THEOLOGIES OF FEAR IN EARLY GREEK EPIC

Carman Romano
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This book explores the theological significance of horror elements in the works of Hesiod and in the Homeric Hymns for the characters within these poems, the mortal audience consuming them, and the poet responsible for mythopoesis. *Theologies of Fear in Early Greek Epic* argues that just as modern supernatural horror fiction can be analyzed to reveal popular conceptions of the divine, so too can the horrific elements in early Greek epic. Romano develops this analogy to show how myth-makers chose to include, omit, or nuance horror elements from their narratives in order to communicate theological messages. By employing methodological approaches from religious studies, classical studies, and literary studies of supernatural horror fiction, this book brings a fresh perspective to our understanding of how the Greeks viewed their gods and how poets helped to create that view.

*Theologies of Fear in Early Greek Epic* will be of interest to scholars in classical studies, religious studies, and comparative literature, as well as students in courses on myth, religion, and Greek culture and society.

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“Carman Romano makes a compelling case for the importance of an overlooked aspect of archaic Greek aesthetics: a sense of horror in the face of the divine.”

William Brockliss, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*
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Carman Romano
For Margot,
who makes everything way less scary.
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Introduction

The gods of Greek myth are frightening. They are terrifying in their superhuman abilities and in their near-constant use of those abilities to achieve violent ends. Think not just about Artemis and Apollo’s divine power, but how they leverage it to slay all of Niobe’s children on their mother’s behalf. Consider not only Zeus’ ability to transform himself—into a swan, a bull, a golden rain—but his eagerness to undergo metamorphosis in order to rape. In the archaic and classical Greek world, where myths could and did transform across time, space, and genre, and where stories about the gods were not bound to canon,1 the Greeks continuously told, retold, and re-tooled myths, stories which have been described by Laura Feldt as “complex literary compositions [that] often narrativize intense feelings to ... superhuman characters with regard to major crises or catastrophes, to the religious community, and to the imagined interactions between this world and the other world.”2 And in many—the majority, even—of these “complex literary creations,” divine characters bring harm both to each other and to human characters. This book proposes that the Greeks, in particular by way of epic poetry,3 told frightening stories about the gods’ interactions with everyday mortals (and ameliorated or complicated the fear roused by those stories) to communicate particular messages about the powerful, inscrutable nature of the divine to their mortal audience members, who would be primed to reflect on such messages given epic poetry’s frequent performance at religious festivals.4 Fear thus emerges as one among many tools, aesthetic and otherwise, that archaic (and archaizing) Greek poets and rhapsodes used to articulate their world and the relationship between its divine and human occupants.

In particular, I examine the literary myths related in the longer Homeric Hymns5—to Apollo, to Demeter, to Aphrodite, to Dionysus, to Hermes, and to Pan—and in Hesiod’s Theogony and Works and Days.6 As Andrew Faulkner puts it, their shared “divine perspective binds the Homeric Hymns closely to the Hesiodic Theogony” in particular, a poem which, not incidentally, opens with a hymn to the Muses.7 Further, and most importantly for my purposes, both of Hesiod’s long epics and the Homeric Hymns share an interest in how the world as we know it came to be insofar as the divine and our—that is, non-heroic human beings’—relationship to it is concerned.8 The long Homeric epics, by contrast, present a world that is fully formed and an Olympian order that is already established by the time the Iliad opens.9 The shorter epics’ focus on average human beings also
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contrasts with that of the long Homeric epics, which largely describe heroes, a special class of mortals, and how they navigate the cosmos and divine-human relationships. I discuss Iliadic and Odyssean characters’ interactions with the divine particularly in Chapter 5 and in the Epilogue. In sum, although they are not attributed to the same poet, I read the *Homeric Hymns* and Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days* together because of their shared epic genre; their focus on the divine; their myths’ concern with the ways in which the world as we know it came to be; and their emphasis on how everyday mortals, as opposed to semi-divine people, interact with the divine sphere.

