

A Cowardly, Ironic Idol: Orpheus in the Elizabethan Renaissance

By the Elizabethan period, Orpheus had earned a unique place in the thoughts, and the hearts, of poets of the Renaissance, one not held by any other hero from classical antiquity. Elizabethan writers and scholars would have been familiar with most myths from their grammar school education of Latin, giving them a foundational knowledge of myths through translating works like Virgil's *Georgics*, and especially Ovid's reworkings of Greek myths in his *Metamorphoses*¹. Yet despite both works leaving poets with a huge array of myths, and a catalogue of heroes to idolise, Orpheus became their idol. Given his late appearance in surviving texts, this could be seen as a strange choice, with his first appearance in literature being unclear. Orpheus does not appear in Homer, nor Hesiod's works in which many of Ovid and Virgil's accounts of myth find their foundations, and which the Elizabethan authors would have also been familiar with. So, even though other figures of myth would have been more familiar to the poets, it was Orpheus who had the ultimate influence on them.

This essay will explore why Orpheus had such an allure to Elizabethan Renaissance poets, despite their more limited knowledge of him in comparison to other mythological figures. I will use R. B.'s *Orpheus His Journey to Hell* (1595) to show the general Renaissance views of the myth, as the poem is a full contemporary account of it.

Orpheus' myth requires only three things to remain itself: for Orpheus to have incredible skill as a poet, the tantalising proximity of his success in regaining his wife, and the totality of his failure to do so. The details of each element can and do change drastically as the myth is retold.

For example, the Roman versions known to Renaissance poets likely differ from the original Greek: Bowra concluded that while Ovid was likely somewhat influenced by Virgil, both appear to have independently drawn from an original Greek text(s) recounting Orpheus' story and assume some familiarity from their audience², so both are likely taking creative liberties to 'improve' upon the myth. They both emphasise Orpheus' failure by dramatising it, Ovid describes it emotively:

*She instantly fell back. Poor Orpheus
stretched out both his arms, trying to hold her
and be held nothing but thin air (10. 57-59)*³

Perhaps this image is inspired by his predecessor Virgil, who, in his typical style, invokes Homer's tragic image first used in the *Odyssey*⁴ of the hero being unable to embrace the dead woman he loves:

*She spoke, and suddenly fled, far from his eyes,
like smoke vanishing in thin air; and never saw him more,
though he grasped in vain at the shadows, and longed
to speak further (4. 499-502)*⁵

The tragedy of Ovid and Virgil's Orpheus is loud and desperate, the emotive language describing the totality of Orpheus' failure building pathos. They emphasise Orpheus' loving mistake, and while pathos is built, it is also clear audiences should respect him. Even though Orpheus' weapon differs

¹ I will use these as the assumed 'foundation' of Elizabethan poets' knowledge of Orpheus, given his very limited appearance in surviving Greek literature.

² Bowra, C. M., 1952. Orpheus and Eurydice. *The Classical Quarterly*, 2(3/4), pp. 113-126.

³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk. X (Translated by Ian Johnston, available free online)

⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Bk. XI, 233-238, Odysseus tries to hug his mother three times in the Underworld, each time he is unsuccessful.

⁵ Virgil, *Georgics* Bk. IV (Translated by A. S. Kline, available free online)

from all other mainstream heroes, being a lyre and skill in poetry, not a sword and skill in battle, his effort was equally great, and his tragedy is equally grim. On the first reading, Ovid and Virgil's loving treatment of Orpheus makes him equally worthy of respect to other heroes.

So, when Renaissance poets read about Orpheus, he made his way into their hearts, not because his skill superseded all other heroes, but because his skill (poetry, not battle) was valuable to them. Perhaps best demonstrated in Renaissance Philosopher Francis Bacon's analysis of the myth in *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), where Bacon states that "*the labors of Orpheus exceed the labors of Hercules, both in power and dignity, as the works of knowledge exceed the works of strength*". Orpheus' skill was not as valued by Romans because of the more war-orientated nature of their society, yet by the Renaissance, war was less important, especially to the poets, who could live in their own world detached from war. To them, Orpheus held the most valuable skill, as it was tangible and familiar.

