HESIODIC INFLUENCE ON PLATO'S MYTH OF THE CICADAS

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Plato's Myth of the Cicadas from the Phaedrus (258e-259d) alludes to Hesiod's Myth of the Golden Race (Op. 109-126). Among other parallels, Hesiod's Golden Race and Plato's Cicadas are comparable with respect to the manners of their diets, deaths and rapports with the gods. The paper points both to the similarities and the poignant differences between the Golden Race and the Cicadas, drawing attention to Plato's vision of the Golden Age, which, unlike Hesiod's, featured dangers and ambiguities, as symbolized by the Cicadas, who are able to punish or reward humans, depending on their behavior.

Keywords: Plato, Phaedrus, Cicadas, Politicus, Hesiod, Golden Race

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There has been a recent rise in scholarly interest in Plato's reception of Hesiod. A particular focus has been on the famous Myth of the Races (*Op.* 106-201), especially the account of the Golden Age (*Op.* 109-126), the traces of which have been recognized in a number of Plato's dialogues: *Protagoras* (320d-322d), *The Republic* (III 414-415), *Politicus* (268d-274e), *The Laws* (677a, 713e-714a).[1] I suggest that there is an allusion to Hesiod's Golden Age also in Plato's *Phaedrus*, in the Myth of the Cicadas (258e-259d), which seems to have so far remained undiscussed.

While the myth of the Cicadas in the *Phaedrus* has long been recognized as Plato's own invention (see Robin 1933: cxii-cxiv; White 1993: 183; Egen 2004: 69), several Hesiodic elements in it have already been noted in previous scholarship. First of all, Plato takes the names of the Muses from Hesiod (*Theog.* 77-79), and adopts "the idea of connecting their names with the activities they supervise" (*Theog.* 63-74, see Yunis 2011: *ad* 259c6). Furthermore, the presence of the Cicadas in Hesiod's famous Summer Landscape (*Op.* 582-583) has been acknowledged as a possible model for their role in the *Phaedrus* (see Werner 2012: 136; Capra 2015: 106-114). Capra (2015: 106-114) also sees a more general connection to Hesiod, as he compares Socrates' encounter with the gift-granting Cicadas with Hesiod's famous account of his own encounter with the Muses who gave him the gift of poetry (*Theog.* 22-35). Leven (2021: 97-98), on the other hand, sees reflexes of *Theogony*'s cosmological idiom even though in Plato's myth the γένος of the Cicadas came into being through metamorphosis rather than birth. We should also mention a recent study (Boys-Stones 2010) which suggests (48-50) that *Works and Days* inform the structure of the *Phaedrus* outside the myth and on a more general scale, as Socrates' two versions of the speech on Ἔρος in the first part of the dialogue can be compared to the two versions of Hesiod's story of Ἔρις.

Therefore, since the tone of the dialogue and especially of the myth of the cicadas already seems imbued with Hesiodic references, we should not be surprised to find one more. There are, in my view, several striking parallels (similarities, as well as poignant divergences) between Plato's Myth and Hesiod's account of the Golden Race:

(1) *Mythological chronology.* First of all, both the men of the Golden Age and Plato's Precicadic Men can be described as "previous generations of men", as they are both set in an undetermined, but remote past. It is unnecessary to search for an exact place for the Precicadic Men in Hesiod's chronology. It is sufficient to recognize that both myths - the myth of the Golden Race, as well as the myth of the Precicadic Men - deal with a very remote period of human history before the birth of the Muses, i.e. before the defining features of the current human civilization had been introduced. Such a setting for the myth may have been a means for Plato to call Hesiod's famous myth to mind and prepare the reader for the parallels that ensue.

(2) *Living with the Gods.* In terms of the relationship with the gods, the Golden Age was not only the time of Cronos' (and ultimately Zeus') rule, but also the time when humans enjoyed a close connection to the gods. Hesiod says so explicitly (120 φίλοι μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν). The Precicadic Men (both before and after their metamorphoses) had a very special relationship with the Muses, since it is their eagerness to honor the Muses in song that led them to an early grave, after which they entered their service in another capacity, as the Cicadas. As such, they are able to make others

dear to them (259d ποιοῦσι προφιλεστέρους), with a possible verbal reminiscence to Hesiod's passage cited above. However, the motif of life with the Gods proceeds in a different way and with a different outcome in the two cases: while Cronos provides for the needs of the men of the Golden Race, the Muses distract the Precicadic Men from seeing to those same vital needs. There does seem to be an allusion to Hesiod in Plato, but with a poignant difference.

