



### **NONNUS' FIERY WORLD**

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#### **Introduction**

Fire is everywhere in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*. It manifests in the heavens as fiery orbs and as meteors and comets that streak and trail across the sky, "the flaming arch of the countless stars".<sup>1</sup> The heavens send forth dancing, leaping lightning (14. 273). Fire is *the* cosmic element, distinct from the terrestrial elements, earth, air and water. But, of course, fire too is terrestrial. In Nonnus it occurs in water, in wine, under the sea and under the earth. It can also be found in a dog's mouth, the Indian leader Deriades' helmet, the Great Bear on Dionysus' shield, the monsters Antaeus and Campe, rubies ("alight like a blazing lamp", 5. 176-77) and agate, the faces of Semele and Chalcomede, the cheeks of Beroe and Artemis, the eyes of Artemis, Zeus, the Cabiri and of Heracles, and perhaps on Selinus' brow (27. 234-35). A sense of fire's abundant presence is also conveyed by the following figures: 67 different words for fire itself, for kindling, burning and blazing, for words indicating fire such as torch, pyre, furnace, forge, lightning, spark and ash, plus compound fire adjectives such as fire-barbed, fire-breathing,

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<sup>1</sup> 4. 276. Cf. 2. 197-201, 42. 7. Fiery orbs in Nonnus include the planets: 38. 232, Mars.

fire-bearing, occur 980 times, an average of once every 21.6 lines.<sup>2</sup> References to fire and lightning cluster in the foreshadowing dream and subsequent destruction of Semele in books 7 and 8, and there are many references to the manner of Dionysus' birth in the remaining books, particularly in the Pentheus books, 44-46, where Dionysus' ability to withstand and handle fire is reiterated and presented as a proof of his divine paternity.<sup>3</sup> Still being tested in the next book, the manner of his birth makes Dionysus invulnerable to fires such as that hurled by Hera, which is akin to lightning (47. 609-17). And in the final book, he uses fire to overcome the Giants in a manner reminiscent of Zeus' dispatch of Typhon (48. 56-86).

The fire that consumed Semele and brought twice-born Dionysus into the world after a six-month gestation is, in many ways, the foundation myth of the whole work, even though the birth does not occur until book 8. If we see as a major theme of the poem Dionysus' growing mastery of fire, which, together with his gifts to humanity, eventually earns him a place in heaven, the pre-Dionysiac failures of Typhon and Zagreus to master fire serve as valuable cautionary tales and contrast with the fire-mastery of Dionysus' sire. The importance of the fire motif is heralded in the first three lines of the *Dionysiaca*: "Tell, Goddess, of Cronides' messenger with fiery gleam (*aithopos augēs*), the thunderbolt (*keranou*) that affected the pangs of travail with bridal sparks (*nymphidiōi spinthēri*), and the lightning (*steropēn*) that was Semele's chambermaid". Nonnus then tells of Dionysus the fire-proof, lifted from the fire still moist and inserted into Zeus' thigh-womb (1.1-7).

### **The nature and symbolism of fire**

Both alluring and dangerous, fire is a richly polyvalent symbol of life and power in almost all cultures. It appears to be a living entity, often growing from sparks/seeds into a conflagration that feeds, spreads, roars, hisses, licks, dances, leaps, spreading light and heat, and above all creating, destroying, transforming. It has a power to shape and impose

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<sup>2</sup> The *Dionysiaca* is 21,287 lines long. Words denoting fire include *pyr*, *pyrsos*, *pyriblētos*, *pyrsotokos*, *pyrikautos*, *phlox*, *plegō*, *plogeros*, *phlogoeis*, *kaiō*, *peukē*, *keranous*, *kaminos*. There are 27 compound fire adjectives. See W. Peek, *Lexicon zu den Dionysiaka des Nonnos* (Hildesheim 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere see, e.g., 9. 62-64, 9. 73, 21. 222-23, 21. 260, 10. 306, 24. 13, 27. 57, 27. 233, 31. 45, 34. 219, 35. 281, 39. 167, 43. 148, 43. 176, 47. 519, 47. 622-23, 47. 677, 48. 843.

form in a way the other elements do not and hence is particularly associated with will and creativity. In Nonnus, fire manifests and originates in various ways: as electric fire, lightning, generated from moist, pregnant clouds (2. 449-50, 482-507); as solar fire, in the sun and the stars and constellations like Eridanus;<sup>4</sup> as combustion fire, generated quasi-sexually by the friction of wood on or in wood, or by striking male and female firestones together and which consumes solid or liquid fuel in forges, pyres ovens, hearths;<sup>5</sup> as volcanic or chthonic fire, molten subterranean magma that produces geothermal heat, steam and lava, evident at Mt. Etna, "where the rock is kindled and craters of fire boil with the hot flare of Typhaon's bed" (13. 319-20, 14. 56-58). From this type of fire the Cyclopes forge the electric-fire thunderbolts of Zeus and similar, if less potent, missiles for themselves to discharge. The Cyclopean firebrands are very like Zeus' thunderbolts, "fire-barbed thunderbolt(s) from the underworld...earth-born lightning...imitation lightning...seed of Sicilian fire and that smoky forge...as if (struck) by hammers on the anvil of Etna".<sup>6</sup> When they are not working on Lemnos or Sicily, and are not making thunderbolts, Hephaestus and his helpers presumably use ordinary combustion fire in furnaces. Hephaestus imparts his special divine mastery and knowledge of fire, and skill in workmanship, to create works of supernatural quality.<sup>7</sup> The fires of Hephaestus and of the metalworking Telchines, chthonic and marine beings associated with volcanically formed Rhodes, also function under the sea in special caves. Hephaestus' fire mastery extends to being able to conjure it up out of nothing, make it appear like an electric discharge

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<sup>4</sup> 23. 240-42, 38. 358, 42. 9, 46. 349, 48. 323. There is, in Nonnus, also the derived fire of the moon, which milks the sun's fire, 4. 280-84, 5. 166, 38. 246, 278, 40. 376, and less specific ethereal fire, 2.448, 38. 222-26.

<sup>5</sup> 37. 66-69: Phaunus took two firestones and "rubbed them to and fro, and thus hitting the male against the female, he brought forth in a spontaneous birth the fire lurking in the stone, and put it under the pyre made of wood from the forest". It is worth noting that firestones are regarded as sent from heaven, so that even this kind of fire is associated with the heavens. See 37. 60-65, 2. 493-95, and M. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (London 1958) 54.

<sup>6</sup> 28 172-205, of Argilipos, Steropes and Brontes, and suggesting that, in India, unless they had access to volcanic fire, we are to understand that these weapons were transported from Sicily. Cf. 14. 52-60, which includes the line (56) "Sicilian sparks were their arrows of fire".

