

Mystic Filters for Tragedy: Orphism and Euripides' *Rhesus*

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For my sons

μη̄ πάντ' ἐρεύνα· πολλὰ καὶ λαθεῖν καλόν
(Soph., *Ἀλέαδα*, fr. 83 Radt)

“So great is the power of names and dates, that most scholars who deny Euripidean authorship grossly undervalue the *Rhesos*.”

One could not agree more with this perceptive observation made by Braun in his brief, but illuminating, introduction to the play¹. Few exceptions aside, the general trend in Euripidean criticism has been to treat *Rhesus* as an embarrassment or, at best, as an interesting specimen of fourth-century drama². It is true that the important question of

1. 1978, 3. The text of Euripides used is the OCT (J. Diggle, *Euripidis Fabulae III*, Oxford 1994). The Orphic testimonia (T) and fragments (F) are cited from Kern 1922 (a new edition of the Orphic testimonia and fragments by A. Bernabé is forthcoming in Bibliotheca Teubneriana; cf. also Bernabé 2000, 2002. 92-3). The abbreviations follow the conventions of *L'Année Philologique* and the *OCD*³ or will be obvious. I owe a debt of gratitude to Richard Seaford, Edith Hall, Robert Parker, Stavros Frangoulidis and audiences at Pyrgos and Olympia for their responses to earlier drafts. I would like to single out Spyridon Rangos and Yannis Tzifopoulos, who have read everything again with great insight and sensitivity. Also, my heartfelt thanks go to Vayos Liapis for letting me see his thought-provoking work on the play. Needless to say, the views expressed remain the responsibility of the author. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

2. *Rhesus* has taken more than its fair share of abuse over the years. Ferguson's remark that it is nothing more than a play “to see, to enjoy, and to forget” is perhaps the most characteristic (1972, 499), but there are many others just as trenchant (cf. e.g. Harsh 1944, 250-3; Grube ²1961, 445-7; Kitto ³1961, 396, 1977; Lattimore 1964, 80; Lesky ³1978, 201-2). However, *Rhesus* has begun to strike increasingly resonant chords among serious critics in the last twenty years or so. For interesting approaches to the play, see e.g. Paduano 1973, 1974; Braun 1978; Rosivach 1978; Burnett 1985; Arnott 1989, 170-1; Bernacchia 1990; Bond 1996;

authenticity has largely diverted attention to specific issues of dating and structure³. As a result wider issues of interpretation have been seriously neglected. I might as well come clean and say that the problem of authorship is irrelevant here, for my concern is with the integrity of the *Rhesus* as a work of dramatic art, not with the integrity of the text as a literary document. More particularly, the aim of this article is to view this rich and fascinating play from a different perspective. As far as I know, the mystic element in the play has attracted no serious discussion. Even though some have noted the operations of the strong emphasis on Orpheus and mystic ritual in the final scene of the play, the consistent thread of allusion to the Athenian mystery cults has not been studied in the depth it deserves⁴.

I

In this article I want to suggest that Orphic ideas about life and death, interwoven as they are with a wider Athenian nexus of Eleusinian and Dionysiac beliefs, present a significant mystic filter through which the original audience would have interpreted the action⁵. The Orphic matrix, which is not unadulterated, but closely related to similar Eleusinian and Bacchic views on the afterlife, is inextricably entwined with the dark vision of life presented in the play. In its various implications with Eleusinian and Dionysiac cult, the Orphic connection lays emphasis on the inevitability of human suffering, but also, in its mystical promise, constitutes a way out of it. The hero-cult, which is established in the closing scenes by hard-grieving Muse, infuses the play with some gladness and some hope. It is not over-bold to assume that the initiated members of the spectating body would have associated the references to mystic affairs with their

Wiles 1997, 156-8; Hall 1999, xxv-xxviii; Battezzato 2000; Pace 2001; Barrett 2002, ch. 5; Michelakis 2002, 168-72. Earlier signs of a more sympathetic approach to the play can be detected in Steadman 1945; Strohm 1959; Parry 1964. It is worth noting that, in one of his few references to the play, Murray 1918, 114 treats the epiphany scene of the *Rhesus* as one of the best in Euripides.

3. The question of authorship has been a bone of contention among scholars. Ritchie 1964 has presented an interesting case for the authenticity of *Rhesus*, but see Fraenkel 1965. Cf. also Porter ²1929, xxx-liv; Sneller 1949; Ebener 1966; Conacher 1967, viii; Burnett 1985, 50-1; Zimmermann 1991, 88; Easterling 1993a, 1997, 211 n. 2; Kuch 1993, 549-51; Klyve 1995; Burlando 1997; Wiles 2000, 171; Liapis 2001, 2003, forthcoming. Personally, I am not totally convinced by the arguments against Euripidean authorship, but I admit that they make a rather strong case.

4. The most important contribution to the subject remains Plichon 2001, who rightly notes the interrelation of Orphism and the Mysteries in the play (cf. also Leaf 1915, who stresses the Eleusinian connection; Ustinova 2002, 281, who follows Plichon 2001 in recognizing an allusion to the Eleusinian mysteries, but is unnecessarily critical of Leaf's views). On Orphic echoes in other plays, see recently Cozzoli 1993; Di Marco 1993. On mystic structures in drama, see Bowie 1993b; Seaford 1994b; Lada-Richards 1999, 48-9; Markantonatos 2002, 197-220.

5. On the notion of filter as a useful interpretative tool, especially with regard to the extremely diverse receptions of the plays, see principally the seminal studies of Bowie 1993a, 1993b, 1997.

varied experiences at mystery cults. Contrary to expectation, Rhesus' inglorious death would have had a profoundly soothing effect on the initiates in the audience. In correlating their own anticipation of blissful happiness in the afterlife with the upcoming elevation of Rhesus in heroic death, the *mystae* would have recognized in the fallen prince a part of their own struggling selves⁶.

I am fully aware that I am treading on slippery ground here. The very notion of Orphism has been the subject of considerable debate, especially in the light of recent important discoveries⁷. However, significant fresh findings allow one to feel confident in painting a picture of Orphism. Thus, before examining the evidence for an Orphic schema, it would be appropriate to shed some light on Orphism and Orphic doctrines in general. The current trend in scholarship is to talk about Orphism not in terms of a movement, but rather in terms of Orphic books. Orphism is basically a very early religion of books, which involved a kind of purification for pay. Theogonical poems were attributed to Orpheus, the legendary singer and musician. Also, in the classical period there existed initiations into Orphic mysteries, which promised purification of sin and a vastly improved afterlife.

More specifically, Orphic literature consisted of cosmogonic and eschatological poems, texts used in ritual, hymns, collections of oracles and purificatory prescriptions. For the most part, the Orphic texts were widely used by the followers of Bacchic mystery groups and the itinerant Orpheotelests or Orpheus-initiators. In view of the strong syncretistic nature of Orphic poems and Dionysiac Mysteries, it has been suggested that many Bacchic mystery groups were deeply influenced by Orphic ideas. A caveat is in order here. The presence of Orphic ideas in the beliefs and rituals of certain Bacchic mystery groups does not presuppose a unified doctrine. Among other influences, in the ancient world, Pythagoreanism in its own right played an important part in shaping the beliefs of specific Dionysiac groups. Also, there is evidence that, by the end of the fifth century, the Eleusinian Mysteries had taken on significant elements from Orphic religion⁸. It is reasonable to argue that the most important Athenian mystery cult had attempted to bring under its control popular mystic ideas, the dissemination of which had been the responsibility of such marginal figures as the itinerant Orpheus-initiators. The general reputation of Orpheus and the colorful Orphic poems must have presented a wealth of mystic themes for the initiates to play upon⁹.

6. On audience reception in Greek tragedy with abundant bibliography, see Markantonatos 2002, 19-25, 2003, 2004, ch. 1, forthcoming, ch. 1.

7. On Orpheus and Orphism, see principally Albinus 2000, 99-152; Alderink 1981; Athanassakis 1977; Borgeaud 1991; Bremmer 1994, 86-9, 2002, ch. 2; Brisson 1993, 1995; Burkert 1982, 1985, 290-304; Calame 1996; Christopoulos 1991; Detienne 1989; Edmonds 1999; Farnell 1921, 373-401; Graf 1974, 1987, 1993; Guthrie 1952; Laks and Most 1997; Linforth 1941; Lloyd-Jones 1985; Mikalson 1983, *passim*; Morand 1997, 2001; Nilsson 1967, 678-99; Parker 1983, 299-307, 1995, 1996, 55, 100-1; Rangos 2000, 2003; Robertson 2003; Rohde 1925, 335-61; Segal 1989; West 1982, 1983; *OCD*³ s.v. Orpheus & Orphism (F. Graf); *LIMC* 7.1, 81-105.

8. Cf. Graf 1974, 1993.

9. Cf. Graf 1974, 79-150; Parker 1983, 282, 1996, 100-1; Sourvinou-Inwood 1997b, 157-9.

The cardinal myth in Orphic literature is the double birth of Dionysus. According to the Orphic poets, Zeus mated with his daughter Persephone. Zagreus, which is another name for Dionysus, was the fruit of the incestuous union¹⁰. Zeus decided to appoint Dionysus as his successor, but the Titans in their jealousy slew and ate the baby after having torn him limb from limb. Only the heart of the infant was saved from the dismembered corpse through the good offices of Athena, but this was enough for Dionysus to be reborn. In his anger Zeus destroyed the Titans with his thunderbolt. From the smoking remnants of the Titans mankind was born. We humans are thus blessed with a divine origin and tainted with inherited blood-guilt. Even though we are born from the evil Titans, we are endowed with a pure and divine soul through our association with Dionysus.

