INTRODUCTION

Bacchic Verses
Poetry and the Gold Leaves

Poetry, Afterlife, and the Mysteries

ἔρχομαι ἐκ καθαρῶ⟨ν⟩ καθαρά, χθονί⟨ων⟩ βασίλεια,
Εὐκλῆς Εὐβουλεύς τε καὶ ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι·
καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼν ὑμῶν γένος ὄλβιον εὔχομαι εἶμεν.

I come pure from the pure, queen of those below the earth,
Eukles, Eubouleus, and other immortal gods:
For I boast that I, too, am of your blessed lineage.

This bold address to Persephone, dread mistress of the underworld, and her divine court appears, etched in gold metal, on three funerary tablets from Thurii in Southern Italy that date to the fourth century BC.[1] More than thirty similar inscribed gold leaves in total have been found deposited in graves of Dionysiac mystery initiates of the Late Classical and Hellenistic periods. They feature brief poetic texts, mostly in dactylic hexameters, making promises, boasts, and declarations for the afterlife. (A representative group of texts is appended to the end of this Introduction.) Though their specific contents vary, all reflect a shared set of extraordinary postmortem hopes: some guide initiates through the underworld, others pronounce them heroes, and some even assign them a place among the gods. They come mostly from the geographic periphery of the Greek world: principally from Western and Northern Greece and Crete, with a few from the Peloponnese. Their number continues to be augmented by new finds.[2]

[1] *OF* 488; compare with 489–91 (see Appendix below).

[2] The standard edition is now *OF* 474–96 (Bernabé 2004–7); see also commentaries of Pugliese Carratelli (2003) and Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008). Edmonds (2011a) 15–50 and Graf and Johnston (2013) 1–49 offer Greek texts with English translations. To these should also be added a small tablet, similar to others already known, published in Tzifopoulos (2014) (= *SEG* LXII 644). In this book, the terms "tablet" and "leaf" are used interchangeably (in preference to the more technical "lamella"). The tablets are conventionally called "leaves" in reference to their thinness rather than their shape, although a few leaf-shaped tablets have been found (e.g., *OF* 485–6, 496a–b, e, i).

Many of these tablets, including the earliest, bear verse inscriptions, primarily in hexameters but interspersed with rhythmic non-hexameter language. Their texts frequently echo epic diction and style. The poetic aspect of the gold leaves is occasionally acknowledged, but rarely attracts more than passing attention.[3] When scholars juxtapose the tablets with more familiar poetic tradition, this is often done to draw a contrast between mysteries and the concerns of early Greek poetry. This book argues to the contrary that the tablets reflect not just verbal borrowings from epic hexameter diction, but an intense participation in the deeper thought patterns and ideological structures of early Greek poetry.[4] The tablets' central themes can especially be understood as developments of the practice and ideals of Greek poetic performance culture. The three lines from Thurii quoted above already incorporate several verbal and conceptual elements derived from early Greek poetry: the boast of lineage, the claim of fellowship with the gods, and the portrayal of the initiate as a member of a privileged group all echo traditional poetic themes. The tablets also reflect an interactive dynamic analogous to that of poetic performance, in which individual performers gained credibility in the eyes of their audience and groups imagined a continued existence for themselves after death. Various modes of ritual authority and authorization no doubt played a role in private mysteries: but poetic tradition furnished Bacchic cults with their principal themes, imagery, and ideological profile and supplied much of the framework for their performance practice.

This approach opens the tablets to a range of new interpretations. It also provides a model both for the activity and expertise of initiators and an explanation for the frequent inconsistency and ambiguity in the tablet texts. Aspects of the gold leaves that have puzzled scholars become less puzzling, or puzzling in more illuminating ways, when the tablets are examined within their native performance context. As will soon become clear, this focus on poetic background brings much-needed light to the vexed question of the social context of private mysteries. The remainder of this Introduction will lay out the theoretical and evidentiary foundations of this approach, especially in relation to recent advances in scholarship on the gold tablets and private mystery religion.

