THE MYSTERIES AND THE ORESTEIA

As long ago as 1893, Dieterich, in a famous article on the ‘initiation’ scene in Aristophanes' Clouds,¹ pointed out that there are a great many echoes of ritual hidden in ordinary works of Greek literature, especially in comedy and tragedy. His hint was followed up in 1900 by F. Adami,² whose paper remains a storehouse of such echoes, but who has by no means exhausted the subject.³ G. Thomson’s article in a recent issue of this Journal ⁴ collects a number of instances in the Oresteia of Aeschylus in which similar echoes can be heard. The purpose of the present contribution is partly to partake the interpretation put by Thomson on certain of the references to mystic rites which Headlam and he have noted, and partly to attempt to carry the search a stage farther.

The point in Thomson’s valuable paper on which most doubt will be raised in his readers’ minds is his tendency to attribute to the Eleusinia all allusions to mysteries in the Oresteia. In his zeal for the exclusive glory of Eleusis, he assumes that its mysteries involved both rites and doctrines which the general consensus of scholars has denied to them. In one place he dismisses this general agreement by lumping modern authorities together as ‘archaeologists’ (p. 22, n. 13), a title which most of them, probably, would humbly deprecate. His procedure raises an important problem in method, and for this reason I may be excused for discussing some of his conclusions. It is regrettable that uncertainty should be reintroduced into a subject, in itself obscure enough, upon which criticism and cautious methods seemed to have secured a fair measure of agreement.

Perhaps the most urgent case for such caution is provided by his quotation (p. 22) from the De Errore Profanarum Religionum of Firmicus Maternus.⁵ This quotation is introduced in order to prove that the phrase ἀπολλαγή πόνων in Aeschylus and similar phrases such as ἀνασφύγας κακῶν in Plato are derived from the language not merely of mysteries in general, but of the Eleusinia in particular. Now, Firmicus gives us no indication of the source from which he is drawing in the passage in question; and, what is more important, the character of the rite there described, which clearly re-enacts the resurrection of a dead god, is entirely foreign to anything we know of Eleusis. It has been usually taken to belong to the

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¹ RheMus XLVIII. pp. 275 f.; reprinted in his Kleine Schriften, pp. 117 f. The reference is to the last paragraph of the article.
² De Poeti Sacrosanctis Gratiae Hymnorum Sacrorum Imitatoribus: Classische Philologie, Supplementband XXVI. pp. 244 f.
³ For a pretty example recently brought to light cp. Wünsch’s comparison (Kern, P-W, XVI. col. 1239) between the opening lines of the second strophe in the parados of Eur. Supp.: ἦκεν καὶ οὐ ποτ᾿ ὤ τὸν κώμον, and the famous Eleusinian formula quoted by Hippolytus (Philos. V. 8, 40): ἐκείνη πότινα κούραν Βρομόν Βρομόν. This echo incidentally guarantees the veracity of Hippolytus as against the scepticism of Wilamowitz (Glaube der Hellenen I p. 175, n. 4).
⁴ JHS 1935, lv. pp. 20 f.
⁵ C. xxii.
cult of Attis or that of Dionysos. This is surely a case where Lobeck's protest is very much to the point: 'Quae tandem ratio est ad Eleusinios transferre quae de Orpeho dicta sunt, et quam Firmicus nullum genus mysteriorum nominatim designaverit, veterario Eleusinia substituere?' Apart from this unwarrantable attribution, the conclusions drawn later in Thomson's article as to echoes of this or a similar rite in the Orestea may be all quite sound.

A less serious point is the attribution to Eleusis of all known formulas for indicating the secrecy of the mysteries. It is very valuable indeed to have these formulas collected as they are in Thomson's article (pp. 20–21). But I would suggest that the three phrases στιγμα θεοποι δει, βούς ἐπὶ γλώσση, and κλης ἐπὶ γλώσσα be kept apart, inasmuch as the last is the only one which is guaranteed as Eleusian, while the second is Pythagorean and the first is so general that it may apply to any mystery-cult whatever. In the same way, Thomson's own quotations show that the formula θύρας ἐπὶ ἐπιθεσθε βεβηλοι is of Orphic and not Eleusinian origin. This matter is important only because of the method involved; the mystic origin of all these phrases is in any case proved.

