

### **'Gods that faine to be': Political Euhemerism in Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos***

The myth of the wars waged against Zeus by the Titans and Giants has been described as 'the most quintessential epic of epics'.<sup>1</sup> It is treated directly in Hesiod's *Theogony*, and was the subject of the first poem in the Epic Cycle, of which only fragments survive.<sup>2</sup> Renaissance readers believed on the testimony of the so-called *Orphic Argonautica* that Orpheus himself—the legendary pre-Homeric singer reported to have invented epic hexameter—had composed a poem about 'the destructive acts of the Giants'.<sup>3</sup> As 'a myth that concerns the struggle between cosmos and chaos at the most universal level,' it forms a crucial subtext in Virgil's *Aeneid*, insistently paralleled with Augustus' suppression of political enemies and establishment of one-man rule.<sup>4</sup> So when Spenser chooses it as the theme of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, however oddly disjointed this enigmatic fragment may seem from the body of his epic, there is also a sense that he is coming at last to the heart of the matter. But a curious anomaly in how he frames the conflict has received very little attention. The question is one of genealogy. In Hesiod's well-known account, Ouranos ('Heaven') is the first ruler of the cosmos, and his children with Ge ('Earth') are called the Titans. One of them, Kronos ('Saturn' to the Romans), deposes his father, and is deposed in turn by his son, Zeus (Roman 'Jupiter'). The deposed Kronos and his siblings, the other Titans, rebel against Zeus and are defeated, in the war known as the Titanomachy. Spenser presents a different family structure, as *Mutabilitie* complains to Jove:

For, *Titan* (as ye all acknowledge must)  
Was *Saturnes* elder brother by birth-right;  
Both, sonnes of *Uranus*: but by vniust  
And guilefull meanes, through *Corybantes* slight,  
The younger thrust the elder from his right:  
Since which, thou *Ioue*, iniuriously hast held  
The Heauens rule from *Titans* sonnes by might;

(*Mutabilitie Cantos* vi.27)

In referring to an older brother of Saturn named 'Titan', Spenser ascribes to a variant of the Titanomachy myth originating in Euhemerus' *Sacred History*, a controversial fantasy travel narrative composed around 300 BCE, which now survives only in fragments and summaries in other authors. At stake is not simply the gods' family-structure, but their presentation in the tradition stemming from Euhemerus' text as a dynasty of mortal kings, who lived and ruled in the historical past, and came to be worshipped by their subjects. Taken as a theory of the origin of Greek religion and a key to the historical basis of mythology, referred to today as 'Euhemerism', the account was influential throughout the middle ages and Renaissance, and all the texts which follow Euhemerus' genealogy

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Sharrock, *Seduction and Repetition in Ovid's Ars Amatoria 2* (Oxford, 1994), 115.

<sup>2</sup> The cyclic *Titanomachy* was ascribed to Eumelus of Corinth or Arctinus of Miletus, and probably composed in the late C7th or C6th; its version of the Titanomachy may be reflected in Apollodorus' account at the beginning of his *Bibliotheca* (l.i). See M.L. West, "'Eumelos": A Corinthian Epic Cycle?' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 122 (2002), 109–133.

<sup>3</sup> *Orphic Argonautica* 17-18, 429. Proclus says that it is peculiarly 'Orphic' to write poems about the war of the Titans against Zeus: E. Diehl (ed.), *In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria* v. 1 p. 174. On Orpheus' supposed invention of hexameter, see Mallius Theodorus, *De metris* 4.1.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Hardie, *Cosmos and Imperium*, 85-156 (quotation at p. 85).

rather than Hesiod's, mentioning Saturn's brother, 'Titan', also embrace his depiction of the Greek gods as mortal men.<sup>5</sup>

In pre-Christian Jewish writing, in early Christian apologetics, and in Renaissance history and mythography, part of the function Euhemerism serves is to expose Greek religion as a human artefact devoid of religious truth, by contrast with Judaism and Christianity, or 'as a way of emptying myth of the meaning it had held in a pagan, polytheistic system of belief,' to pave the way for the imposition of allegorical readings more easily harmonized with Judaeo-Christian thought.<sup>6</sup> Euhemerism throughout the period has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention, but it is usually regarded as a dull, literal-minded interpretive method which strips myths of their aesthetic and imaginative power by reducing them to accounts of historical events, and as motivated simply by an iconoclastic and chauvinistic attitude to pagan religion.<sup>7</sup> What tends to be overlooked is that, from its beginning, Euhemerism was arguably intended as a commentary on politics as much as on religion and myth.<sup>8</sup> When Spenser affiliates himself to the Euhemeristic tradition in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, this neglected political aspect is key: the gesture warns us not to take the divine status of the Olympian 'gods' at face value, but to focus sceptically on their relation to monarchy on one hand, and to the Christian God on the other. Such scepticism happens also to be the essence of *Mutabilitie's* plea, and Spenser emphasizes the political and Christian contexts by his insistent use of the language of monarchy and by the prophecy of Apocalypse, voiced by the Christ-like figure of Nature. Most critics fail to heed the warning, and dismiss *Mutabilitie's* arguments too hastily, taking Jupiter's rightful sovereignty as unquestionable, because they follow the Hesiodic version of the myth (without enquiring too closely into how it can be squared with Spenser's Christianity). The Hesiodic version has its own relation to politics, exploited particularly by Virgil and Horace in their efforts to persuade a republican Rome to accept one-man rule, on the basis of an analogy between Augustus and Jupiter recalling the deification of Hellenistic monarchs and reflecting the nascent cult of the Roman emperors. Hellenistic ruler-cults like that of Alexander the Great were precisely the object of Euhemerus' satire, as we shall see. Among the Augustans, Ovid reacts in a similar spirit to the cultural deification of Augustus in Virgil and Horace and its absolutist political implications, particularly in the story of Lycaon, an oft-remarked intertext of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*. The political force of Euhemerism as a protest against tyrannical government is spelt out most explicitly in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*, which preserves many of the surviving fragments of the *Sacred History*, and which exerts a particularly strong influence on the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, as Spenser applies Euhemerism to concerns about monarchical absolutism he has been voicing throughout his career.

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. the third Sibylline Oracle, 108-158; Boccaccio's *De Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* 3.4 and 4.1; Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy* Book I; and Raleigh's *History of the World* 1.6.5. There is a reference to Titan as a brother of Kronos or Saturn earlier than Euhemerus, in a fragment of Anacreon, preserved in Fulgentius' *Mythologiae*. But even here the context is a euhemerizing passage (*Mythologiae* 1.20, on Ganymede), suggesting that Fulgentius associates the genealogy with euhemerism.

<sup>6</sup> David Lumms, 'Boccaccio's Poetic Anthropology: Allegories of History in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*,' *Speculum*, 87 (2012), 724-765, at 729.

<sup>7</sup> On Euhemerism, see John D. Cooke, 'Euhemerism: A Mediaeval Interpretation of Classical Paganism,' *Speculum* 2 (1927), 396-410; Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (1953; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 11-36.

<sup>8</sup> The term 'Euhemerism' is often used loosely, to describe any interpretation of myth as a distorted account of historical events, or even the practice of deifying a human being; Euhemerus is also often taken too narrowly to have spoken only of the *posthumous* deification of dead kings. In this paper, I use 'Euhemerism' to refer to the idea that the gods were mortal kings, deified either posthumously or in their lifetime.

Before turning to the *Cantos*, let us first examine the relation of politics and religion in Euhemerus and Lactantius.

### Euhemerus

The *Sacred History* was composed by Euhemerus of Messene around 300 BCE, and translated into Latin by Ennius in the second century BCE. Both texts are lost, but we can piece together a fairly clear picture from other authors, especially from the partial summaries in Diodorus Siculus (in the fifth book of his *Bibliotheca* and in a fragment from the sixth book, preserved by Eusebius (*Praeparatio evangelica* 2.2.59B-61A)) and from Lactantius' quotations of Ennius' translation. A novel in at least three books, it tells of Euhemerus' voyage at the order of King Cassander of Messene, and his discovery of the island of Panchaia off the Indian coast. (*Bibliotheca*, 6.1.4) The island is described in terms recalling a literary *locus amoenus*, and its social structure—a mixture of theocracy and democracy, with no private property—explained. In striking contrast to the monarchies of the contemporary Greek-speaking world, the inhabitants of the capital city, Panara, are described as 'independent and having no king over them' (αὐτόνομοι καὶ ἀβασίλευτοι): though it is only Panara which is specifically mentioned here, there is no mention of a living king exercising authority over the rest of Panchaia, which does not seem to be a monarchy.<sup>9</sup> (*Bibliotheca* 5.42.5) Euhemerus is shown the grand Temple of Zeus, and sees there on a massive gold stele the *Ἱερὰ Ἀναγραφή* ('Sacred Inscription') which gives the work its original name, and which became the most controversial and influential part of Euhemerus' text.<sup>10</sup> The inscription tells the history of Ouranos, his sons Titan and Kronos (Saturn), and Kronos' son Zeus (Jupiter), mortal kings who came from Crete. Ouranos, the first king, is said to have introduced astronomy and worship of the eternal gods to Panchaia. After his death, we have the story alluded to by Spenser, quoted at length by Lactantius (*Divine Institutes* 1.14.2-12):

Then Saturn took Ops to wife. Titan, the elder brother, demanded the kingship for himself. Vesta their mother, with their sisters Ceres and Ops, persuaded Saturn not to give way to his brother in the matter. Titan was less good-looking than Saturn; for that reason, and also because he could see his mother and sisters working to have it so, he conceded the kingship to Saturn, and came to terms with him: if Saturn had a male child born to him, it would not be reared. This was done to secure reversion of the kingship to Titan's children. They then killed the first son that was born to Saturn. Next came twin children, Jupiter and Juno. Juno was given to Saturn to see while Jupiter was secretly removed and given to Vesta to be brought up without Saturn's knowledge.... [Jupiter's brothers Neptune and Pluto are secreted in the same way.] Next, when Titan realized Saturn had sons who had been born and brought up without his knowledge, he gathered his own sons around him (they are called Titani), seized his brother Saturn and Ops, built a wall around them and set a guard over them....When Jupiter grew up and heard that his father and mother were ringed about with guards and had been thrown into chains, he came with a great host of Cretans and conquered Titan and his sons in battle; he released his parents, restored his father to the kingship, and then went back

<sup>9</sup> See Sylvie Honigman, 'Euhemerus of Messene and Plato's Atlantis,' *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 58 (2009), 1-35 at 20-21; Winiarczyk, 79-81.