<sup>7</sup> What kind of fire does he use when he works on Olympus?

and shoot it upon someone like a flame-thrower, as he does to the Indian warrior Morrheus, engulfing him with dancing fire.<sup>8</sup>

It is natural to resort to fire imagery to convey the sparkle of precious stones and the scintillating flash of bright colors. Fire is also a common metaphor for thought and consciousness and for emotions such as anger, shame, love, lust.<sup>9</sup> Fire in Nonnus has some peculiar properties, able to exist in unexpected places, such as in water, and can behave in unusual ways, such as not burning surfaces, or being inextinguishable by water.<sup>10</sup>

Particularly in the form of lightning, fire is associated across cultures with sovereignty, divinity, immortality, fertilization, with sperm and the sexual prerogatives of sky gods.<sup>11</sup> Semen, especially divine semen, is considered fiery because it contains the sparks/seeds of life. Fiery arrows are the mark of Eros. Fire as lightning signifies Zeus' phallic and celestial potency, which Typhon prematurely arrogates for himself as he fantasizes about the sexual opportunities he will enjoy as the new, armed-with-lightning lord of heaven (1. 404, 2. 314-55). Elevation, sovereignty and power are easily linked in the imagination to each other, and to fire and to sparks that fly upward or come from immortal realms. References to the fire-height, fire-power and fire-divinity relationships occur throughout the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 30. 66-99, but here the fire is described as Lemnian: "his kindled blaze of lethal Lemnian flame", 96.

<sup>9</sup> There is also the metabolic combustion within the body that generates heat and is a sign of life, 25. 539-52. For some of the many aspects of fire, the ultra living element, latent as heat and overt as flame, see G. Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* trans. A. Ross (London 1938/1964) 7; J. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* trans. J. Sage (New York 1967) 106-07; K. Morgan, "Poetry and the Imagery of Fire", *English* 14 (1962) 49-52.

<sup>10</sup> On fire that does not burn, see 30. 76-78, 39. 399-401, 40. 473-77, 40. 485-92, 43. 386, 403-07, 45. 100, 336-46, 351-56. Such references correspond to references to water that does not wet. See below, n. 47.

<sup>11</sup> R. Caldwell, *The Origin of the Gods* (Oxford 1989) 87.

<sup>12</sup> For example, 2. 583, 7. 268-77, 8. 409 19, 24. 13-15, 24. 67, 33. 378, 37. 62, 38. 91, 40. 369, 46. 349. On the sexual nature of fire, and the sexual arousal it elicits in pyromaniacs, see H. Flournoy, "Dreams on the Symbolism of Water and Fire", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1 (1920) 245-55; Bachelard (n. 9) 13, 102. Bachelard suggests that the sexuality of fire partly explains its Christian association with Satan and a fiery hell for sinners. Hell is a fitting punishment for beliefs that prescribe severe sanctions for surrender to the fires of lust. Caldwell (n. 11) 89 argues that Prometheus' theft of heavenly fire is

A property of fire is that it is both antagonistic to and, in the form of heat, symbiotic with water, harmonizing with moisture in a kind of sacred marriage.<sup>13</sup> This can generate a number of paradoxes, some of which are conveyed by fire-in-liquid wine or other forms of “firewater” alcohol. Human life and most forms of animal and vegetable life require water and fire’s products, heat and light, to fertilize or germinate, and to grow. Fire and water can also be used to distinguish and demarcate male and female, respectively.<sup>14</sup> Insofar as lightning symbolizes both phallic power and divine semen, it is a celestial combination of both fire and water. The ability to hurl flame/lightning, as a deadly weapon or as a warning, is a virility marker. Some kinds of fire are inherently more powerful but much depends on its owner or wielder. Zeus’ thunderbolts (“fiery spear”(s), 2. 212) have only a feeble fire in the hands of Typhon (1. 295-320). The thunderbolts manufactured by the Cyclopes for their use in the Indian war are less destructive than Zeus’.<sup>15</sup> The long list of those who use or are associated with fire in the *Dionysiaca* is overwhelmingly masculine.<sup>16</sup>

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really about stealing Zeus’ sexual prerogatives. Sexual elements are evident in Prometheus’ use of a fennel stalk to convey the fire. A fennel stalk is also part of Dionysus’ phallic signature accoutrement, the thrysus, and he inserts a fennel stalk into the river Hydaspes to ignite it, and then extinguishes the fire when he withdraws it, 23. 255-57, 24. 62. Fire, fennel stalk and thunderbolt are linked in a web of phallic allusion. Cf. too Zeus’s display of “bridal lightning” to Semele and her electrocution when she insisted on proof of the paternity of her unborn child. See G. Durand *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* trans. M. Sanky and J. Heath (Brisbane 1999) 321-22, on hierogamy as placing fire in the womb and on the many psychological and poetic links between elemental fire and sexuality, and 53, 319-20 on fire and sovereignty. The generation of fire on earth by rubbing wood together has clear sexual analogies.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the antagonisms and resolutions are discussed by W. Fauth, *Eidos Poikilon* (Göttingen 1981) 45-58.

<sup>14</sup> The contrast between the dry and the wet is another means for exploring the relationship between fire and water, masculine and feminine. See A. Staples, *Good Goddess and Vestal Virgins* (London 1998) 16, 24-26.

<sup>15</sup> But Nonnus, to explain the phenomenon, also adopts material from natural science handbooks, which have lightning generated by activity within clouds. See, e.g. 1. 481-507, and cf. 8. 368-72, 18. 193-95, lightning shooting from the bosom of the sky. Breasts and wombs are to some extent interchangeable in Nonnus. Thunderbolts thus can be both earth-and sky-born.

<sup>16</sup> Whereas earth and water are typically associated with the feminine, fire and air are seen as masculine. Against 24 males associated with fire, and in the cases

Some evidence for an isotopy in the imagination of Nonnus of fire, water, male and female, sexuality, creativity, divinity, is given above. Nonnus is unlikely to have known just how universal are the motifs and associations of fire and heat that constantly surface in his narrative but he clearly intuits what anthropological inquiry and the literature of other cultures convey on this theme, quite apart from what was transmitted by his own. Rhythm, dance and song can also be associated with fire. The overlapping activities Telchines, Dactyls, Corybants, Curetes and Cabiri, evident in Nonnus and a nexus of great antiquity, are but one expression of this affinity. Fire, music and rhythm all have entrancing, hypnotic powers. In tribal communities the master of fire is often the master of songs too.<sup>17</sup> Divine afflatus, the infusion of sacred presence, is often believed to accompany a sensation of heat. Thus, sacredness is hot. Magico-religious power burns. Heat “is the syndrome of gaining possession of a sacrality...The heat induced by a violent and excessive access of sacred power is feared by the majority of mankind”.<sup>18</sup> Flammable alcohol that instills a sense of expansiveness is appropriately also known as “spirits”. Divinity can also be conceived of as a consuming fire.<sup>19</sup> Aspects of serpent symbolism also belong to the fire-divinity-sexuality-creativity-new life-initiation web of associations, so that handling or wearing snakes or being impervious to their menace is akin to being fire-proof. Fire-breathing dragons are just one expression

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of Zeus, Dionysus, Eros and Hephaestus, frequently so, there are, more rarely, females: Rhea, Hera, Aphrodite, the Fury Tisiphone, Dawn and Bacchants, plus the inadequate Semele.

<sup>17</sup> Durand (n. 12) 323. Arsonists are among those who find fires particularly entrancing. See N. Wiklund, *The Icarus Complex* (Lund 1978) 129. With further reference to the isotopy of fire and Dionysian dance, see C. Wilson, “Wine Rituals, Maenads and Dionysian Fire”, *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar* 10 (1998) 157-68: it may have been thought that dancing increased the pneuma containing the fire within the maturing wine. Igniting alcohol distillate (it burns at 78 degrees Celsius) may have been part of Dionysian initiation ceremonies. See too Bachelard (n. 9) 83.

<sup>18</sup> M. Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*, trans. W. Trask (London 1958) 85-86. See too 7-8, 16-17, 50, 95, 99-100.

<sup>19</sup> *Hebrews* 12.29, evoking divine majesty in terms of blazing power. Cf. *Deuteronomy* 4.14, *Leviticus* 10.2. Proper initiation into some of the mysteries of fire’s power is a wise precaution. Passing over or handling fire are typical tests or ordeals for the initiate, and are supposed to provide access to different realities. Fire represents a barrier to be overcome. See M. Eliade *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. P. Mairet (New York 1960) 69, 72, 94.

of fire-serpent affinity. Serpentine coils can suggest, amongst other things, circle dances. Serpents and serpent imagery are very common in the *Dionysiaca*. Bacchants as well as Dionysus wear serpents in some manner (e.g., 25. 219-22, 27. 235-36). The fire-serpent association is explicit when Ophiuchus shoots fire-bred viper-arrows (1. 244-49), and when serpents play around the heads of Harmonia and the man who had slain a dragon, Cadmus, as fire burns on an altar (44. 107-14).<sup>20</sup>

### **The challenge of fire in the *Dionysiaca***

Besides the types of fire mentioned earlier, such as electric, solar, combustion and volcanic, there is a special type of divine fire that Dionysus must master. When directed at Hydaspes it is self-generated, like Hephaestus' when rescuing his Cabiri sons from Morrheus, and like Zeus', because it can ignite or instantly boil vast quantities of water.<sup>21</sup> When directed at Pentheus it is like Hephaestus' fire in that it dances about like an electrical discharge but is unlike Hephaestus' fire in that it cannot be quenched by water and is unlike both Hephaestus' and Zeus' fire in that it does not burn what it dances around, that is, Pentheus or his property. Water-mastery must be retained alongside fire-mastery, not exchanged for it, and may explain why Dionysus' fire cannot be extinguished until he so determines. The unique properties of Dionysus' fire make it a very special kind of fire therefore, and this would add to the task of achieving complete fire mastery. Moreover, as a future wielder of a fiery torch sufficient to overcome the Giants, Dionysus' body (however one thinks of that particular physical vehicle) must be able to stand close to massive amounts of fiery power. Dionysus can

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<sup>20</sup> The Hindu deity most resembling Dionysus, Siva, is often envisaged as having snakes in his hair and around his waist, dancing within a circle of fire. Dionysus is also like the Hindu Agni, the fiery, serpentine son of the sky, worshipped as terrestrial, solar and lightning fire, the one who produces noise and terror, penetrates, dwells in and fecundates the waters and the womb, eternally young and ever reborn like a serpent with a new skin. See Caldwell (n. 11) 86; J. Long, "Siva and Dionysos – Visions of Terror and Bliss", *Numen* 18 (1971) 180-209; M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, trans. W. Trask (Chicago 1978) 208, and cf. B. Knox, "The Serpent and the Flame", *AJP* 71 (1950) 379-400. On serpents in the *Dionysiaca*, see R. Newbold, "Discipline, Bondage and the Serpent in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*", *CW* 78 (1984) 89-98.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. 2. 444-50, Zeus boiling Typhon's torrents, and 6. 213-16, igniting the seas after Zagreus' death.

even turn himself into fire (and water). Within the womb Dionysus is able to withstand the high voltage of Zeus' thunderbolts, for he was "bathed by the non-burning sparks of lightning" (45. 100). As an adult, he withstood the lower voltage but still dangerous lightning and fire of Hera. Just as Phaethon provides the contrast with Helios in handling solar fire, Semele provides the contrast with Dionysus in withstanding electric fire. Despite Zeus' warnings that his fire is anything but gentle, Semele insists not only on seeing but also touching his undischarged, high-voltage lightning as proof of his identity and therefore her status as divine consort: she wished to feel "the lethal lightning in her own hands. She recklessly touched the deadly thunderbolts with her hands, recking not of Fate" (8. 389-91). In effect electrocuted, her body is reduced to ashes in a great flash (8. 395, 399).

### **Some uses of fire**

Fire's product, heat, combines with water and moisture, words for which occur over one thousand times in the poem, to generate vegetable, animal and human life.<sup>22</sup> Fire fuses elements of the mineral world to create new forms. Apart from its uses for cooking, protecting from cold and its military applications, fire purifies and makes possible new growth or rebirth, as the story of the phoenix reminds us (40. 394-98). Torches and bonfires are used ritually as a form of imitative magic, to ensure that the heat and light of the sun stimulate growth in the fields. Fire is used in sacrifices, initiations, mystery ceremonies where its role is often concealed from outsiders, and in weddings, where it can signify liminal and sexual experience.<sup>23</sup> Some close encounter with fire, such as

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<sup>22</sup> After the fire and water cataclysm of Book 6, "Nature the mother of the generations took root again; earth blended with fire and water wove with the air to form the human race with its four bonds", 7. 4-6. Cf. 41. 51-66.

