' inflection would likely read Dionysus' Shield as an elevation and transformation of traditional myth through the use of symbols, that, subject to Neoplatonic interpretive strategies, would reveal wisdom on the ongoing creation of the universe and the ascent of the soul. Readers with a strong 'Christian' inflection, meanwhile, would see the four Hellenic myths as a vehicle for their own symbolic language; a case of *Kontrastimitation*, whereby soteriological elements in 'pagan' myth are ultimately fulfilled in Christ and Christendom. Meanwhile, *incertus* figures would no doubt interpret the shield according to their own internal concoction of belief and learning.

5.3 Mystis

Many scholars have noted Nonnus' propensity for etymological wordplay and personification. In particular, the *Dionysiaca* has many cosmic and temporal personifications, ranging from figures such as Aion (Time/Eternity) to the Seasons, the Hours, and various Constellations. Dionysus also assembles a retinue over the course of the poem whose names derive primarily from viticulture and Dionysiac cult. One such character who has attracted recent attention for her allegorical potential is Mystis, Dionysus' first nurse (9.98-102) who initiates the infant god into the mystical and nocturnal Bacchic rites. Her name, μύστις, could mean 'initiate' or 'initiator,' and was connected to mystic ritual.

Chrétien links Mystis with other allegorical characters in Dionysus' entourage, like Telete, the daughter of Dionysus and Nicaea.⁵³⁶ Garcia-Gasco sees Mystis as a personification of mystic initiation itself.⁵³⁷ She is attested elsewhere as a personification, but the *Dionysiaca* is the only example of a nurse called Mystis who plays a role in the infancy of Dionysus and the establishment of the Dionysiac

⁵³⁶ Chrétien 1984: 19.

⁵³⁷ Garcia-Gasco 2014: 214.

mysteries.⁵³⁸ Nonnus' portrayal appears to have been influenced by iconographic sources, such as a marble relief preserved in the Louvre which depicts Dionysus' nurse as a mystagogue.⁵³⁹ There is also a potential literary parallel in the Anatolian goddess-nymph Hipta, who features in *Orphic Hymn* 49 as a nurse of Dionysus (Βάκχου τροφόν, 49.1), and carries the god to Mount Ida after his birth from Zeus' thigh. Inscriptions in Asia Minor show that she was also linked with the god Zeus-Sabazios, who is addressed in *Orphic Hymn* 48 and could also be identified with Dionysus.⁵⁴⁰

Proclus refers to a commentary or essay on Hipta attributed to Orpheus in his own commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*,⁵⁴¹ suggesting that her connection with Orphism was well established in Late Antiquity. It also attests to her theological and allegorical potential. Hipta features in Proclus' own metaphysical exegeses. Because Hipta assists Zeus in giving birth, Proclus interprets her as an allegory for the immanent World Soul, who receives Dionysus, the Material Intellect, and acts as a channel through which the Material Intellect is distributed throughout the universe.⁵⁴²

Nonnus' nurse certainly sets the stage for allegorical readings. Mystis conceals Dionysus in a 'dark pit' (ζοφόντι κατεκλήισε βερέθρω, 9.102). This ultimately fulfils the same function as the caves associated with the god's infancy (e.g. at Brasiai at Paus. 3.24.3; Meros at Ps-Oppian *Cyn.* 4.240-6),⁵⁴³ and evokes the caves associated with the hiding and infancy of Zeus on Mount Dicte and Mount Ida. It also echoes Porphyry's essay on the Cave of the Nymphs, where caves symbolise the invisible powers, and Gnostic texts, the *Chaldean Oracles*, and Neoplatonic texts more generally where darkness is equated to matter, and opposed by light symbolising divinity.⁵⁴⁴ Such a location is well suited for initiation ceremonies, and recalls the role that darkness plays in Dionysiac and Eleusinian mysteries. A bright light issues forth from the infant god's

⁵³⁸ Miguelez-Cavero 2013: 182.

⁵³⁹ Garcia-Gasco 2014: 213.

⁵⁴⁰ Morand 2001: 174-181. West 1983: 96.

⁵⁴¹ Procl. *In Tim.* 2.105.28 Diehl (OF 329 II B = 199 K).

⁵⁴² Meisner 2019: 268. Hipta's allegorical role is analogous to the roles of Rhea and Kore in the Intellective sphere. It is notable that the Neoplatonists are comparatively silent on Dionysus' birth from Semele.

⁵⁴³ Chrétien 1984: 19, 108.

⁵⁴⁴ Gigli Piccardi 1985: 240.

face (9.103-4), which illuminates the chamber and ‘conceals’ the darkness (ζόφον ἔκρυψε φέγγος ἀθηήτου Διονύσου, 106).⁵⁴⁵

The opposition of light and darkness mirrors mystic initiation. Plutarch describes how initiates endured ordeals in darkness, which was followed by a sudden light (fr. 178; *Mor.* 36e, 47a, 81e, 943c). At Eleusis, at least, this mystic light appears to have been identified with the deity – a divine child whose birth was announced by the hierophant.⁵⁴⁶ Another intriguing aspect of this passage is how the hidden Dionysus makes darkness invisible. Light’s unusual capacity here to ‘conceal’ darkness rather than banish it seems to presage Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite’s ‘Divine Darkness’ which ‘is hidden by the light that is in existing things’ (Ps.-Dion. *De Myst.* 2.14). Golega compares this passage to John 1.5 (‘and the light shines in the darkness,’ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει), which describes the Logos, and is rendered by Nonnus as ἐν ἀχλυόεντι δὲ κόσμῳ οὐρανίαις σελάγιζε βολαῖς γαιήοχος αἴγλη, καὶ ζόφος οὐ μιν ἔμαρψε (‘the earth-moving light shone with heavenly rays into the darkened cosmos, and the dark did not enfold it,’ *Par.* 1.11-3). The equating of light with truth naturally gives rise to darkness as a metaphor for ignorance, an image that was ultimately derived from Plato’s allegory of the cave. For Neoplatonists, darkness as an analogy for matter made it a symbol of evil by association, and Gigli Piccardi quotes Iambichus *De Myst.* 130.8-12 in connection with these lines.⁵⁴⁷

The passage as a whole is clearly symbolic. However, even though Mystis fulfils a similar role to Hipta, Nonnus’ episode bears few traces of Hipta as a symbol of the World Soul. It is quite likely that Nonnus was aware of this allegory, given his knowledge of Proclus’ commentary on the *Timaeus*, where Proclus mentions ‘Orpheus in his discourse on Hipta’ (Procl. *In Tim.* 2.105.28 Diehl = OF 329 II B = 199 K).⁵⁴⁸ However, he chooses not to reproduce this contemporary Neoplatonic allegory in his text.

⁵⁴⁵ Chrétien 1984: 108 notes other peculiarities in this passage: καταυγάζω has the ray itself as its subject instead of the radiating body. She admits the construction must be deliberate. Cf. *Par.* 8.5; Heliod. 5.31. The divinity expressed through the radiance of Dionysus is otherwise consistent with other divine epiphanies (cf. e.g. *H. Dem.* 189, 280; Philostr. *Imagines* 1.14.1.), as well as divine radiance elsewhere in Nonnus, e.g. *Dion.* 8.341 (Zeus); 9.143 (Phanes); 17.9 (Dionysus); 18.114 (Maron); 27.234 (Silenus); 30.245 (Athena); 33.24 (Iris); 40.413 (Herakles Astrochiton).

⁵⁴⁶ Seaford 1981: 256 n46.

⁵⁴⁷ Gigli Piccardi 1985: 240.

⁵⁴⁸ Chapter 4; Tissoni 1998: 13; Accorinti 2003: 205.

Garcia-Gasco sees the use of the name *Mystis* instead of *Hipta* as a move to confirm the allegorical status of the figure.⁵⁴⁹ However, it is difficult to see how *Mystis* acts as a *metaphor* for Dionysus' rites, since her aetiological role is presented openly within the text: 'the clever handmaiden taught him the art that bears her name' (πινυτή θεράπαινα φερώνυμα μύστιδι τέχνηι ... διδασκομένη, 9.114).⁵⁵⁰ Nonnus' use of the term μύστις both as a common noun and a proper name throughout the text appears to further an aetiological, rather than allegorical, programme.⁵⁵¹

Allegorical interpretation does presuppose that abstract concepts can be personified and woven into a narrative.⁵⁵² Some of earliest examples of proto-allegoresis can be found in Pherecydes' etymologically based questions, such as his famous identification of Kronos with Time (Schibli F 65–66 = DK 7 A 9 = Probus *In Verg. Buc.* 6.31 and Hermias *Irr.* 12).⁵⁵³ Even though etymology could be deployed as a type of allegoresis, the two practices also flourished as independent modes of analysis – allegoresis applied to texts, and etymology to words – through Late Antiquity and beyond.⁵⁵⁴ Etymology can, however, add credence to an allegory by demonstrating a direct link between a figure's name and its hypothesised allegorical meaning.⁵⁵⁵ Speaking of the Classical-era commentator of the Derveni papyrus, Glenn Most observes:

While there are many allegorists and etymologists in later periods, the combination of the two procedures is much rarer than has sometimes been thought, and we find many more allegorists who do not use etymology or etymologists who do not use allegoresis than we find authors who correlate the two.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁴⁹ Garcia-Gasco 2014: 227.

