Orpheus and Eurydice from the *Metamorphoses*

*Ovid*

Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BCE-17 CE) was a renowned and sometimes controversial poet whose work, along with that of Virgil and Horace, characterizes the “golden age” of Roman poetry. Even though he often infuriated the rather puritanical Emperor Augustus, his poetry proved to be the most prominent Roman mythological inheritance of the Medieval West. Medieval writers found a rich source for their own invention in his *Metamorphoses*, a mock epic with the theme of transformations. In this passage, he describes the tale of Eurydice and Orpheus, and is the ultimate source, together with Virgil’s account, of all subsequent tellings of this archetypal tale.

The story begins just as Hymen, the God of Marriage and Weddings, has departed, after having attended the Nuptials of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Veiled in a saffron mantle, through the air unmeasured, after the strange wedding, Hymen departed swiftly for Ciconian land; regardless and not listening to the voice of tuneful Orpheus. Truly Hymen there was present during the festivities of Orpheus and Eurydice, but gave no happy omen, neither hallowed words nor joyful glances; and the torch he held would only sputter, fill the eyes with smoke, and cause no blaze while waving. The result of that sad wedding, proved more terrible than such foreboding fates. While through the grass delighted Naiads wandered with the bride, a serpent struck its venomed tooth in her soft ankle—and she died. After the bard of Rhodope had mourned, and filled the highs of heaven with the moans of his lament, determined also the dark underworld should recognize the misery of death, he dared descend by the Taenarian gate down to the gloomy Styx. And there passed through pale-glimmering phantoms, and the ghosts escaped from sepulchres, until he found Persephone and Pluto, master-king of shadow realms below; and then began to strike his tuneful lyre, to which he sang:

“O deities of this dark world beneath the earth! this shadowy underworld, to which
all mortals must descend! If it can be called lawful, and if you will suffer speech of strict truth (all the winding ways of Falsity forbidden) I come not down here because of curiosity to see the glooms of Tartarus and have no thought to bind or strangle the three necks of the Medusan Monster, vile with snakes.

But I have come, because my darling wife stepped on a viper that sent through her veins death-poison, cutting off her coming years.

“If able, I would bear it, I do not deny my effort—but the god of Love has conquered me—a god so kindly known in all the upper world. We are not sure he can be known so well in this deep world, but have good reason to conjecture he is not unknown here, and if old report almost forgotten, that you stole your wife the same as others. By this Place of Fear this huge void and these vast and silent realms, renew the life-thread of Eurydice.

“All things are due to you, and though on earth it happens we may tarry a short while, slowly or swiftly we must go to one abode; and it will be our final home. Long and tenaciously you will possess unquestioned mastery of the human race. She also shall be yours to rule, when full of age she shall have lived the days of her allotted years. So I ask of you possession of her few days as a boon. But if the fates deny to me this prayer for my true wife, my constant mind must hold me always so that I can not return—and you may triumph in the death of two!”

While he sang all his heart said to the sound of his sweet lyre, the bloodless ghosts themselves were weeping, and the anxious Tantalus stopped clutching at return-flow of the wave, Ixion’s twisting wheel stood wonder-bound; and Tityus’s liver for a while escaped the vultures, and the listening Belides forgot their sieve-like bowls and even you, O Sisyphus! sat idly on your rock!

Then Fame declared that conquered by the song of Orpheus, for the first and only time the hard cheeks of the fierce Eumenides were wet with tears: nor could the royal queen, nor he who rules the lower world deny the prayer of Orpheus; so they called to them Eurydice, who still was held among the new-arriving shades, and she obeyed the call by walking to them with slow steps, yet halting from her wound. So Orpheus then received his wife; and Pluto told him he might now ascend from these Avernian vales up to the light, with his Eurydice; but, if he turned his eyes to look at her,
the gift of her delivery would be lost.

They picked their way in silence up a steep and gloomy path of darkness. There remained but little more to climb till they would touch earth’s surface, when in fear he might again lose her, and anxious for another look at her, he turned his eyes so he could gaze upon her. Instantly she slipped away. He stretched out to her his despairing arms, eager to rescue her, or feel her form, but could hold nothing save the yielding air.

Dying the second time, she could not say a word of censure of her husband’s fault; what had she to complain of—his great love?

Her last word spoken was, “Farewell!” which he could barely hear, and with no further sound she fell from him again to Hades. Struck quite senseless by this double death of his dear wife, he was as fixed from motion as the frightened one who saw the triple necks of Cerberus, that dog whose middle neck was chained. The sight filled him with terror he had no escape from, until petrified to stone; or like Olenos, changed to stone, because he fastened on himself the guilt of his wife. O unfortunate Lethaea!

Too boastful of your beauty, you and he, united once in love, are now two stones upon the mountain Ida, moist with dew.

Orpheus implored in vain the ferry man to help him cross the River Styx again, but was denied the very hope of death. Seven days he sat upon Death’s riverbank, in squalid misery and without all food—nourished by grief, anxiety, and tears—complaining that the Gods of Erebus were pitiless, at last he wandered back, until he came to lofty Rhodope and Haemus, beaten by the strong north wind.