All through Thomson's article there runs the suggestion not merely that the Orphic and Eleusinian conceptions of the after-life were identical, but even that the former were derived from the latter. This derivation is most explicitly suggested in the last note, on p. 34. The subject is one of much difficulty, on which widely varying opinions are still held; but I venture the judgment that nobody who weighs the uncertain evidence with any care will go so far as Thomson does. The question may be divided into two: that of the judgment after death, and that of the subsequent rewards and punishments meted out to the dead. On the first, Thomson has brought forward no new evidence to alter Guthrie's opinion that the origin of the idea is to be found in vague popular belief. His suggestion that the ἀγραφοὶ νόμοι were of Eleusinian origin rests upon the statement in the speech against Andocides included among the works of Lysias that the Eumolpidae gave judgments in accordance with these laws. As against this, his own quotation from the Antigone: κούδες οἴδειν ἐξ ὑπονόμοι, is enough to show that these general precepts were not in the least peculiar to Eleusis. His citation (p. 34, n. 68) of the

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7 Wilamowitz, Glaube, II. p. 381: 'es kann wohl nur Dionysos sein.'
8 Aglaophamus, p. 187.
9 p. 26. I would except the identification in note 34 of Firmicus' nocé quadam with the νόμων 'Eleusinon. Nocturnal celebrations were common to all mystery-cults. The same criticism applies to the preceding note 92; the use of the veil was common in both the mysteries and the marriage-rite, and the phrase νεογύμνου νύμφης δίπλων (Ag. 1178) has nothing specifically mystical about it.
10 Sophocles, O.C. 1052–1053.

11 Philostratus, Apoll. vi. 11. It is rash to equate Pythagorean with Eleusinian. Pythagoreanism is rather akin to the Orphic-Dionysiac cults (Herod. 2. 81).
12 Orpheus, p. 153, quoted on p. 34, n. 68.
13 Quoted by Thomson, p. 30: τοὺς ἀγραφοὺς (νόμους) καθ' οὓς Εὐμολπίδαι ἐξηγοῦται.
14 l. 457.
15 There was at a late date an Eleusinian version of them: Xenocrates ap. Porphyry de Abstinencia, II, 22: φασὶ καὶ Τριπτόλυμον Ἀθηναίοις νομοθέτησαί καὶ τῶν νόμων αὐτοῦ τρεῖς ἔτη ξενοκράτη ὁ φιλόσοφος λέγει διατηρεῖν 'Ελευσινοί τοισδ' γονεῖς τιμῶν, θεοὶ καρποῖς ἄγαλλειν, ζωά μὴ σίνεσθαι.
passage in the Cataphlus of Lucian brings in to support the idea of an Eleusinian judgment what is obviously only a literary reminiscence; Rhadamanthys is not Eleusinian, and the Erinys Tisiphone is more probably an Orphic invention.\(^{16}\)

The second question, relating to rewards and punishments after death, is perhaps more delicate to deal with, but here again I think there is no real warrant for Thomson's sweeping attributions to Eleusinian doctrine of all references to this subject. It is well to insist as a preliminary that we have almost no evidence at all about Eleusinian doctrine. The essential character of the Eleusinian mysteries lay in the fact that something was shown to the initiates. There is really nothing to indicate that Eleusinian teaching on the fate of the soul after death ever developed much farther than is implied by the words of the Hymn to Demeter (ll. 480 f.):

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\begin{align*}
\text{δίασιν} & \text{ ὅς τάδ' ὅπωσιν ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων}. \\
\text{ὅς δ' ἀτελής ἱερῶν, ὅς θ' ὁμοίος, οὔτοι' ὁμοίων} \\
\text{ἀλάνω ἔχει, φίλιμνος περ, ὑπὸ φόβῳ ἔρχετι.}
\end{align*}
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The texts employed for his purpose by Thomson fall into two main classes. The more important are provided by many allusions in Plato and by the parodos in the Frogs of Aristophanes. Plato undoubtedly uses language which can be attributed to any mystery-cult. Many of the ideas about the fate of the soul which we meet with in the Republic and the Phaedo belong to mysteries in general. Such is the case with the repeated contrast between the light in which the initiated enjoy their bliss and the darkness to which all others are condemned. Such again is the case with terms such as πλάνη and πορεία, ἀναφυγή κακῶν, σωτηρία, and the like. These are not peculiar to any one mystery; they belong to the general mystic atmosphere.' On the other hand, whenever Plato particularises, he makes it clear that he is referring, not to Eleusinian, but to Orphic or similar doctrines. Perhaps the surest case of this kind is provided by Thomson's quotations from the Phaedo on p. 25. There can be nothing more certain than that the phrase ὁσπερ δεσμωτηρίων (Phaedo, 114 C, 1) would at once suggest Orphic teaching to its hearers. Plato himself makes this plain in a famous passage in the Cratylus\(^{17}\) in which this doctrine of the body as a prison is attributed to οἱ άφέν' Ὀρφέα. With it naturally must go all the rest of the description of the soul's wandering, and the σχίσεις καὶ τρίδοι of the Phaedo. There is no positive evidence of any such doctrine at Eleusis.