⁵⁵⁰ Vian and Garcia-Gasco both note the importance of διδάσκω in the passage. Vian suggests that the ambiguity of the middle voice in 114 διδασκομένη and 128 διδασκομένω allows for a double reading: not only is Dionysus initiated by *Mystis* into the sacred rites, but *Mystis* herself is also initiated by the infant god. See Vian cited in Garcia-Gasco 2014: 216.

⁵⁵¹ Garcia-Gasco 2014: 214.

⁵⁵² Domaradzki 2017: 318: 'Given that the adjective ἔτυμος means 'true' and the related technical term τὸ ἔτυμον stands for 'the true sense of a word according to its origin,' one may point to a crucial difference between ancient ἔτυμολογία and modern etymology: both study the origin of words or names, but the former also enquires into their 'true' meanings. Consequently, more often than not, this ἔτυμολογία transmogrifies into a certain type of allegoresis.'

⁵⁵³ Domaradzki 2017: 318.

⁵⁵⁴ Most 2016: 52.

⁵⁵⁵ Baxter 1992: 93.

⁵⁵⁶ Most 2016: 57.

Given these distinctions, *Mystis*' role in *Dionysus*' upbringing appears primarily aetiological in nature. For her name to function as an allegory, we would need to interpret her as part of a cluster of symbols, or as a metaphor for the mysteries themselves. In this, *Mystis* appears much like the other members of *Dionysus*' entourage, rather than as a traditional personification, like *Phobos* as personified fear, or *Selene* as the Moon. Given that Nonnus was likely aware of *Hipta* as an allegorical figure, his decision to replace her with an aetiological personification is remarkable. Clearly, Nonnus appealed to various models, and chose iconographic rather than contemporary textual sources for *Dionysus*' nurse. He then chooses to embed her in an allegorical episode of his own design, that appeals to both Christian and Neoplatonic discourse on the opposition of Darkness and Light. Parallels between the light of *Dionysus* and the *Logos* from John's Gospel and the *Paraphrase*, invite further comparison between *Dionysus* and Christ. It suggests that Nonnus desired to compose an epic that could not be interpreted in terms of a monolithic, one-dimensional doctrine. Instead, he appeals to the full fabric of Late Antique theological discourse.

5.4 The Journey of the Soul

Chapter 4 has established that Nonnus was fully capable of composing episodes, and even entire books with micro-level allegorical frameworks. Not only does this shed light on Nonnus' capacity as a poet, and his compositional method, it also tells us about Nonnus' ideal reader: their internal library of texts; their interpretive methods; even their cultural context. Every text trains its reader in some way. Given that Nonnus' ideal reader would be capable of deciphering his micro-level allegories, it is entirely possible that audiences would have found allegorical themes or motifs on a more macro-level. This does not necessarily entail widespread allegorical readings, akin to the astrological schemas advocated by Stegemann. Recurrent themes or motifs need not permeate the entire poem, or be engaged with systematically or consistently. However, they could

still constitute a recurring symbolic language that Nonnus' audience would interpret allegorically.

Systematic, macro-level allegories existed in antiquity. The *Odyssey*, in particular, had been subjected to comprehensive allegorical interpretation by Neopythagorean and Middle Platonic thinkers from at least the 2nd century CE. Numenius interpreted the *Odyssey* as an allegory for the wanderings of the soul through successive stages of genesis, striving to return home to its natural condition (Porph. *De Antro* 34.6-10). Odysseus' wanderings across the sea of generation signified the soul's embodiment in the sensible world, a world identified with the 'bottomless abyss of unlikeness' (*Statesman* 273d-e); characters like Calypso, Circe, and Nausicaa symbolised the material pleasures that attempt to seduce the soul and prevent its *nostos*, its return to its point of origin and natural condition in the Intelligible world.⁵⁵⁷ Within this allegorical framework, Poseidon represented genesis; his attempts to prevent Odysseus' homecoming therefore signify the soul's imprisonment in the corporeal realm. According to this tradition, Odysseus was transformed into a spiritual hero, and was even called a 'philosopher' by Eustathius (*Ad Ody.* 151; X.241).

As discussed in Chapter 4, this macro-level allegory is transmitted by Porphyry in his essay *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, and Porphyry's commentary informed the Homeric Scholia, and was considered important enough to be restated in summary by the Byzantine philosopher Psellus. Although Nonnus was clearly aware of Porphyry's essay and used it in the composition of *Dionysiaca* 6, it is possible that the essay's influence is far more wide reaching.

Porphyry's essay is not anomalous. It reflects general Neoplatonic ideas concerning the universe and the nature of the soul. The image of Odysseus was particularly pervasive. Plotinus, for instance, exhorts us to be like Odysseus, who fled from the material pleasures of Circe and Calypso (1.6.8.16-21):

Φεύγωμεν δὴ φίλην ἐς πατρίδα, ἀληθέστερον ἅν τις παρακελεύοιτο. Τίς οὖν ἡ φυγή καὶ πῶς; Ἀναξόμεθα οἶον ἀπὸ μάγου Κίρκης φησὶν ἢ Καλυψοῦς Ὀδυσσεὺς

⁵⁵⁷ Brisson 2004: 83.

αἰνιττόμενος, δοκεῖ μοι, μεῖναι οὐκ ἀρεσθείς, καίτοι ἔχων ἡδονὰς δι' ὀμμάτων καὶ κάλλει πολλῷ αἰσθητῷ συνών. Πατρίς δὲ ἡμῖν, ὅθεν παρήλθομεν, καὶ πατήρ ἐκεῖ.

This would be truer advice 'Let us fly to our dear country' [//. 2.140]. What then is our way of escape, and how are we to find it? We shall put out to sea, as Odysseus did, from the witch Circe or Calypso—as the poet says (I think with a hidden meaning)—and was not content to stay though he had delights of the eyes and lived among much beauty of sense. Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there.⁵⁵⁸

The characters of Circe and Calypso here become symbols of the fall of the soul into earthly generation. Porphyry interprets the Circe episode in a similar manner (Stob. *Anth.* 1.49.60.1-20):

What Homer writes about Circe contains an amazing view of things that concern the soul. 'Their heads and voices, their bristles and their bodies were those of pigs, but their minds were solid, as before' [*Od.* 10.239-40]. Clearly this myth is a riddle concealing what Pythagoras and Plato have said about the soul: that it is indestructible by nature and eternal, but not immune to experience and change, and that it undergoes change and transfer into other types of bodies when it goes through what we call 'destruction' or 'death.' It then seeks out, in the pursuit of pleasure, that which is fitting and appropriate to it because it is similar and its way of life is similar in character. At this point, by virtue of what each of us gains through education and philosophy, the soul, remembering the good and repelled by shameful and illicit pleasures, is able to prevail and watch itself carefully and take care lest through inattention it be reborn as a beast and fall in love with a body badly suited for virtue and impure, nurturing an uncultivated and irrational nature and encouraging the appetitive and passionate elements of the soul rather than the rational.⁵⁵⁹

A similar conception of Circe can be found in Ps.-Plutarch's *Life of Homer* 26. Lamberton argues that, if we can assume Ps.-Plutarch is earlier than Porphyry, then we can confidently say that the essentials of Porphyry's analysis were traditional by the late 3rd century.⁵⁶⁰ As with Numenius and Porphyry's *De Antro*, the passage goes on to reveal

⁵⁵⁸ Transl. Armstrong 1989: 257.

⁵⁵⁹ Trans. Lamberton 1986: 9-10.

⁵⁶⁰ Lamberton 1986: 118.

its Pythagorean influences through a citation from Empedocles. Lamberton reads Porphyry's allegory as a substitute for a *nekylia*, that expresses the experience of the soul after death. Philosophy is needed to subordinate the irrational parts of the soul to the rational, and if philosophy fails the choice for a new life will be made by the soul's unbridled passions or appetites, which can be disastrous. Ultimately, Hermes, who represents reason (λόγος) will safeguard the soul (Odysseus) in attaining its ultimate goal, its liberation from the cycle of genesis.⁵⁶¹

A similar image appears in his *Life of Plotinus*, where Porphyry records an oracle from Apollo that uses the image of Odysseus reaching the shores of Scherie to describe the destination of Plotinus' soul after death (*VPlot.* 22.23-30):

δαῖμον, ἄνερ τὸ πάροιθεν, ἀτὰρ νῦν δαίμονος αἴση
 θειοτέρη πελάων, ὅτ' ἐλύσας δεσμὸν ἀνάγκης
 ἀνδρομέης, ῥεθέων δὲ πολυφλοίσβοιο κυδοιμοῦ 25
 ῥωσάμενος πρᾶπίδεσσιν ἐς ἡὺνα νηχύτου ἀκτῆς
 νήχε' ἐπειγόμενος δήμου ἄπο νόσφιν ἀλιτρῶν
 στηρίζαι καθαρῆς ψυχῆς εὐκαμπέα οἶμην
 ἧχι θεοῖο σέλας περιλάμπεται, ἧχι θέμιστες
 ἐν καθαρῷ ἀπάτερθεν ἀλιτροσύνης ἀθεμίστου. 30

Spirit, man at first but now approaching the diviner lot of a spirit, as the bond of human necessity has been loosened for you, and strong in heart, you swam swiftly from the roaring surge of the body to that coast where the stream flows strong, far apart from the crowd of the wicked, there to set your steps firm in the easy path of the pure soul, where the splendour of God shines round you and the divine law abides in purity far from lawless wickedness.⁵⁶²

The image evoked is that of Odysseus, who has been saved by the goddess Ino/Leucothea. She provides him with a veil which will protect him against the elements while he is at sea. The Platonic rhetor Maximus of Tyre, a contemporary of Numenius,

⁵⁶¹ Lamberton 1986: 119.