So, these poets began loving Orpheus for his unique nature among classical heroes; he earned great respect for his poetic skill, which was tangible to the poets, unlike the skill of other great heroes- such as the great strength of Hercules. So, the poets began to idolise him, with R.B. describing him as "*like a God*" and "*compos'd of a purer mettel than a man*". This praise reached the point where Orpheus was seen as superior to even Hercules, because not only was his skill more valued, but it was also tangible to the poets, they were familiar with it and it was possible to yield it, making him aspirational, and a perfect idol.

Just as Ovid and Virgil changed Orpheus' myth to emphasise his tragedy to suit their Roman audience, Renaissance poets began to change the myth to emphasise the excellence of Orpheus, until suddenly a man who yielded a lyre instead of a sword, and song instead of strength, became more powerful and dignified than Hercules⁶, who had been the "most durable and beloved of Greek heroes", the "one Panhellenic hero"⁷. But it was Orpheus, not Hercules who was the superior hero to Renaissance poets, their admiration shown in their praise and focus on him, with R.B expanding Orpheus' story, which Ovid and Virgil dedicated roughly one hundred lines each to, to over seven hundred lines, a demonstration of praise and love for his idol.

This view of Orpheus is drastically different from those held in antiquity. One of Orpheus' first appearances in Greek literature is a criticism; in Plato's *Symposium* (360BC), 179d, Phaedrus, in a speech about how there is "*No greater blessing than love*"⁸, is made to deeply criticise Orpheus. To him Orpheus "*showed no spirit*", he "*did not dare like Alcestis to die for love*". Phaedrus explains the gods then cause Orpheus' gruesome death because of this "*cowardliness*". Orpheus' story is sandwiched by quotes from Hesiod, Acusilaus, Parmenides, Homer and Aeschylus (*Symp.* 178b-180a), meaning we must assume Orpheus' story is a genuine reference to literature about the poet, as there is no reason or evidence of it being of Plato's invention⁹.

So, through Phaedrus, we can assume that some Greeks would have had an unfavourable view of Orpheus, or at the very least believed him inferior to great heroes, for "*he was only a harp-player*", and a cowardly one at that, this is the opposite to how the Renaissance received Orpheus.

Phaedrus' charge of "cowardliness" is serious, worsened by his choice of comparison- Alcestis, a woman. Phaedrus briefly paraphrases the plot of Euripides 438 B.C play 'Alcestis', praising Alcestis for her greater demonstration of love in her willingness to die for her husband's life, a feat Orpheus

⁶ I will use his Roman name in all contexts as this is what Renaissance poets knew and referred to him as.

⁷ Gregory, Justina. "Heracles." *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians*, University of Michigan Press, 1991, pp. 121–22.

⁸ Plato, *Symposium* (Translated by Benjamin Jowett, available free online)

⁹ Sansone, David. 1985. *Orpheus and Eurydice in the Fifth Century BC*. *Classica E,T Mediaevalia Revue Danoise De Philologie Et D'histoire*, Vol XXXVI, pp. 55-58

will not go to for Eurydice- he carries on living after his wife's second death. Alcestis is rewarded with resurrection for this show of great love, and Orpheus is condemned to a humiliating death for his failure to fully commit to his lover by dying with her. To Plato, and hence to some Greeks, this makes Orpheus a coward, worthy of such punishment as he is so cowardly that a mere woman¹⁰ is superior.

This view is a far cry from the Renaissance poets, as they saw Orpheus as the 'Archetype of the perfect lover'¹¹, with R. B. repeatedly quoting Virgil in a set of stanzas where Orpheus pleads for Eurydice to be resurrected:

*Quod Amor vincit omnia*¹²

This formal refrain shows that, to R.B., and most Renaissance poets, Orpheus' love is superior to all, it allows him to conquer anything, even the underworld. They have forgotten Alcestis, even those who may have been versed in Euripides enough to know her, disregard her. To them, it is Orpheus who shows the ultimate love, despite his ultimate failure to reunite with his lover.

