Dante’s Metam-Orpheus: 
The Unspoken Presence of Orpheus 
in the *Divine Comedy*

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The myth of Orpheus figures prominently into literature from the Hellenistic era to the present day, yet the interpretations of the myth have remained anything but static during its transmittance. The myth of Orpheus has undergone so many interpretive changes throughout the ages that the mere mention of the name Orpheus evokes a plethora of images, concepts, literary tropes, and archetypes. The physical rending apart of Orpheus by the Maenads, as told by Virgil and Ovid in the Augustan Age, foreshadows the literal fragmentation of the Orpheus myth by writers over time, who have repeatedly manipulated the myth to bolster their own literary aims. This cannibalization of the Orpheus myth was especially popular for writers in the Middle Ages, a time when pagan myths were typically explained either allegorically or euhemeristically so that they could be synchretized with Christian ideology. For this paper I am tracing the implicit and explicit references to the multifaceted figure of Orpheus in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Dante only explicitly names Orpheus once in his *Divine Comedy*, upon seeing him within the Limbo for intellectuals. Yet the function of the Orpheus figure in the *Divine Comedy*, similar to his overall function in literature, is that of a chimera. The shade of Orpheus residing in Dante’s Limbo serves only as the mold for the multiple imprints the figure leaves throughout the text.

Dante’s overt reference to Orpheus is brief; the pilgrim merely mentions that he sees “Orpheus, /and Tully, Linus, moral Seneca”¹ among the “philosophic family.”² The perception of Orpheus as a philosopher epitomizes one of the more prevalent interpretations of his schizophrenic lit-

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² *Inf.* 4:132.
erary identity, yet this aspect of his character was by no means thought to be the most significant or definitive for the writers of the Middle Ages. Emmet Robbins perceives there to be “three facets of this astonishing character,” which “account for the universality of his appeal.”

While Robbins’ evaluation limits the possible identities of Orpheus to three, in the Middle Ages alone, the allegorisis of the Orpheus myth resulted in countless interpretations and literary revisions of the tale, any one of which would be easily recognizable to Dante’s audience. According to Boethius, Orpheus represents “the human soul fleeing the body and the earth but dragged back by its inability to reject temporalia-love for Eurydice.” For Remigius, Orpheus “is reported to have made the woods run and the waters stand still because he was a theologian and led men from wild ways to a civilized life.” Indeed, the list goes on. While the variance of the interpretations is clearly symptomatic of what Gilbert Highet calls “the detestable medieval habit of extracting a moral lesson from every fact or work of art,” it provided Dante with a smorgasbord of material for his own rendition of the Orpheus myth.

Freidman describes the figure of Orpheus as “a broken antique statue, pieced together from scattered fragments and even then forced to face posterity without an arm or a nose.” This metaphor is helpful for explaining the fundamental divisiveness of Orpheus’ literary identity, as not only is there a plurality among authors for the myth, but each account has been subject to infinite interpretations as well. Because of the vast and oblique nature of the body of literature concerning Orpheus, Dante could have irreproachably placed Orpheus among the sinners in any number of his circles of hell. Indeed, had Dante wanted to adhere to his guide’s rendition of the myth, the figure of Virgil’s Orpheus would

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4 Emmet Robbins, "Famous Orpheus," Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a Myth, ed. John Warden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 3. For Robbins, the perception of Orpheus as a musician would be inextricably bound up with that of him as an intellectual: “since the voice of Orpheus is the voice of Music, he presides over the transformations and interaction of poetry and science” (4).
5 Boethius, as paraphrased by John B. Friedman, Orpheus in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) 95.
6 Remigius, in Friedman, 100.
7 For detailed account of interpretations of the Orpheus myth in the Middle Ages, see the chapter "Oraia-phonos and Eur-dike in Hell" in Orpheus in the Middle Ages 86-145.
8 Highet, in Friedman, 86.
9 Friedman, 5.
have been utterly snug among the tragic lovers in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, or with Filippo Argen-
ti among the sullen in the eighth. Conversely, had Dante chosen to adopt the version of the myth pre-
sented in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the versatile Orpheus would have been welcome among the
sodomites in canto fifteen of Dante’s *Inferno*. Indeed, so many are the interpretive slants of the
Orpheus myth, that Dante could have placed Orpheus among the diviners in canto twenty,\(^{10}\) with the
over-curious Ulysses in canto twenty six,\(^{11}\) or even with the suicidal Pier della Vigna\(^{12}\) in canto thir-
teen without incurring accusations that he was misreading the mythical figure. Thus, Dante’s dispos-
als of Orpheus in the intellectual Limbo, with no further explicit mention of his name, appears rather
indiscriminate. One must ask, why did Dante choose the perception of Orpheus as a philosopher as the
definitive interpretation of his character when he had an entire trajectory of possible interpretations of
the figure to choose from? John Warden, author of the text *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*,
comments on the critical efforts to resolve this question,