<sup>10</sup> This is the title given by Diodorus Siculus; Lactantius calls it *Sacra Historia*.

to Crete. After that Saturn was warned by an oracle to beware of his son driving him off the throne. To remove the threat of the oracle and to avoid the danger, he plotted to have Jupiter killed; Jupiter learnt of the plot, reclaimed his right to rule, and put Saturn to flight. Saturn was chased from land to land, pursued by armed men sent by Jupiter to seize him or kill him; with difficulty he found a place in Italy where he could hide.

There is also an account of Zeus' wide travels and conquests, being honoured as a god in the nations he visits (recalling the recent conquests of Alexander the Great). It is Zeus himself who erects the temple of Zeus Triphyllius in Panchaia, claims divine honours, offers sacrifice to his grandfather Ouranos, and has the inscription made. The deeds of Artemis and Apollo have been added to the inscription by Hermes at a later date, extending the deification process dynastically.

This was clearly a rich and piquant text, and scholars have taken various approaches to its tantalizing remains. On one hand, it seems on the surface to offer a distinct theory of the origin of religion, a topic which interested several Hellenistic thinkers, and a distinctive way of interpreting myth, taken up by later writers. On the other, it is not presented as a treatise but as a fantasy travel narrative, clearly not meant to be believed: it may have influenced Lucian, who in turn influenced More's *Utopia*, and we face complex questions about irony and intention familiar to students of More's ludic novel, but all the more difficult to answer because we have only fragments to judge by.<sup>11</sup> Many modern classicists have stressed the contextual importance of the ruler-cults of the Hellenistic world at the time Euhemerus was writing. In the mid-4th BCE Clearchus, tyrant of Heraclea Pontica, instituted his own cult, and Philip II of Macedon attempted to do likewise. (Both were assassinated.) Having received divine honours in Asia Minor, his son Alexander the Great demanded the same from the cities of the League of Corinth: Athens and Sparta complied. After his death in 323 BCE, many of the generals installed as monarchs over his divided empire continued the practice. Ptolemy and his successors in Egypt, with its long Pharaonic tradition, were particularly unrestrained, adding a strong dynastic element.<sup>12</sup> Though related to the traditional Greek custom of 'euergetism', whereby public figures might be addressed as 'god' by way of compliment, in gratitude for some benefaction, nevertheless these official state cults, with their dedicated temples and priests, and their self-aggrandizing quality, being sometimes instituted and imposed by the 'deified' rulers themselves and expanding to include their families, clearly represent a new development, grafting oriental and Egyptian ideas onto Greek ones.<sup>13</sup>

The resemblance to Euhemerus' fable is clear, but there has been disagreement over how to understand the attitude of the text to the historical practice. Some have assumed that Euhemerus intended to explain and justify the political phenomenon, and have even suggested that the *Sacred History* inspired the Ptolemies' acts of self-deification.<sup>14</sup> However, this begs a couple of questions. Firstly, if this was Euhemerus' intention, why does he couch his 'justification' in a fantasy narrative, and set the events on a patently fictional island, with its improbable name (Greek for 'all good things') bewraying so clearly its dreamt-up nature, and its description conforming to the literary

<sup>11</sup> Niklas Holzberg, 'Utopias and Fantastic Travel: Euhemerus, Iambulus', in G. Schmeling (ed.), *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 621–628.

<sup>12</sup> See M. Winiarczyk, *The 'Sacred History' of Euhemerus of Messene* (Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 48–63; Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Middletown, CT: American Philological Association, 1931), 1–34.

<sup>13</sup> Winiarczyk, *Sacred History*, 41–46.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Kololakis, *Zeus's Tomb* (1995), 130. Because of the *Sacred History's* uncertain date, however, we cannot be sure the influence was not the other way around. For the idea that Euhemerus wanted to justify the ruler cults, see e.g. A. Aalders, *Political Thought in Hellenistic Times* (1975), 66; Winiarczyk, 'Sacred History', 101–3.

conventions of the *locus amoenus*? Tim Whitmarsh argues that the setting is designed specifically to evoke the island of Phaeacia in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus recounts his adventures to King Alkinoos, a narrative which was to classical readers itself ‘a byword for fictionality’.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, why did he not choose to concentrate on gods whom the orthodox mythological tradition already presented as deified mortals—Hercules, Bacchus, or Aesculapius? He must have realized that asserting the human origins of the oldest and most authoritative of the Greek gods in the traditional Hesiodic account would be controversial and shocking rather than persuasive. This is the effect it clearly had: Euhemerus’ contemporary Callimachus refers to him as ‘the babbling old man who has concocted the Panchaean Zan [Zeus] and scrawls blasphemous books’;<sup>16</sup> Plutarch similarly accuses Euhemerus of atheism (*Isis and Osiris* 23). Rather, we might see his selection of these gods as deliberately outrageous, and intended to provoke indignant rejection.<sup>17</sup> The flagrant absurdism comes out perhaps most clearly in the way he reconciles his ‘theory’ of mortal origins with the self-evident elemental nature of the oldest of his gods, Ouranos, whose name means ‘Heaven’ or ‘Sky’ in Greek: according to one of the fragments preserved by Lactantius, Zeus renames the sky, which had up until then been known as the aether, after his grandfather, at the same time that he institutes his cult, taking to an intentionally comic extreme the custom of naming cities or landscape features in someone’s honour.<sup>18</sup> (*Divine Institutes* I.11.63) Euhemerus responds to the way in which the ruler-cults of the fourth century were eroding the boundary between gods and mortal kings, pushing the process to its logical limit in order to reduce it to absurdity and to show how impious its implications are. Callimachus and Plutarch are right to be shocked: they are wrong only in ignoring or failing to realize Euhemerus’ irony and satirical purpose.<sup>19</sup>

Several scholars have posited such satirical intent in the *Sacred History*.<sup>20</sup> Holzberg cites the testimony of Athenaeus that Euhemerus made Cadmus and Harmonia, the grandparents of Dionysus, a cook and a flute-girl respectively, which could only be intended to shock, and concludes that ‘disguised satire on...the deification and cult worship of contemporary rulers’ is at least a plausible reading.<sup>21</sup> Roubekas points out that Cassander, the king in whose name Euhemerus undertakes his voyage, seems to have found the ruler-cults inimical and even ridiculous, citing Plutarch on Cassander’s refusal to use the title ‘king’ in his letters, even though others addressed him with the royal title (*Life of Demetrius* 18.2), and for a suggestive anecdote in the *Life of Alexander* (74.1):

Cassander had only recently come to Babylon and when he saw some Barbarians doing obeisance to Alexander, since he had been reared as a Greek and had never seen such a sight as this before, he laughed boisterously.

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<sup>15</sup> Tim Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic: Adventures in Greek Postclassicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 58.

<sup>16</sup> τὸν πάλαι Πάγγαιον ὁ πλάσας Ζᾶνα / γέρων λαλάζων ἄδικα βιβλία ψήχει. Rudolf Pfeiffer (ed.), *Callimachus*, vol. I: *Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), fr. 191, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> As Tim Whitmarsh asks, ‘rather than as a failed attempt to persuade, could we not take the *Inscription* as a successful attempt to discomfit?’ (*Beyond the Second Sophistic*, 53)

<sup>18</sup> Lactantius notes at 1.11.58-9 that this ‘was a common practice in ancient time, particularly with the Greeks.’

<sup>19</sup> Or rather, Callimachus’ speaker in this passage, the revived Hipponax, is doing so: again, we cannot confidently identify the speaker’s view with the author.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to those cited below, see the bibliography of Wiliarczyk at 100, n. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Holzberg, ‘Utopias and Fantastic Travel,’ 625.

Alexander reacts angrily, dashing Cassander's head against the wall (74.2).<sup>22</sup> Note Plutarch's emphasis on the fundamentally 'Barbarian' nature of the worship, as naturally risible to Greek eyes. If the work, like the fictional voyage, was commissioned by Cassander, Roubekas argues, it is likely to have been conceived as a satire against such ruler-worship as a travesty of Greek traditions. Roubekas also emphasizes Euhemerus' distinction between his deified kings and another kind of deity.<sup>23</sup> According to Diodorus Siculus, Euhemerus' Ouranos was 'versed in the movement of the stars' and 'the first to honour the gods of the heavens with sacrifices, whence he was called Ouranos or "Heaven"' (*Bibliotheca* 6.1.8)—tellingly contradicting the more tendentious claim, in the fragment preserved by Lactantius, that Zeus named Heaven after his grandfather. This passage prefaces its account of Euhemerus' teachings 'on the terrestrial gods' with the following:

As regards the gods, then, men of ancient times have handed down to later generations two different conceptions: Certain of the gods, they say, are eternal and imperishable, such as the sun and the moon and the other stars of the heavens, and the winds as well and whatever else possesses a nature similar to theirs; for of each of these the genesis and duration are from everlasting to everlasting. But the other gods, we are told, were terrestrial beings who attained to immortal honour and fame because of their benefactions to mankind, such as Heracles, Dionysus, Aristaeus, and the others who were like them. (*Bibliotheca* 6.1.2)

The 'gods of the heavens' whom Ouranos was the first to honour would appear, in context, to be these 'eternal and imperishable' gods', whom Diodorus contrasts with Panchaia's deified kings. It should be noted, too, that none of the surviving fragments or paraphrases show Zeus or his divine family exercising any supernatural power after their deaths: they are gods only in the sense that the people of Panchaia call them gods, offering worship and sacrifice in the temple built by their king Zeus himself, before his death and burial in Crete. If Hellenistic monarchs and their panegyrists asserted the permeability of the border between the mortal realm and the realm of the eternal gods, Euhemerus' ludic fable seems to assume that such an assertion is ludicrous.

### Lactantius

If the *Sacred History's* claim that the Greek and Roman gods were mortal men is intended satirically, Lactantius misses or ignores the irony, just as Callimachus and Plutarch do. Taking Euhemerus at his word suits his project in the *Divine Institutes*, which is to persuade a cultivated pagan audience that polytheism is mere idolatry, and so convert them to Christianity, but to do so as far as possible by drawing on sources from their own culture. Underlying his argument, however, is the same insistent distinction between a god whose 'genesis and duration [is] from everlasting to everlasting' and 'terrestrial beings who attained to immortal honour', (*Bibliotheca* 6.1.2) and the specific opposition to ruler-worship on both religious and political grounds is common to both.

