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*Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the 'Orphic' Gold Tablets* by Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

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The book by Radcliffe Edmonds deals with texts that relate a very similar tale of the journey to the underworld:

- the Orphic gold tablets, which describe the journey of the deceased to the realm of the dead, providing instructions for handling the dangers of the other world,
- Aristophanes' *Frogs*, which tells of the journey of Dionysos to the underworld with the purpose of bringing back a tragic poet to save Athens, and
- Plato's myth in the *Phaedo*, which also describes the journey of the deceased after death.

These texts belong to very different literary genres and have very different purposes. The Orphic gold tablets are documents of a religious group (or groups), whose goal is that initiates (*μύσται*) achieve a privileged status in the other world. Aristophanes tries to make the audience laugh. Plato places the tale in the frame of a philosophical analysis of the immortality of the soul. The Orphic tablets are therefore religious texts, the Aristophanic interpretation is a parody and the Platonic one, a philosophical adaptation.

Edmonds tries to determine the particularities of each and the relationship between them. His book is organized in five chapters: 'Introduction: The Start of the Journey' [1–28], 'Roadmaps of Déviance: The "Orphic" Gold Tablets' [29–110], 'Descent to the Depths of Comedy: The *Frogs* of Aristophanes' [111–158], 'The Upward Path of Philosophy: The Myth in Plato's *Phaedo*' [159–220], and 'Conclusions: The End of the Road' [221–239]. It also contains a very complete bibliography, an index locorum, and an index.

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In the introduction [1–28], Edmonds tries to define myth, starting from *Phaedo* 107e4–108a6 in which Plato (contradicting the statements made by Aeschylus in his *Telephus*) asserts that the path leading to Hades is ‘neither simple nor single’, speaking ‘from the evidence of the rites and observances followed here’. Edmonds wonders what rites and observances are meant, what stories were told in these rites, and what stories about life after death were told in Greece [2]. Edmonds tries also to explore the ways in which different authors make use of myth. He follows a metaphor by Levi-Strauss: ‘the authors of these texts are all doing *bricolage* with the same pieces of the tradition’ [4]. The story, variously told and retold in the tradition, is defined by Edmonds with the term ‘traditional tale’ [5]. The significant variations among myths arise from the intent of the teller with regard to his audience [7]. Although myths and rituals are different modes of communication, the spheres of myth and ritual can overlap; and the teller of a myth tries to shape the narrative to make it memorable and acceptable to the audience, since his version is always in competition with alternative versions [11].

Edmonds examines also the two approaches taken by previous scholars in interpreting these texts [13–20]: *Quellenforschung* and seeking the meaning of the text in the underlying pattern of action. Edmonds declares himself sceptical about Dieterich’s interpretation [1893], which postulates a canonical, but underground, Orphic descent (*κατάβασις*), because he considers that it is insufficiently supported [15f]. Edmonds prefers to reconstruct a ‘traditional mythic pattern’ [20–24], of which he correctly presents a sound structural analysis: there is a traveller and there is also an obstacle, and the traveller who applies the correct solution finds some reward [23]. Also he shows the different purposes of the three versions [25–27]. Thus, the

so-called Orphic gold tablets<sup>1</sup>...provide evidence of countercultural religious movements in which the individual deceased marks her separation from the mainstream of her society by means of her privileged status in the other world. [25]

In contrast, Aristophanes’ *Frogs* ‘uses his comic picture of the realm of the dead to provide a critique of Athenian society’ [26]; whereas

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<sup>1</sup> Edmonds fails to offer an alternative label.

‘Plato seeks to co-opt the traditionally authoritative mythic discourse in service of his own philosophic projects’ [27].