⁵⁶² Trans. Armstrong 1989: 67.

interprets Leucothea's veil as philosophy itself, which saves the human soul which has been plunged into the tempest of the sensible world (*Diss.* 11.10.32-5):

Thrown into the tumult here below and abandoning itself to the irresistible waves which carry it, the soul swims in an adverse sea, until philosophy itself takes it under its protection by slipping under it its arguments, just as Leucothea did for Ulysses with her veil.⁵⁶³

The analogy between Plotinus and Odysseus goes even deeper. Odysseus' primary guardian is Athena, who is often allegorised as Nous (Mind). Both she and Leucothea protect Odysseus against Poseidon (genesis), and upon leaving the dark island of Calypso (who signifies darkness and materiality), he emerges into the light, where Nausicaa finds him stripped of all his earthly possessions, devoid of materiality.

Spiritual readings of the *Odyssey* were not confined to non-Christians either. The image of Odysseus as the soul returning to its homeland in the Intelligible also provided material for Christian Gnostics and Christian Neoplatonists, who used scenes from the *Odyssey* as a ready source of moral allegory.⁵⁶⁴ The Valentinian Christian *Exegesis on the Soul* found in the Nag Hammadi library follows Numenius and likens Odysseus' longing for home on Calypso's Ogygia to the soul's longing to return to its transcendent origin (Nag Hammadi 2, 6). The early Christian theologians Irenaeus and Hippolytus accused the Valentinian and Naassene Christian Gnostic sects of treating Homer as their prophet.⁵⁶⁵

Allegorical approaches to the *Odyssey* were not solely confined to literature, either. Several 3rd and 4th-century CE sarcophagi portray Odysseus bound to the mast of his ship, as he listens to the Sirens' song, which was frequently allegorised as the harmony of the spheres. Some appear to express the Neoplatonic idea of the ascent of the soul to the Intelligible realm. Several of these sarcophagi were found in a 3rd-century Christian cemetery, which suggests that their owners may have in fact been Christian,

⁵⁶³ Trans. Pépin 1982: 9.

⁵⁶⁴ MacDonald 1994: 260-1.

⁵⁶⁵ Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 4.33.3; Hippolytus *Refutatio* 5.8.1.

and that the images represent stock pagan funerary motifs appropriated to show the soul's nostos to its homeland.⁵⁶⁶

With the *Odyssey* as a comparandum, Dionysus' journey can be read as a reflection of Odysseus' heroic wanderings. The *Dionysiaca's* invocation of Proteus establishes the connective tissue between the two poems, and the Πρωτῆα πολύτροπον (*Dion.* 1.14) provides a nexus between the titular ἄνδρα πολύτροπον (*Od.* 1.1) and the shapeshifting Dionysus. Like Odysseus, Dionysus journeys far across the world in the hopes of earning a figurative homecoming on Mount Olympus. Lefteratou reads Dionysus' Indian campaign as a metaphorical katabasis,⁵⁶⁷ effectively mirroring the famous *nekylia* of *Odyssey* 11. Odysseus descends into literal darkness, before returning to the light;⁵⁶⁸ Dionysus himself embodies light, and travels into a land characterised by darkness.

At the same time, his journey to India draws inspiration from (and prefigures) Alexander the Great's eastern conquests. The view of India in later Greek literature was heavily influenced by Alexander's conquests, and presented a utopian portrayal of the lands east of the Indus. Lefteratou argues that Dionysus' journey to India in the *Dionysiaca* deconstructs these utopian narratives to set the stage for its metaphorical katabasis.⁵⁶⁹ While Indians were famous from imperial times onwards for their worship of the Sun,⁵⁷⁰ they are not generally associated in the *Dionysiaca* with light. Instead, India and its inhabitants and allies are characterised by a host of adjectives relating to darkness (e.g. μέλανες, μελανόχροοι, ἐρυθραῖοι, μελάρρινες, κυανέοι).⁵⁷¹

Dionysus, on the other hand, is associated heavily with light and fire. As we have seen, his shining face illuminates the pit where Mystis raises him, banishing and concealing the darkness (9.98-106). His first birth is brought about by Zeus' thunderbolt. He wields a torch in his battle against the Hydaspes (23.255-66), and the Giants (48.1-

⁵⁶⁶ Klauser 1963: 71-100, cited in MacDonald 1994: 260.

⁵⁶⁷ Lefteratou 2016: 166.

⁵⁶⁸ Nagy 1990: 218; Nagy 2013: 307.

⁵⁶⁹ Lefteratou 2016: 166. Dionysus' journey to India as a metaphorical katabasis effectively replaces the god's famous literal katabasis, in which he descends to Hades to retrieve his mother Semele (*Hes. Theog.* 940; cf. *Ps-Apollodorus* 3.38, *Paus.* 2.31.2.).

⁵⁷⁰ e.g. *Philostratus, V. Apoll.* 2.24; *Nonnus, Dion.* 27.191, 33.151-2.

⁵⁷¹ See Frangoulis 2009: 152 for a comprehensive catalogue of terms for black and blackness.

89). That Dionysus' campaign against the Indians is depicted as a battle between light and darkness is showcased by Hermes' interpretation of a solar eclipse in the final year of the war (38.78-89):

τοῦτό σοι, ἄτρομε Βάκχε, πατήρ ἀνέφηνε Κρονίων
 νίκης Ἰνδοφόνιο προάγγελον· ἡελίῳ γὰρ
 δεύτερον ἀστράπτοντι φεραιγέα Βάκχον εἴσκω,
 καὶ θρασὺν ὀρφναίῃ μελανόχρουν Ἰνδὸν ὁμίχλῃ·
 αἰθέρι γὰρ τύπος οὗτος ὁμοίος· εὐφάεος δὲ
 ὡς ζόφος ἡμάλδυνε καλυπτομένης φάος ἡοῦς,
 καὶ πάλιν ἀντέλλων πυριφεγγέος ὑψόθι δίφρου
 Ἥελιος ζοφόεσσαν ἀπηκόντιζεν ὁμίχλην,
 οὕτω σῶν βλεφάρων μάλα τηλόθι καὶ σὺ τινάξας
 Ταρταρίης ζοφόεσσαν Ἑρινύος ἄσκοπον ἀχλὺν
 ἀστράψεις κατ' ἄρηα τὸ δεύτερον ὡς Ὑπερίων.

Tremble not at this sign, even though night came at midday.
 This sign, fearless Bacchos, your father Cronion
 has shown you to foretell your victory in the Indian War.
 For I liken Bacchos the light-bringer to the sun shining again,
 and the bold black Indian to the thick darkness.
 That is what is meant by the picture in the sky.
 For as the darkness blotted out and covered the light of shining day,
 and then Helios rose again in his fire-shining chariot and dispersed
 the gross darkness, so you also shall shake from your eyes far,
 far away the darksome sightless gloom of the Tartarian Fury,
 and blaze again on the battlefield like Hyperion.⁵⁷²

Dionysus is explicitly described as the light-bringer (φεραιγής) and opposes the black-skinned Indians, like the sun against the darkness of the eclipse. This association is grounded in Classical Dionysiac rituals, which were often held at night and featured fire and light.⁵⁷³ Throughout the *Dionysiaca*, the *Orphic Hymns* and ps.-Oppian's *Cynegetica*,

⁵⁷² Transl. Rose 1940: 99.

⁵⁷³ See Burkert 1985: 61.

Dionysus is πυρίπνοος, πυριφεγγής, πυρίπαις, πυρισθενής, πυρίσπορος, πυριτρεφής, πυρογενής and πυρόεις.⁵⁷⁴

The opposition of Dionysus (light) and darkness is also illustrated by the speech of Nyx (Night) to her son Hypnos (Sleep), who are both allied with the Indians, due to their association with darkness (31.136-61):

My child, how long is Cronides to despise me?
Is it not enough that Phaethon harms me,
that Morning also shoots me, and that Dawn chases me away?
Zeus has a bastard son, just to confound my dear Sleep!
One mortal alone shames my son and I.
All night long Bacchus destroys me, and provokes you
by staying awake and kindling his blazing torch with mystic sparks.
Why are you, Sleep, named the All-vanquisher?
No longer do you charm wakeful men, now that
the counterfeit gleam of earthborn Lyaïos has conquered my revel.
For he hides the flames of my stars by brighter torches of his own.
One mortal alone insults me, a new Light-bringer
who covers the beams of my Moon, great as they are.
I am shamed before Day when she mocks my darkness,
because I have a false brightness in the night.
For another artificial Sun makes me shine as if Night were day.