<sup>23</sup> Mystery and initiation: 3. 43, 9. 118, 13. 43, 13. 402, 14. 13, 14. 18, 27. 320, 27. 256, 29. 214, 31. 141, 44. 149, 193-96, and cf. Eliade, (n. 5) 16, 229. Weddings and the sexual symbolism of bridal torches: 2. 319-20, 8. 310-22, 8. 347, 8. 380, 12. 391, 16. 119, 18. 367-68, 27. 319, 31. 146, 34. 123, 41. 383, 43. 386, 44. 194, 46. 304, 47. 622, 48. 201-02, 48. 210. See especially 43. 385-93, where the fire of wedding torches is said to be unquenchable, and for the isotopy there of fire, music, song and dance. The waving of mystic torches by dancing revellers is a form of photic driving that can induce altered states of consciousness. Initiation into and celebration of the Samothracian mysteries involved fire, drumbeat, music, song and dance, 3. 43, 67-78, 14. 18. See A.



walking barefoot across hot coals, is often associated with an initiation ceremony that instills a general sense of confidence and mastery. Being roasted or boiled by the right entity can be thought to confer immortality. The manner of his birth from Semele, when Dionysus' "limbs were washed with celestial fire", signaled an illustrious career.<sup>24</sup>

### Wielders and Masters of Fire

#### Eros

A common image in Nonnus is Eros with fiery wings, arrows, bowstring, quiver-belt, bridal torch. The fire of Eros is a kind of divine life force, likened to the trails left by shooting stars and able to start as sparks and become a mighty conflagration.<sup>25</sup> The fire of love is irresistible. Women can be fatally consumed by "this great implacable fire" of love (4. 157, 176) but this may be a welcome fate, as Nicaea's rejected and doomed lover Hymnus declares (15. 328. Cf. 15. 320). Sent from fiery Eros, sometimes at the request of his mother, Aphrodite,<sup>26</sup> love is an unquenchable divine fire<sup>27</sup> that is even stronger than the floods and fires that Zeus could command.<sup>28</sup> It wounds Morrheus, and, in a way

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Schachter, "Evolutions of a Mystery Cult. The Theban Kabiroi", in M. Cosmopoulos (ed.), *Greek Mysteries* (London 2003) 112-142, at 112. Cf. 12. 15, where the Seasons dance around the fire of Helios. According to R. Seaford, "Thunder, Lightning and Earthquakes in the *Bacchae*", in A. Lloyd (ed.), *What is a God?* (Swansea 1997) 139-52, torches in the mysteries were equated with thunderbolts, which in turn were associated with future death and rebirth.

<sup>24</sup> 8. 405-06: cf. 45.100. Bathing her new body in purifying fire meant that Semele became immortal and Olympian, 8. 413-14. On Nonnus' treatment of Semele's fiery apotheosis, see C-M. Edsman, *Ignis Divinus* (Lund 1949), 187. Cf. *ibid.* 11, 16, 224, on rejuvenation by fire, the Demeter-Demophon story, and Nonnus and the phoenix in book 40. On sacrificial fire, see M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols* trans. P. Mairet (Princeton 1952) 52. Eliade sees altars and their fires as microcosms of the *imago mundi*, a further reason to be a priestly fire-master.

<sup>25</sup> 5. 592, 42. 6-12. See D. Gigli Piccardi, *Metafora e Poetica in Nonno di Panopoli* (Firenze 1985) 45-50, 90, 94-95, 116-17.

<sup>26</sup> Who is also fiery, 42. 383, 34. 63, and like a furnace, 5. 591.

<sup>27</sup> 1. 402, 6. 362-63, 13. 327, 34. 63-68, 42. 103.

<sup>28</sup> 7. 256, 269-77, 34. 61-62.

most astonishing of all, Helios, impelling its helpless victims to behavior that is not just painful but destructive to them or others. No-one is safe from it (33. 247, 34. 77). The sparks of love are said to be the hottest of all.<sup>29</sup> It is through being wounded, like Poseidon, by Eros' arrow, that makes Dionysus infatuated with Beroe (42. 30-35, 204, 352). This occurs after he has already demonstrated considerable mastery of fire (see below). Dionysus' mastery of fire is even more complete after his subsequent victory over the Giants but he still becomes infatuated with Aura, "scourged by a greater fire" (48. 474, 477). His treatment of her causes her to commit suicide, a grim token of Eros' power.

#### Helios and Phaethon

The word Helios occurs 120 times in the poem. The Sun is a fire-master, *pyrois promos* (27. 101, 36. 83). Sometimes Helios is called Hyperion (10 times) or the Charioteer (Heniocheus) or Phaethon or identified with Phoebus Apollo but in Book 38 the name Phaethon belongs to Helios' son who, fascinated from an early age by fire and his father's four-horse chariot, importuned his father to give him an opportunity to drive the chariot across the sky. Such a feat of fire-mastery should not even be contemplated by the untrained and uninitiated. Helios pointed out that the horses were so difficult to control that even he could hardly drive the chariot, and that Hephaestus as a fire-master kept within his competence and did not seek to become a celestial charioteer. Relenting, however, Helios gave Phaethon detailed instructions and advice on how to complete the task but Phaethon's drive quickly struck trouble as the horses went out of control. Chaos ensued. The heavens were thrown into even greater confusion than they were when Typhon challenged Zeus' supremacy. The Earth was devastated. It took Zeus' mastery of electric fire to strike Phaethon down with a thunderbolt. He then placed Phaethon in the heavens as the constellation of the Charioteer and allowed the fire-scorched river Eridanus, into which Phaethon had fallen, to become a constellation too. Helios resumed his regular career across the sky and vegetation blossomed as the sun once again shed its life-giving warmth.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> 33. 265, 34. 318, 42. 211.

<sup>30</sup> 38. 421-23. Cf. 3. 1-15, the earth's recovery from the havoc wrought by Typhon, whose activity is likened to that of a novice chariot driver, 1. 310-18. Typhon and Phaethon are both described as untaught, *adidaktos*: 1. 311, 38. 323. See G. D'Ippolito, *Studi Nonniani* (Palermo 1964) 253-70, for the greater

The emphasis in Nonnus' account of Phaethon's drive is on the incompetent charioteer with ideas above his station, like a reckless sorcerer's apprentice. However, Helios' is no ordinary chariot but a fire that exceeds all others for its importance to life on earth and its potential for causing disaster. The tale is an awesome illustration of incapacity to handle fire, in this case, solar fire.<sup>31</sup>

### Hephaestus

Workers with fire, such as smiths, enjoy special status in ancient societies for their power to transform matter and create new forms, sometimes with an uncanny skill that seems superhuman or divine. To master fire and to create new things is to partake of the divine world. The divine master craftsman, limping, crook-shank Hephaestus was the relatively asexual custodian of the secrets of ores and fire, of metallurgy, who, arguably, husbanded his own sexual energies to ensure the success of the marriage of elements that takes place in the furnace-as-womb (Cf. 4. 283-84). He was an alchemic midwife who brought forth new forms from the marriage of fire and water, and who could manufacture a form of fire-pronged thunderbolt (36. 130-32) and wield a fire-brand torch (39. 206-09. Cf. 27. 326-29). He was a fire-warrior and ally of Dionysus in India.<sup>32</sup> Hephaestus, coming to the aid of his sons, the Cabiri, intervened in spectacular fashion to beset Deriades' chief lieutenant, Morrheus, with flames that have the properties of discharged electric fire: leaping down

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emphasis placed by Nonnus on Phaethon's fire damage when compared with Ovid's treatment of this story.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. R. Shorrock, *The Challenge of Epic. Allusive Engagement in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus* (Leiden 2001) 132 n. 80, and B. Simon, *Nonnos de Panopolis. Les Dionysiaques. Chants xxviii-xl* (Paris 2003) 3-45.

