

## “Close the doors of your ears:” Tracing an Orphic Formula in Augustan Poetry

The recent publication of a complete and authoritative Teubner edition of Orphica (Bernabé 2004, 2005, 2007), following archaeological finds that include the Derveni Papyrus, bone tablets from Olbia inscribed with Dionysiac formulae, and additional ‘Orphic’ lamellae expanding the collection originally catalogued by Günther Zuntz (Zuntz 1971), has reignited scholarly debate concerning Greek mystery cults, with an especial reconsideration of Bacchism and Orphism (e.g. Edmonds 2013). Advances in such scholarship allow for a reappraisal of the availability of mystery cult as literary topos, an especially potent concept in the context of religious movements that seem to have relied on poetic religious texts as essential in the performance of ritual and to the authority of cultic epistemological and soteriological claims.

Bernabé’s edition of Orphica begins with two variations on a well-known formula, in which Orpheus, in the role of hierophant, is imagined dismissing the uninitiated from the company of adherents in anticipation of the revelation of secret religious arcana (*OF* 1 a and b Bernabé): αείσω ξυνετοῖσι· θύρας δ’ ἐπίθεσθε, βέβηλοι (“I will sing for those who understand: close the doors [of your ears], you who are uninitiated”); φθέγξομαι οἷς θέμις ἐστί· θύρας δ’ ἐπίθεσθε, βέβηλοι (“I will speak to those to whom it is permitted: close the doors [of your ears], you who are uninitiated”). The phrase has a long-standing presence in cultic literature as a kind of *sphragis* for Orphic revelation, appearing in early theogonies attributed to Orpheus and in the Derveni papyrus.

This paper considers the presence of variations on this Orphic formula in Greco-Roman literature, transferred from its original overtly religious context and applied to varying literary genres. My argument begins with a revision of its various manifestations in Greek literature: variations on the formula appear in Plato’s *Symposium* (218b) in the context of philosophical

discussion among learned interlocutors; in the opening of Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter*, in a pointed allusive gesture to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*; and in the 26<sup>th</sup> Idyll of Theocritus, where the phrase is transferred to maenadic activity.

The earliest appearances of the formula in Roman literature have received some recognition by modern scholars, the most famous of which is the prophetic declaration of the Sibyl of Vergil's *Aeneid* (6.258): *procul, o procul este, profani* ("Far off, stay far off, you who are uninitiated"). An earlier version appears in Catullus 64 (*orgia quae frustra cupiunt audire profani*, "rites which in vain do the uninitiated wish to hear," 259). The most original part of my argument identifies three instances of formula *OF* 1 a/b in the Ovidian corpus. The first, at *Ars Amatoria* 2.608, reimagines lovers as engaged in secret rites of Venus; at *Fasti* 4.552, Ovid inserts the phrase into his own version of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* in a conflation of Orphic cultic activity with the mysteries at Eleusis; and at *Metamorphoses* 7.255-6, the phrase makes of the magical activity of Medea in the act of rejuvenating Aeson, the father of Jason, a cultic ritual in which the sorceress plays the part of hierophant.

As the aforementioned examples will demonstrate, the Orphic formula *OF* 1 a/b establishes a presence in poetic literature beyond its original cultic context in various poetic genres as a literary topos to be manipulated by poets interested in evoking a kind of religious sensibility. In doing so, Greek and Roman poets reimagine the allusive relationship between poet and audience as that between hierophant and initiate, while the poetry itself, regardless of content, becomes a kind of *hieros logos* with epistemological and soteriological authority.

## Bibliography

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