

The Beginnings of Greek Allegory

J. Tate

[p.214]

Was Theagenes of Rhegium really the first Homeric allegorist, as the historians of Greek allegorical interpretation habitually assert? It is true that, according to Porphyry on the Theomachy (*Iliad* XX. 67), allegory—as a mode of defending apparently blasphemous passages—dates from Theagenes, 'who was the first to write about Homer,' and who is referred by Tatian (*ad Graec.* 48) to the time of King Cambyses (529-522 B.C.).¹

But the practice—at any rate in an embryonic form—can, I think, be traced back to Pherecydes of Syros (born not much later than 600 B.C.). That he read some kind of new meaning into Homer would appear from Origen (*c. Celsus* VI. 42; in Diels, *F. der V.* II., pp. 203 f.), who says: 'Celsus says that the words of Zeus to Hera (*Iliad* XV. 18) are the words of God to matter, and that they darkly hint that matter being originally in a confused state, God took

[p.215]

it and bound it by certain proportions and ordered it. And he says that *Pherecydes, having thus understood² the verses of Homer*, said that beneath this region, Earth, there is the region Tartarus, guarded by the Harpies and Thyella, whither Zeus thrusts down those of the gods who are rebellious' (with reference to *Iliad* I. 590)

Without putting too strict an interpretation on this passage, it is yet clear that we have here two offending passages of Homer receiving a new and harmless significance by being taken up into a new cosmology.³ As with so many philosophers much later than Pherecydes, the process of reading doctrine into the myths goes on side by side with the process of remoulding and extending the myths for one's own purposes. Probably it is in this twofold practice that we should look for the origin of allegorical interpretation. The early philosophers who expressed their doctrines in mythical language, which, is to be taken as symbolical and allegorical, may well have been the first to interpret the poetic traditions as though they were conscious allegories.

¹ Schrader (*Porphyrii Quaest. Hom.*, p. 384), followed by Gomperz (*G. T. I.*, p. 574), conjectures that he defended Homer against strictures emanating from the school of Pythagoras or that of Xenophanes. Schrader also (*loc. cit.*) points out rightly that the scholiast does not purport to give any samples of Theagenes' interpretations; Leaf (*ad loc.*) seems of a different opinion.

² My case is supported by Diels' suggestion ὑπονοήσαντα (allegorically interpreted) νοήσαντα.

³ Pherecydes also indulged in the fanciful etymology which was the faithful handmaid of allegory to later times. Diogenes Laertius (I. 119) quotes a sentence from him which turns Κρόνος into Χρόνος, and apparently derives γῆ from γέρας (*cf. Zeller, Pre-Socratic Philosophy* I., p. 90, n. 3). Χρόνος, definite its meaning, is something more definite than the father of Zeus; and the change is an allegory in the Greek sense (see Plutarch, 2, 363d).

Some confirmation for this view is afforded by Greek writers on allegory. Maximus of Tyre (IV. 4, ed. Hobein) mentions Pherecydes and Heraclitus as having expressed philosophic truth by means of mythology, which proves (he thinks) that Homer and Hesiod did the same thing. Perhaps what it does prove is that Pherecydes and Heraclitus (like Maximus) thought that this was what Homer and Hesiod had done. 'Heraclitus,' the Homeric allegorist (c. 24), justifies allegorical interpretation by a similar reference to Heraclitus and Empedocles. These philosophers certainly expressed themselves in myth and enigma;⁴ they gave mythology a new application, and therefore in some degree a new interpretation. But did they explicitly regard the mythical traditions as allegorical, and interpret them from that standpoint? Pherecydes apparently did. Whether Heraclitus did so or not is not quite clear;⁵ the Heracliteans in appealing to allegory may have been following their master's example (see *e.g.* Plato, *Theaet.* 152e). Empedocles is also a doubtful case, unless we believe the scholiast on Plato's *Gorgias* 493, where an allegorical interpretation is ascribed to him.

In any case, the probability is that allegorical interpretation did not spring suddenly from the brain of the grammarian Theagenes.⁶ More probably it grew up gradually with the gradual growth of the more conscious, more scientific use of mythical language to express religious and philosophic speculations.

This document is Public Domain and can be freely distributed and copied.

Prepared for the Web in June 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/>

⁴ Cf. Burnet, *E.G.P.*, p. 217: Empedocles' verse is not much harder to interpret philosophically than Heraclitus' prose.

⁵ Compare fr. 94 (Diels) with *Iliad* XIX. 418. In fr. 32 (Diels) he evidently uses etymology (a play on supposed derivation of Zeus from ζῆν).

⁶ The fact that Anaxagoras (*Diog. Laert.* II. 11) is stated to have been 'the first to declare that the poetry of Homer is on the subject of virtue and justice, and Metrodorus, his disciple, the first to work out the suggestion in an allegorical system, leaves us with the suspicion that the work of Theagenes cannot have been of great importance. He probably confined himself to the obvious interpretations of *e.g.* Apollo, Hephaestus, Poseidon, in the *Theomachy*.