<sup>32</sup> On metallurgy, sexual fantasy, and Hephaestus and his magical, shape-shifting helpers like the Telchines, see Caldwell (n. 11) 52, 123-27, 176-78: metallurgy represents a sublimation and redirection of the fires of sexual desire into the body of mother earth in order to create new forms and new beauties. Cf. J. Bolen, *Gods in Everyman* (New York 1989) 223; M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (London 1962) 8, 60, 102-03, 151: miners and metalworkers are like alchemists in their (attempted) acceleration of cultural growth by helping Nature give birth more rapidly by extracting ore from the Earth's womb and using fire to bring about irreversible change. The *Dionysiaca* records a number of other cultural advances, not all associated with Dionysus: cereal agriculture, wine, writing, astronomy, honey-gathering, olive-pressing, rock-cutting, dyeing, flute playing, better cities.

from heaven, “fiery” Hephaestus, “brandishing in his hand a missile of fire”, discharged a flame that was the essence of himself (*syngonon*) and which leapt and wound around Morrheus with many tongues, like a serpent. Then “around Morrheus’ neck the flame crept and spiraled of itself as if with a mind of its own, and wrapped round his throat a constraining necklace of fire; having encircled the throat, the flames darted with a spring to the end of his toes, and wove a wreath of fiery threads over the champion’s foot, and there fast on the ground shook and danced and flashed. His helmet caught fire and warmed his head”. (30. 76-85). Although Hephaestus is experienced by Morrheus as a fiery wardemon (*pyroessan Enyo*), champion lightning hurler (*promon astraptonta*) and blazing pointed missile (*aithaloessan aköken*), Morrheus was not killed because the river Hydaspes, witnessing the assault, came to the rescue and was able to extinguish the deadly fire-bolt.<sup>33</sup> Besides creating a wedding gift for Beroe, a palace for Electra (3. 131-79), a shield for Dionysus (25. 384-567) and brazen fire-breathing horses for his sons (29. 197-212), Hephaestus crafted as if by magic a magnificent, a two-headed and very life-like (“agate spat out its fluid flash of light”) snake necklace for the wedding of Harmonia with Cadmus (5. 135-79). Hephaestus’ mastery of fire includes working in a submarine forge, where his furnace fire “roared unquenched deep beneath the sea” when he is not working on Lemnos or Sicily or Olympus.<sup>34</sup> Although he too makes fire-pronged thunderbolts, his fire and his thunderbolts are inferior to Zeus’ (or so Zeus says, 35. 290), and, seemingly, to Dionysus’ fire, for he is unable (or unwilling) to set Hydaspes alight. Fiery, smoky, fire-bearing, fire-breathing, fire-weaving, he is an incarnation of fire but too lame to dance, an activity he leaves to his assistants.<sup>35</sup> His apprentices and co-workers, the Cyclopes, Telchines, Dactyls, Cabiri, Curetes and Corybants work on Lemnos, Sicily and under the sea.<sup>36</sup> The Cyclopes and Telchines excepted, these associates

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps because it was limited in its compass. See 30. 86-99, 106-07.

<sup>34</sup> Such as when making jewels for Beroe, 43. 398-408. Cf. 2. 225, 25. 337, 567, 29. 194, 205, 374, 30. 74, 96.

<sup>35</sup> 2. 299, 10. 300, 27. 333, 30. 100, 35. 290, 39. 206. Hephaestus was received by the Nereids into an underwater cave when cast from Olympus by Hera. Eliade (n. 19) 265-66 regards this as akin to a shamanic initiation. Mastery of fire declares the shaman as much as it does the smith and alchemist. Cf. 27. 320, the mystical sparks of ever-burning light that Hephaestus generates.

<sup>36</sup> See 3. 35-81 for the connection of the Corybants with the mysteries of Samothrace. For the identification of the mysteries-associated Dactyls with

combine dancing and beating out the rhythm on a drum with extraction of ore from the earth and rhythmic hammer blows in their metalworking. Mainly working in subterranean or submarine workshops, all these workers use volcanic, chthonic fire to create fire-brand missiles and earthborn thunderbolts (14. 17-48, 52-60, 28. 172-205). Just as fire dances, and it does frequently in Nonnus,<sup>37</sup> so do its practitioners. Dionysian revelers, in turn, dance and wave their mystic torches in celebration of their fire-god.<sup>38</sup> The seven Corybants, drummers, dancers, smiths and warriors, cut down the Indian foe and “imitated the rhythm of the dance-in-armor, circling with their feet, warring and reveling”, as they cut down Indian warriors (29. 219-21. Cf. 28. 275-76). The Cyclopes labor beneath Etna. One of them, Argilipos, is described as foremost in fire, *pyroeis promos*, and the seven of them are the heavy artillery and very effective allies of Dionysus. They are more competent controllers of the elements than Typhon.<sup>39</sup>

## Zeus

Precisely the failure to master fire undermines Typhon's attempt to supplant Zeus as lord of the cosmos. Having acquired Zeus' thunderbolts, he is unable to wield them effectively. Typhon is clumsy with them and “their manly fire became womanly” as they emit a feeble, ineffectual, smoky fire, and yet he dreams of forging more powerful lightning.<sup>40</sup> Called an impostor by Zeus, Typhon can hardly lift the thunderbolts. His struggle with Zeus is marked by much fire and

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Corybants, see 3. 238, 14. 23-35, and Eliade (n. 32) 102-03. For the sea-dwelling Telchines, see 8. 108, 14. 36-27, 24. 114-16, 27. 105-06, 37. 293.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. 2. 195, 2. 477 (“the thunderbolts...revelled like dancers in the heavens”), 30. 76-85, 36. 296, 38. 39, 38. 398, 44. 8-9 (“Asopos danced and breathed forth fiery streams, as he swept his waters around in circles”), 47. 28, and perhaps 48. 58.