Little, if anything, less definite is Plato's own evidence with regard to the provenance of the doctrines set forth about rewards and punishments in the second book of the Republic.\(^{18}\) He ascribes them to ἄγορας καὶ

\(^{16}\) Orphic Argonautica, l. 198, Hymn. Orph. (Abel), LXIX. l. 2. In any case there is no evidence that the group of three Erinys, implied by the name Tisiphone, is early.

\(^{17}\) Cratylus, 400 C.: δοκοῦσι μέντοι μοι μάλατα θεᾶσθαι οἱ άφέν' Ὀρφέα τούτο τὸ δύναμι, ὡς ἐπίκου διδοῦσί της ἀγορᾶς ἔν πολλά ἑνκα διδοῦσι: τούτον δὲ περιβολαὶ ἔχει, ἵνα σώζησαι, δεσμωτήριον ἔχειν. This passage incidentally shows that Plato regarded the idea of a judgment as Orphic. Cp. Guthrie, Orpheus, p. 157. Thomson (p. 25, n. 24) says, as against Guthrie, that the reference in the Phaedo (108a) is to Eleusinian ritual, not to the Orphic tablets. He has Plato himself, as well as Guthrie, against him.

\(^{18}\) Rep. 363 C–366 B. Cp. Thomson p. 23, n. 14; ad fin. It is not at all certain that ὅσος ἀνθρώπων
μάντεις who hawk from door to door books attributed to Musaeus and Orpheus. Now we hear of no such persons as in any way connected with Eleusis, whereas the authors of their books entitle them surely to be called Orphic, if anyone can be so called. Here, again, it is not entirely out of the question that Eleusinian initiates shared in the beliefs inculcated by the Orphic books; but that gives us no right to call such beliefs Eleusinian. Plato’s words surely prove that the Orphics had some sort of definite teaching about the next world, whereas the mysteries at Eleusis taught nothing; they only showed something.

In the passage from the Republic above cited, Plato says that Musaeus and his son depict τοὺς ἀνοσίους καὶ ἀδίκους as sunk, in Hades after death, ἐς πηλὸν τινα, or as being compelled to carry water in a sieve. If the origin of these ideas be not sufficiently guaranteed by the context of the Republic, a further guarantee is provided by a passage in the Gorgias 19 in which a closely similar doctrine is attributed to κομψὸς ἀνήρ, Σικελικὸς τις ἢ ἵππωλικός. There can be no question of this attribution implying an Eleusinian origin, whereas Orphism was at least as rife in South Italy and Sicily as it was in Attica. This brings us to the well-known passage 20 in the Frogs of Aristophanes, of which Thomson makes full use. There the wicked are seen immersed in ‘much mud and ever-flowing ordure’ (βόρβορον πολὺν καὶ σκόρ ψεύνον). It is regularly assumed that in the Frogs all references to the mysteries have to do with Eleusis. This view, however, is beset by insuperable difficulties. 21 The most that can be said is that if this picture of the infernal regions was known to the Eleusinian initiates—as it doubtless was—they got it from Orphic teaching, 22 or else, less probably in my opinion, that both Orphics and Eleusinian initiates were drawing upon widespread popular ideas. That much of the colouring of this mystic Hades was ultimately derived from folklore there can be little doubt. This is the case, for example, with the figure of Empusa and others like her, with the stone of withering, and with the sieve. In any event there is no justification for saying, as Thomson does (p. 33, n. 62), that ‘the βόρβορος τῶν ἀμήτων was an Eleusinian, as well as an Orphic, conception,’ with the implication that it actually formed part of Eleusinian teaching. Plato’s references surely prove that Guthrie is absolutely right in describing the βόρβορος as ‘a peculiarly Orphic form of punishment.’ 23

In Rep. 363 C means the Eleusinian Eumolpus. Eusebius (Kern, Orphicorum Fragmenta, p. 6, test. 18) makes Musaeus son of Eumolpus. Both were in any case Orphic figures, whereas Orpheus was not Eleusinian.

Gorgias, 493 B.


I have tried to show (Proc. Royal Irish Academy, 1935, Vol. XLII. Section C. no. 10) that the rites parodied by the Chorus of mystae in the Frogs are really those of the Lenaea, at which the play was produced. On Orphic elements in the Frogs see Dieterich, Nekyia, p. 72; Maas, Orpheus, pp. 115 f.