[3] Notable exceptions include Watkins (1995) 277–91, Nagy (1999) 167–71 and 190, Martin (2007), Herrero (2008), (2011), (2013a), (2013b), and Faraone (2021) 98–104.
[4] The term "song culture" is from Herington (1985) 3–5.

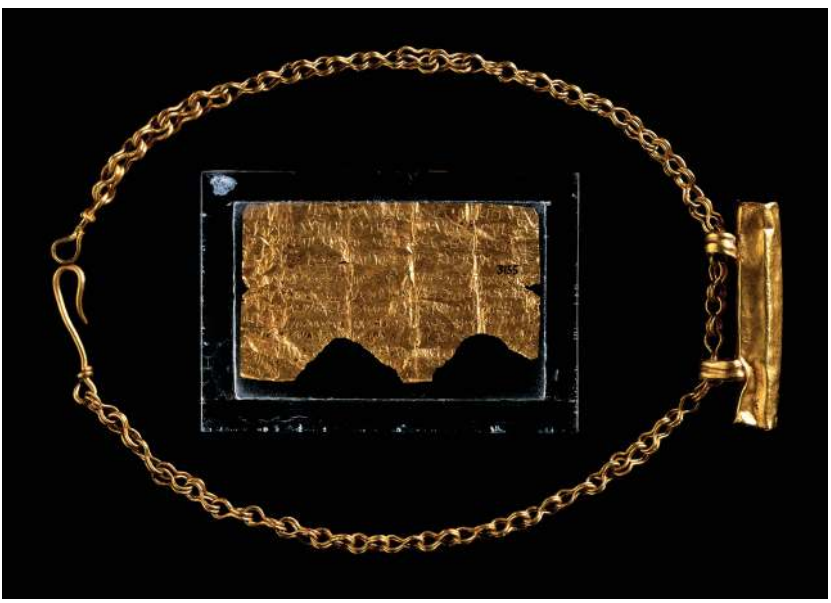

Figure 0.1 Petelia gold leaf (*OF* 476; fourth century BC) with Late Antique amulet case in which it was found (second or third century AD). By permission of the British Museum, London.

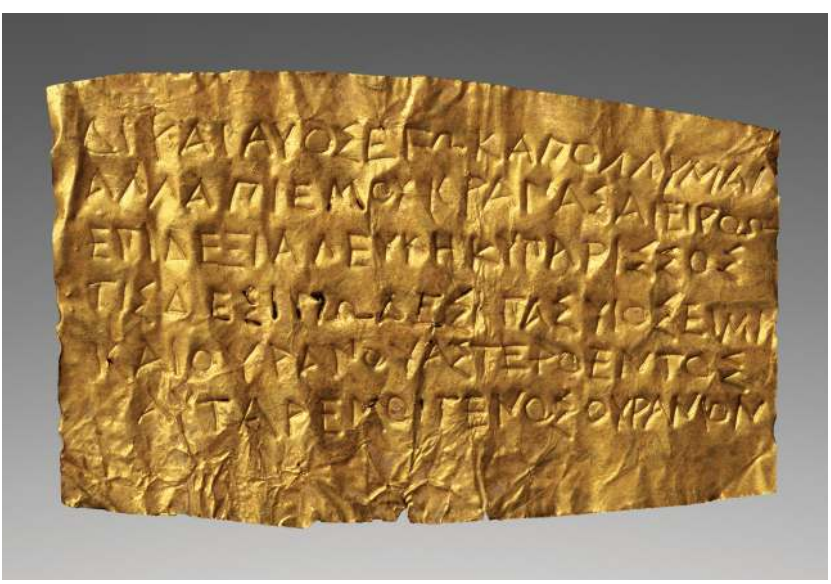

Figure 0.2 Thessaly gold leaf (*OF* 484; fourth century BC). By permission of the Getty Villa, Malibu.

Bacchic Mysteries: What Do We Know?