<sup>38</sup> 9. 118, 43. 99, 47. 28. Cf. 31. 136-57, where Iris, disguised as Night, complains that the light cast by the torches of Dionysian revellers, like another sun, banishes darkness and gleaming stars.

<sup>39</sup> 28. 172-275. See F. Vian, *Nonnos de Panopolis. Les Dionysiaques. Chants xxv-xxix* (Paris 1990) 161-62, 167, 323-25. Association with the number seven commonly denotes sacredness.

<sup>40</sup> 1. 294-320, 2. 344-46. Snaky Typhon's novice-like handling of them closely resembles Nonnus' description of Phaethon trying to drive the chariot of the sun in book 38.

lightning, as the fiery heavenly bodies rally to Zeus' side. Primitive creature that he is, it is to the fire of Cadmus' music that Typhon succumbs and allows Zeus to recover his weapons (1. 404). Eventually he is blasted into a blazing, smoking, subterranean mass, providing material for Etna's volcano, as his ambitions to wield a new and better kind of heavenly fire are mocked by the victorious Zeus (2. 565-630). As Zeus Hyetios, a rain and weather god, Zeus also displays his mastery of another element when he also uses water and hail to overcome Typhon. Later, he both subjects the earth to flood and ignites the seas after the murder of Zagreus.<sup>41</sup> By dispatching monitory thunderbolts, Zeus brings to an end Dionysus' ignition of the Hydaspes, and the battle between Dionysus and Poseidon over Beroe. He killed the monster Campe with a thunderbolt and Nonnus alludes to deadly blasts against Salmoneus and Encelados.<sup>42</sup> It takes a thunderbolt from Zeus, master of a superior fire, to overcome the inexperienced driver of solar fire and end the celestial havoc created by Phaethon. Zeus is the master of electric fire and a divine fire that can set rivers and seas alight, and melt Saturn's ice (18. 226, 230-32, 23. 298).

### Dionysus

While he may never be capable of the particular mastery of fire and water displayed by Zeus, as a fertility deity Dionysus embodies the life-giving powers of moisture as much as he does the life-giving powers of heat and, thanks to the manner of his birth, he is himself fire-proof. Initiated into at least some of the mysteries of fire by his nurse, Mystis (9. 118), he rejects a future as thunderbolt wielder when, grieving for Ampelus, he asks Zeus to give to Hephaestus the thunderbolts meant for him: "My aim is not so high...a fine thing it would be for me to take up Semele's miniature lightning".<sup>43</sup> Hera saw in Zagreus a forerunner of Dionysus but her fears that he (Dionysus) would become a lightning wielder were groundless (31. 34-36). Dionysus acknowledges the

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<sup>41</sup> 6. 206-388. This eventually led to the building of new and better dwellings and cities. V. Stegemann *Astrologie und Universalgeschichte* (Leipzig 1930) 88, likens this conflagration to the Stoic *ekpyresis*, a cataclysm necessary for a new *genitura mundi*.

<sup>42</sup> 18. 236-37, 28. 184, 47. 70.

<sup>43</sup> 10. 298-300, 305-06. At 46. 61-62, in referring Pentheus to the testimony of thunderbolts to prove his paternity, Dionysus means Zeus' thunderbolts. His own testimony is the fire he unleashes at 45. 335-46.

supreme power of Zeus' electric fire when he accepts the messages of thunderbolts to cease fighting with Hydaspes and Poseidon (24. 1-4, 43. 378-80). Poseidon had vainly (and mischievously?) challenged Dionysus to hurl his father's thunderbolt at him, "if the bridal flame of Zeus delivered you" (43. 172-77).

In the Indian war, Books 13-40, there is frequent employment of fire and lightning by combatants, and the war culminates in a sea-battle that involves fire-ships. At first, there is the special fire, part solar, part combustion, part divinely Dionysian,<sup>44</sup> which Dionysus uses to attack the earth- and water-worshipping Indians, who rely on the formidable barrier of the river Hydaspes to block Dionysus' army. The Indian leader Deriades was ignorantly confident his father Hydaspes would overcome any fire that Dionysus might employ: "water is much more powerful than fire. My father Indian Hydaspes, if he wished, could quench the fiery breath of Zeus' thunderbolt with his boiling flow" (21. 223-26). This was a vain boast. Dionysus taunted and set fire to the Hydaspes, and thereby proved his descent from Zeus and provided a partial echo of the way Zeus once turned Eridanus and Asopus into rivers of fire. Having warned Hydaspes he would suffer the same fate as those rivers did at the hands of Zeus,<sup>45</sup> Dionysus inserted his fire-bearing fennel stalk into the river and ignited its surface. Then "the flashing fire moved to the deeps...the wet mud kindled the water with the swimming spark of underwater fire" (23. 266-69). The battle between fire and water is central to, and the climax of, the battle at the Hydaspes. The river is reduced to a suppliant (24. 7-61). Ocean, affected by and alarmed at the conflagration, threatened to extinguish the sun and stars, in a manner reminiscent of Typhon's threats to confound the cosmos, threats that were ended by Zeus' fiery intervention with a thunderbolt to bring a truce.<sup>46</sup> Dionysus withdrew his fennel torch (23. 280-320, 24. 1-61). Somewhat like Phaethon in Book 38, Dionysus had created a firestorm that ultimately threatened the cosmos and had to be checked by a sign, a thunderclap,

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<sup>44</sup> 23. 255-57: "From a nearby thicket, he took a fire-bearing stalk of fennel, and holding it towards the East he warmed it with the sun; the inflammable stalk spontaneously produced a spark and delivered a wood-born fire".

<sup>45</sup> 23. 259-79, 25. 77-79. Cf. 47. 530-32.

<sup>46</sup> 23. 280-320, 24. 1-4. Cf. 2. 256-333.

from the supreme fire-master.<sup>47</sup> But the crucial difference is that Dionysus was then able to control and stop the conflagration himself.

