

Mystery Cult in Vergil

Fiachra Mac Góráin

University College London

London, United Kingdom

f.macgorain@ucl.ac.uk

orcid.org/0000-0002-3559-3876

Damien Nelis

Université de Genève

Geneva, Switzerland

Damien.Nelis@unige.ch

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Abstract

In this paper we begin with a brief survey of the presence of the mysteries in Greek and Latin epic poetry, before giving an overview of the mysteries in Vergil and attempting to identify the function of the references to mystery religion in *Aeneid* 6. Throughout, we consider the modality of how the poets allude to the mysteries in ways that allow mystery cults to take on a life of their own in imaginative literary representations, arriving at the conclusion that it is only by means of closer collaboration between literary critics and historians of religion that progress will be made in this complex field of study.

Keywords

Mysteries – Epic poetry – Vergil – *Aeneid*

Epic poetry offers a useful test case to investigate literary representations of the mysteries. We focus here on Vergil, with an awareness of how he looks back to Homer's heroic epics and how his corpus also encompasses the other sub-genres of philosophical, didactic, and pastoral epic, which themselves derive much from the Homeric tradition, and which sometimes refer to the mysteries. By Vergil's time, epic had become a 'totalizing' genre,¹ folding back into itself in encyclopaedic fashion virtually all the literary traditions and genres which have their origin directly or indirectly in archaic Greek epic. Our approach to the mysteries is, then, predominantly literary and intertextual, but we aim to keep in view what else needs to be taken into consideration as a basis for the interpretation of references to mystery cult in Vergil's poetry, especially the history of the mystery religions themselves, and the cultural and political context in which Vergil wrote.

First, we survey briefly the presence of the mysteries in epic before Vergil, turning then to the mysteries in Vergil's own poetry, with some glances at comparable texts from the epic tradition and beyond. In each case we consider the modality of how the poet alludes to the mysteries. This can be verbal, structural, thematic, or aesthetic, evoking the atmosphere of mystery cult. A poet can allude to specific rites, such as dancing, maenadic ecstasy, *oreibasia* or *sparagmos*; to mystery cult myths, such as Demeter's teaching of agriculture, or the death of Orpheus; to cultic locations such as Eleusis or Samothrace; or to the telestic *koinê*, a generalized mystery cult lore, including devices of purification, initiation and revelation, such as *katabasis*, or the passage from darkness to light. The mysteries ultimately take on a life of their own in imaginative literary representation, which goes beyond historical

¹ Hardie 1993, 1–10.

religious practice. But it would be wrong to dismiss poetic treatments as merely secondary, or epiphenomena of ‘real’ ritual: as Denis Feeney and others have shown, literary representations became for the ancients a special kind of religious knowledge.² Moreover, even if poetic representation departed from or exaggerated aspects of genuine cult practice, there was always the possibility of including reference to genuine ritual, often with local or historical significance, however difficult that may be to prove today.

Beyond the phenomenology,³ we aim to identify the function of the reference to mystery religion in Vergil. One challenge is, of course, to distinguish between references to general *sacra* or ritual and the mysteries more specifically. Another challenge is to define the meaning of the mysteries for their participants, which is obviously a prerequisite for any interpretation of the mysteries in epic poetry; we operate here on the tentative understanding that the vegetal and agrarian imagery of the mysteries pointed to the renewability of the human life-cycle (either in the sense that a particular human may be reincarnated or in the more general sense that the generations of humans are ever renewed), and that initiation into some mysteries offered salvation and possibly the hope of an afterlife. We acknowledge that some scholars have critiqued the ‘eschatological’ interpretation of mystery cults, arguing that soteriological language in ancient descriptions of mystery cult refers to salvation in the ‘here and now’ rather than in the afterlife.³ By contrast, other scholars argue that at least some mysteries offered the promise of post-mortem divinization.⁴ To begin, a necessarily brief sketch of pre-Vergilian traditions will help to set the context.

The mysteries in epic before Vergil

² Feeney 1998; Bendlin and Rüpke 2009; Rüpke and Spickermann 2010.

³ See Jim 2017.

⁴ Tor 2017, 270–273.

It is perhaps surprising how understated the mysteries are in Greek epic. In the *Iliad*, death is often said to be final, and deprives the soul of almost all faculties,⁵ and there is no hope of a blessed afterlife, such as may have been offered by the mystery cults. Even great Herakles died, as Achilles reminds us when lamenting the death of Patroklos (*Il.* 18.117–119). This is striking in view of the tradition attested later that Herakles was initiated into the mysteries (E. *Heracl.* 613; D.S. 4.14, 4.25; A.R. 2.5.12; Plu. *Thes.* 30), and in view of the moment in the Odyssean *nekylia* in which Odysseus distinguishes between the shade of the earthly Herakles and the Herakles in heaven (*Od.* 11.601–604).⁶ The Homeric afterlife grants but very limited animation to the shades of the dead.⁷ In order for *kleos aphthiton* to retain its value, death must be a boundary. A minority view is that Homer tacitly suppresses mystery cult in the *Iliad*, and that it may be read there “under erasure”⁸, but in fact it is difficult to prove that mystery cults conceived as promising a blessed afterlife are as old as Homer.⁹ Despite the absence of mystery cult in Homer, the later tradition still thought of the poet as “le grand hiérophante du ciel et des dieux”.¹⁰

The presence of Dionysus is minimal in the Homeric poems, but several brief references do indicate that Homer was aware of the world of Dionysian myth, if not also of cult, which is attested on Linear B tablets from Pylos and Chania.¹¹ Andromache in her grief is compared to a maenad (*Il.* 6.389; 22.460). The nursling Dionysus is persecuted by Lycurgus, who is blinded for his impiety (*Il.* 6.135ff.); and later, as in Hesiod, Dionysus is called ‘a charm to mortals’ (*Il.* 14.325; Hes. *Op.* 612–614), presumably in reference to wine. In a possible hint at a connection between Dionysus and eschatological dimensions of

⁵ Edmonds 2013, 252–264.

