

## Dionysus: A Successor to Zeus?

The idea of successions within the gods is one of the most crucial aspects of Greek creation stories, exploring the power structure between divinities and how the universe came to have an orderly hierarchy. In the most famous example found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the cosmos are first ruled by the primordial gods Ouranos and Gaea, followed by Kronos and the Titans, and finally find a permanent ruler in Zeus and the Olympian gods. After suppressing challenges from Typhon and the unborn son of Metis, Zeus ensues his rule will never end. However, a close examination of the fragments of the Orphic Rhapsodies reveal an extended theogony where Zeus appoints Dionysus as his successor (Meisner 2018). These fragments preserve a fascinating thread of myth which has Zeus designate Dionysus as his heir (*OF* 208) and later fulfill his divine deeds through him (*OF* 218). While it may seem odd for this tradition to select Dionysus out of all of Zeus' children to be his successor, this paper examines the themes of Hesiod's *Theogony* and Dionysus' character in Euripides' *Bacchae* to better understand how his role in the larger body Greek myth may fit into the succession scheme.

Although Dionysus plays a much smaller role in the *Theogony* compared to the *Bacchae*, this paper analyzes the larger themes of Hesiod's succession myth to see how Dionysus may conceivably fit into such a story. Much of the *Theogony* centers on a father imprisoning his children, with Ouranos trapping his children within the earth (Hes. Th. 156—159) and Kronos later swallowing his children at birth (Hes. Th. 459—462). Likewise, Euripides' *Bacchae* provides an early narrative for the birth of Dionysus that seems to invert several themes within Hesiod's story. Euripides says that after Dionysus' premature birth Zeus sealed the fetus within his own thigh and later bore the child himself (Eur. Ba. 95—104). This creates an interesting

contrast between Zeus and his predecessors: whereas Ouranos and Kronos confine their children in an attempt to deprive them of life, Zeus takes on the mother's role and seals his son away as a protective measure. The Orphic Rhapsodies appear to evoke the same parallel: they have Zeus bear Dionysus from his thigh on Mt. Ida (*OF* 199), the birthplace of Zeus, and assert that the infant Dionysus was guarded by the Kouretes (*OF* 34), the same beings who protected the child Zeus (*Bacchae* 120—125). Thus, the Rhapsodies seem to draw upon better known tellings to present Dionysus as a direct counterpart to Zeus.

Another reason the Orphic Rhapsodies choose Dionysus as Zeus' successor may very well be his identity as a "new" type of god, following the themes of succession found in the *Theogony*. Hesiod has the early generations of gods replaced by a new group, with the primordial deities giving way to the Titans and the Titans yielding to the Olympian gods. Throughout the *Bacchae*, Euripides presents Dionysus as a new god who must prove his identity to challengers who do not believe his divinity. Curiously, Dionysus is the only one of the Olympians whose godhood is called into question by doubtful mortals throughout several myths. This, along with his birth from a mortal mother, sets him apart from his fellow Olympians as a different sort of god. It is possible that the Orphic Rhapsodies drew upon this idea to establish the child Dionysus as next in line in godly succession; however, his part mortal heritage may be seen as a limitation and perhaps a suitable reason for why he never fully takes on Zeus' throne but instead compliments his father's reign.

By synthesizing the content of Orphic Rhapsodies with better known sources discussing succession myths and Dionysus' identity, this paper analyzes why the Orphic tradition might insert Dionysus into the succession myth as an heir to Zeus and how this result compares to the versions in Hesiod and Euripides. This study, therefore, will provide further insight not only on

the narrative found in the Orphic Rhapsodies, but also on Dionysus' role among the Olympians in wider Greek mythology and how his union with the gods and Zeus establishes stability within the pantheon.

## Works Cited

Meisner, Dwayne A. *Orphic Traditions and the Birth of the Gods*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.