The early commentators on Dante’s *Comedy* give various interpretations of what the poet meant when
he placed Orpheus among the virtuous pagans in *Inferno* IV, […] Pietro di Dante […] offers the famil-
 iar allegory in which the musicians seeks his wife […] who has been sent to hell through the bite of
the serpent […] Andrea Lancia, in his gloss on the passage, uses Orpheus as the occasion for a brief
technical discussion of medieval music […] For Benvenuto da Imola, the story of Orpheus has sever-
al meanings […] The most interesting feature of Benevenuto’s gloss is his comparison of Dante and
Orpheus […] Dante […] did not look back, whereas Orpheus disobeyed the law.\(^{13}\)

Dante’s placement of Orpheus among the philosophers has indeed caused speculation among commen-
tators, yet this speculation has produced little resolution. This is possibly because commentators have
largely assumed that Dante’s treatment of the Orpheus myth ends with his explicit mention of the fig-
ure of Orpheus in canto four. Yet, the figure of Orpheus is not ineluctably fused together with the body

\(^{10}\) According to John Warden, Orpheus was perceived to be a "great prophet and religious teacher, founder, at
least according to legend, of a religious sect called Orphism" (ix).

\(^{11}\) Anderson attributes Orpheus’ decision to plead for Eurydice in the underworld more to excessive curiosity
than utter desperation. For Anderson, this degradation of emotive subject matter to mere inquisitiveness marks
one of the major changes from Virgil’s rendition of the text to Ovid’s. See *Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a
Myth* 25-50 for further discussion on this topic.

\(^{12}\) Anderson locates the "main theme" of Virgil’s story of Orpheus as the "essentially futile and ultimately suici-
dal, grief for a loss that cannot be altered" (33). His endless mourning renders him an "emblem of inertia and
death".

\(^{13}\) Warden, 225-6.
of literature surrounding him, and the myth of Orpheus does not have a singular interpretive meaning for Dante, though it appears to initially. Dante resolves the discrepancy between the singularity of the figure of Orpheus and the plurality of interpretations of his character by distinguishing between Orpheus the man and Orpheus the myth(s). Though the figure of Orpheus is represented in Limbo as a poet and philosopher, Dante invokes the network of Orphic literature at various points in his narrative, and a facet of the fragmentary Orpheus serves as the implied prototypical model for many of his characters.

Dante’s primary sources for his duplicable Orpheus are Virgil’s fourth Georgic and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The Orpheus figure in canto four of the *Inferno*, however, is Dante’s own invention. Dante’s Orpheus is one among a group of pagans who “did not sin”, but are punished because “they lived before Christianity.”14 Dante would have indicted both Virgil and Ovid’s Orpheus according to his Christian framework, at the very least as either a sullen, tragic lover or a homosexual, respectively. In contrast to Virgil and Ovid’s Orpheus, the Orpheus in Dante’s Limbo is virtuous, and for that matter, silent. Though not mentioned explicitly, Dante uses Virgil and Ovid’s literary constructions of Orpheus as models for his characters: Francesca da Rimini, Filippo Argenti and Brunetto Latini. Because of the brevity of this paper, I will focus on the implied presence of Virgil’s Orpheus as the paradigmatic model for the tragic lovers in the *Divine Comedy*. However, the similarities between the storytelling Orpheus in Ovid, the “originator (‘auctor’) of male homosexuality,”15 and the poet/pedant Latini are noteworthy. Both men are poet homosexuals, and Latini’s plea to Dante, “let my *Tesoro*, in which I still live /be precious to you,”16 resonates both the popular conception of Orpheus as a symbol of timeless literary fame, as well as his author, Ovid’s, declaration in the *Metamorphoses*,

> Now I have done my work, it will endure,  
> I trust beyond Jove’s anger, fire and sword,  
> Beyond Time’s hunger. The day will come, I know,  
> So let it come, that day which has no power,  
> Save over my body, to end my span of life  
> Whatever it may be. Still, part of me,  
> The better part, immortal, will be remembered

14 *Inf.* 4: 34, 36.  
I shall be read, and through all centuries,
If prophecies of bards are ever truthful,
I shall be living, always.17

By alluding to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Dante also draws a connection between Ovid’s exile from Augustan Rome, and his own exile from Florence, and suggests the capacity of literature to transcend the divisive ages of humanity and so achieve immortality beyond the author.