(3) *Death of the Cicadas.* There is a parallel between the manners in which Hesiod's Men of the Golden Race and Plato's Precicadic Men die. Hesiod's men die "as if overcome with sleep" (116 θνῇσκον δ'ὥσθ'ὕπνῳ δεδμημένοι), which must mean that they die without any kind of agony or, in other words, without noticing that they are dying. This is exactly how Plato describes the Precicadic Men as dying (259c ἔλαθον τελευτήσαντες αὐτούς). Again, while the death of the Precicadic Men seems to allude to the death of Hesiod's men, it is not reenacting it, since there is an important difference: the mere absence of agony in the first case corresponds in the second to the unhealthy infatuation which is in fact the cause of the early demise of the Precicadic Men.

(4) *The diet of the Cicadas.* The question of food is also discussed in both passages. Hesiod stresses that the Earth gave as much food to the Golden Race as they needed (116-118), but it is nevertheless implied that they did not enjoy feasts beyond measure - they led a simple life, without need to till the earth or to travel by sea (cf. Dillon 1993: 23, 27). The point is not that they ate with appetite, but rather that they *did not have need* for more food.[2] Plato's Precicadic Men similarly *felt* no need for food, in the sense that they had "forgotten" all about it (259c ἠμέλησαν σίτων τε καὶ ποτῶν), but with a very different, and dire, outcome: an early death. Furthermore, that is precisely the nature of the gift that was, according to Plato, granted to them after death - "they need no food, but without food or drink sing continually" (259c μηδὲν τροφῆς δεῖσθαι γενόμενον, ἀλλ'ἄσιτόν τε καὶ ἄποτον εὐθὺς ᾄδειν). Again, as in the previous cases, Plato may be seen as alluding to, but also radically changing, Hesiod's account. What was self-sufficiency in the first case, became death and loss of human form in the second.

(5) *After death.* There is also a striking parallel between the careers of the Golden Race and the Precicadic Men after they die. Hesiod's people of the Golden Race become benevolent spirits (122 δαίμονες ἁγνοί) who "keep an eye on the judgements and cruel deeds" (124 οἵ ῥα φυλάσσουσίν τε δίκας καὶ σχέτλια ἔργα) and are also "givers of wealth" (126 πλουτοδόται). Later in the poem we also find out that they are also charged with "denouncing all who oppress others with crooked judgements and lack respect for the gods" (250-251 φράζονται, ὅσοι σκολιῇσι δίκῃσιν ἀλλήλους τρίβουσι θεῶν ὄπιν οὐκ ἀλέγοντες).[3] On the other hand, Plato's Precicadic Men, once they turn into the Cicadas, serve as the informants for the Muses, just like Hesiod's people of the Golden Race do for Zeus. Moreover, they too are able to act both as benefactors and as punishers. In Plato's account the Cicadas, upon dying, inform the Muses about those who honored them on earth and "make them dearer" (259d ποιοῦσι προφιλεστέρους) to the particular Muse they have honored. Socrates also pointedly describes this service as a gift they are able to confer on the humans (259b ὅ γέρας παρὰ θεῶν ἔχουσιν ἀνθρώποις διδόναι), which readily evokes Hesiod's πλυτοδόται (126). The Cicadas also seem to be able to exact punishment, if only by *not* mentioning a particular human to the appropriate Muse. This potentially danger-

ous aspect of the Cicadas is elaborated by Socrates (259a) as he expresses fear that, if he and Phaedrus should stop conversing, the Cicadas would scorn them and consequently deny them the gift of the Muses. As with the previous points, the resemblances between the two myths are underscored by important differences: while Hesiod does not say so explicitly, it is likely that the posthumous service was granted to the Golden Race as a result of their piousness and moral uprightness; the same cannot be said of the Cicadas, who owe their metamorphosis to the unbalanced devotion which led them to death. Just as the Golden Race described by Plato in the *Politicus*, to which we will return shortly, the Cicadas are not imagined as an example to be followed, unlike Hesiod's Golden Race. While the parallels between the posthumous careers of Hesiod's Golden Race and the Cicadas are clear, the underlying differences contribute to the ambiguity of the myth of the Cicadas, which was absent from Hesiod's description of the Golden Race, and to which we will return in the concluding remarks.