Notably, Phaedrus never claims Orpheus' mistake in turning around is what makes him a coward (he never even references the mistake) but rather his unwillingness to die for his lover is cowardly. Perhaps this is because the version of Orpheus Plato refers to had not yet been dramatised to allow Orpheus to have such a totality of failure in one moment. This failure would have been the one most familiar to Renaissance poets, being the one described in depth and emphasised by Ovid and Virgil, with Ovid specifying that Eurydice made no complaint for:

*(what could she object to, except the fact
that she was loved?) (10.62-63)*¹³

For Ovid, Orpheus turns around due to his overwhelming anxiety of a lover, we should admire Orpheus, his mistake representative of true love, so sincere Eurydice can only appreciate it.

R.B demonstrates that Renaissance poets took Orpheus' turning to be for the same reason:

*Jealous thought in a relentless mind,
breeds discontented passions mixt with feare,
was vrging Orpheus oft to looke behind (625-627)*

Renaissance poets took a more Roman approach, Orpheus' failure is in turning around because of his deep love for his wife, his emotions are so chronically human that Orpheus becomes tangible, relatable, much more so than other heroes Renaissance poets would know. The struggles of most heroes, such as slaying the Nemean Lion, defeating a hydra, or going to the underworld to bring a stranger back from the dead, as Hercules does in 'Alcestis', are fascinating, but when living in an era where one can be detached from war and violence, they are so far-fetched it is difficult to allow them to be anything but fantastical stories from school days.

However, Orpheus can then stand out, not only is he unique (and relatable) in his weapon of a lyre and poetry, but his gut-wrenchingly human emotions are also his biggest struggle, deep love which poets would see themselves as relating to.

¹⁰ As these Greeks, in a deeply misogynistic society, would view Alcestis

¹¹ Gros Louis, Kenneth R. R. 1969. *The Triumph and Death of Orpheus in the English Renaissance*. Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 9(1). pp. 65

¹² I have used Collins Dictionary to translate this as "For love conquers everything"-

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/amor-vincit-omnia#:~:text=amor%20vincit%20omnia%20in%20American,love%20conquers%20everything>

¹³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk. X (Translated by Ian Johnston, available free online)

Emotions led Orpheus to the underworld, just as they led Renaissance poets to their poetry, rather than duty, which led heroes like Hercules. Poets can even further resonate with Orpheus as his emotions led to his ultimate failure. R.B. names “*Burning jealousy*” as the reason for his failure. The exact nature of the “jealousie” is uncertain, perhaps he is jealous of the alternate future in which he was able to bed Eurydice, as R. B’s Orpheus is more sensual than any classical interpretations, with Orpheus singing multiple bedding hymns about his lover, who died moments before their wedding night, across the poem. This added sensuality is again a show of the myth being changed to best fit the myth’s new contemporary, with bedding hymns being common to Elizabethans. R.B. puts them in Orpheus’ mouth to make his love more relatable and understandable. A bedding hymn is the final poem Orpheus sings, his final poem is one that most Renaissance poets would have already written, allowing them to imagine themselves to be as great as him, to think in the same way¹⁴.

So, Orpheus is relatable to Renaissance poets, he is driven by his emotions and is even interpreted to write in the same genres as them, showing their changing of him to become even more relatable. It is also clear he is motivated by true love, something admired in the period. Even his ultimate failure is blamed on his “jealousie” bred by a love which poets believed they too experienced. Poets could see themselves in Orpheus, they would like to believe that their love would make them go to such fantastic feats for their lover and that their failure would be brought by the admirable intensity of their love. This meant that Orpheus was seen as superior to Hercules, as Baconian philosophy dictated, because Orpheus represented the poets, they could be Orpheus, so, of course, he was the superior hero, as that made the poets superior. This is best demonstrated by Thomas Nashe’s ‘Preface to Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*’:

*therefore must we ever mourn for our Orpheus*¹⁵

For his relatability, Orpheus was claimed, and for the bravery and superiority he was interpreted to have, he was mourned. He became their idol.