⁶ It has been argued that this scene is a later interpolation that reflects theories of the soul that post-date the bulk of the *Odyssey*; see Cassio 2002.

⁷ Rohde 1925, 3–43.

⁸ Silk 2004, 27.

⁹ For the earliest thinking along these lines see Bremmer 2002.

¹⁰ See Buffière 1956, 39.

¹¹ On Dionysus in Homer see Privitera 1970 and Tsagalis 2008, ch. 1.

mystery cult, the ashes of Achilles and Patroclus are buried together in an urn which was a gift from Dionysus to Thetis (*Od.* 24.75ff.).

We have to wait until around the sixth century for a direct focus on mystery cult. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, which narrates the cult-myth of the Eleusinian mysteries, may date from the early sixth century.¹² Scholars have discussed the ways in which the pre-Socratic philosophers draw on the vocabulary of mystery initiation to express philosophical enlightenment.¹³ Heraclitus is preoccupied with the Dionysian and other mysteries in what may be a critique of popular religion, or of popular perceptions of civic mystery cult (fr. 14; 15; 68 DK).¹⁴ The narrative of Parmenides' poem *On Nature*, whose proem is often understood as describing a *katabasis*,¹⁵ could be construed as having a mystagogic quality, even if its narrator is not explicitly labelled as a mystagogue.¹⁶ It becomes difficult to separate the mystery cult motifs from that of the *katabasis*, and so one might see Parmenides' poem as investing the Homeric *katabasis* or the *katabasis* tradition more generally, with mystery cult significance. The association is rendered clearer by comparison with the so-called 'Orphic' golden leaves, which are inscribed in verse with instructions to the deceased on what to do upon reaching the afterlife.¹⁷ When we turn to the Roman world, this figure of enlightenment-as-initiation is used by Lucretius, one of Vergil's towering models, who casts Epicurus as a mystagogue (3.1–6); at other points the poet himself features as a mystagogue and the reader is his initiand (1.1114–1117). The reader's journey is figured as a progress from darkness into light, from ignorance to illumination.¹⁸

¹² Foley 1994, 29–30.

¹³ On mystery cults in the pre-Socratic poets see Feyerabend 1988; Sassi 1988; Ferrari 2007; Kayachev 2012; Casadesús 2016. See Ranzato 2015, 59–71; and Tor 2017, 237, 244–246, 267–274 on Parmenides; Riedweg 1995; and Megino Rodríguez 2005 on Empedocles.

¹⁴ See Sider and Obbink 2013; Most 2013. On the notion of 'popular religion' in Greece, see Pirenne-Delforge 2008.

¹⁵ See Burkert 1969; cf. Cursaru 2016.

¹⁶ See Burkert 1969 and Tor 2017, 347–359.

¹⁷ On the golden leaves see Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008; Edmonds 2011 and 2013; and Graf and Johnston 2013.

¹⁸ See Reinhardt 2004, 35, and Schiesaro 2020.

By the time we reach Hellenistic narrative epic in the form of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, the poet is in a position to allude to Empedocles, and does so at various points, including having the poet Orpheus sing of cosmic themes in a strongly Empedoclean context (1.496–511).¹⁹ The figure of Orpheus has mystical resonances in the wider tradition, as attested by the author of the Derveni papyrus, but also references in Herodotus (2.81), Euripides (*Hipp.* 952–954) and Plato (*R.* 364b2–365a3).²⁰ Correspondingly, Apollonius' Orpheus is a priest figure who initiates his fellow Argonauts into the mysteries of Samothrace at 1.915–921.²¹ Let us linger over these lines for a moment, since they are of great interest for epic usage and perhaps even paradigmatic of epic allusion to the mysteries.

ἑσπέριοι δ' Ὀρφεῖος ἐφημοσύνησιν ἔκελσαν
νῆσον ἐς Ἥλέκτρης Ἀτλαντίδος, ὄφρα δαέντες
ἀρρήτους ἀγανῆσι τελεσφορήσι θέμιστας
σωότεροι κρυόεσσαν ὑπεῖρ ἄλα ναυτίλλοιντο.
τῶν μὲν ἔτ' οὐ προτέρω μυθήσομαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὴ
νῆσος ὁμῶς κεχάροίτο καὶ οἱ λάχον ὄργια κεῖνα
δαίμονες ἐνναέται, τὰ μὲν οὐ θέμις ἄμμιν ἀείδειν.²²

On Orpheus' instructions they put in at evening at the island of Elektra, daughter of Atlas, so that through reverent initiations they might learn secrets which cannot be revealed and thus sail in greater safety over the chilling sea. I shall say nothing more about this: hail to the island itself and to its indigenous gods, guardians of the mysteries of which I may not sing.

¹⁹ Nelis 1992; see also Kyriakou 1994.

²⁰ See also Graf 1974.

²¹ On the mysteries of Samothrace see Bremmer 2014, 22–36 and Jim 2017, 259–261.

²² A.R. 1.915–921. Transl. R. Hunter.