It is now accepted, after much debate, that the gold leaves derive from Bacchic mystery cults.[5] Dionysos in early Greece, in addition to his well-known connections with wine and theater, was a god of mystic initiations (*teletai, mysteria*) that promised life after death. Bacchic mysteries are mentioned as early as Herodotos and Euripides.[6] The legendary Thracian singer and poet Orpheus was recognized as the proto-founder of mysteries, and written Orphic hexameter poems served an authorizing role in private as well as sanctuary-based initiations. For this reason these cults often carry the label "Orphic" or "Orphic-Bacchic" in modern discussions.[7] Dionysos and Orpheus play an underworld mystagogic role in South Italian vase paintings of the fourth century, and a set of inscribed fifth-century mystic bone tablets unearthed from Pontic Olbia imply a similar cultic role for both the god and the singer.[8]

Unlike the sanctuary-based mysteries at Eleusis and Samothrace, however, Orphic-Bacchic initiations were private rituals performed by individual ritual specialists for individual clients or small groups. Plato's *Republic* paints a vivid, if hostile, picture of such rites and their practitioners. Itinerant ritual practitioners, in his description, go to the doors of the wealthy peddling various services for a fee: sacrifices and incantations to ward off divine punishments for unjust deeds, curses and spells to injure one's enemies. To bolster the credibility of their services, they cite verses from Homer and Hesiod. Using the poetic authority of Orpheus, they also claim to purify their clients and preserve them from postmortem sufferings through rites of mystic initiation (2.364b–365a):

> And they produce a babble of books by Mousaios and Orpheus, descendants, as they claim, of Selene and the Muses, according to which they make sacrifices; and they persuade not only individuals but even cities that they

[5] For history of debate, see Graf and Johnston (2013) 50–63, Edmonds (2011a) 3–14, and (2013a) 51–70. A Dionysiac background is conclusively established by the discoveries from Hipponion (*OF* 474), Pelinna (*OF* 485–6), and Amphipolis (*OF* 496n). For overview of ancient evidence for Orphic-Bacchic mysteries, see also Bowden (2010) 105–55 and Bremmer (2014) 55–80.

[6] Hdt. 2.81, Eur. *Hipp.* 952–5.

[7] West (1983) and Meisner (2018); see also Graf (1974) on the role of Orphic poetry in the Eleusinian Mysteries. In this book, the terms "Bacchic," "Orphic," and "Dionysiac" describe the same phenomena with variations of emphasis rather than interpretation: "Bacchic" and "Dionysiac" emphasize the role of Dionysos (with "Bacchic" stressing initiation over Dionysos's other aspects), while "Orphic" emphasizes the connection with Orpheus and Orphic poetry (often, though not necessarily, in connection with the Zagreus myth: see below).

[8] See Schlesier (2001), Burkert (2004) 71–98, Bernabé (2009), Calame (2009) 210–24, Carpenter (2011) 261, Graf (2011a), and Graf and Johnston (2013) 61–5. Orpheus is attested as a source of mystical underworld lore in Diodoros (Diod. Sic. 1.92.2, 1.96.3–5): see Meisner (2018) 114–15. On the Olbia bone plates, see West (1982) and (1983) 17–19, Lévêque (2000) 82, Ferrari (2016) 179–83, and Chapters 2 and 4.

> really can have release and purification for their wrongdoing through sacrifices and playful delights while they are still alive and equally after death. These they in fact call initiations, which release us from evils in the next world, while terrible things await those who neglect their sacrifices (trans. Loeb).[9]

Theophrastos mentions Orpheus-Initiators (*Orpheotelestai*) to whom a superstitious man might be expected to pay frequent visits.[10] The Derveni Papyrus, a fourth-century scroll containing a fifth-century commentary on a still earlier Orphic theogony, corroborates many details from our other Late Classical evidence. In this text, an unidentified commentator gives an allegorical exegesis of the Orphic poem and critiques the practices of other private initiators. The Derveni author testifies both to the authorizing role of Orphic poems in private initiations and to the variety of uses to which such poetry could be put (on which more below).[11]