While logically Hercules should have been superior, he was successful in his retrieval from the Underworld, he succeeded because he did not love Alcestis; he could retrieve her through brute strength, as he did not have the tragically romantic “destructive anxiety” of Orpheus, so had no desire to turn around.¹⁶ This emotionless, soldier-like action does not fit the romantic ideals of poets. So, poets were naturally more drawn to Orpheus, they already related to him, and would rather aspire to have the romantic glory of a failure, one that is tangible in their belief of their emotions being equally as strong, than to simply have a brute, soldier-like strength of Hercules to succeed. Renaissance poets would rather think of Orpheus as a true hero because they could theoretically be him, to them Hercules was more of a coward for his lack of romantic humanity.

Yet, in an ironic twist, it seems not even Ovid, who these poets seemingly drew the most inspiration from, saw Orpheus as a truly brave figure, or even one of equal standing to other heroes. As Heath has analysed, it seems that Ovid, although sympathetic to the hero, building pathos for him, is subtly critical for his “distinctly un-Herculean”¹⁷ nature, through his typically Ovidian irony¹⁸.

Ovid makes Orpheus compare himself to Hercules in Lines 20-23, as he reassures Persephone he is not there to “tie up Medusa’s monstrous offspring” (a reference to Hercules’ kidnap of Cerberus).

¹⁴ DeNeef, A. Leigh. 1992. *The Poetics of Orpheus: The Text and a Study of “Orpheus His Journey to Hell (1595)”*. Studies in Philosophy. Vol 89, No. 1 pp. 25-30

¹⁵ Thomas Nashe, *Preface to Sidney’s Astrophel and Stella* (1591)

¹⁶ Haynes, Natalie. 2020 *Pandora’s Jar; Women in Greek Myths*. Eurydice. Pp. 186-187

¹⁷ Leach, E. W. 1975. *Ekphrasis and the Theme of Artistic Failure in Ovid’s Metamorphoses*. Ramus 3 pp. 118-119. Leach contrasts Orpheus and Hercules in more detail here.

¹⁸ Heath, John. 1996. *The Stupor of Orpheus: Ovid’s Metamorphoses 10.64-71*. The Classical Journal. Vol. 91, No.4 pp. 353-370

Orpheus' declaration of being unlike Heracles becomes ironic roughly 40 lines later through Ovid's simile choice:

*numbed by the fact his wife had now died twice,
was like that coward who saw Cerberus,
the triple-headed dog, when he had chains
around his middle neck, the one whose fear
did not leave him until his nature did,
when his body turned to stone. (10.64-71)¹⁹*

Orpheus' promise of being no Hercules bears an unhappy truth, he becomes a "failed Hercules.". While Hercules avoided petrification by successfully kidnapping Cerberus, Orpheus paralyses himself by his failure, his inadequacy lying in his very human loss of emotional control²⁰ demonstrated by his turning around, which the Renaissance poets pitied and yet also admired, mourning for their Orpheus as they believed they would do the same, projecting themselves onto Orpheus and his admirably all-consuming love.

While Renaissance poets admired Orpheus for his "Un-Herculean" nature, in this Ovid could be seen to imply that he shouldn't be admired so. Orpheus is ultimately inadequate to Ovid, even if he deserves pathos and his love deserves admiration, he is not worthy of the same worship as Hercules, which he is ultimately given by Renaissance poets, blinded by the fact the poet was tangible to them, they could be him, they accept they can't be Hercules, so do not want to idolise him so.

Ovid continues the simile, making his opinion of Orpheus clearer as he invites us to compare Orpheus' actions to Olenos and Lethaea's:

*Olenos and you, sad Lethaea, so confident
of your own loveliness...
... Olenos desired to take your guilt upon himself
and to be seen to take the blame. (10. 68-72)*

Renaissance poets reading this could interpret Ovid as only comparing Orpheus to Olenos, showing him as a brave hero, one so in love he chooses to die with his lover. But could Ovid be inviting us to see Lethaea²¹ and her extreme hubris in Orpheus instead? Orpheus had "an unrealistic confidence in his art",²² believing he could achieve a Herculean feat with his art alone, while admirable to Renaissance poets, Ovid seems to criticise this, beginning to frame Orpheus as a cowardly hypocrite as he makes a huge and romantic promise to commit himself to a fate which echoes that of Olenos, for if Eurydice isn't returned:

*I have no wish to journey back. You gods
can then rejoice that both of us are dead (10. 35-38)*

But Orpheus does not keep his word, Ovid does not even let us see him consider keeping it, Orpheus only wants to go back alive; his declaration of devotion was nothing more than a rhetorical bluff, making him a coward, lesser than Olenos (an extremely obscure figure), so what is he in comparison to mighty Hercules? It seems clear that while Renaissance poets may have decided Orpheus was superior, Ovid did not truly agree, warning us the power of art can only go so far²³.

¹⁹ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, Bk. X (Translated by Ian Johnston, available free online)

²⁰ Heath pp, 363-364

²¹ Lethaea's vanity led to her to be turned into stone

²² Heath. pp. 365

²³ Heath argues further that this is due to its interweaved nature with the human emotion, any power it has is ultimately temporal- dependant on the emotions of the artist and audience.

Orpheus did not see the limit of the power of art, he was hubristic, believing his lyre could complete Herculean tasks, an ideal Renaissance poets, in their own hubris, would agree with, choosing to be blind to any version of Orpheus but that of the “supreme artist”²⁴. His failure was caused by having overwhelmingly and tragically human emotions, something the poets themselves had, allowing them to excuse Orpheus for his failure, and ignore him not keeping his word. Yet, Ovid, echoing Plato centuries before, presents something of a coward, an “egotistical poet of overblown rhetoric and shallow self-indulgent rhetoric... a shallow, self-satisfied, self-indulgent lover”²⁵.

It should be noted that both the “cynical, parodistic Ovid” and the “humanely sensitive Ovid” seem to exist in *Metamorphoses*²⁶, he does not entirely disregard Orpheus. Most likely Ovid related to Orpheus, and hoped to write poetry as powerful, but he cannot help to criticise his cowardice and hubristic belief in art. The point of interest here is the Renaissance poet's refusal to see the “cynical, parodistic Ovid”, the “shallow... lover” does not exist to them.

Has this allowed Ovid to posthumously create the biggest irony of them all? His veiled criticism of the lover-poet being completely unseen (or disregarded) by the Renaissance poets, blinded by their love for, and resonance with, Orpheus, and, more importantly, blinded by their hubris in their own art.

Orpheus was perhaps most beloved by Renaissance poets for his significance as the “First poet”, and the power he yielded due to his perfection of the art (which led him to such hubristic belief). These poets found resonance in the hero for his lack of strength, and his overwhelming emotions, but what truly made them idolise him above all was his being a “supreme artist” and a “civiliser”²⁷. Orpheus' extreme skill as a poet is emphasised by both Virgil and Ovid in his power not only over nature but also over the underworld, miraculously bringing the most inevitable forces to a halt with his art:

*The House of the Dead itself was stupefied...
the whirling of Ixion's wheel stopped in the wind (Geo 4.481-484)*

Ovid also describes Ixion's wheel stopping, as well as the halting of Tantalus, Sisyphus and Tityus' punishments²⁸, though perhaps the most incredible image, one that must have caught the hearts (and hubris) of Renaissance poets the most is that Orpheus made:

the bloodless spirits wept (Met 10. 66)

It is these incredible feats that Orpheus' art achieves that must have completely won over the hearts of the Elizabethan poets. It has been established that Orpheus was a tangible hero, one they could relate to and feasibly emulate, making the fact he yielded such power irresistible. Ovid unknowingly creates a great irony as these poets obsess over the power of Orpheus' poetry, lamenting about it in their own, showing their hubris and unwise faith in poetry's power. They don't see the cowardly side of Orpheus as Ovid and Plato do, they are blinded by pride in their poetry, writing more and more, hoping to reach the level of excellence, and hence power, of Orpheus.

