

Giving eurydice a voice



In Book X of *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid recounts the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It is the well-known story of a Thracian poet, Orpheus, who travels into the underworld seeking return of his new bride, Eurydice, who had been bitten by a serpent and died on their wedding day. Brought to tears by Orpheus' singing an emotional plea for her return, the king and queen of the underworld agree to release Eurydice. However, her reprieve depends upon the condition that Orpheus not look back at her until they are completely out of the underworld. Orpheus does not meet this condition, and upon his turning around, Eurydice sinks back into the same place from which she had come. In his version, Ovid does not offer much in the way of descriptions of Eurydice's character. She is merely that which Orpheus longs for; she is his unobtainable desire. In fact, her second chance at life is referred to as "the gift that had been given" to Orpheus, not as a gift for herself. Ovid apparently expects the reader to disregard any possible wishes and desires that Eurydice's holds for herself and instead, focus on the how his loss of her affects Orpheus alone. The reader of Ovid's version is provided with a rare insight into Eurydice thoughts as she dies a second time. At this point Ovid claims that she uttered no complaint against her husband. What was there to complain of, but that she had been loved? This glimpse into Eurydice's thoughts is not meant to provide much revelation about her character, but rather to provide a justification for Orpheus' descent into the underworld. Her thoughts serve both to verify Orpheus' strong love for her and to eliminate any potential guilt on his part for causing her second death. His strong love for her brought him to the underworld in the first place; as Ovid seems to claim, one could not possibly judge him guilty

for this. And how can he be held accountable, when the victim herself doesn't even feel she was victimized? Eurydice's thoughts allow Ovid's audience to infer that she had accepted her death and therefore wasn't angry that a chance to live again had been lost. Yet this inference only brings forth the question that if she had truly accepted her death, what feelings did she have about Orpheus bringing her back to life? Was she opposed? Or perhaps her death was so complete, that she was already forever numb to the events surrounding her and, had her husband not turned around, would have existed in a zombie-like? state even in her second life. The reader could infer that Ovid's failure, or perhaps refusal, to develop Eurydice's character to the same extent that he does Orpheus' indicates that he believes the female perspective to bear no importance. The reader could also further infer that this hypothetical belief of Ovid's is reflective of the time in which Ovid wrote. The Greek culture was most likely male-dominated; the thoughts and feelings of women were not essential. While this conclusion would be an easy one to make, it is more likely that Ovid omits Eurydice's voice, not because she is female, but because she is merely a symbol of loss. The central theme in Ovid's tale is obsession over that which is unobtainable or lost. Eurydice is merely that for Orpheus; expounding on her own thoughts is not necessary for Ovid to demonstrate that Orpheus' eventual murder by the Maenads is directly caused by his over-obsession. (Orpheus' great love for his wife caused him to lament endlessly over his loss. He never slept with another woman and this angered the female Maenads, who greatly desired to sleep with him. The offense incensed them to the point that they subsequently tore his body limb from limb and cast his

head on the island of Lesbos, where it continued to sing.) While Orpheus’ quest to regain his wife was justified, his inability to move past his loss, after this failed quest, was not excused; thus the dangers of obsession. In her poems *Orpheus (1)*, *Eurydice*, and *Orpheus (2)*, Margaret Atwood recounts a version of this myth that includes Eurydice’s perceptions. In her translation, Atwood comments on the conditions of life and death and the notion of love in each of these realms. She grants Eurydice a voice in order to accomplish this. She does not lend a voice to Orpheus directly, but uses the voices of Eurydice and Hermes (who in this version retrieves Eurydice for Orpheus and accompanies her on her journey out of the underworld) to covey Orpheus’ thoughts. In Atwood’s version, Eurydice does not choose to return to life, but does so out of loyalty to her husband. She says to Orpheus, “I was obedient, but numb, like an arm gone to sleep; the return to time was not my choice.” She goes on, “before your eyes you held steady the image of what you wanted me to become: living again. It was this hope of yours that kept me following.” The words “what you wanted” insinuate that this was not what Eurydice wanted; she did not wish to live again. The reader is again confronted with Eurydice’s state of content in death in Hermes’ speaking to her. His confirmation of her desire to remain dead suggests that it is not just caused by her numbness, but also by her wish to avoid the negative aspects of life: “You would rather have gone on feeling nothing, emptiness, and silence; the stagnant peace of the deepest sea, which is easier than the noise and flesh of the surface.” In Atwood’s version, the world of the living is presented in negative terms. Eurydice describes this world as “the green light that

had once grown fangs and killed me. ¶ During the journey back to this world, her body begins to change back into a physical form. This physical state is not depicted as pleasant: ¶ Already there was dirt on my hands and I was thirsty. ¶ In his announcement to Eurydice that Orpheus has come to take her back, Hermes suggests that her previous life was unpleasant. He tells her that Orpheus is offering ¶ a promise: that things will be different up there than they were last time. ¶ However, it is not just the idea of living that keeps Eurydice from wishing to return. Atwood hints that Orpheus' love for Eurydice is not true: Eurydice speaks of his love for her as constricting, ¶ You had your old leash with you, love you might call it. ¶ Orpheus' love is not true because he does not actually love her, but rather the person he wishes her to be. Orpheus cannot conceive that Eurydice is more than her physical body. He identifies her personality with her past, physical self and without the presence of that body, he does not know her; how could he possibly truly love someone that he doesn't even know? Hermes provides an even clearer description of the conditions of Orpheus' love. ¶ He says he is singing to you because he loves you, not as you are now [¶] He wants you to be what he calls real [...] This love of his is not something he can do if you aren't there. ¶ Hermes clearly points out that Orpheus' love is dependent upon the physical. Remember that even Eurydice says to Orpheus, ¶ you held steady the image of what you wanted me to become. ¶ Orpheus is not only incapable of loving her without being able to look upon her, but he also needs her to look exactly as she did when she was alive. Only in her previous body, can she represent that person whom Orpheus believes her to be. Atwood uses Eurydice's experience in

death to expound on the notion of true love. She claims that love is above physical boundaries and the realms of life and death. As Hermes says to Eurydice, who in death is *chilled and minimal*, *you knew suddenly as you left your body* [that you love him anywhere, even in this land of no memory, even in this domain of hunger.] As Hermes describes it, love is not restricted to being expressed physically.

Furthermore, he states, *You hold love in your hand, a red seed you had forgotten you were holding.* True love is expressed without purposeful intent; it is done instinctively and can be forgotten, just as one does not dwell on the blinking of their eyes, their breathing, or the beating of their heart. Hermes' description of Eurydice's love of Orpheus explains that, while she does possess love for Orpheus, she does not dwell upon it. Her love for Orpheus, the *red seed* in her hand, is always with her. However, this love is so much a part of her character that she need not remember to love him; Eurydice loves Orpheus unconsciously. On the surface, Margaret Atwood's translation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth simply aims to provide a more solid characterization of Eurydice. However, this characterization completely alters the argument of the myth.

In Ovid's version, Orpheus' failure to bring his *love* into existence rests on his inability to follow the orders of the king of the underworld and his subsequent demise is brought about by his refusal to move past this loss. In Margaret Atwood's translation, Orpheus' failure to bring his *love* into existence rests on his inability to understand the true nature of love. His subsequent downfall is not his murder, but rather the fact that *he will go on singing,* attempting to defy the notion that he never truly loved Eurydice at all.