The tragic story of the singer Orpheus (son of the Muse Calliope) and his beloved wife Eurydice, twice lost to death, is certainly one of the best known of ancient myths. Ovid’s version is told, with remarkable (and intentionally ill-proportioned) economy, in fewer than 80 lines: On the couple’s wedding day, the hero’s new bride falls dead, stricken by the bite of a serpent. Having mourned Eurydice “sufficiently” and “so that he might not neglect to try the shades of Hell”—two of several deliberately curious details in the narrative—Orpheus descends into the Underworld and appeals to Persephone and the prince of darkness to allow his wife’s return to the land of the living. With a rambling, highly rhetorical lyric that takes up nearly a third of the entire tale, the minstrel, who could charm animals and even stones with his song, literally stupefies all the bloodless souls of Hades (the Danaids leave off carrying their urns and Sisyphus sits down on his rock!) and instantly compels Hades’ king and queen to his will, on the condition, however, that in leading Eurydice out of their realm he should never look back at her face. Just as they reach the edge of upper earth, of course, Orpheus does steal a fateful backward glance, only to see Eurydice at that moment, “dying again,” tumbling downward and for eternity into the abyss. Briefly stupefied himself at the calamity, and then thwarted in his attempt at a second crossing of the river Styx, Orpheus retreats to the mountains of his homeland Thrace (despite the implications of an earlier pledge to join his wife in death should he fail in his mission).

The story was in antiquity widely known from several versions, in particular from Vergil’s Georgics (IV.452-546), and modern readers ought to consider carefully the differences between the two accounts, just as Ovid expected his contemporary audience to do. Suffice it here to say that Vergil’s protagonist is at once more heroic and more sympathetic, his Eurydice far more dimensional (in Ovid’s telling, the hapless bride is a mere sketch of a character and has but a single word to say, Vale), his rendering of Hell more fearful (and never verging on the comic, like Sisyphus perched on his stone). In Vergil’s concluding scene, Orpheus’ head, torn from his shoulders by a throng of crazed Bacchantes and hurled into the Hebrus river, cried out the name of his beloved Eurydice again and again as it floated downstream, a pitiable lament re-echoed by the river’s banks. In Ovid’s anti-epic version, a clever undercutting of the traditional tale, Eurydice, “sufficiently mourned,” seems insufficiently loved, and his magniloquent Orpheus seems closer in his ineptitudes to Daphne’s blustering Apollo than to Thisbe’s Pyramus, whose actions speak, as properly they should, far louder than his words.

Like the other transformations in this book, Eurydice’s ill-fated marriage to the mystical lord of song and her tragic metamorphosis from dead to dead again have fascinated musicians, poets, and artists over the centuries. The story has inspired verse by Wordsworth and Shelley (both of whom looked to Vergil’s account), Swinburne and Robert Browning, Rilke, D.H. Lawrence, Robert Lowell, and James Dickey; operas by Jacopo Peri (our earliest surviving opera, first performed in 1600) and Claudio Monteverdi (1607), by Gluck and Haydn and Mozart in the 18th century, by Offenbach in the 19th, and even the modern Japanese opera, Hiroshima no Orfe (Orpheus in Hiroshima), by Yasushi Akutagawa (1967); other musical compositions by Schubert and Liszt and Stravinsky; numerous dramatizations, including Henry Fielding’s farce, Eurydice, or, The Devil Henpeck’d (1737), Jean Anouilh’s Eurydice (1941), and Tennessee Williams’ Orpheus Descending (1955); paintings by Titian, Poussin, Rubens, and Feuerbach (seen below); sculpture by Bandinelli and Rodin; and a wide range of other artistic productions, among them three choreographed dances by Isadora Duncan and the films Orphée (1949) and Le Testament d’Orphée (1959) by Jean Cocteau and Marcel Camus’ Black Orpheus (1959).
Inde: Book IX had ended with the wedding of Iphis and Ianthe on the island of Crete; the marriage god Hymenaeus (line 2) now makes his way from that event to the wedding of Orpheus and Eurydice.