So thinks Dieterich, I.e. I believe that it is unnecessary to assume any contamination of Eleusinian and Orphic in Eleusis itself. If the rites parodied in the Frogs were those of the Lenaea, their partly Eleusinian character is explained by the connexion between Eleusis and the latter. When Plato in the Phaedo (69 c) speaks of βόρβορος in Hades, the context, with its immediate reference to the proverb νερῆς κορόφοι μὲν πολλοί, παύριθι δὲ τι βάχθια, makes it certain that just as in the case of πυλὸς τις in Republic II he is talking about the Orphics. The note of Olympiodorus (Kern, O.F. p. 248, no. 235) confirms this: παραθεῖται ἐπὶ τοῖς Ὀρφικοῖς.

Orpheus, p. 160. Cp. Thomson’s note above cited. Maas (Orpheus, pp. 113 f.) agrees with Thomson’s view, but his arguments really point to common popular acquaintance with ideas which the Orphics had made into some sort of system.
The second class of texts employed by Mr. Thomson is less important. When closely examined this class narrows itself down to three passages: one from Pausanias, one from the 'Sophist' Aristides, and one from Lucian. All three belong to the second century A.D., are vague in character, and can best be explained as literary reminiscences. The passage from Pausanias is part of the famous description of Polygnotus' painting in the Lesce of the Cnidians at Delphi. In one part of this painting were included four figures, one of them an old woman who pours water into a πίθος from a broken jar. Of these figures Pausanias says: ἐπεξεργασθείς δ' εἶναι καὶ τούτους τῶν τὰ δρώμενα ἑλευσίνι ἐν οὐδὲνος θεμένον λόγῳ. οἱ γὰρ ἀρχαῖοτέροι τῶν Ἑλλήνων τελεθίνῃ τὴν Ἐλευσίνι πάντων ὅποσα ἐξ ἐυσφαίρει ἡκε τοσοῦτον ἄγων ἐντιμώτερον δόμα καὶ θεός ἔπεπροθεῖ ηρῴων. The whole phrasing of this sentence shows clearly that Pausanias and his informant were merely guessing. There is evidently some connexion between this scene and the doctrine which Plato attributes to κοιμός ἁγνης, Ἵκιδιος τις ἢ Ἱππαλίκος. It is to be noted that Pausanias mentions Eleusis only in connexion with this group of figures. There is no warrant for Thomson’s suggestion (p. 33, n. 59) that the picture of the demon Euryronous had anything whatever to do with Eleusis.

The passage quoted from Aristides, with its phrase καὶ οὐκ ἐν σκότῳ τε καὶ βορβόρῳ κεισομένους, ἐν τούς ἄλλους ἀμαίνειν, is an obvious reminiscence of the Phaedo, which he mistakenly applies to Eleusis. There is no reason to think, either that Aristides was ever himself initiated at Eleusis, or that he possessed any intimate knowledge of Eleusinian beliefs even for his own day, much less for six centuries earlier. The passage from Lucian quoted by Thomson implies that some doctrine of judgment was taught at Eleusis, but here again the source is almost certainly literary, if not Orphic.

In making these remarks, the length of which is rendered necessary by the rather complicated nature of the subject, I do not at all mean to impugn the conclusion that there are echoes of mystic language in the Oresteia, which conclusion I regard as the most valuable part of Thomson’s paper. Not everyone will go so far as he does (p. 30) in speaking of Clytemnestra’s ‘blasphemous audacity’ when she addresses Cassandra in words which may perhaps have recalled to her hearers the exclusion of barbarians from the Eleusinia. If we content ourselves with describing the echoes he has pointed out as simply mystic in general, without entering into the difficult and unnecessary question of their source, we shall run less risk of confusion.

24 Thomson, p. 33, n. 59.
25 Thomson, p. 22.
26 Thomson, p. 29, n. 24.
27 Pausan., X. 9.
29 Wilamowitz (Glaube, II. p. 183) may be right in thinking that Polygnotus drew for this picture on ideas native to Thasos or Paros, where mysteries were ancient.
30 Dieterich indeed (Nekyia, p. 75, n. 2) thinks that ‘in später Zeit fand ja auch das Orphische in Eleusis Eingang,’ and cites this text from Aristides as evidence. On Aristides and Eleusis see Kern, P-W, XVI. col. 1257.
31 Cataplus, 22. See above. This is the only passage in Lucian’s works which definitely ascribes such ideas to Eleusis. The Menippus is clearly based on literary sources, mostly Plato, although in one place (476 f.), where he speaks of how rich and poor are alike in Hades, there is an echo of the Eumenides, I. 368 f.
He is quite certainly right in associating the Erinyes with the mystic Hades, and it is on this point that I wish to try to develop his argument.