The analysis of the Orphic gold tablets [29–110] reveals the various ways in which ‘the tablets use the traditional pattern of the journey to the underworld to express a protest against the mainstream of polis society’ [30]. Edmonds makes a good review of both formal elements and religious concepts. He denies that the original source of the gold tablets is Orphic because

none of the fragments attributed to Orphic or pseudo-Orphic poems<sup>2</sup> provide any clear parallel to the texts of the gold tablets, and the attribution to one source or another seems largely dependent upon the preconceptions of the attributing scholar. [102]<sup>3</sup>

In the chapter about the *Frogs*, Edmonds considers that

Aristophanes reformulates the boundaries of the polis through his deployment of mythic elements and patterns in the comedy, redefining the true citizens of the polis and excluding those he sees as harmful to the city [112]

and offers many interesting details about this version of the journey. Edmonds concludes that

rather than the traditional pattern of the journey to the other world signaling an initiation of Dionysos into maturity, the pattern provides Aristophanes with a number of opportunities to renegotiate the boundaries of the categories that define Athenian society. [156]

The basic scheme is more difficult to apply to Plato’s *Phaedo* because the pattern is very different. The crux of the matter is the origin of the idea of the soul is somehow imprisoned in the body. This idea is attributed by Socrates in *Phaedo* 62b to ‘mysteries’ (ἀπόρρητα) and in *Cratylus* 400c to ‘those around Orpheus’ (οἱ ἀμφὶ Ὀρφέα) [177]. Edmonds’ interpretation is striking:

<sup>2</sup> I do not understand this distinction, unless Edmonds thinks that there are poems really written by Orpheus. In my opinion, all Orphic poems are pseudo-Orphic.

<sup>3</sup> This is a fault of which Edmonds can by no means claim to be free, as we shall see.

the mysteries (*ἀπορρήτοι* [*sic*]) to which Socrates refers *may allude* to secret doctrines of these people who make use of the poems of Orpheus *or they may refer to some other religious group with a similar idea* of the relation of the soul to the world.<sup>4</sup>

And he adds,

I follow Wilamowitz<sup>5</sup> and Linforth 1941 p. 148 in reading the passage as drawing a distinction between the etymology of *οἱ ἀμφὶ Ὀρφέα* and the unnamed *τινες* who provide the *σῶμα/σῆμα* derivation. [177n48]<sup>6</sup>

In this respect, I find specially interesting his statement that

it is likely... that Plato chose the word *φρουρά* precisely because of its ambiguity, because it enabled him to convey the image of imprisonment of the soul in the body while tempering it with the more positive connotation of garrison duty that is owed to the gods. [177]

The concluding chapter summarizes the previous statements and arguments.

This book is no doubt very interesting. The texts are carefully analyzed and there are many stimulating interpretations, especially in some details. Edmonds shows also a deep knowledge of the relevant bibliography, including (*rara avis!*) Spanish works.<sup>7</sup> The outstanding contribution of the book is its highlighting the political motivation of this narrative model following the path traced by Marcel Detienne [1975], who coined the concept of *chemins de déviance*. But the *interpretatio politica* does not exhaust the scope of these texts. Edmonds considers the texts of the gold tablets as ‘various modes of protest... against the world from which they came’ [109]. But it is a

<sup>4</sup> The italics are mine. Where are these other religious groups attested? Edmonds explains *obscura per obscuriora*. On the Platonic quotations of the Orphic literature, see Bernabé 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Edmonds refers to von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1931.

<sup>6</sup> Edmonds seems not to know Bernabé’s arguments [1995] favoring the identification of *τινες* and *οἱ ἀμφὶ Ὀρφέα*, and showing that the etymological relationship between *σῶμα* and *σῶζω* is proposed by Plato himself.

<sup>7</sup> There are, however, other papers that might be added, such as Suárez de la Torre 1997, a very interesting study of the religious aspects of the *Frogs*.

strange protest, a silent one, because it was destined to be buried. It is likely that political dissatisfaction is an aspect of the interpretation of the texts, but the limitation of the gold tablets to that is a quite reductionist view.