Gigli Piccardi admits that it is tempting to think of the Indian campaign as a kind of struggle against dark spirits, citing Iamblichus' *De Myst.* 3.13.15-21:⁵⁷⁵ 'For just as when the sun shines, the darkness by its nature is not able to resist its light, and suddenly becomes wholly invisible, withdraws completely from its midst, and altogether ceases, so when the power of the gods, filling all with its benefits, shines forth in many directions, the

⁵⁷⁴ Πυρίπνοος: *OH* 52.3; πυριφεγγής: *OH*. 52.9; πυρίπαις: *Opp. Cyn.* 4.287; πυρισθενής: *Nonn. Dion.* 24. 6; πυρίσπορος: *OH* 45.1; πυριτρεφής: *Nonn. Dion.* 24.13; πυρογενής: *Anth. App. Ep.* III 153.3 Cougny; πυρόεις: *Nonn. Dion.* 21.220. Collated in Paleothodoros 2010: 237-8; Cf. Bruchman 1893: 92.

⁵⁷⁵ *De Myst.* 3.13.15-21: ὥσπερ γὰρ ἡλίου καταλάμπσαντος οὐ πέφυκε τὴν αὐγὴν ὑπομένειν τὸ σκότος, ἐξαίφνης δὲ ἀφανὲς ἄρδην καθίσταται καὶ παντελῶς ἐκ μέσων ὑποχωρεῖ καὶ ἐκποδὼν ἐξίσταται, οὕτω καὶ τῆς πάντα ἀγαθῶν πληρούσης τῶν θεῶν δυνάμεως πολλαχόθεν ἐπιλαμπούσης οὐκ ἔχει χώραν ἢ τῶν κακῶν ταραχὴ πνευμάτων...

tumult of evil spirits has no place.⁵⁷⁶ However, she argues that she does not believe the Indian campaign should be interpreted as an allegory, because Dionysus, although he is at times explored as a parallel of Christ, retains enough objectionable characteristics that his campaign cannot be read as an ethical allegory.⁵⁷⁷

The imagery of light versus darkness was pervasive in Late Antique cultural discourse, especially in Neoplatonic and Judaeo-Christian contexts. In Neoplatonism, light was placed at the highest point of the sensible and intelligible worlds. The sun, for instance, was considered a symbol of the noeric light (Procl. *Theol. Plat.*, 6.12, p.61, 7 and 15) because it owed its light to the demiurge himself (*Theol. Plat.* 6.12, p.57, 5-10). Within the Christian tradition, the 6th-century writings of Ps.-Dionysius explain that light and the sun are expressions of God himself, who radiates the hierarchical orders of the angels and the Church with his rays.⁵⁷⁸ Divine light recalls all things from darkness, and when they are illuminated they acquire boundaries and form; darkness, however, was considered a lack and privation of light, with no essence or being.⁵⁷⁹

That Nonnus is tapping into a philosophical discourse is showcased further by the association of the black-skinned Indians with earth and matter. In addition to adjectives relating to blackness and darkness, the Indians are also 'earthborn' (γηγενής, e.g. *Dion.* 18.221, 31.173, 34.182, 36.160, 48.9), and are generally presented in negative terms. They are hubristic because of their impious refusal to welcome Dionysus and his gift of wine. It is worth noting that γηγενής also applies to many of the *Dionysiaca's* antagonists and *theomachoi*, for instance Typhon (1.275, 2.557, 2.629), the Giants (4.403, 4.456, 48.32), the Titans (18.219, 20.77, 35.351), and Pentheus (44.210, 45.345).⁵⁸⁰ Deriades' son-in-law, Morrheus, is physically compared to the 'earthborn Indians,' the Giants, and Typhon over the span of four lines (34.180-4). Typhon, the Giants, and the Titans were all allegorised as agents of materiality that oppose the

⁵⁷⁶ Transl. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell 2004: 153.

⁵⁷⁷ Gigli Piccardi 1985: 240-1.

⁵⁷⁸ Koutras 2002: 33.

⁵⁷⁹ Koutras 2002: 33.

⁵⁸⁰ Γηγενής is not exclusively negative in the *Dionysiaca*, given that it is also used of the Corybantes (*Dion.* 14.25) and the Cyclopes (2.341, 27.86, 28.231), both groups who serve in Dionysus' army. Both uses seem to reflect mythological traditions where they were literally born from the earth (for the Corybantes, see *Dion.* 14.25-6; for Cyclopes, cf. *Apoll. Arg.* 1.498).

Olympians, who represented light and wisdom. The Indians can, then, as *theomachoi* be interpreted in much the same way. Their dark, earthborn nature resists the divine light of Dionysus.

Fauth argues that the Indian campaign is configured as a mythical representation of elementary oppositions: Dionysus, who descends from the sky, against the earthborn Indians; the son of the sky father, versus the children of Mother Earth; of fire, symbolised by Zeus, the lightning bolt, and Dionysus' torch, against water, symbolised by Deriades, the son of the river Hydaspes.⁵⁸¹ Water was commonly understood, in addition to earth, as a symbol of genesis and the material world. For instance, the *Chaldean Oracles* imagine matter as a long, murky river (*Chald. Orac.* 163.5 = Numen. fr. 3 des Places). Nonnus' Indians, therefore, are quite the departure from traditional Greek narratives. Their worship of the Sun, the symbol of the demiurge, is supplanted with darkness along with other symbols of materiality. This makes Nonnus' India a perfect replacement for a traditional katabasis. The realm of Hades had on occasion been allegorised as a metaphor for the material world, which is populated only by images and shadows (e.g., Plot. 1.6.14-7).⁵⁸²

From as early as Plato's *Republic* and the Allegory of the Cave (*Rep.* 514a-517a), darkness was also a symbol of ignorance. The prisoners within the cave only perceive darkness and shadows, whereas the philosopher who has escaped from the cave, is capable of seeing the sun and apprehending truth. The philosopher must then descend to help educate those still within the cave. This descent is expressed through the verb καταβαίνω, which is foreshadowed by the opening word of the *Republic*, the aorist form κατέβην (327a). The philosopher's journey from the light into the darkness becomes a katabasis.

Nonnus' India is therefore a conscious transformation from its utopian narratives. Indians were traditionally seen as enlightened, and occupying a privileged position close to the Sun.⁵⁸³ Wisdom attributed to the Brahmins, for example, features

⁵⁸¹ Fauth 1981: 25.

⁵⁸² See Chapter 4; Smith 2019: 77; Akçay 2019: 122-3.

⁵⁸³ Although the east is associated with divinity in Nonnus' reworking of the Cave of the Nymphs (Chapter 4), his use of this association appears primarily utilitarian for the allegory at hand, and is dispensed with later in his narrative in order to portray India as a katabatic land.

in Porphyry's writings (e.g. *De Abst.* 4.17; *De Styg.*). Although Indian sages exist in the *Dionysiaca* and advocate in favour of Dionysus, they are unable to prevent Deriades from attacking the god, and Dionysus himself has no need to learn from their wisdom.⁵⁸⁴ Nonnus characteristically varies and interweaves his paradigms here. After his victory, Dionysus establishes his cult in India, evoking the philosopher of Plato's cave who brings education to those imprisoned in the dark, instead of the famous *nekyia* of *Odyssey* 11.

A related paradigm for Dionysus' journey and metaphorical katabasis can be found in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. The *Odyssey* acts as an important paradigm for the *Aethiopica*, and Odysseus himself even appears in Kalasiris' dream.⁵⁸⁵ The novel is conceived of as a *nostos* and includes various katabatic and anabatic elements.⁵⁸⁶ Ethiopia, like India, was believed to occupy a privileged position close to the Sun. An allegorical exegesis of the *Aethiopica* survives in a 13th-century manuscript, written by a certain Philip the Philosopher, although the authorship and date of this essay remains fiercely debated.⁵⁸⁷ The exegesis is summarised by Hunter as 'a Neo-Platonically favoured mixture of familiar hermeneutic tools which are used to read the novel as (another) ascent of the soul (i.e. Charicleia) to the intellectual world: metaphor and allegory (Kalasiris guides Charicleia/the soul 'in calm' (ἀκύμονα) through 'the salt and the waves of life (τῶν βιωτικῶν κυμάτων)', protecting her from the plots of Trachinos, i.e. 'the rough (τραχεῖα) confusion of the emotions'), numerology ('Charicleia' adds up to the triply holy number of 777), and etymology ('Arsake' as 'carnal pleasure', ἡ ἡδὼνη ἡ σαρκική, etc.) all play their part.'⁵⁸⁸

Lefteratou notes a further paradigm for a metaphorical katabasis to India in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*. In what could be termed an epic katabatic scene,

⁵⁸⁴ Lefteratou 2016: 171.