In the Eumenides Apollo himself is made at once to state where the Erinyes have come from: ἐπεὶ κακὸν σκότον νέμονται, Τάρταρον θ' ὑπὸ χέρων. In their first song after rediscovering their victim at Athens they describe their functions in language which reminds us closely of the demon Eury Nomus in Polygnotus’ picture. They suck the blood of the living victim, and having drained him dry bring him ‘below,’ i.e. to their dwelling-place in Tartarus. There he will see other sinners who have violated the ἄγαροι νόμοι being fittingly punished, for they have been judged by Hades himself, who judges all the dead and records their deeds with unerring accuracy.

It has long been recognised (see the annotations of Blass and Mazon ad loc.) that in a later passage, in their Binding-Song, they speak of their dwelling-place in language which closely recalls the βόρβορος and πτηλός of Aristophanes and Plato. In the same song their description of their ὕμνος δέσιμος as σοφόν βροτοῖς (I. 333), like their use of the word ἄλωτον (I. 316), inevitably recalls the terminology of the mystic doctrines. The same effect is produced by their distinction (II. 312 f.) between sinners and

τοὺς μὲν καθαρῶς,
kαθαράς χείρας προνέμοντας.

Again at I. 301, where they threaten Orestes that the protection of Apollo and Athena will avail him nothing

ὤςτε μὴ οὐ παρημελημένον
ἐρρειν, τὸ χαίρειν μὴ μαθόνθ’ ὅπου φρενῶν,

we are surely meant to recall the joy of the pure and the initiated as described for us by Pindar in his second Olympian Ode and by Aristophanes in the Frogs. The Χάριτες are almost the heavenly counterparts of the hellish Erinyes. In the next line (302) Orestes is described as they

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22 Not ‘Eleusinian,’ as in the last sentence of his paper.
23 I. 72. My references are to Wilamowitz’s ed. minor.
24 II. 264 f.: δεὶ ο’ ὑπὸ ζώντας βοφεῖν|μυθρόν ἐκ μελῶν πέλανον . . . καὶ ζώντα σ’ ἱσχυνάς ἀπόξειμα κάτω. 
25 δεὶ δι’ θ’ εἰ τις ἄλος ἠλιπεν βροτῶν ἢ ἀδει ἢ ἤπειν τιν’ αἰσθών ἢ τοκάς φιλοὺς ἔχονθ’ ἐκαστὸν τῆς δίκης ἐπάσια.
26 Cp. Thomson, p. 33. The resemblance between the passage just quoted and the list in Ar. Ran. (145–151) is very striking. The discrepancies, however, between these and other mentions of the ‘unwritten laws’ are enough to show that these laws were never strictly formulated.
27 μέγας γὰρ Ἀδής ἐστιν ἐθνοῦν βροτῶν ἐνερέω χέρων: διετογράφῳ ἐπὶ πάντ’ ἐποίη φρενί. There can be no doubt that the same judgment is also referred to in Suppl., 230 f.: κακεὶ δικαίων τάμπλακάμως, ὡς λόγος, Ζώος ἄλος ἐν καμάω τυπάτα δίκες, and is identical with the judgment in Pindar, Ol. II. 65: ἄλωτα κατὰ γάτα δικαίω τῇ ἐφέρῃ λόγον φράσας ἁλήγκα. Note in Eumenides 35 εἰ τις ἠλιπεν and in Pindar ἄλωτα. It seems perfectly safe to assume that the λόγος is some non-Eleusinian mystic doctrine and that Ζώος ἄλος, Ἀδῆς and τις are all to be identified with the Dionysiac-Orphic Ζώος χέρων.
28 I. 387. ἄτιμ’ ἁπειτά δειμέναι λόγχει θεῶν διῃσειάτων ἀνθέλοι λάμπει, δυσοδησία δικαίωμαι καὶ δυσομάστοις ἱώμαι.
29 For λάμψις (I. 389) Wieseler reads λάπτω. The change seems unnecessary, as either word means ‘slime,’ (Cp. L. & S. s.v. λάτιν). Hermann’s ‘sunless light’ is poetical but pointless, and the meaning ‘light’ is much less well attested than ‘slime.’ Note that the Erinyes are children of Night, who is very prominent in Orphic cosmogenies as early as Aristophanes’ parody of one in the Birds.
30 Aristophanes, Frogs, 333; Eurip., Bacchae, 414.
hope to make him: ἀναίματον, βόσκημα δαιμόνων, σκίαν. The word σκία clearly connotes death. The victim of the Furies is doomed to a living death (I. 305): καὶ ζῶν με δαισεις οὐδὲ πρὸς βωμὸς σφαγεῖς. In other words, what happens to Orestes on earth in the play is what usually happens to offenders in the other world; 40 and here, as elsewhere when there is question of infernal punishments, no difference is made between those who are guilty of some crime and those who are simply uninitiated, ἐμπτητοι. The fate which awaits Orestes in life is not dissimilar to that which in Plato 41 is threatened against those who refuse to undergo the purifications of the Orphics; and there is a clear reason for this, because, as Plato tells us, the Orphics offered their purifications as a means for avoiding in the next world the penalties that awaited crimes committed in this.

