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.*

Nymphs Listening to the Songs of Orpheus, by Charles François Jalabert.

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

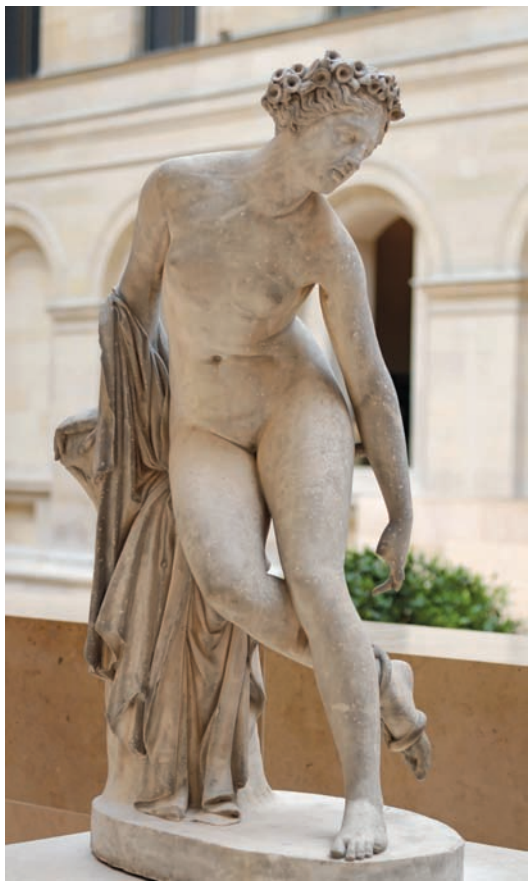
all mortals must descend! If it can be
called lawful, and if you will suffer speech
of strict truth (all the winding ways
of Falsity forbidden) I come not
down here because of curiosity
to see the glooms of Tartarus and have
no thought to bind or strangle the three necks
of the Medusan Monster, vile 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
is not a fiction, Love united you
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,



Dying Eurydice, Charles-François Lebœuf (Nanteuil) (1822), exhibited at the Salon of 1824. Collection of the Louvre. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen.

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.—

Statue of Ovid (1887) in Constanta, Romania, by Ettore Ferrari

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 Bacchanalian 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.

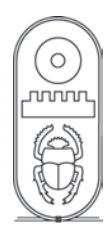
And some threw clods, and others branches torn

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—harrows 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:

[1] Ovid, *Metamorphoses Book* 10:1-86; 11:1-84, translated by Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922). Available at *http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Ov.+Met.+1.1*