The most debatable proposal is that concerning the relationship between the three versions. The *opinio communis* considers that the Orphic tale (which is basically recorded in the gold tablets) is the original one (although of course it can contain some elements of other traditions) and Aristophanes makes a parody of it, whereas Plato elaborates an *interpretatio philosophica* of it. Edmonds [20–24] prefers to start from ‘traditional mythic pattern’ (impossible to situate in space or in time) and to speak about various ‘countercultural religious movements’ [25]. Each tablet is written by one evanescent countercultural movement which cannot be specified nor defined. These movements would proliferate like mushrooms in different places. The similarities among tablets would result from the fact that they turn to the same structural pattern.

The reason for that interpretation is that Edmonds maintains a ‘crusade’ against the idea of the existence in Antiquity of a religious movement that accepted Orpheus as spiritual leader, that is, of the Orphics. Edmonds deals with a question that is now the object of attention by scholars in philology, philosophy, and history of religions, after a long period of lack of interest: the definition and determination of Orphism. During the 19th century and the first third of the 20th, scholarship reconstructed a whole religious and philosophical pattern around a group of literary works that the ancients ascribed to Orpheus. In the reconstruction, many excesses undoubtedly took place and varied heterogeneous phenomena were attributed (often without good reason) to Orphic ‘church’, priests and religion.<sup>8</sup> A sceptical trend was begun by Wilamowitz and followed by other scholars.<sup>9</sup> According to them, Orphism was nothing, only a few poems ascribed to Orpheus which do not shape any system nor religion. After the publication of some fundamental texts like the Derveni papyrus [see Laks and Most 1997, Betegh 2004], the Olbian bone plates [see West 1982], and new gold leaves [see Bernabé

<sup>8</sup> Macchioro [1930] was a conspicuous proponent of ‘panorphism’.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1931, Dodds 1951, Moulinier 1955, and Linforth 1941.

and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2001], most scholars have recognized the existence of a religious movement (although it has no clearly defined boundaries) that follows Orphic texts. But Edmonds still aligns himself with the sceptical trend.

I agree with Edmonds that Orphism is not ‘a sect with an exclusive set of eschatological ideas’ [221];<sup>10</sup> but between that extreme and the idea of many ‘countercultural Bacchic and Orphic movements’ [221], there are many intermediate possibilities. However, Edmonds, as crusaders do, prefers the extremes; he maintains that ‘the Orphic doctrine of Original Sin from the murder of Dionysos Zagreus and the creation of men from the ashes of his Titanic murderers’ is ‘a modern fabrication dating from 1879’ [64].<sup>11</sup>

Other examples of this hypercritical attitude can be found everywhere in the book. Edmonds interprets the statement we found in the Pelinna Tablet, which explicitly describes the deceased as having been born again the same day she died (and then adds: ‘tell to Persephone that Bacchios himself liberated you’), in the following way [227]: ‘even the Pelinna tablets... use the traditional pattern to position the deceased in a network of relations with Persephone and Dionysos that identifies her in ways beyond the normal polis system of identification’. Such reduction of the hope to be reborn after death to political dissatisfaction can only be judged as too narrow a view of religious beliefs.

Edmonds asserts [33] ‘the complete lack of evidence about such a community’ (that is, the group that puts the tablets in the graves of its members). I think that there is no lack of evidence, but lack of interpretation of a mass of facts.<sup>12</sup> I just point out some specially significant examples.

- There is no mention of the ‘great’ tablet from Thurii [C], which was found enveloping another gold leaf [A 4]. There are no references to the journey in it, but it comes from the same ‘coun-

<sup>10</sup> Burkert [1982] has proved that Orphism is not a sect, but it exists. See Bernabé 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Edmonds 1999, which tries to deny the antiquity of the Orphic myth about Dionysos’ death at the hands of Titans and his relationship with the origin of men and metempsychosis. But see Bernabé 2002.

