Hadestown: Jazzing up the Underworld

To what extent can the musical 'Hadestown' be regarded as a work of Classical reception*?

**'The ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imagined and represented.'*[1]*

The musical Hadestown certainly fits the mould of Hardwick and Stray's definition of the term 'Classical reception'. Initially a 2006 folk-opera by singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell, *Hadestown* follows the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, yet puts a contemporary spin on the well known myth. Mitchell interweaves the story of Hades and Persephone with that of the doomed lovers in her post-apocalyptic take on the story, set in a society afflicted by poverty and famine, as well as a perpetually cold climate. Indeed, the intertwining of the two myths leads to, 'a compelling tale of love and sacrifice, asking what price we would pay for our art, and what is beyond our capacities'.[2] In this essay, I argue that this musical, though heavily transformed from the original myth, ought to be considered a work of Classical reception. In support of this, I shall explore extracts from the Roman author Ovid's poem, the *Metamorphoses,* with a specific focus on book 10, where he laments the unlucky fates of Orpheus and Eurydice. In Ovid's tale, newlyweds Orpheus and Eurydice are cruelly torn apart when she is bitten by a viper and is taken to the Underworld. Orpheus cannot accept her death and journeys to the Underworld to bring back his wife. However, after Hades agrees to

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[1]Hardwick, Lorna, and Christopher Stray. 2011. *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (John Wiley & Sons), p. 1

[2] Haynes, Natalie. *Acclaimed classicist Natalie Haynes explores the myths that inspired the musical*

reunite the lovers on one condition (that Orpheus must not once look back at Eurydice as he travels back home), tragedy strikes. Orpheus, unable to resist, checks to ensure Eurydice is following him, and thus is forced to watch as she disappears, permanently removed back to the Underworld. In my analysis of the *Metamorphoses* and *Hadestown*, I draw upon fundamental similarities between the two: the presentation of the characters and the use of song to tell the tale. However, I also dissect some latent inaccuracies of *Hadestown*, specifically its transmuting of myth into a contemporary setting and the intersection of the stories of the two couples.

When watching *Hadestown* and reading book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, one is immediately struck by Mitchell's similar characterisation of her protagonist to the original Ovid: both authors paint a picture of Orpheus with a tarred brush, though whilst Ovid emphasises his cowardly nature, Mitchell focuses on his youthful naivety. Orpheus' obsession with his art is demonstrated from his very first entrance in the show. When introducing himself to Eurydice in the couple's first song, 'Come Home with Me', he forgets himself and tells her, 'Your name is like a melody'[3]. As a character who views everything through the lens of song, the bard Orpheus is the incarnation of innocence. Mitchell directly opposes Orpheus' outlook through her presentation of Eurydice as, 'no stranger to the world'[4]. Unlike Ovid's portrayal of the pair, here Orpheus is the one looking up to and relying upon Eurydice. The antithesis between them is made blindingly evident with Mitchell's homophonic pun: when Orpheus

[3] Mitchell, Anaïs. 2021. *Hadestown* (New York, NY: Concord Theatricals). *Come Home with Me*

[4] Ibid. *Any Way the Wind Blows*

tells Eurydice, 'I also play the *lyre'*, she harshly responds with, 'Oh, a *liar* and a player too!'[5]. Similarly, in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid presents Orpheus as unheroic, though he acknowledges his courage in descending to the Underworld alone to plead with Hades. His music is at the core of his argument, as he 'pulsisq: ad carmina nervis/ Sic ait (Tuning his strings to his voice, thus addresses them)'[6]. Mitchell plays on the idea of Orpheus begging Hades to listen using the power of his song, with a piece aptly titled 'Epic III'. However, in *Hadestown*, Orpheus persuades Hades to set Eurydice free by reminding him of the love he once had for Persephone. Towards the culmination of the song, many rhetorical questions are used, designed (by Orpheus) to force Hades to think about the power of love, 'Where is the treasure inside of your chest?/Where is your pleasure? Where is your youth?/Where is the man with his arms outstretched?/ To the woman he loves'[7]. In the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid details Orpheus singing in a similar vein, pointing out to Hades that, 'Vos quoque junxit amor.' (Love also joined you together)[8]. The use of caesura (amor.) in the middle of line 29 of book 10 perhaps indicates the simplicity of love in Orpheus' eyes – he cannot imagine anything more important or binding. This is a facet of his youthful naivety, explored by Ovid and drawn upon by Mitchell. Interestingly, Mitchell herself, in an interview given for the