Lactantius positions himself firmly within Roman culture, even as he attacks Rome. A successful teacher of rhetoric in the Roman provinces of North Africa in the late C3rd and early C4th CE and a convert to Christianity, he is deeply familiar with Greek and Roman literature and well-

<sup>22</sup> Niklas Roubekas, 'Post Mortem makes a Difference,' *Religion & Theology* 19 (2012), 319–339 at 327–31.

<sup>23</sup> Roubekas, 'Post Mortem,' 324; on the two kinds of god see also Albert I. Baumgarten, 'Euhemerus' Eternal Gods: or, How Not to be Embarrassed by Greek Mythology' in Ranon Katzoff, David Schaps and Yaakov Petroff (eds.), *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press), 91–103.

versed in Roman rhetorical methods, and is explicit about his deliberate deployment of these skills to persuade his educated Roman audience: 'The practice of pleading imaginary cases has helped me considerably: I can now use my plentiful command of rhetoric to plead the cause of truth to its end.'<sup>24</sup> In rhetorical style he modelled himself on Cicero (Ficino calls him 'the Christian Cicero'), and throughout the *Institutes* he supports his arguments with quotations from canonical pagan authors rather than scripture wherever possible, knowing his audience predisposed to regard Judaeo-Christian writings as 'silly fiction and lies' (5.4.4).<sup>25</sup> He quotes frequently from Greek and Roman poets where they seem to support his monotheistic views, and, beyond this, shows a nuanced appreciation of the complexity and aesthetic value of poetic fabling; he engages with various schools of philosophy on their own terms.<sup>26</sup> The title he chooses for his exposition and defence of Christianity, *The Divine Institutes*, is intended to evoke Roman law-manuals, as he explains in the opening chapter:

If certain people who are professional experts in fairness have published Institutes of Civil Law for the settlement of lawsuits and quarrels between citizens in dispute, then we shall be all the more right to publish the Institutes of God, in which we shall not be discussing gutters or water-theft or common affray, but hope and life, salvation and immortality... (1.1.12)

The treatise is thus presented as both resembling and rivalling one of the most authoritative of classical cultural forms, Roman law itself.

The legal metaphor is important throughout. Lactantius is writing during the Great Persecution of Christians, carried out between 303 and 315 CE, a background sometimes drawn into the foreground for discussion, and if at the beginning he presents himself as defendant in a metaphorical trial of Christianity, he frequently adopts the stance of prosecutor denouncing first Roman religion (in Book 1) and then the injustice of Roman law and imperial rule (especially in Book 5). Indeed, the climax of his systematic exposition of Christian doctrine is his treatment of the virtue of Justice, the topic of the fifth book. Justice is for Lactantius 'the supreme virtue or the source of virtue', (5.5.1) 'whose roots are in religion and whose essence is in fairness' (5.14.7). It involves observance of two kinds of duty: duty to God (or *pietas*) and duty to one's fellow men (or *aequitas*). The two kinds of duty are implicit in one another, since God made man in his image and made all men equal in a universal brotherhood. (5.6.12, 6.10.4-8) Likewise, for Lactantius, idolatry (a sin against *pietas*) and political oppression (a sin against *aequitas*) are intimately intertwined in their history and practice. He traces both to the same source in Jupiter's rise to power, which he treats, in his Euhemeristic version, twice—first in Book 1, his attack on polytheism, and then in Book 5, on Justice.

Book 1 is peppered with quotations from Euhemerus, in Ennius' Latin translation, to support its overall argument that the Greek and Roman gods were merely mortal men, worshipped

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<sup>24</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, ed. and tr. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 1.1.10.

<sup>25</sup> Cp. 1.5.1, 1.5.2, 7.13.2.

<sup>26</sup> On Lactantius' attitude to his Greek and Roman sources, see L. J. Swift, 'Arnobius and Lactantius: Two Views of the Pagan Poets', *TAPA* xcvi (1965), 439-48, and 'Lactantius and the Golden Age,' *AJP* 89 (1968), 144-56; on his Euhemerism, J. Pépin, *Mythe et Allégorie* (Paris, 1958), pp. 438-43 and G. Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1948), pp. 33-41.

idolatrously. But the most sustained passage of quotation is chapter 14, quoted above, on the power-struggle between Titan, Saturn and Jupiter.<sup>27</sup> Lactantius describes his original as ‘truthful literature’ by contrast with poets’ fictions: it serves his argument to take Euhemerus literally. But he perceives very clearly the intimate connection between Euhemerus’ story and the contemporary practice of deifying kings. This practice is the topic of the very next chapter, and his scornful and demystifying view of its political nature is very similar to that yielded by a reading of the *Sacred History* as political satire.

Chapter 15 explains that Euhemerus’ account of the Titanomachy makes clear not only that the Greek gods were men, but also ‘why they began to be called gods.’ (1.15.1) These events mark the beginning, he claims, not only of false religion generally but specifically of ruler worship:

No doubt that was the time when people began to honour a particular king and all his family with special adoration and new distinctions, to the point of actually calling them gods, either for their remarkable good qualities (an opinion which would be honestly held by people still rough and simple) or, as tends to be the case, in deference to their actual power. (1.15.2)

The first possible reason he gives here corresponds to traditional euergetism, whereby a benefactor is called ‘god’ by a grateful people: this less controversial explanation is the one he gave at his first introduction of Euhemerism (1.8.8). Note how Lactantius minimizes the blame attached to the people here as ‘rough and simple’ but honest in their folly; he goes on to explore, not unsympathetically, how a people may seek ‘consolation’ for their grief at the death of a good king by setting up statues and honouring their memory to the point of consecrating them, as the grieving Cicero did for his daughter, and also suggests a positive purpose ‘to spur their successors to a desire to be good rulers themselves.’ (1.15.4) ‘This is the reason, no doubt,’ he continues, ‘why the Romans treated their Caesars as holy, and so did the Moors their kings.’ (1.15.6) But the second reason, that kings are deified ‘in deference to their actual power’—which Lactantius clearly finds more plausible, as that which ‘tends to be the case’—strikes a more sinister note, which will be fully developed in Book 5. In the current chapter, he begins to unfold this more cynical game of power politics with the observation that

The biggest contribution to error came in any case from the piety of their successors: they offered, and required others to offer, divine honours to their ancestors precisely in order to seem to be born of divine stock themselves. (1.15.11)

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<sup>27</sup> Lactantius points out that the Erythraean Sibyl gives a nearly identical account (1.14.8): this is the third Sibylline Oracle, written in the Greek dactylic hexameters of the Sybilline corpus, by a Jewish writer in Egypt sometime between the third and the mid-first century BCE. It appropriates Euhemerus in ways similar to Lactantius, as part of its denunciation of both polytheism and imperialism, and its attempt to convert a pagan audience to Judaism from within a familiar and authoritative cultural form. Like the *Institutes*, it also ends by prophesying Apocalypse. On the ‘overt political element’ of the Sibyl, see John J. Collins, ‘The Sibyl and the Potter: Political Propaganda in Ptolemaic Egypt,’ in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World*, ed. Dieter Georgi, Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici and Angela Standhartinger (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 57-70; Amaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), pp. 138-41.

'Piety' here is so transparent a veil for self-interest as to sound with derisory irony. He cites the famously pious Aeneas' libation, prayers, and promise of a shrine to his father Anchises in the *Aeneid* (5.59-60, 7.133-34) as an example, and goes on:

That is patently what Bacchus, Pan, Mercury and Apollo did about Jupiter, and what their descendents did about them. The poets joined in, writing their poetry in compliment, and lauding them to the skies, as happens now when bad kings are extolled in dishonest panegyrics. (1.15.13)

In this reference to 'dishonest panegyrics' it is impossible not to hear a reflection on Virgil, whose intention in the *Aeneid* was (as the fourth century commentator Servius observes) *Augustum laudare a parentibus* ('to praise Augustus through his ancestors'), for Augustus' adoptive father Julius Caesar claimed to be descended from Aeneas.<sup>28</sup> The *Aeneid* anticipates the deification of Augustus in Jove's prophecy in Book I, where he promises Venus that one day she will welcome him into heaven, and he will be invoked in prayers (i.289-90); in Aeneas' prophetic vision in Book VI, Augustus is lauded as the son of a god (*Divi genus*), whose deeds excel those of the deified mortals Bacchus and Hercules, and who will bring back the Golden Age to the fields where Saturn once reigned. (VI.789-805) Augustus had taken *Divi filius* as an official title when he did precisely what Lactantius has been describing here, officially proclaiming Julius Caesar a god after his assassination in 42 BCE (and Lactantius' sarcastic reflection on such filial piety recalls Ovid's comment on this affair at the end of the *Metamorphoses*: Caesar 'had to be made a god, lest his son should have been born of mortal stock,' 15.760-61). At least from May 45 BCE, when he had a statue of himself, inscribed 'To the unconquered god', put up in the Temple of Quirinus (the deified Romulus), Julius Caesar had been fairly open about his aspirations to divine honours like those accorded the Hellenistic kings, and indeed before his death the Senate had formally decreed him to be a god, commanding the erection of a temple with its own dedicated priest; his assassination by indignant republicans before the decree could be put into action taught Augustus to be a little more cautious and covert about the ways in which he tied his power to religious authority, but he too was posthumously deified, and subsequent emperors were openly worshipped.<sup>29</sup> At the heart of Lactantius' hostility to Roman polytheism in general lies his specific rejection of the imperial cult, forging an intellectual bond with Euhemerus' critique of the Hellenistic monarchies which were its model. The religious and the political aspects of this rejection are inseparable.

If the deification of Julius Caesar lurks in the background here, it is soon brought into the light. Lactantius blames the Greeks as the originators of these 'clouds of falsehood...whipped up out of irresponsibility plentifully equipped with facile rhetoric,' (1.15.14) quoting the Sibyl's Euhemerizing outcry against Greek veneration of dead men and empty images (*Sib. Or.* 3.545-49), and asks

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<sup>28</sup> *Servii Grammatici qui feruntur In Vergilii Carmina Commentarii*, ed. G. Thilo and H. Hagen (3 vols.), I.4.11.

<sup>29</sup> Lily Ross Taylor's seminal *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* is an excellent, readable introduction to the topic; more recent and detailed treatments are D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1987-2004) and S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (CUP, 1984).

