

The Platonic Defense of Homeric Allegoresis in Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in
the Department of Classics at Haverford College

May 2019

Abstract

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Haverford College, 2019

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With the emergence of new ethical critiques driven by dialectic and rational discourse in Greece, the beloved Homeric poems began to fall under heavy criticism, most notably by Plato, who has Socrates launch a more comprehensive attack on Homer than previous thinkers, banishing Homer from his ideal state in *Republic X* for conjuring falsehoods and misleading the masses. This paper will examine the ways in which the earlier Neoplatonist, Porphyry of Tyre, makes an implicit defense of Homeric myth in his allegorical reading of Homer, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, against the criticisms that Plato raises in his *Republic*, while still attempting to construct his arguments within a Platonic metaphysical system. Porphyry refutes this criticism that certain myths – including those of Homer – should be dismissed due to their mimetic nature, by demonstrating that the obscurities in Homer's cave are symbolic, rather than imitative; he also contends that many of Plato's insights have already been articulated by Homer and other ancient traditions. While Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* has been noted mainly for its usage of ancient symbol and for its place in the history of Homeric allegoresis, this paper addresses the relevance of this treatise to the centuries-long conversation that has struggled to assess the moral and intellectual standing of Homer in light of the criticisms made by Plato.

The Platonic Defense of Homeric Allegoresis in Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs*

“From the very first age of life, the foolishness of infants just beginning to learn is nurtured on the teaching given in his school. One might almost say that his poems are our baby clothes, and we nourish our minds by draughts of his milk. He stands at our side as we each grow up and shares our youth as we gradually come to manhood; when we are mature, his presence within us is at its prime; and even in old age, we never weary of him. When we stop, we thirst to begin him again. In a word, the only end of Homer for human beings is the end of life” (Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems* 1.5-7).¹

Introduction

No works of literature have done more to establish Hellenic identity and values and spur inquiries into the divine than Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which for generations were foundational in Greek culture, religion, and education. With the emergence of new ethical critiques driven by dialectic and rational discourse, however, the epic poems began to fall under heavy criticism, most notably by Plato, who has Socrates launch a more comprehensive attack on Homer than previous thinkers, banishing Homer from his ideal state in *Republic X* for conjuring falsehoods and misleading the masses. The practice of allegoresis both before Plato and over the centuries that followed allowed readers to step beyond the limits of their texts into hidden realms of meaning in the Homeric epics. Lambertson claims that no one after Plato until the Neoplatonist Proclus mounts a complete defense against his criticisms while remaining true to Plato's metaphysical system.² I argue that the earlier Neoplatonist, Porphyry of Tyre, does wrestle *implicitly* with the criticisms of Homer in his allegorical reading of Homer, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*. The central assumptions and concepts that form the foundation of Porphyry's argument anticipate what is later explicitly and systematically articulated by Proclus. In this paper, I show

¹ This translation is taken from Russell and Konstan 2005. “Εὐθὺς γὰρ ἐκ πρώτης ἡλικίας τὰ νήπια τῶν ἀρτιμαθῶν παιδῶν διδασκαλία παρ' ἐκείνῳ τιθεῖται, καὶ μονοουκ ἐνεσπαργανωμένοι τοῖς ἔπεσιν αὐτοῦ καθαπερὶ ποτίμῳ γάλακτι τὰς ψυχὰς ἐπάρδομεν· ἀρχομένῳ δ' ἐκάστῳ συμπαρέστηκε καὶ κατ' ὀλίγον ἀπανδρουμένῳ, τελείῳ δ' ἐνακμάζει, καὶ κόρος οὐδὲ εἰς ἄχρι γήρωσ, ἀλλὰ παυσάμενοι διψῶμεν αὐτοῦ πάλιν· καὶ σχεδὸν ἐν πέρας Ὀμήρῳ παρ' ἀνθρώποις, ὃ καὶ τοῦ βίου” (Hera. *Hom. Prob.* 1.5-7).

² Lambertson 1986, 19. Lambertson's work *Homer the Theologian* expands upon the history and developments of Homeric allegoresis as done by different schools of thought, especially the Neoplatonists.

how Porphyry in his treatise makes an implicit defense of Homeric myth against the criticisms that Plato makes in his *Republic*, while still attempting to construct his arguments within a Platonic system. Porphyry refutes Plato's criticism that certain myths – including those of Homer – should be dismissed due to their mimetic nature, by demonstrating that the obscurities in Homer's cave are symbolic, rather than imitative. He also contends that many of Plato's insights have already been articulated by Homer and other ancient traditions.

In his *Birth of the Symbol*, Peter Struck identifies a type of reading – allegoresis – prevalent during antiquity, which is predicated on the assumption that writers of certain literary works, especially Homer and Hesiod, have concealed transcendent truths in riddles and symbols waiting to be liberated by a skillful reader.³ An understanding of the developments from which Neoplatonic allegoresis has sprung provides intellectual context for Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and the foundation of this project. Robert Lamberton's *Homer the Theologian* identifies allegoresis as an art form that was practiced throughout antiquity. He brings to the readers' attention that there is a centuries-long history of scholars and thinkers who revere Homer not only as a poet but more importantly as a prophet, diviner, or rather a theologian (θεολόγος).⁴ Because they deem him a theologian, the Homeric epics were for a long time perceived to contain hidden and secondary meanings that hold divine insights that must be decoded by inquiring minds; the divine and artistic grandeur of Homer's poems appears to beg for deeper investigation into its subliminal meanings. Lamberton points to various philosophers and schools of thought, such as the Stoics and Pythagoreans, who have interpreted the Homeric epics with this key assumption in mind.

³ Struck 2004, 1–2. *Birth of Symbol* explores the religious and philosophical significance of *symbol* and *enigma* to ancient allegorists whose methods of literary criticism revolved around interpreting symbols constructed by poets and prophets.

⁴ Lamberton 1986, 22.

Struck expands upon and builds on the central concepts delineated in Lamberton's *Homer the Theologian*. The main premise of his work is that allegorical practices throughout antiquity revolve around the ancient conception of "symbol." He argues that the meaning and significance of "symbol" were inextricably tied to the philosophical/religious inclinations of those who practiced allegoresis. For example, Struck identifies a type of metaphysical scheme among certain schools of thought (particularly the Anaxagoreans, Stoics, and Neoplatonists) that set the preconditions for allegorical approaches to a text: universalist ontology.⁵ This paradigm emphasizes the unity of the cosmos and its interconnectedness and thus blurs distinctions between the cosmos' constituent parts. This metaphysical outlook permits a more expansive approach to literary interpretation and forms a basis for interpretive leaps from obvious meanings to what lies hidden because it views language and its parts as merely designations of imperceptible entities. Struck contrasts this ontological paradigm with the one Aristotle championed – that the cosmos is only composed of and can be understood only in terms of simple, discrete entities. The difference in these paradigms marked a diverging point where two modes of literary criticism evolved separately for the most part. One would be concerned with how effectively a text conveys its meaning by means of various rhetorical devices, the other with what hidden truths a given text intimates by means of riddles and symbols.

The approach that the Neoplatonists take to glean extraordinary meanings that depart far from the obvious can be much better understood in light of the fact that their understanding of the purpose of myth is deeply rooted in this ontological conception of reality and its layers.⁶ They also abide by a universalist ontology in which the One is the superordinate principle of all

⁵ Struck 2004, 37.

⁶ Struck, Peter. 2010. "Allegory and Ascent in Neoplatonism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, Copeland, Rita & Struck, Peter eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; I use the term "Neoplatonist" or "Neoplatonic" to refer to the Platonic tradition inaugurated by Plotinus in the third century CE, lasting until the sixth century CE.

existence and has emanated into hierarchical strata of reality. For the discussion here, this fundamental premise that all Neoplatonists shared suggests two important things. First, the fact that the One as a transcendent entity manifests itself in concrete reality means that any given entity in the material world has other hidden aspects to it. Second, the concept of emanation through a continuous flow indicates ontological links between entities.⁷ These two conclusions permit the Neoplatonists to approach text and language allegorically to glean meanings that often confirm their conceptions of the soul and the cosmos. Struck evokes Porphyry's *On the Cave the Nymphs*, an allegorical reading of a scene from Homer's *Odyssey* and the largest and most complete surviving text of Neoplatonic allegoresis, as evidence of the allegorical techniques that Neoplatonists have employed in their readings of literature; for Porphyry in the first line of his treatise gives away his beginning assumption that "Homer is hinting at when he describes the cave on Ithaca" (Ὁμήρω αἰνίττεται τὸ ἐν Ἰθάκῃ ἄντρον... διαγράφει, *De ant.* 1).⁸ Porphyry takes most details in Homer's Cave as "symbols" (σύμβολα, *De ant.* 6) and asserts that "the poet... is speaking allegorically" (ἀλληγορεῖν δέ τι... τὸν ποιητὴν, *De ant.* 4). Furthermore, the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus applies the concept of symbol to the usage of language in literary texts that he thought contained traces of the emanating One.⁹ He sees words and literary constructions as symbols that render the inexpressible transcendent as concrete.¹⁰ For him, certain works of myth and poetry are puzzles to be solved so as to reveal insights into the divine that are not apparent to inattentive readers that too easily dismiss such notions.

⁷ Struck 2010, 59.

⁸ Greek and translation from Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey*, ed. L. G. Westerink (Seminar Classics 609), Arethusa Monograph: 1 (Buffalo: Department of Classics, State University of New York, 1969), 2–34.

⁹ Struck 2004, 235.

¹⁰ Struck 2010, 59.