(6) *Lexical parallels*. We should also mention a couple of further notable lexical parallels between Hesiod's and Plato's account. First of all, Hesiod's Golden Race is referred to as χρύσεον... γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων (Op. 110), while Plato's Precicadic Men are described as τεττίγων γένος. Even more importantly, the gift of a posthumous service, which is the award to both races by their respective divinities, is in both cases referred to as γέρας (*Op.* 126 τοῦτο γέρας βασιλήιον ἔσχον; 259c γέρας τοῦτο παρὰ Μουσῶν λαβόν), a very specific term signifying a gift of honor (see Görgemanns 1993: 131, n. 27).

(7) Finally, it may also be instructive to compare the Myth of the Cicadas to some of Plato's other descriptions of the Golden Age, especially the one in *Politicus*, where the reference to Hesiod is more explicit. While such connections do not provide a direct link from the Myth of the Cicadas to Hesiod, they can show that Plato consciously used the Golden Race imagery in the Myth of the Cicadas, thus pointing by extension to his use of Hesiod, as the most famous poet of the Golden Race. In *Politicus*, a close connection to the gods is a given. Indeed, the Stranger from Elea instructs young Socrates by analogy that at the time the men where shepherded by the god just like the lower animals are shepherded by the men (*Pol.* 271e). The analogy between humans and animals is certainly relevant for the Myth of the Cicadas in which humans become actual animals. Furthermore, the men of the *Politicus* myth are said by Plato to have risen from the Earth (272a ἐκ γῆς γὰρ ἀνεβιώσκοντο πάντες), and the Cicadas were also often imagined in ancient thought to be earth-born (Davies and Kathirithamby 1986: 125-126; Beavis 1988: 97). While Plato does not mention this specifically, he was certainly aware of the tradition, since his fellow Athenians liked to think of the Cicadas as symbolic of their own earth-born - and thus truly autochthonous - ancestors (cf. Egan 2004: 71).[4] Furthermore, the setting of the Golden Age in the *Politicus* is described as a *locus amoenus* very comparable to that of the *Phaedrus*. Strikingly, the Age of Cronos in the *Politicus* features "soft beds... from the abundant grass growing from the earth" (*Pol.* 272a-b μαλακὰς δὲ εὐνὰς εἶχον ἀναφυομένης ἐκ γῆς πόας ἀφθόνου). Such a delightful depiction of the grass, climactically placed at the end of the Golden Age description, cannot fail to recall Socrates' delighted depiction of the grass in the *Phaedrus*, which had also been placed at the end of his description of the *locus amoenus*, and also featured an emphasis on its quality as a place to lie down

onto (*Phd*. 230c πάντων δὲ κομψότατον τὸ τῆς πόας, ὅτι ἐν ἠρέμα προσάντει ἱκανὴ πέφυκε κατακλινέντι τὴν κεφαλὴν παγκάλως ἔχειν). Parallels between the Myth of the Cicadas in the *Phaedrus* and the Golden Age in the *Politicus* thus reinforce the conclusion that Plato was indeed reacting to Hesiodic Golden Age in both cases, and not just in the *Politicus*.

All the aforementioned parallels lead to the conclusion that Plato's description of the Precicadic Race alludes to, but also subverts Hesiod's description of the Golden Race.

But Plato did not insert the Myth of the Golden Age into his Myth of the Cicadas just for the virtue of doing so. What reason could have driven him to include Hesiod's myth? We will necessarily need to base our answer on an interpretation of the Myth as a whole, as well as its role within the *Phaedrus*. The challenge in doing so is that the scholarly assessments of the Myth of the Cicadas have been polarized, with the interpretations falling into roughly two batches - those that see the Cicadas and their fate as negative and those that see them as positive.