immēnsus, -a, -um, boundless, vast (with aethera 2).
croceus, -a, -um, of saffron; saffron-colored, yellow (the color worn by brides in Roman weddings).
croceō . . . amīctū: the words surround velātus just as the cloak itself was wrapped around the god.
vēlō, -āre, -āvī, -ātus, to cover, clothe (with Hymenaeus 2).
aēthēr, aëtheris, acc. aethera, n., the upper regions of space, heaven.
digredior, digredi, digressurus, to go away, depart.
Ciconēs, Ciconom, m. pl., the Cicones (a tribe of southern Thrace).
Hymenaeus, -i, m., the Greek wedding refrain; the god of marriage (cf. Hymēn 1.480).
*ōra, -ae, f., shore, coast.
*tendo, tendere, tetendi, tentus, to extend, stretch forth; to proceed.
Orphēus, -a, -um, of or belonging to Orpheus.
Orphēa . . . vōce: Ovid uses the adjective instead of Orpheus' name, in order to focus on the man's most remarkable attribute, his mesmerizing voice (which in this case fails to achieve the effect he desired); cf. Rhodopēus . . . vātēs (11-12).
nēquiquam: because, while Hymenaeus did appear, his epiphany proved most unpropitious.
ille: Hymenaeus.
ne . . . / nec . . . nec (5): an effective polysyndeton.
sollemnis, -is, -e, ceremonial, ritual; traditional.
sollemnia verba: i.e., the wedding hymn.
5 nec . . . fēlix: a heavy spondaic line, with conflict of ictus and accent.
*nōmen, nōmis, n., omen, augury, sign.
quoque quam: note the alliteration and cf. ĭisque/-osque in the next line.
lacrīmōsōs, -a, -um, tearful; causing tears.
lacrīmōsō . . . ōumō: the repeated ō's are perhaps meant as a mournful sound effect.
strīdulus, -a, -um, shrill, high-pitched (here, hissing or sputtering, a sound further suggested by the repeated s's in 6-7).
6 ĭisque, adv., all the way to or from; continuously.
nūllos . . . ignēs: i.e., the torch was sputtering and smoking (irritating the eyes of the celebrants) and never thoroughly caught fire, even as it was waved back and forth to ignite the sparks.
mōtus, -ūs, m., movement (here, even with shaking).
8 exitus, -ūs, m., departure, exit; outcome.
Exitus . . . gravior: sc. fuit; brevity, ellipsis, and the quick dactyls add point to the sententia.
*auspicium, -i, n., omen, augury (here abl. of comparison).
Nam . . . vagātūr (9): there are some striking sound effects, including

Discussion Questions

1. How is the positioning of immēnsum . . . / aethera (1-2) appropriate to the scene described?
2. How does meter reinforce meaning in verses 2-3? What is especially effective in the shift of rhythm in 3?
3. Comment on the wordplay in vōce vocātur (3).
4. What are the multiple effects of the meter, the polysyndeton, and the positioning of the adjectives in 4-5?
5. How does the ominous scene conjured up by lacrimōsō . . . ōumō (6) foreshadow the events that follow?
6. Notice that Eurydice is at first (like Orpheus) not named, but only referred to as nupta . . . nova (8-9); knowing that Ovid's audience was already well familiar with the story, what do you see as the effect?
occidīō, occidere, occidiō, occasīōnus, to fall, collapse; to die.
tālūs, -i, m., ankle-bone, ankle.
in tālum . . . receptī: lit., with a snake’s tooth received into her ankle; even in Latin the circumlocution is rather odd, as are other aspects of the narrative.
dēns, dentis, m., tooth, fang (note the assonance in serpentis dente).
*
Quam: = Eam, object of dēflevit (12); Eurydice, like Orpheus, is still not named (their names are delayed to verses 31 and 64, respectively). Note the internal rhyme Quam . . . -ras (at the caesura) -quam. . . -ras.
satis: a curious modifier (did Orpheus mourn Eurydice just “enough”?); one of several elements in the narrative which Ovid deliberately introduces to undercut, and even burlesque, Orpheus’ heroic image.

Discussion Questions
1. What effect does Ovid achieve through the enjambement of occidit (10) and the shift of meter following? Comment too on the line’s striking c/d/t alliteration; are these sounds appropriate to the context?