Luc Brisson's *How Philosophers Saved Myth* also expands upon a near thousand-year tradition of philosophers who have revered and propagated the notion of myths and rites as the expression of a metaphysical system in the form of enigmas and symbols, which established a precedent for Porphyry's reading of Homer's *Odyssey*.¹¹ The most notable of these philosophers is Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism and the teacher of Porphyry. Plotinus saw myth as a means of separating in time entities that exist simultaneously, which he believed that systematic exposition could not effectively accomplish.¹² For myths, "if they are really going to be myths, must separate in time the things of which they tell, and set apart from each other many realities which are together, but distinct in rank or powers" (Δεῖ δὲ τοὺς μύθους, εἴπερ τοῦτο ἔσονται, καὶ μερίζειν χρόνοις ἃ λέγουσι, καὶ διαιρεῖν ἀπ' ἀλλήλων πολλὰ τῶν ὄντων ὁμοῦ μὲν ὄντα, τάξει δὲ ἢ δυνάμεσι διεστῶτα, Plot. *Enn.* III.5.9.24-26).¹³ As Plotinus saw it, however, myth alone cannot be relied upon to confirm a metaphysical system but should rather demonstrate a concordance between itself and the systematic exposition (the philosophical system of Plato specifically) of one same reality, which is located outside of the time that itself rules over sensible reality.¹⁴ It comes as no surprise that the Neoplatonic School of Athens, established two centuries after his time, had two main tasks: to bring out and systematize the theology in Plato's work, and to prove that it agrees with all other theologies, particularly those of Pythagoras, the *Chaldean Oracles*, Orpheus, and Homer and Hesiod.¹⁵ At this juncture, the entire traditions of Platonic philosophy and allegorical literary criticism meet, because myth is transformed into a medium for obtaining

¹¹ Brisson 1996, 85–86. From before Plato to the Renaissance, Brisson expounds the reception of myth by various schools of thought in antiquity. He gives special attention to Plato and the Neoplatonists.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³ The translation is taken from Armstrong 1989 (Loeb Classical Library).

¹⁴ Brisson 1996, 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88. The School of Athens also considered Plato as a "theologian" and his texts as being sacred. It assumed that Plato's writings, though they were delivered in a different mode from that of others (e.g. Homer), pointed to the same truths that these other texts have already intimated.

rational insights and conclusions that Plato has expressed throughout his dialogues. As much as the Neoplatonists claimed to be the true heirs of Plato, they still find a need to defend Homer against Plato's attack.¹⁶

The criticisms that Plato mounts against Homer and the poets instigated two contrasting types of responses that have attempted to contest his criticisms during the following centuries. One dismisses Plato entirely while championing the practice of allegoresis to absolve Homer from traditional accusations for fabricating lies and setting models of improper behavior. In his *Homeric Problems*, the Stoic Heraclitus begins by conceding that if Homer “meant nothing allegorically, he was impious through and through, and sacrilegious fables loaded with blasphemous folly run riot through both epics” (πάντα γὰρ ἠσέβησεν, εἰ μηδὲν ἠλληγόρησεν. Ἱερόσυλοι δὲ μῦθοι καὶ θεομάχου γέμοντες ἀπονοίας δι’ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν σωματίων μεμήνασιν, *Hom. Prob.* 1.1–1.2), echoing the criticisms that Plato famously put in his *Republic*. But he proposes that there is “only one remedy for this impiety: to show that the myth is an allegory” (Ταύτης τοίνυν τῆς ἀσεβείας ἓν ἐστὶν ἀντιφάρμακον, εἰ ἐπιδείξωμεν ἠλληγορημένον τὸν μῦθον, *Hom. Prob.* 22.1); thereafter, Heraclitus pulls evidence from the Homeric epics and relates them to natural and universal truths. He scathingly remarks, “Away too with Plato, the flatterer, Homer's dishonest accuser, who banishes him from his private Republic as an honored exile” (Ἐρρίφθω δὲ Πλάτων ὁ κόλαξ καὶ Ὀμήρου συκοφάντης, ἔνδοξον ἀπὸ τῆς ἰδίας πολιτείας τὸν φυγάδα προπέμπων, *Hom. Prob.* 4.1).

The other type of response is made most notably by many of the Neoplatonists who affirm Plato and thus systematize his philosophy insofar as it accommodates Homer. The most elaborate and technical defense is made by Proclus who responds to Plato's criticism by

¹⁶ Lamberton 1986, 16–19, summarizes all the arguments that Plato makes against Homer and myth in his *Republic*.

organizing poetry into several categories, from the purely mimetic to those that are allegorical and representative of divine truths; he places most of Homer’s poetry into the category of poetry which he thought was divine and symbolic.¹⁷ The fourth-century Neoplatonist philosopher Sallustius also responds to general criticisms against myth by dividing myth into different categories, each with its own purpose. In *On Gods and the World*, he argues that the point of myth is purely representative, either of the gods or their activities; the invisible gods are concealed by myths to prevent “the contempt of the foolish, and compel the good to practice philosophy.”¹⁸ He sees interpretation of myth as an intellectual exercise that stimulated rational activity that would bring the inquiring mind closer to uncovering divine insight. Furthermore, in his *Commentary of Plato’s Gorgias*, sixth-century Neoplatonist Olympiodorus distinguishes “philosophic myths” from “poetic myths” which are supposed to contain outrageous details that appeal to the imagination of the masses. Unlike Plato, who in the voice of Socrates condemns them entirely, Olympiodorus sees an advantage in poetic myths in which their implausible elements compel listeners to move beyond “the surface meaning” and “seek a concealed truth” (ἄ μὴ ἔᾶ εἰς τὸ φαινόμενον ἴστασθαι ἀλλὰ ζητεῖν ποιεῖ κεκρυμμένην ἀλήθειαν, Olympiodorus *In Gorg.* 46.4).¹⁹ He later claims, however, that poetic myths also have a disadvantage in that it can deceive youthful ears that are not receptive of allegory; he sympathizes with Plato’s decision to exile Homer and advocates Plato’s creation of philosophic myths which are better than poetic myths that run the risk of misinterpretation in youthful minds.

¹⁷ Struck 2004, 241–243, gives a thorough presentation of Proclus’ theories of language and symbol in the seventh chapter *Moonstones and Men that Glow*. He also summarizes Proclus’ arguments against Plato’s criticism of Mimesis.

¹⁸ Sallustius, *On the Gods and the World*, III.4. In sections III–IV, Sallustius makes a specific address about myth as received by the Neoplatonists and pagans. The exact identity of Sallustius is unknown; his name is associated with two people who lived during the reign of Emperor Julian.

¹⁹ The translation is taken from Jackson et al.

It is important to realize that Porphyry is not explicitly defending Homer against Plato in the same way that Heraclitus the Allegorist blatantly refutes him. Nor does he establish an elaborate system that simultaneously affirms Plato and defends Homer. Porphyry sidesteps both extremes and proceeds not to critique Plato directly; however, in his allegorical reading of Homer, he incorporates Platonic allusions and ideas, not only to support his own interpretation of Homer, but to reinterpret the moves that Plato makes in his *Republic* in a way that ultimately frees Homer from his criticisms. Struck and Lambertson give attention to Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and note its usage of symbol and its place in the history of Homeric allegoresis, but both ignore the direct relevance of this treatise to the centuries-long conversation that has struggled to assess the moral and intellectual standing of Homer in light of the criticisms launched by Plato. In this project, I analyze Porphyry's assumptions and the techniques he employs against Plato in defense of Homeric allegoresis, while attempting to keep his argument true to Plato's metaphysical system. Porphyry refutes Plato's criticism that certain myths should be dismissed due to their mimetic nature, by demonstrating that the obscurities in Homer's cave are symbolic, rather than imitative. He also argues that many of Plato's insights are already present throughout Homer and have been articulated by other foreign or ancient traditions.

Refutation of Mimesis and Falsehood

In his *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, Proclus blames critics who only pay attention to the visible aspects of mythic fiction rather than "purifying their intelligence" (Proclus, *In Remp.* I 74, 16–30).²⁰ The sort of defense that Proclus mounts on behalf of myth certainly applies to the critics who have failed to look beyond the sensible elements of Homeric myths that tell of gods who behave like or worse than human beings. In his own defense of Homer, Porphyry takes a

²⁰ Translation of Proclus from Brisson 2004, 102.

prime example of a Homeric passage from the *Odyssey* that includes obviously absurd depictions that many would deem implausible. He explicitly identifies a key interpretative framework that would allow keen investigators to unpack what the apparent absurdities might imply and to arrive at hidden truths that would escape the notice of someone fixated on the visible aspects of Homer's poetry. Both from the beginning of his treatise and consistently throughout, Porphyry emphasizes that Homer's cave of the nymphs must be interpreted through an analytic framework intended to investigate meanings that underlie symbols. To accomplish the task of readmitting Homer into the circle of revered intellectuals from which Socrates expels him in the *Republic*, Porphyry attempts to counteract the criticisms Plato raises in the *Republic*, which are established on two grounds: the mimetic nature of myth and its harmful falsehoods.

This criticism of myth and the poets unfolds in two directions, one in *Republic X* and the other in *Republic II*. In *Republic X*, this criticism is directed against mimesis as a fundamental feature of art and literature. The dialogue assumes that the visible and sensible world is already an "image" for the intelligible (εἰκὼν τοῦ νοητοῦ, Plato *Tim.* 92c). But if mimetic representations are only imitations of that which in itself only imitates true being, then they must be "third from the truth" (τρίτος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας, Plato *Rep.* X 599d).²¹ After condemning Homer in *Republic II*, Plato's Socrates accuses Homer, once again, of being the founder of mimetic art and charges him with generating images that are further away from the truth, as seemly as they may appear. Whether what they represent is true and good or not, mimetic images are inherently inferior since they are ultimately copies that cannot replace reality. He points out that there is no evidence that Homer left behind fine deeds, bettered the lives of men, or started his own school; he was solely occupied with creating representations that would contain no useful content but appearances if

²¹ All translations of Plato are from *Plato Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

one were to strip them “of their musical colorings and take them by themselves” (γυμνωθέντα γε τῶν τῆς μουσικῆς χρωμάτων τὰ τῶν ποιητῶν, αὐτὰ ἐφ’ αὐτῶν λεγόμενα, *Rep. X* 601b).²² For this reason, “all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, imitate images of virtue...and have no grasp of the truth” (ἀπὸ Ὁμήρου ἀρξαμένους πάντας τοὺς ποιητικούς μιμητὰς εἰδώλων ἀρετῆς εἶναι...τῆς δὲ ἀληθείας οὐχ ἄπτεσθαι, *Rep. X* 600e).

