

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk X:1-85 Orpheus and Eurydice

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Hymen, called by the voice of Orpheus, departed, and, dressed in his saffron robes, made his way through the vast skies to the Ciconian coast: but in vain. He was present at Orpheus's marriage, true, but he did not speak the usual words, display a joyful expression, or bring good luck. The torch, too, that he held, sputtered continually, with tear-provoking fumes, and no amount of shaking contrived to light it properly. The result was worse than any omens. While the newly wedded bride, Eurydice, was walking through the grass, with a crowd of naiads as her companions, she was killed, by a bite on her ankle, from a snake, sheltering there. When Thracian Orpheus, the poet of Rhodope, had mourned for her, greatly, in the upper world, he dared to go down to Styx, through the gate of Taenarus, also, to see if he might not move the dead.

Through the weightless throng, and the ghosts that had received proper burial, he came to Persephone, and the lord of the shadows, he who rules the joyless kingdom. Then striking the lyre-strings to accompany his words, he sang: 'O gods of this world, placed below the earth, to which, all, who are created mortal, descend; if you allow me, and it is lawful, to set aside the fictions of idle tongues, and speak the truth, I have not come here to see dark Tartarus, nor to bind Cerberus, Medusa's child, with his three necks, and snaky hair. My wife is the cause of my journey. A viper, she trod on, diffused its venom into her body, and robbed her of her best years. I longed to be able to accept it, and I do not say I have not tried: Love won.

He is a god well known in the world above, though I do not know if that is so here: though I imagine him to be here, as well, and if the story of that rape in ancient times is not a lie, you also were wedded by Amor. I beg you, by these fearful places, by this immense abyss, and the silence of your vast realms, reverse Eurydice's swift death. All things are destined to be yours, and though we delay a while, sooner or later, we hasten home. Here we are all bound, this is our final abode, and you hold the longest reign over the human race. Eurydice, too, will be yours to command, when she has lived out her fair span of years, to maturity. I ask this benefit as a gift; but, if the fates refuse my wife this kindness, I am determined not to return: you can delight in both our deaths.'

The bloodless spirits wept as he spoke, accompanying his words with the music. Tantalus did not reach for the ever-retreating water: Ixion's wheel was stilled: the vultures did not pluck at Tityus's liver: the Belides, the daughters of Danaüs, left their water jars: and you, Sisyphus, perched there, on your rock. Then they say, for the first time, the faces of the Furies were wet with tears, won over by his song: the king of the deep, and his royal bride, could not bear to refuse his prayer, and called for Eurydice.

She was among the recent ghosts, and walked haltingly from her wound. The poet of Rhodope received her, and, at the same time, accepted this condition, that he must not turn his eyes behind him, until he emerged from the vale of Avernus, or the gift would be null and void.

They took the upward path, through the still silence, steep and dark, shadowy with dense fog, drawing near to the threshold of the upper world. Afraid she was no longer there, and eager to see her, the lover turned his eyes. In an instant she dropped back, and he, unhappy man, stretching out his arms to hold her and be held, clutched at nothing but the receding air. Dying a second time, now, there was no complaint to her husband (what, then, could she complain of, except that she had been loved?). She spoke a last 'farewell' that, now, scarcely reached his ears, and turned again towards that same place.

Stunned by the double loss of his wife, Orpheus was like that coward who saw Cerberus, the three-headed dog, chained by the central neck, and whose fear vanished with his nature, as stone transformed his body. Or like Olenos, and you, his Lethaea, too proud of your beauty: he wished to be charged with your crime, and seem guilty himself: once wedded hearts, you are now rocks set on moist Mount Ida.

Orpheus wished and prayed, in vain, to cross the Styx again, but the ferryman fended him off. Still, for seven days, he sat there by the shore, neglecting himself and not taking nourishment. Sorrow, troubled thought, and tears were his food. He took himself to lofty Mount Rhodope, and Haemus, swept by the winds, complaining that the gods of Erebus were cruel.

Three times the sun had ended the year, in watery Pisces, and Orpheus had abstained from the love of women, either because things ended badly for him, or because he had sworn to do so. Yet, many felt a desire to be joined with the poet, and many grieved at rejection. Indeed, he was the first of the Thracian people to transfer his love to young boys, and enjoy their brief springtime, and early flowering, this side of manhood.

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