So, it was this element of Orpheus that became most emphasised by the Renaissance poets, the drama and his humanness that had been emphasised in classical literature drew them to the character, but his power became the most important part to them. They revised the myth (as must be done to keep myths

²⁴Gros Louis, Kenneth R. R 1969. *The Triumph and Death of Orpheus in the English Renaissance*. Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 9(1). pp. 63-65

²⁵Anderson, W. S. 1982, *The Orpheus in Virgil and Ovid: flebile nesico quid*. In *Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a Myth*, pp. 25-50

²⁶Segal, Charles. 1989. *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet*. pp.81

²⁷Gros Louis, pp. 65

²⁸Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk X, Ln 43-47

alive) to be relevant to their time and cause, which was that of the power and importance of poetry, given they lived in an era where poetry was slowly losing prestige, science and pure philosophy becoming more favoured²⁹. They began to use Orpheus as a symbol of poetry's importance, obsessing over the power it gave him. R.B. laments over stanzas about the poet's power, not only through expanding on Ovid and Virgil's description of his power over the underworld, but also specifying his:

*heauenly harmony had power to moouē:
Hilles, trees and stones, beasts, birds and other things
Both men on the earth, and all the gods aboue*

Even Shakespeare lamented on the poet's great power, drifting from the Roman texts to explain his power over nature:

*For Orpheus' lute was strung with poets' sinews,
Whose golden touch could soften steel and stones,
Make tigers tame and huge leviathans
Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands³⁰*

His power over nature was a spectacle, it was incredible it was used to demonstrate the true power of poetry. Sidney, in *Defense of Poetry (1595)*, explains that the power of Orpheus was so great he could draw "*Wild untamed wits to an admiration of knowledge*" and direct the minds of "*stony and beastly people*". Webbe also explores this, Orpheus' poetry "*withdrew men from raungyning uncertainty... made them gather together... make houses*"³¹. Puttenham summarises this as he explains that the cold logic can only be communicated to the "*wild beasts*" of everyday people when spoken in harmony like Orpheus.³²

Orpheus had long been known as the "Civiliser of mankind"³³, but it was the Renaissance poets who specified that it was his poetry that allowed him to. Their emphasis on the power of Orpheus' poetry to civilise man (which is never truly explored by Ovid and Virgil) demonstrates their changing of the myth to become relevant. Orpheus, their idol, became symbolic of not just the power of poetry, but also its purpose. The politics of early modern England were tumultuous, religion and philosophy changing and spreading like never before, these poets, who saw themselves in Orpheus, saw his poetry's power, and believed (arguably arrogantly) that they too could write poetry so great they could civilise all the population. Orpheus was used to legitimise the art of poetry, an art that was slowly losing its once prestigious place, by giving it a new and clear purpose.

Orpheus found his way into poets of the Elizabethan Renaissance's hearts through his unique nature of wielding a lyre and words, not a sword and strength, which made him a tangible figure, one who could feasibly be emulated by the poets. His story evolved across antiquity, being overtly criticised by Plato, and subtlety criticised by Ovid, each wary of the hero's un-herculean nature, and showing his cowardice through his comparison to unremarkable people. Yet, by the time of the Renaissance, these criticisms were disregarded. Orpheus became the perfect hero, one superior to Hercules. He became their idol due to the power of his poetry, so beloved because it was both aspirational and tangible, every poet hoped one day his words could yield the power of Orpheus (their blindness to the faults of Orpheus due to their unrealistic faith in their words a triumphal posthumous irony of Ovid). They

²⁹Gros Louis, pp. 63-80

³⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, III, ii, 78-81

³¹ William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586)

³² George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589)

³³ For example, by Golding and Conti

could also use Orpheus to justify their efforts, he was proof poetry was both powerful and useful in its civilising nature. So, Renaissance poets were arguably misinterpreting Orpheus, completely blind to his faults, but are inarguably a perfect demonstration of how myths are kept alive- they are changed. Orpheus' love was no longer the emphasis, but his human nature, and the power of his poetry, as he was revitalised to suit the new contemporary, allowing him to be an ironic idol in the Elizabethan Renaissance, holding a higher status than he ever had in antiquity.

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