It should be noted, however, that this myth of Zagreus is told only in Neoplatonist sources, and the notion of man's dual nature was first expounded by Olympiodorus, a sixth-century CE Neoplatonist in his commentary on Plato's *Phaedo* (Olympiodorus *In Phaed.* 1. 3 = F 220)¹¹. The story offers a neat explanation of man's wicked nature and the need for Dionysus himself to intercede on man's behalf with his mother Persephone after death. Despite the scantiness of the evidence, it has been suggested that these elements can be detected as early as the sixth century BCE, thus placing the belief in an inherited ancestral crime back into Classical times. According to a Pindaric fragment (fr. 133 S-M = Pl. *Meno* 81bc), Persephone allows the human souls to pass through a series of reincarnations and attain the supreme stage in metempsychosis on the condition that she accepts recompense from humans on account of her "ancient grief"¹². Further, Plato (*Leg.* 701c = F 9) and his disciple Xenocrates (fr. 20 Heinze = Damascius *In Paed.* 1. 2) refer to man's Titanic nature¹³. Valuable evidence for an

10. The identification of Zagreus with Dionysus is first attested with some degree of certainty in a fragment from Euripides' *Cretans* (fr. 472 Nauck²; cf. also Cozzolli 1993, 160-8, 2001, apud 11; Collard, Cropp & Lee 1995, 69-70; Diggle 1998, 115-6). For a more sceptical approach, see principally Edmonds 1999, 37 n. 6.

11. This interpretation of the Zagreus myth has come under severe scrutiny by Edmonds 1999, 66 who, building on Linforth 1941, concludes that the later stories of an Orphic anthropogony and the notion of original sin should be dismissed as "a fabrication of the scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". Even though Edmond's vigorous analysis of the Zagreus myth may strike one as extreme and, at times, unconvincing, his sceptical attack is a constant reminder of the serious problems involved in treating the myth of Dionysus as the central doctrine of Orphism. Personally, I believe that Edmond's survey has its merits, but, contrary to the standard interpretation, fails to offer sufficient evidence to account for the closely-knit pattern of mystic motifs in the Zagreus myth. See also West 1983, 166, who rejects Olympiodorus' reading of the myth as a mere theological explanation of his own, but convincingly argues that the soteriological aspect of Orphism, as this is displayed by the living Dionysus' intercession with his mother Persephone to save his worshippers, is securely implied in the myth. It is reasonable to assume that the Orphic poet may have touched on issues pertaining to human nature (cf. the sensible treatment of the evidence by Parker 1995, 494-8).

12. For various views on this much-debated fragment, see Linforth 1941, 347-50; Dodds 1951, 155-6; Alderink 1981, 65-74; West 1983, 110 n. 82; Seaford 1986, 6-7; Parker 1983, 300, 1995, 496; Edmonds 1999, 47-9. Also, on Titans and original sin in the Orphic Hymns, see Morand 2001, 216-7.

13. For later references to the Zagreus myth, see Paus. 8. 37. 5 (= T 194); Plut. *De Esu Carn.* 1. 996b-c (=

Orphic Dionysus has come in the form of two identical gold leaves, which were recently discovered in a grave in Pellina, Thessaly¹⁴. The inscribed gold leaves, which date from the second part of the fourth century BCE and are significantly shaped like leaves of ivy, reveal that the initiate has to appeal to Dionysus' help before a tribunal in the underworld. The dead person, who has been released by Dionysus himself through initiation in the Bacchic mysteries, should tell this to Persephone. Apparently, there is a reference here to Orphic beliefs about man's original sin on account of the *sparagmos* and *ōmophagia* of Dionysus, the son of Persephone, by the Titans¹⁵. It is only Dionysus the Releaser, who has the power to intercede with his wrathful mother on behalf of the progeny of the wicked Titans¹⁶.

II

With extreme caution I will argue that some mystic ideas, which are found in the context of Athenian Orphism, are closely related not only to significant issues treated in the play, but also to certain peculiarities in staging and structure. Even though the Orphic element is particularly strong in the final scenes, in which there are direct references to Orpheus and mystic ritual (941-947, 962-973), the rather bold device of a night setting (and the concomitant interplay of light and darkness), the erratic pacing of the plot and, most importantly, the intricate relationship between the almighty gods and the struggling players are exploited in complex and subtle ways to invite the audience to view the action through a mystic filter. Essentially, I would suggest that there is more than one level of tragedy in the play — that the closing scenes unite with the seemingly fragmented main action to form a subtly mystical design.

Furthermore this article sets out to explore briefly and selectively the relation of the affirmative mystic point to the many negations of the play. As the audience are being bombarded with spirited and exciting events, they become aware of the fact that both cruelty and suffering are essential parts of the world's constitution, at least of the

F 210); Proclus *In Plat. Republicam* 2. 338 (= F 224). Cf. also *RE* s.v. Zagreus (W. Fauth) with detailed discussion.

14. Cf. Tsantsanoglou and Parassoglou 1987; Graf 1991, 1993. On gold tablets in general, see Zuntz 1972, 277-393; Janko 1984; Pugliese Carratelli 1993; Parker 1995, 496-8; Riedweg 1998; Betz 1998; Tzifopoulos 1998, 2002 with relevant bibliography; Albinus 2000, 141-52; Rangos 2003.

15. A similar idea is perhaps echoed in a recent discovery at Pherae, Thessaly (*SEG* 45. 646). According to the tablet, ἄποινοσ' γὰρ ὁ μύστησ (cf. also Chrysostomou 1998, 210-20 esp. 217-8; Tzifopoulos 2002, 157-8). It may be remarked here for all it is worth that in the *Rhesus* the idea of recompense is associated with both Dolon (177 τίν' οἶν' Ἀχαιῶν ζῶντ' ἀποινᾶσθαι θέλεις;) and Rhesus (465-466 ὅτω πολυφόνουσι χειρὸς ἄποιν' ἄροιο σᾶ λόγγα; cf. also Diggle 1994, 515-7).

16. Cf. also the depiction of Dionysus greeting Pluto in the underworld on an Apulian vase in Toledo. Apparently, the image symbolizes Dionysus' power to intercede with the infernal deities on behalf of his votaries (cf. Johnston and McNiven 1996; Tzifopoulos 2002, 161-2).

world the Greeks and the Trojans dwell in. Even divine assistance lends itself to questionable enterprises and sympathy gives way to trickery. In a single violent night the life of men is shown to be burdened with false hopes and unspeakable fears. As the ironies are piled thick and deep, the abortive attempts of the characters to establish some sense of order in a meaningless universe speak a stronger message than is carried by their short-lived achievements and pretentious rhetoric.

But, on the other hand, my present thesis is that the playwright is choosing details consciously and loading them with mystic significance. In view of the full import of each loaded fact, a mystic nexus proclaims itself moment by moment. The sorrowful ending brightens. Instead of becoming paralyzed by the very awareness of life's futility, the spectators would have seen in the agonizing players a part of their own suffering selves. Especially, in the heroic elevation of Rhesus they would have recognized a welcome escape-route from the gloomy prospect of death, not unlike the comfort and release derived from the mystic notion of blissful existence in the underworld. None the less, the mystical finale does not suggest a Christian heaven. The contradictions remain forceful in the closing scenes of the play, and the affirmative mystic point is never adequately objectified and sustained to tell us which is true. In the *Rhesus* there is a persistent emphasis on the negative aspects of mystic ritual. Amid the general confusion, the characters are symbolically associated with the forces of night and darkness. Even the light of the Mysteries, a confident affirmation of life, serves to underline the dominant themes of deception and trickery. Thus the intricate web of conflicts and contrasts should be a useful corrective to any lingering notion that the mystical matrix presupposes a happy ending. Rhesus is fated to become an uneasy and lonesome presence in his faraway chamber on Pangaeus, the Thracian mountain, and the anxieties and distress of the initiates are not easy to dispel outside the theatre. Redeemed suffering can be uplifting, but the inescapable facts of human life are out there for us to face.

Let us start our investigation with the unusual night setting, which is a unique feature of the *Rhesus*. In view of the mystic filter, it is reasonable to argue that the nocturnal aspect of the play is related to Orphic ideas about the beginning of things. In the Orphic theogonies, Night is presented as a mighty cosmogonic figure that exercises an immense influence over creation¹⁷. There is evidence that in an earlier Orphic version Nyx was the first primeval being (F 111). According to the Derveni papyrus, discovered in Greece in 1962, which contains a valuable segment of a commentary on a cosmogonic poem, probably dating from the fifth century BCE, the first king of the world, Ouranos, was a child of Night¹⁸. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Night is treated as one of the first primeval beings (1091b 4) together with Ouranos, Chasm and Oceanus

17. The Orphic cosmology reported by Eudemus of Rhodes began from Night (F 28). Musaeus began from Night (B 5 D-K). Also, Night was first with Silence in Antiphanes' comedy *Theogony* (?) (cf. *PCG* 2 pp. 366ff.). Cf. also Kern 1922, Index III, s.v. Nyx; Guthrie 1952, 102-4; West 1966, apud 116, 1983, 116ff.; Bremmer 1994, 87, 2002, 20; *OCD*³ s.v. Nyx; Rangos 2000, 40.

18. On the Derveni papyrus, see Laks and Most 1997 with abundant bibliography. Cf. also Bernabé

and in a vague reference in the same work (1071b 26 = F 24) the so-called *theologoi* derive everything from Night. It has been argued that the aforementioned passages refer to Orphic poetry¹⁹. Also, the theogony of Aristophanes' *Birds* (694-695), which perhaps has been influenced by Orphic ideas, places Night in the first generation of beings together with Chasm, Darkness and Tartarus²⁰.

