



WHAT DID MYSTERIES MEAN TO ANCIENT GREEKS?

Nikolay P. Grintser, Russian State Univ. for the Humanities, Moscow
grintser@mtu-net.ru

When we try to perceive the cultural meaning of the terms and notions relevant for an ancient civilization, we cannot ignore any detail within the entire, sometimes peculiar, range of their possible connotations. This is true for the particular words in which these ancient notions are expressed, and for the strange, even funny ancient interpretations of these words, which are not in line with their original etymological meaning. We should not be purists; we should try, if possible, to look for and to reconstruct some reasons for the existence of such unusual interpretations. This is even more necessary when we deal with the phenomenon of Greek mysteries: as the reality they revealed was made secret and hardly accessible already in antiquity, how can we ignore any extant piece of evidence? Pursuing this quite trivial assumption, I will try to analyze the very term *mysteries*, taking into account each and every classical comment on the word in question.

The general meaning of Greek μυστήρια, “mysteries, initiations” and words of the same family, like μύστης, “initiate”, or μυστηρικός, “pertaining to the mysteries” seems to be quite obvious and agreed upon among most scholars. It is derived from the verb μύω meaning “to keep eyes or mouth shut.”¹ This verb is reconstructed on the Indo-European level as **mus-* “sich schliessen, von der Lippen und den Augen”² with no direct parallels outside Greek, or just **mu-*. In the

¹ Chantraine 1968-1970: 728; Frisk 1960-1972 (II): 276.

² Pokorny 1959: 752.

latter case the meaning can be reconstructed only as “undeutlich reden, unartikulierte murmeln, den Mund geschlossen halten oder schliessen.” This has no connotation of “eyes”, but we have a large number of additional, mainly, onomatopoeic examples both in Greek – μυμῦα imitating sobbing sounds in Aristophanes’ *Knights* 10, μυῦαλαεῖν “to mutter” by Hipponax 124 West,³ μυκάομαι, “to low, bellow,” properly of oxen – and outside Greek, in Latin *mugio*, German *mugen*, Russian *myčat’* “to bellow” – properly of cows, Latvian *maut* “to bellow.”⁴ Thus, with Greek μυστήρια we have the first problem, although it is small and surmountable: the word itself must have a somewhat ambiguous sense of “things either hardly seen or hardly spoken about.” Indo-European parallels speak for the latter meaning, but the realities of Greek language and culture strongly support the former. The most convincing evidence may be the dichotomy between the two classes of initiates in the mysteries. It is well known that the Eleusinian rituals offered two levels of initiation: those who had passed the intermediary rites acquired the title of μύσται, while those who completed the last and higher level of initiation received the full knowledge of ἐπόπται. As the latter term presumes the sense of “those who look upon, see,” we have every reason to assume that the former is also linked with the idea of “viewing,” but in this case presupposes not the “full view” and means something like “those who can hardly see.” This dichotomy, together with the notion of “things shown,” δεικνύμενα, as an important part of Eleusinian rites, encourages a number of scholars, Karl Kerényi (1967) more than others, to understand the process of *myesis*⁵ as an experience of “seeing the unseen.” Literary descriptions of mystic experience may also be used to support such interpretation. Sophocles in his *Triptolemus* praised the Eleusinian initiates in this way: “Three times blessed are those mortals who have *seen* these rites and then descended in Hades, for there life is only for them, and all others experience everything bad” (ὥς τρισόλβιοι ἀ κείνοι φροτῶν, οἳ ἀταῦτα δερχθέντες τέλη ἀμόλωσ’ ἐς Ἄϊδου· ἀποῖσδε ἀ γὰρ ἀμόνοις ἀκείῳ ζῆν ἄστι, τοῖς δ’ ἄλλοις ἀπάντ’ ἔχειν ἀκακά – *TGF* fr. 837). The same idea of sacred vision that secures happiness in the afterlife is attested also by Pindar: “Blessed is the one who went under

³ This is the manuscript reading, corrected by Meineke (according to Hesychius’ gloss) into μοιμύλλειν, the latter reading being accepted, with slight corrections, by M. West.

⁴ Pokorny 1959: 752.

⁵ that is, “initiation,” a word like the corresponding verb, μύεω “to initiate”, being a later formation following the semantics of μυστήρια and μύστης.

the earth after *having seen* these [sacred things] (ὄλβιος ἔσσις ἐίδων κείνῃ Ἴσ' ὑπὸ ἔχθρῳ – fr. 137,1 Snell-Maehler). Later on, one can remember Apuleius' words in the *Metamorphoses* saying that during his initiation into the cult of Isis he “saw the brilliance of sun shining in the middle of the night” (*nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine* – *Metamorphoses* 11, 23). The number of examples presupposing the sacred importance of *seeing* while participating in mysteries can be easily enlarged.