⁵⁸⁵ Whitmarsh 1999: 22 offers a succinct overview: 'In a literal sense, Charicleia is returning home, back to her biological parents: although Calasiris' dream matches her up with Penelope and Calasiris with Odysseus, it is clear that she is the most important of the several 'Odyssean' figures in this text. Like Odysseus, Charicleia and Theagenes find in the conclusion to the text an end to their 'wandering' (the source of a continually reaffirmed anxiety in the *Aethiopica*). Again like the *Odyssey*, the *Aethiopica* concludes with a series of exercises in recognition, ending with a powerful assertion of identity and royal privilege.' See also Keyes 1922; Woronoff 1992: 37–42.

⁵⁸⁶ Whitmarsh 1999: 27.

⁵⁸⁷ Colonna 1960; Lamberton 1986: 148; Longo 1991; Sandy 2001: 170–1. Lavagnini 1974 has argued for an identification of Philip with Philagathos of Cerami in the 12th century. Tarán 1992 especially has spoken in favour of dating the text to Late Antiquity, probably in the 5th or 6th century.

⁵⁸⁸ Hunter 2005: 134.

Apollonius learns from the Brahmins about his past life as a captain on the island of Pharos in Alexandria (3.23).⁵⁸⁹ Like Odysseus who consults Tiresias in the underworld, or Menelaus with Proteus in Egypt, Apollonius learns of his future: he will be esteemed as a god by many after his death, but also in his lifetime (3.50). These katabatic resonances are then balanced by anabatic details; Apollonius thanks his Indian hosts and departs, and may now 'walk into the heavens' (3.51) as a result of their teachings. Apollonius' katabasis is transformed into an image of heavenly ascent and apotheosis, which neatly corresponds to Dionysus' journey from India to Olympus at the end of the *Dionysiaca*.⁵⁹⁰

That Dionysus ascends to join his father in heaven understandably has strong Christian parallels. However, it also reflects Platonic and Late Antique concerns about the virtuous life and the destiny of the soul. Plato had established in the 4th century BCE that the ultimate endeavour of the philosopher was to become 'like god so far as is possible.'⁵⁹¹ This assimilation to the divine was also fundamental to Gregory of Nyssa's definition of Christianity as 'imitation of the divine nature.'⁵⁹² Man had been made in the image of God and had fallen from grace due to original sin; therefore, anagogical ascent could only be achieved by assimilation to the divine through mimesis.⁵⁹³ Neoplatonists were equally inspired by Plato's assertion in the *Theaetetus*, subject to their own revisions. Plotinus, for instance, diverges from the *Theaetetus* by omitting Plato's qualification that emulation of the divine can only be achieved 'so far as is possible.' Where Plato placed inherent limitations upon the degree of divine verisimilitude the philosopher can achieve, Plotinus believes that the soul's noetic ascent and complete likeness to the God is possible: our goal is 'not to be exempt from error, but to be god' (οὐκ ἔξω ἀμαρτίας εἶναι, ἀλλὰ θεὸν εἶναι, Plot. 1.2.6.2-3, cf. 2.9.15.40). Since virtues are Intelligible powers in the soul and derive from the divine Intellect, these virtues have the power to lead the human mind to anagogic ascent, and the soul to its return to the Intelligible world (1.2.6.3-11).

⁵⁸⁹ Lefteratou 2016: 174.

⁵⁹⁰ Lefteratou 2016: 174.

⁵⁹¹ Plat. *Theaet.* 176a-c; cf. also *Rep.* 500b-d, 540a-c, 613a-b; *Symp.* 207c-208b; *Laws.* 71d-e; *Tim.* 47c, 89e-90d; *Phd.* 78b-84d; *Phdr.* 246d-e, 249c.

⁵⁹² Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione Christiana*, GNO VIII/1.136.7-8.

⁵⁹³ Mateo-Seco 2010.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, assimilation to the divine Father is a key facet of Dionysus' journey in the *Dionysiaca*. Dionysus is hidden at birth among nymphs; he has Rhea, the mother of the gods, as a substitute mother; as discussed above, he is associated with fire; and, in his final task before he ascends to Mount Olympus, he must vanquish the theomachic earthborn Giants with his flaming torch. Zeus is Dionysus' main paradigm, and assimilation is the primary means proving his divine lineage and repudiating his enemies' statements surrounding his legitimacy and birth-right. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the *Dionysiaca* is filled with exempla illustrating the potential danger of imitating divinities in the wrong way. Typhon's attempt to imitate and overthrow Zeus is portrayed as unbridled hubris. Ampelus angers Selene, the driver of cattle, with his boasting and riding of a bull. Hermes recites the story of Phaethon and his attempt to imitate his father Helios in the chariot of the Sun as a warning to Dionysus not to aspire to his father's power. Meanwhile, Herakles Astrochiton is held up as a positive example and model for mortal apotheosis.

Dionysus' positive model of assimilation has contemporary links with Proclus. Although Plotinus conceived of assimilation in terms of the experience of *nous*, and did not distinguish between the various gods one might assimilate themselves to,⁵⁹⁴ Proclus sought to locate the Olympian gods within this mimetic framework. For Proclus, the Olympians are divine *henads* which form a bridge between the transcendent One and Being. These gods differ from the One in that they can be participated in. Assimilation in Proclus, then, involves being like a particular kind of god. Our souls derive their form and character from the nature of our leading gods (*In Tim.* 3.262.6-14), and these gods may have different powers or play different roles in the administration of providence.⁵⁹⁵ If a soul extends from Helios, then it should choose a life according to the powers of Helios, for example, one devoted to medicine or priesthood (*In Tim.* 3.279.14-9). As Baltzly shows, soul will not be assimilated successfully to god if it lives a life inappropriate to its series, or attempts to live an appropriate life but engages in it badly.

⁵⁹⁴ Baltzly 2004: 308.

⁵⁹⁵ Baltzly 2004: 309.

Thus, assimilation to our leading gods provides ‘something like an understanding of our cosmic station and duties.’⁵⁹⁶

Nonnus’ conception of the mimetic relationship between Dionysus and Zeus appears shaped by an understanding of Platonic participation. Dionysus was conceived as an imitation of Zeus elsewhere in Neoplatonic theology. This can be seen in Kore’s robe from the Orphica, which depicted the procession of the divine *henads*: the Hypercosmic deities, followed by the Hypercosmic-Encosmic deities, and then the Encosmic deities. The Hypercosmic deities exist on the level of the transcendent world soul; Hypercosmic-Encosmic deities rule over nature but remain detached from the world; and the Encosmic deities exist at the level of the sensible world.⁵⁹⁷ These are the deities that correspond to material nature and are headed by Dionysus. As we have seen in Chapter 2, when Zeus makes Dionysus king of all the Encosmic gods (Procl. *In Crat.* 55.5 Pasquali = *OF* 288 ii B = 208 K), Dionysus occupies the highest level of Encosmic Nature, the level at which the physical world comes into being. His father Zeus is the Intellective Intellect (νοετὸς νοῦς), the demiurge who initiates creation and differentiates the Forms through the agency of deities at a lower metaphysical level.⁵⁹⁸ Within this schema, Zeus as the Intellective Intellect contains all the Forms in a differentiated state; Dionysus represents the material or Encosmic Intellect through which the Forms are dispersed into the physical universe. Damascius says that, as the final ruler in the Orphic succession, Dionysus ‘completes the work of Zeus ... who is the producer of all’ (Dam. *In Phaed.* 1.4 = 31 Westerink = *OF* 299 ii B = 208 K). Their joint rule is thereby read as an allegory for the way in which the Encosmic Intellect completes the Demiurge’s creative task.⁵⁹⁹

Dionysus’ imitation of Zeus in the *Dionysiaca* can thus be framed within the context of contemporary philosophical discussions. Dionysus ascends to godhood on Mount Olympus through imitation of his father Zeus, and achieves this much like the soul that assimilates itself to its leading god. Dionysus must choose a life that accords

⁵⁹⁶ Baltzly 2004: 309.

⁵⁹⁷ On the Hypercosmic, Hypercosmic-Encosmic, and Encosmic deities, see Proclus, *In Crat.* 55.5 Pasquali (*OF* 299 i B = 208 K); Brisson 1995: 82–84, 186; cf. Chlup 2012: 126–127. For their depiction on Persephone’s woven *peplos*, see Meisner 2019: 262.

⁵⁹⁸ Meisner 2019: 220.

⁵⁹⁹ Meisner 2019: 264.

with the power of Zeus. In Neoplatonic hypostases, this is fulfilled by demiurgic activity. In the *Dionysiaca*, these powers include agriculture, light and mastery of fire, and victory over the agents of materiality. By achieving a positive form of imitation, Dionysus avoids the fate of Typhon, whose imitation of Zeus is poor and at times, even perverse. Dionysus' journey can, therefore, be seen as analogous to the journey of the soul as it navigates the material world and attempts to chart a course towards positive emulation and assimilation to the divine; only then can the soul rise above the shifting currents of the sensible world and ascend to the heavens.

