THE DERVENI COMMENTATOR
AS LITERARY CRITIC

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The Derveni papyrus, a document vital to our understanding of early Orphism, has excited keen interest since its publication in *ZPE* some twenty-three years ago.[1] Much attention has been devoted to the Orphic cosmogony contained within the papyrus, to what light the accompanying commentary sheds on the cosmogony and on Orphic practice, and to the commentator's scholarly method (or lack thereof). The document as a whole adds much to our knowledge of Orphism, but the commentary on the Orphic poem has been found wanting. It has been roundly indicted as a defective allegorization of the poem, as highly derivative of Presocratic paradigms and vocabulary, and as an actual impediment to our study of the poem.[2] As currently published, however, the papyrus

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[1] The text was first printed in its entirety as "der Papyrus von Derveni" in *ZPE* 47 (1982) following 300. Jeffrey Rusten, in "Interim Notes on the Papyrus from Derveni," *HSCP* 89 (1985) 121–40 has given the best concise account of the fortunes of the text (121–22). Unless otherwise indicated I use the *ZPE* text but adopt, as does Rusten, the numberings of columns which M. L. West uses in *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1983): *ZPE* column 4 = West column 5 and so on. When quoting from the papyrus I use boldface to identify those words which are quotations of the Orphic Cosmogony. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own and all texts are OCT. Many thanks to Jeffrey Rusten for allowing me to use the word-index which he prepared for this document, to Larry Alderink for first introducing me to P. Derveni, and to the editor and Jeffrey Rusten for their many helpful suggestions.

[2] The following scholars indict the commentator as a bad allegorizer: West (above, note 1) 77–94 and Jeffrey Rusten ("Interim Notes," above, note 1) and in "Phanes-Eros in the Theogony of 'Orpheus'" (paper delivered at the 17th International Congress of Papyrologists, Naples, May 1983) where he calls the commentator unscrupulous. The assessment that the commentator derives his thought and vocabulary from the Presocratics is made by Walter Burkert in "Orpheus und die Vorsokratiker. Bemerkungen zum Derveni Papyrus und zur pythagoreischen Zahlenlehre," *A&A* 13 (1967) 93–114; in "La Genèse des choses et des mots. Le Papyrus de Derveni entre Anaxagore et Cratyle," *Les Etudes Philosophiques* 4 (1970) 443–55; and in "The Derveni Papyrus and Orphic Theogony" (unpublished lecture, Cambridge University, 1979) 1–3 and passim. This assessment is echoed by West at 78–82, who also accuses the commentator of manipulating the text to suit his own purposes. Rusten ("Interim Notes," above, note 1) believes that the commentator's

invites us to examine it more closely for what it is: a commentary upon
multiple texts. In fact, it is at least 85% commentary; only 39 of the 311
lines which constitute columns 1–22 of the *ZPE* text are lines or parts
of lines of the Orphic poem, and these yield but fifteen whole verses of
that poem.[3] Instead of indicting the document for what it is not, let us
reexamine it and redefine it on its own terms as practical criticism of
written and nonwritten texts. As such, the document is important to
our understanding of the development of the literary theory and criti-
cism if not to the entire *epistêmê* of the late fifth and fourth centuries.[4]

The Derveni commentator, whom I shall also call the Derveni
author, does indeed explicate a segment of Orphic cosmogony without
reference to any specific critical method, but we must remember that
when he wrote (ca. 400 B.C.) critical theory and method, as they are
conceived of today, did not exist.[5] Moreover, what commentaries on
classical texts from the classical and late antique period we do possess
vary widely in their authors' purposes, methods, insights, and scope;
neither the form nor the subject of criticism had yet become generic.[6]
The great intellectual revolution of the late fifth and fourth centuries was
that critical questions were being asked about language and literature and
that a critical vocabulary with which to ask the questions was developing.

While the Derveni author's explication may seem haphazard and his
strategies nonexistent, these strategies nonetheless echo, foreshadow,
and on occasion surpass in their insight those of Plato and Aristotle.
His preoccupations also reflect an apprehension of literary meaning
which reminds us of Aristophanes'. Whereas Aristotle in the *Poetics* is
an almost purely theoretical critic who elaborates generic taxonomy

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defective allegorizations defy grammar and logic. But Burkert (1979) 13 acknowledges that
the commentary is "a piece of literature, written by an ambitious author for a public of
educated readers."

[3] So Burkert ("The Derveni Papyrus," above, note 2) 5.

[4] I use the interpretation of Foucault's term which Alan Sheridan gives in *Michel Fou-
cault: The Will to Truth* (London and New York 1980) 209: " ... the underlying set of
rules governing the production of discourses in any single period."

[5] I accept Burkert's dating ("The Derveni Papyrus," above, note 2) 2–3 as adopted and
further justified by West (above, note 1) 77–82.

[6] The Derveni document can tell us much about the development of scholia; such an
investigation would best be pursued in a separate essay. For example, the problem of
whether or not column 17 is an "insertion" (and if so, its attribution) could be discussed
in the context of N. G. Wilson's remarks on composite commentaries in "A Chapter in
the History of Scholia," *CQ* 17 (1967) 244–56, especially at 255–56. Recent work on
individual early scholiasts has sought to revise (for better and worse) their traditional
reputations: for example, S. West, in "Chalcenteric Negligence," *CQ* 20 (1970) 288–96,
argues that Didymus' keen judgment in historical matters has been vastly overrated;
Robert Kaster, in "The Grammarian's Authority," *CP* 75 (1980) 216–41, gives a sympa-
thetic audience analysis of Servius' commentary on Vergil, while in "Macrobius and Ser-
vius," *HSCP* 84 (1980) 219–62 he examines Macrobius.

through a technical vocabulary, and whereas Plato's characters nicely expound linguistic and literary theory as *obiter dicta*, and whereas Aristophanes' delightful wordplay betrays a sophisticated but mostly unstated understanding of language, the Derveni commentator, like the majority of ancient critics, is a practical critic.[7] It is important to view Plato's and Aristotle's theoretical criticism in light of the practical criticism displayed in the Derveni document. Since such documents were probably far more numerous in the early fourth century than we can now imagine, the Derveni document can give us some small idea of the critical milieu in which Plato, Aristotle, and Aristophanes worked and to which they contributed and reacted.