The formulation and narrative context imply exclusivity, benefit or divine privilege to the initiands, and secrecy which suggests a division between public and private spheres. The Argonauts are on an international mission which has political and public implications; the mysteries are a matter of private and individual initiation; and yet the success of the collective depends on the safety of individuals and the coherence of the group, which Orpheus as spiritual leader promotes.²³ The poet acknowledges and negotiates this distinction between public and private by making discreet reference to mystery initiation (917), but then refusing to go further (919–921). The notion of speech that is or is not *themis* (921; cf. 917, ἀρρήτους ... θέμιστας) is something of a *topos* in mystic texts.²⁴ We shall see the theme of secrecy surrounding the mysteries resurfacing in Latin epic. As far as Apollonius is concerned, the relationship between the heavily Empedoclean song of Orpheus²⁵ and his role in the initiation of the Argonauts on Samothrace is something of an open question. They may simply be two isolated incidents, but on the other hand, they both promote cohesion among the Argonauts, in that the song of Orpheus quells the quarrel between Idas and Idmon, and the mystery ritual unites the group. A reader tempted to connect them further could perhaps begin to sense the presence of a unified and wide-ranging Orphic-Empedoclean subtext at work in the *Argonautica*, and there is some evidence to suggest that Vergil may indeed have read Apollonius along such lines.

Vergil

A reader of Vergil's *Eclogues* would have to search carefully to find clear reference to the mysteries, as distinct from the abundant references to religion in general.²⁶ The most likely

²³ See Karanika 2010.

²⁴ Cf. e.g. *OF* 3 Bernabé (from the Derveni Theogony), Parmenides B1.28, Empedocles B3.4.

²⁵ See Kyriakou 1994; note also Kyriakou 2018.

²⁶ See Whitaker 2007 on the fourth *Eclogue*.

candidate is Daphnis' introduction of Bacchic choruses and of the thyrsus (5.30–31). It is fascinating to speculate about a possible interpretation of this mention of Dionysian cult, not least as the deceased Daphnis of the fifth *Eclogue* is often read, in view of his apotheosis, as an allegory of Julius Caesar or perhaps of Octavian.²⁷ It is notable that when Daphnis is mentioned in the ninth *Eclogue*, it is in the context of the rise of the *sidus Julium*, a comet that was understood to signify the apotheosis of Julius Caesar, and which here is said to attend the growth of crops and the ripening of the grapes.

Daphni, quid antiquos signorum suspicis ortus?
ecce Dionaei processit Caesaris astrum,
astrum quo segetes gauderent frugibus et quo
duceret apricis in collibus uua colorem.
insere, Daphni, piros: carpent tua poma nepotes.²⁸

Daphnis, why are you gazing at the old constellations rising? See! The star of Caesar, seed of Dione, has gone forth—the star to make the fields glad with corn, and the grape deepen its hue on the sunny hills. Graft your pears, Daphnis; your children's children shall gather the fruits you have sown.

It may be that a connection is thereby suggested between the mysteries, political renewal, and agricultural prosperity. Beyond this reference to Dionysian cult, Orpheus is mentioned at several points in the *Eclogues*, and his name is the last word mentioned before the song of

²⁷ See Cucchiarelli 2012 *ad loc.*, who discusses the tradition, recorded by Servius but not corroborated by any other source, that Caesar was the first to introduce the rites of Liber Pater to Rome. For Daphnis as Octavian see Pulbrook 1978.

²⁸ Verg. *Ecl.* 9.46–50. Transl. Fairclough and Goold.

Silenus is reported in the sixth *Eclogue*.²⁹ The cosmogonic opening of the song of Silenus (6.31–40) bears comparison with the song of Orpheus in Apollonius' *Argonautica* (1.496–511),³⁰ which itself echoes Empedoclean themes and language.³¹

More overt allusions to the mysteries in the *Georgics* have attracted considerable scholarly attention.³² Triptolemus is invoked in the proem (*uncique puer monstrator aratri*, 1.19), in a clear allusion to the cult myth and the *deiknumena* of Eleusis, including to Demeter's teaching of agriculture. At the same time, the proem makes obscure reference to a version of the Persephone story in which Demeter's daughter refused to return from Hades to the upper air when summoned (*nec repetita sequi curet Proserpina matrem*, 1.39). Later in the same book, as Vergil enumerates the farmer's *arma*, he includes a cluster of Eleusinian references:

Dicendum et quae sint duris agrestibus arma,
quis sine nec potuere seri nec surgere messes:
uomis et inflexi primum graue robur aratri,
tardaue Eleusinae matris uoluentia plaustra,
tribulaque traheaeque et iniquo pondere rastro;
uirgea praeterea Celei uilisque supellex,
arbuteae crates et **mystica uannus Iacchi;**
omnia quae multo ante memor prouisa repones,
si te digna manet diuini gloria ruris.³³

²⁹ See *Ecl.* 3.46, 4.55, 6.30, with Cucchiarelli 2012 *ad loc.*

³⁰ See Cucchiarelli 2012, 341.

³¹ Kyriakou 1994.

³² See Harrison 1903; Scazzoso 1956; Johnston 1977; Morgan 1999; Hardie 2002; Johnston 2009; Mackenzie 2019.

³³ Verg. *G.* 1.160-168. Transl. Fairclough and Goold.

I must tell, too, of the hardy farmers' weapons, without which the crops could be neither sown nor raised. First the share and the curved plough's heavy frame, the slow-rolling wains of the Mother of Eleusis, sledges and drags, and hoes of cruel weight; further, the common wicker ware of Celeus, arbutus hurdles and the mystic fan of Iacchus. All of these you will remember to provide and store away long beforehand, if the glory the divine country gives is to be yours in worth measure.