After an interlude when Dionysus gets a new shield made by Hephaestus, his fire-working allies, Hephaestus, the Cyclopes and the Cabiri, bring their armory to bear when battle is resumed.<sup>48</sup> Their presence and that of the Corybants, the Telchines, and the Curetes in his force gives Dionysus a fire-power that Deriades is driven to try to emulate. Deriades having, as we have seen, initially declared his faith in earth and water and their divinity, and in water's power to extinguish even divine fire (and still claiming this so at 27. 73-74), sought to enlist the fires and smithy skills of Hephaestus and the Cyclopes, just as Typhon had hoped to do when he appeared to become the new ruler of the universe (2. 340-46). Deriades refers ominously to his grandfather Phaethon as he fantasizes about "wielding a late-born fiery thunderbolt".<sup>49</sup> The battle din of Books 28 and 29 has been likened to an orchestration of volcanic forge noises.<sup>50</sup> And for a moment, emboldened by Hera, Deriades becomes a veritable fire-demon who frightens Dionysus into leaving the battlefield, until the latter is rallied by

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<sup>47</sup> See R. Schmiel, "Composition and Structure: The Battle at the Hydaspes (Nonnos *Donysiaca* 21. 303-24. 178)", in *Des Géants à Dionysos. Melanges F. Vian*, D. Accorinti and P. Chuvin (edd.), (Alessandria 2003) 469-81. "Since rainy Zeus wields the fiery thunderbolt, since he is both father of Dionysos and father of rivers (21. 101f.), he is the logical choice to bring the war between fire and water to a conclusion." (480). Schmiel (481) also suggests that part of Dionysus' army crossing the Hydaspes and remaining dry (23. 147-91) foreshadows the subsequent elemental fire-water conflict, where fire prevails. If so, perhaps subsequent references to un wetting water may relive that victory. On un wetting water, see 1. 264, 322, 6. 292, 7. 186, 8. 255, 10. 164-66, 13. 323-27, 16. 51-55, 97-90, 20. 157-59, 21. 196-98, 23. 125-27, 146, 139, 168-87, 24. 111, 43. 214-15, 351-56, 268-69, 46. 31-32. For a discussion of water in Nonnus, see R. Newbold, "The Character and Content of Water in Nonnus and Claudian", *Ramus* 30 (2001) 169-89, esp. 174-76 on water versus fire. It is worth noting that a common ritual for consecrating water is to plunge a firebrand into it.

<sup>48</sup> 28. 172-94, 29. 193-214, 30. 66-104, and later, 39. 206-18, 391-407.

<sup>49</sup> 27.98. See the whole passage, 27. 70-125, and cf. 27. 189-94, where Dionysus considers enlisting Poseidon's aid against Deriades if he (Deriades) should indeed gain the sun as an ally, and 36. 144-56.

<sup>50</sup> J. Winkler *In Pursuit of the Nymphs. Comedy and Sex in Nonnos' Tales of Dionysos* (U. Texas Diss. 1974) 96.



Athene.<sup>51</sup> But later without Hera's support, Deriades, in his duel with Dionysus (36. 292-353, 40. 49), is befuddled by the god's rapid shape-shifting which includes the capacity to change into both water and fire: "Sometimes he (Dionysus) opposed him (Deriades) as a raging fire-storm, shooting forth curved flames and dancing smoke. Sometimes he flowed as water and deceitful waves and shot forth watery missiles" (36. 296-99). Deriades is specifically described as wishing to overcome Dionysus by "mystic art" (*mystidi technēi*, 36. 353), which he would have to be initiated or instructed in.

Deriades' ultimate failure to sufficiently master fire is also foreshadowed by the story of Phaethon in Book 38, which is told because of its correspondence to an eagle and snake omen foretelling imminent victory for Dionysus. In Book 39, Deriades nevertheless planned to destroy both the divine Dionysus and his fleet with his own unquenchable fire, but instead has his own fleet routed by a fire-ship used by the Cabirus, Eurymedon, which is described as the fire of Hephaestus (39. 33-39, 206-08, 391-407). In regard to the theme of fire, the overall message of the Indian war is that Dionysus and his allies are adept and effective in the use of solar, combustion and volcanic fire, whereas Deriades and the Indians are not. Fire prevails over water near the beginning and at the end of the Indian war.

Even after his fire-assisted victory over Deriades, Dionysus still has more to learn of the secrets of fire. At Tyre, he encounters fire-eyed, star-clad Heracles, lord of fire, *anax pyros*, a title also of Helios. Heracles initiates Dionysus into the mysteries of Tyre's origins and an olive tree of fire that does not burn a resident serpent and eagle: "On the top of the tree you will see an eagle sitting...From the blazing tree fire of itself spits out amazing sparks, and the bright flame feeds all around the olive tree all round but does not burn it. A snake curls and dances round the high-leaved tree...the flame does not move upon the branches of the tall tree and consume the indestructible olive tree, nor withers the spiraling, scaly serpent, nor does the leaping flame catch the interwoven feathers of the bird" (40. 471-92). The tree burns with a divine fire that does not consume fuel and reduce to ashes. It does not appear to

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<sup>51</sup> 30. 231-95. Presumably he has forgotten his asbestos nature (nor does Athene remind him of it) or else there is something especially alarming about Deriades and Hera working together.

combust.<sup>52</sup> It is like a controlled solar fire that does not spread to engulf and reduce to cinders the snake and eagle. Helios, and Dionysus when he changes into fire opposite Deriades, also illustrates in different ways this capacity to burn without producing ashes. Mastery of such a fire that does not burn is what Dionysus will demonstrate to Pentheus. But he remains vulnerable to a different kind of fire, the fire of love for Beroe that Eros arouses and which cannot be extinguished by floods of water.<sup>53</sup>

Still a formidable water-master, Dionysus marshaled rivers and water spirits to his side and fared well in his battle on water with Poseidon, similarly love-struck, for Beroe's hand, until Zeus' intervention. An apparent mark of Dionysus' progress, the ability to transmit a degree of mastery of *both* fire *and* water to Bacchantes in a trance state, is evident when, during the battle, "One Bacchant, possessed and out of her mind, danced on the sea with unwetted feet, as if dancing on Poseidon's head, beating the waves with her foot, ... borne by the water; from the maiden's hair self-kindled fire blazed over her neck but did not burn it, a marvel to behold" (43. 351-58). Compare this with an earlier display, a Bacchant, similarly entranced, showing mastery only of fire (or if not mastery, at least immunity): "One mad Bassarid, possessed and out of her mind, was engaged in the battle against the Indians, in your cause, O Lydian god! From the Bacchant's hair a self-kindled flame blazed over her neck but did not burn her".<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Zeus checked his son, hurling thunderbolts around him when it seemed he might dislodge Poseidon from sovereignty over the sea (42. 372-76). Dionysus had to accept the loss of Beroe to his uncle.

Dionysus has achieved considerable mastery of fire by the time he encounters Pentheus who is insultingly skeptical about Dionysus' fire-born divinity, and claims to have an earthborn, chthonic fire hot enough to match heavenly fire.<sup>55</sup> He perishes, of course, a vain boaster, but not before Dionysus had filled his palace with dancing, water-proof flames, Dionysus' fiery witnesses (*martyri pyrsōi*, 45. 335. Cf. 46. 61.) which testify to his descent from Zeus. These flames were not only water-proof

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<sup>52</sup> Of course, the sun will eventually burn up all its hydrogen and become a burnt out star.