<sup>12</sup> The evidence is collected in Bernabé 2004–2005.

tercultural movement'. The analysis of its content is important for determining the religious ideas of the group.<sup>13</sup>

- The Cretan tablets with an abbreviated text [B 3–9] are also neglected. Edmonds only mentions one of them [B 6: page 65] because the possible reading of *ΓΥΕΤΕΡ* as *θυγάτηρ* fits very well with his proposal of 'gender issues' [65]. Edmonds' method of analysis would lead us to suppose that the group of initiates from Crete does not know about the journey, but only about the question which they will be asked. The Cretan tablets show that these documents only refer to one part of the trip, it being possible that the journey referred to in all the gold leaves be one and the same, as Riedweg [2002] has pointed out.
- Despite the cover of the book, which shows an interesting Apulian vase,<sup>14</sup> Edmonds does not fully exploit the rich information given by Apulian pottery. The imagery of the netherworld depicted in these works is very similar to the one reflected in the gold tablets [see Bernabé 2006]; but Edmonds only mentions the scene depicted in the the aforementioned vase, with his characteristically hypercritical attitude [59n85]:

Johnston and McNiven 1996 have argued that this scene illustrates the power of Dionysos in the underworld, but their inference that the scene provides evidence for the filial relation of Dionysos and Persephone does not necessarily follow from their argument.

That is true, but it would be strange to find on the vase the inscription, 'She is his mother!'

- The iconography of the *πίνακες* from Locri [see Giangiulio 1994, Bernabé 2006], which illustrates close relationships between Persephone and Dionysos, are also completely ignored.
- The same 'reductionist' view is shown on page 58:

certainly Persephone seems to stand in some sort of close relation to Dionysos, particularly to Dionysos as Bac-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2001, 183–200, with many Orphic parallels, and Betegh 2004, 332ff, which compares the C tablet with the Derveni papyrus.

<sup>14</sup> A vase now in Toledo, Ohio, whose Orphic character has been demonstrated by Johnston and McNiven [1996].

chios in the Pelinna tablets, but the relation is not necessarily that of mother to child.

Edmond also quotes another well known skeptic, Moulinier,<sup>15</sup> to conclude that ‘the first reference to Dionysos as the child of Persephone . . . comes in a fragment of Callimachus [Fr. 171]’ [59n84]. But Pindar fr. 133 [Maehler 1987–1989] is a clear and older reference than this.<sup>16</sup>

- o Both Aristophanes and Plato refer to their sources. The comedigrapher mentions Orpheus by his name in *Frogs* 1030–1032:

Look at how, from the very beginning,  
the noblest of poets have conferred benefits on us.  
Orpheus revealed mystic rites (τελετὰς κατέδειξε) to  
us and taught us to refrain from killing.<sup>17</sup> [Sommerstein  
1996, 117–119]

Orpheus is mentioned as a real person, a prestigious and beneficial poet, because he revealed rites (τελεταί). The Orphic poems are, therefore, used as texts (λεγόμενα) in these rites, and these rites are in fact parodied in the *Frogs*.<sup>18</sup> Even the word τελετή is used twice again in the *Frogs*—by the chorus of initiates [342f] and by the chorus-leader (κορυφαῖος) [368].

Plato also alludes several times to the Orphic mysteries in the *Phaedo*:

There is of course the reason given in mystery doctrine (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις), that we men are in a sort of prison [62b: Hackforth 1955, 36]

and it may well be that those persons to whom we owe the institution of mystery-rites (οἱ τὰς τελετὰς ἡμῶν οὗτοι καταστήσαντες) are not to be despised, inasmuch as they have in fact long ago hinted at the truth by declaring that all such

<sup>15</sup> ‘Les documents que nous rappelons ici ne nous permettent pas d’admettre que le thème du Dionysos, fils de Perséphone, ait été orphique dès l’époque classique’ [Moulinier 1955, 64n5].