The Eleusinian mother is of course Demeter, who in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* stayed at the home of Celeus, king of Eleusis, while searching for her daughter Persephone. Iacchus, sometimes identified with Dionysus, and a minor deity in the Eleusinian mysteries, was the god who presided over the procession from Athens to Eleusis. The winnowing basket (or sieve) was one of the Eleusinian cult objects. Servius attests to an esoteric interpretation that the winnowing basket purified grain just as humans are purified by the mysteries of Liber-Iacchus, and goes on to connect this with the dismemberment of Osiris, and of Liber, as narrated by Orpheus. In the quoted passage, for a brief moment, it looks as though farming itself is being set up as an Eleusinian activity that will run on the Eleusinian calendar, but as the poem proceeds the references fade into the background, and the mysteries end up being just one "component, albeit a highly significant one" in Virgil's "literary synthesis".³⁴

The mystery motif dips in and out of view as the poem proceeds. As we saw, Lucretius used the figure of the mystagogue, which may have featured in the pre-Socratic poets, and Vergil reprises this role in the passage in which he asks the Muses to teach him about the workings of the cosmos.³⁵

³⁴ Hardie 2002, 179.

³⁵ Scazzoso 1956.

Me uero primum dulces ante omnia Musae, 475
 quarum sacra fero ingenti percussus amore,
 accipiant caelique uias et sidera monstrent,
 defectus solis uarios lunaeque labores;
 unde tremor terris, qua ui maria alta tumescant
 obicibus ruptis rursusque in se ipsa residant, 480
 quid tantum Oceano properent se tingere soles
 hiberni, uel quae tardis mora noctibus obstet.
 sin has ne possim naturae accedere partis
frigidus obstiterit circum praecordia sanguis,
 rura mihi et rigui placeant in uallibus amnes, 485
 flumina amem siluasque inglorius. o ubi campi
 Spercheosque et uirginibus bacchata Lacaenis
 Taygeta! o qui me gelidis conuallibus Haemi
 sistat, et ingenti ramorum protegat umbra!
 felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas 490
 atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum
 subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis auari:
 fortunatus et ille deos qui nouit agrestis
 Panaque Siluanumque senem Nymphasque sorores.³⁶

The cosmology of the passage gives it an overall Empedoclean feel.³⁷ Moreover, scholars have detected in lines 483–484 a precise allusion to Empedocles’ theory of the περικάρδιον

³⁶ Verg. *G.* 2.475–494.

³⁷ Hardie 2002; Nelis 2004.

αἶμα (105.3 DK).³⁸ Lines 486–488 imagine the poet in a Bacchic dance on the plains of Thessaly and among Spartan maidens.³⁹ This famously evokes Lucretius’ expression of hope for praise and love of the muses, expressed at *De rerum natura* 1.922–927 in terms of Dionysian ecstasy (esp. *sed acri / percussit thyrsos laudis spes magna meum cor*, 922–923). Immediately after Vergil’s Dionysian moment, he appears in line 490 to salute in a *makarismos* Lucretius, who discovered the causes of things, and trod underfoot fear and fate and the noise of Acheron, but he includes in his *makarismos* him who has come to know the country gods.⁴⁰ The *makarismos* is a form that occurs in Empedocles and is especially associated with mystic initiation.⁴¹ The range of religious references is thus complex.

The Dionysian and Orphic mysteries are evoked in particular in book 4, in which Orpheus’ *katabasis*⁴² is narrated, as part of a wider set of allusions to Orphic lore in the *Georgics*.⁴³ There is one textual resemblance between *Georgics* 4.468–471 and the *Orphic Argonautica*, noticed at least as early as La Cerda. Norden (on *A.* 6.120) believed that this echo, which is re-echoed in *Aeneid* 6, derived from a lost Orphic *katabasis* composed not later than c. 300 BCE.

Ἄλλα δέ σοι κατέλεξ' ἄπερ εἴσιδον ἠδ' ἐνόησα,
 Ταίναρον ἠνίκ' ἔβην σκοτίην ὁδὸν, Ἄϊδος εἴσω,
 ἡμετέρη πίσυνος κιθάρη δι' ἔρωτ' ἀλόχοιο.⁴⁴

³⁸ Scazzoso 1956, 16–17; Hardie 2002, 204; Nelis 2004, 9–14.

³⁹ On the Bacchic qualities of the passage, see most recently Freer 2019, 84–85.

⁴⁰ On this passage see also Hardie 2002, 184–192; Freer 2019, 84.

⁴¹ Empedocles B132 DK; cf. esp. *hDem* 480 with Richardson 1974 *ad loc.*; other examples of *makarismos* in an initiatory context include Pi. fr. 137a; S. fr. 837; E. *Ba.* 72ff. *Apul. Met.* 11.16.2ff. For a comprehensive list of examples, see Norden 1913, 99–100. We owe these references entirely to Mackenzie 2021, 143, n. 148.

⁴² For a critical and bibliographical overview of the *katabasis* tradition, including its mystical iterations, see Bonnechere and Cursaru 2016. Kroll 1932 remains fundamental.

⁴³ See esp. Mackenzie 2019.

⁴⁴ *Orphic Argonautica* 40–42.

And I sang other things to you [Musaeus] which I had seen and perceived, when I descended the dark path to Taenarus within Hades, relying on my cithara through love for my wife.

Taenarias etiam fauces, alta ostia Ditis,
et caligantem nigra formidine lucum
ingressus, Manisque adiit regemque tremendum
nesciaque humanis precibus mansuescere corda.⁴⁵

He even passed through the jaws of Taenarum, the lofty portals of Dis, the grove that is murky with black terror, and made his way to the land of the dead with its fearful king and hearts no human prayers can soften.

After the second loss of Eurydice, which looks back to Proserpina's refusal to follow her mother out of Hades (1.39), Orpheus is torn apart by Ciconian mothers in ritual *sparagmos*.

spretae Ciconum quo munere matres
inter sacra deum nocturnique orgia Bacchi
discerptum latos iuuenem sparsere per agros.⁴⁶

the Ciconian women, resenting such devotion, in the midst of their sacred rites and their midnight Bacchic orgies, tore the youth limb from limb and flung him over the far-spread plains.

⁴⁵ Verg. *G.* 4.468–471. Transl. Fairclough and Goold.

⁴⁶ Verg. *G.* 4.520–522. Transl. Fairclough and Goold.

One noteworthy feature of this passage is the wordplay between *sparsere per agros* and Greek *sparagmos*, the fate of Pentheus at the hands of his mother and aunts in Euripides' *Bacchae*.⁴⁷ Building on these and several other allusions to mystery cult in *Georgics* 4, Llewelyn Morgan has read the whole episode of Orpheus' *katabasis* against the background of mystery cult.⁴⁸

How should we interpret these references to mystery cult in the *Georgics*? Patricia Johnston has argued for reading Eleusinian myth as relevant to death and rebirth in the vegetal cycle.⁴⁹ Alex Hardie has, in a detailed survey of mystery motifs in the poem, traced connections in the poem between mystery cult and the temple of Hercules of the Muses, and argued for an emphasis on the politics of *Concordia* in the 20s BCE.⁵⁰ Most recently, Tom Mackenzie has argued that Vergil's allusion to Orphic lore in the *Georgics* evokes purification of the soul that can lead to a blessed afterlife.⁵¹ We find most fruitful Llewelyn Morgan's case for reading the mysteries in the *Georgics* in a political light as suggesting, through the paradoxical principle of creative destruction, the rebirth of the Roman state after the ravages of the civil wars.⁵² On this reading, the *sparagmos* of Orpheus and the *bugonia* are allegories for destructive events in Roman history followed by renewal and rebirth. Morgan's reading depends on the argument that an ancient reader would have understood the mysteries in this way, and he supports his argument with a wide variety of sources from Pindar and Plutarch's theological discussions through the mythography of Diodorus to Augustine's polemical reflection on Varro's account of the Liberalia. Even though the argument for an agrarian historical allegory relies on evidence from different contexts and not

⁴⁷ On this wordplay, see Bocciolini Palagi 2007, 135–137.

⁴⁸ Morgan 1999, 187–197.

⁴⁹ Johnston 1977.

⁵⁰ Hardie 2002.

⁵¹ Mackenzie 2019.

⁵² Morgan 1999.

all of Morgan's arguments about the good that seems to come so straightforwardly from civil strife are convincing, we find that his overall approach adds up to a powerful reading of the politics of the *Georgics*, and one that should be kept in mind when attempting to interpret references to mystery religion in the *Aeneid*.

References to mystery cult stand out even more clearly in the narrative of the *Aeneid* than in the *Eclogues* or the *Georgics*. As we saw in book 1 of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, secrecy is a central motif in references to the mysteries.⁵³ In a contribution to the longstanding debate over whether Vergil alluded to Eleusinian ritual in *Aeneid* 6 (to which we shall turn shortly), Edward Gibbon replied that either Vergil was initiated and so *would not* tell, or he was not initiated and *could not* tell.⁵⁴ If we look at general references to the mysteries in Latin literature, sure enough, there is strong emphasis on how they should not be revealed (Hor. *Carm.* 1.18.12–13, 3.2.25–26), and we find, unsurprisingly, that the word *mysteria* is often used in a metaphorical sense of that which should not be divulged, 'secret knowledge' (Lucil. 26.652 M), including the secrets of rhetoric (Quint. *Inst.* 5.13.60; Cic. *De orat.* 1.206), or those of Venus (Ov. *Ars* 2.609). In the manner of Apollonius, Vergil is consistent with this practice: Anchises mentions the mysteries as having originated in Crete, but as something about which one should keep a faithful silence (3.112, *hinc [Crete] fida silentia sacris*), and speaking in his own voice, Vergil pleads indulgence in the invocation to the *katabasis* to reveal certain things (*sit mihi fas audita loqui*, 6.266), an invocation to what will turn out to be a mystical sequence that we discuss at the end of this paper.

Since Homer's Andromache, the maenadic metaphor has been available to express extreme female emotion; in tragedy, especially Euripidean tragedy, Bacchic madness becomes the very *type* of divinely inflicted madness. Consider Pentheus and the maenads in

⁵³ See Burkert 1987, 8–9 on this aspect of the mysteries.

⁵⁴ Cited by Luck 1973, 161. For a reconstruction of the Eleusinian rites see Bremmer 2012.

Bacchae, Cassandra in *Troades*, Herakles in *Hercules furens*, and so forth. The motif makes its way into Latin epic perhaps through Catullus' Ariadne (*saxea ut effigies bacchantis*, 64.61), and can be used to express erotic infatuation and frustration, as well as grief. Two of Andromache's and Ariadne's maenadic descendants in the *Aeneid* are Dido and Amata, whose stories contain the poem's greatest scenes of Bacchic madness. Dido in her frustration at Aeneas' fated departure is compared to a maenad (4.300–303) and to the infatuated Pentheus (4.469ff.),⁵⁵ and Amata rages in a Bacchanal in an attempt to obstruct the wedding of Aeneas and Lavinia (7.385–405). Amata's Bacchanal is preceded by a scene of Dionysian infatuation which bears detailed comparison with ritual initiation.⁵⁶ It is notable that these maenadic behaviours are asserted in opposition to the teleology of the epic narrative, the historical destiny of Rome, and motivated by female concerns which are incompatible with the fulfilment of Roman or proto-Roman public duty towards which the epic hero strives. They also lend themselves to interpretation from a Roman point of view as political transgressions, particularly if we think of the Roman Senate's severe regulation of the Bacchanalia in 186 BCE, and of the cults of Isis and the Magna Mater, and indeed public regulation of religion in general.⁵⁷

In Amata's bacchanal we find the phrase *simulato numine Bacchi* (7.385) which echoes Pentheus' words from the *Bacchae*, *πλασταῖσι βακχεΐαισιν* (218).⁵⁸ Pentheus alleged that the rites were counterfeit and a cover for illicit sexual activity. He expresses the public voice of the state, which would confine women to the domestic sphere and limit their private discretion. But his remark also points to the literary possibilities for mystery rites. In a humorous vein, Ovid advises the lover to seduce a woman by feigning mystery rites (*Ars* 1.319–320). In surviving Latin epic women from Amata onwards frequently use mystery rites

⁵⁵ See Krummen 2004.