<sup>53</sup> 42. 100-07. Cf. 6. 36-62, 13. 323-26.

<sup>54</sup> 29. 278-81. Cf. Deriades' idle threat to burn women's hair, 36. 155-56, and Echelaos setting his own hair alight with a torch as he falls and dies, 32. 207-08.

<sup>55</sup> 44. 151-53. This fire is clearly not the very different earthborn (*gegeneos*) lightning/electric-fire thunderbolts that the Cyclopes fire-masters make from volcanic fire, 28. 178-79, 187-191.

(45. 347-56, water thrown on them acts like petrol), causing panic to Pentheus, but did not burn anything. "Lines of fire flashed and leaped all over the walls, rushing down in a shower of sparks; fire moved in spirals over the king's breast and purple robes but did not burn his clothes. Hot tongues of fire leaped from his feet to the middle of his back, across Pentheus' groin to the top of his back, and from there the flashing fire ran round his neck: often the godly fire, moving about at whim, spat forth sparks that did not burn on the rich bed of the earthborn king". (45. 336-46). Later, attacked with electric fire by Hera at Argos, Dionysus is now sufficiently confident in his powers to mock and remind her that he has been fireproof since birth: "She charged at Bacchos like a bolt of lightning, a divine, leaping fire, and hurled at Bromios her flashing, fiery spear. But Dionysus laughed and replied in the voice of one possessed: you have a spear with no iron that makes no great flash; you cannot make me tremble, even though the point of your spear is ablaze!" (47. 609-17).

The *Dionysiaca*'s structure is marked by a degree of ring composition,<sup>56</sup> and just as the Semele episode corresponds to the Pentheus episode, so the gigantomachy that corresponds with the Zeus-Typhon struggle is near the end of the work, Dionysus' battle with the chthonic Giants of Thrace and a fire-spitting serpent, when he hurls torches to great destructive effect. However, one of these Giants, Enceladus, was not vanquished. Only a later thunderbolt from Zeus could do that. The roasting of Giants' bodies created only "an *image* on earth of the thunderbolt that Zeus hurled", but it was enough to show Dionysus' eventual fitness as *pyroies promos* to ascend to Olympus and quaff nectar.<sup>57</sup>

Although the portents for Dionysus' victory in the elemental struggle with Poseidon were never good (42. 534-39), Dionysus' ultimate mastery of fire was likely from his infancy. Dionysus was acquainted early with the secret of fire by his nurse, snake-girt Mystis, who "first kindled the night-dancing fire of the pine torch" (9.118). Furthermore, his forerunner, Zagreus, although marked out for some kind of sovereignty of the cosmos, was by contrast not born amidst fire, nor tutored by and allied with chthonic fire-masters such as the Cabiri. Although Zagreus was conceived by Zeus taking the form of a serpent, and although he handled the insignia of cosmic power, lightning and

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<sup>56</sup> See Shorrock (n. 31) 11-13 for discussion of this feature.

<sup>57</sup> 48. 974-78. Dionysus' earlier vanquishing of a chthonic giant, Alpus, is accomplished with a thyrsus, 45. 169-215.

thunderbolts as he played on Zeus' throne, he was unable to save himself from being dismembered by the Titans, despite many shape shifts - but not into fire.<sup>58</sup> Demonstrating a mastery of several kinds of fire is one of the conditions Dionysus must meet before taking up permanent residence in the realm of ethereal fire. Becoming immune to the fires of love, however, is not one of those conditions, as the continuing vulnerability to Eros' arrows of Dionysus' father likewise attests. Insofar as fire is a symbol of consciousness, mastery of fire/control of consciousness is a mark of at least a degree of enlightenment.

### **Conclusion.**

The above categorization of fire in Nonnus is meant to be heuristic rather than the reproduction of a tight taxonomy presumed to exist in Nonnus' mind. Nonnus does periodically draw upon (pseudo-scientific) handbooks to explain natural phenomena but he is a poet first. Therefore, he need not worry about inconsistencies about the source of thunderbolts (generated within clouds or manufactured in subterranean forges?) or by vagueness about where Hephaestus and his co-workers labored to produce certain artifacts, and just what kind of forge-fuel they used. Moreover, there is much that is mysterious and unclassifiable about the power of Zeus' undischarged thunderbolts vis-à-vis Semele, about Zeus and Dionysus' capacity to ignite or overcome water with fire, about Dionysus' and Hephaestus' power to generate fire from within themselves, about Dionysus' ability to become fire itself and to project a fire that does not burn what it touches, and about an olive tree that can burn like a solar fire.

A thorough examination of the manifestations and role of fire in Nonnus would require a much longer paper.<sup>59</sup> In this survey, however,

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<sup>58</sup> 6. 165-205. Cf. 38. 209-11, 39. 73. A very different use of fire, and a relationship between fire and water different from the normally antagonistic one, is the result of Dionysus' dissemination of wine. One could argue that his ability to change water into wine represents the infusion of water with fire, the fiery life that he himself embodies, and that the object of distilling wine was to concentrate the fire in the vine. See W. Pater, *Greek Studies* (Bloomington 1895) 163. However, while Nonnus is ready to explore the fire-water relationship in all sorts of ways, apart from oblique hints at 42. 30-39, wine as fire-in-water is not one of them.

<sup>59</sup> For example, besides the 27 references in the section on Eros, above, fire words occur another 20 times in association with Eros.

we can see Dionysus' progress through the poem as a journey to mastery of fire and the reward of a place in heaven. Typhon, Zagreus, Semele, Deriades and Phaethon and Pentheus are the cautionary failures who attempt to handle or withstand fire. The ubiquity of literal and metaphoric fire in a work not just about Dionysus but about the Dionysian world-view is one of the reasons why the *Dionysiaca* is so full of life, restless movement and mania, as if in a continuous state of sexual arousal.<sup>60</sup> As a god associated with dance, serpents, wine, water, divine afflatus, fertility and creativity, fire and heat fall naturally within Dionysus' purview and inform the creativity of numerous other beings. To be a master of fire is to be, amongst other things, a master of renewal, a force for irreversible change and cultural progress. Despite or because of his close association and alliance with them, Dionysus at no stage tries to master the electric, thunderbolt fire of Zeus or the special combustion and volcanic fires that Hephaestus and his helpers use but he does deploy fires with very unusual properties such as those that in effect turn water into petrol, and treat Pentheus and his possessions as if they were made of asbestos.

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<sup>60</sup> Or to put it another way, about Nonnus becoming a Dionysian poet, about becoming like a Bacchant. See Shorrock (n. 31) 114.

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