5.5 Conclusion

Collectively, the evidence suggests that Nonnus approaches symbolism from an almost meta-allegorical angle, self-consciously reflecting on the conventions of allegory. His *ktisis* of Thebes and ekphrasis of Harmonia's palace appear inspired by exegetical texts, and include embedded glosses and self-exegesis that feels almost playful at times. His allegories are made explicit precisely where the reader is already trained to look for allegory, for example, in ekphrases. In each case, these more transparent details set the stage for deeper allegorical readings. Thebes' imitation of the cosmos has logical implications for how we read Cadmus as an artist; Harmonia's palace leads to contemplation of her status as a goddess of cosmic harmony. It is evidence that the *Dionysiaca* is actively engaged in training its ideal reader.

The same can be said of Dionysus' Shield. It stands in a long tradition of allegorically composed shield ekphrases, and uses this staging ground to create a universal history and a model of salvation that anticipates the coming of Dionysus. Ganymede, the Stoic Logos and cosmic pourer, pours nectar in heaven, prefiguring Dionysus' role as the Material Intellect who pours wine for humankind. As a self-conscious reflection of Nonnus' poetic composition, the shield's soteriological themes have strong implications on how we are invited to read the *Dionysiaca* as a whole.

Perhaps most compelling, however, is the pervasive opposition between light and darkness. As a theme, it interfaces directly with Christian, Platonic, Gnostic, Chaldean, Zoroastrian, and Manichaean schools of discourse, which all make up the cultural fabric of the eastern Mediterranean in Late Antiquity, and would, each in their own way, have informed Nonnus' audience. All of these traditions are in dialogue with one another, and it is difficult to disentangle individual strands. However, given the poem's nuanced exploration of mimesis as a metaphysical principle, and its association of darkness with materiality and ignorance, the *Dionysiaca's* dichotomy between light and darkness bears Platonic hallmarks. It further supports Lefteratou's reading of the Indian campaign as a metaphorical katabasis. The result draws together influences and models from allegories of the *Odyssey*, Plato's Cave, Heliodorus, and Philostratus. With the *Odyssey* in particular as a comparandum, the *Dionysiaca* appears to bear enough hallmarks of the journey of the soul that students of Homer would recognise, that tune them into a more semiotic mode of reading.

Conclusion

From Joseph Golega in 1930 down to the present day, the presence of Neoplatonic influence in Nonnus has remained a fringe area of Nonnian studies. This project has not only established that the *Dionysiaca* does indeed owe a significant debt to Neoplatonic writings, but that Neoplatonic ideas and influences are expressed in a mode and style befitting Late Antiquity's *poikilos* poet. These influences are multifarious, and not limited to individual themes, motifs, or doctrines. Instead, the *Dionysiaca* embraces a multitude of Neoplatonic sources and ideas. These ideas can manifest in individual episodes (e.g. Zagreus' murder), or in recurrent themes (e.g. circularity), or as structural frameworks (e.g. light versus dark).

Throughout my thesis, I have endeavoured to identify any Neoplatonic ideas and reminiscences, and situate them within their intellectual context. This has involved appealing to a wide variety of authors and sources, including Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, and Christian authors like Gregory of Nyssa and Ps-Dionysius the Areopagite. It is clear that Nonnus did not have a single point of contact with Neoplatonic thought. Even though there are clear links to Proclus (Tissoni 1998, Accorinti 2003), and his writings are particularly useful in illuminating the context of Neoplatonic themes and motifs, Nonnus clearly reaches back to earlier writers, suggesting meaningful engagement with the full breadth of the Neoplatonic tradition, as it existed in his time.

Chapter 1 of my thesis focused on the poem's three Dionysoi, particularly on their relations to one another. That there are precisely three Dionysoi (Zagreus, Dionysus, Iacchus) appears no accident, given the proliferation of triadic theological schemas in Late Antiquity, with the Christian Trinity the most famous example. The relatively short space allowed for Iacchus in Book 48, at the culmination of the poem, suggests that Iacchus is important primarily for bringing the number of Dionysoi to three and rounding out a 'trinity,' as he does not appear particularly significant as an individual. Proclus' triadic schemas provide perhaps the most compelling conceptual comparandum, particularly his demiurgic triad in the second hypostasis, consisting of Zeus, Poseidon,

and Pluto. Within Proclus' triad, each god is a 'Zeus,' governed by the monad of Zeus. The Zeus within the triad takes his name directly from its monad, because he is the highest. This analogue offers us a means of understanding the uncertain continuity between Nonnus' three Dionysoi, where each is a Dionysus, who also possesses their own name, with the most famous among them taking his name from his governing monad.

Chapter 1 also revisited the Zagreus episode, which has already received attention for its Neoplatonic context (e.g. Hernández de la Fuente 2014). Prevalent themes from Neoplatonic commentaries on the death and dismemberment of Dionysus include the insubstantiality of the reflection on the mirror's surface, the mimetic quality of both the mirror and the reflection, as well as the indivisible and eternal nature of the soul. Although these themes are present in Nonnus' Zagreus episode, they appear even more prominently elsewhere in his epic, particularly in Book 5 with the dismemberment of Actaeon and the mirror of Persephone. The physical rebirth attested in Middle Platonic accounts (e.g. Plutarch, Clement of Alexandria) is dispensed with entirely in favour of a more Neoplatonic approach. As we have seen with Synesius, bodily resurrection was one of the key impediments to Platonic thinkers converting to Christianity, because bodily resurrection would mean the re-imprisonment of the soul within the material world. *Incertus* figures like Synesius had to find ways to reconcile Christ's resurrection with their own personal doctrines. Eschewing the idea of bodily resurrection, Nonnus leaves the continuity between Zagreus' and Dionysus deliberately obscure, but ultimately more amenable to Neoplatonic doctrines on the immortality of the soul.

Chapter 2 built on the themes of mimesis introduced in the examination of Zagreus' mirror. Frequency analyses of mimetic terminology (τύπος, αντίτυπος, εἰκών, ἴνδαλμα, φάσμα, μίμημα, μιμηλός, and μιμέομαι) established clear points of contact and contrast between Nonnus and other writers. Nonnus' use of mimetic vocabulary represents a clear innovation over his epic predecessors, and is statistically significant also compared to his imitators and successors in the so-called 'Nonnian School' and his near contemporaries like Synesius. His use of mimetic vocabulary has clear parallels, however, with Christian theological and Neoplatonic philosophical texts. Nonnus' closest poetic parallels are the *Carmina* of Gregory of Nazianzus and the hexameter

Sibylline Oracles, and further comparative studies between the *Dionysiaca* and these two collections might produce intriguing results. Nonnus also shows a clear preference for mimetic language in the *Dionysiaca* compared to the *Paraphrase*. Nonnus clearly felt that mimesis as a theme was more suited to his Dionysiac composition. This is understandable, given Dionysus' role as the king of the Encosmic series of gods, the Material Intellect that governs the sense-perceptible world.

Beyond language, mimesis also permeates the *Dionysiaca* on a thematic and structural level. It appears as a metaphysical and aesthetic principle, whereby material artefacts and forms depend upon and participate non-reciprocally in divine, cosmic, or transcendent models. Mimesis also acts as an artistic principle for the imitation of natural or intelligible models. It appears as a mechanism for learning, and even allows for spiritual elevation. Dionysus' own journey appears to be figurative as well as spatial, and can be framed within discussions of mimesis, as he seeks to navigate his mimetic relationship with his father Zeus.

As a theme, mimesis also raises questions of ontology and epistemology. The relationship between image and model, imitation and archetype, is problematised or expounded upon depending on the context of individual passages. Although it is fair to say that mimetic vocabulary often appears in conjunction with words, or in contexts related to, deception, disguise, and falsehood (e.g. Newbold 2010), this is not universally the case. As this chapter demonstrates, mimetic terminology can appear with no moral or ethical implications, but rather as a principle of Nonnus' material, Dionysiac world, dependent on Neoplatonic conceptions of the universe.

Chapter 3 explored the various mechanisms of inspiration that appear in the *Dionysiaca*, with a focus on madness and ecstatic union. As a substance and analogy for Nonnus' poetry, wine can bring about initiation into Dionysus' thiasos; it can inspire others, in the same way as the breath of the Muses. However, intoxication can also lead to uncontrolled frenzy, endangering the consumer and those around them. Shorrock's interpretation of wine as a symbol for the *Dionysiaca* itself is particularly illuminating here, as Nonnus uses the relative benefits and dangers of wine to reflect on the nature of poetic composition, and the need for restraint and positive, elevatory experience as opposed to unbridled frenzy.

As the chapter has shown, the *Dionysiaca* draws upon Homeric scenes where heroes are invested with divine power; Nonnus then updates these prototypical scenes using Neoplatonic theories of divine inspiration. These Neoplatonic dimensions are showcased particularly through the two Bacchantes, who blaze with fire yet remain miraculously unburnt. Nonnus' portrayal of divine inspiration has numerous intersections with Iamblichus' treatment of divine inspiration in his *De Mysteriis*. The fire's autonomous and self-fulfilling capacity, and its ability to shine without burning also establishes parallels with celestial fire.