2. What is your response to Ovid’s quick narration of Eurydice’s death and Orpheus’ mourning before descending into the underworld (10-12)? Is the narrative too abbreviated and the transition in 11 deliberately abrupt, and, if so, what is the poet’s intent?

3. How might the negative phrasing of the purpose clause in 12 serve to undercut Orpheus’ heroic image?

4. How is the meter in 12 suited to the scene shift from II? Comment on other sound effects in the line.

5. By comparison with Aeneas’ descent into Hades in Aeneid VI, Orpheus’ journey seems to have been accomplished with lightning-fast speed; how does the meter in 14–15 help convey this impression?

inamoenaque . . . dominum (16): an epic periphrasis for Pluto, lord of the dead.

umbrārum dominum: a highly effective enjambment, punctuated by caesura and intensified by the roaring r’s and the foreboding assonance of um-/u/-um/-um (under the iotis in each of the first three feet).

pulsīisque ad carmina nervīs: with the strings (of his lyre) strummed to accompany his song; Orpheus does not merely address the prince of darkness and his bride, but tries to charm them through the magic of his lyrics. Cf. nervōsque ad verba moventem (40), which precisely balances the phrase here and with it frames the entire song (17–39).
sic ait: the enjambement and diaeresis effectively introduce Orpheus' lengthy song.
numina: voc., with the gen. phrase positis...mundi; note the soundplay with carmina (identically positioned in 16) and mundi.
mundus, -i, m., world, universe.
reccido, reccidere, reccidi, recciisurus, to fall back, sink back (here pres. tense).
*quisquis, quidquid, indefinite rel. pron., any who, whoever, whatever.
quidquid...creämur: "we," the subject of reccidimus, is the antecedent; the n. sing. pron. is used here for a generalizing effect, whichever of us are created mortal.
mortalis, -is, -e, subject to death, mortal.
créo, -are, -avi, -atus, to beget, create.
si licet et...sinitis (20): the protasis of a simple fact condition, with descendii (21) the verb of the apodosis.
*falsus, -a, -um, untrue, false; misleading, deceptive.
falsi...oris: the beguiling singer here promises to utter only the truth.
(whether he does or not is a matter of interpretation).
positis: = depositis, set aside; the implication is that he sometimes does, or at least can, speak evasively or obscurely.
ambages, -um, f. pl., a circuitous path; long-winded, obscure, or evasive speech.
opacus, -a, -om, shaded; shadowy, dark, dim.
Tartara, -orum, n. pl., Tartarus (the Underworld).
uti: = ut.
villiisus, -a, -um, shaggy, hairy.
villiisa...guttur (22): note the elaborate interlocked word order, producing with Medüsaei...mönstr (a brilliant golden line.
colubra, -ae, f., serpent, snake (used especially of the "hair" of monsters, as here with villiosa, bristling with serpents).
termi, -ae, -a, pl. adj., three (each), three at a time, three in succession.
Medüsaeus, -a, -um, of Medusa (the Gorgon whose hair consisted of living serpents); (here) resembling Medusa, Medusa-like.
Medüsaei...mönstr: Cerberus, the three-headed watchdog of the Underworld, was born of the snake-demon Echidna, a sister of Medusa; like Medusa, he had snaky locks and was so hideous that a single glance at him could turn a man to stone (cf. 65-66).
vinciö, vincire, vinxi, vinctus, to bind, tie up.
guttur, gutturis, n., throat.
mönstrum, -i, n., omen, portent; monster.
causa...coniünx: an abrupt formulation; note the harsh alliteration of c, continued in calcäta.
calco, -are, -avi, -atus, to trample; to tread, step on.
venenum, -i, n., a potent herb: poison, venom.
viperá, -ae, f., viper, serpent.

Discussion Questions

1. In what respects does the expression falsi positis ambágibus oris / vèra loquí (19-20) seem redundant? What might Ovid's purpose be in having Orpheus speak this way?
2. What is the point of having Orpheus mention two purposes that did not motivate his descent into the underworld (20-22)?
3. How is the intricate interweaving of the three adjectives and three nouns in 21-22 (villiis...monstri) neatly suited to Ovid's depiction of the hellhound Cerberus?
vicit Amor: sc. mē; asyndeton (we expect sed or autem) and the very brevity of the sentence underscore Orpheus' point (cf. the expanded vōs quoque fūnxit Amor 29).