The main argument in favor of the negative interpretation of the Myth is the metamorphosis of the Precicadic Men from a human into a sub-human status (Carson 198: 183-185; Nicholson 1999: 220-221), characterized by empty garrulity which might hold appeal for Phaedrus, but not for true philosophers (De Vries 1969: *ad* 158c6-7; Griswold 1986: 166; Ferrari 1987: 29). Most recently, Werner (2012: 100) summarizes this position by arguing that "the fate of the pre-cicadic men is one of demoting and degeneration, as they devolve from human creatures capable of rational discourse into sub-human creatures capable only of monotone droning", a position reflected also in Männlein-Robert (2002: 146-146) who describes the Cicadas' song as "nur Klang... nichts, was auch dialogisch-dialektisch differenziert vermittelt werden könnte."[5]

The positive interpretations, on the other hand, starting with Nawratil (1972: 157-160) equate the Cicadas to philosophers. Most importantly, Gottfried (1993: 180) objected to the negative interpretation on the grounds that Socrates himself argued in the *Phaedrus* that the divine beings cannot be mean (242d). For him, the Cicadas' forgetfulness of food, i.e. material needs, is "a divine sort of madness" (191) and thus a mark of true philosophers. Gottfried's article managed to change Ferrari's opinion on the Cicadas to the extent that he issued a Palinode of his own (2012). This line of interpretation is also supported by Capra (2015: 106-114), who argues that the "Cicadas stand for music and philosophy, in that they both sing and dialogue."[6] Reflecting on the Cicadas' diet, Leven (2021, 98) goes even further and suggests that "the ascetic cicada is closer to gods who need no sustenance to speak of than to animal who eat their food raw."

Now, can the parallels noted between the Myth of the Cicadas and Hesiod's Myth of the Golden Race offer support to either camp?

In Plato's other dialogues, the Golden Age does not have the positive connotations like in Hesiod's account. It is rather ambiguous, problematic and threatening. This is especially true for the *Politicus*, the connections of which to the myth in the *Phaedrus* have already been discussed. Vidal-Naquet (1981: 291-296) drew attention to the ambiguous nature of Cronos in *Gorgias* 523b-e (where his rule represents an era of arbitrary judgements) and in the *Republic* 378a where he is an example of a type of story not to tell children. Furthermore, the Golden Age in the *Politicus* is, according to Vidal Naquet "an animal paradise" (294) and as such unsuitable for humans, who rather need a political structure. Dillon (1993) similarly

compared the Golden Age described by Plato in the *Politicus* and the *Laws* 676a-682e to Homer's description of Cyclops' abode (Book 9) and argued that Plato envisaged it as ironic. According to Dillon (1993: 32), "Plato is hostile to, or at least skeptical of the idea of an age of primitive simplicity" because his is "the ideal of total organization, as opposed to primitive freedom and lack of structure."

These considerations also feed into and are supported by the larger context of the *Phaedrus*. The relationship of nature and men is one of the themes of the dialogue, heralded by the dialogue's setting in a *locus amoenus*. According to the influential interpretation of Erler (1989), Socrates' description of nature is ironic and, along with the parable of the farmer later on in the dialogue (276b), is meant as a challenge to Prodicus' views that the human civilization is owed to Nature as the universal teacher. This interpretation ties in very well with the subversion of the Golden Age imagery in the Myth of the Cicadas in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Politicus*, where, as we have seen, Plato expressed doubt about man's ability to thrive in a primitive, natural environment.

We should also take a closer look at how the Stranger of the *Politicus* assesses the possibility of happiness in the Age of Cronos (272b-d): if the denizens of the Golden Age used their leisure "to pursue philosophical enquiry" (272c ἐπὶ φιλοσοφίαν), then, according to the Stranger, "they were immensely happier than we are today" (272c τῶν νῦν οἱ τότε μυρίῳ πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν διέφερον). The Stranger claims that, on the contrary, they will not have been happy, if they wasted their time in trivial exercises such as eating and drinking their fill (272c σίτων ἄδην καὶ ποτῶν), exercises that the Cicadas notably abstain from.

These considerations are strikingly similar to the ones Socrates warns Phaedrus about in the preamble to the Myth of the Cicadas. If the two of them fall asleep (259a νυστάζοντας καὶ κηλουμένους ὑφ'αὐτῶν δι'ἀργίαν τῆς διανοίας), fulfilling thus a material need parallel to the vulgar eating and drinking in the *Politicus*, then they will lose the opportunity to obtain the gift of the Muses. If they, on the other hand, continue their (philosophical) discussion (259a διαλεγομένους), the Cicadas will deliver a favorable report about them to the Muses.