Furthermore, in *Republic II*, Plato’s Socrates proceeds to assert that the stories of Homer are in themselves false since they mislead the uneducated youth farther away from the truth and inspire immoral behavior. Because he begins with the assumption that god is good and that he alone is responsible for all good things, he questions the “foolish mistake Homer makes about the gods” (Ὁμήρου...ταύτην τὴν ἀμαρτίαν περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς ἀνοήτως) and the account that Zeus is “the distributor of both good and bad” (ταμίας ἡμῖν Ζεὺς—ἀγαθῶν τε κακῶν τε τέτυκται, *Rep. II* 379c-e). In the same section, Socrates evokes Hesiod’s myth on the castration of Uranus and Cronus by their sons to exemplify the sort of falsehoods that are rife in ancient myths by Homer, Hesiod, and other poets. He famously criticizes “Hesiod telling us about how Uranus behaved, how Cronus punished him for it, and how he was in turn punished by his own son,” and goes on to say that “even if it were true, it should be passed over in silence, not told to foolish people young people” (Ἡσίοδος, ὃ τε αὖ Κρόνος ὡς ἐτιμωρήσατο αὐτόν. τὰ δὲ δὴ τοῦ Κρόνου ἔργα καὶ πάθη ὑπὸ τοῦ ὑέος, οὐδ’ ἂν εἰ ἦν ἀληθῆ ᾧμην δεῖν ῥαδίως οὕτω λέγεσθαι πρὸς ἄφρονάς τε καὶ νέους, ἀλλὰ μάλιστα μὲν σιγᾶσθαι, *Rep. II* 378a). Because such stories give a “bad image of what the gods and heroes are like, the way a painter does whose picture is not at all the things he’s trying to paint” (*Rep. II* 377d-e), Socrates expresses concern that they will inculcate a false impression of the gods, and especially provide the youth with models of immoral behavior – for

²² Lamberton 1986, 18–19 summarizes Socrates’ criticism of mimesis as an art form in *Republic X*.

instance, a son punishing his father – that would bring harm to society.²³ Making this argument, Socrates assumes that poets play a key role as educators who attempt to modify public behavior by presenting gods through mimetic models.²⁴ He believes that young men are educated in physical training for the body, whereas they are educated in music and poetry for the soul.²⁵ Because of the societal ramifications of the transmission of “false” myths, Socrates would not “admit stories into our city – whether allegorical or not” (οὐ παραδεκτέον εἰς τὴν πόλιν, οὔτ’ ἐν ὑπονοίαις πεπονημένας οὔτε ἄνευ ὑπονοιῶν, Plato *Republic II* 378d).

Porphry, on the other hand, approaches the stories of Homer from a different interpretative framework from that which Plato employs in the *Republic* to characterize them as mimetic devices; by doing so, he demonstrates that Homeric poetry does have inherent utility in philosophy. Porphry consistently reminds his readers throughout his treatise that his primary objective is to investigate the cave and “require to have the symbolism of the sacred objects in it explained” (τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ συμβολικῆς καθιδρύσεως δεόμενον τῆς παραστάσεως, *De ant.* 4). He makes a case that, by virtue of their obscure qualities, the depictions in Homer’s cave are not imitations; rather, the fact that Homer’s “description is full of obscurities like these, it cannot, [Cronius] says, be a random piece of fiction written to entertain us, nor is it an account of an actual place; the poet in this instance is speaking allegorically” (τοιούτων ἀσαφειῶν πλήρους ὄντος τοῦ διηγήματος πλάσμα μὲν ὡς ἔτυχεν εἰς ψυχαγωγίαν πεπονημένον μὴ εἶναι, ἀλλ’ οὐδ’ ἱστορίας τοπικῆς περιήγησιν ἔχειν, ἀλληγορεῖν δέ τι δι’ αὐτοῦ τὸν ποιητήν, *De ant.* 4). Porphry lists the obscurities in the form of rhetorical questions, including why the cave is simultaneously

²³ Plato, *Republic II* 378b-e.

²⁴ Brisson 2004, 6–7, in this chapter explores the function and significance of myth to Greek communities until the introduction of philosophical discourse championed by Xenophanes of Colophon and Plato. He argues that before the introduction of prose writing, which in turn led to the development of dialectical discourse that is featured in Plato’s dialogues, poetry and myth were the prominent media through which ethical values along with all sorts of knowledge could be transmitted through communities and generations

²⁵ Plato, *Republic II* 376e.

pleasant and misty (since darkness is not pleasant), why Homer uses mixing-bowls and amphoras when there is no mention of liquid in them but honey, and how goddesses weave sea-purple garments in a dark cave on stone looms (*De ant.* 3). These sorts of elements are far from being mere aesthetic copies; the intent of the poet lies beneath them and is expressed through symbols, which at first may appear as absurdities, but are referents to hidden and important meanings about the cosmos and the fate of souls. The distinction between mimesis and symbolism that Porphyry makes is much later articulated by Proclus: the prime characteristic of the symbol, as opposed to that of mere images, is that it seems quite “unlike” what it represents; therefore, these symbols are “hinting secretly” at what they ultimately represent.²⁶

Thus, Porphyry upholds poets like Homer who have been able to construct their myths in this fashion not as imitators in the sense that Plato portrays them, but as diviners of truth or *theologians*. According to Lambertson, “theologian” (ὁ θεολόγος) in its earliest occurrences refer to Orpheus.²⁷ Although over the centuries the terms *theologian* and *theology* have been used to refer to philosophical inquiries into the divine, the distinction between “theologizing” as composing poetry that presents divine matters and “theologizing” as interpreting poetry to bring out its layered meanings has not been clear.²⁸ In *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry uses the term *theologian* mostly to refer to poets who have employed various symbols to encode their hidden thoughts, not those who interpret them. For instance, before introducing the myth of the castration of Uranus, Porphyry presents Orpheus as another poet, thus a “theologian [who] is hinting” (τοῦ θεολόγου...αἰνισσομένου, *De ant.* 16). Classifying Homer as one of the theologians, Porphyry believes that “it would not have been possible for Homer to fashion the

²⁶ Coulter 1976, 42–43.

²⁷ Lambertson 1986, 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

whole subject plausibly, if he had not modeled his creation on certain truths” (οὐ γὰρ ἐνῆν ἐπιτυχῶς πλάσσειν ὄλην ὑπόθεσιν μὴ ἀπό τινων ἀληθῶν μεταποιῶντα τὸ πλάσμα, *De ant.* 36).

To Porphyry, what makes something plausible is that it conveys and teaches fundamental philosophical truths; therefore, if Homer intended to compose an allegory with underlying meanings that align with these truths – which is Porphyry’s chief goal to demonstrate in this treatise – he must have had a “grasp of the truth.” Plato is aware of Homer’s widespread renown for “theologizing” and his contributions to the canonization of the Olympian Gods; as far back as Herodotus, it was believed that “Homer and Hesiod...provided the Greek with an account of the origins of the gods and gave the gods their names and defined their honors and skills and indicated shapes for them” (Herod. *Hist.* 2.53–54).²⁹ Plato, however, understands Homer as a theologian insofar as he creates images of the Olympian gods, not as someone with the intention to intimate higher metaphysical truths.

Porphyry, therefore, urges readers of Homer to inquire into the *intent* of the poet rather than the visible components of his poetry, in order to avoid the risk of misinterpreting Homer for contriving falsehoods or for using his poetic fancy for merely aesthetic purposes. Anticipating immediate criticisms of the cave for its implausibility, Porphyry begins his treatise with the following statement: “One wonders what Homer is hinting at when he describes the cave of Ithaca” (“Ὅτι ποτὲ Ὅμηρῳ αἰνίττεται τὸ ἐν Ἰθάκῃ ἄντρον, ὃ...διαγράφει, *De ant.* 1). Porphyry’s selection of the word “αἰνίττεται” reveals his first and foremost assumption that a hidden intent lies behind Homer’s depiction of his cave. According to Struck, “αἰνίττεται” refers to the act of making “riddles” (αἰνιγμαα) that are intended to be decoded by readers.³⁰ The assumption that a

²⁹ Translation of Herodotus from Lambertson 1986, 23.

³⁰ Struck 2004, 23, mentions Porphyry’s *On the Cave of the Nymphs* as an important example of ancient allegorical reading in contrast to Aristotelian approaches to poetic interpretation which calls most for clarity and rhetorical utility.

certain literary text is to be read as an intentional form of communication signals readers to pay closer attention to its symbols that are consciously employed by the author.³¹ Porphyry acknowledges that the descriptions of Homer's cave are far-fetched, but obviously so. On the other hand, as Porphyry also argues, Homer would not have constructed his cave if he had hoped to convince his audience by means of haphazard fiction. For this reason, the fact that Homer included these outstandingly odd details suggests that the poet had every intention to "compel the reader to inquire which gate is for men, which gate is for gods, and what the sense is of a cave with two entrances" (πολυπραγμονεῖν ἀναγκάζοντα τίς μὲν ἀνθρώπων πύλη, τίς δὲ θεῶν, καὶ τί βούλεται τὸ ἄντρον τοῦτο τὸ δίθυρον, *De ant.* 3); for Homer did not make the cave "by poetic license" (κατὰ ποιητικὴν ἐξουσίαν, *De ant.* 2). If readers are too occupied with the visible components, they will make the sort of critiques that Plato raises on account of their falsehoods.

In addition to advocating a new approach to Homeric interpretation, Porphyry evokes Homer's cave both as a real-life phenomenon in another attempt to preclude criticisms of either its falseness or its uselessness. He later makes a brief aside that the cave does in fact exist on the shores of Ithaca. As he begins his discussion of the cave, he writes, "Those people who have written about the place and who have considered the cave and its description as pure fiction on the poet's part seem to have given careless accounts" (Περὶ μὲν οὖν τῆς ἐγχωρίου ἱστορίας ῥαθυμότερον φαίνονται ἀναγράψαντες ὅσοι τέλεον ᾤθησαν πλάσμα εἶναι τοῦ ποιητοῦ τότε ἄντρον καὶ ὅσα περὶ τούτου ἀφηγήσατο, *De ant.* 4). Here, he is targeting critics such as Cronius who says that "the poet's description is not based on factual information, and this is clear, Cronius assures us, because no such cave is mentioned in the written accounts of the island" ("Ὅτι μὲν οὐ καθ' ἱστορίαν παρεληφῶς μνήμην τῶν παραδοθέντων πεποιήται, δηλοῦσιν οἱ τὰς

³¹ Coulter 1976, 45.