The scene of the Lydian priest of Zeus in Book 13 is particularly notable, because the priest's noeric fire compels Typhon in the same manner as a theurgist. The priest's noeric fire appears to also parallel the noeric light which inspires John the Baptist to spread the divine word of God in the *Paraphrase*. The priest's power to compel using only his voice also recalls Christ's ability to command the Pharisees' soldiers at *Par.* 18.34-8. Collectively, evidence from the passage suggests that the priest assimilates himself to his patron Zeus, fulfilling the ultimate goal of theurgic ritual, to achieve contact and assimilation to the divine. The anonymous epitaphic homage, *AP* 9.198, which professes to speak with the voice of Nonnus, appears to allude to this episode directly; both Nonnus and the priest lay low agents of materiality – the Giants and Typhon – through the power of their voice. Regardless of the epigram's actual authorship, it suggests that the associations between Nonnus and the Lydian priest were there to be made by Nonnus, his students, and his audience.

Chapter 4 returned to *Dionysiaca* 6, and identified key allusions between Nonnus' poetry and Neoplatonic mystic allegories. The centrepiece case study is without a doubt Nonnus' transposition and reworking of the Homeric cave of the nymphs, which utilises a significant amount of material from Porphyry's commentary. Details in Porphyry's exegesis are used to reverse engineer an Orphic cave of Persephone, which continues to draw from Homer's original passage in fundamental ways. Nonnus alters the exegetical significance from the creation of material bodies and the ensoulment of matter to present a more cosmogonic allegory through the symbol of Persephone's weaving. Nonnus includes further motifs from Plato's *Timaeus* and Proclus'

commentary, incorporating the cyclic processes of destruction and generation into *Dionysiaca* 6's cosmic framework.

Together with the allegory of the Orphic Dionysus, these episodes combine to present a tour de force of allegorised myths. The allegorical material behind *Dionysiaca* 6 inevitably poses the question whether Nonnus conceived of, and structured other books with, the same degree of allegorical complexity. The self-confined and almost epyllion nature of *Dionysiaca* 6 suggests perhaps not. Perhaps Nonnus, who was clearly capable of composing in an allegorical mode, opted for an allegorical composition to elevate the book's cosmic nature, as he does later with Dionysus' Shield, but felt no need to continue such a mode throughout his epic. Definite answers to this question, however, are beyond the scope of this present study. If Nonnus did engage with allegorical models elsewhere in a systematic fashion, utilising a similar mode of composition, then this study's analysis of *Dionysiaca* 6 can perhaps provide a blueprint for future studies on this monumental poem.

Nonnus' compositional approach to *Dionysiaca* 6 offers some indication about how he conceived of his audience. Nonnus employs clusters of symbols, motifs, and myths that all possess pre-established meanings attested in allegorical commentaries. He does not seem to create wholly new symbols for his audience to uncover and interpret. This approach suggests he did not want to leave the allegorical interpretation of his text, in essence, up to chance, in the mind of an untrained and uninitiated reader. Every text attempts in some way to train its ideal reader, and the *Dionysiaca* is no different. It is for that reason that we can detect a palpable authorial intent behind *Dionysiaca* 6's allusions. Nonnus takes familiar symbols and deploys them in novel clusters, offering allegorical configurations that the reader had perhaps not seen before, but with familiar enough constituent parts to sufficiently guide the reader's interpretation, like a mystagogue leading an initiate.

The texts Nonnus alludes to were certainly well known to his readers. Proclus famously remarked that, if it were up to him, he would remove all texts from circulation except Plato's *Timaeus* and the *Chaldean Oracles*. In late Alexandrian Platonism, the *Timaeus* would eventually replace the *Parmenides* as the Platonic theological text par excellence, because its depiction of the divine was more familiar and acceptable to Christian

audiences.⁶⁰⁰ Nonnus' use of Proclus' commentary on the dialogue has also been noted elsewhere.⁶⁰¹ Additionally, Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* was one of several texts on the cave from *Odyssey* 13, and Porphyry's essay was authoritative enough and circulated widely enough that its content was reproduced in scholarship on Homer. Crucially, the variety of Platonic texts Nonnus invokes underscores the fact that he was appealing to a knowledge base beyond just Homeric literary criticism.

Chapter 5 continued my inquiries into Nonnus' use of allegory, this time moving beyond *Dionysiaca* 6, to identify themes, motifs, and case studies across the poem. This chapter sought to establish that Nonnus is inspired by exegetical texts, even when he does not adopt a verifiably allegorical mode of composition. He showcases this through ekphrases with cosmological features. By recalling commentaries, the *Dionysiaca* engages in a process whereby it actively trains its audience into becoming an ideal reader, a reader with the requisite knowledge, experience, and frames of reference to interpret the poem as its author intended, much like an initiate. Ekphrases like the *ktisis* of Thebes gloss their own cosmological features as modelled on 'seven-zoned heaven,' providing the key to their own interpretation.

Dionysus' Shield offers another compelling example. Nonnus composes his shield allegorically, precisely because allegorically-decorated shields have become a trope of epic poetry. Nonnus' shield ekphrasis stands in a long tradition that winds its way from Homer and Ps-Hesiod, through the Latin tradition, down to the Imperial period with Quintus of Smyrna. Shield ekphrases had become such a locus for allegoresis, in composition and interpretation, that attempts by the poet to deliberately signal an allegorical schema become almost redundant. Audiences are primed to seek 'hidden' and 'deeper' meanings in shield ekphrases, whether they are there or not. Fortunately, Nonnus does not disappoint. Building on Spanoudakis' elaborate catalogue of the ekphrases' allusions, the intertexts identified in my final chapter cement his conclusions further through the comparison between Amphion and David, and integrate the shield ekphrasis more strongly into the *Dionysiaca* as a whole, with the comparison between Ganymede as the Cosmic Pourer and Stoic Logos, and Dionysus as the earthly dispenser

⁶⁰⁰ Tarrant 2017: 36-41.

⁶⁰¹ Tissoni 1998: 13; Accorinti 2003: 205.

of wine and the Material Intellect. The allegorical programme at work in Dionysus' Shield can be seen as a *mise en abyme* that reflects the structural and semiotic aspirations of the poem as a whole.

In addition to the shield ekphrasis, Nonnus also demonstrates a fairly consistent thematic approach to allegory. The opposition of light and darkness interfaces with the cultural dialogue of the eastern Mediterranean, dominated by Christian and Platonic schools, with Gnostic, Chaldean, Zoroastrian, and Manichean contributions and influences. Not only does this cast Dionysus' campaign against the Indians as a metaphorical katabasis, it also feeds into the wider themes of the light of divinity and its conflict with the darkness of materiality and ignorance.

Tying themes and ideas from all five chapters, it is possible to draw more holistic conclusions about the *Dionysiaca* and its composition. Throughout the poem, Dionysus is confronted by agents of materiality, whether they be the Titans, the Giants, the Indians, or even Pentheus. Overcoming the Giants in Book 48, therefore, offers a wonderful thematic culmination to Nonnus' epic. Dionysus becomes a μίμημα of Zeus in all but name. He overcomes his earthborn enemies with his torch, a symbol of light, and an earthly image of Zeus' thunderbolt. Through the language of mimesis and participation, Dionysus' torch has its identity and quality by virtue of Zeus' thunderbolt. In vanquishing the Giants, Dionysus emulates his father's victory over the Typhon at the poem's opening. The conflict between Zeus and Typhon happens on a cosmic scale, with landmasses and constellations displaced by the son of Earth, whose massive bulk inhabits the sea, the earth, and the sky. Dionysus' victory over the Giants is an entirely terrestrial affair by comparison, with no real sense of cosmic upheaval. In a sense, these two complementary episodes, which close out the *Dionysiaca*'s ring composition, mirror the metaphysical status of their protagonists. Zeus, the demiurge and Intellective Intellect (νοερός νοῦς) at the level of the Hypercosmic gods, battles against materiality on the cosmic stage. Dionysus, the Encosmic or Material Intellect, mirrors the activity of the demiurge at the encosmic level.

The poem's climax, in conjunction with the epigram *AP* 9.198, also represents the final assimilation between poet and subject: both Dionysus and Nonnus triumph over the Giants. Whether the epigram was from the pen of Nonnus, or a student's epitaphic

homage, the result is the same. Either Nonnus cemented the elision between himself and his Dionysus himself, or, perhaps more likely, comparisons between poet and protagonist were readily identifiable to Nonnus' readers.

The culmination of Nonnus' and Dionysus' journeys are ultimately rooted in a form of mimesis that goes far beyond what past critics have characterised as slavish imitation.⁶⁰² Within the *Dionysiaca*, the impulse to slavishly imitate is characterised as poorly meditated, and generally leads to the self-destruction of the imitator. Zagreus, while still an infant, climbs on the throne of Zeus and wields his thunderbolts, and unwittingly provokes the ire of Hera and the ferocity of the Titans. Phaethon, who rides in the chariot of the sun, brings about his own destruction through his attempts to prove his divine parentage. Dionysus' legitimacy as a son of Zeus is questioned continually by his enemies: Hera, Lycurgus, Deriades, and Pentheus. Repudiating concerns about his heritage in a safe manner requires a different form of mimesis, one where he participates in the qualities and imagery of Zeus without resorting to slavish imitation. He must also forge his own path, exemplified by the Indian campaign, the spread of his cult, and his gift of wine.