Those poems also, I contend, all contain elements that are deliberately deployed to rouse fear in their audience and so shape their audience’s beliefs about the divine world. In this book, I theorize these elements. Recently, scholars of religion such as Feldt and Jeffrey Kripal¹⁰ have each shown that religious narratives¹¹ often contain fear-inducing elements, and they have proposed ways of interpreting these. Feldt, for her part, has assessed horrific aesthetics in the biblical book of Exodus and in Mesopotamian myth. In general, Feldt argues that the study of the aesthetics of religious narratives, a topic that has been generally neglected by religious studies scholars, promises to be a rich field of inquiry, given that “[m]uch of the traditional material of the history of religions—Mesopotamian, Greek, Hebrew, Roman, Hindu, Old English, Islamic and others—is literary…” In particular, “[t]he strong religious reactions to fantasy fiction in the contemporary era, both in the form of enthusiastic appropriation and vehement rejection, are also an impetus for examining traditional religious narratives from a fantasy perspective.”¹² Upon bringing the literary critical apparatus of the fantastic to Exodus 1–18,¹³ for example, Feldt finds that this narrative is rife with figures such as metamorphoses, *adynata*, hyperboles, coincidence, paradox, and uncertainty.¹⁴ Although, in Feldt’s words, “[i]t is … currently relatively common to stress the capacity of religious narrative to create a meaningful cosmos for believers, to orient identity and to found and maintain institutions,” her “perspective suggests the importance of a more in-depth inclusion of constructs such as destabilisation, uncertainty and ambiguity in theories of what religious narrative is and does ….”¹⁵ Kripal, for his part, points out that since Rudolf Otto’s 1917 *The Idea of the Holy*, students of religion have understood “that the holy and the horrific are cut from the same phenomenological cloth …”: “the mystical reveals a kind of double nature in the history of religions—at once fascinating (*fascinans*) and terrifying (*tremendum*). A holy horror.”¹⁶ There is excellent reason to read Greek myths in particular with their fearsome effects in mind, as ancient thinkers, such as Longinus (to be discussed shortly), express anxiety and curiosity about the portrayal of such “holy horrors” in religious narratives.

Just as horror elements—that is, features of a narrative intended to stimulate fear in their consumer—are present in religious narratives, so too are religious elements present in media usually classified as horrific (that is, designed to elicit a fear response in consumers) or fantastic. Timothy Beal’s division of his 2002 *Religion and Its Monsters* into two parts speaks to this duality: Part I deals with “Religion and Its Monsters” and Part II, with “Monsters and Their Religion.” The former explores such topics as cosmic horrors in the ancient Near East and
in the biblical Job’s suffering, and the second, modern media such as Dracula. Beal argues that both ancient and modern media often attempt to comprehend the nature of the divine through recourse to horror elements, as these elements, such as cosmic unknowability and vampires, help a storyteller to theologize his world. Kripal meditates on the deeply intertwined nature of horror media and religion after commenting that despite his refusal to consume scary fiction, as a scholar of religion, he is “constantly drawn to thinking about horror.” He continues rhetorically, asking,

How can I not think about the classic religious emotions of fear, terror, and dread, about the hair-raising phenomenology of eeriness and the uncanny, about the ghost, the possession, and the haunting, about the centrality of death, dissociation, and dissolution in religious symbolism (and experience), about the cosmic violence of comparative eschatology, and—we cannot possibly avoid the fact—about the horrific spectacles of contemporary religious terrorism?17

Kripal is far from the only scholar of religion to take horror media seriously. Like Kripal, Douglas Cowan takes “holy horror” as his subject in Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen and in America’s Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King. In both volumes, Cowan argues that horror media—films, in Sacred Terror, and the oeuvre of King in Dark Theologian—is a site at which we can see the modern American religious imagination at work. And just as Kripal cannot help but think about horror as a scholar of religion, authors and connoisseurs of horror media have recently begun to think carefully about religion. To borrow Kripal’s phrase, how can they not? Zoë Lehmann-Imfeld, for instance, is a scholar of modern English literature who assesses the theology of the Victorian ghost story “from Le Fanu to James.”18 Sarah Iles Johnston argues that some pieces of supernatural horror fiction make use of “rhetorical tropes and narrative strategies that … conduce belief in the supernatural phenomena they describe.”19 There is, then, an acknowledged intersection between supernatural horror fiction and religion from scholars in both areas.

I show in this book that for some ancient Greeks, myth, like some narratives both ancient and modern, is a site at which horror elements help articulate theological claims. It is perhaps not surprising that Johnston, although she assesses King and M. R. James in her article on religious affordance and horror fiction, is a scholar of myth, since myths are stories which often involve supernatural elements. In fact, in commenting on the relationship between narratives of alien abduction and religious narratives more traditionally construed, Kripal memorably sums up “the entire history of religions” like this:

Weird and fantastic superbeings from the sky come down to interact with human beings, provide them with cultural and technological knowledge, guide them, demand their submission and obedience, have sex with them (often forcefully), and generally terrorize, awe, baffle, and inspire them.20
In this summary, tongue-in-cheek though it may be, Kripal points to the intensely negative experiences that human beings typically have with G/god(s) in religious narratives and the intense emotions that come with those experiences. Although Kripal does not invoke the category in this passage, many myths fit his definition well. Several scholars of religion, such as Beal, Brandon Grafius, and Steve Wiggins, have already illustrated that biblical myths both contain and have spawned meditations on the horrific. Grafius reads the ancient narratives of the Bible with various theories of horror in *Reading the Bible with Horror*, demonstrating the fruitful avenues opened up at their intersection. Wiggins, in *Nightmares with the Bible*, considers the ways in which modern media and cinema in particular have developed demonology from its ancient roots. I build particularly on Grafius’ stance on the importance of YHWH’s monstrous or horrific qualities in biblical narratives, and on Beal’s observation that religious narratives often communicate “a deep sense of ambivalence about the relation between the monstrous and the divine.” Like Beal, who argues that moments in which the terrifyingly monstrous and the divine converge are “a site for religious reflection,” I argue that when tellers of particular Greek myths make use of horror elements, they are doing so to communicate about the nature of the divine and of the cosmos.

Poets are able to shape their audience’s thinking about these things because of the force of deliberate, vivid storytelling, deployed in particular performance contexts. Johnston, in *The Story of Myth*, examines how Greek myths “create and sustain belief” in the seemingly unbelievable reality that they propose by shining light on the highly sophisticated techniques that ancient poets used in narrating a myth. One of Johnston’s major innovations here is her treatment of myth, often considered by scholars of myth and religion to be in a special, sacred category all its own, as a story first and foremost. Johnston discovers that a myth is defined not by its (assumed) sacredness, but instead by its membership in a tightly woven story world that was cumulatively created, on a continuous basis, by the myths that were narrated. This story world validated not only each individual myth that was part of it, but also *ta palaia* more generally—all the stories about what had happened in the mythic past, the characters who had lived then and the entire world view on which the stories rested.

Johnston’s view that a myth is a story (albeit a story networked tightly to other stories) builds on Claude Calame’s that a myth is a *particular* story narrated a particular way for a particular reason and that myth constitutes “ancient things,” *ta palaia*. As Calame puts it, every version or formulation of what we call a ‘myth’ should be considered as the result of a particular and specific discourse production and discursive
rendering that relates to a precise enunciative situation, one in which the fictional narration realizes its pragmatic dimension.\(^\text{30}\)

In other words, the particularities of a story are its meaning.

I italicize “fictional” because Calame reminds us that myths are, in the most literal way, fictional, an adjective derived from Latin *fingere*, related to the Greek ποιεῖν and πλάττειν, all of which carry the valence of “making” or “crafting.” *Fingere* in particular “refers to the action of fashioning, shaping, modelling, so it relates to the act of constructing and representing by means of the imagination.”\(^\text{31}\)

The myths which constitute a large part of Greek poetry have been fabricated by means of the imagination, and thus myths do not constitute a discourse completely other than what we in our modern era consider to be fictional storytelling. And if myth is “just” a crafted story, then myths can be compared productively to other works of fiction—including modern horror fiction. Both Calame’s and Johnston’s approaches to myth have been essential to my thinking and I apply their methodologies broadly throughout this project. I define myth as a story linked to other stories about what I call the “deep past” (Calame’s and Johnston’s *ta palaia*) and this deep past is contiguous with the here-and-now of the story’s narration rather than somehow separate from it. I do not abstract a myth from its context, as it is a story’s context in which its theological meaning/s can be found.\(^\text{32}\) Finally, and most crucially, I always keep in mind that myth is pragmatic, able to “act upon the imagination of its public.”\(^\text{33}\)

To Calame’s and Johnston’s respective strategies for analyzing “the story of myth,” I add perspectives drawn from the study of horror fiction and fantastic religious narratives to show that just as modern horror fiction can be analyzed to reveal the popular theology/ies of its culture of origin,\(^\text{34}\) so too can the horror elements of ancient mythic literature. Already, several scholars, classicists among them, have noticed the importance of the horrific to both Greek and Latin language texts and to the examination of their aesthetics. Aline Estèves, for instance, assesses the horror generated in Latin epic and historiography from the first century BCE to the first century CE, and Andrew McClellan delves into the violent, bodily horrors of Roman epic.\(^\text{35}\) Debbie Felton brings together a collection of essays in *Landscapes of Dread in Classical Antiquity: Negative Emotion in Natural and Constructed Spaces*. Douglas Cairns, like Estèves, frames horror as his object of inquiry and brings it into conversation with pity in an article on Greek aesthetics.\(^\text{36}\) Thomas Emmrich’s *Ästhetische Monsterpolitiken* and James Uden’s *Spectres of Antiquity* trace, respectively, the monstrous and the spectral from ancient to contemporary literature. In a recent article, William Brockliss even argues that the pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield of Herakles*’ “anomalous qualities,” namely, “fractured sequences of intense images and … the recurrence of characters” and “excessive lists” evoke the aesthetics of the nightmare.\(^\text{37}\) My project diverges from these in that I analyze horror elements for their theological imperatives as opposed to, for instance, their purely aesthetic qualities or for their history in or reception by more contemporary authors. What we all share,
however, is the conviction that we must investigate the frightening aspects of ancient literature in order to glean a fuller appreciation for these works’ effect on and appeal to audiences, ancient and contemporary.

My definition of fear and related terms and the phrase “theology/ies of fear,” like my definition of myth, is pragmatic. First, I am not contending that ancient poets ever set out to create anything like modern horror media or “art-horror,” a term coined by Noël Carroll in his seminal work on the topic. That said, horror elements or effects, as Brockliss and Estèves (among many others) have demonstrated, cannot be pigeonholed to the post-Gothic period. While creators of modern horror media hearken often to the pre-modern roots of their favored genre, Mathias Clasen, in his recent work on what he calls the “biocultural” nature of horror media, points out that scholars tend (incorrectly) to relegate horror to the contemporary world. Clasen argues, however, that this pigeonholing is “[r]educ‑tive, because it fails to take into account the deep-seated psychological dispositions upon which horror stories depend and problematic, moreover, because the hypothesis in its strong version ignores horror’s roots in older storytelling traditions.”

Wiggins, in an article entitled “The Theological Origins of Horror,” substitutes Clasen’s “reductive” with “revisionist”: he makes the case that the Bible ought to be considered the progenitor of European literature and that “horror should be considered an extension of a literary tradition that began with the Bible.” Like biblical narratives, Greek myth certainly numbers among the world’s “older storytelling traditions” and I do indeed agree with Clasen and the scholars and creators in his camp that “horror,” in Clasen’s words, “is a functional designation, one that transcends history.” Following Clasen, I designate certain scenes within the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod as horrific because of the function of certain (horror) elements contained therein: to stimulate a fear response in the audience listening to these vivid poems.

The genres of modern horror and ancient Greek mythic poetry, in fact, have more in common to recommend their comparison, even beyond the fact that both (often) contain supernatural, fantastic elements. Creators in both genres, because of their reliance on these elements, must prove the veracity of the story they tell. In a recent interview, Grady Hendrix, author of contemporary popular novels such as My Best Friend’s Exorcism, noted that as a genre, horror alone bears the burden of proving itself to be “true” in order to read as effective fiction. He hearkens all the way back to Horace Walpole’s 1764 Gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto, allegedly based on much older manuscripts that report real events. Like purveyors of modern horror, myth-makers work very hard indeed to render their stories believable despite the counterintuitive elements such as gods, ghosts, and griffins that populate their stories. Much like Walpole (or Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, H. P. Lovecraft, or the team behind any entry in the found-footage subgenre of horror film), Hesiod, Homer, and many others claim not to be the origin of the myths they relate. Instead, they invoke a higher authority, the Muses, as the ultimate source from which their seemingly unbelievable stories flow. In the case of both Frankenstein and the Iliad, then, their author or singer promotes the idea that he is only the messenger of the supernatural material he disseminates. To render their tales more
believable still, as Johnston has observed, following Kirsi Hänninen and Gillian Bennett, myth-makers tend to set their stories in the everyday world, a technique common to creators of some stories, and especially horror stories, containing fantastic elements. Creators in both genres, then, share both their particular interest in fantastic elements and their need to suggest the reliability of their reports on these elements.

And as scholars like Cairns have shown, ancient texts certainly contain not just fantastic elements, but horror elements meant to rouse fear. With Feldt, I do not presume to be able to access affect (defined as a physical response) directly, but instead emotion, since all emotions are verbalised, managed and practiced in historically and culturally variable ways. With many other scholars, we may distinguish between affect as a bodily response and emotion as the verbalised reaction … In and through stories and narrative framings, affects become emotions, we make sense of those emotions, and through narrative we access the emotions of others, that is, the cultural framings of experiences of others.

Jacob Mackey, in his masterful monograph on Roman religion, goes even further than Feldt. He pushes back against scholars who maintain that because we do not have access to the private thoughts of ancient people, we cannot discuss their inner lives, including their “sensory perceptions, bodily feelings, emotions, and beliefs …” As he rightly observes,

one has no immediate access to anyone’s sensory, cognitive, or affective experience but one’s own, whatever the cultural similarities or differences between self and other. Yet this hardly justifies solipsism. Others obviously have inner states, even if our only evidence for those states is their outward behavior, including their speech.

Thus, I follow Feldt (and Mackey and others) in “work[ing] from the assumption that verbalised emotions can be studied historically as sources for key emotional practices in a religious culture, just as narratives can stimulate emotional responses and affects.”

In the same way as there is no single, universally applicable definition of horror as a genre, there is no single, universally applicable definition of fear as an emotion or affect precisely because of each individual person’s—both historical and fictive—social, spatial, temporal, and cultural location. Although there is no single Greek word “that matches the modern English word fear in all its comprehensiveness,” ancient Greek sources concur that mythic media could stimulate emotions that we would file under its heading. In Greek (as in English), the feeling of fear is designated by a plethora of terms, such as (but certainly not limited to) ἔκπληξις, φρίκη, and φόβος and δέος. As Gregory Nagy observes, Aristotle uses the term ἔκπληξις, perhaps best translated as “stunned fear,” to describe the communal fear experienced vicariously by the Athenian audience upon witnessing “the
primal fear experienced by Oedipus” upon discovering his true identity in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The same term appears in Plato’s *Ion* 535b to describe the reaction of the eponymous rhapsode’s audience as he “re-enacts scenes of fear and pity in his performances of Homeric poetry.” Φρίκη, an involuntary shuddering sensation, is specifically modeled for the tragic audience of Oedipus’ demise by the chorus and is a response that, as Cairns argues, makes possible the chorus’ recognition that suffering could befall anyone. Indeed, Cairns points out that Longinus in *On the Sublime* 15.1–2 theorizes that a vivid narrative prompts its audience to imagine a character’s experience and thus feel emotions akin to theirs. In 9.6 of that same text, Longinus insists that Homer’s Theomachy, in which divine characters experience fear, “frightening,” φοβερά, as it is, ought to be taken allegorically because it is “impious,” ἄθεα. Clearly, Plato, Sophocles, Aristotle, and Longinus expect a scene from tragedy or epic that depicts a character/s experiencing fear to stimulate a similar reaction in its audience, and, as Jessica Lightfoot has shown, ancient Greeks certainly thought that stories (among other media) produced “wonder,” an excess of which results in stunned fear. Longinus even worries about the effects that such a terrifying passage as the Theomachy could have on its audience’s beliefs about the divine. All of our ancient theoreticians were certainly onto something: as Rachel Lesser observes, “negative emotions” have been shown to be very efficacious at activating an audience’s empathy for a story’s characters.

Although Nagy’s treatment of ἔκπληξις with respect to the tragic stage and epic might make the term seem an ideal translation for what I mean by “fear” in this book, David Konstan’s observation that ἔκπληξις is not necessarily connected to reason, but rather to instinct, eliminates it. Cairns’ observation that φρίκη, unlike ἔκπληξις, contains “ideational content” makes it a better contestant to cover what I mean by fear: the chorus’ φρίκη in *Oedipus Tyrannus* stems from “[their] attempt to encompass the sheer magnitude of Oedipus’ suffering, together with whatever superhuman or supernatural forces may have caused it.” Indeed, φρίκη is associated with epiphany and other apparently supernatural phenomena. Emotions that their audiences may have called ἔκπληξις and especially φρίκη certainly could have been roused by the vivid storytelling of Hesiod and the poets of the *Hymns*. Φρίκη, however, is an emotion largely associated with “unexpected and unsettling visual stimuli,” such as self-blinding. This limitation to the meaning of φρίκη renders it less applicable to the feeling roused by Hesiod through his descriptions of, for instance, Zeus’ everyday indecision regarding which arrogant person he might strike down.

I submit that all of the frightening stories about the power of the divine—both the spectacularly vivid and the depressingly mundane—told in Hesiod’s work and in the *Hymns* are most likely to have aroused in their audience the sort of fear encapsulated by δέος and φόβος in Aristotle’s theorizing because of the role that inferiority and inference play in this subcategory of fear. Despite Aristotle’s later *floruit*, his theorization, according to Konstan, “best captures the way fear was conceptualized in archaic and classical Greek literature.” Aristotle observes that those who are in a position to do us harm are most likely to arouse our fright, and its “chief catalyst … is the superior
strength of the other party.” And fear, as described by the term φόβος, is not just roused in individuals by an immediate threat, but even by observing, for instance, “that people more powerful than they have suffered reversals, since this causes them to recognize their own vulnerability ...” (the same vulnerability which, Cairns notes, makes pity an available third-party emotion). Fear, then, indicated by φόβος and in large overlap with δέος and its related verb, δέδοικα, involves the evaluation of a possible threat and can be roused by direct experience and by inference, like φρίκη. Unlike φρίκη, φόβος/δέος seems to refer in large part to fear of one’s superiors, and the divine certainly number among our superiors.