⁵⁶ Bocciolini Palagi 2007, 37–71; Lowe 2012.

⁵⁷ See Panoussi 2009, with anthropological inflections.

⁵⁸ See Mac Góráin 2013, 132 n. 30 and 134.

as a surreptitious expedient to achieve some narrative development, often in defiance of male or public authority.⁵⁹ Thus Helen, *chorum simulans* (A. 6.517), gives secret signals to the Greeks which help them to capture Troy.

The motif has a rich afterlife in post-Vergilian epic. In book 6 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Procne feigns Dionysian possession to commune with her sister Philomela during the rites, and learns that her husband Tereus raped her sister. In book 2 of Valerius' *Argonautica*, Hypsipyle rescues her father Thoas from the slaughter perpetrated by the Lemnian women by staging a bacchanal and conveying the old man to a temple (2.249–284). In Statius' *Achilleid*, Thetis hides Achilles away on Scyros to delay his participation in the Trojan War; there he disguises himself as a girl and participates in a dancing Bacchic chorus.⁶⁰

We turn now finally to the *katabasis* of *Aeneid* 6 as a figurative mystery initiation. In their introduction to a volume entitled *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature. Ideas and Practices*, the editors attempt to provide a working definition of the term 'mystery' as follows:

In scholarly discourse the term 'mystery' (deriving, via Latin, from the Greek word *musterion*) usually refers to a secret rite, and/or to exclusive and treasured knowledge in the form of a revealed secret. The mystery often reveals cosmological or ontological truths. It may be the disclosure of God's general plan, of hidden heavenly realities, unknown earthly truths, the real layout of past events, or a description of things to come. The mystery is commonly revealed by God or other divine agents, and is conveyed through revelatory dialogues, visions, rites or other practices. It is

⁵⁹ See Heyne 1841 on A. 6, Exc. XI for the motif in literature.

⁶⁰ On these episodes see Panoussi 2019, 140–167, 203–217, with further bibliography.

often of limited public exposure, and provides those who have gained access to it knowledge of things at and beyond the limits of knowability.⁶¹

Though this description is devised with one eye on Jewish and Christian contexts, it is not difficult to see how in general terms it fits well with some aspects of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, and the descent of Aeneas under the guidance of the Sibyl to meet Anchises, who delivers a speech in which he reveals information about cosmology, eschatology and Roman history, has indeed been read in light of mystery religions. In the 18th century, William Warburton made the point in no uncertain terms: “the descent of Virgil's hero into the infernal regions, I presume, was no other than a figurative description of an initiation, and particularly a very exact picture of the spectacles in the Eleusinian mysteries, ...”.⁶²

Warburton's striking claim was for a long time neglected by Vergilian critics, but it was resurrected and re-discussed, particularly in light of some of the material in Norden's commentary, by Georg Luck in an article published in 1973.⁶³ Luck's paper did not make a huge impression on scholarship, but its main idea was reprised by James Zetzel in a magisterial article on justice and judgment in *Aeneid* 6, which examined how Vergil inserted Orphic-Pythagorean religious ideas into a Homeric framework to express a vision of Roman history.⁶⁴ More recently, three new contributions⁶⁵ have revisited the topic and made it possible to get some sense of the *status quaestionis*. Within the scope of this paper it will, of course, not be possible to deal fully or satisfactorily with what is an extraordinary complex subject. We will attempt first merely to outline some of the similarities between the action of book 6 and cultic activities associated with the mysteries that could have allowed readers of

⁶¹ Bull, Lied and Turner 2012, ix.

⁶² See Warburton 1741, 158 (The Divine Legation, book 2, section 4); reprinted in Warburton 1825.

⁶³ Luck 1973. Bailey 1935, 243, 264, 272 comments briefly on Virgil's allusions to the Orphic mysteries.

⁶⁴ Zetzel 1989.

⁶⁵ Bremmer 2009; Horsfall 2013; Herrero de Jáuregui 2015.

Vergil's text to begin interpreting the experiences of Aeneas as an initiatory experience of some kind, before attempting to suggest how progress might be made in interpreting Vergil's use of mystical sources in *Aeneid* 6.

Aeneid 6 combines a complex range of sources. The key literary model is the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, which, as we have seen, can be associated with mystery cult through the *katabasis* tradition.⁶⁶ As noted by Zetzel and others, Vergil combines the Homeric framework with an astonishingly complex mix of, at the very least, Platonic, Stoic, and Orphic-Pythagorean or Orphic-Bacchic sources of various kinds, as reflected, for example, in much-discussed similarities between book 6 and gold tablets and a Bologna papyrus generally referred to as Orphic. In narrative terms Aeneas' descent culminates in the parade of heroes, which in turn draws on the myth of Er at the end of Plato's *Republic*, and the dream of Scipio at the end of Cicero's *De re publica*.⁶⁷ Our approach to *Aeneid* 6 builds on several scholarly treatments—especially Zetzel's argument that Vergil's *Romane memento* may be a nod to the impending Secular Games, which eventually took place two years after Vergil's death; Morgan's agrarian-allegorical interpretation of mystery religion in the *Georgics*; and Mackenzie's argument that the *Georgics* allude to purificatory Orphic rites—that inspire us to consider how Vergil alludes to Empedocles and mystery cult in *Aeneid* 6 to propose that purification is needed before historical renewal or salvation can take place. Aeneas experiences a symbolic death in the manner of mystery cult initiation, and purifies himself of his past experiences through the three encounters that he has with Palinurus, Dido and Deiphobus. There follows the parade of heroes, an epopteia in the mystical scheme, a grand revelation, but one that is not without its complications.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ See above on the gold leaves. Note also Herrero de Jáuregui 2011 on *Iliad* 24 and Priam's journey as a *katabasis*. On initiation as involving symbolic death see Burkert 1987, 99–101.