Another reworking of Orpheus may be seen in Dante’s depiction of Filippo Argenti, who definitively classifies of himself as “one who weeps.”18 Dante speaks of Argenti’s fate at the hands of the other wrathful and sullen sinners:

Then he stretched both his hands out toward the boat […]
Soon after […] I saw
The muddy sinners so dismember him […]
They all were shouting: ‘At Filippo Argenti.’19

The parallels between this passage and Virgil’s fourth Georgic are striking: Eurydice, like Argenti, extends her “helpless hands […] stretching to you [Orpheus].”20 Orpheus is said to have “vainly grasped at shadows” before the “Thracian women […] tore him apart.”21 While Orpheus serves as a model for Dante’s characters Argenti and Latini, most exceptional is Dante’s depiction of Francesca da Rimini. Francesca is suspiciously reminiscent of Virgil’s Orpheus, and Dante the pilgrim encounters her only moments after leaving the spirit of Orpheus in Limbo.

The figure of Orpheus rendered in Virgil’s fourth Georgic is primarily a tragic and passionate lover. Indeed, critics have noted potential similarities between Virgil’s Orpheus and his later creations of Dido and Turnus,22 both of whom are notorious for their sublimation of reason under passion, and the former of which suffers in Dante’s inferno for her rashness. Anderson asserts that like his predecessor Dido, it is Orpheus’ passion that is ultimately the cause of his demise. He argues that “Virgil has made his central object the portrayal of love as ‘furor.’”23 While “Orpheus almost resurrected

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18 *Inf.* 8:36
19 *Inf.* 8:40, 58-9, 61.
21 Virgil 519.
22 Anderson states that: "Orpheus, Virgil's first elaborate dramatic character, is the prototype of those magnificently flawed individuals Dido and Turnus of the Aeneid" (36).
Eurydice, […] his irrational passions froze him in inactivity and ultimately brought about his death.”

Despite Orpheus’ “irrational passion” there seems to be no place for Orpheus in Dante’s circle for the lovers where, as Dante pilgrim explicates, the sinners “are damned because they sinned within the flesh, subjecting reason to the rule of lust.” However, upon closer examination, Dante’s description of the sinners in hell is reminiscent of Virgil’s description of the shades in the underworld, as told in his fourth Georgic. Virgil’s Orpheus, as well, resides in the circle of the lustful in spirit, or in spirit of a spirit, as the model for the figure of Francesca.

Virgil uses an epic simile to describe how the shades in his underworld flock to the figure of Orpheus like birds:

Drawn from the very depths
Of Erebus came insubstantial shades,
The phantoms of the lightless. Thick as birds
That hide themselves in thousands in thousands in the leaves
When evening or a winter shower has brought them
Down from the mountains.

The lovers Dante summons are, like Virgil’s shades, drawn to him:

As doves when summoned by desire,
Borne forward by their will, move through the air
With wings uplifted, still, to their sweet nest,
Those spirits left the ranks where Dido suffers.

Dante invokes this simile a second time, as though in conversation with Virgil’s Georgic. His lovers are not merely birds in the broad, generic sense of the word; Dante’s lovers are doves, starlings and cranes! He grandiloquently continues:

And as, in the cold season, starlings’ wings
Bear them along in broad and crowded ranks,
So does the blast bear on the guilty spirits:
Now here, now there, now down, now up, it drives them.
Virgil, not to be outdone even posthumously, in turn relates Orpheus’ incessant weeping to the cries of a mournful nightingale:

He wept […] as the nightingale  
Mourning beneath the shade of a poplar-tree  
Laments lost young ones whom a heartless plowman  
Has spied unfledged in the nest and Plundered.  
She weeps all night long and perched upon a bough  
Repeats her piteous plaint, and far and wide  
Fills all the air with grief.\(^{30}\)

Dante reciprocates, extending the simile in order to evoke a sense of perpetual mourning, similar to Orpheus’ endless grief, in his tragic lovers. Both the nightingale-like Orpheus of Virgil and the crane-like lovers of Dante mourn their fate to the unresponsive winds:

There is no hope that ever comforts them-  
No hope for rest and none for lesser pain.  
And just as cranes in flight will chant their lays,  
Arraying their long file across the air,  
So did the shades I saw approaching, borne  
By that assailing wind, lament and moan.\(^{31}\)

The structural similarities between the two texts render Dante’s deliberate omission of Orpheus’ conspicuous at the very least. Where is Virgil’s original tragic lover, whose character served as the skeletal model for Virgil’s creation of Dido? The answer comes with Dante’s introduction of Francesca.