Who could be so stupid as to think that heaven opens up for the dead at the consent and determination of a host of idiots, or that anyone can give to another what he does not possess himself? (1.15.28)

But he concludes the chapter by turning squarely to Roman politics, for two especially flagrant examples of politically motivated deification:

Julius Caesar became a god in Rome because that criminal Mark Antony so decided; Quirinus became a god because some shepherds liked the idea. Yet one of the two men killed his brother and the other one killed his country. (1.15.29)

Lactantius makes no attempt to veil his republican sympathies here. He seems to be indebted to Lucan for his views on the civil war fought by Caesar against Pompey and the Senate, which ushered in the era of imperial rule, ending republican liberty in Rome. In Book 6, Lactantius will offer the death of Pompey, who 'took up arms on behalf of the republic, the senate and liberty,' but 'was conquered, and fell with liberty itself', as an example of 'how often the losers are the better and the juster party', which 'is why communities have always been subject to vicious tyrannies.' (6.6.16-17) Caesar's republican assassin Brutus will be remembered in Book 7 as the preserver of Rome's liberty (until his defeat by Octavian and Antony). (7.15.16) Meanwhile, the penultimate chapter of Book 1 states most bluntly the direct connection between religious cults and political power as Lactantius saw it: Numa, he says, claimed to receive his laws from his divine wife Egeria 'so that he could enforce the people's obedience not merely by command but by religious sanction also,' (1.22.3) and as to the first origins of the practice, cites Euhemerus again to the effect that "'after Jupiter attained power," he developed such arrogance that "he set up shrines to himself all over the place.'" (1.22.21) Monarchical oppression and idolatry are clearly, for Lactantius, twins from birth.

The treatment of 'the supreme virtue', Justice, in Book 5 opens by returning to the same myth. Citing poets' descriptions of the reign of Saturn as a Golden Age when Justice (personified as Astraea) still dwelt on earth, he argues 'This is not to be treated as poetical fiction but as truth,' and proceeds to restate the Euhemeristic account, with added Christianizing colour and political emphasis. His first claim is that

When Saturn was king, and worship of gods had not yet been instituted and no nation was yet committed to a view of divine status, God was certainly being worshipped. Hence the lack of discord, and of enmity or war... (5.5.3-4)

Though the claim that humanity was originally monotheistic is startling, it is shared by Eusebius writing around the same time, and it has a certain logic as an extrapolation from his earlier (and less controversial) argument that many classical poets, philosophers and prophets, from Orpheus and the sibyls to Plato, Virgil and Ovid, had recognized one supreme god, though they did not dare to acknowledge it openly or to cease their practice of polytheistic worship.<sup>30</sup> We might also observe a resonance with Ouranos' worship of the 'heavenly gods', which counterpoints the institution of the

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<sup>30</sup> This is the subject of 1.5-7. On the claim that monotheism was older than polytheism, see Nicholson, '*Caelum potius intuemini: Lactantius and a Statue of Constantine,*' *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001), 177-96 and T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 126-7, 184-5.

cults of the 'terrestrial gods' by Zeus, in Euhemerus (*Bibliotheca* 6.1.2, 8). Lactantius emphasizes that the Golden Age came to an end, and Astraea left the earth, when Jupiter drove Saturn into exile,

and the people left off worshipping God, whether for fear of the new king or from a natural depravity, and began to treat the king as God, and the king himself, a virtual parricide, was a model for the abuse of piety to everyone else... (5.5.9)

Jupiter is thus directly responsible for the departure of justice, the end of 'the communality of life' and 'the social contract', and it was under his rule and as a result of it that 'people began to fight with each other, and to plot, and to seek their esteem in human blood.' (5.5.13-14)

Where Lactantius' first account of the myth of Saturn and Jupiter in its Euhemeristic form was the story of a power struggle between individuals, focussed on proving their lack of real divinity, the emphasis here is on the experience of the many who are subject to Jupiter's tyrannical rule, and beyond them, the many who are subject to the Roman empire in Lactantius' day. Jupiter figures now merely as the leader and enabler of a whole class of 'people of prosperity' who proceed to oppress the rest of society out of greed for personal gain. Not only do they fail to share with others, but they seize others' property.<sup>31</sup> (5.6.1) Theft is an obvious example of injustice, as a breaking of law, but it is quickly followed by the institution of unjust laws which effectively consolidate the theft. They proceed to hoard the necessities of life to drive up prices and increase their wealth, and then

In the name of justice they authorized for their own purposes laws of great unfairness and injustice, by which they could protect their greedy plunderings from mob violence. Their advantage came from sheer position as much as it did from their muscle, money and malice, and since there was no trace in them at all of justice, whose due expression is fairness, kindness and pity, the inequality they now rejoiced in swelled their sense of superiority; they raised themselves above the rest with trains of henchmen, weaponry and special dress. Hence their invention of office for themselves, and purple and maces: they could use the threat of sword and axe to lord it over a cowed and petrified people with all the authority of a slave-owner (*dominus*). That was the state of human life under king Jupiter: when he had conquered his father in war and put him to flight, it was no kingship he then exercised but an impious tyranny, of violence and armies; the golden age of justice he removed, forcing people into evil and impiety precisely by turning them away from truth and diverting them from worshipping God to worshipping him, such was the terror produced by his extraordinary power. Who would not be scared of a man girt about with weapons, or ringed with the unprecedented gleam of iron swords? (5.6.3-7)

As Bowen notes, the 'institutions and symbols of magisterial authority in Rome are here provocatively associated with the power of a king or slave owner': the 'purple and maces' are recognizably a specific allusion to Rome, and Rome is more generally evoked by this society's worship of Jupiter, chief god of Rome's pantheon, by its militarism, and (with trenchant irony) by its

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<sup>31</sup> By contrast with Euhemerus' Panchaia and many accounts of the Golden Age in classical poetry, society under Saturn's reign according to Lactantius does feature private property, but there is no gross inequality, because everyone is willing to give to those in need.

making of laws. Lactantius clearly intends this as a kind of etiology for political oppression in general and the Roman Empire in particular, and the very institutions Rome holds up as evidence of its status as an exemplar of justice—its laws and its system of public office—are revealed as ‘invented’ to shore up and disguise a reality of violent extortion by avaricious warlords. Roman ideology presented its military expansionism as a mission to bring peace and the rule of law to other nations, as when Virgil describes Augustus ‘giving laws to grateful peoples’ at the end of the *Georgics*, or Anchises in the underworld of the *Aeneid* instructs Aeneas to ‘spare the humble and tame the proud.’ Lactantius exposes this as sham. ‘The people of Rome got themselves control of the whole world,’ as he will put it in Book 6, ‘by using forms of law to cover their wrongdoings and to seize and take other people’s property.’ (6.9.4) In reality, Roman imperialism is nothing more than the exercise of brute force for base and selfish ends, and by not only excusing but honouring it, the Roman people honour violence and murder:

a king’s power, because of its tendency to cut a broad swathe, they so admire that they think bold and belligerent leaders belong in the company of the gods, and the only path to immortality is leading armies, ravaging other people’s land, wiping out cities, destroying towns and either slaughtering free people or forcing them into slavery....If you cut the throat of one man you are treated as contagiously evil...but the man who has slain his tens of thousands, soaking the fields in gore and fouling rivers, is let into heaven. (1.18.8, 10)

The worship of the mortal king, Jupiter, pattern for the Roman imperial cult, brings with it ‘contempt for the true superior power’, God, (5.6.1) and greed and violence institutionalized in unjust laws replace true justice, the law of God which bids men ‘cherish one another and know the bond of brotherhood that binds them’, and ‘share with those denied it the bounty of God...harming none and oppressing none’. (5.6.12)<sup>32</sup> This divine law is what, according to Lactantius, people had followed until Jupiter took power; Christ is sent as the ‘living law’ to teach it again to forgetful humanity, as Lactantius explains in Book 4; and it is the law whose *Institutes* he is now expounding.

Lactantius is not generally treated as a political writer, because he lays out no constructive ideas for how government should be organized in a just society. Instead, the vision offered in the *Institutes* is of societal justice arising naturally from the exercise of virtue and charity by individuals following the teachings of Christ.<sup>33</sup> But we must remember that he was writing from the perspective of a beleaguered and oppressed minority during the Great Persecution, a time when making practical plans for government according to Christian principles would have seemed neither necessary nor realistic. The time called only for radical political critique of the ruling power, and this is what the *Institutes* offer, in the course of what is also the first systematic exposition of Christian belief. The Euhemeristic account of the Roman gods, which lends itself so well to Lactantius’ attack on polytheism, also serves the purpose, as it did in Euhemerus’ original text, of satire on contemporary politics. Lactantius could not have known that the Tetrarchs would be succeeded by the first Christian emperor, Constantine, soon after he completed the work. (At this late point he added invocations praising Constantine because, at the beginning of his reign, he has ‘made amends

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<sup>32</sup> Lactantius will develop this at length in Book 6, where he expounds justice as ‘compassion, or humanity’ (6.10.2), necessitating charity to all without hope of return (except the hope of salvation), and takes issue with the Stoics for their denigration of pity.

<sup>33</sup> See particularly *Institutes* 5.8.8-9.

for the abominable crime of others and brought back justice from her overthrow and exile' (1.1.13), but even here he holds back from the rhetoric of political theology which his contemporary Eusebius uses to praise Constantine, in terms highly reminiscent of Hellenistic and Roman ruler cults.<sup>34</sup>) Lactantius' real answer to political injustice in the *Institutes* is the expectation of Apocalypse, and the seventh and last book ends by looking forward to the second coming of Christ, which he believes will happen within the next two hundred years, to be followed by the millennium and the Last Judgement. The work thus participates in the tradition of apocalyptic literature, but it is simultaneously an elegantly argued expression of radical political views.

The story of Jupiter's rise to power as Lactantius presents it is not only an etiology for the injustice of the Roman Empire in general terms, but also alludes specifically to the rule of the Tetrarchs Diocletian and Maximian, and the Great Persecution of Christians they orchestrated. Of Jupiter's crimes in 5.5, Lactantius observes (this time by way of a moral allegory on a passage from the *Georgics*)<sup>35</sup> 'That is exactly the performance of those who persecute the just, the people loyal to God, and give licence to judges to treat the innocent with savagery.' And the very fact that he singles Jupiter out for especial condemnation has a sharply topical relevance. As Elizabeth DePalma Digeser observes,

It is no coincidence that in his view the figure primarily responsible for the world's lapse into polytheism was Jupiter and that Hercules was to blame for many of its ills. [There are extended passages on Hercules' immorality, e.g. 1.9.] That these were the gods whose family names Diocletian and Maximian had taken up as part of the new political theology made it possible to attack each emperor through references to his divine parent.<sup>36</sup>

Diocletian had adopted the name Iovius, and Maximian the name Herculus. Bowen and Garnsey note that contemporary panegyric praised them, under the names of these gods, for bringing back the Golden Age, while Lactantius pointedly reverses this strategy, as he insistently 'blames Jupiter for *destroying* the Golden Age'.<sup>37</sup> In his later work, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, Lactantius is direct and explicit in his condemnation of the same rulers, triumphantly presenting the end of the persecution and their unpleasant deaths as evidence of Divine Providence. In the *Institutes*, the scathing account of Jupiter performs the same condemnation in what is effectively an allegorical and poetic way. Though Euhemerism is often regarded as a dully literalizing approach to myth, Lactantius exploits its potential to generate daringly satirical meanings, playing it off against the political theology of contemporary panegyric.