⁶⁷ Zetzel 1989; Molyviati-Topsis 1994; Kayachev 2012; Herrero de Jáuregui 2016; useful summary in Fratantuono 2014.

⁶⁸ Feeney 1986. On the philosophical background to the famous *Romane memento* passage see Moles 2017.

The connection between mystery cults and ideas about the afterlife and the fact that initiation into a mystery cult could be represented as a kind of *katabasis* are two features that facilitate from the outset the probability that ancient readers will have been able to set Aeneas' descent in parallel with the experiences of mystic initiates. Scholarship has thus been able to come up with many possible points of contact between the two. Among them are: the role of the Sibyl as a mystagogue; the Golden Bough as comparable to the branches carried by initiates, and to golden leaves; the roles played by Persephone and Hecate in book 6 as direct links to the Eleusinian mysteries; Vergil's reticence about revealing secrets about the Underworld (A. 6.264–267) as evoking the air of mystery surrounding the mysteries and the ban on revealing what actually was said and done during the rituals; the fear felt by Aeneas (A. 6.290) as reflecting the fact that initiates were deliberately put into a state of shock and fear as part of the whole initiatory process; the splendid light that bathes the Elysian fields as corresponding to the radiant light that is frequently mentioned in connection with the culmination of mystic rites; Anchises' speech may stand as the equivalent of the *hieros logos* or *epopteia* that came as the culmination of the whole cultic process of initiation. These and other similarities have been discussed by scholars including Luck, Bremmer, Horsfall, and Herrero de Jáuregui. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to assume that such similarities are not completely irrelevant to the understanding of *Aeneid* 6, and that many ancient readers, whatever their true knowledge of various kinds of mystery cults, will have been capable of appreciating them. On the other hand, it is not immediately obvious what comes next. How does appreciation of such parallels affect interpretation of the Vergilian text? Why does Vergil seemingly allude to mystery cults? How does this mystic material relate to all the other numerous sources that have been identified as going into the creation of the sixth book? What evidence is there that the descent narrative ends up with Aeneas as undergoing any kind

of initiation? Large questions abound. It seems best to try to tackle them by means of a close look at a small portion of text.

At *Aeneid* 6.305–312, numerous souls of the dead crowd the bank of the Styx:

huc omnis turba ad ripas effusa ruebat 305

matres atque uiri defunctaque corpora uita

magnanimum heroum, pueri innuptaeque puellae,

impositique rogis iuuenes ante ora parentum:

quam multa in siluis autumnis frigore primo

lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto 310

quam multae glomerantur aues, ubi frigidus annus

trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis.⁶⁹

Hither rushed all the throng, streaming to the banks; mothers and men and bodies of high-souled heroes, their life now done, boys and unwedded girls, and sons placed on the pyre before their fathers' eyes; thick as the leaves of the forest that at autumn's first frost drop and fall, and thick as the birds that from the seething deep flock shoreward, when the chill of the year drives them overseas and sends them into sunny lands.

This comparison of the souls of the dead to leaves and birds evokes the natural cycle of vegetal growth and seasonal migration of birds. The double simile seems highly appropriate for a mystery cult setting, if we remember how the Eleusinian cult myth in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter also acts as an aetiology for the dying of plants in winter while Persephone

⁶⁹ Verg. A. 6.305-312. Transl. Fairclough and Goold.

is absent, and their rising in the spring with Persephone's *anodos*. The simile has also been shown to be of remarkable intertextual density, even by the usual Vergilian standards. Homer (*Il.* 6.146–149, generations of humans compared to leaves), Bacchylides (5.63–67, souls of the dead compared to leaves in the context of Herakles' descent into Hades in search of Cerberus), Sophocles (*OT* 175–177, souls compared to birds), Apollonius Rhodius (4.216–217 and 238–240, Colchians compared to waves and leaves), and Vergil (*G.* 4.473–474, souls of the dead compared to birds amidst leaves, in the context of the *katabasis* of Orpheus in search of Eurydice) have all been adduced. In addition, a fragmentary text that has been attributed to Pindar⁷⁰ may also be part of what N. Horsfall has described as “a nexus of incestuous ancestors (or antecedents), rather than a neat genealogy”.⁷¹ But what makes these Vergilian lines particularly interesting for the concerns of this paper, is that the tradition which Vergil and at least some of his various models are working with may go back to a lost text dating to around the middle of the sixth century BCE, one which told the story of Herakles' initiation at Eleusis before his *katabasis* in search of Cerberus, a text which would predate the surviving sources for Herakles' Eleusinian initiation. Norden brilliantly first worked out the basic argument that the similarities between several texts could all be traced back to an early *katabasis* of Herakles. Obviously, the possibility that Vergil did indeed look all the way back to an archaic Greek model recounting Herakles' Eleusinian initiation and descent into Hades must be of central importance for any attempt to survey Vergilian references to the mystery religions. If Norden and those who have followed him are right (and Horsfall believes that parts of Vergil's reading “can be reconstructed with some confidence”),⁷² the Vergilian double simile points the way to an appreciation of the multi-

⁷⁰ Lloyd-Jones 1967 = 1990, 167-187.

⁷¹ Horsfall 2013, 143.