No less numerous are the instances where the idea of “speaking the unspoken” is much more prominent than that of “seeing the unseen.” Maybe the fact that the contents of Eleusinian rites should not be revealed under penalty of death is the most notable characteristic of these rituals which are considered the mysteries par excellence. There is no need at all to recall the famous names charged with such a blasphemy: sometimes one gets the impression that any prominent citizen of Athens had experienced it at least once, but it is worth mentioning that the epithet ἀπόρητα ἄρρητα, “unspoken,” became nearly formulaic in application to mysteries. Eleusinian mysteries are called [ἄ]ρρητος ἐτελής already in the fifth century inscription from the Eleusinian agora (IG I³ 953), and we have the phrase “unspoken mysteries”, μυστηρίων...ἀπορήτων, in Euripides' *Rhesus* 943 (ὄργι'...ἄρρητ', “unspoken orgies” being a definition for Bacchic rites in *Bacchae* 470-472.) Ultimately, such a description gradually becomes an alternative way of referring to mysteries: see Herodian's explanation of the name of Athena's festival of *arrhephoria*: “*arrhephoria* is a festival praising Athena, and named from the expression “to carry” (φέρειν) the unspoken (ἄρρητα), that is, “to carry mysteries” (ἄρρηφορία ἐορτὴ ἐπιτελουμένη ἐν τῇ Ἀθηνᾷ παρὰ τὸ ἐἶναι ἀρρητὰ καὶ μυστήρια φέρειν) (*On orthography* III 2.479). Hence, the idea of mysteries as “things not to be spoken about” got an additional dimension. It is well known that, apart from “things shown”, τὰ ἐδεικνύμενα, and “things practiced”, τὰ ἐδρώμενα, mysteries contained a revelation of the sacred things said, τὰ ἐλεγόμενα, and the latter could not be properly understood by those not initiated. That is why sometimes mysteries were understood as a sort of ἀλληγορία, “hidden-saying,” that is, an indirect naming of sacred, “mysterious” things. Thus mystery rites are described in Demetrius' *On style* 101: “This is why mysteries are revealed in allegories, to inspire the shuddering and awe associated with darkness and night. In fact allegory

is not unlike darkness and night.”⁶ (διδοῖ καὶ τὰ μυστήρια ἐν ἄλληγορίαις ἱλέγεται πρὸς ἑκπληξιν καὶ φόβον, ὥσπερ ἐν ἴσκότῳ καὶ νυκτί. ἔοικε ἰδέσθαι ἢ ἄλληγορίαι τῷ ἴσκότῳ καὶ τῇ νυκτί.) It is quite suggestive, with respect to this, that Philo Judaeus writes “the initiates have their ears purified” (μύσται κεκαθαμένοι τὰ ὦτα, *De cherubim* 48), meaning that the sacred knowledge is opened to those who do listen. The list of relevant examples may be broadened considerably. It is no wonder, therefore, that μυστήρια as indirect, allegorical significations were compared to another kind of authoritative and enigmatic word, now designated by the term μῦθος, and that those two words seem to be associated also on the level of inner form and etymology. Plotinus speaks about “mysteries and myths that are speaking in riddles about the gods,” (τὰ μυστήρια καὶ οἱ μῦθοι οἱ περὶ θεῶν αἰνίττονται – V.1) and Eusebius thinks “mysteries resonate in harmony with the ancient mythical stories about the gods” (μυστήρια σύμφωνά τοις τῶν προτέρων μυθικοῖς διηγήμασι – *Praeparatio evangelica* XV 1, 2). It is interesting, by the way, that partly because of such associations, some modern scholars think it plausible to derive μῦθος, which has no satisfactory etymology so far, from the same onomatopoeic μῦ which is taken to be the root of μύω and μυστήρια.⁷

Whatever the etymological grounds may be, it is quite clear that both possible connotations of μύω, i.e. of “shutting” either “eyes” or “mouth,” turn out to be equally relevant for ancient reflections on the cultural and religious meaning of mysteries, and that they can peacefully coexist as two interdependent and complimentary interpretations. From the point of view of cultural studies, this should not be taken as a sort of “contamination” which sometimes bothers the partisans of a strictly “scientific” approach, which we may define as one which looks for a

⁶ translated by Doreen C. Innes

⁷ Frisk 1960-1972 (II): 265. Chantraine, however, vehemently opposes such a hypothesis, arguing that this association contradicts the semantics of μῦθος (Chantraine 1968-1970: 719). In my view, there is no conflict here: the initial meaning of μῦθος as “authoritative, significant word or speech” can easily produce a deviation into “inscrutability, mystery” presumed by μύω. The same semantic development is pursued, for instance, by G. Nagy (1990: 148-9, 426-29) in his analysis of the semantic link between αἶνος “authoritative speech” and αἰνῖγμα “riddle”. Cf. the passage from Plotinus (*Enneades* V 1, 7) quoted immediately above where both “mysteries” and “myths” are said to “talk in riddles” (αἰνίττονται). Cf. also Nagy 1996: 119-133, especially 129, on the specific meaning of μῦθος.

single solution. I wonder if it was this wide range of connotations that drove Burkert to a questionable conclusion that “the connection of *mysteries* with *myo*, “to shut one’s eyes or lips” may be just a popular etymology.”⁸ “Popular etymology” is, after all, the reflection of popular beliefs and therefore could tell us a lot about the actual meaning of terms and notions we explore.⁹ If this is the case, perhaps we don’t have to stop with these two familiar interpretations of the word μυστήρια, but can go beyond them to include other ways Greeks explained the inner sense of this mysterious concept.

We find an almost all-embracing list of possible etymologies for μυστήρια in Clement of Alexandria: Καίτοι δοκεῖ τὰ ὄργια καὶ τὰ μυστήρια δεῖν ἀτυμολογεῖν, τὰ μὲν ἀπὸ αἵματος ὀργῆς αἵματος Διὸς αἵματος πρὸς Δία γεγενεμένης, τὰ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ μύσους τοῦ συμβεβηκότος περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον· εἰ δὲ καὶ ἀπὸ Μυοῦντός τινος Ἀττικοῦ, ὃν ἐν κυνηγίᾳ διαφθάρηναι Ἀπολλόδωρος λέγει, οὐ φθόνος ὑμῶν δεδοξάσθαι τὰ μυστήρια ἐπιτυμβίῳ τιμῇ. πάρεστιν δὲ καὶ ἄλλως μυθήριά σοι νοεῖν, ἀντιστοιχοῦντων τῶν γραμμάτων, τὰ μυστήρια. θηρεύουσι γάρ, εἰω καὶ ἄλλοι ὠρινές, ἀτὰρ δὴ καὶ οἰαμῦθοι οἱ τοιοῖδε Θρακῶν τοὺς βαρβαρικωτάτους, Φρυγῶν τοὺς ἀνοητοτάτους, Ἑλλήνων τοὺς δεισιδαμοναῖς “It seems necessary to me to tell the etymologies of orgies and mysteries. The former is called so because of the anger (ὀργή) of Demeter against Zeus, whereas the latter is named because of uncleanness (μύσος) of things happening in connection with Dionysos; and if one associates the name with a certain Myon from Attica, whom Apollodorus says perished in a dog’s hunt, we have good reason to see in mysteries certain honors to the dead. It is possible to think, with letters changed, that it means “preservation of myths,” as myths (μῦθοι) are preserved (θηρεύω), the most barbarous ones by Thracians, the silliest ones by Phrygians, and the superstitious ones by Greeks, and some others by the others” (*Stromata* 2, 13). Apart from an already perceived connection with *myths*, and a common way of inventing an aetiological story of a certain Myon, one should pay attention to the association of mysteries with “uncleanness” (μύσος), thus making them, by negative association, a sort of “purification” or “cleansing.” It also reveals, of

⁸ Burkert 1987: 137.

⁹ It is worth noting here that ancient etymology, unlike the modern discipline, tended to reveal the multiplicity of meanings of a given word (see Lallot 1991, Herbermann 1991). It is quite suggestive also that the idea of “multiple” or “contaminational” etymology becomes more and more popular among contemporary scholars (see Toporov 1960; Georgiev 1982).

course, an important characteristic of mysteries, as in antiquity they were also viewed as a kind of cathartic expiation.

Another way of interpreting the term in question was to connect it with the idea of “satiation” or “quest for knowledge” – the latter being expressed by the Greek verb μῶμαι. This is how μυστήρια were etymologized by the Roman philosopher and rhetorician of the first century A.D., Lucius Annaeus Cornutus: “*mysia* is “satiation;” it is plausible that *mysteria* are named because of that, and from the fact that Demeter is also named Mysia by some people, or [they are called so] because of the “quest for knowledge” which is necessary to understand their difficult symbolism.” (μυσιᾶν τερῶ ἐστι κεκορησθαι· πιθανὸν γὰρ ἀντεῦθεν ἀνώνομάσθαι τὰ ἀμυστήρια, ὅθεν ἀκαὶ ἀμυσία ἀπαράατισιν ἀήα Δημήτηρ, ... ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀμῶσεως δεῖσθαι τὰ ὑσξύμβλητόν τι ἔχοντα – *On the Nature of the Gods* 57.2-5).

