

Vergil, *Georgics* 4.453-527: Orpheus and Eurydice
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NOTE: Vergil's story of Orpheus and Eurydice is a story-within-a-story. The hero Aristaeus has lost his swarm of bees (which are vital for agriculture), and he has captured the prophetic old man of the sea, Proteus, in the hopes of learning how to regain them. Proteus tells Aristaeus that he has fallen out of divine favor because he is responsible for the death of Eurydice.

“Not for nothing does divine anger harass you:
you atone for a heavy crime: it is Orpheus, wretched man,
455 who brings this punishment on you, no less than you deserve
if the fates did not oppose it: he raves madly for his lost wife.

She, doomed girl, running headlong along the stream,
so as to escape you, did not see the fierce snake, that kept
to the riverbank, in the deep grass under her feet.
460 But her crowd of Dryad friends filled the mountaintops
with their cry: the towers of Rhodope wept, and the heights
of Pangaea, and Thrace, the warlike land of Rhesus,
and the Getae, the Hebrus, and Orythia, Acte's child.
Orpheus, consoling love's anguish, with his hollow lyre,
465 sang of you, sweet wife, you, alone on the empty shore,
of you as day neared, of you as day departed.

He even entered the jaws of Taenarus, the high gates
of Dis, and the grove dim with dark fear,
and came to the spirits, and their dread king, and hearts
470 that do not know how to soften at human prayer.
The insubstantial shadows, and the phantoms of those without light,
came from the lowest depths of Erebus, startled by his song,
as many as the thousand birds that hide among the leaves,
when Vesper, or wintry rain, drives them from the hills,
475 mothers and husbands, and the bodies of noble heroes
bereft of life, boys and unmarried girls, and young men
placed on the pyre before their father's eyes:
round them are the black mud and foul reeds
of Cocytus, the vile marsh, holding them with its sluggish waters,
480 and Styx, confining them in its nine-fold ditches.
The House of the Dead itself was stupefied, and innermost
Tartarus, and the Furies, with dark snakes twined in their hair,
and Cerberus held his three mouths gaping wide,
and the whirling of Ixion's wheel stopped in the wind.
485 And now, retracing his steps, he evaded all mischance,
and Eurydice, regained, approached the upper air,
he following behind (since Proserpine had ordained it),

when a sudden madness seized the incautious lover,
one to be forgiven, if the spirits knew how to forgive:
490 he stopped, and forgetful, alas, on the edge of light,
his will conquered, he looked back, now, at his Eurydice.

In that instant, all his effort was wasted, and his pact
with the cruel tyrant was broken, and three times a crash
was heard by the waters of Avernus. 'Orpheus,' she cried,
495 'what madness has destroyed my wretched self, and you?
See, the cruel Fates recall me, and sleep hides my swimming eyes,
Farewell, now: I am taken, wrapped round by vast night,
stretching out to you, alas, hands no longer yours.'
She spoke, and suddenly fled, far from his eyes,
500 like smoke vanishing in thin air, and never saw him more,
though he grasped in vain at shadows, and longed
to speak further: nor did Charon, the ferryman of Orcus,
let him cross the barrier of that marsh again.

What could he do? Where could he turn, twice robbed of his wife?
505 With what tears could he move the spirits, with what voice
move their powers? Cold now, she floated in the Stygian boat.
They say he wept for seven whole months,
beneath an airy cliff, by the waters of desolate Strymon,
and told his tale, in the icy caves, softening the tigers' mood,
510 and gathering the oak-trees to his song:
as the nightingale grieving in the poplar's shadows
laments the loss of her chicks, that a rough ploughman saw
snatching them, featherless, from the nest:
but she weeps all night, and repeats her sad song perched
515 among the branches, filling the place around with mournful cries.
No love, no wedding-song could move Orpheus's heart.

He wandered the Northern ice, and snowy Tanais,
and the fields that are never free of Rhipaeon frost,
mourning his lost Eurydice, and Dis's vain gift:
520 the Ciconian women, spurned by his devotion,
tore the youth apart, in their divine rites and midnight
Bacchic revels, and scattered him over the fields.
Even then, when Oeagrian Hebros rolled the head onwards,
torn from its marble neck, carrying it mid-stream,
525 the voice alone, the ice-cold tongue, with ebbing breath,
cried out: 'Eurydice, ah poor Eurydice!'
'Eurydice' the riverbanks echoed, all along the stream."