Though our sources testify to a variety of content among Orphic-Bacchic cults, they also indicate a basic coherency of themes and concerns. Participants are portrayed as adherents of extreme ritual purity, sometimes abstaining from meat. They claim great antiquity for their rituals by connection with Orpheus and posit strange myths and afterlife beliefs (though often these are variants or elaborations of traditional themes).[12] The same emphases on purity and afterlife appear in the gold leaves. In these and other respects, Orphic-Bacchic phenomena show interaction with early Pythagoreanism, and the two persuasions are sometimes difficult to distinguish.[13] Bacchic cults likely featured certain characteristic mythical narratives and themes, though specifics

[9] *Rep.* 2.364b–365a: βίβλων δὲ ὅμαδον παρέχονται Μουσαίου καὶ Ὀρφέως, Σελήνης τε καὶ Μουσῶν ἐκγόνων, ὥς φασι, καθ' ἃς θυηπολοῦσιν, πείθοντες οὐ μόνον ἰδιώτας ἀλλὰ καὶ πόλεις, ὡς ἄρα λύσεις τε καὶ καθαρμοὶ ἀδικημάτων διὰ θυσιῶν καὶ παιδιᾶς ἡδονῶν εἰσι μὲν ἔτι ζῶσιν, εἰσὶ δὲ καὶ τελευτήσασιν, ἃς δὴ τελετὰς καλοῦσιν, αἳ τῶν ἐκεῖ κακῶν ἀπολύουσιν ἡμᾶς, μὴ θύσαντας δὲ δεινὰ περιμένει.

[10] Theophr. *Char.* 16.11.

[11] The edition and translation of Laks and Most (2016) VI 378–435 reflect current work on the text; see also editions and commentaries of Kouremenos, Parássoglou, and Tsantsanoglou (2006) and Kotwick (2017). Janko (2002) and (2016b) reflect important papyrological work (though his claim of a citation from Parmenides in the early part of the papyrus text must be taken as uncertain). Betegh (2004), while predating important work on the text, still offers the best overview of interpretative issues. Among the large bibliography on the papyrus, note especially Laks and Most (1997), Papadapoulou and Muellner (2014), Santamaría Álvarez (2018), and Meisner (2018) 51–86.

[12] For these and other definitional criteria of "Orphism," see Edmonds (2013a) and below.

[13] Overlap between Orphism and Pythagoreanism is already suggested in Hdt. 2.81 and Ion of Chios fr. 116 Leurini; see Burkert (1972) 125 and (1982), Kingsley (1995), Bernabé (2004–7) II 84–92 (with further testimonia collected under *OF* 506–9), Seaford (2005b), and Betegh (2014).

are uncertain (on which more momentarily).[14] The gold tablets, despite the variety of their contents, reflect largely the same cluster of concerns. All groups of tablets aim to secure for initiates an exceptional or differentiated condition in the afterlife. Several emphasize purity. Nearly all describe or imagine an encounter with powers of the underworld. Some include mystic passwords (*symbola*) that operated as safe-conduct passes for the deceased. Tablets of different sites and text groups also articulate a kinship connection with the gods.[15] These themes are all developments of mainstream religious concerns, though their specific emphases and modes of expression vary across the corpus of tablets. [16]

Ritual and Poetry: Cult as Performance Context

Recent decades have seen major shifts in our understanding of Orphism, prompted both by new evidence and by refinements of methodology. Four such developments are critical to the approach of this book: first, the reevaluation of the so-called Zagreus myth and its centrality to Orphic-Bacchic cult; second, the redefinition of Orphism as a scattered practice of individual experts rather than a coherent religious sect; third, the appearance of the Derveni Papyrus (noted above), which shows the role of poetic performance in Orphic tradition; and fourth, the analysis of Orphic-Bacchic cults as a practice of *bricolage*. Though it is expedient to present these developments sequentially, it will be clear that they are all aspects of a single turn in scholarship – that is, a centrifugal turn away from a uniform model of Orphism toward the manifest variety of Orphic-Bacchic cult phenomena in local contexts.[17]