περιηγήσεις τῆς νήσου γράψαντες, οὐδενὸς τοιούτου κατὰ τὴν νῆσον ἄντρον μνησθέντες, ὡς φησὶ Κρόνιος, *De ant.* 2). Porphyry raises evidence of the actual existence of the cave, citing the geographical account of Artemidorus the Ephesian who charted on the shore of Ithaca and in the harbor of Phorcys “a cave sacred to the nymphs” (ἐκεῖ νυμφῶν ἱερὸν ἄντρον, *De ant.* 4). While Porphyry argues that the cave on Ithaca is real, he also argues that its symbolic meaning is more significant than the inherent flaws in its mimetic nature; for he is more concerned with “what the intention was, either of those who consecrated it or of the poet who elaborated on it” (τὴν βούλησιν ἢ τῶν καθιδρυσαμένων ἢ τοῦ προσθέντος ποιητοῦ ἀνιχνεύοντι, *De ant.* 4).

Understanding what the intentions are, as Porphyry believes, will deliver readers to deeper truths of the divine. He suggests that viewing certain objects as symbols is the only way to unpack divine wisdom which has been transmitted through generations in this form; for “the ancients did not consecrate sanctuaries without mystical signification, and Homer does not describe them haphazardly” (ὡς ἂν μήτε τῶν παλαιῶν ἄνευ συμβόλων μυστικῶν τὰ ἱερά καθιδρυσαμένων μήτε Ὅμηρου ὡς ἔτυχε τὰ περὶ τούτων ἀφηγουμένου, *De ant.* 4).

Although the myth of the castration of Uranus and Cronus is not Homeric, Porphyry’s attempt to allegorize this myth within an allegorical treatise on Homer reveals that he is responding less to Homer than he is to Plato, who prominently uses this myth to bring up criticisms of the falsehoods in poetic myths. As scandalous as the details of this myth may appear, Porphyry goes at length to prove that this myth is not false, but revelatory of how the cosmos is structured; there is more to those stories interpreted in *Republic II*. Porphyry begins by quoting Orpheus: “As soon as you see him beneath the high-leaved oaks, drunken with the labors of loud-buzzing bees, bind him” (εὖτ’ ἂν δὴ μιν ἴδῃαι ὑπὸ δρυσὶν ὑψικόμοισιν ἔργοισιν μεθύοντα μελισσῶων ἐριβομβέων, δῆσον αὐτόν, *De ant.* 16). From here, Porphyry refers to the

myth of castration and then mentions that Orpheus, like Homer, “is hinting” (αἰνισσομένου, *De ant.* 16) at unapparent messages. For,

“the theologian is hinting here that the divine principles are ensnared by pleasure and led to genesis, and dissolving into pleasure they shed their powers like semen...Now, Powers in fact descend both from heaven and from the planets. But Cronus receives those from Ouranos and Zeus receives those from Cronus.”

“τοῦ θεολόγου δι’ ἡδονῆς δεσμεῖσθαι καὶ κατάγεσθαι τὰ θεῖα εἰς γένεσιν αἰνισσομένου ἀποσπερματίζειν τε δυνάμεις εἰς τὴν ἡδονὴν ἐκλυθέντα...κατίασι δὲ δυνάμεις ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν πλανωμένων· ἀλλὰ τὰς μὲν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ δέχεται Κρόνος, τὰς δ’ ἀπὸ τοῦ Κρόνου Ζεὺς” (*De ant.* 16–17).

The interpretation of the ancient myth that Porphyry proposes here echoes the interpretation that his teacher, Plotinus, makes of the castration scene, now allegorized as the tripartite hypostatic system of reality in which Uranus refers to the One, Cronus to the Intellect, and Zeus to the Soul.³² Porphyry manages to distill from this myth alone a cosmological system which Plato’s Socrates fails to realize and appreciate. Furthermore, he concludes his discussion of this myth by relating his interpretation of it to the symbol of honey in Homer’s cave. By identifying this relationship, he illuminates the interconnectedness and consistency of deeper and metaphysical meanings that pervade different ancient myths. Tales such as the myth of Uranus’ castration and Homer’s cave are not mere poetic fabrications, but are important in passing down divine knowledge.

The cave is real, argues Porphyry, citing the geographical accounts of Artemidorus the Ephesian; thus, Homer’s cave could not have been constructed out of mere poetic fancy or the type of falsehoods that Plato charges the ancient poets with. But the question regarding the existence of the cave at Ithaca is subsidiary to Porphyry’s main point, which is concerned with the interpretation of mystical significations to discover the intent of the poet. For the ancients

³² Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1.7; Hadot 1981, 133, explains how the *Theogony* portrayed by Hesiod is able to serve as an illustration of Plotinus’ own cosmogony.

have consecrated caves as sanctuaries and symbols of the cosmos, and theologians including Homer and Orpheus in the “form of a fairy-tale [were] intimating images of higher things” (ἐν μυθαρίου πλάσματι εικόνας τῶν θειοτέρων ἠνίσσετο, *De ant.* 36). The prominence of the Homeric epics has remained untarnished throughout the Hellenic world since their creation; Porphyry assumes that Homer would not be as famous as he is if he had not modeled his stories on fundamental truths.

Porphyry’s Presentation of Plato in Homer

Porphyry’s project in this treatise is to demonstrate that Homer is a theologian full of divine insight. Accomplishing this task first entails addressing the criticisms most notoriously made by Plato; Porphyry, however, also indicates throughout his treatise that Plato too is a theologian who had knowledge of the divine. This assumption of Porphyry’s comes as no surprise, given that Plato is the foremost predecessor of the Neoplatonists. Throughout his argument, Porphyry consistently references Plato to justify his metaphysical interpretation of Homer’s cave and his claim of Homer’s intent. Symbol for Porphyry is not only a tool of refutation against Plato’s argument about mimesis, but also a doorway through which readers can find Platonic ideas in Homer. By responding to Plato’s criticisms against the ancient poets, including Homer, Porphyry attempts to reconcile the metaphysical system of Plato with Homer’s theology as found in the Cave of the Nymphs.

First, by classifying Plato as a theologian, Porphyry establishes a common ground between Homer and Plato, from which Porphyry can draw parallels between their metaphysical systems. Critiques of Homer in *Republic II* and *X* that were earlier discussed seem to undercut “Plato’s” move to create his own myths in the *Republic* and in his other dialogues. This discrepancy raises the perennial question of what Plato intended when he has Socrates (who just

criticized myth-making) create his own myths, not to mention when Plato writes about Socrates in a dialogue as a writer and *poet*. Addressing this question, Porphyry is careful not to explicitly attribute the critiques of mimesis to Plato himself; instead, he uses this opportunity to illuminate Plato as a theologian, like Homer, since Plato constructs myths that convey truths that Porphyry argues are compatible with Homer's insights. Plato is cited seven times in the treatise, and in every instance where he is mentioned, Porphyry refers to one of his myths from various dialogues including the *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and the *Timaeus*. In so doing, Porphyry characterizes Plato in this treatise, not as a scathing accuser of Homer, but as a myth maker privy to divine insights. In fact, Porphyry counts Plato among the ranks of “theologians [who] spoke of these, Capricorn and Cancer, as two gates” (δύο οὖν ταύτας ἔθεντο πύλας καρκίνον καὶ αἰγόκερων οἱ θεολόγοι, *De ant.* 22).

Porphyry attempts to draw as many parallels as he can between Homer's cave and Platonic myths, in order to accomplish two things. First, by likening Plato's myths to Homer's cave, Porphyry is essentially “allegorizing” Plato's myths, transforming images into symbols and a philosopher into an allegorist or *theologian*. For example, Porphyry mentions Plato for the first time when referring to his “Allegory of the Cave” which is described by Socrates as an image (εἰκόνα, *Rep.* VII 517b), but after making an allegorical interpretation of the cave – the details of the interpretation will be discussed later – Porphyry follows with the conclusion that the theologians have made caves a “symbol of the Cosmos and of the cosmic powers” (σύμβολον κόσμου...καὶ τῶν ἐγκοσμίων δυνάμεων, *De ant.* 9). He turns Plato's cave into a σύμβολον and includes Plato among the theologians because he believes that Plato understands the nature of the cosmos, for which reason Plato arranged his own “allegory” of a cave. By designating both Homer and Plato as theologians, Porphyry places them on the same intellectual plane; therefore,

if a philosopher like Plato has used allegorical expression for his philosophical agenda, a poet can just as well use allegory on the same terms as a philosopher, especially if they are both intimating the same principles.

Porphiry's second objective is to demonstrate that both Plato and Homer have arrived at the same metaphysical conclusions through their myths; by establishing a commonality in cosmological thought between Homer and Plato, Porphiry implies that Homer is adhering to a correct pattern that accurately describes the structure of the cosmos in same way that Plato does in his myth. The "theologizing" of the ancient poets is not subjective and arbitrary as Plato deems it to be.³³ If Plato criticizes Homer for using arbitrary fancies to convey the same truths that Plato presented in his Allegory of the Cave, Plato's construction of his allegory should fall under the same charge that Plato himself made. After the introduction to his treatise, Porphiry interprets and discusses at length the structure and constitution of Homer's cave and how it corresponds symbolically to the nature of the entire cosmos. At the end of that discussion, Porphiry proceeds to cite Plato's cave. In his *Republic*, as much as he criticizes ancient myth for being mimetic, Plato sees the utility of myth to teach and inspire the masses who are not as philosophically inclined as the "educated."³⁴ Plato therefore at several places in the dialogue formulates his own myths to convey philosophical truth to the masses, but nevertheless calls them images. One of such images, Plato's cave, depicts prisoners in a dimly lit cave who are ignorant of what lies outside the cave until one of the members is taken outside to witness the blinding power of the sun and the world outside (*Rep. VII* 514a–517c). Plato's cave is meant to

³³ Lamberton 1986, 25; Plato, *Protagoras* 347c–348a.

³⁴ Brisson 1998, 75–85, concludes in his search throughout the Platonic corpus that Plato finds myth as an effective "game," though illusory, that can effectively persuade its audience "in whom reason has not yet attained, or will never attain, the ultimate stage of its development."

represent the epistemological limitations of the human condition which in turn cannot grasp the “form of the good” (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα, *Rep. VII 517b*), except with great difficulty.