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[5] Ibid. *Come Home with Me*

[6] Ovid, 43 B. C.-17 or 18 A. D., and Robarts - University of Toronto. 1822. *Metamorphoses : Translated into English Prose with the Latin Text and Order of Construction on the Same Page, and Critical, Historical, Geographical, and Classical Notes in English*, *Internet Archive* (London : G. and W.B. Whittaker), p. 348

[7] Mitchell, Anaïs. 2021. *Hadestown* (New York, Ny: Concord Theatricals) *Epic III*

[8] Ovid, 43 B. C.-17 or 18 A. D., and Robarts - University of Toronto. 1822. *Metamorphoses : Translated into English Prose with the Latin Text and Order of Construction on the Same Page, and Critical, Historical, Geographical, and Classical Notes in English*, *Internet Archive* (London : G. and W.B. Whittaker), p. 348

Hanover Theatre and Conservatory, admitted that she found the character of Orpheus the hardest to write. She explained that, 'he's more "pure" than any other character…Orpheus is a dreamer, a genuine optimist'[9]. From this, one can see her struggle to portray Orpheus' nature as developed by Ovid, yet also her willingness to engage fully with the character itself. I would argue that this means *Hadestown* constitutes a true work of Classical reception – Mitchell strives to replicate the authenticity of the original characters and draw that into her narrative.

Hadestown (West End)

Act I, *Road to Hell*

Orpheus and Eurydice meeting for the first time

Moreover, the style of music in *Hadestown* is significant in enforcing Mitchell's exploration of love and its power to harm or heal. One can assume that she drew inspiration from Ovid's verse, though her music is loosely inspired by what was popularised in the Depression era and in New Orleans. Much of the plot of *Hadestown* is sung by the principal narrator, Hermes, with the setting and chorus inhabiting a backdrop of a New Orleans-style club. This is designed to set the scene for a play of hope and innovation, yet one which will ultimately end in tragedy. The songs tend to be reminiscent of the style of epic poetry, perhaps a nod to *Hadestown's* forerunner, the *Metamorphoses*. The latter work is generally considered to meet the criteria for epic – with over 250 narratives across 15 books, as well as being composed in

[9] 'Q&A with Anaïs Mitchell (Writer & Composer of Hadestown) and Rachel Chavkin (Director of Hadestown) - Hanover Theatre and Conservatory'. 2022. *Thehanovertheatre.org*

dactylic hexameter (the metre of the famous epics, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as Virgil's *Aeneid*). Thus, the audience may particularly notice Mitchell's inclusion of three songs, named: 'Epic I, II and III'. 'Epic III' appears to be the one of most significance, as it comprises of Orpheus' performance for Hades in the Underworld to convince him to give Eurydice back. Although he sings Persephone and Hades' love story, he interweaves this with moments from his relationship with Eurydice, repeating lines from the earlier song 'All I've Ever Known' (sung by him and Eurydice as they began to fall in love). In 'All I've Ever Known', Orpheus sings to Eurydice, 'When I saw you all alone there against the sky/ It's like I'd known you all along'[10]. When one compares this to how Hades felt when he saw Persephone in 'Epic III': 'You saw her alone there, against the sky/ It was like she was someone you'd always known'[11], the similarity is obvious, and thus designed to be noted by the audience. The simile in the phrase evokes connotations of familiarity and comfort, implying that Mitchell feels these are intrinsic to the sensation of love. The poignancy of this repeated phrase eventually leads to Hades allowing Eurydice to leave, though with the condition in place that Orpheus must not look back. Ovid also evokes a poignancy surrounding love, crafting the famous phrase when Eurydice vanishes silently for the last time, 'quid enim nisi se quereretur amatam? (for what could she complain about except for that she had been loved?)'[12]. This rhetorical question denies Eurydice of any *vox ultima,*

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[10] Mitchell, Anaïs. 2021. Hadestown (New York, Ny: Concord Theatricals) *All I've Ever Known*