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<sup>34</sup> Bowen and Garnsey, 'Introduction', 50; on Eusebius see Norman Baynes, 'Eusebius and the Christian Empire,' in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London: Althone Press, University of London, 1955), 168-72.

<sup>35</sup> *Georgics* 1.129-30, 'He put the evil poison in black snakes, and bid the wolves go hunt', is interpreted as meaning 'Jupiter put envy, hatred and cheating into human beings so that they should be as venomous as snakes and as rapacious as wolves'. (5.5.10)

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Cornell University Press, 2000), 36. I do not agree with her further argument that Lactantius' Saturn is to be identified with Augustus, that Lactantius believed 'the principate reflected the order of the cosmos', promoting its restoration 'as a genuine alternative to the dominate', and that his criticism of the Roman emperor cult and the social inequality and violence of the empire is limited to the Tetrarchy. (43-44)

<sup>37</sup> Bowen and Garnsey, *Divine Institutes*, 'Introduction', 44.

Lactantius appreciates such indirection in the classical poets he cites so often. Already before Euhemerus' time philosophers had tried to salvage the dignity of the gods in the face of their undignified behaviour in ancient myth and poetry by calling poets liars (as Plato does), or by interpreting the stories as allegories about the interactions of the elements in the cosmos (as the Stoics did). Lactantius argues that both these responses are misreadings, which fail to grasp the blend of truth and fiction in poetic fabling. To interpret the myths allegorically is to impose implausible figurative meanings (Lactantius runs through some problems of logic and inconsistency in Stoic allegorizations of the castration of Saturn, for instance, in 1.12), while to dismiss them as lies is to misunderstand both the poets' wish to convey certain truths, and the techniques by which they embellish it. When poets depict the 'gods' struggling for power, committing shameful acts, or showing weakness, they are to be taken literally, but when they call them gods, they are speaking figuratively to veil or embellish their subject:

The poets were talking about men, but they used the word god of them in order to mark out the ones whose memories they recorded with approval. Fiction is a better label for what they said of them as gods than for what they said of them as men....The poets have thus not created events—if they did they would be impostors—but they have added a certain colour to events. That is what deceives people, especially because all the while they think of these things as poetical fictions they are worshipping what they do not recognize. They do not know the limits of poetical licence and how far one may go in a fiction, since a poet's business lies in transposing reality into something else with metaphor and allusion and in covering up the misrepresentation with charm....No poetical work is a total fiction. There is some element perhaps of adaptation and concealment by metaphor so that the truth can be hidden in wraps.... (1.11.17-30)

Here the poets are motivated by 'approval' of the deeds of particular kings, and by the aesthetic goal of 'charm', but just as, in his explanation of why people began to worship kings, Lactantius passes from traditional euergetism to 'deference to power' (1.15.2) and 'the pressure of exceptional panic' in a 'cowed and petrified people' living under tyranny (5.6.8, 5), the suggestion emerges that, 'when bad kings are extolled in dishonest panegyrics,' (1.15.13) poets too might be steering cautiously in dangerous waters: 'they were afraid of bad reactions if they affronted public opinion with admission of the truth,' (1.19.5) as he puts it later. The chapter containing the observations on poetry quoted above opens, after a catalogue of Jupiter's rapes and adulteries, by referring to 'the poet who wrote the *Triumph of Cupid*', who 'was no fool':

In it he makes Cupid not only the most powerful of the gods but also their conqueror. One by one he listed the love affairs that had brought them under Cupid's power and control, and he created a procession in which Jupiter is led in chains, together with the rest of the gods, in front of the victor's chariot. (1.11.1-2)

If he means Ovid, he is conflating *Amores* 1.2 (a triumph of Cupid, in which the Olympian gods do not appear) with the *Metamorphoses*, which similarly catalogues the rapes and adulteries of the gods, especially Jupiter's, demonstrating Cupid's power, by which he expands his mother's empire, (*Met.* 5.371-2) and displaying both the gods' cruelty and their shameful and subhuman lack of self-control: 'Majesty and love do not sit easily together.' (*Met.* 2.846-7) If he is, alternatively, referring to some

poem now lost, it was clearly one written under a strong Ovidian influence.<sup>38</sup> Ovid's depiction of the gods in the *Metamorphoses* often contain clear and unflattering reflections on Augustus, which would obviously have been unsafe to state openly. Given Lactantius' veiled criticism of Diocletian in his own account of Jupiter, it seems likely that he appreciated Ovid's fabling as a similar disguised political satire. Lactantius is mostly concerned with unveiling, revealing 'the truth' of Christianity which 'is wrapped in obscurity' (*obvoluta in obscure veritas latet*, 1.1.7). But the means he uses include poetic veiling and indirection, and the appreciation of how it has been used by earlier poets.

### ***Mutabilitie Cantos***

Spenser's own exercise in Euhemerism as a mode of sceptical political enquiry takes the form of just such a fable, and the opening allusion to Euhemerus' Titan invites the reader to interpret it in light of this tradition. The most innovative feature of his reworking of the Titanomachy in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* is its transformation from war into legal process. More precisely, it is framed as a sequel, taking for granted the wars in which the Olympians' superior might has already been shown and moving on to a judicial consideration of the rights and wrongs of the case, independent of the threat of force. *Mutabilitie's* legal claim is that Jove has alienated her hereditary right to rule; on the literal level, this is simply a continuation, by more civilized means, of the power-struggle described in the traditional Titanomachy. Jupiter opposes *Mutabilitie's* claim by invoking his own right of conquest:

we by Conquest of our soueraine might,  
And by eternall doome of Fates decree,  
Haue wonne the Empire of the Heauens bright... (vi.33)

The Hesiodic display of force, in other words, does not need this judicial sequel, according to Jove; there is no legitimate appeal to a higher principle of justice. But Spenser, regardless, stages his 'trial of their Titles and best Rights', (VII.vi.36) affirming that Right cannot be determined simply by Might. Jove's argument has contemporary political resonance as the basis of Elizabeth's claim to sovereignty over Ireland and of James' in Scotland; Spenser's refusal to let Jove evade judicial proceedings here implies scepticism towards such claims.<sup>39</sup> But *Mutabilitie's* status as a personification allegory makes this more than a dispute over a throne: it is also a philosophical argument as to whether the universe *and the Olympian gods* are subject to mutability. Nature's verdict pronounces that the mutability of the universe itself subserves Divine Providence, and looks forward to Apocalypse, a change to end all change which will be effectively *Mutabilitie's* moment of triumph and simultaneous extinction. As the eighth canto concludes, *Mutabilitie* is 'all vnworthy...Of the Heav'ns Rule': this belongs to the Christian God. But nothing is said against the philosophical

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<sup>38</sup> Lactantius' description interestingly evokes Spenser's House of Busirane in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, inspired by the same combination of Ovidian texts. Was Spenser perhaps also recalling Lactantius' sketch of this mysterious poem?

<sup>39</sup> The right of conquest held by the English monarch over Ireland is emphasized in Spenser's *Viewe of the Present State of Ireland*, on which see Nicholas Canny, 'Edmund Spenser and the Development of an Anglo-Irish Identity,' *Yearbook of English Studies* 13 (1983), 1-19; for James' similar claim in Scotland, see J. P. Sommerville (ed.), *James VI and I: Political Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 74.

truth of Mutabilitie's claim that the Olympians are subject to mutability—that is, that they are not divine but simply mortal beings.

Mutabilitie argues that Cynthia 'is...mortall borne, how-so ye crake,' (VII.vii.50) that Jove is 'mortall borne, and thrall to me,' (VII.vii.54) and that Mars is simply a 'valiant man' (VII.vii.52); in short that all these 'gods that faine to be' (VII.vii.15) are not gods at all, but merely 'Kings' (VII.vii.49)—the argument of Euhemerus and Lactantius. Because Spenser wants his Olympians to appear with speaking roles in the narrative present, he cannot say that they are *dead* kings, as in Euhemerus' fable, so instead Mutabilitie emphasizes their earthly birth: Cynthia and Jove must be merely human, she argues, since they were 'borne here in this world,' 'On *Cynthus* hill,' 'in *Crete*' or 'in *Thebes*'. (VII.vii.50, 53) This is also an emphasis of Lactantius' argument: before mentioning Jupiter's tomb on Crete (*Institutes* 1.11.46, quoting the passage from Euhemerus which specially angered Callimachus), he commences his proof that the Olympians were 'merely men' (1.8.4) precisely with the fact that myths speak of them as being born, and having parents. (1.8.3) The Euhemeristic argument does not exhaust Spenser's treatment of the gods: he blends Euhemerus' deified kings with the planetary deities, and Mutabilitie adduces the lunar phases and planetary eccentricity as revealing their mutability.<sup>40</sup> But her denial of true divinity to the Olympians, and her insistence that they are mortal monarchs, are at the heart of her argument.