Porphry incorporates this Platonic theme into his interpretation of Homer’s cave. One of Porphry’s main points about the cave is that it symbolizes the sensible and intelligible cosmos because of its composition of earth and matter. Immediately before reiterating this point, Porphry introduces Plato’s cave:

“Plato too, in the seventh book of the *Republic*, says: ‘Imagine men, as it were, in a subterranean cave or cavern-like dwelling opening to the light and with a wide passage-way along its entire length’; and when the interlocutor remarks, ‘This is a strange image,’ he goes on to say, ‘Now, my good friend Glaucon, we must apply the image to all we have said before, likening the visible world to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire of the power of the sun.’”

“παρά τε Πλάτωνι ἐν τῷ ἑβδόμῳ τῆς Πολιτείας λέγεται ‘ἰδὲ γὰρ ἀνθρώπους οἷον ἐν κατωγείῳ ἄντρῳ καὶ οἰκῆσει σπηλαιώδει ἀναπεπταμένη πρὸς φῶς, τὴν εἴσοδον ἐχούση μακρὰν παρ’ ἅπαν τὸ σπήλαιον’. εἶτα εἰπόντος τοῦ προσδιαλεγομένου ‘ἄτοπον λέγεις εἰκόνα’, ἐπάγει ‘τὴν εἰκόνα, ὧ φίλε Γλαῦκων, προσαπτέον πᾶσι τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν λεγομένοις, τὴν μὲν δι’ ὄψεως φαινομένην ἔδραν τῆ τοῦ δεσμοτηρίου οἰκῆσει ἀφομοιοῦντα, τὸ δὲ τοῦ πυρὸς φῶς τῆ τοῦ ἡλίου δυνάμει’ (*De ant. 8*).

He follows with the conclusion that “these examples, then, show us that the theologians made caves... a symbol of the sensible Cosmos because they are dark and stony and moist” (“Ὅτι μὲν οὖν σύμβολον...τὰ ἄντρα...ἐτίθεντο οἱ θεολόγοι, διὰ τούτων δεδήλωται...αἰσθητοῦ κόσμου διὰ τὸ σκοτεινὰ εἶναι τὰ ἄντρα καὶ πετρώδη καὶ δίυγρα, *De ant. 9*), demonstrating that both Homer and Plato arrive at the same cosmological truth as conveyed by using the same image, or rather symbol, to represent the sensible cosmos.

Porphry applies the same two objectives when he mentions Plato again later in the context of the cave’s double entrance; this time, however, both Homer and Plato seem to share not only the same cosmological views, but also the same views on the destiny of the souls. In his discussion of the double entrance, Porphry first identifies a Homeric symbol: “With regard to

the cave on Ithaca, Homer, in describing it, was not content to merely say that it has two entrances, but that one of them faces north and the other south; the northern one he says, is a descent” (τὸ Ἰθακήσιον σπήλαιον οὐκ ἠρκέσθη δίθυρον εἰπὼν Ὅμηρος, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς μὲν τινας πρὸς βορρᾶν τετράφθαι θύρας, τὰς δὲ πρὸς νότον [θεωτέρας], καὶ καταβατάς γε τὰς βορείους, *De ant.* 20). After demonstrating that the double entrance symbolizes two extremities of the cosmos through which souls ascend or descend, Porphyry draws a parallel between this Homeric symbol and the one employed by Plato who also among the “theologians [that] spoke of these, Capricorn and Cancer, as two gates...called them orifices” (δύο οὖν ταύτας ἔθεντο πύλας καρκίνον καὶ αἰγόκερον οἱ θεολόγοι, Πλάτων δὲ δύο στόμια ἔφη, *De ant.* 22). The mention of Plato’s “orifices” is a direct reference to the myth of Er in which Plato speaks of “two adjacent openings in the earth, and opposite and above them two others in the heavens...souls departing after judgment through one of the opening in the heavens and one in the earth” (τῆς τε γῆς δύο εἶναι χάσματα ἐχομένω ἀλλήλοισιν καὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ αὖ ἐν τῷ ἄνω ἄλλα καταντικρῦ...καθ’ ἐκάτερον τὸ χάσμα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τε καὶ τῆς γῆς ἀπιούσας τὰς ψυχάς, ἐπειδὴ αὐταῖς δικασθεῖη, *Rep.* 614c–d).

The myth of Er is a story about a soldier named Er who recounts his observations of the afterlife to the people on earth. Er recalls that souls are reborn into a new body and a new life, and the new life they choose will reflect how they have lived in their previous life and the state of their soul at death. He vividly describes four openings for souls to enter and exit, two of which are in the ground and the other two in the sky.³⁵ The story explains that souls are immortal and that the way of living on earth affects the status of souls after death. Although Porphyry avoids attributing the criticisms of mimesis to Plato himself, he does the opposite with the myth of Er

³⁵ Plato, *Republic X* 614b–621d.

which was narrated by Socrates to Glaucon. He explicitly attributes the detail of the orifice from the myth to Plato in order to support his assertion that Homer and Plato are in agreement on the nature and fate of souls. Porphyry is also seen attempting to have Homeric and Platonic views of the soul agree with one another in his other work, *On What is in Our Power*, which was either a commentary or an interpretative essay on Plato's myth of Er in the *Republic*. Here, Porphyry argues that according to Plato himself, souls "prior to falling into bodies and different lives, have the power of self-determination for choosing this or that [first] life, which they are to live out with a certain life-form and a body appropriate to that life-form" (Porphyry, *On What*. 270F).³⁶ Later, citing passages from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, he points to Homer to demonstrate that even someone much older than Plato "acknowledges the dual [choice] of lives – the one being a kind of unchangeable life that the soul can either choose or not choose" (*On What*. 271F). By pointing to the fact that Homer and Plato used the same symbol to portray the movement of soul through two entrances, Porphyry draws two possible conclusions: either Plato borrowed this imagery and concept directly from the more ancient Homer to whom he would be indebted, or both Homer and Plato separately arrived at the same conclusion regarding the fate of souls and borrowed their depictions from other theologians. Either way, Porphyry is emphasizing that both Homer and Plato hold the same metaphysical conception of the soul; if Plato can embody this truth in his myth of Er, there is no reason for Homer to be criticized by Plato for creating his own myths that convey the same insight.

Throughout the rest of his treatise, Porphyry continues to work with other symbols to demonstrate that Plato is working from the same truths as Homer's, using the same set of images. In the middle of his discussion of the cave's double entrance, Porphyry evokes another Homeric

³⁶ This translation is taken from James Wilberding 2011.

symbol from the *Iliad*, in which “there are two jars, ‘Of such gifts as he bestows, one of evils, the other of blessings’” (καὶ δύο πίθοι παρ’ Ὀμήρῳ ‘δώρων, οἷα δίδωσι, κακῶν, ἕτερος δὲ ἐάων,’ *De ant.* 29).³⁷ Porphyry allegorizes the jars as souls, then adding that “for Plato, too in the *Gorgias*, the soul is a wine-jar, and of two kinds, an agent of good or bad, rational or irrational” (πίθου νενομισμένης καὶ παρὰ Πλάτωνι ἐν Γοργία τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ τῆς μὲν οὔσης εὐεργέτιδος, τῆς δὲ κακοεργέτιδος, καὶ τῆς μὲν λογικῆς, τῆς δ’ ἀλόγου, *De ant.* 30). When speaking of jars in his *Gorgias*, Plato makes a distinction between two types of living: one temperate, and the other licentious (Plato, *Gorgias* 493d–494a). Porphyry relates this Platonic distinction to his notion of genesis, in which one portal is “proper to the gods and to good men, while the other is proper to mortals and to baser natures” (καὶ τὰς μὲν θεοῖς τε καὶ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς προσηκούσας, τὰς δὲ τοῖς θνητοῖς καὶ φαυλοτέροις, *De ant.* 31). The subject of genesis occupies the remaining sections of Porphyry’s argument. Genesis refers to the process by which soul descend from the heavens or the mortal realm into corporeal generation. Porphyry mentions Hesiod who also spoke of jars to symbolize the “ignoble soul, scattered about matter, [which] strays widely from its proper arrangement” (ἡ φαύλη ψυχὴ σκιδναμένη περὶ ὕλην τάξεως διαμαρτάνει, *De ant.* 30). Porphyry presents the jars of both Homer and Hesiod to demonstrate that Plato’s bipartite division of the soul has already been conceptualized by the very poets whom he criticized, since souls have always been “thought of as jars because they were seen to be receptacles of activities and dispositions of a particular sort. Therefore, “in this connection, Plato too, working from the same assumptions, knows of mixing bowls, and has wine jars in place of amphoras, and, as we have observed, two orifices instead of the gates” (ἀφ’ ὧν καὶ Πλάτων ὀρμώμενος οἶδε καὶ αὐτὸς

³⁷ Homer, *Iliad* 24.527–528.

κρατήρας, καὶ ἀντὶ τῶν ἀμφιφορέων λαμβάνει πίθους, καὶ δύο στόμια, ὡς ἔφαμεν, τῶν δύο πυλῶν, *De ant.* 31).

In addition to gates and entrances, Porphyry points to the symbol of mixing bowls. In the *Timaeus*, Plato uses the symbol of mixing bowls to describe the process by which souls are implanted into bodies during the formation of men. Plato recounts that the young gods were tasked to “weave together the mortal with the immortal, and thereby fashion and generate living creatures, and give them food that they may grow, and when they waste away receive them to yourselves again” (ἀθανάτω θνητὸν προσυφαίνοντες, ἀπεργάζεσθε ζῶα καὶ γεννᾶτε τροφήν τε διδόντες αὐξάνετε καὶ φθίνοντα πάλιν δέχεσθε, Plato, *Timaeus* 41d). Porphyry connects this Platonic depiction with his interpretation that the mixing bowls and garments found in Homer’s cave symbolize different aspects of genesis. Because “water co-operates in the process of genesis...mixing-bowls bear a symbol of springs, just as the mixing-bowl is set beside Mithras in place of a spring” (συνεργεῖ γὰρ γενέσει τὸ ὕδωρ...τῶν μὲν κρατήρων σύμβολον τῶν πηγῶν φερόντων, καθὼς παρὰ τῷ Μίθρα ὁ κρατὴρ ἀντὶ τῆς πηγῆς τέτακται, *De ant.* 17), Mithras being the creator of all things, both the cosmos and souls. Porphyry finally continues to read into the intent of Homer behind this symbolism when citing a passage from Homer’s cave.