Remodeling Orphism: The Zagreus Paradigm and Its Limits

Not long ago, it would have been uncontroversial to define Orphic cults in terms of the so-called Zagreus myth or myth of Dionysos related in Orphic poetry. Domenico Comparetti in the late nineteenth century posited this as the defining myth of Orphism, and this interpretation continues to be

[14] See Meisner (2018). Edmonds (2013a) (esp. 160–72, 190–1, and 302–74), on the other hand, stresses the continuity of Orphic myths with traditional mythical themes attested in non-Orphic contexts.
[15] Edmonds (2004) 75–80, Graf and Johnston (2013) 114–15, and McClay (forthcoming-a).
[16] Encounter: Edmonds (2004) and Petridou (2016) 252–71. Kinship: Long (2015) 51–87 and McClay (forthcoming-a). Afterlife and purity: Parker (1983) 281–307 and Edmonds (2013a) 195–391.
[17] On the local distinctiveness of tablets, see, for example, Graf and Johnston (2013²) 3 (justifying a geographically determined enumeration), Ferrari (2011), and Tzifopoulos (2010) and (2011a) (with emphasis on the Cretan group).

carried forward in some scholarship.[18] According to this myth as it appears in later sources, Dionysos was the son of Zeus and Persephone; he was to succeed Zeus, but the Titans (perhaps with Hera's encouragement) dismembered him and devoured his flesh; to punish them, Zeus incinerated the Titans with his thunderbolt, and from their ashes rose humanity; Dionysos was reconstituted or revived; as a consequence of their origins, the human race bears inherited guilt for the Titans' murder of Dionysos, as well as inherited divinity from the flesh of Dionysos. Orphics performed propitiatory rituals for Dionysos and his mother Persephone to gain a better afterlife and release from punishment. All these mythic and cultic elements, Comparetti and his successors have claimed, are present or alluded to in the texts of the gold leaves. The myth in extended form is first narrated by the Neoplatonist commentator Olympiodoros in the sixth century AD, but elements appear in earlier sources.[19] On the interpretation of Comparetti, the gold tablets refer consistently to a specific myth and set of ideas and ritual practices derived from it.

The Zagreus myth is now a focus of debate, with Radcliffe Edmonds leading a challenge to the Comparettian model. Edmonds contends that the myth itself is a construct of modern scholarship that is not genuinely ancient or reflected in the tablets.[20] As with Pythagoreanism, much evidence for this Orphic myth comes via Neoplatonist intermediaries such as Olympiodoros, and these have imposed their own systems of thought on the earlier tradition.[21] In addition, modern scholars have applied Christian categories in ways that have distorted the evidence for Orphism and other ancient mystery cults. As Edmonds shows, early twentieth-century descriptions of Orphism were shaped by polemics between Protestant and Catholic Christianity.[22] The definition of

[18] For example, Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008) 40–3, 68–76, 105–9, 112–14, Graf and Johnston (2013) 66–93, and Bremmer (2014) 76–7; the myth also plays a key role in the earlier scholarship of Harrison (1922) and (1927) and Guthrie (1952).

[19] The main source is Olympiodoros (*In Plat. Phaedr.* 1.3 (41 W.) = *OF* 320 I); other partial sources include Pind. fr. 133 SM (= Pl. *Men.* 81b–c), Pl. *Leg.* 3.701b–c, Xenokrates fr. 219 Parente (= Damasc. *In Phaed.* 1.2), Euphorion fr. 33 Scheidweiler (= fr. 36 Powell), Paus. 8.37.5, Plut. *de Esu Carn.* 1.996b–c (see collected fragments in *OF* 34–39, 57–59, 301–33). For review of sources and debates, see Meisner (2018) 237–53.

[20] Edmonds (1999). The status of the myth is a major point of dispute: see Bernabé (2002a), Edmonds (2008b) and (2013a) 296–39, Henrichs (2011), Graf and Johnston (2013) 66–93, Bremmer (2014) 76–7, and McClay (forthcoming-a).

[21] Graf and Johnston (2013) 188–91, Edmonds (2013a) 27–30, 37–47, and Meisner (2018) 48–9, 119–27. For the analogous problem in Pythagorean tradition, see especially Burkert (1972).