Superā . . . ärō: cf. superās . . . aūrās (11).

Supera . . . ora: cf. superas . . . auras (11).

an sit: sc. bene notos; the series of monosyllables, and the consequent jerkiness of the dactylic rhythm, both preceding and following dubito, help suggest Orpheus' initial hesitancy (or the hesitancy he feigns).

et: = etiam; the anaphora of et hie strengthens the equation Orpheus makes between Love's two victories in 26 and 29.

auguror, augurari, auguratus sum,
to foretell by augury; to intuit, sense, surmise.

esse: i.e., eum (Amōrem) esse nōtum, indirect statement with auguror.

*fama, -ae, f., news, report; tradition, story.

veteris . . . rapinae: i.e., Pluto's rape of Persephone (which Ovid himself had included in Met. V, in a tale narrated by Orpheus' own mother, the Muse Calliope).

mentiō, mentiri, mentitus sum,
to lie; to invent, fabricate.

Per: with oaths, by.

Per . . . loca . . . / per Chaos (30): anaphora and asyndeton lend intensity to Orpheus' oath, as do the strong epithets (plēna timōris, ingēns, vāstī—these last two effectively juxtaposed). Cf. in loca plēna metēs (IV.111 above).

ego: in prose this word (subject of oro 31) would either precede or follow the prepositional phrases; but in oaths Ovid favors this arrangement, which emphasizes the subject.

30 

Discussion Questions

1. In view of its context, what do you suppose is the intended effect of the poetic plural silentia (30)?

2. Some readers take properāta retextīte fāta (31) to mean reweave Eurydice's destiny, too swiftly ended rather than unweave her premature death; which makes better sense in this context and why?

3. Comment on the placement of omnia and īnum (32-33); what is the intended effect and how is the idea continued in the next verse?
iūris . . . vestrī: under your authority (a variety of possessive gen.).
*mīnūs, mīnerīs, n., a required task; tribute, offering (to a deity); gift (with pro, as a gift); favor, service.
*ūsus, -īs, m., use, employment; the right to use or enjoy (especially with reference to property owned by another); potential for use, utility; marriage (one type of Roman civil marriage, which became binding following a full year of cohabitation).

Quod: here, but.
*venīa, -ae, f., favor, kindness, blessing (especially in a religious sense); forgiveness, pardon; reprieve, remission.
certum est / . . . mihi (39): I am determined (lit., it is a certainty for me) + infin.; mihi is delayed to balance coniuge.
nōlle: essentially equivalent to nōn here, but with greater force.
lētō gaudete duorum: the t/d alliteration, the assonance of let-/-det-, the accented o’s, and the abrupt imperative add a harsh, melancholy tone to the song’s close.

Tāliā . . . moventem: this line corresponds precisely to pulsisque . . . / sēc ait (16-17) and with it provides a chiastic frame for Orpheus’ song; the internal rhyme in dicentem . . . moventem adds an aptly musical sound effect. With the participles sc. Orpheum, object of flebant (41).
exsangūis, -is, -e, bloodless; pale; lifeless.
*flēō, flere, flevi, fletūs, to weep, cry; to weep for, lament.

Tantalus, -ī, m., Tantalus (a Lydian king, son of Zeus and father of Pelops).
Tantalus . . . refugam (42): like the others named in the next few lines (and described by Ovid earlier in Met. IV), Tantalus had committed a crime that earned him eternal torment in Hades. Since Tantalus’ offense was culinary (he had butchered his son and served him to the gods in a stew to test their omniscience), he was cursed with perpetual hunger and thirst, standing beneath a tree whose fruits remained just beyond his reach and in a stream whose waters receded from his lips whenever he sought to drink. Here, stunned by Orpheus’ song, each of these shades momentarily ceases from its labors.

captāvit: here, with nec Tantalus, and Tantalus did not try to seize (or catch at).
refugus, -a, -um, fleeting; receding.
stupūtique Ixōnis orbīs: and Ixion’s wheel, in amazement, ceased to turn; Orpheus’ song was powerful enough to mesmerize, not only men and beasts (like the volucrés in 43), but even inanimate objects.
Ixōn, Ixōnis, m., Ixion (king of the Lapiths, who was tied to a perpetually turning wheel in Hades as punishment for his attempt to seduce Juno).