[11] Ibid. *Epic III*

[12] Ovid, 43 B. C.-17 or 18 A. D., and Robarts - University of Toronto. 1822. *Metamorphoses : Translated into English Prose with the Latin Text and Order of Construction on the Same Page, and Critical, Historical, Geographical, and Classical Notes in English*, *Internet Archive* (London : G. and W.B. Whittaker), p. 350

instead implying that she had nothing left to say – she had been loved and she ought to be content with having been the object of Orpheus' affection. Many authors, especially female ones, have attempted to reimagine what Eurydice would have felt about her second death, in order to give her the agency Ovid deprives her of in the *Metamorphoses.* Therefore, Mitchell joins them in her reimagining of Eurydice.

Hadestown (West End)

Act I, *Wait For Me*

Orpheus begins his journey down to the Underworld

In dissecting the definition of Classical reception, and what can be classified as such, it is pertinent to explore other versions of the Orpheus and Eurydice and Hades and Persephone myths in order to fully evaluate just how loose a term 'Classical reception' is. One can surmise that many books inspired by the respective tales in fact take liberty with the facts of the original story, strengthening the argument that *Hadestown* can in fact be defined as a work of Classical reception. For instance, the popular comic book *Lore Olympus* puts a contemporary twist on the tale of the abduction of Persephone, creating a soap-opera-style drama where the gods are transported into a semi-modern world. In contrast to the Ovidian tale in book 5, the creator of the comic, Rachel Smythe, views it through a feminist lens; she constructs a vision of Persephone as creating her own life in the Underworld and slowly falling in love with Hades, her employer. Just like Mitchell, Smythe aims for her reimagined woman to reclaim her agency, giving Persephone the primary voice in her story. Interestingly, Smythe glamorises the world of the gods, with Olympus being ultra-modern in style, whilst the mortal realm features many characteristics of the ancient world, with marble temples and

traditional Greek clothing. This anachronistic lauding of Olympus is at odds with Mitchell's dystopian portrayal of the gods' surroundings, perhaps corresponding with their respective stories – Mitchell relates a tragedy, whilst Smythe optimistically tells a tale of beauty and love. Although both *Lore Olympus* and *Hadestown* are unfaithful to the plot of the Ovidian stories, they transport the characters into a relatable setting for more modern readers to enjoy, opening up the Classical tales for a wider audience than was possible in the past.

Lore Olympus

Volume II, episode 157

Hades and Persephone dancing by the fire

Intriguingly, just as Mitchell interweaves the two myths in her folk opera, when looking closely at Ovid's language in the *Metamorphoses,* one can deduce some similarities between his versions of the two stories. In book 5, when Demeter is attempting to find Persephone, the nymph Arethusa informs her of her abduction. Stricken with grief, 'Mater ad auditas *stupuit*, ceu saxea, voces: (upon hearing these words, the goddess *stood motionless* like a statue)'[13]. The connotations of the English word 'stupor' encompass a wide range of meanings, from paralysis through to amazement. Here, Demeter is so horrified at her daughter's fate that she

[13] Ovid, 43 B. C.-17 or 18 A. D., and Robarts - University of Toronto. 1822. *Metamorphoses : Translated into English Prose with the Latin Text and Order of Construction on the Same Page, and Critical, Historical, Geographical, and Classical Notes in English*, *Internet Archive* (London : G. and W.B. Whittaker), p. 194