The judicial framework in which Spenser couches Mutabilitie's Euhemeristic argument is also inspired by Lactantius, whose *Institutes* expound the true justice of God, exposing Roman injustice in the process. Refusing to let her case be decided by Jupiter in the distinctly royal court of his 'palace', Spenser's Mutabilitie appeals to the same highest authority:

But thee, O *Ioue*, no equall Iudge I deeme  
 Of my desert, or of my dewfull Right;  
 That in thine owne behalf maist partiall seeme:  
 But to the highest him, that is behight  
 Father of Gods and men by equall might;  
 To weet, the God of Nature, I appeale.  
 There-at *Ioue* wexed wroth, and in his spight  
 Did inly grudge, yet did it well conceale... (VII.vi.35)

When Nature appears in person in the next canto, Spenser describes her (for the female pronoun is used now, though her sex is said to remain mysterious) in terms which allude to biblical descriptions of God. She is veiled, whether because her face is as terrifying as a lion or because her splendour, said to outshine the sun a thousand-fold, would blind mortal eyes, 'Ne could be seene, but like an image in a glass', recalling Paul's 'For now you see him as in a glass darkly, but then face to face.' Even this veil is indescribable: in the numerologically significant stanza VII.vii.7, Spenser compares

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<sup>40</sup> Compare Book V.Pr, where planetary eccentricity is linked to Hesiod's declining ages and the growth of injustice. It is worth noting that the opening of Book V is markedly Euhemeristic, with Artegall introduced as successor to a Bacchus and a Hercules treated explicitly as euergetized conquering heroes (V.i.2): does a similar deification await Artegall (Elizabeth's ancestor according to Merlin's prophecy)? Book V is obviously concerned with the relation between monarchical authority and divine justice, especially in V.ix, where the 'Angel-like' Mercilla, who appears to fuse royal and divine authority, presides over the trial of Duessa, 'now vntitled Queene', and is enforced 'by strong constraint' to condemn her to death. (V.ix.29, 42) The same cluster of ideas—wandering planets, Euhemerism, and the question of whether monarchs are subject to law—is common to the Legend of Justice and the *Mutabilitie Cantos*.

his own inability to find anything with which to compare its brightness to the bafflement of the disciples who witnessed Christ transfigured on Mount Tabor. The very ineffability and incomparability, which in a delightfully self-reflexive turn are the point of the comparison, imply that this God of Nature is the Christian God.<sup>41</sup> Mutabilitie approaches 'With meek obaysance and humilitie,' as 'An humble suppliant' (vii.13-14), as any good Christian should, and addresses her as the embodiment of divine justice which 'knittest each to each, as brother vnto brother',

Damning all Wrong and tortious Iniurie,  
Which any of thy creatures doe to other  
(Oppressing them with power, vnequally)  
Since of them all thou art the equall mother...(vii.14)

This is the Justice which, for Lactantius, flows from

worship of God, the only cause of humans cherishing one another and of knowing the bond of brotherhood that binds them: since God is 'father equally to all', so people are to share with those denied it the bounty of the God and father whom they all share, harming none, oppressing none.... (5.6.12)

and which 'went wrong at the outset of Jupiter's reign', with his tyranny and self-deification. Just as Lactantius measures the injustice of the Tetrarchs and the Great Persecution against this Christian law, so Mutabilitie complains to Nature of Jupiter's transgressions here. Spenser's Jove has no power to deny the authority of Nature's court, but his 'grudge' against Mutabilitie's appeal at vi.35 reflects his lack of respect for her and for the justice she represents: nowhere in the cantos do we see the Olympians pay any mark of respect to this veiled figure of God. Rather, as Mutabilitie charges them when she puts her case to Nature, they appropriate the worship which is rightfully God's for themselves:

And that is onely dew vnto thy might  
Arrogate to themselues ambitiously (vii.16)

It is not only Mutabilitie's right to rule 'Which *loue* vsurpes vniustly,' according to Mutabilitie's plea, but the Christian God's.

Apart from the culminating vision of God 'hid in his own brightness' with his 'soueraine dearling' Sapience in the *Fowre Hymnes*, Spenser's canon contains no more direct representation of God than Nature here. That she appears alongside Jove and his fellow-gods should not be simply accepted as a fictional given in an obviously fabulous narrative. It is startling, and intended to provoke the question 'In what sense are the Olympians gods?' Mutabilitie's answer is the same as Lactantius': they are not gods at all, but kings. For Spenser in the sixteenth century there is no real threat from polytheism, let alone from worship of the Roman gods, and the polemic against polytheism which was so urgently necessary for Lactantius in the context of the Great Persecution is not his chief concern. It is the political aspect of Euhemerism which interests him, and he is using it,

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<sup>41</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Spenser's Images of Life* (CUP, 1967), p. 15; Harold Weatherby, 'Dame Nature and the Nymph,' *ELR* 26 (1996), 243–258.

like Euhemerus himself and Lactantius after him, to subject ruler-worship such as that which characterized the Hellenistic monarchies and the Roman empire to sceptical scrutiny. For though explicit polytheism itself is a thing of the past, the political absolutism which Lactantius identifies as polytheism's original purpose is alive and well, and like the earlier regimes satirized by Euhemerus and Lactantius, it works by appropriating religious authority.<sup>42</sup> Henry VIII had 'reinvented the theocratic model of kingship' when he broke from Rome, emphasizing his status as the Lord's anointed to assert his independence not only of the papacy but also of Parliament. Against common-law tradition, he held that 'the king is under God but not the law, because the king makes the law'. Elizabeth similarly believed that 'absolute princes ought not to be accountable to any other than to God alone'. But traditional common-law ideas of constitutional and limited monarchy persisted, causing frequent clashes with Parliament and with her own Privy Council, whose 'political creed' John Guy summarizes thus: '1) sovereignty lay in the queen-in-parliament...; 2) the prerogative of the ruler was limited by the advice of the Privy Council; and 3) the assent of the whole realm in Parliament was required to effect significant political or religious change'.<sup>43</sup> One of these clashes was over the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Elizabeth delayed at every turn, fearful of setting a precedent for her own disaffected subjects by appearing to concede that an anointed monarch might be legally tried, condemned and killed. Her Privy Council finally issued the warrant secretly, and a furious Elizabeth 'sought to hang her secretary...by prerogative (i.e. summarily and without trial) for allowing the warrant to leave his possession'.<sup>44</sup> But Guy observes a 'drift to authoritarianism' after 1587, when Mary's execution had removed the threat of a Catholic succession (the counsellors' worst fear). The Star Chamber decision in Cawdrey's Case (1591) effectively ruled that the Queen's 'imperial' prerogative could override statute and common law, reasserting the theory of imperial and theocratic monarchy.<sup>45</sup> The 1590s have been described as Elizabeth's 'second reign', shifting away from conciliar and parliamentary government to an absolutism anticipating James' Divine Right kingship, and marked by harsh treatment of 'Puritans' critical of Elizabeth's management of the church and the pace of reform.<sup>46</sup> The terms of Essex's outburst after a quarrel with the Queen in 1598 (sparked by Essex's aristocratic pride rather than his militant Protestantism) are symptomatic in our context: advised 'that both his discretion, duety, and religion would command him to submit himself to so good a Queene, seeing that betweene a Prince

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<sup>42</sup> On unease about the idolatrous implications of the rhetoric and political claims of monarchical regimes throughout the period, see Richard Hardin, *Civil Idolatry: Desacralizing and Monarchy in Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992); on the sceptical understanding of deifying praise of the monarch as idolatry driven by *Realpolitik* in two of Spenser's contemporaries, see Ethan John Guagliardo, 'The Political Atheology of George Puttenham and Fulke Greville,' *Modern Philology* 112 (2015), 591-614; on Spenser's negotiation of the boundary between licit praise of Elizabeth and idolatry in Book V, see Beth Quitslund, 'Elizabethan Epideixis and the Spenserian Art of State Idolatry,' *The European Legacy* 5 (2000), 29-48.

<sup>43</sup> John Guy, 'Tudor Monarchy and its Critiques,' in Guy (ed.), *The Tudor Monarchy* (London: Arnold, 1997), 78-109, at 98; see also Patrick Collinson, 'The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I' in the same volume (110-34). This paragraph summarizes many points from Guy's essay; other quotations come from pp. 83, 84, 87, 99.

<sup>44</sup> Compare Jove's treatment of Lycaon and relation to his council in the *Metamorphoses*, discussed below.

<sup>45</sup> John Guy, 'The Elizabethan Establishment and the Ecclesiastical Polity,' in Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 126-49.

<sup>46</sup> Guy, 'The 1590s: The Second Reign of Elizabeth I?' in Guy (ed.), *Reign of Elizabeth I*, 1-19. On the growth of discontent with Elizabeth's regime in this decade and the contemporaneous increasingly hyperbolic and deifying rhetoric applied to her, see Helen Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 163-97

and a Subject there is no proportion,' he responded by 'appealing from the Queene to God Almighty,'

If I should confesse my selfe guilty, I should both iniure truth, and God the authour of truth....Cannot Princes erre? Is their earthly power infinite?... Let them thinke the Queenes power infinite, who beleeeue that God is not omnipotent.

To do so would be to 'liue like a seruant, and a bond-slaue'.<sup>47</sup> This attitude would lead ultimately to Essex's failed coup and execution in 1601.

After Mary's death, her son James was the chief candidate for the succession. His *True Law of Free Monarchies* is a forthright assertion of imperial absolutism, arguing that the king is 'the trew paterne of Divinitie'.<sup>48</sup> He is 'above the law', which is made by his word alone, independent of Parliament, and he is not bound to obey it except 'of his own good will'. His authority is founded on right of conquest; his subjects are 'vassals', owing absolute obedience even should he prove tyrannical as Nimrod or Nero. Since the *True Law* was first published in Edinburgh in 1598, probably in September, while Spenser fled his Irish home in October, to die in London in January 1599, it is unlikely (though not impossible) that the *Mutabilitie Cantos* were written in the light of James' pronouncements. But James' censorship, in his own realm of Scotland, of Buchanan's *De Iure Regni Apud Scotos* (expounding a contractarian theory of monarchy) and of the 1596 *Faerie Queene* (angered by its approbation of Mary's trial in V.ix) would already have given Spenser cause for alarm on both personal and ideological grounds. His unease over the hubris and idolatry of the 'cult' of Elizabeth, her rhetorical deification in poetry and painting, is evident from the beginning of his career, for instance in the Niobe allusion in *Aprill's* lay to Elisa, in Una's refusal of the satyrs' idolatrous worship (*FQ* i.vi.19), and in his depiction of the 'mayden Queene' Lucifera, attended by the seven deadly sins in the House of Pride (*FQ* I.v), going hand in hand with his satire against the abuses of her government (especially clear in the *Shepherdess Calender*, *Mother Hubberds Tale* and 'Colin Clouts Come Home Againe'). In the 1590s he was seeking patronage from the unruly Essex, who along with Philip Sidney's widow had inherited his role as chivalric Protestant hero, praising him as 'Great Englands glory' in *Prothalamion* (1596). The absolutism of Elizabeth's reign throughout this last decade, and the likelihood that James would take a similar approach on his probable accession, are the crucial background for his turn to Euhemerism in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, to subject to sceptical scrutiny the claims of monarchs to govern as gods on earth, and to ask with Essex 'Is their earthly power infinite?'