It seems that all the connotations of mysteries mentioned to this point – that of the “unseen”, “unspoken”, “purifying” or “searching for knowledge” rituals – turn out to be relevant or at least suggestive in the light of what mysteries meant for ancient Greeks. If that is true for four interpretations, why should we ignore the remaining fifth one, although it is, perhaps, the most funny and challenging of all? I mean the words of Aristotle, said *en passant* in the *Rhetoric* while discussing some types of ambiguity. Aristotle says, “One case is to say something by homonymy, that is, to say that a mouse (μῦς) is very important, as it is the cause of the most honorable rites, for the most honorable rites are mysteries” (ἐνὰ ἐτὸ παρὰ τὴν ὁμωνυμίαν, τὸ φάναι σπουδαῖον ἵναι μῦν, φ’ οὗ γ’ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀτιμιωτάτη πασῶν ἀτελετή· ἀτὰρ γὰρ ἀμυστήρια πασῶν ἀτιμιωτάτη ἀτελετή – *Rhetoric* 1401a13-15). Most commentaries just stress the world-play, μῦς-μυστήρια, but give no consideration of the possible reasons for it. Ancient scholiasts even thought it necessary to argue against Aristotle: “Mysteries are not named from the word for “mouse”, but from the verb μῶ, “to learn” (οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀμῶς ἀ ἐπωνομάσθη, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀμῶ, τὸ ἀμάνθω), thus following the above-mentioned etymology of Cornutus and starting the long sequence of commentators who over the centuries took this passage to be a mere joke. After all, homonymy is just homonymy, and nothing more. Not for Greeks, and not for Aristotle, I think: one can recall the seriousness of his numerous etymologies, which are sometimes very close to the type Plato practiced in the *Cratylus*.¹⁰ This example is immediately followed

¹⁰ cf., for instance, Aristotelic explanation of the word “science” as “something that sets the soul” (ἡ ἐπιστήμη ὁκεῖα ἵναί τι τὴν ψυχὴν ἐνεργεῖ – *Problemata*

in the text of *Rhetoric* by another one: one calls the dog a heavenly creature, bearing in mind that Pindar called Pan “the dog of the Great Goddess” (ὦ δὲ μάκαρ, ὄν ἐ τεέ μ γάλαξέ θεοῦ ἐ κύνα ἐ παντοδαπόν ἐ καλέουσιν ἑὸ λύμπιοι – fr. 96 Snell-Maehler). Pindar, at least, must have taken this epithet seriously, and we know other instances of praising dogs in antiquity (most of all, the famous oath of Socrates, although its origin and meaning is still a point of debate). So I will dare to treat this example with some attention, the more so as it is not the only occurrence of mice being associated with mysteries.

Another one is found in Athenaeus, who tells us that Dionysius I of Sicily, to whom other strange etymologies thought to be used in his tragedies were attributed, used the word μυστήρια to refer to “mouse-holes, because the mouse guards them” (Διονύσιον ... τὰς ἐ τῶν ἐ μυστῶν ἐ ἱεὺς δύνει μυστήρια ἐ κάλει, ὅτι ἐ τοὺς ἐ μῦς ἐ τηρεῖ – *Deipnosophistae* III 54, 11). And in Photius’ *Bibliotheca*, the Byzantine patriarch reports that “Iamblichus distinguishes three kinds of magic: that of grasshoppers, of lions and of mice, and after the latter mysteries were called, as the magic of mice was the first among all” (καὶ διεξέρχεται ἐὸ ἐ λᾶμβλιχος ἐ μαγικῆς ἐ ἴδη, μάγον ἐ ἀκρίδων ἐ καὶ μάγον ἐ λεόντων ἐ καὶ μάγον ἐ μῶν· ἐξ ἐ οὗ ἐ καλεῖσθαι ἐ καὶ τὰ ἐ μυστήρια ἐ ἀπὸ ἐ τῶν ἐ μῶν (πρώτην ἐ γὰρ ἐ εἶναι ἐ τὴν ἐ τῶν ἐ μῶν ἐ μαγικὴν – *Bibl.* 75b22.) Certainly, these two can be taken as just funny and crazy sayings, and they are often treated as such.¹¹ But can something serious be perceived in this peculiar association?

In order to answer this possibly quite superfluous question, one needs to investigate briefly the role of mice in popular Greek mythological and religious beliefs. The most famous figure in this context is, of course, Apollo the Mouse, Apollo Smintheus. This epithet is attested for Apollo already by Homer (*Iliad* 1, 39)¹² and then by the Orphics (34, 4 Kern), Strabo (13.1.48 and 64), Hesychius (s.v. σμίνθα), Aelian (*NA* 12.5), et al. According to scholia, mice were devastating the fields in Chryse in Asia Minor; Apollo punished them, and acquired this

956b40), which follows exactly the etymology of *Cratylus* (437a), or the interpretation of “nature” (φύσις) as “the rise of everything that grows” (ἡ ἐ τῶν ἐ φυσιομένων ἐ γένεσις – *Metaphysics* 1014b 16-17). In the latter case Aristotle ascribes length to the brief vowel u in the root of φύσις, and this lengthening presumably reflects the very semantics of “growth”. The argument here is in perfect accordance with the Platonic theory of “sound symbolism.”

¹¹ Significantly, Photius’ passage is usually not included in Iamblichus’ collection of fragments.

¹² and maybe even earlier in Mycenaean tablets: see [Baumbach 1971: 180](#).

title in commemoration of his deed. Cults of Apollo Smintheus existed in Asia Minor, mainly in the Troad, but also at Lesbos, Chios, Rhodes and other sites. He was represented with mice on numerous coins from Asia Minor, and a famous statue, made by Scopas and erected in Apollo's temple Smintheion in Chryse, depicted the god standing with his foot placed on top of a mouse (Strabo 13.1.48). It is worth noting that Apollo was worshipped in this cult as the protector of crops from the mice, and it is also suggestive for our future purposes that this function and eponym was shared with him (as many other functions, too) by Dionysus. Apollonius the Sophist, who compiled the *Lexicon Homericum* in the first or early second century A.D., mentions in his work that "the epithet Smintheus, according to Aristarchus, comes from Smynthe, a Trojan city. But Apion derives it from mice that are also called *smynthioi*, and at Rhodes there is a festival called *smynthia*, because Apollo and Dionysus extinguished there the mice who were destroying the crops in the vineyards" (Σμινθεῦ ἐπίθετον Ἀπόλλωνος, κατὰ τὸν Ἀρίσταρχον ἀπὸ πόλεως Τρωικῆς Σμίνθης καλουμένης. ὁὗ δὲ Ἀπίων ἀπὸ τῶν μυῶν, οἳ σμίνθιοι καλοῦνται· καὶ ἐν Ῥόδῳ σμίνθια ἑορτή, ὅτι ὡτῶν ὠμῶν ὥστε λυμαινομένων τὸν ὠκάρπὸν ὡτῶν ἄμπελων ὠτῶν Ἀπόλλων καὶ Διόνυσος διέφθειραν τοὺς ὠμύς – Apollonius, *Lexicon Homericum*.¹³

The cult of Apollo Smintheus in Chryse was also connected with a sort of totemistic myth in which mice played the crucial role. According to Strabo, the following legend existed about Trojans: "After Teucres left Crete, there was an oracle saying that they would find a new homeland there where *the earth-born* would attack them. And when they came, the story goes, in the region of Amaxiton, a great number of field mice burst forth, wishing to eat all the leather they had on their arms and utensils. And then they settled there" (ἐκ τῆς Κρήτης ἀφικόμενοις Τεύκροις ... χρησμός ἦν, αὐτόθι ποιήσασθαι τὴν ἐκ γῆς οἴῳ γηγενεῖς αὐτοῖς ἐπιθῶνται ὥστε μὴ ναιδὲ τοῦτ' αὐτοῖς ἀρᾶσι περὶ Ἀμαξιτόν· ὠκτωρὶ ἄρα πολὺ πλεονέκτου ἀνθρώπων ἀνθῆσαν ὡς διαφγεῖν ὅσα ἐκ τῶν ὡτῶν ὠκάρπων καὶ χρηστηρίων αὐτοῖς ἐκ αὐτόθι εἶναι – Strabo 13.1.48) The epithet "earth-born" (γγεγενεῖς) applied to mice seems also quite suggestive. Being dangerous for crops, mice are at the same time closely linked with earth; they are, as the crops, "fruits of the earth."

¹³ On the joint cult of Apollo and Dionysus Sminthei at Rhodes, see [Morelli 1959: 41-42, 162-164](#); [Detienne 2001: 147-158](#).