“Homer was bold enough to say that on [looms], ‘they weave sea-purple garments – a wonderful sight’...For woolen garments are sea-purple because of blood, since the wool is dyed in the blood of animals; and similarly, it is by means of blood and from blood that flesh is formed. And the body is the garment of the soul which it clothes.”

“διὸ καὶ ἀπετόλμησεν εἰπεῖν ὁ ποιητὴς ὅτι ἐν τούτοις ‘φάρε’ ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ιδέσθαι’...ἐξ αἵματος μὲν γὰρ ἀλουργῆ ἔρια καὶ ἐκ ζῶων ἐβάφη καὶ τὸ ἔριον, δι’ αἵματος δὲ καὶ ἐξ αἱμάτων ἢ σαρκογονία. καὶ χιτῶν γε τὸ σῶμα τῆ ψυχῆ ὃ ἡμφίεσται” (*De ant.* 14).

To describe the water-nymphs who were weaving souls into flesh, Porphyry cites one of the words that Homer uses, “ὄφαινουσιν,” for weaving, which echoes the description Plato made of the gods ἀθανάτω θνητὸν προσυφαίνοντες (Plato, *Timaeus* 41d).

Proceeding to the symbol of the sea, Porphyry interprets the entire Odyssean narrative as the journey of the soul to ascend from genesis as Odysseus seeks to find his homeland from the tumultuous sea. Here as throughout the text, Porphyry associates water with flesh formed from genesis. And here, for the last time in his treatise, he references Plato, who said that “the deep, the sea, and the sea-swell are...material substance” (πόντος δὲ καὶ θάλασσα καὶ κλύδων καὶ...ἡ ὕλικὴ σύστασις, *De ant.* 34–35). Because the sea and the water-nymphs embody the cycle of genesis, Porphyry supposes that Homer gave the harbor the name of Phorcys, “the sea god...whose daughter was Thoosa, the mother of the Cyclops whom Odysseus blinded, with the result that he was accompanied by a reminder of his errors all the way to his homeland” (ἐναλίου θεοῦ, οὗ δὴ καὶ θυγατέρα...τὴν Θόωσαν...ἀφ’ ἧς ὁ Κύκλωψ, ὃν ὀφθαλμοῦ Ὀδυσσεὺς ἀλάωσεν, ἵνα καὶ ἄχρι τῆς πατρίδος ὑπῆ τι τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων μνημόσυνον, *De ant.* 35).

Porphyry never suggests that Plato advocates the critiques that Socrates raises in the *Republic*. By alluding, however, to Plato on multiple occasions in order to mark parallels between Homer’s and Plato’s symbolism, Porphyry distances Plato from the impression of an accuser and presents him as a theologian compatible with the ideas and concepts symbolized by Homer’s poetry. He takes advantage of the fact that the critiques raised cannot be taken at face value from Plato himself. To Porphyry, both have used the symbol of the cave, two-way entrance, jars, mixing bowls, and the sea in a similar manner to make sense of the cosmos and the fate of souls. Porphyry, nonetheless, goes beyond marking parallels between the two and

spends the majority of his argument formulating a grander system of metaphysical thought that encompasses both Homeric and Platonic theology.

Universality of Homeric and Platonic Theology

Porphyry devotes almost a third of his defense to discussing the mystical significance of caves in foreign or ancient wisdom. Before, however, he begins his analysis of Homer's cave, he concludes his introduction by declaring that "the more one attempts to show that Homer's cave is not a piece of fiction of his own but was dedicated to the gods before his time, the more this place proves to be full of ancient wisdom" (ὅσῳ δ' ἂν τις μὴ Ὅμηρου πλάσμα ἐγχειρῇ τὰ κατὰ τὸ ἄντρον δεικνύναι, τῶν δὲ πρὸ Ὅμηρου θεοῖς τοῦτο καθιερωσάντων, τοσοῦτῳ τῆς παλαιᾶς σοφίας πλήρες τὸ ἀνάθημα εὔρεθήσεται, *De ant.* 4), suggesting that even people who had lived before Homer himself held wisdom that Homer is indebted to and that caves have always held symbolic significance. For this reason, Porphyry declares to his readers that the cave "will deserve to be investigated and require to have the symbolism of the sacred objects in it explained" (ἄξιον ἐρεύνης καὶ τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ συμβολικῆς καθιδρύσεως δεόμενον τῆς παραστάσεως, *De ant.* 4). He again reminds his readers that Homer's cave must be approached through the framework of symbol interpretation because primordial understanding of the cosmos is inseparable from the medium of symbols through which it is conveyed and transmitted.³⁸ This assumption allows Porphyry to place among the ranks of the revered ancients Homer because he too uses symbols and allegorical myth to represent divine truths that are centuries later articulated by Plato. In so doing, not only does Porphyry integrate Plato's metaphysical schemes into Homeric theology, but he takes one step forward to demonstrate that both Homeric and Platonic theologies are together subsumed under a common and primordial tradition of wisdom.

³⁸ Struck 2004, 37, argues that the development of literary symbol or the poetic "enigma" was crucial for the expression of universalist metaphysical thought, including that of the Neoplatonists.

Porphyry begins his discussion of the cave by referring to “the ancients” (οἱ παλαιοὶ) who have “consecrated caves and grottoes to the Cosmos taken as a whole and in its parts, making earth a symbol of matter of which the Cosmos consists” (Ἄντρα...καὶ σπήλαια τῷ κόσμῳ καθιέρουν καθ’ ὅλον τε αὐτὸν καὶ κατὰ μέρη λαμβάνοντες, σύμβολον μὲν τῆς ὕλης ἐξ ἧς ὁ κόσμος τὴν γῆν παραδιδόντες, *De ant.* 5). It is unclear to readers whom Porphyry had in mind when referring to the ancients, but he does suggest later that the ancients include people who have lived “in the most remote periods of antiquity [when] caves and grottoes were consecrated to gods before temples were even thought of” (Σπήλαια τοίνυν καὶ ἄντρα τῶν παλαιωτάτων πρὶν καὶ ναοὺς ἐπινοῆσαι θεοῖς ἀφοσιούντων, *De ant.* 20). His consistent references to the ancients and to their practice of consecration of caves reveals his assumption that other and older traditions were already aware of the wisdom conveyed in Homer’s myth and have ascribed a metaphysical status to caves in the same way he believes Homer and Plato have done. First, Porphyry states that one of the reasons the ancients used caves to represent the cosmos is that the matter of which the cosmos is composed “is in a state of flux and of itself lacks the form by which it can be shaped and recognized...Because of matter, then, the Cosmos is misty and dim” (ῥευστῆς δ’ οὐσίας αὐτῆς καὶ τοῦ εἶδους δι’ οὗ μορφοῦται καὶ φαίνεται καθ’ ἑαυτὴν ἐστερημένης...διὰ μὲν οὖν τὴν ὕλην ἠεροειδῆς καὶ σκοτεινὸς ὁ κόσμος, *De ant.* 6). Furthermore, because of “the power of form for connecting and ordering (which gives the Cosmos its name), it is beautiful and pleasing” (διὰ δὲ τὴν τοῦ εἶδους συμπλοκὴν καὶ διακόσμησιν, ἀφ’ οὗ καὶ κόσμος ἐκλήθη, καλὸς τέ ἐστι καὶ ἐπέραστος, *De ant.* 6). Thus, as Porphyry argues, it comes as no surprise that Homer would describe the cave at Ithaca as being “misty and pleasant” (ἐπήρατον ἠεροειδές, *De ant.* 1). Porphyry’s reverence for the ancients echoes the tendency of Greek philosophers, including Plato, before him to respect the wisdom of “older” men; for in his

Timaeus, Plato states that souls are devoid of ancient wisdom that have been “made hoary by time” (οὐδὲ μάθημα χρόνῳ πολλῶν οὐδέν, Plato *Tim.* 22b). Aristotle also observes that “what is most ancient is most revered” (τιμιώτατον μὲν γὰρ τὸ πρεσβύτατον, Arist. *Metaph.* A 983b).

Next, Porphyry further connects Homer and Plato to foreign religious thoughts and practices pertaining to caves, especially those of the Persians; the fact that Porphyry draws on non-Greek evidence to substantiate his allegorization of a Greek poet reveals his assumption that all cultures have access to the same source of primordial wisdom. After comparing the ancients’ conception of the cave to what is portrayed in Homer, Porphyry introduces Persians who “similarly...call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend and go back again” (οὕτω καὶ Πέρσαι τὴν εἰς κάτω κάθοδον τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ πάλιν ἔξοδον μυσταγωγοῦντες τελοῦσι τὸν μύστην, ἐπονομάσαντες σπήλαιον <τὸν> τόπον, *De ant.* 6). He also refers to Zoroaster who was “the first to dedicate a natural cave in honor of Mithras, the creator and father of all...This cave bore for him the image of the Cosmos which Mithras had created and the things which the cave contained” (πρώτου...Ζωροάστρου αὐτοφυῆς σπήλαιον...ἀνιερώσαντος εἰς τιμὴν τοῦ πάντων ποιητοῦ καὶ πατρὸς Μίθρου, εἰκόνα φέροντος αὐτῷ τοῦ σπηλαίου τοῦ κόσμου, ὃν ὁ Μίθρας ἐδημιούργησε, *De ant.* 6). By drawing parallels between the Homeric symbol of the cave and Mithraic practices, Porphyry intends not only to bring credibility to his interpretation, but to establish a totalizing understanding of the cosmos and soul that permeates every cultural expression of religion. Such primordial wisdom is what he believes Homer would have had closer access to by virtue of being one of the ancients – at least being more ancient than Plato – which is why his esoteric myths warrant deep philosophical investigation. Porphyry mentions that the Persians also “dedicated to the nymphs caves and grottoes because of the waters that flow either from above or below” (ταῖς

νύμφαις διὰ τὰ ἐν ἄντροις καταλειβόμενα ἢ ἀναδιδόμενα ὕδατα, *De ant.* 6); the fact that Homer used exactly the same details to describe his cave cannot be mere coincidence. Homer's construction of his cave cannot be "poetic license," a blatant falsehood that Plato in his *Republic* would have charged Homer with. He had to have borrowed his symbols and concepts directly from either the Persians or more ancient predecessors who shared the same primordial insight with the ancients who came from other traditions of wisdom. Porphyry's evocation of foreign thought and practices echoes what Plato has Socrates say in his *Phaedo* when stating that good or wise men like himself can be found among "the tribes of foreigners" (τὰ τῶν βαρβάρων γένη, *Phaedo* 78a).