It has been observed that the *Cantos*, with their staged competition for a throne, would have struck contemporary readers as relating to the succession, and readings have been proposed of *Mutabilitie* herself as representing the young Arbella Stuart, or Mary Queen of Scots and by association her son James, all as embodying the threat of a return to Catholicism open or covert.<sup>49</sup> These may be strands of Spenser's meaning, though *Mutabilitie*, as Titaness and particularly as a personification of a broad philosophical concept, is evidently more than a cypher for specific

<sup>47</sup> William Camden, *The historie of the life and reigne of that famous princesse Elizabeth* (Oxford, 1634), 219-20.

<sup>48</sup> *James VI and I: Political Writings*, 64. Subsequent references are to pp. 75, 73, 74, 79, the probable date of the *True Law's* publication as September is noted at 282.

<sup>49</sup> Mary K. Woodworth, 'The Mutability Cantos and the Succession,' *PMLA* 59 (1944), 985-1002; Andrew Hadfield, 'Spenser and the Stuart Succession,' *Literature and History* 13 (2004), 9-24.

individuals. But the Olympians evoke the royal participants in the current crisis more strongly and insistently. Cynthia must represent Elizabeth on some level; it is the name under which Raleigh depicts her in *The Ocean to Cynthia*, praised by Spenser as a lively portrait in the Proem to Book III; the identification is widespread in Elizabethan literature. Her reappearance under her Roman name, Diana, in the inset Faunus narrative, is irresistibly evocative of the Queen, with the etiology of the present state of Ireland almost explicitly blaming its lawlessness on Elizabeth's mismanagement.<sup>50</sup> Cynthia is the first object of Mutabilitie's assault on heaven. The emphasis on the 'euerlasting glory' in which she reigns (vi.8; cp. 10) recalls Elizabeth's chief avatar in his poem, Gloriana; her confidence in her 'soueraigne seat/By highest *loue* assign'd' (vi.12) recalls the familiar Tudor emphasis on the monarch as God's representative on earth—though as the Cantos progress, and we are invited to interrogate the relation between Jove and the Christian God, the fact that it is to Jove that Cynthia owes her throne becomes less a vindication of her authority than a doubt cast on it. When Mutabilitie threatens physically 'To plucke her downe perforce' and 'to strike her if she did withstand', (vi.13) causing darkness and perplexity on earth, the allusion is at once to a recent lunar eclipse and to the prospect of the Queen's death, her succumbing to mortality.<sup>51</sup> This is the inevitable event whose anticipation, in the climate of uncertainty arising from her refusal to name a successor, provoked fears of a contest for the throne which might lead to civil war, and of the evils that might follow from the success of one claimant or another. In the dispute which ensues in Spenser's narrative, it seems natural to read Jove as reflecting the chief contender for that throne, James VI of Scotland, who by the time of the Cantos' publication would indeed have been 'confirm'd in his imperiall see'. (vii.59) James' position in the *True Law* echoes through Jove's emphasis on his right of conquest, his 'grudge' at being held liable to any judicial proceeding, and most of all his insistence on the gulf between what he presents as his own divine status and Mutabilitie's mere mortality. When James states that kings are gods on earth, he renders explicit the implications of Henry's and Elizabeth's absolutist claims that they are above the law and unaccountable to their subjects, and that to question or resist their authority amounts to sacrilege. Though Mutabilitie is his cousin, Jove's insistence on an ontological distinction between them similarly enables him to present her challenge in law as an act of rebellious hubris:

Will neuer mortall thoughts cease to aspire,  
 In this bold sort, to Heauen claime to make  
 And touch celestiall seates with earthly mire? (vi.29)

But when Spenser introduces the Christian 'Father of Gods and men' alongside his Olympian characters, and compels Jove to submit to a court-hearing, he provokes us to question Jove's assumption of divine status and his claim to an absolute and unaccountable authority. And if Mutabilitie's Euhemeristic argument is true, Jove himself is guilty of precisely this charge: he is an hubristic mortal making claim to Heaven, and touching 'celestiall seates with earthly mire'.

Like Lactantius, then, Spenser uses Euhemerism to satirize ruler-cults. But where Lactantius adopts the form of a legalistic treatise, Spenser constructs a fable, and for this he draws primarily on Ovid. Ovid shared Lactantius' scepticism about Rome's transformation from republic to Hellenistic-

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<sup>50</sup> See Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soy!* (Oxford: Clarendon Press (1997), 185-202.

<sup>51</sup> David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London, 1984), 152–3.

style monarchy, and the religious claims underpinning it, on political grounds at least, though expressing it obliquely in an (ultimately unsuccessful) effort to evade censorship or punishment. As Lactantius recognizes, he uses 'adaptation and concealment by metaphor so that the truth can be hidden in wraps'. (*Divine Institutes* 1.11.30) Greek myth was Ovid's 'preferred medium for thinking through what could not be openly addressed,' as Joseph Farrell puts it,

at a moment when rulers had become and were expected to continue to become gods; when genealogy, both in mythical terms and in the sense of actual family relations, whether by blood or by adoption, had become a basis of legitimizing the right to rule; when traditional Roman forms of government had lost almost all their meaning and had, in effect, been replaced with a hereditary Hellenistic monarchy more powerful than any that had ever been.<sup>52</sup>

The growth of the ruler-cult is a particular recurring focus in the *Metamorphoses*. Primit Chaudhuri traces a series of theomachy narratives across the poem which are 'distinctive' for their 'interest in testing the empirical criteria of divinity,' with specifically political implications for contemporaries struggling to come to terms with the importation of Greek ideas about deified rulers.<sup>53</sup> The series culminates in the assassination and apotheosis of Julius Caesar, and anticipated apotheosis of Augustus, in Book 15; it includes tales whose influence on the *Mutabilitie Cantos* I have discussed elsewhere;<sup>54</sup> but it begins with the programmatic myth of Lycaon, narrated by Jove at a council of the gods in Book 1. Several scholars have noted that the first of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* draws on Ovid's episode, both in general subject and setting, and particularly in the detail of Jove's initial reaction to Mutabilitie at 30-31, where he takes up his thunderbolt but refrains from hurling it; the passage has reminded critics of Jove's change of plan at I.253-61, where he lays aside his thunderbolts for fear that his intended conflagration may destroy heaven along with earth, and decides on a universal flood instead.<sup>55</sup> But the fundamental relevance of Ovid's council scene and tale of Lycaon to Spenser's *Cantos*, which has not received comment, lies in its questioning of the ruler-cult and its concern with the conflict between despotism and the rule of law.<sup>56</sup>

Ovid presents the council of the gods almost explicitly as an allegory of Augustus' despotic rule. A description of the dwellings of the gods lining the *via lactea* (or Milky Way), comic in its application of Rome's urban materiality and social stratification to divine society, culminates 'This is the place which, if permitted to speak boldly, I should not fear to call heaven's Palatine.' (1.175-6) Lactantius quotes the passage approvingly at 1.16.12. The scene is intended to be recognized as representing a meeting of the Senate under the new conditions of Augustus' rule, with its conspicuous divergences from traditional epic councils of the gods reflecting satirically on the

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph Farrell, 'Complementarity and Contradiction in Ovid,' in *Writing Myth: Mythography in the Ancient World*, ed. Stephen M. Trzaskoma and R. Scott Smith (Leuven: Peeters, 2013) 223-251, at 251.

<sup>53</sup> Primit Chaudhuri, *The War With God: Theomachy in Roman Imperial Poetry* (OUP, 2014), 83.

<sup>54</sup> Pugh, *Spenser and Ovid*, on Niobe and the Pierides.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. William P. Cumming, 'The Influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos*,' *Studies in Philology* 28 (1931), 241-56 at 245n12; Raphael Lyne, *Ovid's Changing Worlds: English Metamorphoses, 1567-1632* (OUP, 2001), p. 97; Andrew Zurcher, *Spenser's Legal Language: Law and Poetry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), p. 185.

<sup>56</sup> For an excellent discussion of the response to the politically subversive aspects of Ovid's episode in Renaissance commentary, see Heather James, 'Ovid and the Question of Politics in Early Modern England,' *ELH* 70 (2003), 343-73.

erosion of republican liberties and institutions in contemporary Rome. Where Homer's council scenes are marked by vigorous disagreement among the gods, and where the Roman Senate was traditionally a forum for debate and collective decision-making by the entire patrician class, Ovid's council is conspicuous for the complete absence of dissenting voices.<sup>57</sup> It takes place in Jove's 'royal house' (171), reflecting the way in which Augustus sometimes held senate meetings in the library of the Apolline complex, which also contained his private residence, on the Palatine.<sup>58</sup> It is set up in fact as if it were a treason trial, to establish whether Lycaon is guilty of a *crimen maiestatis*, but in fact, as Balsley observes, 'no procedural justice actually occurs': Jove merely narrates Lycaon's crime and punishment as a *fait accompli*; summary justice has already been executed without the senate of gods being informed or involved, and Jove's speech is conspicuously 'a performance of injustice in place of a practice of justice'.<sup>59</sup>

Jove offers his narrative as an *exemplum* proving that the entire human race deserves to be exterminated (187-8, 242-3), but he is unable to control its subversive force. Hearing reports of human crime, he relates, he visited earth to test their truth. (211-3) This clearly evokes theoxeny, the myth-type in which gods disguise themselves as wandering mortals to test whether humans obey the law of hospitality, offering food and shelter to strangers. (The myth of Philemon and Baucis told later in Ovid's poem is a familiar example; theoxeny is also alluded to in the *Odyssey*, where it is central to the poem's theodicy.) But in fact Jove does not conform to this myth-type at all, for he tells the people his identity as soon as he arrives in Arcadia. He is not testing their obedience to the moral law of hospitality, but simply demanding their worship.<sup>60</sup> The common folk comply, but their king Lycaon mocks their devotions and resolves 'I shall prove by a clear test whether he is god or mortal: the truth will not be in doubt.' (222-3) The verb he uses, *experiar*, can denote any empirical testing, but also has the specific meaning of trying a claim in a court of law, so that Lycaon's sceptical process of enquiry to establish truth alludes precisely to the legal institutions whose decay was satirized in the framing council scene.<sup>61</sup> His method is impeccably logical, as Ahl notes. He plans an attempt on Jove's life (though Jove does not give him a chance to carry it out): what better test could there be to determine whether Jove is immortal? If he is a god as he claims, the attempt will not harm him; if he dies, Lycaon will have executed a human impostor who laid claim wrongfully and hubristically to divine status.