When we meet Francesca da Rimini, the lover who converses with Dante in the fifth canto, Dante pilgrim tells her, “Francesca, your afflictions /move me to tears of sorrow and pity.”\(^{32}\) Akin to Orpheus, Francesca has the capacity to move people to tears with her words. Virgil tells his reader that Orpheus could move: “hard hearts no human prayer [could] hope to soften.”\(^{33}\) Francesca responds to Dante’s ejaculation of pity with the words, “there is no greater sorrow /than thinking back upon a happy time /in misery-and this your teacher knows.”\(^{34}\) Lest we had forgotten Virgil’s presence, and what his

\(^{29}\) *Inf.* 5:40-3.  
\(^{30}\) Virgil 507, 511-515.  
\(^{31}\) *Inf.* 5:44-49.
presence entails, Francesca reminds us that the author and creator of the tragic lovers, Orpheus and Dido, is standing beside them. She continues in her address to Dante, “I shall tell /my tale to you as one who weeps and speaks,” she says, echoing Orpheus’ own vocal lament of his dead wife through song. Francesca’s tale evolves to be quite similar to Orpheus’. Just as in Orpheus’ case, “madness overcame /the unwary lover”, Francesca tells Dante how she, too, was overcome by a rash and tragic love on earth:

Love that can quickly seize the gentle heart
Took hold of him […]
Love, that releases no beloved from loving,
Took hold of me […]
Love led the two of us unto one death.

The triple repetition of the word ‘Love’ by Francesca echoes Orpheus’ thrice uttered lament for his wife:

‘Eurydice!’ the voice and frozen tongue
Still called aloud, ‘Ah, poor Eurydice!’
As life was ebbing away, and the river banks
Echoed across the flood, ‘Eurydice.’

Virgil’s Orpheus, though not even gratified with a vestigial presence in this canto, permeates every line and every character of this episode. Anderson argues that “Virgil unflinchingly requires us to perceive Orpheus as guilty,” yet, it is impossible to condemn what is not apparent. Virgil’s Orpheus symbolically represents the archetypal tragic lover for Dante, yet implicitly so, as the original shade of Orpheus subsists, guileless, in Limbo.

32 Inf. 5:116-17. 33 Virgil 470.
34 Inf. 5:121-3. 35 Inf. 5:125-6.
36 Virgil 490-1.
37 Inf. 5, 100-1, 103-4,106
38 Virgil 526-30
Dante alludes to Virgil’s Orpheus as the lover again in canto thirty of his Purgatorio. In this canto, Virgil’s disappearance from Purgatory stems an emotive discourse from Dante pilgrim: “but Virgil had deprived us of himself, /Virgil, the gentlest father, Virgil, he /to whom I gave my self for my salvation.” Critics have noted the implicit allusion to Virgil’s Orpheus in Dante’s lament:

As Daniello was the first to point out, Virgil’s fourth Georgic, with its double tragedy of Orpheus’ loss of Eurydice and of his own life, is reformulated to serve as Dante’s farewell to Virgil, when he perceives that his ‘sweet father’ is no longer with him, the words ‘Virgilio, Virgilio, Virgilio’ paralleling Orpheus’ three apostrophizing cries, ‘Eurydice, Eurydice, Eurydice.’

Dante’s renewed incorporation of Orpheus’ tragic speech suggests what Dante pilgrim could have become, had he never ceased mourning the disappearance of Virgil. Dante pilgrim is in mortal danger of re-enacting Orpheus’ role as the eternally mourning lover, yet he is saved by Beatrice, who tells him “do not /yet weep, do not weep yet.” The loss of Virgil is not sufficient cause for endless lament for Dante. Beatrice tells Dante that he will need to save his tears for his journey into Paradise. This canto has a profound element of transcendence, both poetic and spiritual. Dante will transcend the world of mortals into Paradise, and while doing so, he will as well surpass Virgil in poetic glory. Beatrice interrupts Dante pilgrim’s thrice-uttered cry to the absent ‘Virgil’ by calling out to him by name. As Mandelbaum points out, Beatrice’s vocalization of “Dante,” constitutes “the first and only time that Dante’s name is mentioned in the Comedy.” Thus, Virgil and his poetry are re-wrought by Dante as models that merit reverence, but ultimately must be surpassed. The allusion to Orpheus, while nevertheless a tribute to Virgil’s poetic mastery, serves to institute Dante as the pre-eminent poet.

Dante silences the ever-mourning figure of Orpheus by assigning him to a Limbo where he does not speak, but rather is spoken for by his setting among intellectuals. Dante allows this facet of the mythical Orpheus to predominate only briefly, as Dante’s Orpheus is soon overshadowed by the prevalent, yet tacit allusions to Virgil and Ovid’s Orpheus throughout the text. Perhaps by recasting...
Orpheus as a speechless intellectual, Dante is implying the superiority of textual over oral discourse, as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, can speak for the poet either out of exile, or after death. The appearance of the myth of Orpheus is manifold in Dante’s work, yet by no means blatant. Either in his conspicuous absence among the astrologers, for example, or his implied presence in the circles for the lovers and the sullen, Orpheus’ voice resonates through the *Divine Comedy*, though it is seen and not heard.
Works Cited

Ancient Works


Modern Work