This constant analogy between the pursuit of Orestes by the Erinyes and the punishment of the sinner after death explains, I believe, one of the most puzzling points in the play. It is obvious, of course, that Aeschylus deliberately reduces the rôle of Apollo from that which the god at one time had in the story (in Stesichorus, for example) to that of a mere advocate before the higher court of Athena. In the earliest versions of the story, the pursuit of Orestes must have ended with his purification at Delphi. Aeschylus sends him farther, from Delphi to Athens; even though Apollo purifies him, he cannot set him altogether free until the Areopagus has judged. But we should expect at least that his wanderings should cease with his purification, and that he should go straight from Delphi to Athena's temple. In the Choræphori (I. 1042) he has already described himself as ἀληθῆς, and we naturally assume that he has been pursued over long distances before he reaches Delphi and safety. His journey to Athens should in comparison be direct and simple.

Yet three times in the Eumenides this journey is referred to in language which implies that it is long and difficult, over sea and land. On Apollo's first appearance, while assuring Orestes of his protection, he at the same time bids him fly (II. 75 f.):

οὕως δὲ φεύγε, μηδείς μάλαξκος γένης.

Not only the prospective fate of Orestes, but his condition as pursued by the Furies, is a living death, for, as Apollo emphasises, their visitation of the living world is a monstrous horror.

40 Compare Lucian Menipp. 474 f., where at least one feature (the abolition of all distinction between the great and the humble) has its parallel in Eum. 368: δύσαί δ' ἄνθρωποι καὶ μάλις ὑπ' αἰθήρι σαμῖαν ταχύμεναι κατά γάς μινῦσθουν ἄτμοι.

41 Rep. II. 365 A: μὴ ὕπαθαι δὲ δεινὰ περιμένει. The ὕπαθαι are identical with Orphic rites (ἄσ ἡ τελές καλότροπος). And this is again the significance of ὕπαθαι, which is better attested than ὕπαθαν, in Phaedo, 108 a (cp. Burnet's note). It has nothing to do with Hecate.

Again, when the scene opens before Athena's temple, Orestes prays to the Goddess for protection as one already purified, and as one who has gone through a long pilgrimage (I. 240):

ὁμοία χέρσον καὶ θάλασσαν ἐκπερδεῖν.
A little later (ll. 249–251) the Erinyes who have pursued him describe their wanderings on his track:

χθονός γάρ πᾶς πεποίμανται τόπος
ὑπὲρ τε πόντου ἀπτέροις ποτήμασιν
ὥθην διώκουσι’ οὐδὲν ύστερα νεώς.

Now, the flight from Delphi to Athens should neither take a long time nor should it normally involve a long journey over the sea. In ancient times the regular way to come would surely be overland, by the road laid down by the κελευθοποιοὶ πατίδες Ἡφαίστου, spoken of at I. 13—the Athenian sacred way by which θεόρια went to Delphi. Even if we suppose a journey by the modern route from Itea, crossing the Isthmus at Corinth or Megara, such a journey could hardly have been described as covering a long stretch of land. On the other hand, if Aeschylus implies an exile like that of Alcmeon,\(^{42}\) then such an exile should naturally end with the purification at Delphi.\(^{43}\) The emphasis placed on the wanderings, like the whole treatment of the Delphic purification, can have only one object—to magnify the importance of Athena’s court and the finality of its verdict.

If Aeschylus all along has in mind an analogy between Orestes as destined victim of the Erinyes and the uninitiated in Hades, then the wanderings between Delphi and Athens take their proper place in his design. They are the equivalent of the τορείαι, πλάναι, πόνοι of the Phaedo and other texts which speak of the wandering of the soul. In his speech to Orestes (ll. 78–79) Apollo actually refers to them as πόνον, and Thomson has emphasised the significance of the phrase ἀπαλλάξει πόνων which we meet at the end of the same speech (l. 83). In the lines I have already quoted, we get the word πλάνη in a very slight disguise (l. 76: πλανοστίβη χθόνο). As Thomson has sufficiently shown (pp. 21, 25), this idea of the long wanderings of the unpurified soul is a commonplace in mystic literature. I may repeat here that Plato (Phaedo, 107d–108c) makes much use of it, and especially signals the long duration of the ordeal (πολὺν χρόνον ἐπτοµήν).