The gods respond with indignation at Lycaon's impiety, Jove is gratified by this display of their loyalty, and the poem's first simile compares Augustus' pleasure at his people's expressions of horror when an impious gang sought Caesar's blood. (200-5) It has been disputed whether this refers to the assassination of Julius Caesar or to a failed plot against Augustus, but the ring composition by which this episode is answered by Caesar's assassination in Book 15 supports the former reading. By

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<sup>57</sup> Frederick Ahl, *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 79; Denis Feeney, *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 200.

<sup>58</sup> Feeney, *Gods in Epic*, 199; Stephen Wheeler, *A Discourse of Wonders* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 173.

<sup>59</sup> K. Balsley, 'Truthseeking and Truthmaking in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* I.163-245,' *Law and Literature* 23 (2011), 48-70 at 57-58. On Ovid's sceptical analysis of changes in Roman *maiestas* law under Augustus in the *Fasti* (in an episode involving an ironic treatment of the Gigantomachy myth), see also Nicola Mackie, 'Ovid and the Birth of *Maiestas*,' in Anton Powell (ed.), *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, 'Deceptive Paradigm'?

<sup>61</sup> Balsley ('Truthseeking,' 62) notes that he has 'a similar *modus operandi* as the Roman jurists'.

implication, the assassination appears as a test of Caesar's claims to divinity such as that Lycaon was not permitted to carry out, and one whose clear result seems to be proof that Caesar was mortal after all. Jove's response is grossly disproportionate and unjust. Though Lycaon has already been punished for his impiety, Jove claims that all mankind deserve to die. 'You would think it a conspiracy of crime!' he exclaims (242). Yet by his own evidence, all the other Arcadians offered him pious prayers (220), Lycaon alone expressing doubt. There is an implied parallel with the Proscriptions (a programme of mass executions without trial) and the civil wars with which Augustus consolidated his power after 44 BCE, claiming to be motivated by filial piety and the desire to avenge his father's assassins.<sup>62</sup> One might speculate that the lesser gods are constrained to respond the way they do for fear that disagreement might be judged a sign of disloyalty, that the Senate laboured under similar constraints (the Proscriptions had claimed the lives of many senators), and indeed that, for the reader of the *Metamorphoses*, to acknowledge Jove's injustice and its topical relevance would run the risk of incurring Lycaon's guilt as a traitor.<sup>63</sup> But nevertheless Ovid opens up the possibility: in Balsley's words, he 'retries the case of Lycaon, providing...the...trial he was not given by Jupiter and giving to his Roman audience a chance to participate in the judicial process.'<sup>64</sup> One might add that we are invited not only to try Lycaon, but also to try Augustus, just as Lycaon sought to try Jove. As in Lactantius' *Institutes*, the text constitutes a virtual lawcourt passing judgement on self-deifying despots.

Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos* draw on Ovid's council scene and the Lycaon myth to similar effect. Jove's council in canto vi takes place in his palace, with all the trappings of a royal court. Sitting in majesty in his royal throne, Jove employs both the threat of violence and the offer of courtly patronage to persuade Mutabilitie to yield, appropriating the language of the Articles of Faith to suggest that, like sinful humanity before the Christian God, his subjects have no claim on him, but must rely on his grace in return for absolute obedience. But Spenser endorses Mutabilitie's right to take her case to a higher and less partial justice. Like Lycaon (but without any murderous intent which might muddy the moral waters), Mutabilitie seeks to prove that Jove is mortal, and nothing is offered against this. Mutabilitie is not granted dominion, but this is because she is no more divine than the Olympians. Though, unlike them, she openly pays homage to Spenser's divine Nature, 'Father of gods and men', she does not see her own self-contradiction when she asks Nature to grant her 'the rule of all, all being rul'd by you'. (vii.56) If she were installed as ruler in Jove's stead, she would be guilty of the same hubristic self-deification of which she accuses him. In fact, Mutabilitie is described at the beginning of her career in terms which evoke Lactantius' self-deifying tyrants very precisely. She is inspired by the example of Hecate and Bellona, whom Jove has granted power respectively over the two principles which underpin monarchical absolutism on earth. Hecate disposes 'rule and principality...To Gods and men, as she them list diuide', the syntactical ambiguity (does 'them' refer to 'rule and principality' or to 'Gods and men'?) suggesting that the allocation of monarchical power may amount to a wholly arbitrary labelling of certain men as gods. Bellona,

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<sup>62</sup> The Perusine War ended in 40 BCE in a particularly shocking confluence of extrajudicial violence and assertion of the ruler cult, when Octavian put his captives to death at an altar to the deified Julius Caesar, as though they were human sacrifices. (See for example Seneca, *De Clementia* I.xi; Suetonius, *Augustus* 15.)

<sup>63</sup> 'Belief becomes a test of loyalty and disbelief a sign of political opposition.' (Wheeler, *Discourse of Wonders*, p. 164) Cp. James, 'Ovid and the Question of Politics,' on the cautious approach to political aspects of the tale in Renaissance commentaries.

<sup>64</sup> Balsley, 'Truthseeking,' 64.

meanwhile, presides over 'Warres and allarums', revealing the real foundation of such claims in violent conquest or the threat of force. (vi.3) Emulating them,

So likewise did this *Titanesse* aspire,  
 Rule and dominion to her selfe to gaine;  
 That as a Goddess, men might her admire,  
 And heavenly honours yield, as to them twaine.  
 And first, on earth she sought it to obtaine;  
 Where she such prooffe and sad examples shewed  
 Of her great power, to many ones great paine... (vi.4)

*Mutabilitie* begins her career like Lactantius' Jupiter, demanding idolatrous worship and inflicting 'an impious tyranny of violence' on men. (*Institutes* 5.6.6) Rather than simply challenging the Olympians, she holds up a mirror to their own hubris: what she and they fail to perceive is how much they resemble each other. By offering his rebellious Titaness as a reflection of self-deifying monarchs, Spenser recalls the argument of the *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, one of the most outspoken works of sixteenth-century resistance theory:

if a Prince usurpe the right of God, and put himselfe forward after the manner of the Giants to scale the Heavens, he is no lesse guilty of high treason to his Sovereigne, and commits fellonie in the same manner, as if one of his vassals should seize on the rights of his Crown, and puts himselfe into evident danger to be dispoyled of his estates, and that so much the more justly, there being no proportion between God and an earthly King, between the Almighty and a mortall man; whereas yet between the Lord and the vassell there is some relation of proportion.<sup>65</sup>

Like the *Vindiciae*, Spenser's fable appropriates and inverts the traditional political application of the Titanomachy myth as a triumphalist assertion of monarchical authority against wrongful rebellion, and directs the charge of hubris against monarchical absolutism itself.

We are more used to thinking of such hostility to the 'civill...idolatry' of monarchical absolutism in connection with Milton than with Spenser.<sup>66</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, as has often been remarked, Milton produces his own reworking of the 'quintessential epic of epics', the classical Titanomachy. Tellingly, when Milton turns to name the gods of the original myth in Book I, he like Spenser ascribes to Euhemerus' distinctive genealogy as relayed by Lactantius, referring to 'Titan Heaven's first born/With his enormous brood, and birthright seized/By younger Saturn'. (*Paradise Lost*, 1.510-12) As in the case of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, the unusual choice has attracted critical comment only occasionally and as a curiosity, and never been connected, as far as I can find, to his ideas on political idolatry. But as I have argued for Spenser, it should be taken as an allusion to Euhemerism as a critique, not simply of Greek and Roman religion, but of ruler cults and the tyranny

<sup>65</sup> *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* [Basel, 1579], trans. William Walker (1648), 21.

<sup>66</sup> See Hardin, *Civil Idolatry*; Stevie Davies, *Images of Kingship in Paradise Lost: Milton's Politics and Christian Liberty* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), ch. 1.

associated with them.<sup>67</sup> Milton's debt to Lactantius, in particular, extends beyond his Euhemeristic interpretation of the Greek gods and associated critique of monarchy as idolatry, to other aspects of the ethical, religious and political frame built around this idea in the *Divine Institutes*—including his insistence on free will, the notion that 'knowledge of good and evil were given to the first man together', 'so that he could strengthen virtue by constant practice and bring it to perfection through its conflict with evil', and his argument for the necessity of religious toleration in a just society.<sup>68</sup> He also follows Lactantius further than Spenser does in his analysis of the pagan gods, taking up the idea that the fallen angels took up residence in the temples and statues of kings worshipped by their subjects, performing prodigies in their name, in order to encourage idolatry and tempt mankind to sin, so that men would not gain the heaven they themselves had lost.<sup>69</sup> Like Lactantius, Milton felt himself to be living through a period of religious persecution tied to oppressive imperial power, and issuing an urgent call for conversion. The relation between them deserves greater attention; and indeed the subtleties of Lactantius' critique-from-within of classical culture might also cast new light on the topic of Milton's attitude to the classical poets. But we should also expand our sense of Milton's debt to Spenser, to include the example set in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* of an English epic Titanomachy which uses Euhemerism as a tool for Christian critique of self-deifying kings.

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<sup>67</sup> In fact Philip J. Gallagher writes '[A]lthough Milton knew the euhemeristic source he is not writing in that tradition, and he does not turn to Lactantius in order to observe euhemeristic decorum. Milton's gods are fallen angels, not men, and their journeys—both within Greece and beyond—belong in his view to the history of human devil worship and not of human kingdoms.' ('*Paradise Lost* and the Greek Theogony,' p. 128, n. 13) In fact, Milton's 'Ionian gods' are fallen angels *who have taken on the names and identities of dead kings*, getting 'them new names' 'among the sons of Eve' now that their original names are 'blotted out and razed' from 'heavenly records'. (l.361-5). This is precisely the theory that Lactantius himself develops, drawing on the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, in Book 2 of the *Divine Institutes*, and blending Christian demonology with Euhemerism. The 'history of human devil worship' and the history 'of human kingdoms' are inseparable both for Milton and for Lactantius.

<sup>68</sup> *Divine Institutes* 7.27.j, f (the passage may have been added by a later writer, but is included in all early modern editions); compare the famous passage in *Areopagitica* on 'good and evil as two twins cleaving together'. Kathleen Hartwell, *Lactantius and Milton* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929) discusses all these points, and the next; see also D. Danielson, *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982); Pitt Harding, 'Milton's Serpent and the Birth of Pagan Error,' *SEL* 47 (2007), 161-177; Philip Gallagher, 'Milton and Euhemerism: Paradise Lost X. 578-584,' *Milton Quarterly* 12 (1978), 16-23.

<sup>69</sup> *Divine Institutes* 2.16-17.