⁷² Horsfall 2013, 142.

layered complexity of Vergil's techniques of imitation, which may in turn be applicable to the understanding of the role of the mysteries in book 6.

It is not too difficult to imagine Vergil beginning from Homer, and it has been demonstrated in remarkable and convincing detail that the whole conception of *Aeneid* 6 depends on the reworking of the *nekylia* of *Odyssey* 11.⁷³ Subsequently, Vergil was adept at understanding the ways in which other poets had subsequently imitated Homer.⁷⁴ From the reader's perspective, therefore, one task is to appreciate how Vergil works post-Homeric texts into his fundamentally Homeric narrative patterns, in this case, as if to re-invest the Homeric *nekylia* with mystery elements that are conspicuous for their absence, but that had already become associated with the Homeric *nekylia* through allusion.

In the case of the lost *Descent of Heracles* it is hardly difficult to imagine that it will have owed something to *Odyssey* 11, and so could be easily read as related to that model. In the passage on the descent of Herakles in Bacchylides 5 one finds fusion of the leaf simile of *Iliad* 6 and details from *Odyssey* 11.⁷⁵ As we have noted, and as Norden believed, the *katabasis* in *Georgics* 4 will have had an Orphic model or models, which also informed the descent in *Aeneid* 6,⁷⁶ but Vergil's account also contains allusion to *Odyssey* 11.⁷⁷ From the list of texts mentioned above, this leaves the passages of Sophocles and Apollonius Rhodius. The former does not seem to be alluding directly to Homer in the verses in question.⁷⁸ The latter is an interesting case. On the face of it, it is the most unlikely presence in the list of possible model similes, since it seems to have nothing to do with the souls of the dead. But there is good reason to think that Vergil read the Colchian episode of *Argonautica* 3-4, and

⁷³ Knauer 1979, 107–147.

⁷⁴ See Nelis 2001 on the case of Homer and Apollonius Rhodius, with Farrell 2005 on some of the implications.

⁷⁵ Cairns 2010 on 60-61 and 69, for example.

⁷⁶ See Bocciolini Palagi 1990, esp. 133–135.

⁷⁷ Knauer 1981, 913.

⁷⁸ This may be a good enough reason to exclude S. *OT* 175-177 from consideration as a model of Vergil. It is hard to see direction allusion to Sophocles, and Vergil hardly needed him for the comparison of souls to birds, as the *Georgics* 4 passage shows.

indeed the Argonautic voyage as a whole, as a special type of katabatic narrative.⁷⁹ If there is anything to the suggestion that Vergil read the *Argonautica* as a form of katabatic narrative, and one that at certain points alludes directly to *Odyssey* 11, then the Apollonian similes (4.216–217 and 238–240) can easily be accommodated within an interpretative model that sets out to try to see how in cases of multiple sources it is always necessary to figure out how post-Homeric texts fit into Vergil’s fundamentally Homeric narrative structures.

But does a refined understanding of Vergil’s allusive techniques lead to better comprehension of the function of possible references to the mysteries within the *Aeneid*? It does not seem unreasonable to extrapolate from what we have been able to say about the double similes of lines 6.309–312 and suggest that the same basic technique is at work throughout the *katabasis* of book 6, with Vergil consistently subsuming post-Homeric traditions within his basic Homeric framework. Within this overall pattern, scholars have placed much emphasis on Orphic-Pythagorean material as essential. As already noted, Vergil has thus been seen by a number of scholars to be reflecting on Roman history, and the interconnected themes of crisis, destruction, and renewal are considered to lie at the heart of the matter; we are convinced that this approach is essentially correct. It is also clear that proper appreciation of Vergil’s ultimate vision of Roman history and his thinking about the current state of Roman society as expressed by means of the speech of Anchises in Elysium comes only after detailed study of the ways in which Vergil’s poem reworks other texts, and in particular of how Vergil read and understood both Homer and the Homeric tradition. The expansion and the filling out of the Homeric Hades into the much fuller and more detailed Vergilian version of the Underworld took Vergil to many sources. Searching for them by adopting an approach that gives priority to the analysis of Vergil’s remarkably coherent,

⁷⁹ See Hunter 1993, 182–189; Nelis 2001, 228–235; Hunter 2015, 111; also Reinhardt 2004, 32 n. 14 on this kind of “virtual katabasis”.

multi-tier strategies of allusion may, for example, bring a helpful focus to bear on Empedocles as a specific model who is probably of greater importance for *Aeneid* 6 than has thus far been assumed.⁸⁰ As an epic poet Empedocles sits easily within Vergil's encyclopaedic approach to the epic genre. He can also be seen as fitting comfortably into Orphic-Pythagorean traditions.⁸¹ And it has been argued that he is an important literary model for Vergil in both the *Georgics* and elsewhere in the *Aeneid*. As a poet who sang of a Golden Age, of sin, punishment, and purification, reincarnation and eventual deification, he may have had much more influence on book 6 than we can possibly reconstruct. But exploring possible Empedoclean material in the Vergilian *katabasis* is the topic for another study and cannot be undertaken here. We will end with a call for reflection on a point of method. There is a need for more collaboration between historians of religion and historians of literature, that is, between scholars attempting to make the most of a wide range of texts that seem to offer information about cults and rituals and those studying intertextual dynamics in such a way as to reveal connections between texts. The latter can sometimes help to clarify strands in literary history that are useful to the former, as we hope to have shown, however sketchily, in this paper.⁸²

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⁸⁰ Note Austin 1977, on 739ff. On Empedocles in the Roman epic tradition see Hardie 1995.

⁸¹ Betegh 2004, 370–372.

⁸² The authors are very grateful to Francesco Massa, Tom Mackenzie, and the anonymous readers for the journal for their helpful comments.

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