Porphyry further demonstrates that the symbols in Homer are also found in other ancient myths and poets. He first mentions how "Cronus prepares a cave for himself in the ocean and there he hides his children" and "Demeter, in the same way, rears Persephone in a cave among nymphs" (ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ ἡ Δημήτηρ ἐν ἄντρῳ τρέφει τὴν Κόρην μετὰ νυμφῶν, *De. ant.* 7). Then he briefly notes that many similar examples can be found in the "writings of the theologians" (ἐπιῶν τὰ τῶν θεολόγων, *De ant.* 7), as a reminder that the creator of these myths are not just poets but wise men who were closely intimate with the divine truth. Even though the authorship of these myths and the time in which they were first conceived are unknown, Porphyry evokes them in the context of the ancients who made "the cave a symbol of the Cosmos i.e. of generated and sensible nature; they also used it as a symbol of all invisible powers, because caves are dark and the essence of these powers is indistinct" (κόσμου σύμβολον ἦτοι γενητοῦ αισθητοῦ τὸ ἄντρον...ἀλλ' ἤδη καὶ πασῶν τῶν ἀοράτων δυνάμεων τὸ ἄντρον ἐν συμβόλῳ παρελάμβανον διὰ τὸ σκοτεινὰ μὲν εἶναι τὰ ἄντρα, ἀφανὲς δὲ τὸ τῶν δυνάμεων οὐσιῶδες, *De ant.* 7); he assumes that these myths originated from the ancient poets or

theologians. Porphyry says that even “the hymn of Apollo shows that caves were also dedicated to nymphs, and especially to the naiads or water-nymphs who preside over springs” (ὅτι δὲ καὶ ταῖς νύμφαις ἀνετίθεσαν ἄντρα καὶ τούτων μάλιστα ταῖς ναΐσιν, αἱ ἐπὶ πηγῶν...δηλοῖ καὶ ὁ εἰς Ἀπόλλωνα ὕμνος, *De ant.* 8), who also happened to be described in Homer’s cave. He then concludes that philosophers including the Pythagoreans and Plato owe their renditions of caves to these ancient myths and traditions: “it was under these influences, I think, that the Pythagoreans and Plato after them, called the Cosmos a cave or grotto” (Ἄφ’ ὧν οἴμαι ὀρμώμενοι καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι καὶ μετὰ τούτους Πλάτων ἄντρον καὶ σπήλαιον τὸν κόσμον ἀπεφώνησαντο, *De ant.* 8). Both Homer’s and Plato’s caves not only are allegorical representations of the same cosmic truth, as discussed before, but have descended from older traditions of wisdom that had already consecrated caves.

I previously discussed the fact that Homer and Plato alike have integrated the symbol of double entrances into their myths; this symbol is employed in Homer’s cave and in Plato’s myth of Er. Porphyry, however, also relates this parallelism to the same symbols as found elsewhere in other sources of wisdom. He relies on astrological symbols to elucidate the intention of the poet behind his description of the two entrances in the cave. He associates the southernmost winter tropic with Capricorn and the northernmost summer tropic with Cancer, with Cancer closest to the earth and Capricorn to the highest heavens. Since the theologians, as Porphyry puts it, spoke of “Capricorn and Cancer as two gates” (δύο...πύλας καρκίνον καὶ αἰγόκερων, *De ant.* 22), Cancer being in the north and closest to earth is suited for the descent of souls into genesis while Capricorn being in the south is suited for ascent. From here, Porphyry directly relates this pattern to Homer’s entrances:

“The northern quarters of the heavens are for souls descending to genesis, and correspondingly the northern gates of the quarters of the heavens, however, are not for

gods but for souls ascending to the gods and for the same reason, Homer does not speak of a ‘way for gods,’ but for ‘immortals’ – a term applicable in common to souls as well, inasmuch as they are immortal either of themselves or in essence.”

“ἔστι δὲ τὰ μὲν βόρεια ψυχῶν εἰς γένεσιν κατιουσῶν, καὶ ὀρθῶς καὶ τοῦ ἄντρου αἰ πρὸς βορρᾶν πύλαι καταβαταὶ ἀνθρώποις· τὰ δὲ νότια οὐ θεῶν, ἀλλὰ τῶν εἰς θεοὺς ἀνιουσῶν, διὰ τὴν αὐτὴν δ’ αἰτίαν οὐ θεῶν ἔφη ὁδός, ἀλλ’ ἀθανάτων, ὁ κοινὸν καὶ ἐπὶ ψυχῶν ὡς οὐσῶν καθ’ αὐτὸ ἢ τῆ οὐσίᾳ ἀθανάτων” (*De ant.* 23).

He adds that Homer’s mention of the southern gate as reserved only for the passage of immortals is confirmed by ancient practices in which “it is impious for men to enter temples when the sun is inclined to the south, but this is the way for immortals” (ὡς κατὰ τὴν εἰς νότον ἔγκλισιν τοῦ θεοῦ οὐ θέμις ἀνθρώπους εἰσιέναι εἰς τὰ ἱερά, ἀλλ’ ἀθανάτων ὁδός ἐστίν, *De ant.* 26). Right after, he also mentions that “Pythagoras and the wise men among the Egyptians forbade speaking while passing through doors or gates, thus revering God who is the first principle of all things in their entirety, by their silence” (οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι καὶ οἱ παρ’ Αἰγυπτίοις σοφοὶ μὴ λαλεῖν ἀπηγόρευον διερχομένους ἢ θύρας ἢ πύλας, σεβομένους ὑπὸ σιωπῆς θεὸν ἀρχὴν τῶν ὄλων ἔχοντα, *De ant.* 27). Porphyry later assumes that “the ancients everywhere made that which has a twofold entrance [nature’s] symbol...and again it is made either by a mortal or immortal road” (πανταχοῦ τὸ δίθυρον αὐτῆς πεποιήνται σύμβολον...καὶ πάλιν ἢ διὰ τῆς ἀθανάτου ἢ διὰ τῆς θνητῆς πορείας, *De ant.* 29), and then he relates this symbol to Plato’s “two orifices.” He also mentions Pherecydes of Syrus, a pre-Socratic philosopher who also through the same symbols “intimated...the genesis of souls and their departure from genesis” (διὰ τούτων αἰνιττομένου τὰς τῶν ψυχῶν γενέσεις καὶ ἀπογενέσεις, *De ant.* 31) in order to reveal that Plato and Homer are not the only ones who have constructed their symbol of two entrances. Their insights, rather, were influenced by or inherited from a more widespread and older system of cosmology.

In addition to drawing parallels across various expressions of religious thought regarding caves, Porphyry makes additional connections regarding fluids portrayed in Homer’s cave. In the

same way that he begins his discussion of the signification of caves, Porphyry opens his new discussion with the ancients who assigned to souls descending into genesis the name, naiad nymphs, thus identifying them with beings who are generally recognized to preside over waters (*De ant.* 10). Porphyry is suggesting that the ancients themselves also used naiad nymphs to symbolize the “souls [that] settle by the water, which is divinely inspired” (προσιζάνειν τῷ ὕδατι τὰς ψυχὰς θεοπνόω ὄντι, *De ant.* 10). He thus analyzes another element of Homer’s cave, the scene of naiad nymphs, through the interpretation of symbols to make sense of deeper philosophical truths that Homer is hinting at and are also found in foreign or other ancient sources. Porphyry cites the creation of the world story in Genesis: “The spirit of God was borne upon the waters” (ἐμφέρεσθαι ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος θεοῦ πνεῦμα, *De ant.* 10) as evidence of the fact that the ancients believed that souls settle by water.³⁹ Additionally, he evokes another instance in which the Egyptians too “represent all superior beings as standing not on solid ground but on a boat; this applies to the Sun and, in short, to all the deities” (τοὺς δαίμονας ἅπαντας οὐχ ἰστάναι ἐπὶ στερεοῦ, ἀλλὰ πάντας ἐπὶ πλοίου, καὶ τὸν Ἥλιον καὶ ἀπλῶς πάντας, *De ant.* 10). From his citation of both the ancient Hebraic text and Egyptian iconography, Porphyry concludes that that souls descending into genesis are associated with moisture and fluids with which they are portrayed.

Egyptian wisdom occupies a place of deep reverence in Greek thought. Historian Diodorus Siculus reports that the Greeks have acquired their renowned wisdom and learning by having “visited Egypt in ancient times, in order to become acquainted with its customs and learning (παρέβαλον εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἐν τοῖς ἀρχαίοις χρόνοις, ἵνα τῶν ἐνταῦθα νομίμων καὶ τῆς παιδείας μετάσχωσιν, Diodorus Siculus I.96.1). For example, the notion of Hermes as a

³⁹ Genesis 1:2

messenger of souls to the Underworld was introduced from Egyptian funeral customs to Orpheus, and after he “had introduced this notion among the Greeks, Homer followed it” (τοῦτο καταδείξαντος παρὰ τοῖς Ἕλλησι τὸν Ὅμηρον ἀκολούθως τούτῳ, Diodorus Siculus I.96.6). Plato too shares this assumption in his *Timaeus* when recounting the journey of Solon to Egypt where one of the Egyptian priests tells him, “Ah, Solon, Solon, you Greeks are ever children. There isn’t an old man among you...Your souls are devoid of beliefs about antiquity handed down by ancient tradition” (ὦ Σόλων, Σόλων, Ἕλληνες ἀεὶ παῖδες ἐστε, γέρον δὲ Ἕλλην οὐκ ἔστιν...οὐδεμίαν γὰρ ἐν αὐταῖς ἔχετε δι’ ἀρχαίαν ἀκοὴν παλαιὰν δόξαν, *Tim.* 22b). By the “authority of the old,” particularly of the Egyptians, and in accordance with Plato’s reverence for the wisdom of the Egyptians, Porphyry is corroborating his interpretation of Homer’s cave and at the same time establishing a cross-cultural understanding of the soul that includes both Homeric and Platonic conceptions of the soul.