Association with Apollo¹⁴ provides a reason for the beliefs that mice have some magical, most of all prophetic, capacities.¹⁵ Aelian called them “the most prophetic animals” (ἡσαντὶ ἄρα ἡμαντικώτατοι ἡ τῶν ὥων καὶ ἡ μύες – *Varied Histories* 1.11), and Pliny agreed that they are “animals that one shouldn’t ignore, even in public prodigies” (*haut spernendum in ostentis etiam publicis animal* – *Natural History* 8.221), relying also on the authority of Persian sorcerers who thought mice to be “an animal most adequate for religious practices (*animal religionum capacissimum* – 30.19). Aelian also tells about one physiological peculiarity that makes mice a perfect object for a soothsayer’s attention: their liver becomes bigger or smaller in exact accordance with the cycles of the moon (*Nature of Animals* 2.56). Foreshadowing my final conclusions, I would like to draw attention to the fact that in antiquity the moon was associated with Artemis, Hecate and Persephone, and afterwards, certainly, with Isis. And the moon-goddess became quite an important figure in the ideology of mysteries.¹⁶

Since mice “physically” reflected the passage of time, it is no wonder that they themselves could predict changes of weather and seasons. Mainly, they were believed to show the approach of winter storms and heavy rains. Mouse cries are the sign for a severe winter (Aelian, *Nature of Animals* 7.8); they cease to gather in the fields before rainy weather (Theophrastus fr. 174.7); and the shrieking and dancing of mice predict the season of storms:

ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐδὲ μύες, τετριγότες εἴ ποτε ἡμᾶλλον ἡ
εὐδίοι ἐσκίρτησαν εἰκότα ὀρχηθμοῖσιν,
ἄσκεπτοι ἐγένοντο παλαιότεροις ἀνθρώποις,
καὶ μύεσσι μέριοι ποσὶ στιβάδα στρωφῶντες
κοίτης ἱμείρονται, ὅτ’ ὄμβροθ σήματα φαίνει.

Mice, too, as signs of storms, whenever with louder
squeaking than their wont they gamboled and seemed to

¹⁴ Again, as in the case with the epithet “earth-born”, we have here the mechanics typical for mythological consciousness. The fact that mice are opposed to Apollo doesn’t exclude the possibility for them to share in his functions. Actually, in mythology, negative links presuppose positive ones.

¹⁵ This fact is thoroughly investigated in Vladimir Toporov’s path-breaking article (1977), who connects mice with the other servants and companions of Apollo partly because of their prophetic powers.

¹⁶ The most obvious example is Lucius praying to Isis-Moon in the 11th book of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*.

dance in fair weather, were not unmarked by the weather-seers of old...Mice in the daytime toss straw and are fain to build a nest when Zeus shows signs of rain.¹⁷

Aratus, *Phaenomena* 1131-1141.

“Shrieking” (τρίζω) and “dancing” (ὀρχηθμός) of mice are the signs of their unnatural and thus prophetic behavior. To give one more example, one can quote Theophrastus saying that “shrieking and dancing mice signify the stormy season” (fr. 6.41). These “dancing choruses” (χοροί) of mice are sometimes described as very akin to some ecstatic processions of Bacchants and Corybants. For instance, in the scholia to the Aratus passage quoted above, mice are said “to dance and spring into the air” (σκιρτάω) – exactly the same phraseology is applied to Bacchae in Aristophanes’ *Ploutos* 761 and *Wasps* 1305. On the other hand, the verb τρίζω, designating the strange “creaking” sound produced by mice, is constantly used in Greece, from Homer (*Iliad* 23.101; *Odyssey* 24. 5, 9) on, in the descriptions of the voices of the dead, or ghosts (ψυχάι). Being associated with earth (γηγενεῖς – Strabo 13.1.48, quoted above), mice might also be included in rites connected with honoring the dead. Ovid, for instance, described the Roman festival *Feralia*, often thought to be parallel to Greek *Anthesteria*, in these words:

Ecce anus in mediis residens annosa puellis
sacra facit Tacitae vix tamen ipsa tacet,
et digitis tria tura tribus sub limine ponit,
qua brevis occultum mus sibi fecit iter.

And then an elderly woman, sitting among the girls,
makes offerings to the Mute Goddess, not being silent herself.
She takes three pieces of incense with three fingers and puts
them under the porch, where a mouse made a secret passage for
itself (*Fasti* 2.571-574).

In relation to our topic, we certainly can’t ignore the “Mute Goddess” serving as a symbol for the secret rites connected with the dead, reminding us about the “unsaid” content of ancient mysteries.¹⁸

¹⁷ Transl. by G.R. Mair

¹⁸ In Roman tradition *Tacita*, the “Mute Goddess,” was equated with the goddess of the earth and the dead (she was the central figure of another Roman festival, *Larentalia*, also celebrating the dead). Hence her Greek counterparts should have been Demeter and Persephone, main heroines of the Eleusinian mysteries.

The magical power of mice was also reflected in the role they played in ancient medicine. In particular, they were believed to cure blindness and bad sight. Pliny and Marcellus Empiricus advise, as treatment for diseases of the eye, that a blind new-born mouse be placed over the eyes of the sick person. It is interesting, by the way, that the same belief is attested throughout the centuries all over the Balkans – e.g. in Serbia, Romania etc. (Toporov 1977: 58). The idea of healing is also reflected in another animal close to the mouse – a blind rat who was the sacred animal of Asclepius.¹⁹ So it seems that mice were associated in ritual both with being “mute”, as in Ovid, and being “blind” in popular medicine – again, a notable hint for our search.²⁰

Speaking about popular beliefs, one should also take into consideration the idea of mice being one of the most, if not the most, sexual animals, famous for numerous progenies. Theophrastus describes mice as “giving multiple birth” (πολύγονον ζῷον), Aelian supports this view (*Nature of animals* 12.10) quoting as an example several poetic passages, including a description of a lustful woman by a comic Epicrates (IV century B.C.):

τελέωσῃ ἐμ’ ὑπὴλθενῇ κατάρατος μαστροπόσῃ
 ἐπομνύουσα τὰν Κόραν τὰν Ἀρτεμίνῃ
 τὰν Φερρέφατταν ὡσὶ ἀμαλῖς, ὡς παρθένος,
 ὡς πῶλος ἀδμήης· ἦσῃ ἄρ’ ἦν μυωνίαῃ
 At the end this wretched procuress approached me, swearing
 the names of Kore,
 Artemis and Pherrephatta, like a heifer, like a girl, like a
 foal-maiden: such was this mouse-hole.

Here two points must be stressed: first, the fact that the girl compared with a mouse is addressing maiden-goddesses, and especially Kore-

In the context of Vladimir Toporov’s arguments for the connection of mice with Muses (see note 11 above) Ovid’s evidence is also valuable, as *Tacita* was also one of the Muses, and specifically esteemed in Rome as such (see Plutarch *Numa* 8.6)

¹⁹ Regarding the blind rat, and the connection between Asclepius, Apollo Smintheus, on the one hand, and Indic Rudra and Ganesh (with a blind rat and a mouse, respectively, as their sacred animals) on the other, see an old but still relevant work of H. Gregoire (1949).

²⁰ As for the use of *mus caecus*, “blind mouse,” in medicine, cf. also the recipes contained in the poetic treatise by Quintus Serenus (II-III centuries A.D), *Liber medicinalis* 46, 1, 879.

Persephone (Pherrephatta is her constant and dangerous epithet), and the word *μῶνία* which in Greek meant both mouse-hole and female genitals. Hence, here we have a complex play on the interdependent notions of mice, sexuality and, through Persephone-Pherrephatta, the world of death.

If we sum up the whole range of connotations, it turns out that mice were associated in antiquity with crops (which they damage), earth, the underworld, magic and prophecy (in particular, predicting weather changes relevant for agriculture), blindness (being blind and healing blindness), extreme sexuality and abundant progeny. It is striking how this complex of associations reminds us of the religious beliefs relevant for fertility rituals and cults of the dead, and as a continuation of them, with mysteries as such. Some remote links of mice with Dionysus and Persephone also speak in favor of such a connection. We have also direct iconographic evidence relating mice to Demeter, in the form of coins on which they are present together. There is, for instance, a number of coins from Metapontum in Italy, dated to the end of the classical / beginning of Hellenistic times.²¹ On these the head of Demeter is depicted on the front side, and a stack, or ear, of barley and a mouse on the reverse. A silver stater from Metapontum illustrates this type (see image).²² It is well-known that a stack of barley was a sacred symbol of the Eleusinian mysteries, where it was shown to the initiates as the apotheosis of the ritual. It is worth noting in this context also a rare, strange and yet unidentified epithet of Demeter *Mysia* which is loosely explained as “cleaning,” since it is connected with the words of *μῶς* type (see Cornutus, *On the Nature of the Gods* 57.2-5, quoted above); morphologically, however, with all probability it might signify “mouse-goddess” as well.²³

²¹ Metapontum was one of the earliest Greek colonies in the so-called Magna Graecia, founded, according to legend, either by Nestor or by Epeius, the creator of the Trojan horse.

²² Image used by kind permission of the British Museum, *BM* no. 122; [Poole 1963: 254](#); [Johnston 1990: 12, 67-68](#).

²³ As mouse, or more precisely “a mouse-path” was associated with the ritual, dedicated to the “Mute Goddess” (see note 14 above), sacred silence of Demeter in the context of Persephone myth and Eleusinian ceremonies (see [Kerenyi 1967: 51](#)) could be seen as a possible parallel.



If Demeter and, respectively, Kore and Dionysus were associated with mice, Eleusis might serve as a possible focus for all indirect parallels we were contemplating. Greek mysteries, and Eleusinian mysteries, above all, were mainly about “gift of grain” on the one hand and salvation from death on the other. The mouse could be an appropriate symbol, as it combined in itself both of those ideas, with all their positive and negative connotations.

This general symbolism is also supported by a range of comparative evidence I will briefly enumerate. In Hittite ritual texts (KUB XXVII 67), an “Old Woman” (Sumerogram SAL ŠU.GI) saves a

person from death by attaching a piece of tin, or copper (a symbol of death), to a mouse which is sent as a sort of replacement to the underworld.²⁴ In Asia Minor, mice were connected with the highest female deity already as early as in the culture of Čatal-Hüyük (VII-VI millennium B.C.) where votive figures of mice were discovered in the tombs of higher priestesses. It is worth mentioning that such votive mice were also found in the Greek acropolis of Argos in Larissa in the eastern Peloponnese. The same connection is true for the mythological traditions of Slavic and Germanic people.²⁵ It is worth noting that mice were also important cult animals in Egyptian religion, where their votive figures are also often found in graves. They were one of the sacred animals of Hor, and naturally were ritual opponents of the sacred cats of the goddess Bast (Bastet). In some versions of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, we find mention of a goddess with a mouse-head who symbolizes the kingdom of death.²⁶ This is also quite understandable in light of the association of mice with death in the mythology and folklore of various peoples, both Indo-European and not.²⁷

Of course, all this is no more than a bunch of indirect and highly hypothetical data. I am far from supposing that Greek *μυστήρια* were actually derived from *μῦς* “mouse.” But the associations are there: and if all other connotations of the *mu*-stem turn out to reflect different aspects of the Greek experience of mysteries, perhaps it is worth bearing in mind that Aristotelian “homonymy” might also hint at something more real than mere word-play.²⁸ Just to finish with one more provocative example. Everybody now agrees upon the Eleusinian “background” for Aristophanes’ *Frogs*,²⁹ but the problem of frogs being its main chorus

²⁴ see Gamkrelidze., Ivanov 1984: 531; again, it can be looked upon as a parallel to Roman *Feralia* (see notes 14, 18 above).

²⁵ These people called the Milky Way the “Mouse Way”, and identified it as the road to the underworld (Vasmer 1986-1987 (III) :27)

²⁶ Toporov 1977: 78.

²⁷ Jobes 1962: 1131-1132; Mify 1991 (II): 190.

²⁸ Still, if we remember the etymological problems J. Pokorny has with reconstructing **mu(s)* – the stem for “shutting lips or eyes” on the Indo-European level – with no problems at all with **mus-* stem for “mouse”, one could wonder whether this “homonymy” could have been actual even then?

²⁹ For the most recent and exhaustive analysis of Aristophanes’ allusions to the ideology and ritual practice of mysteries see Bowie 1993, Lada-Richards 1999.

(and correspondingly, the title of the play) still remains kind of a riddle.³⁰ But if we bear in mind that the *Batrachomyomachia* could have been written in the first half of the fifth century BC., that is, not long before the *Frogs* appeared on stage, we can see it in a new light.³¹ If *mystai* in comedy could be somehow associated with “mice”, then two half-choruses of “frogs and mice” would make a perfect comic effect and, moreover, an effect very typical for Aristophanes. His humor is always multi-dimensional, simultaneously relying on real, ritual and literary allusions. In that case, Eleusinian mysteries, on the one hand, and a mock pseudo-Homeric poem, on the other, gives a perfect background for such an interplay. And note another significant point: Aristophanes never in his comedy refers directly to the $\mu\sigma\tau\alpha\iota - \mu\tilde{\upsilon}\varsigma$ consonance! Knowing his love of any possible word-play, how can we explain that if not by his wish to avoid direct mention of the real details of the ritual in order to keep off the charges of blasphemy? And if such a guess has some truth in it, might there have been then a tiny animal in the $\kappa\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\eta$ of the Eleusinian mysteries?

³⁰ Of course, the existence of the temple and cult of Dionysus Limnaios, “Dionysus the Marshy”, in Athens gives a solution, but only a partial one. See details of the discussion in [Dover 1994: 56](#).

³¹ It is well-known that Plutarch (*De Herodoti malignitate* 873F3-4) and the Suda lexicon ascribed this mock poem to Pigres from Halicarnassus who lived in the time of Xerxes. Some editors accepted this dating (Evelyn-White 1982: xli); however, now scholars tend to look at *Batrachomyomachy* as a Hellenistic poem ([Wölke 1978: 63](#), [Most 1993: 27-40](#)). The same view is expressed by M. West, who thinks the poem, nevertheless, belongs to a very ancient Eastern tradition of “animal epics” ([West 2003: 229](#)).

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