[22] Edmonds (2013a) 27–37; see also Herrero (2010) and Graf and Johnston (2013) 59. For similar problems in other aspects of ancient religion, see Smith (1990), Asad (1993), Nongbri (2013), and Barton and Boyarin (2016).

Orphism in propositional terms – as a religion built around a narrative of a god who dies and is resurrected, based on sacred texts, and with doctrines of original sin and postmortem punishment, whose worshippers are united in distinctive beliefs and lifestyles – reflects a move among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars to imagine Orphism as a proto-Protestant reform movement in early Greek religion.[23]

Though most scholars are reluctant to accept Edmonds's outright rejection of the Zagreus myth, many of his basic critiques are valid. The Comparettian model's virtue lies in its elegant unification of fragmentary material; but Edmonds argues persuasively that the resulting coherency of the interpretation derives more from the model than from the evidence itself.[24] Edmonds proposes instead to describe Orphism under a Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" definitional scheme. The label "Orphic," thus understood, signifies no specific myth or doctrine, but rather was used in ancient religious discourse either to denote the poetic authorship of Orpheus or to label ritual practices for their extraordinary purity, sanctity, antiquity, or strangeness.[25] Edmonds's approach counters the tendency to define Orphic phenomena in terms of their assumed divergence from mainstream religion – what he terms the "Orphic Exception." This family-resemblance approach also allows for cult phenomena not explicitly attributed to Orpheus, including the gold leaves, to be described as "Orphic" without presumptively assigning to them any underlying belief system.

Edmonds's approach is also responsive to the current state of evidence, which is much changed since Comparetti. Though aspects of Comparetti's model, especially the role of Dionysos, have been vindicated by subsequent

[23] See Edmonds (1999) 57–66, (2008a), and (2013a); compare with Meisner (2018) 9–10. Macchioro (1930) is an especially egregious instance of this tendency.

[24] Edmonds (2013a) 395:

> There are several reasons why the hypothesis of the Zagreus myth and the attendant idea of a coherent Orphic religion might have been appealing to the scholars at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries who first put it forth. Orphism, as reconstructed on the basis of the Zagreus myth, not only provides a simple, elegant, and coherent explanation of the evidence, but the model that it assumes of a doctrinally-based religion, focused on salvation from sin and relying on the authority of sacred texts, is familiar to modern scholars of religion who come from a Judaeo-Christian background. The very coherence of the model that the Zagreus myth assumes, therefore, comes not from the ancient evidence but from the familiarity of the religious model. However, such a model, forged in the debates between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism and shaped by the ideas of the Enlightenment as well as the Reformation, cannot be applied to ancient religion without anachronism. Such a model is scarcely applicable to early Christianity, much less to Greek religion.

[25] Edmonds (2013a) 77–82.

finds, the accumulated evidence for Bacchic cult is now much more difficult to explain through a single myth or set of beliefs. The tablets are now accepted as products of Bacchic cults, but divinities other than Dionysos and Persephone make appearances as well.[26] The fifth-century Orphic bone plates found in Olbia articulate a cultic link between Orpheus and Dionysos, but they are found in a sanctuary rather than a burial context.[27] The Derveni Papyrus, too, offers insight into private mysteries and their internal dynamics during the Classical period: yet neither the poem nor the commentator mentions Dionysos in the surviving text, and the author's interest in poetic performance, pre-Socratic physics, and allegorical exegesis again reveals a complex engagement with his intellectual surroundings. While the newer evidence does not support the extreme skepticism of the last century, it has not wholly confirmed the views of Comparetti and his successors. Rather, discoveries have repeatedly pointed in directions unanticipated by the Comparettian model. Edmonds's multi-factor and non-belief-based approach to Orphism is well suited to the heterogeneous phenomena it seeks to describe.