In the course of making his *explication du texte*, the Derveni author grapples with unstated questions about the very nature of language, its ability to convey meaning, its utter necessity, and its ambiguity. I hope here to extract and state the questions which direct the Derveni commentator's remarks, to discover at what points his investigations intersect with those of Plato and Aristotle, and to show in what ways he shares Aristophanes' insights. Therefore, I shall articulate six critical concerns which I believe the Derveni author demonstrates and discuss each, when possible, with reference to the critical concerns expressed or implied in relevant works of Plato, Aristotle, and Aristophanes. The first concern is the most important; subsequent concerns derive from it. This method need not be viewed as an "infinite regression," as Herzfeld puts it, i.e. as a lack of willingness to embrace a purely philological explication, but rather should be considered a valid process whereby we may discern the Derveni author's critical concerns and assumptions.[8]

1. The first concern is, what is the author's subject? Moderns have assumed that the Derveni author's subject is his own (flawed) interpretation of the theological content of the Orphic poem. In fact, the commentator's subject might better be seen as text, viewed in utilitarian and concrete rather than in aesthetic and abstract terms. The Derveni author comments not only upon the Orphic poem, but also upon other phenomena which may be considered texts and which are pertinent to Orphism. Again, we must remember that our present and nearly universal habit of characterizing the Derveni document as a poem and commentary thereon may be harmfully inaccurate, for such a perceptual stance diverts us from viewing the entire document as an autonomous object of study. The tendency to forget that the Derveni author himself

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[7] For a history of literary theory, see Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* 1 (Oxford 1968) 16–86. D. A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981) 9 reminds us that literary criticism in antiquity was predominantly practical and very seldom theoretical.

[8] Michael Herzfeld, "The Excavation of Concepts: Commentary on Peradotto and Nagy," *Arethusa* 16 (1983) 59.

may not have viewed his effort as a commentary on a poem is nearly universal.[9] In fact, the Derveni author discusses not only the Orphic poem (columns 5–16 and 18–23) but also dreams (2.6), oracles (2.2–5), and sacrificial and/or initiatory rites (columns 3, 4, 17).

Nowhere does the commentator use a word which may be translated as "text"; that word is used here to refer to all the discrete objects of his scrutiny.[10] For two reasons we can refer to all such objects with this term: a) all such objects—the Orphic poem, the dreams, the oracles, and the rites—share the commentator's attention as phenomena which he must interpret on behalf of others; b) the author uses the same vocabulary and the same analytical method to discuss both written and non-written texts, again with the same end: to show the utility afforded him who understands them. Thus his interpretation finds its unity as much in the methods he employs as in that which he chooses to interpret. The commentator employs what we now call metaphor and simile in order to describe both written and nonwritten texts. Thus he makes payment of a penalty a metaphor for the devotees' giving of offerings and likens the numerous ritual cakes to the numberless souls of the dead:

$ψ[υχ . . . . . .]$ ͅοι τὴν θυσ[ίαμ] τούτου ἕνεκεν [
οἱ μ[ύστα]ͅι ὡ[σ]περεὶ ποινὴ[ν] ἀποδιδόντες τοιδε[ ]
ἱεροῖ[ς] ἐπισπένδουσιν ὕ[δω]ρ καὶ γάλα, ἐξ ὧμπερ καὶ τὰς
χοὰς ποιοῦσι. ἀνάριθμα [καὶ] πολυόμφαλα τὰ πόπανα
θύουσιν ὅτι καὶ αἱ ψυχα[ὶ ἀνά]ριθμο[ί] εἰσι. (3.4–8)

Compare to this metaphorical description of actions and symbolic objects his metaphorical analysis of Orpheus' choice of words: *adyton*, the commentator says, is used by Orpheus to represent *bathos*:

[τ]ῆς Νυκτός. ἐξ ἀ[δύτοι]ο δ᾽ αὐτὴν [λέγει] χρῆσαι
γνώμην ποιού[με]νος ἄδυτον ε[ἶ]ναι τὸ βάθος
τῆς νυκτός. (8.1–3)

Thus Orpheus speaks to men in metaphor just as the actions prescribed for men are explained metaphorically.[11]

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[9] Rusten ("Interim Notes," above, note 1) 138–40 claims that the talent and confidence displayed by the writer of column 17 could not have belonged to "our poor commentator" (139) and that column 17's irrelevant and unsympathetic look at initiations constitutes a change in subject (138). Burkert ("The Derveni Papyrus," above, note 2) 15 calls column 17 an insertion; West (above, note 1) 78 finds that "it is in the poet's thought, not the commentator's, that one sees a coherent development from column to column." Yet one must note that even if column 17 was not written by the commentator, he has chosen to include it here.

[10] Herzfeld (above, note 8) 66 remarks on our difficulty in recognizing "such concepts when they are not articulated in abstract, theoretical terms akin to our own."

[11] Larry J. Alderink, *Creation and Salvation in Ancient Orphism* (Chico, Cal. 1981) 29, notes the Derveni author's "metaphorical use of sexual language to portray the origin and continuation of the cosmos."