is entirely petrified, her physical stature reflecting her inner turmoil. In a similar state of events, in book 10, when Orpheus is singing his song to persuade Hades, Ovid details that, '*stupuit*que Ixionis orbis (and Ixion's orb *stood, as in amaze*)'[14]. Here, the verb is applied to one of the inhabitants of the Underworld (Ixion, hubristic king of the Lapiths), but is used to indirectly indicate the immense power of Orpheus' song. In fact, 'the collection of ideas behind *stupeo* – paralysis, shock, amazement, silence, petrification – has become Orpheus' trademark as he produces *stupor* in those who listen to his lament'[15]. In a show of intertextuality, Ovid was perhaps inspired by the use of *stupeo* in Virgil's *Georgics* to create this image of Orpheus' musical sway. As Virgil writes in book 4 of the *Georgics*, 'quin ipsae *stupuere* domus (the house of the dead itself was *stupefied*)'[16] by Orpheus' music. Here, the syncopated perfect form of *stupeo* is used to demonstrate the immense strength of Orpheus' song. As the *Georgics* predates the *Metamorphoses*, one can assume that Virgil effectively 'set the trend'. This is an example of Classical reception at its innermost core, with one Classical author drawing upon language from another. After Virgil's use of *stupeo* in his works, the verb became one of the standard ones in Latin literature used to signpost Orpheus' mastery over the Underworld creatures with his music[17]. Mitchell draws on this mastery in *Hadestown,* with Orpheus' triad of 'Epic' songs leading to a completed version of Hades' and Persephone's story. This appears almost hypnotic on stage, with Hades realising his lost love for his wife and taking to the floor to dance with her. This moment of awakening is the key to Hades softening his demeanour and giving Orpheus the chance to win back his own wife.

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[14] Ovid, 43 B. C.-17 or 18 A. D., and Robarts - University of Toronto. 1822. *Metamorphoses : Translated into English Prose with the Latin Text and Order of Construction on the Same Page, and Critical, Historical, Geographical, and Classical Notes in English*, *Internet Archive* (London : G. and W.B. Whittaker), p. 349

[15] Heath, John. 1996. 'The Stupor of Orpheus: Ovid's "Metamorphoses" 10.64-71', *The Classical Journal*, 91.4: 362

[16] 'VIRGIL, GEORGICS BOOKS 3-4 - Theoi Classical Texts Library'. [n.d.].

[17] Heath, John. 1996. 'The Stupor of Orpheus: Ovid's "Metamorphoses" 10.64-71', *The Classical Journal*, 91.4: 362

Thus, Mitchell continues to imitate ancient authors' slants on Orpheus' character with her indication of the power of his song.

Hadestown (West End)

Act II, *Come Home With Me (reprise)*

Orpheus rescues Eurydice from Hades' clutches

However, antithetical to this argument is the opinion that *Hadestown* simply strays too far from the Latin of the *Metamorphoses* to be regarded as a direct work of reception. Although Mitchell engages with the Ovidian characters, she transmutes them into a completely contemporary role. This is most evident when one explores the character of Eurydice in Hadestown – given complete agency, she is seen to be the driver of the plot, rather than the naïve and unaware Orpheus. Yet, in the *Metamorphoses* Eurydice is rendered completely passive, merely fulfilling her role as the object of Orpheus' desires. One must ponder the question: how far is Mitchell's Eurydice a product of the contemporary attitude towards women, and how far is she a completely metamorphosed (!) construct to the one Ovid created? In *Hadestown,* Eurydice is tempted by Hades to make the choice to go with him to the Underworld, as due to Orpheus' obsession with his music and finishing his 'Epic' song, the two are living in abject poverty. In his sinister, almost predatorial song, 'Hey, Little Songbird', the refrain of Hades calling Eurydice 'little songbird' creates a threatening tone. Startlingly reminiscent of Stanley's treatment of Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Hades uses zoomorphic imagery to demonstrate to Eurydice just how much power he has over her as a higher, immortal being. The promise of death circulates ominously

throughout the lyrics of the song, with Hades telling Eurydice, 'You'd shine like a diamond down in the mine…And I could use a canary'[18]. In the late 19th century, canaries were often used in mines in order to ensure the safety of the workers – when the air became too congested, they would stop singing and then eventually die, warning the workers to exit the mine immediately. By comparing Eurydice to a canary, Hades perhaps foreshadows her upcoming death. Eventually, Eurydice's hunger and fear wins out, and she agrees to become a worker in the Underworld. The entire interaction between the two is overseen by the three Fates, who act as a kind of Greek chorus, reminding the audience that socio-economic want can drive people to make difficult decisions: 'What you gonna do when the chips are down?'[19].

