

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 telling 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 venomous 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,
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.¹

Endnote:

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922). Available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Ov.+Met.+1.1>.