The fear stimulated by Hesiod and the Hymns’ poets, then, is a fear made possible by inference (for Aristotle, a meaning covered by φόβος and δέος; and by φρίκη, especially if unexpected stimuli are present) rather than a purely instincual fear that looks like unreasoning shock (ἔκπληξις). In addition, it is a feeling generated toward someone more powerful than the person feeling it (δέος/φόβος). If a random pirate exhibits fear at Dionysus’ fantastic power, then I likely should; if Zeus has the ability to hide livelihood from mortals in general, then he can likely hide mine. Inference is, not incidentally, a way that horror fiction works to rouse fear in its audience, too. Although I have never myself experienced events like those depicted in The Castle of Otranto, the believability of its narrative and of the horror elements embedded within it might prompt me toward fear that similar might occur to me. When a member of Hesiod’s audience or that of the Homeric Hymns heard a story about the superior power that the divine is only too able to wield against human beings much like themselves (and against each other), that person would be rightly afraid of the power of that particular deity.

In this study, I do not limit my assessment of horror elements and their effects to passages in which a poet uses any particular Greek term because Hesiod and the Hymns’ poets are not theorizing the effects of their stories to determine where feelings that could be described as fear—whether ἔκπληξις, φρίκη, or δέος and φόβος—might be roused, as they are too busy rousing those feelings. A Greek audience member may have used any or all of these “fear” terms to describe her feeling at hearing a story that Hesiod recited. To describe this feeling, I tend to use the general “fear,” but to describe the elements deployed to rouse this feeling, the more specific “horror,” as this fear word commonly describes the fright deliberately stimulated by the creator of a piece of media. Media fall into the horror genre, as Carroll and Clasen (among others) observe, only because entries seek to elicit fear at the events depicted within. Genre and emotion are thus intimately bound up with each other, and when a piece of media intends to rouse fear in its audience, we call both the piece and the feeling “horror.”

In assessing the elements of Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns that are meant to frighten their audiences and the emotional responses these elements model in narrative, I closely follow the thinking laid out by Feldt in her article, “Feeling Narrative Cultures.” There, Feldt pushes her case for the importance of horror and fantastic elements with her work on the Mesopotamian myth of Ninurta, where she delves into the (verbalized) emotions and affects (defined by Feldt as “somatic responses”) generated by religious narratives. She follows certain scholars of
emotion in treating emotions “as narratives.” Such a view is supported by the work of those who argue “that we understand affects/emotions only when we verbalize or narrate them, or in an interplay with a verbalized form.” Feldt argues, “… we must pay more attention to the nexus of narrativity and the emotions, as religions undoubtedly play key roles in emotion regulation, stimulation, and training.” In other words, “we need to investigate not only how narratives stimulate emotions but also how emotions unfold narratively and become part of religious identity formation.” To that end, and with horror effects in mind, Feldt proposes to assess “(1) verbalized emotions, (2) emotional story effects, and (3) the overall levels of stimulation of emotions across a narrative or a set of narratives.” In general, she distinguishes between strategies or elements that increase emotional or sensory simulation and those that moderate it. Novelty, dishabituation, ambiguity, complexity, switching perspectives, horror, and similar strategies may be said to increase the rousing of emotions and sensations, while familiarity, meeting standard cultural expectations, familiar patterns, or everyday happenings, etc. are strategies that we can assume will decrease sensory rousing.

Feldt is interested not in the rousing of feelings such as joy, but instead on those such as fear.

Like Feldt, I also track the various elements that might rouse fear in the audiences of religious narratives, but I take my argument a step further by extrapolating theological messaging from these elements. Feldt herself is wary of “problems of theologising … that may arise when scholars of religion focus on the religious representations severed from the aesthetic form, and assume that religious texts embed (more or less) consistent theologies or worldviews.” By focusing on the “aesthetic form” of the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod and extrapolating possible theologies, I seek both to honor the particularities of these poems and the fact that what we often call “Greek religion” is in no way a uniform system. I embrace the “lack of order and consistency [that] seems to be more normal in religious narratives than consistency” and I keep in mind these poems’ “genre and contexts of use” in assessing their horrors. Although gathered into this study under the aegis of fear, horror elements appear differently and promote different messaging within and between the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod’s works.

Still, my analyses in this book rest on the assumption that the poets of the Hymns and Hesiod ought to be considered theological thinkers. Ancient people clearly considered Hesiod, at least, to be one (even if a very bad one). That said, as Julia Kindt puts it in her entry in the volume, Theologies of Greek Religion, “ancient Greek religious beliefs articulated themselves in a much more haphazard and piecemeal fashion” than our term “theology” typically accommodates, and these beliefs were fashioned “throughout a wide variety of texts and contexts.” Hence, I follow the example set especially throughout the volume in which Kindt’s article appears in speaking of multiple theologies or of a theology rather than of
Greek Theology proper. A reading of the *Hymns* and Hesiod that embraces their plurality aligns with the fact that “[a]ncient Greek religion was a heterogeneous phenomenon, which included and embraced multiple religious stances,” including those articulated in tragedy, historiography, and other genres. I am particularly influenced by what Kindt defines as ‘the theology of the story’—the way in which in the ancient Greek world, views about the nature of the gods and their availability to human knowledge were articulated not only explicitly in critical discourse but also, and perhaps above all, in narrative form: as stories. … Given the multiple ways in which stories seem to articulate theological views … it may not be entirely misleading to say that ancient Greek religion was to a significant extent a theology of the story.

Both Hesiod’s work and the *Homeric Hymns* narrate stories and, as I show in this volume, these stories make theological claims. I keep in mind that “even though different kinds of stories do indeed speak to the question of what is a god, they may do so in radically different ways” and thus that “later scholarship has favoured some stories and dismissed others as irrelevant to our understanding of ancient Greek religion.” I devote equal space and thought in this volume to Hesiod and the *Hymns*, and find that their respective stories have different things to say about divine entities.

Rather than juxtapose the claims articulated in Hesiod with that of the *Hymns* by way of their generic differences or chronology, two modes that might help “map the spectrum of ways in which stories articulate views about the nature of the divine,” I seek in this book to track these poems’ use of horror elements to promote their respective theological messages: should we fear the divine? If so, why, or under what circumstances? Because these poems, despite their shared epic nature, differ in content and were composed by different poets for different audiences at different times, the messages that each articulates likewise differ. It is the purpose of my project to track the ways in which these poems use horror elements to stimulate and represent disquieting emotions and, importantly, how their poets nuance, complicate, and help their audience members cope with the fears they have roused.

Over the five main chapters of this book, I follow two different yet complementary strains of fear, one pertinent to the *Homeric Hymns* and one to Hesiod’s epics, alternating my treatment of these corpora over the first four.

To begin, I explore in Chapters 1 and 2 the ways in which these poets sought to stimulate a fear of the divine in their audience to communicate about the nature of the same. The poets of the *Homeric Hymns* use the direct divine-mortal interaction offered by epiphany, while Hesiod opts to describe a cosmic regime that is not organized with humankind in mind. Chapter 1 assesses the *Hymns*, in which human beings are subject to the terrifying whim of each poem’s titular deity, as each piece crescendos in its titular divinity’s unexpected epiphany to (a) mortal interlocutor(s). I read these epiphanies especially with Feldt’s maximalist, mode-based model of the literary fantastic. This chapter focuses on the narrative
*Hymns* (those that relate a mythic narrative) with the exception of the comparatively later *Hymns to Hermes* and *to Pan*, to which I return in Chapter 5 when I consider the role of humor in lightening the horrific overtones of myth. Already in Chapter 1 we see how the poets could use fear to presage the great blessing or even, in the *Hymn to Apollo*’s case, joy, that could follow direct interaction with a god, and I return to these nuances in Chapter 3.

First, however, in Chapter 2, I borrow from Lovecraft the apparatus of “cosmic horror” to tackle Hesiod’s disorienting cosmos and the fear his descriptions of it could rouse in his audience. Although Beal has acknowledged the cosmically horrific overtones of ancient Near Eastern myths, scholarship on Hesiod tends to see in the corpus an overall positive tone. I agree, however, with the pessimistic readings of Brockliss, who brings the apparatus of “dark ecology” to bear on *Works and Days* and the aesthetics of the nightmare to the pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield of Heracles*. I demonstrate that in Hesiod’s myths, set “earlier” in the sweeping “history” of the mythological story world than the narratives recorded in the *Hymns*, human beings are born into an already-established cosmos and must grapple with the divine for their position within it. This existential fear—namely, that humanity is a cosmic afterthought with little power in the scheme of the cosmos—is baked, for instance, into Hesiod’s multiple, distressing accounts of humanity’s origin. Even the justice-oriented Zeus proves himself a terrifying force in Hesiod’s worldview.