Hadestown (Broadway)

Act I, *Hey, Little Songbird*

Persephone is tempted by Hades as the Fates surround them

Mitchell's political comment on there being too much stringent poverty in America is paired with other contemporary issues – climate change being especially prominent. When the audience first sees the Underworld, it is set up in a quasi-steampunk style, with Hades being the overseer of what seems to be a huge factory. Since Hades is the villain of her tale, this is perhaps illustrative of factories' detrimental effects on the environment and the dangers associated with this. In his song 'Chant', Hades tells Persephone that he built his fossil fuel

[18] Mitchell, Anaïs. 2021. Hadestown (New York, Ny: Concord Theatricals) *Hey, Little Songbird*

[19] Ibid. *When the Chips Are Down*

empire out of his love for her: ‘Then I kept that furnace fed/ With the fossils of the dead/ Lover when you feel that fire/ Think of it as my desire’[20]. This helps to paint a picture of Hades as having such unrequited passion for Persephone that he has become physically destructive. It is implied that since his and Persephone’s relationship has been falling apart, he has resorted to a Machiavellian mantra of ruling by fear rather than love.[21] Mitchell leaves it initially unclear as to whether Hades uses his so-called ‘love’ as an excuse for his damaging actions, knowing the negative consequences and being unwilling to take responsibility for them. However, with Hades and Persephone eventually reuniting due to Orpheus’ ‘Epic III’, his overwhelming love for her is reconfirmed in a tender instrumental dance break. However, the theme of climate change is even further explored with the inclusion of a Depression-era famine amongst the mortals. As the plot unfolds, the audience is made aware that because of Persephone’s depression, spring has not come for many seasons and there have been no harvests, and therefore no food. Moreover, in his song, ‘Why We Build the Wall’, Hades embodies the role of a somewhat benevolent dictator, calling his Underworld subjects, ‘my children’. Running throughout is a theme of political indoctrination and fear, as the chorus repeat the words of Hades in a monotonous manner: ‘the enemy is poverty/ And the wall keeps out the enemy’[22]. Although written in the early 2000s, the mantra of ‘We build the wall to keep us free’[23] is eerily proleptic of future president Donald Trump’s manifesto, promising that he would build a wall along the US-Mexico border in order to restrict the number of

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[20] Mitchell, Anaïs. 2021. Hadestown (New York, Ny: Concord Theatricals). *Chant*

[21] DePrado, Jarrod. 2024. ‘Two Roads to Hell: Rebirth and Relevance in Musical Adaptations of Katabatic Myth’, *Mythlore*, 42.2 (144): 85–102

[22] Ibid. *Why we build the wall*

[23] Ibid.

immigrants allowed across. From this, one can clearly see Mitchell's continual engagement with contemporary political issues throughout her musical, and potentially argue that this makes the piece a new story in its own right, and not a work of Classical reception.

Hadestown (Broadway)

Act II, *Epic III ("They danced") instrumental*

Hades and Persephone rediscovering their love

In conclusion, it is clear that the musical *Hadestown* must be regarded as a modern work of Classical reception. With its plot being rooted in the Ovidian tale, Mitchell merely contemporizes the characters and their anxieties in order to relate to her 21st-century audience. She certainly maintains the tragic culmination of the story, with Orpheus and Eurydice's final words to each other being, 'It's you/ It's me' and 'Orpheus/ Eurydice'[24] as Orpheus turns around and watches Eurydice vanish before him. Although it must be conceded that *Hadestown* is fairly loosely inspired by the myth, taking great liberties with the merging of two primarily unconnected tales into one, this gives the piece a depth of intertextuality that serves to intrigue the audience even further. As many critics argue, Classical reception shouldn't be a simple transmission of one story onto another sheet of paper, but a, 'complex

[24] Mitchell, Anaïs. 2021. Hadestown (New York, Ny: Concord Theatricals). *Doubt Comes In*

dialogic exchange between two bodies of writing'[25], and *Hadestown* certainly provokes this conversation with its exploration of socio-economic want, political indoctrination and female struggles in a world dominated by men. Thus, it seems only fitting to end with the refrain from *Hadestown's* titular song: 'It's an old tale from way back when… And we're gonna sing it again'[26].

Hadestown (West End)

Act I, *Road to Hell*

'It's an old tale from way back when…And we're gonna sing it again'

~ Hermes

[25] Hopkins, David, Charles Martindale, Norman Vance, Rita Copeland, Patrick Cheney, and others. 2012. *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature.* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press), p. X

[26] Mitchell, Anaïs. 2021. *Hadestown* (New York, Ny: Concord Theatricals) *Road to Hell*

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