Another important way to keep a due measure of attention directed upon the mystical side of the nocturnal theme is to recognize that the play is set into a double axis, light and darkness, and day and night²¹. In view of the blending of mystic ideas in the play, I would suggest that the constant interplay of light and darkness would have put the initiates in the audience in mind of the central symbolism of light and darkness in the Eleusinian Mysteries, without wishing to restrict the discussion to exclude other mystery cults²². In spite of this, it is important to emphasize that the soteriological aspect of light does not presuppose a happy climax for either the Greeks or, more pressingly still, the Trojans. Even though one would expect that the positive connotations of light, enhanced as they are by the mystic code, would have prepared the ear for cries of triumphant joy at the end of the play —perhaps in a similar fashion to the torch-bearing procession of men and women in the closing scene of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*— the turn of events shows that there is a long way to salvation, if at all²³. This is a dark play — darker still than any other play riddled in mystic language. Hopeful resolution only comes in the guise of an extraordinary, if terrifying, hero-cult. Under the canopy of night, the bright prospect of mystical release is always presented with a terrible sign of cancellation.

For a start, the transition from darkness to light offers a significant metaphor for the joys of initiation in general. According to Plutarch's fragment 178 Sandbach (= Stobaeus 4. 52. 49), a wonderful light welcomes the initiate to the blessed regions of the dead after a grueling and terrifying journey in darkness²⁴. Further, the burning of

2002, esp. 103-11 with further bibliography; Janko 2002.

19. Cf. Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983, 17-8; West 1983, 184-5.

20. Cf. also Dunbar 1995, apud 693-4. Night has been a great cosmogonic deity in ancient Greece. In Hesiod's *Theogony* 123, Night is described as a respectable cosmic force, but is not included in the group of the oldest beings. She is the child of Chasm. Also, in *Iliad* 14. 261, Night is so important that even Zeus is fearful of her (cf. also Janko 1992, 192-3).

21. On the night setting of the play as a symbol of great potency, see Macurdy 1943; Strohm 1959, 261-3; Parry 1964; Barlow 1971, 44-5; Braun 1978, 5; Burnett 1985, 16; Walton 2000. According to Bond 1996, 270 n. 30, "aside from the twenty incidental references to night, there are fifteen references to darkness (six of which describe darkness as a hindrance to sight), and five references to unseen sounds and voices."

22. On the importance of light in the Eleusinian Mysteries and, especially, in the rituals inside the Telesterion, see principally Mylonas 1961, 263-9; Richardson 1974, 26-30; Burkert 1983, 274-93; Parisinou 2000, 60-71.

23. On the mystic echoes in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, see the important discussion by Bowie 1993b, 24-6 drawing on Headlam 1906, Thomson 1935 and Tierney 1937.

24. On the possible Eleusinian overtones of this much-discussed passage, see Graf 1974, chs. 4 & 5 and esp. 132-8, who argues that poems about Orpheus' *katabasis* may have influenced the literary representations of

torches is an extremely important feature of the Eleusinian ritual. Apart from the use of burning torches at the Iacchus procession and the *pannychis*, it has been argued that the initiation inside the Telesterion was concluded with “the sudden blaze of torches, contrasting with the former darkness”²⁵.

More contentiously perhaps, I would suggest that one should not be too ready to rule out the possibility that the recurrent intersection of light and darkness in the play presents a more thoroughly “Orphic” connection with a touch of Pythagoreanism. Admittedly, in view of the merging of mystic ideas in the *Rhesus* and the conceivable dramatic adaptation of mythical and cultic beliefs, establishing a specific mystic lead with some degree of certainty is an extremely hard, if not futile, task. None the less, one is tempted to argue that the contrast between day and night, which the playwright draws over and over again, is a contrast to do with the close association of Orpheus with Apollo, the Sun-god in a Dionysiac context. The myth of Orpheus and Apollo presents significant affinities with prominent themes in the *Rhesus*, not least the interplay of day and night, the Thracian topographic reference and the presence of the mournful Muses. According to Pseudo-Eratosthenes *Cataster*. 24 (= T 113; cf. also *MG* iii/1. 29-30 Olivieri = *TrGF* vol. 3, p. 138-9), in his play *Βασσάροι* or *Βασσαρίδες* Aeschylus tells the story of the *sparagmos* of Orpheus at the hands of maenads²⁶. After returning from the underworld, Orpheus held Dionysus in no reverence. He treated the Sun as the greatest of the gods and addressed him as Apollo. During the night he walked to the summit of Mt. Pangaeus and waited to see the rising sun first among men²⁷. Hence wrathful Dionysus sent his maenads to the mountain. The women tore Orpheus to pieces and scattered his members. The Muses collected the torn pieces and buried them in Leibethra²⁸.

At the very beginning of the *Rhesus*, the dual theme of light and darkness, and day and night is firmly established. The intermittent references to the nocturnal fires on the Greek side and the persistent allusions to the light of the new day, which will bring the

Eleusinian beliefs; Burkert 1987, 91-2; Bowie 1993a, 234-5; Seaford 1996, apud 616-37.

25. Richardson 1974, 233. Cf. also Burkert 1983, 275-6 with the relevant references to ancient sources. Significantly, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* the epiphanies of Demeter (188-90, 275-80) are accompanied by bright light (cf. Foley 1994, apud 189-90 and 273-80). Further, in iconography, torches frequently feature in depictions of Kore’s *anodos* (cf. Bérard 1974, pl. 9, no. 33; pl. 17, no. 59; pl. 17, no. 60, Bérard 1989, 114-8).

26. On the fusion of Orphic and Dionysiac beliefs in the Aeschylean play, see the interesting discussion by Di Marco 1993. Cf. also West 1983, 12-5, 1990, 32-46; Benson 1995. On the syncretism between Apollo/Helios and Dionysus, and the role of Orpheus as mediator between the two gods, see Rutherford 2001, 133, 198. On the prominent role of Apollo *Λύκειος* in the *Rhesus* in association with Dolon’s disguise in wolf-skin and the “Phoebus” password, see Elderkin 1935; Steadman 1945.

27. Perhaps the flashing light of a blazing torch in darkness is implied in fr. 23a Radt from Aeschylus’ *Bassares* (cf. also Weir Smyth and Lloyd-Jones² 1971, 388):

Παγγαίον γὰρ ἀργυρόηλατον
 πρῶν’ ἦες τὸ τῆς ἀστραπῆς† πευκῶεν σέλας

28. On the close association of Orpheus with Zalmoxis and Sabazios, the Thracian sun-gods, see Albinus 2000, 189-90, who rightly brings into the discussion the prominent part of the underworld sun in mystical geography. Also, on bright “whiteness” and Orphism, see Christopoulos 1991, 220-1.

hope of freedom and release from suffering to the hard-pressed Trojans, evoke the mystic experiences of the initiates at Eleusis and, possibly, elsewhere. The burning torches and the fires that can be seen at night from the enemy camp alert the Trojan guards (41-43; cf. 95, 109-110). With a new situation in his hands, Hector blames the seers, who told him to wait until dawn and then lead an attack against the Greeks (65-67). In line with the dominant motif of light and darkness, the elaborate description of Rhesus' arrival by the Messenger thrusts sharply and emphatically into relief the magnificent, at times even superhuman, splendour of the armour of the Thracian prince, who leads his vast army in the dark (301-308). Like a *daimon* in the night (301), Rhesus is seen as the long-awaited saviour of Troy. However, his resplendent epiphany will not bring salvation to the despondent Trojans. Despite his arrogant assertion that he will conquer the Greeks in a single day (447-449; cf. 600-604, 615), he is brutally killed by Diomedes in his sleep. His splendid horses, "conspicuous in the night" (617), are captured by Odysseus. It appears that Rhesus' heroic elevation will not benefit the Trojan cause. Hidden away in the caverns of Mt. Pangaeus he himself will see the light of day and at the same time he will not see the light of day (967, 971). However, one thing remains certain. The rays of the rising sun will not usher in a day of freedom for Troy in spite of Hector's confident claim (991-992). It appears that the mystical vision is revealed only behind a dense cloud. The redeeming light, which is implied in the mystic metaphors, is always preceded by toilsome wanderings in darkness — something that brings us to our next point of discussion.

Rhesus is a spectacular play full of sudden changes of situation and unexpected twists. The night setting plays an important part in the general confusion. Even though some critics have treated the erratic tempo of the plot as a serious weakness, my contention is that the exciting events taking place in the Trojan camp serve an important function in the thematics of the play. As we have seen before, in the *Rhesus* there is a constant reference to the unpleasant aspect of mystical release. Even the soteriological connotations of light are employed to underscore the anxiety and suffering of the initiate before the mystic salvation. Therefore, in view of the great significance given to the elements of confusion and surprise in mystic ritual, the carefully established network of crossing plots and counterplots would have served as the appropriate background to an Orphic matrix. In the darkness of night most of the characters remain most of the time ignorant of what is really going on; ironies, deceptions and constant reversal of expectations characterize the action. In general, mystic initiation presupposes an element of surprise and confusion. The initial stage of a rite of passage must detach the initiates from their previous identity, prepare them for their new one and stimulate them in order to attain the mystical transition. This process of disorientation and detachment contributed greatly to the fear and suffering, which were imposed on the *μύσθης*²⁹.

29. Cf. Richardson 1974, 20-4; Burkert 1983, 265-74, 1985, 260-4, 1987, 89-114; Seaford 1987, 1996, apud 918-9, 1998; Bowie 1993a, 236-8; Jakob 2000, esp. 66; Markantonatos 2002, 212-3. It is tempting to argue that the charioteer's dream may well qualify as a near mystic experience (779-788; on the remarkable character of the charioteer's narrative, see Burnett 1985, 34; Barrett 2002, 181). Again here fear and suffering

This strand of interpretation is supported by the very difficulty of knowing at any stage during the play what is true and what false, what bluff and what sincere. The Greeks and the Trojans inhabit a world of deception and covert action, in which there is no room for certainty. Even though the playwright made the *Rhesus* round the espionage incident treated in the tenth book of the *Iliad*, he rearranged significant details of the received story to throw particular emphasis on such polar opposites as sleep and wakefulness, knowledge and misunderstanding³⁰. Unlike *Iliad* 10. 299-312, where the Trojans are in council and Hector calls for volunteers to spy out the Achaean camp, here Hector is fast asleep in his tent. Again, by contrast with *Iliad* 10. 11-13 where it is the watch-fires and celebrations of the jubilant Trojans which have made Agamemnon apprehensive of the renewal of the battle at first light, in the play Hector and the people around him try to explain the meaning of the fiery signs coming from the Greek camp. After the departure of Dolon in disguise and the majestic arrival of Rhesus, Odysseus and Diomedes come through the enemy lines. They have killed Dolon on their way to the Trojan camp and they head for Hector's tent. But Hector is not in his tent. They are ready to go away when Athena appears. The goddess tells Odysseus and Diomedes of Rhesus' unforeseen advent and says no one will be able to resist him if he survives that night³¹. It is imperative for them to kill him. Quite unexpectedly, Paris storms in. He suspects that Greeks have infiltrated the camp and has come to warn Hector. Athena covers the exit of Odysseus and Diomedes by assuming the likeness of Aphrodite. According to Rosivach, "Athena's deception of Paris is more than a time-filler. Rather, it fits into a pattern of deception and treachery, real and imagined, which runs throughout the *Rhesus*."³² Meanwhile the two Greeks have killed Rhesus and seized his horses. One of Rhesus' charioteers, wounded, enters lamenting his master's sudden death. In his ignorance, he even accuses Hector and the Trojans of murdering Rhesus in his sleep. Again, this vaguely comic scene is a typifying instance of the running motif of

are present (786 φόβω, 788 φόβος). The terrible vision (780 δόξα τις, 782 ὡς ὄναρ δοκῶν) of two bloodthirsty wolves attacking Rhesus' horses awakens the charioteer, who dazed and confused has only time to see his attacker before he collapses wounded by a sword (789-796).

30. Cf. Braun 1978, 5-10; Rosivach 1978, 62-5; Burnett 1985, 15-7. On the Homeric version, see Fenik 1964, who unconvincingly treats the Homeric connection as extremely thin and argues for a non-Homeric source; Bond 1996, who offers an excellent discussion of the Homeric influence; Fantuzzi 1996.

31. According to the *Iliad* scholia on *Doloneia* (ΣβΤ .ΙΙ. 10. 435 = fr. 262 S-M; ΣΑ .ΙΙ. 10. 435), Pindar presented Rhesus as coming to Troy and killing many Greeks in one day. Alarmed by his heroic deeds, Hera sends Athena to advise Odysseus and Diomedes to undertake the spy mission. The latter scholia remark that if his horses could drink the water of Scamandros and feed on its banks, then Rhesus would become invincible. Also, Vergil has Aeneas describe the scene of Rhesus' killing and the capture of the fiery horses by Diomedes before they could graze at Troy or drink the water of the Xanthus (*Aen.* 1. 469-473). Servius at *Aen.* 1. 469 explains the passage by referring to a prophecy of Troy's invulnerability on the condition that Rhesus' horses feed or drink while in Trojan land. On the various versions of the oracle and the Rhesus myth in general, see e.g. Fenik 1964; Ritchie 1964, 62-4; Borgeaud 1991, 51-3; Hainsworth 1993, 151.

32. 1978, 65.

confusion and misunderstanding³³. From this slight sketch it becomes apparent that the story is superbly moulded to embody the painful truth that man's fate is hidden in a profusion of external appearances. Tricks and treacheries lock the characters together in a frustrating bondage, and there seems no way out. The playwright boldly underlines that in this decisive night the darkness of death is half of the rhythm of life.

We can now turn to another significant aspect of the mystic filter with a new understanding. The complex relation between man and god, as this is presented in the play, informs and enriches the multifarious responses of the audience to the mystical structures. My contention is that the heroization of Rhesus offers a welcome alternative, at least as far as his mother is concerned, from the total emptiness of death, not unlike the mystical promise of a greatly improved afterlife. The magnificent character of Rhesus' ἀφηρωισμός, announced as it is by the Muse with a clarity and directness that the human characters never attain, contrasts markedly with the general tenor of the play. The *Rhesus* presents a grim view of life. Divine will appears embedded in falsehoods, ambiguous statements, or oracles of uncertain reliability. In view of the subtle irony that is spun so systematically in the play, the divine forces seem to operate in and behind the visible world that human power anxiously tries to bring under its control³⁴.

Thus, before examining the climactic scene of the Muse (890-982), which has a larger function and involves the major issues of the play, let us discuss the main aspects of the relationship between man and god in the *Rhesus*. From the beginning of the play, it becomes apparent that the human level of the action is only part of a more complex design. Upon hearing of unusual activity in the Greek camp, Hector calls for an immediate attack on the enemy in spite of the soothsayers' advice to hold back his spear till the morning:

ἀλλ' οἱ σοφοί με καὶ τὸ θεῖον εἰδότες
μάντιες ἔπεισαν ἡμέρας μεῖναι φάος
κἄπειτ' Ἀχαιῶν μηδέν' ἐν χέρσῳ λιπεῖν. (65-67)

But the wise seers who know the divine plans
persuaded me to wait until the next day
and then spare no Greek in the land. (65-67)

By contrast with the Homeric version, where the halt of the fighting is the outcome of human volition, here there is an obscure reference to a prophecy, which persuaded Hector to cut short his victorious advance against the Greek ships and wait till daylight. No more is known about the predictions apart from Hector's scornful remark. As he grows impatient, Hector notes that the Greeks do not await the plans of his seers (68-69 οἱ δ' οὐ μένουσι τῶν ἐμῶν θουσοκῶν/βουλάς).

33. Cf. Strohm 1959, 272; Pagani 1970, 38; Burnett 1985, 33-5; Barrett 2002, 179-85.

34. Pace Michelini 1987, 102 n. 40, who unconvincingly argues for "the play's total lack of irony".

Later in the play, more of the divine nexus proclaims itself. After the departure of Dolon in his wolf disguise, the Chorus sing a prayer to Apollo to come to the protection of the man who had the courage to spy on the Greek camp (224-263). The turn of events shows that their prayer is to remain unanswered. Dolon is slain by Odysseus and Diomedes, who in their turn are saved by knowing the enemy password (573, 688). Significantly, the Trojan password is “Phoebus”. Also, the Greek fighters are greatly assisted by Athena in their spy mission. Unlike *Iliad* 10. 507-511, where Athena’s epiphany takes place only after the killing of Rhesus, the playwright shifts the received story to make the goddess solely responsible for the death of Rhesus. It is for her advice and trickery that Odysseus and Diomedes succeed in killing the Thracian ally and departing from the Trojan camp unharmed³⁵. The frailty of human beings beside the mysterious devices of the gods becomes starkly obvious in Athena’s claim that Diomedes is not destined to slay Paris (634-635). It is indicative of the important role of fate in the play that Paris is saved to strike down Achilles with his arrow³⁶. This chain of causation does not go unheeded by the Muse, who in mourning for her dead son foretells the fall of Achilles (974-979)³⁷. This time Athena will give way to Apollo to accomplish the divine plan. However, the forthcoming death of Achilles is no great consolation for hard-grieving Muse, whose unanticipated epiphany squares the play with myth and theology³⁸.

III

It is no accident that this enigmatic play ends with the magnificent appearance of the mother of Rhesus. In her lamentation, she brings her clear knowledge of the past events to the characters; but it is too late for them to make use of this knowledge³⁹. First, she tells the story of her son’s birth:

ἡ πολλὰ μὲν ζῶν, πολλὰ δ’ εἰς Αἰδον μολών,
 Φιλάμμονος παῖ, τῆς ἐμῆς ἥψω φρενός·
 ὕβρις γὰρ, ἣ σ’ ἔσφηλε, καὶ Μουσῶν ἔρις
 τεκεῖν μ’ ἔθηκε τόνδε δύστηνον γόνον.

35. On Athena’s unseemly conduct, see Braun 1978, 9; Rosivach 1978, 62-3; Burnett 1985, 40.

36. Cf. Rosivach 1978, 72.

37. Cf. Michelakis 2002, 170-1. The reference to the dirge of Thetis, the *mater dolorosa*, is significant in view of the mystic aspect of the *Rhesus* because, as Segal 1993, 61 argues in connection with *Od.* 24. 63-64, her “keening not only joins the mourners with the deceased in his last passage, but also brings them into the company of the gods, momentarily bridging the gap between mortals and gods.”

38. On *deus ex machina* in Euripides and divine epiphanies in general, see e.g. Hourmouziades 1965, 146-69; Goff 1990, 106-7; Easterling 1993b; Pucci 1994; Dunn 1996, 26-44 with relevant bibliography; Goward 1999, 123; Allan 2000, 242.

39. On the emphasis on knowledge in the Mysteries, see Richardson 1974, 28.

περῶσα γὰρ δὴ ποταμίους διὰ ῥοὰς
 λέκτροις ἐπλάθην Στρυμόνος φυταλμίους,
 ὄτ' ἤλθομεν γῆς χρυσόβωλον ἐς λέπας
 Πάγγαιον ὀργάνοισιν ἐξησκημέναι
 Μοῦσαι μεγίστην εἰς ἔριν μελωδίας
 κλεινῶ σοφιστῆ Ἰορκί κατύφλώσαμεν
 Θάμυριν, ὃς ἡμῶν πόλλ' ἐδέννασεν τέχνην.
 καπεῖ σε τίκτω, συγγόνους αἰδουμένη
 καὶ παρθεναίαν, ἧκ' ἐς εὐύδρου πατρὸς
 δίνας· τρέφειν δέ σ' οὐ βρότειον ἐς χέρα
 Στρυμῶν δίδωσιν ἀλλὰ πηγαίαις κόραις.
 ἔνθ' ἐκτραφεῖς κάλλιστα παρθένων ὕπο,
 Ἰορκῆς ἀνάσσων πρῶτος ἦσθ' ἀνδρῶν, τέκνον. (915-931)

Many indeed are the misfortunes, son of Philammon,
 that you have brought upon me in your life and in your death.
 For it was your gross insult, which destroyed you,
 and your rivalry with us, the Muses,
 that made me mother of this poor son of mine.
 Yes, when I crossed the streams of the river,
 I roamed into the fruitful couch of Strymon.
 It was when we the Muses came to the rocky Mount Pangaeus,
 with its soil full of gold, all prepared for the singing contest
 with that renowned Thracian bard, well-versed in music.
 And we blinded Thamyris,
 the man who more than any abused our craft.
 Then, when I gave birth to you,
 as I was ashamed of my sisters and my virginity,
 I sent you to the well-watered eddies of your father.
 And Strymon did not entrust your nurture to any mortal,
 but gave you to the fountain maidens to raise.
 There the virgin nymphs comfortably reared you, my son,
 And you grew up to become ruler of Thrace, a leader of men. (915-931)

This section elaborates on previous significant references to the superhuman qualities of Rhesus and prepares the ear for the establishment of his hero-cult. More importantly, certain allusions to mystic affairs help to maintain the Eleusinian and Orphic colouring of the scene. In particular, from the beginning of her speech, the Muse throws particular emphasis on the divine parentage of Rhesus⁴⁰. The elaborate

40. Unlike *Iliad* 10. 435, in which Rhesus is given a mortal father, Burnett 1985, 27 argues that the sharp

reference to the eventful birth-tale of her son brings to mind the earlier enthusiastic descriptions of his god-like appearance at Troy⁴¹. First it is the Messenger, who announces the magnificent night-time arrival of the Thracian prince (284-316). As he is dazzled by the image of Rhesus in his golden armour leading the vast Thracian host, he likens him to a god (301 ὥστε δαίμονα).

Later, in their enthusiasm at his almost divine epiphany, the Chorus celebrate the greatness and power of Rhesus (342-387). Burnett is particularly good at discussing the cultic significance of the Rhesus Ode as a preparatory stage to heroic honour⁴². Despite her careful analysis, she downplays the inner logic of the “mad confusion of ritual motifs” in the Ode⁴³. It is not impossible to argue that this nexus of ritual themes, which are especially associated with Thrace, can be read to disclose a mystical pattern. It should be noted, however, that it is not obvious and labouring the point would look as special pleading. Therefore, my present thesis is that it is no accident that the Rhesus Ode and, by implication, the connected mystic matrix are evoked in a funeral context. More pointedly, in their extravagant praise, the Chorus compare Rhesus to Zeus Phanaios (355 Ζεὺς ὁ φαναῖος) and Zeus Eleutherios (359 τὸν ἐλευθέριον Ζῆνα)⁴⁴. Even though Wilamowitz thought of the reference to Zeus Phanaios as simply another piece of evidence against Euripidean authorship, this kind of greeting is not at all

emphasis thrown by Euripides on Strymon, the river-god and, by implication, on the cult of Rhesus, in his capacity as river-god himself, may allude to “esoteric matters” of Thracian religion (cf. also Brewster 1997, 40-3). I admit, however, that the mystic connection remains tenuous. In spite of this, note that in Aeschylus’ *Persians* 492-507, a play with a strong chthonic aspect, the Messenger refers to Mount Pangaeus (494) and river Strymon (497) in the course of his detailed description of the Persians’ plight in Thrace. Not to put too fine a point on it, I want to suggest that the Aeschylean passage may echo Dionysiac, and perhaps Orphic, beliefs (cf. also Broadhead 1960, apud 495-7; Hall 1996, apud 494-5, 495-7, 497-9; both commentators fail to explore the religious connotations of this most intriguing instance of heaven-appointed retribution). More specifically, the river Strymon is given the significant, if admittedly common and thus less striking, epithet ἀγνός (497 “sacred”; cf. Broadhead 1960, apud 495-7; Friis Johansen and Whittle 1980, apud 254; Hall 1996, apud 495-7; for a different view, see principally Conacher 1996, 19-20); moreover there is an important allusion to a purely Dionysiac schema of ‘the irreligious turned into believer through divine intervention’ (497-499; Sommerstein 1996b, 83-4; Hall 1996, apud 494-5 correctly associates the reference to “Edonian territory” at 495 with the *Edonians*, “the first play of Aeschylus’ tetralogic *Lycurgeia*”; on the *Edonians*, see West 1990, 27-32, who supports the theory that Lycurgus is punished in the play for his theomachy); more strikingly still, the Sun-god, with his blazing rays, a sight reminiscent of Orphic ideas, disperses the all-enveloping night with disastrous consequences for the Persian army (504-505; cf. also Aech. *Suppl.* 254-255 Page *καὶ πᾶσαν αἶαν ἧε δι’ ἀγνός ἔρχεται Στρυμόν, τὸ πρὸς δύνοντος ἡλίου, κρατῶ*, in which river Strymon is coupled with a problematic reference to the Sun; on the latter most difficult passage, see Friis Johansen & Whittle 1980 apud 254-5; West 1990, 135-7 in connection with his edition of Aeschylus in the *Bibliotheca Teubneriana*). It is therefore proposed that the sacred river Strymon may have been associated with Dionysiac cult, and possibly Orphic beliefs, in the context of Greek tragedy.

41. Cf. also Wathelet 1989, 230-1; Ustinova 2002, 281 n. 143.

42. 1985, 26-8.

43. 1985, 26-7.

44. According to Hall 1989, 92, “on no other occasion in extant fifth-century tragedy is any king called *theos*.”

incongruous with the mystic language of the play⁴⁵. Phanes, an important god in many Orphic theogonical poems, is often identified with Zeus⁴⁶. In view of the etymology of his name, “the one who makes (or is) manifest”, and his close association with bright light, frequently to the point of identification, it can be argued that Phanes is connected with Rhesus in all his divine magnificence (301-306). Phanes is described as “gold-winged” (F 78, F 87), “bringer of the bright, holy light”, which causes admiration and brings gladness (F 72, F 86), and “invisible” to all but Night (F 86), who is his daughter and consort (F 98). In a manner similar to resplendent Phanes, Rhesus appears gleaming in the night with his golden shield and his snow-white horses. He inspires terror and amazement in the Messenger (295, 301), but he brings the hope of salvation for the Trojans. Accordingly, as if he were a god, the Chorus ask Rhesus to appear and vanquish their enemies (370 *ἔλθὲ φάνηθι*)⁴⁷. Thus, it is fair to suggest that, despite the unusual character of the reference to the heliacal side of Zeus, the comparison of Rhesus to Zeus as “bringer of light” foreshadows his mystical elevation.

Also, Burnett rightly argues that the appeal toAdrasteia (343) and Ares (385), the latter being identified with Rhesus himself in the Ode, and the image of the galloping horses (356) evoke cultic motifs, which are closely associated with Thrace, a place where eschatological beliefs were widespread among the population⁴⁸. Interestingly, she brings attention to the Orphic-Dionysiac colouring of the second strophe (360-369), in which “the resurrected Troy is envisaged as a paradise of drinking and masculine love.”⁴⁹ In view of Plato *Rep.* 363c, Tsantsanoglou succinctly notes that “in Orphic/Bacchic eschatology, the souls were believed to participate in an endless banquet, and the numerous wine vessels and wine cups placed in the graves, to say nothing of the numerous golden wreaths, testify tangibly to this fact.”⁵⁰

The well-timed evocation of the Rhesus Ode thrusts into sharp relief other significant mystic allusions in the introductory section of the Muse’s speech. In

45. 1932, II, 259-62. Cf. also Lesky 1983, 397; Burnett 1985, 28, 180 n. 34. On Zeus Phanaios, see Cook 1914-1940. I: 7.

46. On Phanes, see Guthrie 1952, 95-102; West 1983, 202-6.

47. On the uses of *ἔλθὲ* in Greek prayers, see Pulleyn 1997, 139-46. Also, *φάνηθι* is a common word in Greek prayers used to invoke both the dead (e.g. Darius) and the Olympians (e.g. Pan, Dionysus). It appears that *φάνηθι* is ambiguous here: the exalted Chorus treat Rhesus as a god, but the Thracian prince is destined to die a brutal death at the hands of Odysseus and Diomedes. The prayer of the Chorus may well play on Rhesus’ chthonic aspect. For literary attestations of *ἔλθὲ* and *φάνηθι*, see Pulleyn 1997, appendix 1.

48. 1985, 27-8 (cf. also Theodossiev 2002); further, on Thrace and the Thracian people, see Stronk 1995, 39-58. On the Orphic associations of Adrasteia/Nemesis (cf. also Aesch. fr. 158 Radt) and her later identification with Fate, see West 1983, 194-8 (cf. also Rangos 2000, 41). Further, according to Hdt. 7. 113, in order to obtain favourable signs, the Magi had the custom of sacrificing white horses near river Strymon. On the “hubristic” identification of Rhesus with Ares, see Hall 1989, 92, 123.

49. 1985, 27.