At least two important consequences follow. First, even if Edmonds's rejection of the Zagreus myth is not accepted in its most extreme form, it is still not necessary to take the myth as an indispensable explanatory key. Even if, as seems probable, some tablets allude to the myth,[28] it need not have played an essential role in all or most Bacchic cults. Edmonds is also correct, in my view, in questioning the centrality of specific doctrines, including those derived from the Zagreus myth, in Orphic-Bacchic cults. It cannot be assumed that religious practices are simply an "expression" of a preexisting a system of beliefs. Removal of the Zagreus myth from its privileged position in the discussion of Orphism, and its replacement by other definitional criteria, allows Orphic phenomena to be studied through a range of analytic lenses without presuming any uniform set of beliefs.

Second, Edmonds's multi-factor definitional model describes a form of cult that is consistent in core concerns – purity, eschatology, myth, strangeness, etc. – but variable in its realization of those themes. Such an

[26] See textual Appendix below. Other notable divinities include Demeter and the Mountain Mother (both *OF* 493a) and the Thessalian Brimo (*OF* 493), probably to be identified with Persephone or Demeter: see Graf and Johnston (2013) 195–207 and Bremmer (2013) 40–1.

[27] *SEG* XXVIII 659–61 (= *OF* 463–5); see West (1982) and (1983) 17–19, Lévêque (2000) 82, Ferrari (2016) 179–83, and Chapters 2 and 4 below. Bacchic mysteries in Olbia are attested also in Hdt. 4.79.

[28] The tablets from Pelinna (*OF* 485–6) and the Thurii Timpone Piccolo (*OF* 488–90) remain difficult to explain without reference to the myth; but it does not follow that the same myth is equally important in other tablets or that it would have been given a consistent interpretation: see McClay (forthcoming-a).

approach corrects for the tendency to impose textual or narrative uniformity on the gold leaves. M. L. West and Richard Janko, for instance, have used stemmatic theory to reconstruct a textual archetype of the B group, while Christoph Riedweg has interpreted the gold leaves as segments of a master *hieros logos*.[29] While such methods have undeniable heuristic value, much is lost when the gold leaves are treated as expressions of a single myth, narrative, text, or belief system. It is precisely those aspects of the gold leaves that situate them in the realm of ritual practice – their textual variation, narrative form, and materiality – that tend to be smoothed out and erased by the centripetal approaches of much past scholarship. Edmonds's polythetic model allows for a cult that is united less by its specific ideas than by its overall aims and concerns. Thus, for example, the initiate in many tablets wins immortality by claiming a kinship-connection with the gods; but this consistent idea finds different, even contradictory, articulations across the corpus. The Zagreus myth served, in my view, as a part of their conceptual repertoire for articulating the initiate's special connection to the gods: but this does not mean that it is invariably present in the tablets. Even where present, it would have been only one among several narratives and symbols that could achieve the same effect.[30]

Craft vs. Sect: Orphism as Performance Genre

The inconsistent content of Orphic-Bacchic mysteries stems from the mechanisms by which such cults were propagated. Even before Edmonds's recent work, Walter Burkert initiated an important interpretive turn in his 1982 essay "Craft Versus Sect: The Problem of Orphics and Pythagoreans." Burkert here tackled the problem of disentangling Orphic and Pythagorean phenomena in ancient sources. While evidence exists for communities and individuals who assumed a Pythagorean identity, Burkert observed that this does not hold for Orphic cult phenomena. Rather, the cultic authority of Orpheus attaches to itinerant ritual experts – healers, magicians, diviners, and initiators – who offered services to clients, often for a fee, on an individual basis.[31] This dynamic manifests itself both externally, in ancient testimonia, and internally, in the variations of the

[29] Stemma/Archetype: West (1975a), Janko (1984) and (2016a). *Hieros Logos*: Riedweg (2011). For critique of these approaches, see further below.
[30] For a full development of this argument, see McClay (forthcoming-a).
[31] Burkert (1982); compare with Burkert (1998) 393. On the phenomenon of itinerant ritual specialists, see also Parker (1983) 207–34 and (2005) 116–35, Bremmer (2010) 22–9, and Mili (2015) 285–95.