To further support the notion that souls have a proclivity for water, Porphyry evokes the thoughts of pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus regarding the metaphysical state of souls during genesis and relates them to the portrayals from Homer. He cites Heraclitus twice. First, Heraclitus says that “it is a delight, not death, for souls to become moist...We live their death, they live our death” (ψυχῆσι...τέρψιν μὴ θάνατον ὑγρῆσι γενέσθαι...ζῆν ἡμᾶς τὸν ἐκείνων θάνατον καὶ ζῆν ἐκείνας τὸν ἡμέτερον θάνατον, *De ant.* 10), and later he is also mentioned to have said that “the dry soul is wisest” (ξηρὰ ψυχὴ σοφωτάτη, *De ant.* 11). Porphyry gleans from both passages the concept of genesis as a cycle in which souls are infused into physical form which is symbolized by water and moisture, for which reason “Homer calls those in genesis ‘wet,’ because they have their souls ‘moist’” (διερούς τοὺς ἐν γενέσει ὄντας καλεῖν τὸν ποιητὴν τοὺς διύγρους τὰς ψυχὰς ἔχοντας, *De ant.* 10). He also mentions that because of pleasures

derived from genesis for “misty” souls, “a pleasant misty cave would be a fitting consecration to them on earth...and the cave with ever-flowing water would also be fitting for the nymphs who preside over waters” (οἰκεῖον αὐταῖς ἱερὸν ἐπὶ γῆς ἂν εἴη ἄντρον ἐπήρατον ἡεροειδὲς...νύμφαις τε ὑδάτων προστάτισιν οἰκεῖον τὸ ἄντρον, ἔνθ’ ὕδατ’ ἀενάοντα ἔνεστιν, *De ant.* 12). Porphyry’s conception of the soul and its genesis foreshadows the symbolic significance that he later finds in the narrative of Homer’s *Odyssey* when he cites Numenius who described Odysseus as passing “through the stages of genesis” and representing one who has eliminated “the treacherous passions of one’s soul” (τὰ ἐπίβουλα τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ πάθη, *De ant.* 34).⁴⁰ Essentially, Porphyry borrows from Numenius’ allegorical reading of the Odyssean narrative and weaves it with sources from other philosophers. Among these sources is Plato himself, whom Porphyry understands to mean that “the deep, the sea, and the sea-swell are...material substance” (πόντος δὲ καὶ θάλασσα καὶ κλύδων καὶ...ἡ ὑλικὴ σύστασις, *De ant.* 34–35). He also draws on the ancients to construct and substantiate his own Neoplatonic rendition of Homer’s cave: the soul’s struggle to pass through the cycle of genesis embodied by the sea and the nymphs toward arrival at wisdom.⁴¹

Porphyry also discusses the symbolism of honey; for the “theologians indeed make use of honey for many different symbols” (κέκρηνται δὴ τῷ μέλιτι οἱ θεολόγοι πρὸς πολλὰ καὶ διάφορα σύμβολα, *De ant.* 15). He mentions that honey has often symbolized the powers of preservation “when...they offer honey to the Persian as the preserver of fruits” (ὅταν δὲ τῷ Πέρσῃ προσάγωσι μέλι ὡς φύλακι καρπῶν, *De ant.* 16) to demonstrate that this same symbol has also been found in

⁴⁰ Not much is known about Numenius of Apamea; his works are lost except in fragments. Numenius’ contributions to the allegorical interpretation of Homer are transmitted almost exclusively in Porphyry’s *On the Cave of the Nymphs*. See Lambertson, *Homer the Theologian*, p. 54–55.

⁴¹ Edwards, M.J. 1990. “Numenius, Pherecydes and the Cave of the Nymphs.” *The Classical Quarterly* 40.1: 258–262

Homer, in which it is “dripped down the nostrils to preserve the dead from decay, since honey is the food of the gods” (κατὰ ῥινῶν στάζει ὁ ποιητῆς εἰς τὸ μὴ σαπῆναι τοὺς τεθνηκότας, τὸ μέλι ἐκδέχασθαι, θεῶν τροφῆς ὄντος τοῦ μέλιτος, *De ant.* 16). Here again, Porphyry is pointing to another symbol that is used across both Greek and Persian cultures. He cites a passage from Orpheus in which “Cronus is ensnared by Zeus with honey” (ὁ Κρόνος μέλιτι ὑπὸ Διὸς ἐνεδρεύεται, *De ant.* 16), but then adds that Cronus is “drunk and stupefied as if with wine, and sleeps like Plato’s Poros, who is sated with nectar, ‘for there was no wine as yet’” (οὔπω γὰρ οἶνος ἦν, *De ant.* 16).⁴² Porphyry points to the fact that Plato models his myth of Poros from the drunkenness of Cronus that comes from the myth of castration that Plato has Socrates criticize. By highlighting the discrepancy between Plato’s actions and the criticisms he raises against the myth of castration, Porphyry reinterprets Socrates’ criticisms as though they were not made by Plato himself.

Porphyry dedicates the majority of his treatise to citing information from an extensive collection of practices and textual sources, foreign or “ancient,” on the signification of many objects detailed in Homer’s cave. He relates symbols such as caves, naiads, honey, and double entrances found among other philosophers and religious practices to what is described in Homer and Plato. He treats every object as a symbol because its interpretation is the only way for him to uncover metaphysical truths that have been transmitted by many philosophers and religions. One need not resort only to Homer or Plato for the finding of divine wisdom, but the same type of wisdom, as Porphyry shows in his evocation of various cultures and traditions, can be found elsewhere. Homeric and Platonic theologies owe their development to and are only a couple of

⁴² Plato, *Symposium* 203b

examples of a grander and totalizing system of metaphysics that has existed as far back as the very beginning and permeated almost every tradition of philosophy and religion.

Conclusion

The criticisms of Homer and the ancient myths that Plato raises on account of their falsehood and their mimetic nature were not systematically addressed in a way that is compatible with the Platonic model of reality articulated in the *Republic* until centuries later when the Neoplatonists entered the conversation about myth and allegory.⁴³ Although this defense is not explicitly articulated until Proclus in his *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, the principles that Proclus outlines in his commentary (and elsewhere) provide the assumptions behind and underpinnings for Porphyry's allegorical interpretation and defense of Homer's cave in the *Odyssey*. Porphyry writes his defense with the criticisms that Plato and other critics proposed in mind, yet he manages to address them within a Platonic metaphysical system.

Plato identifies two main problems with the ancient myths, particularly ones with scenes that he found appalling, unfolds at two levels in *Republic II-III* and *X*. First, if poetry along with other modes of artistic representation are meant to imitate entities that are already copies of his intelligible forms, their products would be a third farther away from the truth; uneducated audience members would mistake the images, whether what they represent is true or false, for reality. Then, if the Hesiodic and Homeric myths are copies of divine models that encourage immoral behavior, they must be false. Because these myths are both mimetic in nature and dangerously false, their creators should be expelled from the city. Porphyry establishes that Homer's cave does in fact exist and that the absurdities one may find in myth can easily be discerned by laymen and others who will proceed to interpret symbols that contain hidden truths

⁴³ Lamberton 1986, 19.

by virtue of their apparent absurdity. Symbols are not meant to copy their referents, but to serve an analogous function that points inquiring readers to them.

Porphyrus points out that Plato constructs his own myth, the allegory of the cave, to draw a distinction between his transcendent realm of intelligible forms and the reality grounded in the sensible and material universe. Porphyrus interprets both Plato's allegory of the cave and Homer's cave of the nymphs to mean the same thing; for both have employed the cave symbol to describe the bipartite nature of the cosmos. He identifies another commonality between Homer's conception of the soul and the one that Plato conveys in the myth of Er. Since both have used mythmaking to convey the same metaphysical truths, both Homer and Plato are equated by Porphyrus as *theologians*. Porphyrus extends this same line of reasoning to other symbols he finds in both Homer's cave and Plato's dialogues.

But Homer and Plato are not the only ones who have established the same metaphysical system. Ancients and foreigners, as Porphyrus argues, have already conceptualized the same principles that have been either conveyed or articulated by Homer and Plato. By evoking other precedents and drawing parallels between them and that of Homer and Plato, Porphyrus constructs a grander and totalizing theological system that encompasses both Homer and Plato. After devoting close to a third of his treatise enumerating examples that demonstrate the ubiquitous presence of Homer's and Plato's theology across time and culture, Porphyrus concludes that he must "avoid making our discussion overlong by introducing further evidence from the ancient philosophers and theologians, we presume to have shown by what has already been said, the intent of Homer's description as a whole" (*De ant.* 31); he takes for granted that a single principle of metaphysics undeniably underpins every expression of theology.

Rarely does Porphyry rely on his “own thoughts” to support his interpretation, or at least he attempts to make it appear so. He tends in *On the Cave of the Nymphs* to rely rather on synthesizing various sources of authority than on the development of his own thoughts independently.⁴⁴ He presents his argument as though everyone else before him has already done the work of interpretation of the symbols found in Homer’s cave. This sort of presentation reveals the Neoplatonic tendency to scan for commonalities across various authoritative texts to arrive at more fundamental conclusions. Through late antiquity, the Neoplatonists have attempted to combine different ideas into a coherent ontological system that intersects philosophical, religious, and literary achievements that were made before them throughout antiquity. This movement of philosophy was revolutionary not in the sense that it established an entirely innovative system of beliefs, but rather in how it was able to hybridize different philosophical traditions of their ancient predecessors into a legacy well received by the Middle Ages. Porphyry’s *On the Cave of the Nymphs* provides a glimpse of the vast history of interpretation that continues to muse on and be inspired by Homer with the same fervor and awe.

⁴⁴ Lamberton 1986, 119.

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