*iūris . . . vestrī—prō mūnere poscimus ūsum.
Quod si Fāta negant veniam prō coniuge, certum est nōlle redire mihi; lētō gaudēte duōrum."

Tāliā dicentem nervōsque ad verba moventem exsanguēs flēbant animae; nec Tantalus undam captāvit refugam, stupūtique Ixōnis orbīs, nec carpsēre iecur volucrés, urnīsque vacārunt

Discussion Questions

1. What rhetorical effect does Ovid hope to achieve by his repeated use of the second person pronoun in 29-37?

2. One argument for releasing Eurydice (25-29) precedes Orpheus’ oath and entreaty in 29-31, and another (32-37) follows; what are the arguments and which is stronger? How economically is the second point made, and how does this economy (or the lack of it) coincide with Orpheus’ promise in positīs ambāgibus (19)? At what point earlier in Orpheus’ speech is the second argument anticipated?

3. What tone is established through the use of the words iūstos, iūris, and poscimus ūsum (36-37)? What impression of Orpheus’ attitude toward his spouse may this language be intended to convey?

4. How does Ovid carefully position his words to accentuate the internal rhyme in 40?

*iucur, iecoris, n., the liver.
*volucrés, volucris, f., a winged creature, bird.

* vacō, -āre, -āvi, -ātus, to be empty, unfilled; to be free from, take a rest from (vacārunt = vacāvērunt).
Belis, Belidos, nom. pl. Belides, inque tuo sedisti, Sisyph, saxo.

Tunc primum lacramis victarum carmine fama est Eumenidum maduisse genas; nec regia coniunx sustinet orantf nec qui regit ima negare, Eurydicenque vocant. Umbras erat illa recentes inter, et incessit passú de vulnere tardó.

Hanc simul et légem Rhodopeius accipit hérōs, nē flectat retró sua lúmina, dōnec Avernās exierit vallēs, aut irrita dōna futūra.

Carpitur acclīvis per múta silentia trāmes,
70 J1D [ OVID: LOVE AND TRANSFORMATION

54 caligó, caliginis, f., darkness; gloom.
*densus, -a, -um, thick, dense; frequent.
55 *margō, marginis, m., wall; border, edge; margin.
56 *déficiō, déficeré, défeci, defectus, to fail; to lose strength, collapse, faint.
*nec déficeret, the understood subject of the (positive) fear clause is Eurydice.
*nec déficeret metuens avidusque videndi: note the effective chiasmus and the soundplay in avidus . . . videndi; both epithets modify the subject amāns (57), the lover (Le., Orpheus).
57 *metuo, metuere, metui, metiitus, to fear, be afraid of.
avidus, -a, -um, greedy,' desirous (of), eager (for) + gen.
videndi: sc. eam, Le., Eurydice.
58 *prendo, prendere, prendi, prensus, to grasp, seize, take hold of; to catch, capture.
59 *prendō, prendere, prendi, prensus, to grasp, take hold of; to catch, capture.
certō, -āre, -āvi, -ātus, to contend, strive, struggle.

cédentēs . . . aurās: the retreating air (of the world of the living); for aurae in this fairly common sense, cf. Met. IV.478. As Eurydice reaches out for Orpheus, she catches hold of nothing but the longed-for air of upper earth, which they had very nearly reached (55) but which now retreats from her outstretched arms as she falls backward. Most readers, comparing (among other examples) the scene in Aen. II.791-94, where Aeneas grasps only a wisp of air as he tries to embrace Creusa's ghost, refer infelix arripit to Orpheus and aurās to Eurydice's shade (a possible interpretation, but see above on 58 and note also that in Aen. II.772 Creusa, not Aeneas, is described as infelix).
arripō, arripere, arripui, ariptus, to grasp, take hold of, embrace.
est . . . / questa (61): Eurydice is subject.
quicquam, adv., in any respect, at all.