This idea may well have been common to the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries, but once more it was the Orphics who made it part of an elaborate doctrine, which involved their peculiar notion of a κύκλος γενέσεως.\(^{44}\) Akin to this doctrine was the Pythagorean one of the soul’s δόος or κέλευθος, and the variant of this which we find in Pindar.\(^{45}\) A similar doctrine is forcibly set forth in the famous fragment of Empe-

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\(^{42}\) Thuc. II. 102. Cp. Plut. de exil. 9, p. 602 c:

\(^{43}\) This point was clearly seen by K. O. Müller (Eumenides, Eng. trans., 1853, pp. 132–133), but he had no real explanation of it to offer. His idea (ibid., p. 131) that the flight of Orestes after his purification is supposed to bring him to Rhegium and elsewhere, attributes to the Athenians of Aeschylus’ time the same mythological material as has come down to us.


\(^{45}\) Ol. II. 75 : ἔτελην δίος δόον παρὰ Κρόνου τύρων.
docles, in which the δαίμονες who have sinned are compelled τρις μὲν μυρίς ὀρας ἀπὸ μακάρων ἀλάληθαι. Here we meet, I think for the first time, the notion that the wandering spirits are thrown back and forth between sea and land:


The comparison of the soul’s quest for a blessed immortality to a sea-voyage becomes more frequent in later literature, although its origin is probably to be sought in very ancient Egyptian beliefs. In all probability the comparison lies behind a beautiful passage in the Bacchae of Euripides (ll. 902 f.):


where the μόχθοι are evidently the same as the πόνοι, πορείαι, πλάναι of the Phaedo. It is perhaps most strikingly expressed in a passage from the Florilegium of Vettius Valens, a ‘neo-Pythagorean’ astrologer of the second century A.D., in which he describes his own mystic experience in striving to attain δυμίλησις τοῦ θεοῦ: πελαγοδρομίσης οὐ καὶ πολλῆν γῆν διοδεύσας, κλιμάτων τε καὶ ἐθνῶν κατόπτης γενόμενος, πολυχρονίς πείρας καὶ πόνοις συμπεριέκλει,

When Orestes arrives in Athens and comes face to face with the Goddess, he loses no time in assuring her of his purity (ll. 277 f.):


The ritual associations of his language have been so well brought out by Thomson that it is unnecessary for me to dwell any further on them. He emphasises his purity once more a few lines farther on (l. 287):


46 Burnet, E. Gr. Phil. p. 222, no. 115; Ritter-Preller, p. 151, beginning έτειν ‘Ανάγκης χρήμα κ.τ.λ.
47 Cp. Nilsson, Min-Myc. Rel. pp. 544 f.; Cumont, After-life in Roman Paganism, pp. 154−155. In later times the voyage is through the aether and the Islands of the Blest are the sun and moon.
48 Ed. Kroll p. 330, l. 14. For this quotation I am indebted to Festugière, L’Idéal Religieux des Grecs et l’Évangile, Paris, 1932, p. 124, note 3. As is there remarked, the Cynic comparison of the wise man with Odysseus, and the περὶ τῆς ἵππου πορείας of the Epicurean Metrodorus of Lampscus, both derive from the same source. Plato (or rather the Socrates of the Clouds) had made the analogy with the philosopher’s quest a commonplace.
49 In all probability the sacred legend of the wanderings of Dionysos had something to do with the origin of this doctrine. Cp. Eur. Bacchae, passim, and Aristoph. Frogs, ll. 400−401: καὶ δίδον ὡς δῶν πόνου πολλῆν ὄδον παραιν. Note how in the passage from Vettius Valens all the motives recur—sea and land, long lapse of time, πόνος, and the semi-mystic term κατόπτης, which recalls the περιϕορῶ τὸν ἡλίου of Socrates in the Clouds (l. 225).
50 Cp. Thomson, p. 20. I should prefer to keep καθαρμόνς and at most to read πολλοῖς for πολλοὺς.
The whole speech is distinctly reminiscent of the formulas intended to be recited by the Orphic initiate before Persephone:  

ερχομαι ἐκ καθαρόν καθαρά χθόνιοι βασιλεῖα.

The resemblance is made all the stronger by the presence of Hermes in the play; indeed it is the only way to account for that presence. As Orestes is departing from Delphi to begin his wanderings (I. 89), Apollo bids Hermes accompany him, with these words:

'Ερμή, φύλασσε, κάρτα δ’ ὑν ἔπτώνυμος πομπταῖος ἱσθι.

At first sight the epithet πομπταῖος seems to be a very ordinary epithet for Hermes, who is called ὁ πεμπτων in a general sense by Sophocles, for example. It is all the more striking to find that the only other case where the adjective πομπταῖος is applied to Hermes is a passage where he is simultaneously invoked as χθόνιος (Sophocles, Ajax, 832):

καλώ δ’ ἄµα
πομπταῖον 'Ερμήν χθόνιον εὖ µε κοιµίσαι.

In that passage he is called on to conduct the soul of Ajax to its resting-place in Hades. This renders the conclusion very tempting, to say the least of it, that in the Eumenides the epithet πομπταῖος is deliberately chosen as ambiguous. On the one hand, it suggests the ordinary function of Hermes as guide of the living. On the other, it recalls to the audience the fact that Orestes is no ordinary mortal, but, as the Erinyes later on describe him, a living corpse. In that character it is fitting that he should be guided by a god whose epithet suggests ψυχοπτοµός, the Chthonic Hermes, guide of souls, who was particularly prominent in the mystic Other-world. His presence surely clinches the analogy between the πῶνος of Orestes and the πλάνη of the soul seeking rest.

If this analogy holds good, the poet’s conception of his plot was even bolder than is usual thought, and his meaning richer and deeper. Not alone does he substitute a new for an old moral law, a new legal procedure for an ancient semi-magical sanction, the law-court of Athena for the primitive rite of Apollo, the revered Goddesses of the Areopagus for the dreadful phantasms of an older dispensation; he also suggests that there is an analogy between Athena’s court, with its judgment by democratic procedure, and the awful, irrevocable doom pronounced by the ‘Other Zeus’ of the underworld. Just as the initiate is ‘saved’ by producing his mystic symbol of initiation, so Orestes is saved by virtue of his purification at Apollo’s hands. It is to be noted that in neither case does purification

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81 Gold leaf from Thurii, Kern, Orph. Frag., p. 106, 32, IV. C. The same formula is many times repeated.

82 Philoct. 133. As πομπός, however, he is guide of the dead: Soph. O.C. 1. 1548: τῇδε γὰρ µ’ ἀγιών ἑκάτερος ἑκάτερους ἱστεν ἑκάτερον καθαρά τοῖς νεκροῖς τὰς αἰματοσειτιαί τις. Also in Hymn. Orph., 57, 6 (Abel, p. 88).

83 Cp. Plutarch, Consol. ad Uxor. 10: καὶ µὴ δ’ τῶν ἄλλων ἅκοις ... ὃς σώθην σώδαμη τῷ διαλεύτῃ κακῖν σώθην λυπηρῖν ἔστιν, οἶδα ὅτι καλὰ ἐν τοῖς ποιητέων ὁ πάτριος λόγοι, καὶ τὰ μυστικὰ σύμβολα τῶν περὶ τὸν διάνοιαν δρομὸν. The σωφρική so common in mystic language is equivalent to ἀπαλλαγή πόνων: Thomson, p. 22.
immediately confer the longed-for ἱερόν; it merely gives, both to the mystic and to Orestes, knowledge of the right way which leads to the judgment-seat, and the assurance of a favourable judgment. The effects of that judgment on Orestes again remind us of mystic ideas. He comes to his trial a living dead man; he leaves it reborn (l. 757), declaring himself ‘an Argive again’ and thanking Athena, Loxias and Zeus in a speech which three times in eight lines has a reference to ἱερόν. The notion that initiation in the mysteries was equivalent to rebirth was a widespread one. The contrast between Orestes’ state before and after his trial seems clearly intended to suggest it. I believe that the ordinary Athenian in 458 B.C. was capable of seeing all through the Eumenides the majestic comparison between the institutions of his city and the eternal economy of the κόσμος which is implied in the echoes of mystic terminology here pointed out.

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54 Compare Orestes’ words (Eum., ii. 278–279): ἐν δὲ τῷ τε πάγωμα φωναίν ἐπάχυν πρὸς σφοι διδασκάλου, and the speech of Apollo giving him his directions, with the instructions on the gold plate from Petelia (Kern, Orph. Frag., p. 104, no 32 a) and with the similar document from Thurii (ibid., p. 108, no. 32 b) which ends χαίρε, χαίρε, δεξιάν ἔδωτον λειμώνας τε λεούς καὶ ἀλεξά Φιλασφόνιασ. In both cases the idea that purification gives some sort of knowledge is apparent.