50. 1997, 103. It is worth noting that the Chorus call Rhesus “Strymon’s colt” (386 *ὁ Στρυμόνιος πᾶλος*). According to Mossman 1995, 149-50, who readily offers numerous examples, the colt simile is associated with Bacchic ecstasy in Euripides.

particular, both Philammon (916) and his son, Thamyris (925), were especially connected with Orpheus. In a manner similar to Orpheus, Philammon was a famous musician and poet. Also, West argues that “according to an alternative, perhaps older tradition the Argonauts’ musician was Philammon (Pherec. 3 F 26)”, instead of Orpheus himself⁵¹. Pausanias (2. 37. 2) treats Philammon as founder of the mysteries at Lerna, but he expresses some serious reservations⁵². Further, like the mythical poet Orpheus, the Thracian singer Thamyris is credited with theogonical poetry⁵³. The constant employment of mystic language and the significant evocation of legendary poets associated with Orpheus help to pave the way to the following closely-knit pattern of mystical beliefs. This is all the more so in view of the revelation that it was not for Rhesus’ idleness that the Thracians failed to assist the Trojans, but it was the Muse herself who advised her son against coming to Troy, lest he meet his death there (932-937). This unexpected piece of information sheds a sympathetic light upon boastful Rhesus before the establishment of his hero-cult⁵⁴.

In censuring Athena for her deviousness and ingratitude (938-940), the Muse offers direct references to Orpheus and Musaeus, chief exponents of an Athenian and Eleusinian Orphism:

*καίτοι πόλιν σὴν σύγγονοι πρεσβεύομεν
Μοῦσαι μάλιστα ἀπιχρώμεθα χθονί,
μυστηρίων τε τῶν ἀπορρήτων φανῶς
ἔδειξεν Ὀρφεύς, ἀντανέπιος νεκροῦ
τοῦδ’ ὄν κατέκτεινας σύ· Μουσαῖόν τε, σὸν
σεμνὸν πολίτην κἀπὶ πλεῖστον ἄνδρ’ ἔνα
ἐλθόντα, Φοῖβος σύγγονοί τ’ ἠγκήσαμεν.
καὶ τῶνδε μισθὸν παῖδ’ ἔχουσ’ ἐν ἀγκάλαις
θρηγῶ· σοφιστὴν δ’ ἄλλον οὐκ ἐπάξομαι. (941-949)*

And yet we the Muses honour your city
and chiefly haunt your land, and Orpheus has introduced
the torch-processions of the forbidden mysteries,
cousin of this man, whom you have slain.
Musaeus, too, your revered citizen
and most wise man among many,
was trained by Phoebus and us, the Muses.

51. 1983. 4 n. 4.

52. Cf. also Paus. 10. 7. 2, where Philammon and Thamyris are associated with Orpheus and Musaeus in a Delphic context.

53. Cf. West 1983, 53-6. On further associations of Thamyris with Orpheus, see Pl. *Ion* 533b and *Leg.* 829d.

54. On Rhesus’ excessive arrogance and “the low Athenian opinion of the Thracian royal house”, see Hall 1989, 125, 155; Mossman 1995, 185-6.

Here is the reward that I get for this;
 I hold my son in my arms and mourn his death;
 I shall not wish for another interpreter. (941-949)

According to her account, Rhesus is the cousin of Orpheus (944), who is said to have introduced forbidden mystic rituals to the Athenians (943-944)⁵⁵. In view of the continuity of Orphic ideas and traditional religion, it is not surprising that Orpheus is treated as the founder of the Eleusinian Mysteries⁵⁶. It is significant that there follows a reference to another important Orphic figure, who is closely related to Orpheus himself, Musaeus (945).

Musaeus is frequently associated with Orpheus and, like him, is a mythical poet⁵⁷. According to Diodorus Siculus 4.25.1, Musaeus is the son of Orpheus. In a manner similar to Orpheus, he is found in an Eleusinian context, but his exact place in the genealogy is not at all fixed. He is the father of Eumolpus (Androtion *FGrHist* 10 F 13; *Marm. Par.* = *FGrHist* 239 A 15; cf. perhaps Pl. *Rep.* 363c) and other times he is treated as his own son (Philochorus *FGrHist* 328 F 208) - Eumolpus being the mythical founder of the Eleusinian clan of the Eumolpidae and the first *hierophant*⁵⁸. Also, the grave of Musaeus' wife, Deiope, is located beneath the Eleusinian Telesterion. More importantly, in the line of Orpheus, Musaeus is the singer of apocryphal poetry⁵⁹. Plato (*Rep.* 364e) knows of "a hubbub of books" by Orpheus and Musaeus, and Paus. 4.1.5, in a strongly Eleusinian context, refers to a *Hymn to Demeter* composed by Musaeus for the family cult of the Lycomidæ at Messene⁶⁰.

55. On ἀπορρήτων (943) as a common description of the Eleusinian Mysteries, see Richardson 1974, 304-8. On ἄρρητος in the Orphic Hymns, see Morand 2001, 147-50, 330 (cf. also Brisson 1995b).

56. Cf. Graf 1974, 22-39, who cites this passage as evidence together with [Dem.] 25.11 and D. S. 1.96.4-5, 5.77.3. Also, Orpheus' good reputation was already attested in an interestingly complimentary reference in Aristophanes (*Ran.* 1032 Ὀρφεὺς μὲν γὰρ τελετὰς ἡμῖν κατέδειξε φόνων τ' ἀπέχεσθαι) as a founder of "initiations" (cf. Parker 1995, 503; Dover 1993, apud 1032; Sommerstein 1996a, apud 1032). In particular, φόνων (*Ran.* 1032) "must be taken here as unauthorized killing of humans by individuals, and it is assumed that Orpheus was one of the legendary 'civilizers' of human society, showing it the way out of its 'lawless and bestial' condition (cf. Demokritos B 5.8.1, Kritias B 25.1-4) by the institution of laws governing homicide" (Dover 1993 apud 1032). Further, in the same passage "there may well be an allusion to the Eleusinian sacred law excluding from the Mysteries those whose hands were not clean of bloodshed" (Sommerstein 1996a, apud 1032).

57. Cf. Pl. *Apol.* 41a, *Ion* 536b, *Prot.* 316d, *Rep.* 364e. In particular, Pl. *Rep.* 364e treats both Orpheus and Musaeus as offspring of the Moon and the Muses. Also, Tat. *Adv. Graec.* 39 makes Musaeus the disciple of Orpheus.

58. Cf. also D.S. 4.25.1, who reports that Musaeus was in charge of the Mysteries at the time of Heracles' initiation into the Eleusinian cult.

59. Cf. principally West 1983, 39-44 with the relevant references to ancient sources; *OCD*³ s.v. Musaeus (F. Graf).

60. Perhaps relevant to the discussion is a collection of oracles (cf. also Ar. *Ran.* 1033; cf. Dover 1993, apud 1033; Sommerstein 1996a, apud 1033) under the name of Musaeus. After the fashion of Orpheus' collection of oracles, this compilation presented an important specimen of apocryphal literature. According to Hdt. 7.6.3, the collection has been edited at Athens by Onomacritus in the second part of the sixth century (cf. also Hdt. 8.96.2 and 9.43.2, who appears to give credit to the oracles).

The Muse unravelled the knot of past events with sound knowledge and perfect confidence⁶¹. Hector in his turn promises a stately burial for Rhesus (959-960). This is unacceptable for the Muse, who has devised a better lot for her son after death⁶². In laying down her plan, she foretells the establishment of Rhesus' hero-cult in Thrace⁶³. Her programmatic statement delineates a mystical schema, which brings to mind significant Orphic, Eleusinian and Bacchic themes:

οὐκ εἶσι γαίᾳς ἐς μελάγχμιον πέδον
 τοσόνδε νύμφην τὴν ἔνερθ' αἰτήσομαι,
 τῆς καρποποιοῦ παῖδα Δήμητρος θεᾶς,
 ψυχὴν ἀνεῖναι τοῦδ'· ὀφειλέτις δέ μοι
 τοὺς Ὀρφέως τιμῶσα φαίνεσθαι φίλους.
 κάμοι μὲν ὡς θανῶν τε κοῦ λεύσσω φάος
 ἔσται τὸ λοιπόν· οὐ γὰρ ἐς ταῦτόν ποτε
 ἔτ' εἶσιν οὐδὲ μητρὸς ὄψεται δέμας·
 κρυπτός δ' ἐν ἄντροις τῆς ὑπαργύρου χθονὸς
 ἀνθρωποδαίμων κείσεται βλέπων φάος,
 Βάκχου προφήτης, ὅς γε Παγγαίου πέτρῳ
 ὄκησε, σεμνὸς τοῖσιν εἰδόσιν θεός. (962-973)

He will not go into the black plain of earth.
 I shall ask the netherworld nymph,
 the daughter of the food-producing goddess Demeter,
 to send up his soul. She is obliged to me
 to show that she honours the relatives of Orpheus.
 Hereafter Rhesus will be to me like one dead
 and not seeing the light, because he will never
 meet nor see me, his mother.
 He will lie, hidden in the caves of the silver-rich land,
 a man-god, seeing the light,

61. Could there be an Orphic connection in the emphatic use of the word *σοφιστήν* (949; cf. also 924) by the Muse? It has been argued that there are striking similarities between Orphics and Sophists (cf. Brenner 2002, 17). Both of them are considered to be dangerous itinerants peddling their knowledge in books.

62. Perhaps the fact that Rhesus was killed in his sleep removes some of the horror of his brutal murder. It may be noted here that Sleep is associated with a peaceful passing to the underworld (cf. Markantonatos 2002, 130 n. 25). Also, the special emphasis on sleep and dream in the play may allude to divination through incubation. Incubation oracles were especially associated with subterranean deities, such as Amphiarus, Asclepius and indeed Rhesus (cf. Ustinova 2002).