Discussion Questions
1. What is the intended effect of the chiasmus in 56?
2. How are the meter, the elision, and the chiasmus in 57 especially appropriate to the sense?

above on 58 and note also that in Aen. II.772 Creusa, not Aeneas, is described as infelix).
arripō, arripere, arripui, ariptus, to grasp, take hold of, embrace.
est . . . / questa (61): Eurydice is subject.
quicquam, adv., in any respect, at all.

60 quid . . . amātam: sē . . . amātam (esse) is indirect statement after the potential subjunctive quererētur, for what could she complain of except that she had been loved.
62 suprēnum: n. acc., modifying the word valē, which as Eurydice's final utterance is object of dixit (63). Only that last fleeting word falls into a quick dactyl—the rest of the line is in an aptly spondaic and, with the series of monosyllables, halting rhythm.
acciperet: subj. in a rel. clause of characteristic, perhaps with the force of result (her cry was so quiet and faint that Orpheus could barely hear it).

revolutus, revolvere, revolute, revolutus, to roll back, return; pass., to fall back again (cf. relapsa est 57—there she first slips and now she tumbles quickly backward).

eōdēm, adv., to or into the same place (the redundancy in re- and the adverbs rūrsus and eōdēm are deliberately emphatic—and cf. iterum 60 and geminā 64).

64 Nōn aliter stupuit . . . / quam . . . qui (65) . . . / quam qui . . . (68) . . . tūque (69): momentarily the hero was paralyzed with horror; the quick dactylics in 64–65 suggest how suddenly this happened. In his inability to act or speak, Orpheus is compared in this double simile with characters who were turned to stone in two otherwise unattested transformation tales; for nōn aliter quam, cf. IV.122 above.

geminā nece: abl. of cause; cf. iterum moriēns (60) and geminī . . . crūris (IV.161).

Orpheus, -ī, m., Orpheus (the hero is at last named; -eu- in the nom. case here is a diphthong).

65 tria . . . / cola canis (66): the tale's second reference to Cerberus (cf. terna . . . guttura mōnstrī 22).

quī timidus: with vīdīt; in prose the words would follow quam. The character (whose name is unknown) apparently gazed upon Cerberus as Hercules was leading him on a chain leash to king Eurystheus and, paralyzed by fear, was turned to stone.

mediō: sc. colla.

catēna, -ae, f., a chain: pl., chains, fetters.

66 quem . . . prior (67): the full expression here would be quem pavor non reliquit, antequam nātūra prior reliquit; in English we would say, who did not lose his fear until he lost his original nature, i.e., as a human being.

pavor, pavoris, m., sudden fear, terror.

antequam or (by tmesis) ante . . . quam, conj., before.

oborōrī, oborōri, obortus sum, to rise up, spring up.

68 quam qui . . . / Olenos (69): i.e., aut quam Olenos, qui . . . trāxit; most manuscripts read quīque, but (as Anderson notes) quam qui more clearly introduces the second simile in parallel with the first (cf. quam . . . qui 65). We can only deduce from the context, and roughly comparable tales, that Lethaea had offended some deity, apparently in boasting of her own beauty, and when her lover (or spouse) Olenos attempted to accept both the blame and the punishment in her place, the two were transformed to stone.

69 Ōlenos, -ī, m., Ōlenos (the character is otherwise unknown, but there are several Greek towns with this name—and Herodotus 4.35 mentions an early Greek named Olen who, like Orpheus, was a minstrel and composer of hymns).

nocēns: here, guilty; note the assonance in Ōlenos esse nocēns.

tūque: with quam (68), i.e., than Ōlenos . . . and you, oh Lethaea; for the acciperet, dīxit, revolūtaque rūrsus eōdēm est.

Nōn aliter stupuit geminā nece coniugi Orpheus,

quam tria qui timidus, mediō portante catēnās,
colla canis vīdīt, quem nōn pavor ante reliquit,
quam nātūra prior, saxō per corpus obortō;
quam qui in sē crīmen trāxit voluitque viderī
Ōlenos esse nocēns, tūque, ō confīsa fīgūrēae
infēlix Lethaea tuae, iūncissima quondam
pectora, nunc lapidēs, quōs ūmida sustinet Ídē.

Discussion Question

1. Contrast the meter of 63 with that of 62; in what way is the shift appropriate?

2. What are the several points of correspondence between the circumstances of Orpheus and Eurydice and those of the characters in the two similes (64–71)? Are the similes an effective part of the narrative, or do you find them unduly digressive?—defend your response.

dramatic apostrophe, cf. Sisyphus (44).

confidō, confidere, confidi, confīsus + dat., to trust in, have confidence in, be sure of.

confīsa fīgūrēae . . . tuae: so self-assured in your beauty; note the alliteration with infēlix.

70 infēlix Lethaea: enjambement underscores the epithet and draws our attention back to infēlix (Eurydice) in 59; both women were young (presumably) and beautiful, and had lovers who hoped to rescue them from death.

Lethaea, -ae, f., Lethaea (the character is not otherwise known, but the name, like the adj. Lēthaeus, -a, -um, is doubtless meant to recall Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness in the Underworld, and all of its dark, infernal associations).

iūncissima quondam / pectora, nunc lapidēs (71): both phrases, linked by the antithetical then/now adverbs (and the iūnc-/nunc assonance), are in apposition with Ōlenos and Lethaea.

71 ūmīdus, -a, -um, wet, moist; rainy.
sustinet: here, simply holds (i.e., the rocks, boulders perhaps, were situated on the mountain).

Ídē, Ídēs, f., Mt. Ida (there were mountains of this name in both Crete and Troy—probably Ovid means the latter, site of the judgment of Paris and described by Horace, Carm. III.20.16, as aquōsa).
72 Orantem... volentem: sc. eum (Orpheus); the participles, both objects of arcuerat (73) and both to be taken with the adv. frustrā, effectively frame the line.

73 portitor, portitōris, m., tollkeeper (one who collects import or export taxes); as applied to Charon (who collected pennies from the tongues of the dead before allowing them to cross over the Styx into Hades), ferryman.

arcceō, arcère, arcui, to contain, restrain; to keep away, drive back.

Septem... diēbus: abl. of duration of time, instead of the much commoner acc. construction.

74 squālīdus, -a, -um, rough; filthy, unbathed, unkempt.

ripa, -ae, f., bank (of a river, here the Styx).

*Ceres, Cereris, f., Ceres (goddess of grain, identified with the Greek Demeter, mother of Persephone/Proserpina).

Cereris sine munere: Orpheus is without Ceres' gift (of grain), first because he refuses to eat (just as he refuses to bathe) and also perhaps because Ceres, as Persephone's mother, will not aid in his further assault on her daughter's realm.

alimentum, -I, n., food; pl., nourishment, sustenance (here predicate nom. with fuere = fuerunt).

75 Esse... crudēlib: the prose order would be deōs Erebi esse crudēlēs, indirect statement after questus (complaining that).

Erebus, -i, m., Erebus (son of Chaos, father of Charon, and god of darkness), the Underworld.

Rhodopē, Rhodopés, acc. Rhodopēn, f., Mt. Rhodope (see on Rhodopēus 11).

Rhodopēn pulsumque aquilōnibus Haemum: the harsh p/q alliteration, the booming assonance of -um (under the iotus in pulsum), and the hissing s's are perhaps intended to suggest the storms of the wild north winds as Orpheus retreats from Hades, and indeed from civilization itself, here at the close of the tale.

76 aquilō, aquilōnis, m., the north wind.

Haemus, -I, m., Haemus (another mountain in northern Thrace).

Discussion Questions

1. Comment on the combined effects of sound, meter, and polysyndeton in 75.

2. Orpheus' actions at the very end of the tale (76-77) do not coincide with what he had pledged he would do in the end of his song to Pluto and Persephone. What do you make of the discrepancy? Compare Pyramus' pledge and his actions in IV.108-21 and Thisbe's words and deeds in 151-63 with Orpheus' actions here. In view of the burlesque elements that appear at least occasionally in the story, what overall response to the tale do you suppose Ovid expected of his readers? What is your own response?

And then he struck from forth the strings a sound
Of deep and fearful melody. Alas!
In times long past, when fair Eurydice
With her bright eyes sat listening by his side,
He gently sang of high and heavenly themes.

From "Orpheus," Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1820