<sup>16</sup> Edmonds [1999] scorns this testimony: but cf. Nilsson 1935, 214; Rose 1936, 79–96; Lloyd-Jones 1985, 245–279 [= 1990, 80–105]; Cannatà Fera 1990, 65 and 219ff; Bernabé, 1999 and 2002.

<sup>17</sup> On τελεταί, see Jiménez San Cristóbal 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Aristophanes parodies Orphism again and again: cf. Bernabé 2004.

as arrive in Hades uninitiated into the rites shall lie in mud, while he that comes there purified and initiated shall dwell with the gods. For truly, as their authorities tell us, there are ‘many that carry the wand, but Bacchantes few are amongst them’. [69c: Hackforth 1955, 55. Cf. Bernabé 2004–2005, fr. 576]

we may put our question like this: do the souls of men that have departed this life exist in Hades or do they not? Now there is an ancient doctrine (*παλαιὸς λόγος*) that comes into my mind, that souls which have come from this world exist in the other, and conversely souls come and are born into this world from the world of the dead. [70c: Hackforth 1955, 59]

It is very difficult to separate the Platonic reference, ‘persons to whom we owe the institution of mystery-rites (*τελετάς*)’, from the Aristophanic one, ‘Orpheus revealed mystic rites (*τελετάς*)’. On the other hand, the verse quoted by Plato is attributed to Orpheus by Neoplatonic philosophers,<sup>19</sup> and the ‘ancient doctrine’ referred to by Plato is an ‘Orphic and Pythagorean one’ according to Olympiodorus and Damascius.<sup>20</sup>

There is no lack of evidence, but obstinacy in denying the evidence we have.

To sum up, there was at least one ancient text attributed to Orpheus and used in rites in which a descent (*κατάβασις*) of the soul was described. This descent of the soul has been composed for concrete religious (secondarily, political too) purposes: to enable initiates to save themselves. This is not an *interpretatio christiana* nor a fiction by modern scholars: the purpose of saving oneself is explicitly stated in the Gurob papyrus.<sup>21</sup> It is, therefore, a poem composed at a given moment and transmitted in a text, from which the leaves derive. Aristophanes had in mind this kind of poem for elaborating his parody. A parody presupposes a concrete type of

<sup>19</sup> Olympiodorus, *In Plat. Phaedon* 7.10, 10.3, 8.7 [Westerink 1976, 115, 141, 123]; Hermias, *In Plat. Phaedr.* at Couvreur 1901, 249.

<sup>20</sup> Olympiodorus, *In Plat. Phaedon* 10.6 [Westerink 1976, 145]; Damascius, *In Plat. Phaedon* 1.203 [Westerink 1976, 123].

<sup>21</sup> We read in line 5 *σῶζόν με* (‘Save me’). On the Gurob papyrus, see Hordern 2000.

religious poetry dealing with the descent of the initiate known by his audience. An evanescent ‘traditional tale’ cannot be parodied. Plato adapts the Orphic pattern converting the ritual and religious model into a philosophical and political proposal.<sup>22</sup>

Edmonds denies that the gold tablets are Orphic. But if they are not Orphic, what are they? If the Orphics are not religious groups, what are they? It is significant that Edmonds cannot give another name to the ‘Orphic’ gold tablets.

In spite of my disagreement on these points, I think that Edmonds has elaborated a very interesting study of the ‘path to underworld’ theme. The book contains many important statements about political aspects, gender issues, and pattern variations. The analysis of the *Frogs* and *Phaedo* is in my opinion more interesting than that of the gold leaves because they are not so conditioned by Edmonds’ *parti pris*.

Edmonds, who shapes his book as a journey which starts in the introduction and ends in the conclusion, persists in maintaining his particular *chemin de déviance* against the mainstream of scholarship. I am not sure that he will reach salvation.

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<sup>22</sup> That is the procedure named *transposition* by Diès [1927, 2.432ff]: cf. Bernabé 1998.

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