The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

Variations on the Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

As classicist M. Owen Lee said in his book entitled Virgil as Orpheus, “A great artist never touches a myth without developing, expanding, and sometimes radically changing it.” There have been many different interpretations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice; the first versions harkening back to Ancient Greek myths and frescoes, which parlayed themselves into poems, songs, operas, and paintings for centuries. Sarah Ruhl’s Eurydice is unique among these, in that instead of focusing on the story of Orpheus, the great demigod and musician with legendary powers of reincarnation, it focuses on the story of Eurydice, whose action in the play (calling out to Orpheus as they ascend into the world) is what causes her return back to the underworld. She is given both more agency and a more poignant dilemma than in most other variations on the myth, the most drastic of which is the relationship she cultivates with her dead father. But to further understand these differences, we should first take a look at the origin of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, found in its first complete version in Virgil’s Georgics, and a generation later in Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

To understand the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, we first must fully comprehend the story of Persephone. Persephone, goddess of the Underworld, was the beautiful daughter of Demeter and Zeus. One day when she was a young maiden, she was out picking flowers with some Nymphs when Hades rose up from a cleft in the earth and stole her away to be his bride. Demeter searched everywhere for her lost daughter, and eventually Helios, the Sun, told her what happened. Zeus forced Hades to return Persephone to the upper world; however, Hades tricked Persephone into eating pomegranate seeds (and those who eat and drink in the underworld must stay there for eternity). Therefore, Persephone was able to be reunited with her mother, but had to return to the underworld for one season each year. This myth originally explained the seasons. It is vital to understand this story because Persephone’s sympathy for Orpheus for having lost a loved one is part of what allows her to give him permission to regain his bride.

Virgil’s Georgics

In this version of the myth, Eurydice was fleeing from the shepherd Aristaeus, a demigod in his adolescence, not yet fully matured who tended to cause trouble. She fled, headlong along a river, and didn’t see the poisonous snake that lurked in the high grass. It bit her, and she died. Orpheus, son of Apollo (sometimes of the Thracian river god Oeagrus) and the muse Calliope, was famous for his beautiful music and was married to Eurydice. When she died, his song made the whole world weep; the stones, the trees, and the waters. He went through the gates of hell to find Hades to get his love back. He played his sad music and Cerberus (the three headed dog) was silenced, the snakes in the Furies’ hair were transfixed, and Ixion’s wheel stopped turning. Persephone, goddess of the underworld, commanded that he go back the way he came and that Eurydice was to follow behind, unseen.

Just as they were coming on the brink of the upper world (light was in sight), Orpheus was seized by what Virgil describes as “the madness of love,” and turned to look back at Eurydice. Virgil claims that those in hell would forgive him if they only knew the madness of love. Eurydice cried “What is it, what madness, Orpheus, was it that has destroyed us, you and me, oh look!” Sleep begins to cover her swimming eyes, and she reaches her hands out, towards him, forevermore as she falls back into the depths of hell.

For seven months afterwards, he lay beside the river Strymon and wept, and charming the trees with his sad songs. One day, the Ciconian Bacchantes in a nocturnal orgy tore his body to pieces and scattered them everywhere. He is never to see his love again. However, his lute plays the saddest songs as it floats down the river, and though he is beheaded, he still sings his sad songs.

Ovid’s Metamorphoses

Orpheus is a musician and poet of Thrace, the son of Apollo and Calliope, who is in love with and marrying Eurydice. Their wedding doesn’t go as planned: Hymen didn’t bring the usual joyous fervor he brought to weddings, and the torch he held sputtered throughout the ceremony. Later that day, she was roaming in a field with nymphs when she got bit by a poisonous snake and died. Orpheus played a sad song that made the whole world weep. He went to Hades to ask for his wife back, and played him his sad song. The song stopped the waters of hell, Ixion’s wheel, the eating of the vultures, and the Furies even wept. Sisyphus sat rapt on his rock. At the urging of Persephone, Hades allowed for Eurydice to return to the upper world on the condition that Orpheus not look back at her throughout their trek out of the Underworld. The two made it almost all the way to the upper world— the light was in sight when Orpheus, fearing Eurydice would faint, looked back. Eurydice fell back into the depths of the Underworld, making no complaint—for she was loved.

Orpheus was not allowed to cross the river Styx a second time, and he fasted on the banks of the river in anguish for seven days. For three years after, he held himself aloof from women, though they burned in passion for him. He eventually took to living in the forests near the river, castrated himself, and sang his sad songs to the trees, which were charmed by him. One day, a group of Thracian women found him singing on the banks of the river and beat him to death. His sad music and Cerebrus (the three headed dog) was silenced, the snakes in the Furies’ hair were transfixed, and Ixion’s wheel stopped turning.

Significant Differences in these Interpretations

Of the most significant differences in these interpretations is that Ovid’s version seems on the whole kinder than Virgil’s. The mischievous shepherd, Aristaeus (perhaps seen in Ruhl’s version as the Nasty Interesting Man) doesn’t exist, it is entirely the fault of Orpheus’s temporary madness that he is torn from his love forever (instead of, in Ovid’s, how he is simply concerned his wife may faint). And importantly, in Ovid’s telling of the tale, the lovers are eventually reunited in the Underworld, while in Virgil’s they are not. Below are some further interpretations of the myth from around this time period.

Other Interpretations of the Myth

EURIPIDES: In his earliest surviving play, Euripides tells the story of Admetus, King of Thassaly, who allowed his wife to die in his place. He claims that if he only had the song of Orpheus, he would be able to move the powers of hell to get his wife back.

PLATO: In this version, Orpheus was only given a phantom version of his wife. According to Plato, because he was a musician he didn’t want to die for his love, so he died at the hands of women. It should be pointed out that Plato was against music making.

ISOCRATES: In Busiris, Isocrates (an ancient Greek Rhetorician and orator) wrote that Orpheus successfully got out of the Underworld with Eurydice, and implied he was the leader of a cult that promised reincarnation. Other versions of the myth also imply that Orpheus held secrets about the afterlife, and was descending into the Underworld to find them.