Just as they set up their terrifying premises in disparate ways, these poets each ameliorate and complicate their audience’s fears in disparate ways, and their coping mechanisms are the focus of the next three chapters. I turn in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 to consider how the mortal audience members listening to the *Theogony*, *Works and Days*, or *Hymns* coped with the frightening patterns established in the mythic paradigms explored in my first two chapters. In Chapter 3, I return to the *Homeric Hymns*, and first show how their poets are careful to maintain a temporal frame around the horrific events of their myths to isolate these contents to the deep past. Second, I show how a poet could “re-tool” scenes of epiphany into scenes of, in Kripal’s term, “communion,” in the *Hymns to Demeter* and *to Apollo*. In Chapter 4, I show how Hesiod promotes his mortal audience’s productive engagement with mythic narratives not despite, but rather because of their horrifying premises. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod reveals that one’s lot in life hinges largely on one’s ability to cultivate a positive (or at least not a negative) relationship with the current Olympian regime. Hesiod’s mortal audience is in the perfect position to establish such a relationship precisely because of the fear they have just experienced, as the poem’s depiction of an uncaring or even malevolent cosmic order demonstrates precisely why they ought to take Hesiod’s words seriously. Hesiod thus uses fear to posture as an authoritative poet worth heeding. Both poets, then, ameliorate the fears of their audience members through variant modes.

I conclude my exploration of both of these bodies of poetry in Chapter 5 by assessing the explicit self-representation of Hesiod and the implicit self-representation of the poets of the *Hymns*. Each poet ultimately demonstrates himself to be a master of myth, able to manipulate the emotional cadence of the stories he tells. This ability allows the poets of the *Homeric Hymns* to compose scenes of irony at the
expense of their divine characters. Their deep familiarity with the horrifying tropes of epiphany, meanwhile, allows the poets of the *Hymns to Hermes* and *to Pan* in particular to invert them. Hesiod, meanwhile, represents himself in the famous *Dichterweihe* of the *Theogony* easily withstanding an epiphany of the Muses on Mount Helicon. The poet, by representing himself as able to interact with or even poke fun at the gods without anxiety subtly convinces his audience that his perspective on the divine ought to be considered authoritative.

To conclude this book, I turn to the *Iliad* and * Odyssey*, poems which have only up to this point served as comparanda, and illustrate the wider applicability of the methods employed in Chapters 1 and 2 for identifying the horrific potential of myth. I run my analysis of these longer epics parallel to that conducted in those first chapters, focusing as I did there on the fantastic and unknowable nature of the divine and structure of the cosmos from the mortal perspective. I show that Homer communicates to his audience of non-heroic mortals how their heroic counterparts are subject to the fearsome nature of the divine and the murky machinations of the cosmos over which they rule. If even heroes, to whom the gods are particularly close, still suffer greatly in confrontation with divinity and with the cosmic order, then what could Homer’s audience expect, composed as it would have been of “mere” mortals for whom particularly close divine-human relationships were unavailable?

Mythic literature allows us a glimpse into how ancient Greeks theologized their world. The *Homeric Hymns* and Hesiod in particular communicate theologies of fear that illustrate at once the anxieties of (some) ancient people regarding the divine and, importantly, how these practitioners of Greek religion, broadly conceived, managed to cope with those anxieties. As Feldt puts it, “[t]he aesthetic form and context in which religious representations are embedded are crucial for how they are understood and used” and yet, “[t]here has been surprisingly little outright theoretical reflection on the literary-aesthetic form of religious texts.”86 I do not wish to foreclose in this book other interpretations of the myths related by Hesiod and the poets of the *Homeric Hymns*, but only to show that these texts’ respective horror elements and the fear they rouse and this emotion’s subsequent amelioration contributes to the theological messaging of each set. In a culture without an official canon, where myth-makers can and did intervene in religious storytelling, I propose some new ways to understand why poets insisted on an often fear-inducing supernatural realm.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Pindar’s admitted intervention in the story of Pelops in *Olympian* 1.
2 Feldt 2020.133.
3 By which I mean, after Hardie 2020 (2015), “hexameter narrative poems on the deeds of gods, heroes, and men …” Per Richardson 2015.19–20: “It is easy to see the longer *Homeric Hymns* as miniature epic narratives. They tell stories about the gods in a language and style similar to that of the Homeric epics,” and both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain scenes, such as Hera’s deception of Zeus and Aphrodite’s affair with Ares that are comparable to the *Hymns*. See also Faraone 2015.