The comparisons with Nonnus are striking. He is a son, following in the footsteps of his poetic father, navigating a path between innovation and imitation. He imitates Homer in terms of diction and topoi, but carves out his own space in the epic genre. He transposes existing allegories into new frameworks and contexts, striving to be a theologian like Homer, but one firmly rooted in a Late Antique milieu. As the literary synchronism in Book 25 demonstrates, Nonnus is inextricably bound up with Dionysus. Dionysus needs to vindicate himself by proving his worth and divine ancestry, but Nonnus needs to help him get there, vindicating his own choice of protagonist and epic subject matter in the process. Each advances the aims of the other. Nonnus could not achieve the fame and theologian status without the god. The god could not reach Mount Olympus without Nonnus' poetry.

⁶⁰² E.g., Willis 1941: 397 on Nonnus' imitation of the funeral games for Patroclus in *Iliad* 23, a view that was echoed also by Chrétien 1984: 74 and Vian 1991. Even Agosti 2016: 660 concedes the episode is a 'slavish rewriting,' although he allows for a more positive appraisal of Nonnus' embedded reflections of real life in Late Antiquity. Previous accusations that Nonnus engages in slavish imitation in his reworking of Euripides' *Bacchae* have also recently been challenged. See Simon 2004: 130-2.

When Dionysus does reach Mount Olympus, intentionally or not, he fulfils the Platonic, and particularly Plotinian ambition of becoming god. Furthermore, he also becomes a Hellenic analogue of Gregory of Nyssa's definition of Christianity, becoming an imitation of the divine nature. His enthronement beside Apollo also signifies the symbolic culmination of his journey. It is, I believe, no accident that Dionysus' journey appears analogous to that of Odysseus. The materiality of the sea from the *Odyssey* is developed into a fully-fledged theme of the *Dionysiaca*'s world, where materiality is pervasive, and material forms are subject to change, and mimesis and sense-perception continually pose questions of ontology and epistemology. Obstacles to Odysseus' homecoming, which were read as agents or symbols of materiality by Neopythagorean and Platonic commentators, are exchanged for earthborn theomachoi and river-gods, beings collectively associated with matter, and privation of form and being. Like Odysseus, Dionysus must navigate his way through the passions of the material world, and arrive at his 'home' in heaven. Sitting beside Apollo accords him a place of honour beside Hellenism's most famous 'Son of God,' and a fellow recipient of henotheistic worship in Late Antiquity. At the same time, it may be read as a symbolic nod to Middle Platonic allegories, where Apollo was a symbol of unity.

In a sense, these connotations could have been formed, at least preliminarily, in the audience's minds at the first point of reception: the title. For Damascius, who likely postdates Nonnus by a few decades, the term Διονυσιακά designates the sphere of Dionysus, and pertains to the dual nature of the god himself, both divisible and indivisible (Dam. *In Phd.* 4.5-12). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that scholars have grappled with the *Dionysiaca*'s structure, seeing disparateness in its overabundance of material and epyllia-inspired episodes, or seeking unifying structures so that the whole might appear at the very least the sum of its parts. On both sides, there have been distinguished scholars who have left enduring contributions to Nonnian scholarship: Keydell and D'Ippolito advocating for a disparate lack of structure;⁶⁰³ Stegemann and Lasky for unity.⁶⁰⁴ Robert Shorrock charted a more nuanced approach between these two extremes, viewing the *Dionysiaca* as neither clearly structured nor clearly

⁶⁰³ Keydell 1936: 910.14-28; D'Ippolito 1964.

⁶⁰⁴ Stegemann 1930; Lasky 1978: 360.

unstructured, but instead a product of different narrative strands, and a series of overlapping and intersecting matrices.⁶⁰⁵ As Shorrock argues, the *Dionysiaca*'s enjoyed contemporary success, despite the prevalence of small scale epyllia, encomia, and patria during his time, which suggests that Nonnus must have found some way to reconcile his jewelled episodic style with the epic desire to tell a grand, unifying narrative.⁶⁰⁶ It is entirely possible, then, that readers with a basis in Neoplatonism would have seen in the *Dionysiaca* and its title the perfect fusion of form and content, and that modern debates over unity and division actually cut to the heart of a tension that, for Nonnus and his audience, was intrinsic to Διονυσιακά.

Moving from the possible unity of the *Dionysiaca* to the unity of this dissertation, I believe it is clear that mimesis, as a philosophical and poetic concept, is central to Nonnus' poetic undertaking in the *Dionysiaca*, and that it deserves almost as much attention as *poikilia*. In fact, I argue that the two concepts are inextricably entwined, that Nonnus conceives of diversity in form and content within a mimetic framework, that like Proteus and Dionysus he is capable of transforming and imitating pre-existing models with perfect verisimilitude; the *Dionysiaca*, like the allegorised Proteus of Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic thought, contains all the forms of poetry and high art within its whole.

This study has shown that the philosophical context behind the *Dionysiaca* was not just important, but formative for Nonnus in how he conceived of his poem's form and content. It is an aspect of Nonnus' poetry that remains underexplored. Domenico Accorinti's excellent *Brill's Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis* includes thirty-two essays from distinguished scholars of Nonnus and Late Antiquity does not feature a single dedicated chapter on Nonnus and philosophy – a regrettable omission given the rich and complex interplay of different philosophical traditions in Nonnus' time, and the contributions of Neoplatonism in particular to the Late Antique aesthetic landscape. This study, too, has only scratched the surface of this monumental poem's engagement with philosophy. The impact of Neoplatonic material has been my primary focus, and many of my initial hypotheses have either born fruit, or opened up other, fruitful

⁶⁰⁵ Shorrock 2001: 3-4, and chapter 1 especially.

⁶⁰⁶ Shorrock 2001: 20.

avenues of research. The chapters of this dissertation have explored diverse themes, but collectively they establish a set of clear conclusions: that Nonnus read Neoplatonic works; that he referenced them directly; that they were fundamental to numerous themes, motifs, and episodes; and finally, that he understood Neoplatonic writings to a high enough degree that he could begin to transpose and rework their content into new and surprising contexts. Hernández de la Fuente recommended future study of Nonnus and Neoplatonism in his 2014 contribution to the proceedings from the first ‘Nonnus of Panopolis in Context’ conference; he suggested that the poem could be understood as a practical application of Neoplatonic metaphysics, aesthetics, and poetics. I believe my conclusions go beyond this, especially with regard to Nonnus’ use of Neoplatonic allegory. Nonnus’ knowledge of Neoplatonic allegory is demonstrable, and not confined to Homeric literary criticism. Nonnus’ knowledge of Neoplatonism is not just a lens for understanding Homer, but a fundamental aspect of his poetic aspirations.

There were avenues of research which unfortunately fell outside the scope of this thesis, particularly Nonnus’ use of language and vocabulary from Late Antique oracular collections, especially the *Chaldean Oracles*. Oracles were considered an important part of philosophical thought and practice, as can be seen from Neoplatonic works like Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis*, especially Book 3. Given Nonnus’ use of Neoplatonic material elsewhere, it is likely that his audience would have read these oracular episodes against this intellectual backdrop. This offers a potential avenue for future research. It is also impossible for a dissertation project to analyse the *Dionysiaca* in its totality. I hope, however, that my case studies and findings will serve as proof of concept, and that literary approaches and methodologies applied here, particularly in relation to allegoresis, can be applied to other episodes, scenes, or themes by future scholars.

Nonnus was certainly popular enough to inspire his own imitators, at least in terms of his hexameters. It is entirely possible that he inspired them in other ways, and that the Neoplatonic material and sensibility in his poetry went on to influence others, in which case, findings from this project have potential implications for the wider corpus of Late Antique literature. Nonnus also likely had his own models who fused poetry and philosophy, although undoubtedly the first and foremost of these was, at least in Late Antique imagination, always Homer.

Conclusions from this study will likely also be of interest to scholars of Neoplatonism and of Late Antique culture. Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* is a case study for the popular reception of Neoplatonic philosophy in the eastern Mediterranean. Not only does the *Dionysiaca* demonstrate the degree of Neoplatonic learning available, in whatever form, to the educated Christian elite in 5th-century Panopolis and Alexandria, it also presupposes the existence of readers with the same cultural background who could interpret and appreciate its philosophical themes and motifs.

In the end, Late Antiquity's *poikilos* poet, like Proteus and Zagreus, continues to resist any attempt to fully tie him down. But, crucially, Nonnus has proven himself a theologian in his own right, through his varied dialogue with Neoplatonic writings, and his own symbolic frameworks. And, like Proteus, if we can but pin him down for long enough, who knows what sort of wisdom he might reveal about himself, his poetry, and his world?

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