Furthermore, this dangerous, ambivalent aspect of the Cicadas and their Golden Age setting connects them to the central theme of the dialogue - the art of rhetoric, and the dangers of speeches that are false, but convincing. Not unlike the famous parable of the ass (260b-c), which concludes by imagining the disastrous consequences of a competent orator promoting evil under the guise of good, the Cicadas of the central myth, along with the *locus amoenus* as their natural setting, are capable of seducing those who encounter them into making wrong choices, such as to sleep instead to discuss philosophy. The Golden Age of the Plato's Cicadas is thus a dangerous place whose influence must be resisted, just as the infatuation of the Cicadas, which led them to starvation and death, must not be followed.

Socrates and Phaedrus have been transported into this hostile Golden Age of the Cicadas and it is now up to them to use its features for the right and philosophical, rather than the wrong and material, purposes, just as it was up to the denizens of the Age of Cronos in the *Politicus*. The Cicadas themselves, in their own way, fulfill a function comparable (although certainly not identical) to that of Hesiod's spirits of the Golden Race - they are πλυτοδόται in that they can confer "that gift which the gods bestowed on them to grant humans" (259b ὃ γέρας παρὰ θεῶν ἔχουσιν

ἀνθρώποις διδόναι), but also - *pace* West (1978: *ad* 124-125) - a "secret police" that informs the gods (or, in this case, the Muses) about the men who do not honor them.

To sum up. The Cicadas in Plato's myth can be seen as a twisted reflection of Hesiod's Golden Race. The many parallels between the two myths urge the reader to consider them jointly, but the differences, which are no less important than the similarities, show that Plato's vision of the Golden Age was much less idealistic than Hesiod's. In his other treatments of the Golden Age myth, as well as in the Myth of the Cicadas, Plato problematizes the benefits and exposes the dangers of primitive, natural simplicity, as symbolized by the example of the famous *locus amoenus*. The connection to the Golden Race myth thus sheds some new light on the Myth of the Cicadas, but it also provides a helpful tool for thinking about the *Phaedrus* more generally: Plato uses the Cicadas, with their alluring, but ultimately problematic Golden Age setting to present his philosophical concerns about the danger coming from deceitful rhetoric, which is one of the central concerns of the dialogue.

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ENDNOTES

1 Solmsen 1962: 181-195 and Dillon 1993: 21-33 discuss *The Republic, Politicus* and *The Laws*; Fago 1991 discusses *The Republic*. More recent studies include Van Norden 2010: 176-199 (*The Republic*); 2015: 89-167 (*Protagoras, The Republic, Politicus*); El Murr 2010: 276-297 (*Politicus*); Vezir 2019: 53-88 (*Politicus*, *The Laws*); De Luise 2020 (*Politicus*).

2 It could be instructive to compare the self-sufficiency of Hesiod's Golden Race with Socrates' description of the life of the early people in *The Republic* (372a-d) featuring such sober frugality that Glaucon felt compelled to jump in with a dry comment that Socrates may be "catering for a Republic of Pigs" (372d ὑῶν πόλιν).

3 West (1978) marked 124-125 as interpolation arguing that the benevolent spirits of the Golden Age cannot at the same time also work as "secret police." Consequently, he does not identify the divine informants of lines 249-255 with the spirits of the Golden Race. Verdenius (1986: *ad* 124-125) objected against bracketing 124-125 and warned against making a too strict distinction between punishers and benefactors, since "in Hes's view prosperity and justice are closely connected." Moreover, Plato may well have identified the two even if Hesiod did not, and there is no reason to believe that his manuscript of Hesiod did not include 124-125 (cf. Solmsen 1962: 195 n.2; West 1978: *ad* 124-125).

4 Plato seems aware of certain traditions about the Cicadas that he does not bring up explicitly in the Myth. Apart from their provenance from the earth, the tradition that they feed on dew (Arist. *HA* 532b10-13 may be partly behind Plato's assertions on their eating habits.

5 Burger (1980: 74) also adduces an additional point - namely, that the Cicadas stand for the seduction of the written word, as opposed to the dialectic.

6 It is important to keep in mind that the positive interpretation of the myth of the Cicadas does not deny its dangers for the "intellectually lazy" (Ferrari 2012: 106), or, in the words of Gottfried (1993: 1990), for "those who lack the desire for truth which characterizes the philosophers."