Plato often uses metaphor but has no technical term for it; Aristotle, however, can state that a mastery of metaphor is the most important part of diction for a poet to master:

> ἔστιν δὲ μέγα μὲν τὸ ἑκάστῳ τῶν εἰρημένων πρεπόντως χρῆ-
> σθαι, καὶ διπλοῖς ὀνόμασι καὶ γλώτταις, πολὺ δὲ μέγιστον τὸ
> μεταφορικὸν εἶναι. μόνον γὰρ τοῦτο οὔτε παρ' ἄλλου ἔστι λα-
> βεῖν εὐφυΐας τε σημεῖόν ἐστι· τὸ γὰρ εὖ μεταφέρειν τὸ τὸ
> ὅμοιον θεωρεῖν ἐστιν. (Poet. 1459A4–8; cf. Rhet. 3.2.7–15).

Whether or not action, spoken language, and written language are all equally important or effective ways to encode meaning is a question not taken up by the commentator; as noted previously, he considers written and nonwritten texts equally interpretable. When he discusses the meanings of words found in the Orphic poem, we cannot tell what relationship he draws (if any) between spoken and written language; he writes a commentary upon a poem which is here written but which he describes as having been uttered. In fourteen instances the commentator refers (using forms of φημί and λέγω) to Orpheus as someone who speaks (6.13; 9.10; 10.3; 11.3, 5, 8; 12.7; 13.2, 9; 14.6; 16.11; 18.1; 21.7; 23.12). In any case, these instances reflect, as does much of Plato's work, the conquest of orality by writing, or what Saussure calls "la tyrannie de la lettre."[12]

It is far beyond the scope of this study to define Plato's concept of text, or to discuss whether in fact Plato has a concept of text which may be compared with the Derveni author's. From his frequent concern in the Cratylus, Protagoras, and the end of the Phaedrus with the problem of whether language can express thought, it is clear that Plato's attention is directed far more often to written and spoken texts than to such texts as dreams and oracles, or for that matter, to such texts (or signs) as artistic mimeseis. Certainly Plato, like the Derveni author, is concerned with the effect that misinterpretation of texts has upon the audience's subsequent behavior.

Aristotle's understanding of text in the Poetics is restricted to a secular, written poiēsis, an imitation through words of actions designed to produce genre-specific affects; the influence of poetry upon subsequent behavior is not discussed. Like our commentator, Aristotle writes in order to help the audience of a text to understand authorial intent, but since for him texts are not sacred, he wishes to discern how we might judge how well the poet has produced the affect which he, the critic, deems proper. And to a much greater degree than does the Derveni author, Aristotle asserts the efficacy of written texts to convey meaning; I shall discuss this matter at greater length presently.

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[12] Ferdinand de Saussure, Cours de Linguistique Générale (Paris 1931³) 53.

Having arrived at a definition of text for the Derveni author as a
written, spoken, or otherwise manifested sign which when properly
understood leads men to the correct activities and states of mind, I shall
now attend to the questions raised by the Derveni commentator's inter-
pretation of that particular text known as the Orphic poem. This at-
tention is necessary because three of the four columns which discuss
nonwritten texts (columns 2, 3, and 4) are very poorly preserved, and
the fourth (column 17), while in a far better state of preservation, may
not have been written by the Derveni commentator himself.[13] Thus, it
is impossible to contrast the Derveni author's concept of written text
with his concept of nonwritten text, supposing that it is valid to do so,
and equally impossible to contrast his views with those scattered and
enigmatic views expressed by Plato and Aristotle.

2. If written or spoken texts convey and contain meaning with language,
what is language? Language is comprised of utterances which postdate
and explain being and which direct action. That being precedes naming
is implicit throughout most of the commentary but is made explicit at
14.1: π[ρό]τερον ἦν πρ[ὶν ὀνο]μ[α]σθῆνα[ι]· ἔπ[ει]τα ὠνομάσθ[η] (cf.
15.9–12 and 18.9–10). The Derveni author knows that some men find
oracles useful in a practical way:

> χρᾶν τόνδε τὸν θεὸν νομίζον[τες ἔρ]χονται
> [π]ευσόμενοι ἄσσα ποῶσι. (8.8–9)

When we consider the commentary from this perspective, we find that
the Derveni author seems to view language as a sign of a sign, as
Derrida puts it; language does not necessarily pervert or skew thought,
but may in fact express it.[14]

The *Cratylus* reflects similar concerns: speech acts, particularly acts
of naming, are meaningful; a name is a class of action: Ἆρ' οὖν οὐ καὶ
τὸ λέγειν μία τις τῶν πράξεών ἐστιν; *Crat.* 387β8–9). Furthermore,
names are tools (388Α8) by which we give each other information and
by which we distinguish essences (387β7–c10). Because the act of
naming imparts meaning, it is a powerful act: Οἶσθα ὅτι ὁ λόγος τὸ πᾶν
σημαίνει καὶ κυκλεῖ καὶ πολεῖ ἀεί, καὶ ἔστι διπλοῦς, ἀληθής τε καὶ
ψευδής (408c2–3). One might compare the Derveni commentator's
description of how and why Orpheus named things as he did:

> πά[ντ' οὖ]ν ὁμοίω[ς ὠ]νόμασεν ὡς κάλλιστα ἠ[δύν]ατο
> γινώσκων τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὴμ φύσιν, ὅτι οὐ πάντες
> ὁμοίαν ἔχουσιν οὐδὲ θέλουσιν πάντες ταυτά. (19.1–3)

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[13] Arguments in favor of calling column 17 an insertion are given by Burkert ("The Der-
veni Papyrus," above, note 2) 15 and by Rusten ("Interim Notes," above, note 1) 138–40.
[14] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and
London 1976) 29.

In the *Cratylus*, Socrates avers, probably in jest, that names do signify the innate φύσις of the referent (396A2–6; cf. 404B5ff. and 407E5–408) and that language ultimately shapes all (408C2–3). The end of the *Cratylus*, however, leaves us wondering whether or not language in fact perverts the thought which it attempts to convey (435D7ff.).

Aristotle does not ask, let alone attempt to decide, whether or not language can express thought. For him, the question is irrelevant; language represents what it purports to; it is a sign of a sign. It effectively communicates meaning; indeed, that is its task: Ἔστω οὖν ἐκεῖνα τεθεω-ρημένα καὶ ὡρίσθω λέξεως ἀρετὴ σαφῆ εἶναι· (σημεῖον γάρ τι ὁ λόγος ὤν, ἐὰν μὴ δηλοῖ, οὐ ποιήσει τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἔργον) (*Rhet.* 3.2.1). Language is the most important tool by which the tragic mimesis is accomplished. Tragedy can do its job without being performed: ἡ γὰρ τῆς τραγῳδίας δύναμις καὶ ἄνευ ἀγῶνος καὶ ὑποκριτῶν ἔστιν, ἔτι δὲ κυριωτέρα περὶ τὴν ἀπεργασίαν τῶν ὄψεων ἡ τοῦ σκευοποιοῦ τέχνη τῆς τῶν ποιητῶν ἐστιν (*Poet.* 1450B18–20; cf. 1453B3–6 and 1462A11–14). Some dithyrambists composed for an audience of readers alone: Βαστάζονται δὲ οἱ ἀναγνω-στικοί, οἷον Χαιρήμων (ἀκριβὴς γὰρ ὥσπερ λογογράφος), καὶ Λικύ-μνιος τῶν διθυραμβοποιῶν (*Rhet.* 3.12.2). Such statements imply that reading a written text is as effective and affective as is witnessing a performance, if not more so.[15] Aristotle also states that that which is written should be as easy to read as it is to utter since the two are the same: Ὅλως δὲ δεῖ εὐανάγνωστον εἶναι τὸ γεγραμμένον καὶ εὔφραστον· ἔστιν δὲ τὸ αὐτό (*Rhet.* 3.5.6). (We should not, of course, ignore the strong possibility that this remark also refers to the practice of reading aloud.) In any case, Aristotle's concern with assessing a poet's effectiveness in imitating thought with language implies that language can in fact do so.

3. If it is granted that language has meaning and power, is its meaning necessarily patent? If not, why not? Does the maker of a text intentionally obscure its meaning? Why and how should we be aware of this? The extent to which a commentator must explicate tells us the extent to which the poet has obscured meaning.

The Derveni author uses αἰνίσσομαι to indicate the enigmatic nature of poetry:[16]

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[15] Cf. the detective novelist K. C. Constantine's remark about writing dialogue: "You do it and read it and do it again and read it again, and keep doing it until it starts to *look* like you want to *hear* the story. Very tricky stuff, this tone business, because you're not writing it to be spoken or acted or even to be read aloud. You're writing it to be read silently"; in *The Man Who Liked to Look at Himself* and *A Fix Like This* (Boston 1983) iii.

[16] Though probably not of Platonic authorship, *Alc. B* provides an apt parallel: ἀλλ' αἰνίττεται, ὦ βέλτιστε, καὶ οὗτος καὶ ἄλλοι δὲ ποιηταὶ σχεδόν τι πάντες. ἔστιν τε γὰρ φύσει ποιητικὴ ἡ σύμπασα αἰνιγματώδης καὶ οὐ τοῦ προστυχόντος ἀνδρὸς γνωρίσαι (Socrates at 147B7–C1). Cf. Plato's assertions that Homer (*Theaet.* 194C), Simonides (*Rep.* 332B), and the god at Delphi (*Charm.* 164E) speak enigmatically.

(τ)ἀπο]ρρηθέντα. ἔστι δὲ [. . . . .] πόησις
αἰνιγμ]ατώδης [. .]. [. . . . . .]σαυτ.
].κε θεὰς λέγειν [. . αἰν]ιγματῳδῷ[ς. (4.3–5; cf.
10.5–6, 14.13, and 6.10–11)

Furthermore, he is aware that Orpheus is deliberately obscure (20.1–3ff.) and that it is necessary to say how Orpheus is enigmatic (10.5–6). Two examples of the fact that Orpheus is enigmatic are provided by the commentator: Orpheus calls the abstraction φρόνησις by the proper name Μοῖρα (15.6–7) and alters the existing meaning of an ἔπος (20.1–3). Aristophanes, too, is aware of such poetic "riddles" and makes good comedy of them, as can be seen from Strepsiades' readiness to learn the new meaning of the word δῖνος and from his too-prompt acknowledgment of his prior ignorance:

οὐκ ἐξελήλακ', ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τοῦτ' ᾠόμην
διὰ τουτονὶ τὸν δῖνον. οἴμοι δείλαιος,
ὅτε καὶ σὲ χυτρεοῦν ὄντα θεὸν ἡγησάμην. (Clouds 1472–74)

Aristotle finds that poets can render meaning obscure, for they coin words:

πεποιημένον δ' ἐστὶν ὃ ὅλως μὴ καλούμενον ὑπὸ τινῶν αὐτὸς
τίθεται ὁ ποιητής, δοκεῖ γὰρ ἔνια εἶναι τοιαῦτα, οἷον τὰ κέρατα
ἔρνυγας καὶ τὸν ἱερέα ἀρητῆρα, (Poet. 1457b33–35)

and we grant them license to use uncommon words (Poet. 1458a18–b7).

   The Derveni author does not discuss the problems which arise when authorial incompetence leads to a skewed meaning, probably because Orpheus is a holy man; but it is a problem raised often by Plato. For example, Socrates' remarks to Phaedrus concerning Lysias' compositions introduce a discussion of the relationship between the knowledge of good and evil possessed by an author and the goodness or badness of his composition (Phaedr. 258D). Oftentimes for Plato, the burden of goodness or badness is shifted from the author to his very language; language itself is enigmatic, and this emphasis moves Plato more in the direction of what we now call linguistics than in the direction of poetics or of ethics. For Aristotle, the prescriber and analyst of affect, the issue of authorial competence is central. The fact that there can be good or bad plots implies that not all poets are equally able to construct plots (Poet. 1452b34–1453a7). Likewise, the setting of criteria for characterization implies both that criteria need to be set and also that not all poets can meet these criteria (Poet. 1454a16–b18); the same is true of recognitions (Poet. 1454b19–1455a21). The listing of the qualities characteristic of poets implies that not all men can possess these (Poet. 1455a32–34).

4. If the meaning of poetry is not immediately apprehensible, but has instead been rendered enigmatic by the poet, how can a commentator

help the audience understand the text? The commentator can become an intermediate reader. The kinds of explication which he provides indicate his major linguistic and literary concerns. The Derveni author explicates the Orphic poem in ways which demonstrate that his central concern is to show the many ways in which its meaning is ambiguous. There are two major ways in which language is ambiguous.

a) Different descriptors can have the same referent. For example, different verbs can refer to one action: λέγειν = φωνεῖν = [διδ]άσκειν (7.1-8) and χρῆσαι = ἀρκέσαι (8.5). Different nouns can refer to one entity: Ὄλυμπος = χρόνος (9.3-7), Γῆ, Μήτηρ, Ῥέα, and Ἥρη all refer to the same divinity (19.7-11), Δηιώ can be referred to by Δημή-τηρ, Ῥέα, Γῆ, Μήτηρ, and Ἑστία (19.2-3), and Μοῖρα = φρόνησις (15.6-7). Nouns and verbs can also describe the same referent: Πει-θώ = πείθειν because πείθειν = εἴκειν (18.10-11). All the following are names for the same god: Ἀφροδίτη οὐρανία, Ζεύς, ἀφροδισιάζειν, θόρνυσθαι, Πειθώ, Ἁρμονία (18.5-12) and Νοῦς = Κρόνος because the activity described by κρούειν is one which must be directed by Νοῦς:

τὸ δ᾽ ἐπὶ τούτωι·
Οὐρανὸς Εὐφρονίδης, ὃς πρώτιστος βασίλευσεν,
κρούοντα τὸν Νοῦμ πρὸς ἀλληλ[α] Κρόνον ὀνομάσας
μέγα ῥέξαι φησὶ τὸν Οὐρανόν. (11.5-8)

Plato, like the Derveni author, sees nothing objectionable about equating nouns with nouns and nouns with verbs; after all, actions are a class of being: Πότερον οὖν αὐτὰ μὲν ἂν εἴη οὕτω πεφυκότα, αἱ δὲ πράξεις αὐτῶν οὐ κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον; ἢ οὐ καὶ αὗται ἕν τι εἶδος τῶν ὄντων εἰσίν, αἱ πράξεις; (*Crat.* 386E6-9). The connection of Ζεύς with ζῆν makes this clear (*Crat.* 396A8-B7).

No Aristophanic comedy lacks the sophisticated wordplay for which he is remembered, but one famous example shows Aristophanes' genius for making humor out of the fact that several descriptors can share the same referent. At the end of the *Clouds*, Pheidippides betrays the extent to which he has learned the Stronger Argument, for he neatly asks Strepsiades, whom he is about to beat:

εἰπὲ δή μοι,
οὐ κἀμέ σοι δίκαιόν ἐστιν εὐνοεῖν ὁμοίως
τύπτειν τ᾽, ἐπειδήπερ γε τοῦτ᾽ ἐστ᾽ εὐνοεῖν τὸ τύπτειν;
(1410-12; cf. P. Derveni 7.1-8, discussed above)

Language, then, can be ambiguous insofar as several descriptors can have the same referent. The Derveni author finds four reasons why this can be so:

i) One referent can have different descriptors because these have arisen from different dialects: Γῆ καὶ Γαῖα κατὰ [γ]λῶσσαν ἑκάστοις

(19.9). Plato is concerned with such phenomena, as can be seen from Socrates' statement that ἥλιος = ἅλιος (*Crat.* 408ε5–409α5). Aristotle too is aware that some words are native and others are foreign, but makes this observation in the course of discussing diction and style: λέγω δὲ κύριον μὲν ᾧ χρῶνται ἕκαστοι, γλῶτταν δὲ ᾧ ἕτεροι (*Poet.* 1457β3–4).

ii) One referent can have several descriptors because each descriptor refers to a discrete quality or discrete qualities of that referent; the lengthy discussion of ἀφροδισιάζειν, Ἀφροδίτη, Πειθώ, and Ἁρμονία shows that this is so:

> Ἀφροδίτη οὐρανία
> καὶ Ζεὺς καὶ ἀφροδισιάζειν καὶ θόρνυσθαι καὶ Πειθὼ
> καὶ Ἁρμονία τῶι αὐτῶι θεῶι ὄνομα κεῖται. ἀνὴρ
> γυναικὶ μισγόμενος ἀφροδισιάζειν λέγεται κατὰ
> φάτιν. τῶγ γὰ[ρ] νῦν ἐόντωμ μιχθέντων ἀλλ[ή]λοις
> Ἀφροδίτη ὠν[ο]μάσθη. Πειθώ δ᾽ ὅτι εἶξεν τὰ ἐ[ό]ντα
> ἀλλήλο[ι]σιν. ε[ἴ]κειν δὲ καὶ πείθειν τὸ αὐτόν. [Ἁ]ρμονία δὲ
> ὅτι πο[. . . . . .ἥ]ρμοσε τῶν ἐόντων ἑκάστω[. .]. (18.5–12)

But neither the Derveni author, Plato, nor Aristotle concludes that, since multiple descriptors can exist for a given referent, no one word can utterly represent the referent, nor do they conclude that there are no true synonyms. In fact, Aristotle takes the existence of synonyms for granted: τῶν δ᾽ ὀνομάτων τῷ μὲν σοφιστῇ ὁμωνυμίαι χρήσιμοι (παρὰ ταύτας γὰρ κακουργεῖ), τῷ ποιητῇ δὲ συνωνυμίαι (*Rhet.* 3.2.7).

iii) Sometimes, several descriptors can have one referent because these words are compounds whose aggregate meaning equals the sum of the meanings of their parts: the meaning of Δημήτηρ equals the sum of its parts Γῆ and Μήτηρ, which are two names for one goddess (19.7–11). *Crat.* 404β5–9 gives a different explanation of the etymology of Δημήτηρ, but one which nonetheless considers the word as a compound. Aristotle, on the other hand, attacks as invalid the practice of breaking down nouns and verbs into their component parts; he denies that any individual part of a noun or verb has a meaning in its own right:

> ὄνομα δέ ἐστι φωνὴ συνθετὴ σημαντικὴ ἄνευ χρόνου ἧς μέρος
> οὐδέν ἐστι καθ᾽ αὑτὸ σημαντικόν· ἐν γὰρ τοῖς διπλοῖς οὐ χρώ-
> μεθα ὡς καὶ αὐτὸ καθ᾽ αὑτὸ σημαῖνον, οἷον ἐν τῷ Θεόδωρος τὸ
> δωρος οὐ σημαίνει. ῥῆμα δὲ φωνὴ συνθετὴ σημαντικὴ μετὰ
> χρόνου ἧς οὐδὲν μέρος σημαίνει καθ᾽ αὑτό, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν
> ὀνομάτων. (*Poet.* 1457α10–16)

iv) The Derveni author does not claim that poets coin new words, but rather that Orpheus alters existing meanings or chooses the most appropriate of existing words:

Ὀρφεὺς γὰρ
τὴμ φρόνησ[ι]μ Μοῖραν ἐκάλεσεν· ἐφαίνετο γὰρ αὐτῶι
τοῦτο προσφερέστατον ε[ἶ]ναι ἐξ ὧν ἅπαντες ἄνθρωποι
ὠνόμασαμ. (15.6–9; cf. 16.8–9; 20.1–3)

Aristotle reminds us that the poet may violate common standards of
syntax and diction (*Poet.* 1458b33–35); his remark implies that the poet
has for some reason found existing words unsuitable, and may be com-
pared to the Derveni author's implication that existing meanings are
unsuitable. Sometimes this phenomenon allows a referent to have mul-
tiple descriptors which are not in turn equated with one another; this
should be seen as a logical consequence of points i–iv above rather than
as bad philology and ill logic. Μοῖρα = πνεῦμα (15.1–8) and Μοῖρα =
φρόνησις (15.6–7), but it is neither stated nor implied that πνεῦμα =
φρόνησις. The descriptors Γῆ, Μήτηρ, Ῥέα, and Ἥρη can all refer to
"the same goddess" (19.7–11) and the descriptors Δημήτηρ, Ῥέα, Γῆ,
Μήτηρ, and Ἑστία are all applicable to the referent Δηιώ (19.12). Is it
impossible for Ἥρη to refer to Δηιώ or for Ἑστία to refer to "the same
goddess"? If not, why not? We are not told.

b) A second way in which language is ambiguous is that one
descriptor can have multiple referents; that is, a given word can be
polysemous. The Derveni author's awareness of this phenomenon is
evident in his discussion of the two referents of τὸ αἰδοῖον (10.4–9).
The commentator remarks that, "seeing that men believe that the
source of life is in the genitals, and without them it does not occur, he
used this word, likening Helios to the genital":

ἐν τοῖς α[ἰδοίο]ις ὁρῶν τὴγ γένεσιν τοὺς ἀνθρώπου[ς]
νομίζο[ντας εἶ]ναι τούτωι ἐχρήσατο, ἄνευ δὲ τῶν
αἰδοίων [οὐ γίν]εσθαι, αἰδοίωι εἰκάσας τὸν ἥλιο[ν]. (10.7–9)

Plato, of course, makes the polysemous quality of descriptors the
focus of many of his dialogues; the entire *Symposium*, for example, is a
disquisition on the meaning(s) of Ἔρως. At the beginning of the ban-
quet, it is assumed that Eros is the referent, or the concept, to be dis-
cussed, and that each speech shall act as an extended descriptor; as
Eryximachos suggests, δοκεῖ γάρ μοι χρῆναι ἕκαστον ἡμῶν λόγον
εἰπεῖν ἔπαινον Ἔρωτος ἐπὶ δεξιὰ ὡς ἂν δύνηται κάλλιστον, ἄρχειν δὲ
Φαῖδρον πρῶτον, ἐπειδὴ καὶ πρῶτος κατάκειται καὶ ἔστιν ἅμα πατὴρ
τοῦ λόγου (177d2–5). But Socrates injects doubt; when he interrogates
Agathon, it becomes clear that Agathon (if not the other symposiasts as
well) knows nothing whatsoever of Eros' nature. He even asks Aga-
thon, pointedly, to begin anew: δεῖ δή, ὦ Ἀγάθων, ὥσπερ σὺ διηγήσω,
διελθεῖν αὐτὸν πρῶτον, τίς ἐστιν ὁ Ἔρως καὶ ποῖός τις, ἔπειτα τὰ ἔργα
αὐτοῦ (201d8–e2). And Diotima's extended description of Eros, which
gives a totally different genealogy and attributes to Eros than prior

speakers had given, suggests that "eros," after all, is merely a conve-
nient and time-honored descriptor for someone/something of which
men have no true understanding.

Aristophanes often exploits the comic possibilities of the polyse-
mous nature of descriptors to excellent advantage. In the *Clouds*, the
denizens of the Thinkery venerate a δῖνος in its two referents of "jar"
and "Vortex." And his use of the various referents of the descriptor
χοῖρος creates vicious, multi-level humor at *Ach.* 729–835. The Megar-
ian farmer wishes to sell his daughters, who are disguised as pigs; χοῖροι
can describe not only pigs but also the female genitalia, to which the
girls are and will be equated inasmuch as they shall become slave prosti-
tutes or sexual "food" for their buyers.[17]

5. If words are polysemous, is meaning then not absolute? We may
conclude that for the Derveni author, meaning is contextual rather than
absolute. It has been shown that the choice of any given descriptor can
be governed by a poet's preferences for a dialect form, for a particular
word, or for an alteration of that word's usual meaning, as well as by a
given word's ability to describe some quality or qualities of the referent.
Thus poets manipulate existing contextual meanings and thereby create
their own new contexts. We ought to view Orpheus as such a poet; the
Derveni author states at the beginning of column 19 that Orpheus chose
particular names because he knew that not all men have the same
φύσις.[18] Thus, if men of different φύσεις require different words (i.e. a
different form of encoding) in order to apprehend meaning, then one
meaning can be conveyed in more than one way; the contexts from
which one extracts meaning can vary.

The Derveni commentator does not view the possibility that mean-
ing is contextual as something bad, nor does Socrates, when he declares
that words in a given φωνή must be evaluated according to the stan-
dards proper to that φωνή (*Crat.* 409E4–6; cf. *Prot.* 346D8–E2). Like-
wise, Aristotle acknowledges contextuality when he asserts that a word
can be foreign or native depending on who and/or where we are: λέγω
δὲ κύριον μὲν ᾧ χρῶνται ἕκαστοι, γλῶτταν δὲ ᾧ ἕτεροι· ὥστε φα-
νερὸν ὅτι καὶ γλῶτταν καὶ κύριον εἶναι δυνατὸν τὸ αὐτό, μὴ τοῖς
αὐτοῖς δέ· τὸ γὰρ σίγυνον Κυπρίοις μὲν κύριον, ἡμῖν δὲ γλῶττα (*Poet.*
1457B3–6).

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[17] The *Acharnians* passage has been discussed most recently by Eva C. Keuls in *The
Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (New York 1985) 354 and by myself
in *Menander's Courtesans and the Greek Comic Tradition* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1985) 18–19.

[18] Thanks to Jeffrey Rusten for making it clear that here the Derveni author uses φύσις
in a colloquial way, as does Aristophanes in the *Wasps*:

τὸ γὰρ ἀποστῆναι χαλεπὸν
φύσεως, ἣν ἔχοι τις, ἀεί. (1457–58)

Several things bring about contextuality: space (referential differ-
ence, such as that found between words of different dialects), time
(historical changes between earlier and later meanings of words), and
the varying abilities of the audience to understand different meanings.
All these are at any and all times manipulated by the poet.

Entities in the Derveni cosmogony are ever-changing; being is dy-
namic rather than static. Because, or when, entities change, the words
used to describe them must also change. The words must change in the
sense of being discarded for new words, or else the old words must
acquire new meaning(s). The commentator says, "Zeus will be so called
until . . . ":

καὶ ὕστατον ἔφησεν ἔσεσθαι τοῦτον, ἔπειτ.
ὠνομάσθη Ζεὺς καὶ τοῦτο αὐτῶι διατελεῖ ὄνομα ὂν
μέχρι εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ εἶδος τὰ νῦν ἐόντα συνεστάθη,
ἐν ὧιπερ πρόσθεν [ἐ]όντα ἠωρεῖτο. (14.6–9)

He thus accords recognition to the fact that being is given a different
name when it changes. Conversely, a name is not supplied until the
entity which needs to be named comes into existence:

] τῶγ γὰ[ρ] νῦν ἐόντωμ μιχθέντων ἀλλ[ή]λοις
Ἀφροδίτη ὠν[ο]μάσθη (18.9–10)

Socrates adopts the opposite or "Cratylian" stance when, in arguing
that words have an innate φύσις, he avers that changes in pronuncia-
tion or spelling change the meaning of a word (*Crat.* 418A5ff.). Yet
Socrates and Hermogenes conclude later that both the form and the
meaning of some words may be skewed by their very antiquity (*Crat.*
421c12–D5). Aristotle touches on history's effect on words only briefly
(*Poet.* 1457B1–4); he is more often concerned with the historical changes
in genre.

Yet it does not follow that a new name must be bestowed upon an
entity whenever that entity changes or arises; that is, the commentator
acknowledges that, as being changes, so do the meanings of existing
words. In recognition of Zeus' might, Orpheus likened him to a king,
for a reason which the commentator makes clear:

βασ[ι]λεῖ δὲ αὐτὸν εἰκάζει (τοῦτο γάρ οἱ προσφέρειν
ἐφα[ί]νετο ἐκ τῶν λεγομένων ὀνομάτων) λέγων ὧδε·
Ζεὺς βασιλεύς, Ζεὺς δ' ἀρχὸς ἀπάντων ἀγρικέραυνος. (16.8–10)

We infer that old meanings of existing words do not fall away, and that
words become polysemous with time as they gain new referents. The
Derveni author asserts that the poet Orpheus can change the meaning
of an ἔπος (20.1). Here our author anticipates Aristotle in his granting
of poetic license (see above).