63. On Rhesus' hero-cult in Thrace and Thracian Orphism, see Theodossiev 1996, 2000. On his hero worship at Amphipolis, see Isaac 1986, 54-9; Borgeaud 1991; Parker 1994, 340; Hornblower 1996, 323-4; Zacharia 2001, 98-101 esp. 98.

a prophet of Bacchus, who inhabited the rock of Pangaeus,
a revered god to those who know. (962-973, trans. J. D. Mikalson)

Most importantly, the notion of the *post mortem* fate of Rhesus as some sort of an escape route from the total emptiness of death evokes the basic pattern of the Eleusinian Mysteries and alludes to eschatological hopes promised by mystery cults in general. The mystic passing from sorrow to joy, which is modelled on the transformation of Demeter's mourning for Persephone into happiness at their reunion would have been treated as a metaphor for Rhesus' fate⁶⁴. According to the Muse, her son will not dwell in the murky plains of the netherworld. This the Muse will achieve by the aid of Persephone, the queen of Hades (963-964). The reference to Persephone, one of the two central divinities of the Mysteries, within a potentially mystic context is significant. *καρποποιού* (964), in particular, throws emphasis on one of the gifts of Demeter to mankind, which is celebrated at Eleusis, agricultural fertility.

Apart from the Eleusinian connection, the passage may provide a different mystic articulation, this time closer to a purely Orphic-Dionysiac schema. As we have seen before, the decisive evidence of the gold tablets reveals that the mediation of Dionysus is instrumental in the final stage of mystical release. Therefore, the petitionary prayer by the Muse to Kore in order to attain a special honour for her son after death is reminiscent of a similar Orphic-Dionysiac pattern of divine kindness exhibited by Persephone towards the dead after the necessary intercession of her son, Dionysus. In both cases, a divinity intercedes on man's behalf with Persephone to achieve a considerably improved afterlife⁶⁵.

It is no accident that the new existence, which the Muse anticipates for her son, presupposes the elevation of his soul from the dark depths of the underworld (965). The image of Rhesus' soul ascending from Hades is inextricably entwined with the mystical character of the play. Orphism gives great emphasis on the notion of the soul as the main vehicle of man's perpetual existence⁶⁶. As we have noted above, Orphic ritual serves to cleanse men and to give better hopes in the afterlife. If we give credit to the idea of man's "Titanic" nature, then the soul is the primary locus of purification and the only means of men's continued life. According to Orphic-Dionysiac doctrine, it is the soul, set free from the chains of the body, which asks the infernal powers for the long-anticipated mystic happiness in the underworld. In particular, the repeated reference to Orpheus as relative of Rhesus (966) at this point gives even more force to this Orphic-Dionysiac connection.

Even though the Muse is confident that Rhesus will live eternally, her grief is not easily assuaged⁶⁷. In describing the parameters of her son's future existence, she treats

64. Cf. Bowie 1993b, 25; Markantonatos 2002, 209-11.

65. Cf. also Plichon 2001, 18-9.

66. Cf. e.g. West 1983, 21-4; Burkert 1985, 300-1.

67. On the theme of the "inconsolable grief of the mother at the loss of her son", see Ritchie 1964, 80 (cf. also Lada-Richards 2002, 82, who brings attention to the fact that the *Rhesus*, alone in extant tragedy, features

him as good as dead, since he will not be able to see or meet his mother (967-969). Heroic elevation is preferable to the complete vacuity of death, but grief at an untimely loss is not easy to dispel. The sorrowful remarks of the Muse are not out of step with the positive prospect of mystic release. It is essential to keep in mind that, in guaranteeing happiness in the underworld, the function of the Eleusinian ritual did not fail to recognize the inevitability of death. This is apparent in the basic schema of the Mysteries: after the happy reunion of Demeter and Persephone, the latter is to stay part of the year in Hades and the initiates are to experience life's relentless cycle of change and suffering, before being blessed with a happy afterlife. This aspect of mystic ritual is again echoed in the concluding section of the Muses' speech. The mother of Rhesus closes her lament with a radical insight into the human condition, which dates from the archaic period⁶⁸:

ὦ παιδοποιοὶ συμφοραί, πόνοι βροτῶν
ὡς ὅστις ὑμᾶς μὴ κακῶς λογιζέται
ἄπαις διοίσει κοῦ τεκὰν θάψει τέκνα. (980-982)

Oh, the misfortunes of parenthood, troubles of mortals,
because whoever looks upon you he will remain childless
and will have to bury no children. (980-982)

This extremely pessimistic outlook on human life has been recently recognized as perhaps giving voice to the ambition and distress of the *mystae*, “who seek the rebirth that abolishes death but at the same time know that death itself has to be experienced”⁶⁹.

Even though death remains a reality, heroic elevation suggests a new beginning⁷⁰.

the Muse as an on-stage character, whose grief is powerful enough to “draw the audience's empathic response”; on the Muses, see also Paschalis 2002, s.v. Muses). It may be noted here that, according to Aristotle (*Περὶ Φιλοσοφίας*, fr. 15 Ross = Synesius *Dio* 10 p. 48a), the *pathos*, which the initiate is required to experience, is an essential part of the Eleusinian ritual (cf. also Burkert 1987, 89). The suffering, which is undergone by the initiate, is reminiscent of Demeter's unbearable anguish over the loss of Persephone. On the notion of *ἄχος* in the Mysteries and Demeter *Ἀχαιά*, see Richardson 1974 apud 40. Also, in the sphere of *Orphica*, the dismemberment of Dionysus is symbolic of the Orphic passion before the mystic rebirth.

68. Cf. e.g. Theog. 425-428; Hdt. 1.31.8.

69. Easterling 1997, 53. The same pessimistic theme within a potentially mystic context is found in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* 1224-1228 and perhaps in Aeschylus' *Oedipus*, ii fr. 466 (401) Radt is rightly attributed to this play (cf. also Weir Smyth and Lloyd-Jones² 1971, 502; Markantonatos 2002, 2 18 n. 1 12):

ζόης πονηρᾶς θάνατος αἰρετώτερος·
τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι δ' ἔστιν ἢ πεφυκέναι
κρεῖσσον κακῶς πράσσοντα

Further, a similar idea is expressed by the Chorus in Sophocles' *Tantalus* fr. 572 (518) Radt:

βιοτῆς μὲν γὰρ χρόνος ἐστὶ βραχύς,
κρυφθεὶς δ' ὑπὸ γῆς κείται θνητὸς
τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον

70. Cf. Seaford 1994, 398, who notes that “hero-cult and mysteries sometimes occur together, and in

As a “man-god”, Rhesus will inhabit the caverns of the Thracian mountains (970-971)⁷¹. Perhaps we can catch a glimpse of the ambiguity that is inherent in mystic salvation in the confident prediction that Rhesus will “see the light”, which is in direct contrast to the previous claim made by pain-stricken Muse that he will be as a dead man for her and “not seeing the light” (967)⁷². Still, the honour derived from heroic existence is considerable. Despite the emotional energy of the Muse, her son will be a prophet of Bacchus, who took his abode at Pangaeus, the Thracian mountain (972-973)⁷³. In the light of Athenian Orphism, through which the play is filtered, the reference to Dionysus in the programmatic statement of Rhesus' *post mortem* fate is significant⁷⁴. As we have seen before, in the sphere of *Orphica*, there seems to be a strong connection between Orphic anthropogony and Dionysiac mysteries. Orphic ideas and Bacchic mysteries share the same paramount concern for burial and the afterlife. Apart from the fact that Bacchic groups had taken on Orphic ideas, Dionysus is an important figure in the mythology and cult associated with all three: Orphism, Eleusinian Mysteries and Dionysiac ritual⁷⁵.

The Muse departs, taking her son's body with her⁷⁶. The new day has come and

myth heroes are initiated into the mysteries”. On hero-cult and the mysteries, see Markantonatos 2002, 199-200. According to Guiliani 1996, 77, 84-6 the story of Rhesus' death, as this is depicted “on three Apulian vases all produced between 360 and 340 BC”, may have been employed as a significant mythological topos of consolatory speeches. In view of the sepulchral function of the vases, Rhesus' untimely death may have given rise to comforting remarks among the mourners.

71. On *ἀνθρωποδαίμων* (971) as a hapax, see Ritchie 1964, 159-60; Theodossiev 2000, 443-4; Plichon 2001, 14-5; Ustinova 2002, 281-3. Also, the reference to the Thracian caves inside which Rhesus will live eternally is closely associated with the notion of the *ἄντρον* as a chthonic entrance (cf. Plichon 2001, 15; on the Orphic adyton of Phanes and Night, see West 1983, 213-4). Especially, in the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries, a cavernous rock at Eleusis, the so-called Plutoneion, served as a passage to the underworld (cf. Clinton 1992, 74; Sourvinou-Inwood 1997b, 141). Further, a chasm in the earth, probably constructed by human hand, was used in the oracle of Trophonius at Lebadeia to symbolize a death/rebirth sequence. On Eleusis, Trophonius and caves in general, see Boyancé 1960-1961; Mylonas 1961, 133; Clark 1968; Richardson 1974, 220; Weinberg 1986; Ustinova 2002, 269-74 with further bibliography on Trophonius; Markantonatos 2002, 202-3.

72. Mikalson 1991, 43-4 is unnecessarily critical of the passage. Heroic honour is not always painless or agreeable. The cases of Heracles, Hippolytus, Ajax, Eurystheus and Oedipus indicate the terrible aspect of hero cult, which may well give rise to bitter lamentation (on *διόβλητοι* heroes, see Garland 1985, 99-100). For a sensible critique of Mikalson's views on religion and tragedy, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1997a (cf. also Sourvinou-Inwood 2003).

73. The line is problematic and many guesses have been advanced (cf. also Burnett 1985, 188 n. 113; Plichon 2001, 16-18). After introducing the new reading *ὄς γε* (972), Diggle 1994 convincingly argues that the prophet is Rhesus himself (cf. also Zanetto 1993). The prophet of Bacchus may also be: (a) Lycurgus. Cf. West 1990, 32. (b) Orpheus. Cf. Ebener 1966, 130. (c) Zalmoxis. According to Herodotus (4. 94-96; cf. also Pl. *Charm.* 158b), he was a Thracian god. The devotees of Zalmoxis nourished hopes for the afterlife (cf. also Theodossiev 2000, 442-3; Ustinova 2002, 278-81).

74. On the Dionysiac oracle of the Bessi alluded to here, see Burnett 1985, 49; Diggle 1987, 171-2. On Dionysus and Thracian implications in Athenian vase-painting, see Carpenter 1997, 35-51.

75. On the relationship between Dionysus and the Eleusinian Mysteries, see Graf 1974, 40-78; Mylonas 1961, 275-8; Markantonatos 2002, 207 with abundant bibliography.

76. There are striking similarities between the play and Aeschylus' lost *Psychostasia* (cf. also Patin

Hector gives orders to the allied army for an attack on the enemy at dawn. The Chorus go to carry them out and pray for a swift victory⁷⁷. In an echo of the previous orders for an immediate attack on the Greek camp (70-75), the new call for battle brings the play full circle. In sharp contrast to the preceding speech of the Muse, who presented the future with an assured intimacy of knowledge that never fails or blurs, the turn of events will show that the Chorus' hopes for divine assistance have been seriously misplaced. The acute irony of the ending indicates that there is an unbridgeable gap between human understanding and immortal vision. It is only in the heroic elevation of Rhesus that these two cease to be irreconcilable.

IV

Briefly, some general considerations and conclusions may be offered. My contention is that the prospect of Rhesus' hero-cult has further as yet uncharted levels of meaning and complexity. In view of the Orphic nexus with its various Attic and Eleusinian manifestations, the play can be read to disclose several interlocking mystic themes. My present thesis is that the hopeful anticipation of Rhesus' heroic elevation takes on an extra dimension in the light of specific references to a mystic design. None the less, it is here that it becomes most vitally important not to oversimplify the drama of mystic ideas. Therefore, my aim is *not* to decide that the *Rhesus* is primarily about mystic beliefs, and then try to lop off whatever seems to be contrary to this interpretation⁷⁸. I strongly believe, however, that the mystical connection deserves much further exploration. Under the canopy of night, the not-so-innocent dealings between man and god within and without the acting-space suggest a grim vision of life. As each startling

1873, 166; Harsh 1944, 250-3; Burnett 1985, 186 n. 104). It should be noted, however, that our evidence are drawn from later sources, some of which have come under serious doubt. More specifically, the closing scene of the Muse with the body of Rhesus invokes the scene of Eos/Dawn with the body of her son, Memnon, in the Aeschylean play. According to the myth, in a manner similar to Rhesus, Memnon came to Troy with a large force to assist Priam. When Memnon was killed by Achilles, his mother, Eos, pleaded with Zeus to grant him some special honour. Also, both playwrights may have produced their dramas round an episode in the *Iliad*. Taplin 1977, 431-3 is more skeptical and argues that "Aeschylus modelled his play on the *Aithiopsis* and not on the *Iliad*". Significantly, especially in the context of the Orphic interpretation of the *Rhesus*, in *Psychostasia* Aeschylus is said to have mistakenly equated *ψυχή* with *κήρ* (*φασί δὲ οἱ παλαιοὶ ὅτι Αἰσχύλος ἐνταῦθα κῆρας οὐ τὰς εἰς θάνατον μοίρας ἀλλὰ ψυχὰς νοήσας ἐποίησεν αὐτὸς Ψυχοστασίαν*). However, Taplin 1977, 431 argues that "this observation seems to be based only on the *title* of the play, not on its text". Also, Aeschylus is presented in Ar. *Ran.* 1032 to sing the praises of Orpheus and his rituals. Radt (*TrGF* vol. 3, p. 376) notes with regard to Aeschylus' *Psychostasia* that "*fortasse Aeschyli fabulam ante oculos habuit Aristophanes in Ran. 1365sqq*".

77. The ambiguous relationship between man and god is reflected in the final line of the play: *τάχα* (995) can be taken with a hint of "perhaps" as well as "fast". On the deeply ironic closure of the play, see also Rosivach 1978, 73.

78. On ritual and tragedy, see the sobering comments by Lloyd-Jones 1998.

new turn of events follows the other, the life of men appears to be suffused with uncertainty and improbability. In the world of the Greeks and the Trojans, the thoughtful exercise of reason and political skill is not the ultimate determinant of the events. This pessimistic vision of human life affects, to a large measure, the hopeful message implied in the mystic schema. As the *Rhesus* heads towards its grimly ironic completion, the playwright likes to debate ritual frameworks for determining the longed-for mystical transition. Even so, by means of a spectacular epiphany, which comes only in the last moments of the action, the play offers comfort and a kind of a let-out. However terrible the final solution and however shadowy the consolation that the grief-stricken Muse derives from Achilles' forthcoming death (974-979), the redemptive light of a heroic, even divine, existence after death disperses much of the clinging darkness.

More to the point, in view of the mystic filter, I would suggest that *Rhesus* is a play of violent contrasts within a rigorous structural unity. The extremes of optimism and depression, knowledge and misunderstanding, hope and fear: these are the swings of the pendulum in the world of the *Rhesus*, and it is the sickening to-and-fro motion of the plot that reflects them. Primarily, the final speech of the Muse consummates the play in both its aspects —extreme pessimism and hopeful aspiration— and each in its own way triumphs over the other. In essence, visually and thematically the concluding scene of the Muse, Hector and the dead Rhesus powerfully portrays what it means to be human and mortal beside the inexplicable workings of the gods. The playwright is eager to show that the world of the Greeks and the Trojans has forked along a path that is inapprehensible, alien, and opaque. It has become a mirror that reflects the enigmatic, the deceptive, and the hegemony of death. In the face of the disillusionments of mortal life, which is constantly tempered in the crucibles of bereavement and unhappiness, Rhesus' hero-cult strikes an apt balance between horror and hopefulness, dismay and due reverence. There is no clear theodicy in the play. The final scene with the mystic exemplars of salvation lets a ray of hope warm the hearts of the spectators. Yet at the same time, the very experience of deeper involvement in incomprehensible suffering may as well leave a stale and dusty taste behind it. One thing remains certain. The cruel change of condition apart, the misery-redeeming heroic death of Rhesus serves as a symbolic condensation of something hopeful in a human life of which mystic anticipation is but one aspect.

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Μυστηριακές Απηχήσεις στην Αρχαία Ελληνική Τραγωδία: Ορφισμός και ο Ρήσος του Ευριπίδη

ΑΝΤΡΕΑΣ ΜΑΡΚΑΝΤΩΝΑΤΟΣ

Στο άρθρο αυτό εξετάζω τη στενή σχέση της ηρωικής λατρείας με τον έντονα μυστηριακό χαρακτήρα της αμφισβητούμενης τραγωδίας του Ευριπίδη *Ρήσος*. Ο αφηρωισμός του Ρήσου, που προαναγγέλλεται από τα χείλη της Μούσας στο τέλος του έργου, συνυφαίνεται με σημαντικές αναφορές σε γνωστές «ορφικο-διονυσιακές» αντιλήψεις. Ειδικότερα, η ελπιδοφόρα προοπτική της ηρωικής θεραπείας του θνητού Ρήσου στη Θράκη προβάλλεται ως μια απεγνωσμένη προσπάθεια διαφυγής από τα ακατάλυτα δεσμά του θανάτου. Εξαιτίας του έντονου συγκρητισμού των μυστηριακών πεποιθήσεων στην Αθήνα, οι Ορφικές ιδέες που απηχούνται στο έργο είναι άρρηκτα συνδεδεμένες με ανάλογες Βακχικές και Ελευσινιακές δοξασίες για τελεστική απαθανάτιση και μεταθανάτια ολβιότητα. Αυτό έχει ως αποτέλεσμα τα μυστικά σχήματα της εν λόγω τραγωδίας να απευθύνονται σε ένα ευρύτατο φάσμα θεατρικού κοινού. Επίσης, το μυστηριακό υπόβαθρο του έργου σχετίζεται άμεσα ή έμμεσα με το συνεχώς επανερχόμενο μοτίβο φωτός-σκότους, την πολυδαίδαλη δομή της πλοκής και τις περίπλοκες σχέσεις μεταξύ θεών και ανθρώπων. Ο κόσμος του *Ρήσου* είναι βαθύτατα απαισιόδοξος. Η δράση εκτυλίσσεται μέσα στο πυκνό σκοτάδι της νύχτας, όπου δεν υπάρχει καμιά χαραμάδα για να μπορεί να διακρίνει κανείς θύτες και θύματα, αθώους και ενόχους, πρόσωπα και προσωπεία. Αυτός ο ζοφερός κόσμος φωτίζεται στιγμιαία στην τελευταία σκηνή, κατά την οποία η ίδια η μητέρα του Ρήσου, η Μούσα, προσημαίνει τον αφηρωισμό του μονάρχιδου γιου της. Πρέπει στο σημείο αυτό να υπογραμμισθεί ότι η θεϊκή «επιφάνεια» δεν σκοπεύει να απαλύνει τελείως την υφέρπουσα απελπισία. Ωστόσο, για τους μύστες-θεατές, η εικόνα της ελεύθερης ψυχής του Ρήσου που ίπταται κατευθυνόμενη προς τα σπήλαια του Παγγαίου, αντιμάχεται τη θλιβερή θνητότητα του επίγειου κόσμου και συμβολίζει τη μυστική προσδοκία μιας μεταθανάτιας δικαίωσης.