

Orpheus and Eurydice (X.1-77)



Orpheus, Dis & Proserpina - Francois Perrier, 1600-1650

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The story of Orpheus' marriage to Eurydice, her early death and his trip to the Underworld to reclaim her wind up with her falling back when his love drives him to glance back to see her. The danger of looking back is seen also with the biblical story of Lot's wife, who did look back to see her destroyed city and was turned to a pillar of salt; but here the person who commits the wrong, as defined by the gods as a condition for her release, sees his beloved wife punished for his transgression. In the part of the story presented here, Orpheus emerges to a prolonged period of mourning. Eventually, according to Ovid in Book XI.1-84, some Bacchantes were so mad at Orpheus because he ignored them in the midst of their rites that they tore him apart, much as Pentheus' female relatives did to him in III.529-733.

Orpheus is the most celebrated singer and musician in mythology; his singing and playing of the lyre were so good that everyone and everything, even stones, stopped to listen to him. Ovid plays with this concept in his presentation of Orpheus' song to Dis and Proserpina; although various figures undergoing punishment pause just to hear him, his song is very impolitic, reminding Dis and Proserpina of their unorthodox courtship and marriage. Using his usual mix of serious theme with a humorous perspective intruding constantly, Ovid has Orpheus present an argument that is not very convincing and ends with a threat unlikely to move the rulers of the Underworld. Some critics have suggested that Ovid is contrasting his poetic skills with Orpheus and by "quoting" the speech Ovid demonstrates his superior talent, although it may be that Ovid is simply making a joke about artists' infatuation with their self-perceptions and beliefs.

Outline:

1-10 The marriage and immediate death of Eurydice.

11-39 Orpheus goes to the Underworld and asks the gods for the return of his wife.

40-49 The effect of Orpheus song on the souls there is strong and compels the gods to release Eurydice.

50-64 Orpheus is told he may not look back until both are in the world above; he breaks the condition and Eurydice falls back to the Underworld.

65-77 Orpheus is stunned and grieves when he cannot re-enter the Underworld; finally he returns to the inhospitable mountains of Thrace.