6. If meaning is contextual rather than absolute, how can we understand the varied meanings which arise from varied contexts? In what ways can the contextual nature of meaning enhance meaning? For the Derveni author, contextuality has four facets:

a) The existence of contextuality validates the use of metaphor. A word can be used metaphorically instead of literally (8.1–3, on ἄδυτον and βάθος). The pervasiveness of metaphor and simile in the entire Derveni document has been remarked upon already; Aristotle considers proper use of metaphor a *sine qua non* for the poet (*Poet.* 1459A4–8). And while Plato's characters frequently use metaphor, neither Plato nor the Derveni author has a specialized technical term for it.

b) Because a word can be polysemous, its several meanings can enrich its sense within a given context: τὸ αἰδοῖον can refer to both the phallus and Helios because both contribute to growth (10.7ff.).

c) Because meaning is contextual, one can examine other uses of a word whose meaning is in dispute in order to decide which local meaning is preferable. The lengthy discussion in column 23, where the Derveni author attempts to show that ἐᾶς = ἀγαθῆς and not ἑαυτοῦ is a good example. This section of the commentary has been indicted as proof of its author's prudery; he is seen as unwilling to acknowledge the mention of mother-son incest.[19] But there is plenty of irregular sexual behavior elsewhere in the cosmogony, and it seems unlikely that the commentator is trying to explain it away here and here alone. It seems likelier instead that the Derveni author declines to bowdlerize; here he anticipates Aristotle, who refuses to evaluate a text on morally absolute grounds:

> περὶ δὲ τοῦ καλῶς ἢ μὴ καλῶς εἰ εἴρηταί τινι ἢ πέπρακται, οὐ
> μόνον σκεπτέον εἰς αὐτὸ τὸ πεπραγμένον ἢ εἰρημένον βλέ-
> ποντα εἰ σπουδαῖον ἢ φαῦλον, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰς τὸν πράττοντα ἢ
> λέγοντα πρὸς ὃν ἢ ὅτε ἢ ὅτῳ ἢ οὗ ἕνεκεν, οἷον εἰ μείζονος
> ἀγαθοῦ, ἵνα γένηται, ἢ μείζονος κακοῦ, ἵνα ἀπογένηται. (*Poet.*
> 1461A4–9)

We should also note that the commentator invokes Homer as a source for the sense in which Orpheus wished ἐᾶς to be understood; this is philological criticism of the oldest and best sort.

d) Logic can tell us why there are contextual differences in meaning, as at 9.3–10, where we learn why Ὄλυμπος is not the same as Οὐρανός but is the same as Χρόνος, and at 19.7–8, where we learn why Μήτηρ is an apt name for the goddess:

> Γῆ δὲ καὶ Μήτηρ καὶ Ῥέα καὶ Ἥρη ἡ αὐτή. ἐκλήθη δὲ
> Γῆ μὲν νόμωι, Μήτηρ δ᾿ ὅτι ἐκ ταύτης πάντα γ[ίν]εται.

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[19] So Burkert ("The Derveni Papyrus," above, note 2) 11–12 and West (above, note 1) 80.

Both the Derveni author (9.7) and Socrates in the *Cratylus* (387c3) use
the verb ἐξαμαρτάνω to describe the kind of error made by those who
do not understand such nuances; the burden is not upon an author to
be clear, but upon his audience to understand.

A recognition of contextuality leads, of course, to a recognition of
the necessity for criticism. For the Derveni author, as for Plato, this is a
matter of practical necessity. As stated earlier, the Derveni author
wishes the audiences of Orphic texts to apprehend them correctly in
order to be led to right states and actions. Plato too sees practical value
in understanding, though he articulates this by its obverse, i.e. by recog-
nizing the pitfalls awaiting those who misunderstand. Indeed, Plato
advocates censorship because he doubts the individual's ability to appre-
hend correctly poetic meaning (*Rep.* 10.595ff.). Does this suggestion not
rest on the assumption that citizens, including poets themselves, do not
choose the best kind of art of their own accord? Youth, in particular, is
unable to extract the ὑπόνοια of poetry (*Rep.* 3.378D2–E1).

Plato fears for the inexpert receptor; his solution is not to educate
individuals in critical methods but rather to allow a board of censors to
decide what is suitable for civic consumption. It is unclear how these
censors would achieve consensus among themselves, since Socrates and
his friends are unable to agree among themselves on whether language
conveys or perverts thought (e.g. in the *Cratylus* and the *Phaedrus*) or
what Simonides really meant in his poem (*Prot.* 338–47). Protagoras
thinks the most important part of education is to be clever in regard to
poetry and to understand what in a poem was properly constructed and
what was not (*Prot.* 338E6–339A3). Socrates and Protagoras attempt to
discern Simonides' intent in writing the poem: in ways somewhat like
those found in the Derveni commentary, they examine his choice of
words, his use of particles, and the circumstances under which the poem
was written. That is, they attempt to reconstruct the context. But Plato
never takes the step which the Derveni author and Aristotle take,
namely, the step which assumes that it is possible to extract meaning
from poetry and to communicate this to another party.

To call the Derveni commentator unscrupulous or polemical is to be
out of sympathy for his great achievement, which was to practice inter-
pretive criticism out of a conviction that it is possible and necessary to
do so. The Derveni author anticipates Aristotle in that he charges the
audience with the responsibility for understanding poetry: for both crit-
ics language, while ambiguous, can convey thought, and the ambiguity
can be decoded by the proper reader. The Derveni author interprets the
Orphic poem on behalf of an untrained audience. By rereading and
rewriting the text for that audience, the commentator implies that all
criticism is a species of rewriting as well as of rereading. It is self-

justifying because in thus guiding the audience to what he believes are important questions, the Derveni author creates his own "model readers." Lest we take premature exception to his efforts, let us attempt to understand his initial questions and the critical milieu in which he worked; if we look sympathetically at his aims and methods, we may be able to reconstruct more of the history of Greek literary criticism and theory than we could otherwise hope.