Three times the Sun completed his full course to watery Pisces, and in all that time, shunning all women, Orpheus still believed his love-pledge was forever. So he kept
away from women, though so many grieved, because he took no notice of their love.
The only friendship he enjoyed was given to the young men of Thrace.

While with his songs, Orpheus, the bard of Thrace, allured the trees, the savage animals, and even the insensate rocks, to follow him;

Ciconian matrons, with their raving breasts concealed in skins of forest animals, from the summit of a hill observed him there, attuning love songs to a sounding harp.

One of those women, as her tangled hair was tossed upon the light breeze shouted, “See! Here is the poet who has scorned our love!”

Then hurled her spear at the melodious mouth of great Apollo’s bard: but the spear’s point, trailing in flight a garland of fresh leaves, made but a harmless bruise and wounded not.

The weapon of another was a stone, which in the very air was overpowered by the true harmony of his voice and lyre, and so disabled lay before his feet, as asking pardon for that vain attempt.

The madness of such warfare then increased.

All moderation is entirely lost, and a wild Fury overcomes the right.—

Although their weapons would have lost all force, subjected to the power of Orpheus’s harp, the clamorous discord of their box-wood pipes, the blaring of their horns, their tambourines and clapping hands and Bacchana-lian yells, with hideous discords drowned his voice and harp.—

At last the stones that heard his song no more fell crimson with the Thracian poet’s blood.

Before his life was taken, the maenads turned their threatening hands upon the many birds, which still were charmed by Orpheus as he sang, the serpents, and the company of beasts—

fabulous audience of that worshipped bard.

And then they turned on him their blood-stained hands:

and flocked together swiftly, as wild birds, which, by some chance, may see the bird of night beneath the sun. And as the savage dogs rush on the doomed stag, loosed some bright fore-noon, on blood-sand of the amphitheatre; they rushed against the bard, with swift hurled thyrsi which, adorned with emerald leaves had not till then been used for cruelty.

And some threw clods, and others branches torn
from trees; and others threw flint stones
at him,
and, that no lack of weapons might
restrain
their savage fury then, not far from there
by chance they found some oxen which
turned up
the soil with ploughshares, and in fields
nearby
were strong-armed peasants, who with
eager sweat
worked for the harvest as they dug hard
fields;
and all those peasants, when they saw
the troop
of frantic women, ran away and left
their implements of labor strown upon
deserted fields—harrowes and heavy rakes
and their long spades
after the savage mob
had seized upon those implements, and
torn
to pieces oxen armed with threatening
horns,
they hastened to destroy the harmless
bard,
devoted Orpheus; and with impious hate,
murdered him, while his out-stretched
hands implored
their mercy—the first and only time his
voice
had no persuasion. O great Jupiter!
Through those same lips which had
controlled the rocks
and which had overcome ferocious beasts,
his life breathed forth, departed in the air.

The mournful birds, the stricken animals,
the hard stones and the weeping woods,
all these
that often had followed your inspiring
voice,
bewailed your death; while trees dropped
their green leaves,
mourning for you, as if they tore their
hair.
They say sad rivers swelled with their
own tears—
naiads and dryads with dishevelled hair
wore garments of dark color.

His torn limbs
were scattered in strange places. Hebrus
then
received his head and harp—and, wonderful!
While his loved harp was floating down
the stream,
it mourned for him beyond my power
to tell.
His tongue though lifeless, uttered a
mournful sound
and mournfully the river's banks replied:
onward borne by the river to the sea
they left their native stream and reached
the shore
of Lesbos at Methymna. Instantly,
a furious serpent rose to attack the head
of Orpheus, cast up on that foreign
sand—
the hair still wet with spray. Phoebus at
last
appeared and saved the head from that
attack:
before the serpent could inflict a sting,
he drove it off, and hardened its wide jaws
to rigid stone.

Meanwhile the fleeting shade
of Orpheus had descended under earth:
remembering now those regions that he
saw
when there before, he sought Eurydice
through fields frequented by the blest;
and when
he found her, folded her in eager arms. Then lovingly they wandered side by side, or he would follow when she chose to lead, or at another time he walked in front, looking back, safely,—at Eurydice.

Bacchus would not permit the wickedness of those who slaughtered Orpheus to remain unpunished. Grieving for the loss of his loved bard of sacred rites, at once he bound with twisted roots the feet of everyone of those Edonian women who had caused the crime of Orpheus’s death.

Their toes grew long. He thrust the sharp points in the solid earth. As when a bird entangled in a snare, hid by the cunning fowler, knows too late that it is held, then vainly beats its wings, and fluttering only makes more tight the noose with every struggle; so each woman-fiend whose feet were sinking in the soil, when she attempted flight, was held by deepening roots.

And while she looks down where her toes and nails and feet should be, she sees wood growing up Full of delirious grief, endeavoring to smite with right hand on her changing thigh, she strikes on solid oak. Her tender breast and shoulders are transformed to rigid oak. You would declare that her extended arms are real branches of a forest tree, and such a thought would be the very truth.¹

Endnotes: