

## The Failure of Orpheus\*

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In 1986, after a brief review of the evidence, Fritz Graf (81–82) concluded that there is “no unambiguous testimony to a happy ending of Orpheus’ quest” to recover his wife from the world of the dead. This should have raised at least a few eyebrows, for the nearly universal conclusion of twentieth-century scholarship has been that the earliest and most pervasive pre-Virgilian account of Orpheus’ catabasis related his unqualified success: the bard charms the powers of the underworld into releasing his wife, and she returns with him to the land of the living. The more familiar tale of a second loss due to the breaking of a tabu (e.g. Verg. *G.* 4.485f.), according to the prevailing opinion, is the invention of the Hellenistic world (Gruppe 1158–9; Kern 13, 24–25; Wilamowitz 1932: 193; Guthrie 30–31; Nilsson 189; Linforth 16–21; Bowra 1952; Dronke 1962; Lee 1964, 1965; Robbins 15–17; West 32). A fifth-century genesis has been suggested by a few scholars for this familiar tragic version, but this is usually linked to the parallel development of the more common “happy-ending” variant (Heurgon 46–49; Wilamowitz 1932: 193; Linforth 16–21).<sup>1</sup> With this kind of support, it is not surprising that Orpheus’ “complete victory” has found its way into the mythological handbooks (e.g. Grant and Hazel 309), introductory texts (e.g. Reinhold 329), and commentaries (e.g. Thomas *ad Verg. G.* 4.453–527).

The dénouement of Orpheus’ quest not only has implications for the early Greek vision of death, but directly governs our understanding of several controversial pieces of art and important passages in major literary works. For example, a recent interpretation of the fifth-century Orpheus relief—Orpheus draws back the veil of Eurydice and restores her to life—depends almost entirely upon the existence of this successful variant (Touchette). And an influ-

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<sup>1</sup>Wilamowitz suggested that the fifth-century playwright Aristias might have introduced the tragic ending to the story, a conjecture picked up by Ziegler 1270, Anderson 27, and especially Sansone.

ential reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* relies upon the myth's consequent "dual possibility" to uncover an Ovidian tour de force, whereby the tale of Eurydice's tragic second death still "manages to suggest Orpheus' success" (Segal 1989: 8, 69). If Graf is right, however, and the triumphant Orpheus did not actually appear in the classical world, the joyful moment of the enigmatic relief and the subtle Ovidian ambiguity become primarily the industrious creations of the critics.

Graf's intentionally limited survey could hardly be expected to earn many Olympian nods, particularly when set against the authority of what amounts to an all-star line-up of this century's Hellenists. The fate of K. Ziegler's extensive discussion of the issue in the *Real-Encyclopädie* (1268–81) reveals how firmly entrenched the standard interpretation has become. His arguments there are directed primarily against J. Heurgon, who had concluded that "de tous les textes prévirgiliens qui parlent de la tentative d'Orphée, six sur sept nous la représentent, sans équivoque, comme couronnée de succès" (11–12). Carefully reviewing each of these texts, Ziegler cannot find even one which explicitly tells of Orpheus' unmitigated triumph. His argument is primarily a negative one; that is, he makes little effort to suggest why any given allusion works *better* in its context if it refers to the bard's failure to resurrect his wife. Still, his criticisms are sound and would seem to have demanded some response. Instead, his article is virtually ignored in the subsequent literature—Graf himself does not draw upon it. Bowra's influential article a little more than a decade later refers to Ziegler in the first sentence and then disregards all of his particular objections to the "happy-ending."

But the conclusions of Ziegler and Graf should not be so easily dismissed.<sup>2</sup> A close re-examination of all the relevant passages reveals that there is no compelling reason to assume that Orpheus ever returned to the world of light with his wife.<sup>3</sup> The texts instead usually emphasize the famous bard's

<sup>2</sup>Graf's article attempts to demonstrate that Orpheus' origins lie in an initiatory band of warriors rather than in what has become the favored shamanistic background. Orpheus was primarily a musician and poet whose super-human qualities explain his "otherness." The bard's quest for his wife, then, involves only one very small portion of Graf's much broader argument. I am not concerned here with the delicate questions of the origins of Orpheus or the nature of Orphic cult; for Orpheus' shamanistic voyage from Meuli to Dodds to West, see Graf's article *passim* and esp. 102 n.6. I therefore leave out of discussion the origins of the tale of Orpheus' descent, probably to be found in Orphic material (West 9–12; Bowra 123–4, but cf. Kern 25 n.1). The extant texts dealing with the quest for Eurydice are all embedded in literary contexts or encyclopedic compendia and need have no direct link to the much debated Orphic material.

<sup>3</sup>It is, in fact, much *simpler* to conclude that no such variant ever existed. Bowra's analysis, for example, must assume three Greek poems of which we have no trace: 1) a poem, at least as early as the mid-fifth century, portraying Orpheus' complete success in recovering his wife; 2)

musical powers so impressively displayed in charming the denizens of the land of the dead. The evidence suggests that Orpheus' "victory" is sharply limited to his persuasion of Pluto and/or Persephone to surrender his wife. In this he is extremely and consistently successful—it forms the basis and essential element of the myth in *every extant account*, demonstrating the supernatural force of the singer's music. The details of the second part of the myth, however, which recounts the return trip, are secondary and perhaps even relatively unimportant until Virgil. Indeed, the sources often seem to be positively indifferent to the events after Orpheus' bewitching performance in the underworld. This should not be surprising: classical authors could assume that the audience knew that the journey ended in frustration and failure. No account mentions a successful conclusion with Orpheus and Eurydice returning from Hades to live "happily ever after." Every reference to the quest makes perfect sense, and usually sits in its thematic context much more comfortably, if one assumes that the spouse of the bereaved bard begins the ascent but never makes it back with him to the upper world. There simply is no "unequivocal" evidence for anything but a tragic end to Orpheus' most famous adventure.

The earliest relevant evidence is found not in literature but on Attic red-figured vases from the beginning of the fifth-century.<sup>4</sup> These vases tell us little directly about Orpheus' descent to regain his wife, but they put a heavy burden of proof on the shoulders of the happy-ending school. The topic of interest to the painters is remarkably consistent: the death of Orpheus at the hands of women. Sometimes the bard is depicted singing to a group of Thracian men as the women rush to attack; on some vases he is already fleeing for his life from a band of angry women; occasionally we are shown his final moments as he collapses, captured and wounded, under the weight of the feminine fury. What has the singer done to cause these women, armed with spits, mallets, pestles, knives, axes, stones, and clubs, to hunt him down so viciously? The scenes themselves offer few clues. The later literary tradition provides several possible motives, but remains equally insistent that women were responsible

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a poem, also at least as early as the mid-fifth century, in which Orpheus' success was very limited (evidence for which he finds in Plato, the Orpheus-relief, and Plutarch; see below); 3) a Hellenistic poem on which Virgil and Ovid drew, which first contained the tragic ending. It is this poem Bowra reconstructs in his article.

<sup>4</sup>For Orpheus in art, see Guthrie 33, 64 n.8, Linforth 12–14, Schoeller, Schmidt, and Touchette. His first extant appearance would appear to be on the Treasury of the Sicyonians at Delphi (mid-sixth century), in the context of his participation in the voyage of the Argo. I leave out of my discussion the famous Orpheus-relief of the late fifth century, which has been used to support all sides of this argument, although most recent scholarship has favored a tragic-ending interpretation; see Touchette, who sets out all the possible artistic evidence for a happy-ending reading.

(although Pausanias [9.30.5–6] records a few minor variants—Orpheus kills himself, or is vaporized by Zeus’ thunderbolt; cf. Alcid., *Od.* 24). Motivations for the women’s attack, both direct and indirect, include the hostility of Dionysus (Ps.–Eratosth. *Cat.* 24, who claims it comes from Aeschylus’ *Bas-sarides*; cf. Hyg. *Astr.* 2.7.1), or blasphemies (Isoc. 11.39; torn apart but it is not said by whom; cf. Plato *Symp.* 179d and *Rep.* 10.620a, where Orpheus is killed by women but no direct reason is given), or his refusal to initiate females into his mysteries (Conon *Narr.* 45), or his persuasion of their husbands to go with him on his travels (Paus. 9.30.5), or Aphrodite’s anger at his mother (Hyg. *Astr.* 2.7.3). More pertinent to his quest for Eurydice is the direct connection provided by some authors between Orpheus’ *failure* and his death. Phanocles (fr. 1 Powell) is the first to make this connection. This story involves Calais, a son of Boreas whom Orpheus loved, although the youth apparently was not similarly infatuated. The bard would sit in the shady groves singing of his passion, but his heart could find no rest. Whenever he saw Calais, sleepless cares ate at his soul (αἰεὶ μιν ἄγρυπνοι ὑπὸ ψυχῇ μελεδῶναι ἔτρυχον). Finally the Thracian women surrounded and stabbed him because he was the first to teach male homosexuality among the Thracians without celebrating the passions of females (οὐνεκα πρῶτος ἔδειξεν ἐνὶ Θρήκεσσιν ἔρωτας ἄρρενας, οὐδὲ πόθους ἦνεσε θηλυτέρων).

Now, no matter where this episode is placed in the biography of Orpheus—it certainly must come after the quest for Eurydice—critics of the happy-ending school are backed into a bit of a corner. Perhaps after the death of his wife he was simply tormented by one final unrequited love. Or maybe Calais is already dead, another disastrous love-affair to haunt Orpheus’ life. Or perhaps Phanocles slyly substitutes Calais for Eurydice, and this tale really offers a characteristic gender twist on the familiar lamenting of the bard for his dead wife. But whichever alternative is chosen, there is no room in Orpheus’ life for a resuscitated spouse. He rejects women, and they get their gruesome revenge. Ovid tells a similar story, as the Thracian women dismember the heart-broken poet for shunning them (*contemptor nostri*) after the death of his wife and teaching homosexuality by example (*Met.* 10.78f.; 11.1f.). His death is thus directly linked to his loss of Eurydice. When she dies a second time, he gives up on all women and is soon killed by them for his aloofness. This connection is also made by Virgil, who leaves out Phanocles’ homoeroticism (*G.* 4.507f.). Moved by no love at all, Orpheus wanders alone bewailing his lost Eurydice. The Thracian women feel scorned by such devotion (*spretae Ciconum quo munere matres*, 4.520) and tear him apart (cf. Apollod. 1.3.2).

Biographies of mythological characters are famously confused and contradictory. Different aspects of originally separate figures coalesce over time into one individual, and the resulting creation often reveals an extra limb. The death of Orpheus, one of the most complex and malleable of heroes, need have nothing to do with any of his other adventures. But in fact it was integrated quite smoothly with the life of Orpheus, but only with Eurydice's removal from the picture. Phanocles, Virgil, and Ovid seamlessly tie together his traditional death at the hands of women with his unhappy love-life. And this account of the bard's death can be made with little effort to support our earliest evidence on vases. Armed with common household implements and dressed in standard female attire (that is, never with the weapons or costumes of Bacchantes, thus ruling out the hostility of Dionysus as the cause), they attack the bard for some purely personal affront. The several early vases which depict the Thracian men sitting apart from the women (who approach separately to attack) and listening intently to the bard, could easily illustrate these later literary versions. Angered at the "enticement" of their men by the disillusioned bard, they exact a horrific revenge (Guthrie 33).

The interpretation of vase-painting on the basis of poetic, especially tragic, accounts, is notoriously problematic. But the fact remains that no author or artist in all of classical antiquity ever thought it appropriate or necessary to depict Orpheus living, or even re-united, with his recovered wife back on earth.<sup>5</sup> They do bother to connect his death at the hands of women—one of the oldest and most frequent elements of his biography—with the loss of his lover, another central event in his life. There is no obvious link between his recovery of Eurydice and his death; there is between his loss of Eurydice and his death. The most reasonable conclusion would be that Orpheus traditionally failed in his quest. The incubus of proof must be on those who insist on a happy ending to the tragic story. It is they who must explain the disappearance of Eurydice. Why is she not with her famous husband at his death? Why do we never learn

<sup>5</sup>Orpheus and Eurydice are depicted together *in the underworld* in later vase-painting (fourth century). Touchette 82–84 interprets several of these as references to Orpheus' ultimate success, but this is even more strained than the optimistic reading of the Orpheus relief (for which there is no context). Eurydice lifts her veil, and Orpheus clasps her wrist—this need mean only that he has been reunited with her, not that he will successfully lead her back to life. They are, after all, still in Hades. In fact, in his famous fifth-century depiction of the Nekyia at Delphi, Polygnotus depicted Orpheus sitting alone with his lyre, Eurydice nowhere in sight (Paus. 10.30.6). The association on much later vases (second century A.D.) of Orpheus and Eurydice with Hercules and Alcestis (or the earlier parallels drawn between Eurydice and Cerberus) refers only to the underworld quest, not to a successful retrieval; see below.

what happens to her upon her safe return to her husband's house? As we shall see, the literary allusions provide the widowed poet with little solace.

The first extant reference to Orpheus' catabasis appears in Euripides' *Alcestis*. This allusion is usually offered as proof of the success of Orpheus' quest, yet the passage contains most of the ambiguities found in the majority of the texts under discussion, and so it warrants a particularly close examination. Alcestis has just made her long final speech to Admetus, urging him not to remarry (280–325). Admetus insists that he will abide by her request, realizing what a wonderful wife he is losing. Caught up in his sorrow, he wishes he could do something to save her (357–362):

εἰ δ' Ὀρφέως μοι γλώσσα καὶ μέλος παρῆν,  
ὥστ' ἢ κόρην Διμήτρος ἢ κείνης πόσιν  
ὕμνοισι κηλήσαντά σ' ἐξ Ἄιδου λαβεῖν,  
κατηλθὼν ἄν, καὶ μ' οὔθ' ὁ Πλούτωνος κύων  
οὔθ' οὐπὶ κώπῃ ψυχοπομπὸς ἄν Χάρων  
ἔσχον, πρὶν ἐς φῶς σὸν καταστήσαι βίον.

If I had the words and music of Orpheus to charm Persephone or her spouse with my songs and take you from Hades, I would have made the descent. Then neither Pluto's hound nor soul-conducting Charon at his oar would have stopped me until I set you alive once more in the light of day.

The grieving husband's point is obvious: he wishes he had the powers of Orpheus to plead for Alcestis' return. Although the text nowhere explicitly states that Orpheus had been successful in restoring the dead to life, what else could it mean? Admetus does not even make it clear that Orpheus went to Hades seeking his wife, yet certainly this can be assumed. Is it not obvious that Orpheus must have brought his wife back? Otherwise the reference would be "absurd" or "inappropriate," the traditional readers tell us.<sup>6</sup> This response, however, is conditioned primarily by our expectations of Admetus. If he is an ingenuous, an "un-ironic" speaker, then we will take his wish at face value. But in fact the grieving husband's speech is anything but straightforward. It is filled with extreme and inappropriate, not to mention bizarre elements. Taken in its context—and it is the context which is missing in most discussions of the references to Orpheus' descent—it is just this sort of ironic remark that we come to count on from the self-absorbed protagonist.

<sup>6</sup>"Absurd": Heurgon ("saugrenu") 11; Dronke 201–202; "Inappropriate": Linforth 17; Robbins 16; Riemer 116 n.284 ("äusserst seltsam"); Bowra 119 calls the happy-ending here "more forcible." Sansone 59–61 seems to be alone in arguing that the bard is not to be imagined searching for his wife but rather for some cult follower.

Critics who argue against any possible irony surrounding Admetus' words to Alcestis must separate his statements from the context of the play.<sup>7</sup> Euripides, we are told, encourages us to forget both the contract with Death and what must result from it. Admetus' words are "traditional" lamentations and should be taken as simply that—the mourning of a loving husband.<sup>8</sup> But in fact the playwright never allows us to forget the circumstances of Alcestis' death. From the prologue up to the re-appearance of Heracles with the resurrected Alcestis, there are nearly twenty references to the "arrangement": Alcestis has exchanged her life for that of her husband. Apollo tells the audience in the prologue that Admetus could find no one but his wife willing to die for him (17–18), and reminds Thanatos (and us) of that fact just a few verses later (δάμαρτ' ἀμείψας, 46). The servant then recalls Alcestis' sacrifice (ἀνδρός, οὗ θνήσκω πέρι, 178) to the chorus between suggestions that Admetus does not yet know what sufferings his deal has brought him (145, 197–98). The chorus agrees (242–43). Alcestis herself is not shy about reminding her husband what she has done for him (280–284):

Ἄδμηθ', ὄρῳς γὰρ τὰμὰ πράγμαθ' ὥς ἔχει,  
λέξαι θέλω σοι πρὶν θανεῖν ἃ βούλομαι.  
ἐγὼ σε πρεσβεύουσα κἀντὶ τῆς ἐμῆς  
ψυχῆς καταστήσασα φῶς τόδ' εἴσορᾶν,  
θνήσκω, παρόν μοι μὴ θανεῖν, ὑπὲρ σέθεν...

Admetus, since you see what state I'm in, I want to tell you my wishes before I die. Honoring you more than my own life, I arranged for you to continue to look upon the light of day. I am dying for *you*, although I need not die...

She points out that she did not have to do it, and notes with some bitterness that his parents would have made more appropriate volunteers (290–297). Her intention in all this is not to make Admetus feel worse, or guilty, or even bad, but indebted. She has a favor to ask (χάριν), a favor which she modestly concludes could never be more valuable than life itself, her gift to him (299–301).

It should be clear then that Euripides wants the audience to be acutely aware from the very beginning of the play of Admetus' bargain with the fates. In fact, one could argue it is the major topic of conversation right up to

<sup>7</sup>Recent discussions by Rabinowitz, Stanton, Dyson, Lloyd, and Rivier have been particularly valuable. For a bibliographical survey of interpretations favoring an ironic reading, see Michelini's Appendix B, "Albin Lesky and Alkestis" 324–29.

<sup>8</sup>Lloyd 125; Burnett 241 notes that whereas Alcestis explores her reasons, Admetus does not. This is true, but misses the point that his words force us to examine his decision; see below.

Admetus' response.<sup>9</sup> With the facts of the exchange constantly before us, whatever one may think of the sincerity of Admetus and the overall seriousness of the *Alcestis*—and we must not forget its position as the satyric fourth in a tetralogy (Sutton 1973)—it requires a good deal of ingenuousness, not to mention ingenuity, to miss the contextual irony of Admetus' words. He may be authentically mournful, and of course he offers unexceptional articulations of grief (how else could he express himself?), but Euripides does not let us forget who put the couple into this predicament in the first place. It is important to follow the trail of Admetus' remarks in order to understand the import of his conjuration of Orpheus' descent to the underworld.<sup>10</sup>

The very first words of Admetus introduce his ironic tendencies. He enters with his fast-failing wife, wondering with all apparent earnestness why she must die, for neither of them has deserved such treatment from the gods: ὄρᾱ [Helios] σὲ κάμῃ, δύο κακῶς πεπραγότας, / οὐδὲν θεοὺς δρᾶσαντας ἀνθ' ὅτου θανῇ (246–7). We know the answer to his puzzlement, of course, for Euripides has made it abundantly clear that she is dying in his place at his request. Although neither Alcestis nor the chorus will blame him for his actions—and the Athenian audience might not have either—the words juxtapose the traditional rhetoric of lamentation and Admetus' responsibility for the situation in a particularly vivid (if not sickly humorous) fashion. Similarly, what are we to make of Admetus' subsequent protestations that to hear his wife's dying words is more bitter than death, or of his insistence that she not abandon him and the children, since with her death he would cease to exist himself (273–279; cf. 202; 250; 258)? He may in fact be beginning to realize that he has made a mistake in his bargain with the fates, but he does not say so at this point. For the audience, his words are clearly ironic, appropriate for *any other* grieving husband about to lose his loving spouse (Knox 334). Admetus' character is defined for us by his blindness to the significance of his own sentences. He was unaware of the consequences Alcestis' gift would have for him, and he is oblivious to the context of his lamentation. Indeed, his ear-

<sup>9</sup>The allusions do not stop here, of course. Alcestis' last words of substance are a final reminder to Admetus of her gift to him (383). One thinks of Phères' speech, of course (see 620, 696f., 710), but the chorus (462–63, 472, 928) and even Heracles (524) keep Alcestis' sacrifice before our eyes throughout the play.

<sup>10</sup>My argument owes much to others, particularly Conacher 29–49, Bradley, Rosenmeyer 211–229, Smith, Beye, and Jones. The ironies continue throughout the play, of course, but it suffices here to examine only those passages leading up to Admetus' speech to Alcestis. Von Fritz (esp. 29f.) goes too far, it seems to me, in taking such a harsh view of Admetus himself. Admetus may be shallow, but his feelings do appear to be genuine. Euripides wants us to examine his actions, not merely criticize his emotions. On Admetus' emotional growth, see Segal 1992.



nestness may make his character more sympathetic, while at the same time casting a shadow on his initial decision. The growing darkness here need not be primarily associated with issues of gender roles or cultural expectations, but be rooted in the much larger issue of the nature of mortality itself.

We should not be surprised, then, when his response to Alcestis' final request is replete with ironically inappropriate statements.<sup>11</sup> She had asked for one thing only—that he not remarry. Admetus begins his speech by readily agreeing to her deathbed entreaty. In fact, he finds it to be sound and practical advice: no other woman is so well-born, or beautiful. And besides, he already has enough children—may he profit (ὄνησιν, 334) from them more than he did (ὠνήμεθα, 335) from his short-lived wife! He is especially aggrieved because he is losing a wife so noble that she sacrificed her life for him (σὺ δ' ἀντιδοῦσα τῆς ἐμῆς τὰ φίλτατα / ψυχῆς ἔσωσας, 340–41). So, in the midst of his promises, he acknowledges (and reminds us, as if we could have forgotten) that his wife is dying in his place. He will hate his parents forever—a remarkably extreme comment in itself—since they refused to exchange their lives for his. They were loved-ones in name only. His mourning will last not just a year but forever: he will cease from all festive activities and he will never again touch the lyre (οὐ γάρ ποτ' οὐτ' ἄν βαρβίτου θίγοιμ' ἔτι, 345). If this is true, it will make his wishful impersonation of Orpheus a few lines later extremely difficult. But perhaps this kind of consistency is too much to ask from a nearly hysterical mourner (he later orders that the sound of the flute and lyre not be heard in the city for twelve months, 430–31). Yet the next few verses (348–54), which *immediately* precede the allusion to Orpheus' quest, put that passage into its full and wonderfully weird context, as the desperate husband claims that he will have a likeness of Alcestis made for him to fall upon and wrap his arms around (δέμας τὸ σὸν / εἰκασθὲν ἐν λέκτροισιν ἐκταθήσεται, / ᾧ προσπεσοῦμαι καὶ περιπτύσσων χέρας). Now whatever the squeamish among us may want this to mean,<sup>12</sup> it seems clear that Admetus here envisions sexual relations with a statue made in the image of his dead wife. This is odd behavior even to the Greeks. Most ancient Greek widowers

<sup>11</sup>Even the majority of non-ironists find an unnecessary urgency in Admetus' reply: "elaborate," "exaggerated," and "paradoxical" are the preferred descriptions of Lloyd 126, Franco 132, Erbse 46, and Steidle 135.

<sup>12</sup>Dyson 20, for example, glosses the passage with "reminders in art and dreams will keep her permanently present." Lloyd 126 similarly tip-toes around the issue with "[h]e will preserve contact with her by means of an image," and quickly dismisses the suggestion that Admetus "is a pervert." Paley's amusingly desperate response to the passage is often cited by commentators: "The Greeks had a deeper feeling for sculptured forms than we can pretend to realize," quoted in Jerram's commentary (5th ed. Oxford 1926) *ad* 348, apparently with approval.

did not sleep with a wax or marble effigy of their spouse. In fact, this rare type of pathology—agalmatophilia—is always discussed in the sources as inappropriate and strange, even if pathetically touching in some cases.<sup>13</sup> Admetus has lost his balance at this point, demonstrating his grief beyond all normal measure. His wife had simply asked that he not remarry. He has promised not to get married, not to play music, sing, or have sex with an animate object ever again. Is it humorous? Disgusting? Pathetic? Or merely extreme? His words are inappropriate at least, ridiculous at worst, exaggerated at best. His suggested action does have a parallel, though, and one with good Euripidean authority which may offer an additional vantage point from which to view this scene.

Wilamowitz (1906: 29 n.1; 1929: 89–94) suggested that Euripides is borrowing here from his own play, the *Protesilaus*, produced a short time before the *Alcestis*. In fact, we do not know the date of Euripides' lost play, nor are we sure of the details of the drama, but the statue motif is almost certainly taken from Laodameia's similar act of desperation.<sup>14</sup> Protesilaus, a Thessalian prince like Admetus, leaves for the Trojan War shortly after his marriage to Laodameia. The first Greek to be killed at Troy, he asks the rulers of the underworld to allow him to return to his wife, although some sources suggest that it is Laodameia whose prayers are answered. The request is granted, but

<sup>13</sup>Admetus' chilling promise has its admirers. Burnett 248 calls it "positive, delicately stated, and filled with a powerful meaning." Kullman 133 labels the thought "exaltiert"; Dale (*ad* 348–54) prefers "extreme" to "morbid," although she notes that Admetus shows a "disarming awareness of the touch of extravagance in his idea"; cf. Seeck 99, Franco 132, and Steidle 135. Segal 1992: 144 smells in the statue a "flowery promise;" cf. Segal 1993 44–45. Most commentators, however, find the episode macabre, ludicrous, disgusting, or simply in bad taste. Scobie and Taylor collect twelve references to this ailment, Admetus' being the first. The most notorious involve Praxiteles' statue of naked Aphrodite for the Cnidians, which was "stained" by those deranged by its beauty. Ovid apparently is the first to transform the story of Pygmalion from a king's perverse and consummated lust for a statue into an exemplar of the power of an artist to bring his creation to life; see Bauer 14–16. For such use and abuse of statues, see Trenkner 69, who observes that Euripides gives an erotic meaning to the Greek custom of making colossoi, statues of the dead; also Vernant 305–320, Michelini 167, and Schmid–Stählin 353 n.9 on εἰκόνας ἐπὶ, though see Fraenkel on Ag. 416. Webster 87 notes that the motif is found as early as the statue of Enkidu in *Gilgamesh*.

<sup>14</sup>The outlines of the myth are fairly clear, although it is not certain exactly where Euripides' drama began. The best analysis of the plot of the *Protesilaus*, combining the fragments, scholiasts, allusions, and suggestions of previous scholars, is Jouan 317–336, who draws many additional parallels between this play and the *Alcestis*. He suggests that the *Alcestis* was produced shortly before the *Protesilaus*, perhaps with the *Skyrioi*; 335 and n.2; see also Séchan 3–27. The most thorough examination of the ancient sources themselves remains Mayer, though see the cautions in Lenz 163–170. I have drawn upon these studies, as well as that of Jacobson 195–212, for the following summary.

always with the condition that his return to life be of a very limited nature. Most sources refer to one day (Lucian *DM* 23, *Charon* 1; Stat. *Silv.* 2.7.120–123, 5.3.273; schol. Ael. Arist. 3.671–672D; Ael. Arist. 2.300D; Auson. *Cup. Cruc.* 35–36), although it could be for as little as three hours (Hyg. *Fab.* 103–104; Min. Felix *Oct.* 11.8). A central feature of the myth is Laodameia's remarkable attempt to fill the emptiness left by her absent husband. At some point—after Protesilaus' first departure for Troy, or his death, or his final return to Hades—she has a statue of her husband made and brought into her room. Part cult image and part sexual surrogate, the icon (probably of wax) plays a key role in the drama. Either a servant, or Alcastus (Laodameia's father), or both on separate occasions, catch her embracing the statue alone in her room.<sup>15</sup> Alcastus may burn the image to spare his daughter further torment, and Laodameia finally kills herself.

This statue-motif, then, plays a central role in the tragic tale of Protesilaus and Laodameia, but is absolutely supplemental—one might be tempted to say superfluous—to the fate of Alcestis. It appears that Euripides has gone to some lengths to place an explicit allusion to Laodameia's actions into the mouth of Admetus.<sup>16</sup> The reunion conjured up by this striking reference was notoriously brief and disastrous. Laodameia and Protesilaus came together for just a few tantalizing hours (whether it was three or twenty-four), and ultimately her grief, passion, and frustration drove Laodameia to suicide. Whether there is an implicit criticism here of Admetus' failure to follow Laodameia's example will be discussed below.<sup>17</sup> For now, it is sufficient to conclude that once again the

<sup>15</sup>For the statue: Fr. 655 (N<sup>2</sup>); Ov. *Ep.* 13.152–58; Hyg. 104; Apollod. *Ep.* 3.30; Stat. *Silv.* 2.7.124–31; Tzetz., *Chil.* 2.52.772–73; Eust. on B 701; Philostr. *Imag.* 2.9.6; for art, see Jouan 322 nn.3–4. Again, there have been some critics who hesitate to acknowledge that Laodameia is having any physically arousing contact with the statue. Eustathius is explicit on the matter (ἀγάλατι αὐτοῦ περικειμένην), although he says Protesilaus himself discovers her with it. Tzetzes uses συνεκοίταξεν. Ovid too leaves no doubt: *amplexus accipit illa [cera] meos...hanc specto teneoque sinu pro coniuge vero* (*Her.* 13.154, 157f.); cf. Hyg. 104 *viditque eam...simulacrum tenentem atque osculantem* and Apollodorus' προσωμίλει.

<sup>16</sup>He need not be referring to Euripides' play, as Wilamowitz suggested, but merely to the elements of the myth. This is a complicated issue, to be sure, for we do not know which elements could have been invented by Euripides, not to mention our difficulty in assigning particular actions to a non-extant drama. Was the resurrection and/or statue-motif a central pre-Euripidean element? There seems to have been no tragedy dealing with the topic in great detail before Euripides; see Jouan 330 n. 2 on Sophocles' *Poimenes*. Séchan 9 thinks it appeared in the *Cypria*. According to Pausanias (4.2.7), the *Cypria* mentioned at least the suicide of Protesilaus' wife (who was named Cleopatra). Protesilaus' short marriage and quick death at Troy were familiar to Homer (*Il.* 2.700–701). Boedeker 39 argues that the main elements of the myth were known to Herodotus' audience.

<sup>17</sup>Michellini 168 notes that Admetus hints he will play Laodameia to Alcestis' Protesilaus, "promising an obsessive and unending grief, such as Laodameia felt for Protesilaus." On such

words out of Admetus' mouth, while possibly revealing an honest if peculiar protestation of his feelings, would strike the audience as particularly inappropriate. The image he chooses to represent his eternal sorrow, passion, and fidelity is borrowed from an infamously tragic tale of separation. He certainly does not mean to suggest that he wishes for the short-lived and ill-fated reunion embedded in that story as well. It is just his nature to find the wrong thing to say. His powers of allusion are similarly limited in his very next reference to another prematurely separated couple, Orpheus and his wife.

Admetus laments the absence of Orphic powers to charm the lords of the underworld and seize his wife from Hades. Rather than assuming that Admetus here appropriately refers to a (now lost) variant in which Orpheus lives happily with his restored wife, it makes more sense to place his boast within the context of his ironic statements. Admetus cites the first half—the successful half—of the myth, leaving off the unhappy conclusion.<sup>18</sup> Graf is on the wrong path when he suggests that one “might even argue that Admetus hopes to have more success than his famous predecessor” (81; cf. Gantz 723). Admetus is not so clever or controlled. He has made a long series of earnest, heartfelt, exaggerated and consistently inappropriate statements, and this is another. There is no reason to believe that Admetus is referring to a happy ending—he instead is caught up in his own grief and wishes he had the powers of Orpheus to persuade the underworld powers to release his wife. The fact that Orpheus failed

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role reversals, and the blurring of gender roles in general in the play, see Franco 134–5 and Segal 1992: 152f. Almost all commentators suggest that the Protesilaus may be behind this reference (though see Erbse 46), but the significance of the allusion is rarely explored. I leave aside considering whether Euripides is engaging in his penchant for mythological and cultic etiology; see Burnett 254 n.10, Smith 132–3, n.12, Knox 326–7, and Boedeker 39–40. Kullman 133 n.18 is certainly right to dismiss concerns of Thessalian magic.

<sup>18</sup>So suggests Dale *ad* 352, who does not see any irony in the scene, but still finds “nothing in the passage to indicate Euripides is referring to such a [successful] version;” so also Steinman 114, cited in Riemer 116 n.284, who disagrees. Dale also deals well with the unhelpful remark of the scholiast on 357: Ὀρφείως γυνὴ Εὐρυδίκη, ἧς ἀποθανούσης ὑπὸ ὄφεως κατελθὼν καὶ τῇ μουσικῇ θέλξας τὸν Πλούτωνα καὶ τὴν κόρην αὐτὴν ἀνήγαγεν ἐξ ᾧδου. First, it is clear that this does not refer directly to the text of Euripides, for both the name of Orpheus' wife and the cause of her death are not mentioned in the play (and in fact may have been quite different in the fifth century from those supplied here from a later tradition). Bowra believes that the aorist ἀνήγαγεν rules out the possibility that Eurydice did not live happily ever after, but I fail to see his point. Certainly the aorist does not always denote successful completion of the action of the verb. It seems much more likely that scholiast is simply pointing out that Orpheus successfully regained his wife from the powers of the underworld and led her up. No conclusion about the results of this journey can be drawn. As Dale argues, the scholiast found no reason to add the point of failure; neither did Admetus. The scholiast, in other words, is acting in similar fashion to most modern commentators; see also Ziegler 1273 n.1.

to accomplish his ultimate mission is secondary, lost to Admetus, but in the mind of the audience.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, both within the play itself and to the Greek audience there would be no parallels for someone successfully emerging from the underworld. There is no well-known individual in all Greek mythology *except Alcestis* who dies and is returned to human life without cosmic repercussions which are soon remedied. There are plenty of symbolic and metaphorical rebirths in the cata-bases of various heroes (e.g. Odysseus, Theseus, Orpheus, Heracles, Aeneas), but simple and unconditional resurrection to a second earthly life is limited to Alcestis.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the folktales upon which the tale seem to be based tell of the inevitable death of the prince's bride.<sup>21</sup> And it should be remembered that Alcestis is not immortal—she and Admetus must eventually die their fated deaths. With her return at the end of the play, Apollo's tinkering with human mortality is ended, his *officium* paid in full. Death remains the defining condition for everyone but the gods.

More importantly, as many commentators have noted, the drama itself has as its background the inevitability of death, and as one of its poignant themes the importance of death for an ordinary, as well as heroic, life.<sup>22</sup> The entire "tragedy" is built around the ineluctable grasp of Death on the lives of

<sup>19</sup>Nielsen 97 rightly observes that "the lesson to be learned is that Orpheus fell short of achieving his goal, as has Admetus of his responsibility to die. Apollo's gift has opened more doors than it has closed."

<sup>20</sup>It is too frequently overlooked that Alcestis' case is unique. The various recipients of Asclepius' gift of a second life (e.g. Capaneus, Hymenaeus, Lycurgus, Glaucus, Hippolytus, Tyndareus) must share in the responsibility for the physician's ultimate destruction; see Apollod. 3.10.3–4 with Frazer's notes. Glaucus is restored by either Asclepius or a magic herb supplied by Polyidus (Apollod. 3.3.1 and Frazer's Appendix 7). Sisyphus too eludes death several times but pays a heavy penalty for it. Other undead become divine (e.g. Hippolytus, Asclepius, Semele), a strong indication of the sharp line in the Greek mind between the mortal and the immortal. A final group comes back only with conditions (Protesilaus, Castor and Pollux, Adonis). Rosenmeyer 211 notes that, Heracles excepted, of all who attempted to descend to the netherworld and outwit death, all failed or proved to be a rascal. This is perhaps unfair to Odysseus, certainly to Aeneas, but the significant point is that no one who actually dies returns for more than a brief visit. Hyg. 251 supplies a list of those *qui licentia parcarum ab inferis redierunt*. Socrates' tale of Er (*Rep.* 10.614f.) belongs solely to the philosophical world of Plato.

<sup>21</sup>Lesky; see also Beekes 233–35 on the Indo-European origin of the motif, although Hamilton 299–300 rightly warns of the difficulties of using folkmaterial in discussing the *Alcestis*.

<sup>22</sup>Especially good on this are Segal (1993), Kullman, Dyson, Nielsen, and Gregory. Oddly, Lloyd 130 n.2 sees that the ineluctability of death is "one of the most prominent themes in the *Alcestis*," but still follows Bowra's interpretation of the Orpheus passage (as apparently does Segal 1993: 44 and n.17). If Orpheus could overcome death with impunity, however, even with his extraordinary but human musical skills, then there would be a paradigm from early in the play for human immortality.

the characters and the remarkable exception that these events will portray. In fact, Admetus owes his own "escape clause" to Asclepius' raising the dead, an action quickly terminated by Zeus. From the third line of the play through the end, it is clear that in this world everyone must die, and Zeus is there to guarantee this truth. Apollo reveals this defining condition of life (3–4), and the chorus picks it up (112f.) in bewailing inevitable death (μόρος...ἀπότμος, 112f.). The chorus later makes an appeal remarkably similar to that of Admetus by wishing it had the power to bring Alcestis to the light from the halls of Hades (455–59). Heracles himself drunkenly admits that all men must die (βροτοῖς ἅπασι κατθανεῖν ὀφείλεται, 782) shortly before learning that it is Alcestis who is dead.<sup>23</sup> Most impressive is the famous choral ode on Necessity (962f.), where the certainty of death is held out as a form of consolation to Admetus. Here the chorus says that it has studied every possible physical and metaphysical body of evidence and it has discovered no means of escaping Necessity and the clutches of Zeus. No cure for Necessity can be found even "on the Thracian tablets which the Orphic voice inscribed" (Θρήσσαις ἐν σάνισιν, τὰς / Ὀρφεῖα κατέγραψεν / γῆρυς, 967–69). Thus even the religious appeal to Orpheus does not provide a way to avoid death.

Finally, Heracles nearly repeats Admetus' words at the end the play. In fact, Heracles' teasing lament caps a sequence of analogous statements about the impossibility of overcoming death. The similarities, as well as the important differences, can perhaps be seen most easily by superimposing the major components of the sentences—Admetus (357–62), Chorus (455–59), and Heracles (1072–73):

εἰ δ'...μοι...παρῆν, ὥστ'...σ' ἐξ Ἄιδου λαβεῖν, κατῆλθον ἄν...ἐς φῶς  
εἴθ' ἐπ' ἐμοὶ...εἴη, δυναίμαν δέ σε πέμψαι φάος ἐξ Ἄϊδα τεράμων  
εἰ γὰρ...δύναμιν εἶχον ὥστε...ἐς φῶς πορεύσαι νερτέρων ἐκ δωμάτων

All three would like to take Alcestis out of the world of the dead into the light of the living, if they could. Admetus expresses himself in an unreal or unfulfilled condition, an unusual construction for such laments upon a death or departure (Seeck 141).<sup>24</sup> He is an admitted failure. He completes his condition

<sup>23</sup>In verses 850f., Heracles suggests that if he misses death he will go to the underworld and persuade Core and Pluto to let Alcestis go. Commentators note that this may be a reference to a different version of the tale in which Alcestis is sent back by the lords of the underworld without violent intervention (Plato *Symp.* 179b; Apollod. 1.9.15).

<sup>24</sup>The oft-cited comparison with *Iph. Aul.* 1211f. is instructive. Here we find a similar construction (past unreal) in a wish for the powers of Orpheus. Iphigenia is noting that she did not have Orphic powers of persuasion to move rocks, no doubt at least partially an unflattering allusion to her father and the other Greek leaders. Her point is that this one young woman has

in the past tense, as if his wife were already dead and he had already lost the opportunity to recover her. If Admetus had the powers of Orpheus, which he (grammatically) does not, he would have gone down to charm the powers in the underworld and taken his wife out of Hades (which even Orpheus did not accomplish successfully). The chorus is a bit more positive, more hopeful, than Admetus, for it wishes (optative) that it had the power to accomplish this task, an ability which is not out of the question and is untainted by the inappositeness of a mythological exemplum. The rules of grammar do not immediately rule out the chance of the wish coming true. Ironically, as we have seen, the chorus knows more certainly than any other group in the play that death is unavoidable. Its wish, it knows full well, cannot be fulfilled. Heracles, on the other hand, reverses the irony. He seems to borrow from both Admetus (εἰ, ὥστε, ἐς φῶς) and the chorus (δύναμιν, ἐκ τεράμνων/δωμάτων). With the rescued Alcestis standing silently next to him, he wishes he had the power to bring her back to the light (1072–74). Grammatically, however, he makes it clear that his wish is unattainable. “If only I had the power,” he says, but his construction (εἰ γὰρ with the imperfect) explicitly denies that this desire is realizable. Admetus understandably responds with what he has known to be the truth all along: it is not possible for the dead to come back to the light of day (οὐκ ἔστι τοὺς θανόντας ἐς φάος μολεῖν, 1076). Yet here is the one case in the Greek world where the deceased is actually fetched back from the underworld! The picture is consistent throughout the play, right up to Heracles’ unveiling of Alcestis—the dead do not return.

These passages make clear that Admetus and the chorus understand from the opening to the closing lines that death is final and unavoidable. Orpheus’ own cult cannot find a way to avoid this necessity. It is in fact this unwavering vision which provides the surprise ending for Admetus. He never actually thought it possible for his wife to come back to life. As we have seen, he explicitly denies this possibility at the end of the drama. His evocation of Orpheus must be read in the light of this theme of the play, in addition to the tenor of his ironic remarks. When he says that if he had the powers of Orpheus he

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no way to avoid her death by relying on her own verbal strengths. Her only maneuver (σοφά) is to weep (δάκρυα παρέξω, 1215). She is completely irresponsible for her plight, but she will eventually (1368f.) prove herself to be more brave than any of the men (even Achilles is impotent, afraid of being stoned.) Admetus, on the other hand, shows himself inferior to his wife. For the correct reading of this passage, see Stockert ad loc. He notes that such an appeal to Orpheus in the prooemium of a speech is standard rhetorical fare; see Men. Rhet. 369 on the imperial oration. And we should not lose sight of the fact that Iphigenia uses this appeal to Orphic persuasiveness as a standard aporetic introduction to an extremely powerful and rhetorically impressive speech.

would grab his wife from Hades, he is not suggesting that only his lack of musical ability keeps him from prevailing. Orpheus' temporary success over death had quickly turned into disaster, a lesson learned only too late by the self-centered Admetus. He just wishes he had some control over the powers of the underworld. He is trying to explain the ineffable—how much he will miss his exceptional wife. Orpheus is not an appropriate paradigm, or at least completely appropriate, and this inaptness is perfectly consistent with Admetus' deportment throughout the drama. The only correct model would be that of Heracles, and he has not yet completed his uniquely successful task. Admetus is depicted with his restored wife back in their home. Orpheus is *never* found living happily once again with his revived Eurydice. The *Alcestis*, then, does not offer proof of an early version of Orpheus' unmitigated victory over death. On the contrary, it is his traditional inefficacy which fits closely with the major themes of the play.

Orpheus' descent next appears in Plato's *Symposium* (179b–180b), and here there can be no question about the results of his appeal. Phaedrus argues that only lovers are willing to die for each other. So powerful is love that even wives (quite a concession from the homosexual speaker) have demonstrated such selflessness. He first cites Alcestis' self-sacrifice, although his version differs slightly from that of Euripides. Her act seemed so noble (οὕτω καλὸν) not only to mortals but also to the gods (ἀλλὰ καὶ θεοῖς) that they (οἱ θεοί) granted her the gift (γέρας) of returning from Hades. In this way even the gods (καὶ θεοὶ) single out for honor zeal and courage in matters of love. But the gods' treatment of Orpheus, Phaedrus continues, shows us what happens when one does not demonstrate true love with the proper suicidal devotion (179d):

Ὅρφέα δὲ τὸν Οἰάγρου ἀτελῇ ἀπέπεμψαν ἐξ Ἅιδου, φάσμα δείξαντες τῆς γυναικὸς ἐφ' ἣν ἦκεν, αὐτὴν δὲ οὐ δόντες, ὅτι μαλθακίζεσθαι ἐδόκει, ἅτε ὦν κιθαρῳδός, καὶ οὐ τολμᾶν ἔνεκα τοῦ ἔρωτος ἀποθνήσκειν ὥσπερ Ἀλκίησις, ἀλλὰ διαμηχανᾶσθαι ζῶν εἰσιέναι εἰς Ἅιδου. τοιγάρτοι διὰ ταῦτα δίκην αὐτῷ ἐπέθεσαν, καὶ ἐποίησαν τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ὑπὸ γυναικῶν γενέσθαι...

But Orpheus, the son of Oeagrus, the gods sent back from Hades a failure. They showed him a mere phantom of the wife for whom he made the journey. They did not give him the real thing because he seemed to be a coward, seeing that he was a harp-player and did not have the heart to die for his love as Alcestis had. Instead he schemed to enter Hades while still alive, and so for this reason the gods punished him and arranged for his death to come at the hands of women.



Orpheus is clearly thwarted (ἄτελῆ) in his quest for his wife. The gods supply him with a phantom instead. Phaedrus does not tell us whether Orpheus makes it back from Hades with it or not, but readers of the passage often assume that he must. Such a tale as this “presupposes” the bard’s success (Bowra 120–21; Dronke 202; Robbins 17; Touchette 81)—does Phaedrus not assume that Orpheus traditionally came back to earth with *something* by his side? Thus Plato would be twisting the supposedly familiar tale of Orpheus’ triumph by giving him a Helenesque ghost in place of his wife. But this critical assumption once again leaps from Orpheus’ impressive persuasion of the gods to his successful restoration of his wife to the world of the living, and this second stage simply is not stated either here or in the *Alcestis*. In fact, Phaedrus’ point has little to do with life after death, but rather is meant to reveal the attitude of the gods (who are explicitly referred to three separate times). The gods honor only self-sacrificing love. This is part of the larger argument that love alone leads to this kind of noble deed. The gods rewarded Alcestis with a return to life because she displayed such “virtue” in her suicide. The traditional tale, as this paper argues, merely accorded Orpheus a momentary victory in persuading the gods to return his wife. But how could the gods agree to this if Orpheus did not deserve it (in Phaedrus’ view)? How could the gods have acted in a fashion which violates Phaedrus’ entire thesis? The tradition was too secure to alter at this point, so Plato/Phaedrus gives the bard an empty gift. Orpheus always gets his wife from the gods. In this case, however, in order to fit into Phaedrus’ view of virtue, she must be a mere ghost, an evanescent wraith. The second part of the quest—the ascent to life—is again left out because it is of little consequence. If we think logically about it (and there is no reason that we should), certainly it would be absurd to think that behind this variant hides Orpheus’ happy reunion and new life with his restored wife. If he lived happily ever after with the phantom, then what real difference would the substitution make? The incorporeality of his wife must have been revealed to him at some point. As he went up? Just before he reached the top? When he reached the top? After he reached the top but before he arrived home (cf. the injunction in Apollod. 1.3.2)? A few days after his return? Helen’s phantom served an important dramatic function and had to remain until the real Helen could be discovered. The mirage here plays a very different role, punishing the husband’s cowardice rather than preserving a wife’s virtue. There is, then, every reason to assume that Orpheus was quite quickly confronted with his failure.

One further observation on this passage may in turn bolster the previous interpretation of the Orpheus tale in the *Alcestis*. Bowra (120–21) suggested that since Plato’s tale accords neither with the Euripidean “success” (an inter-

pretation of the drama disputed here) nor with the Virgilian “tragic disaster,” it might reflect a third version of the story current in the fourth century, half-way between, which told of Orpheus’ short-lived, “Protesilaus-like” success. In fact, critics are divided on the degree of Platonic originality here, with some believing it to be an example of Plato’s private myth-making, and others feeling that he has borrowed a familiar tale.<sup>25</sup> David Sansone has been the most specific. In his 1985 essay he attempts to demonstrate that Phaedrus not only draws most of what he says from various literary sources, but that in this particular passage the character’s three exempla are drawn from three specific tragedies: Euripides’ *Alcestis*, Aristias’ *Orpheus*, and Aeschylus’ *Achilleis*. Sansone further suggests that Plato followed Aristias’ tragedy, which depicted the gods’ refusal to restore Orpheus’ wife to him because they considered him inferior to both Alcestis and Heracles. His conclusion is noteworthy (he considers the reference to Orpheus in the *Alcestis* to be inconclusive): “There existed in the fifth century only one version of the myth concerning Orpheus and his wife, and according to that version, to which the relief and the account in Plato are our only surviving witnesses, Orpheus was unsuccessful in his attempt to resurrect his wife” (59). Of great significance here is the possibility that Orpheus in the fifth century, around the time of or even before the *Alcestis*, had a reputation for cowardice. That is, it may not be Phaedrus’ unique view, or even Plato’s, that the bard is in fact a model of unmanly behavior. If this were a common reading of his actions then our reading of irony in Admetus’ allusion becomes even more likely.

Phaedrus makes it very clear that Orpheus should have committed suicide if he had really wished to demonstrate his love. He did not have the heart (οὐ τολμᾶν) to die for love as had Alcestis, but instead contrived to enter Hades while still alive (ἀλλὰ διαμηχανᾶσθαι ζῶν εἰσιέναι). Phaedrus (and Plato?) says the gods do not give his wife back because he seemed to act cowardly (ὅτι μαλθακίζεσθαι ἐδόκει). So unmanly was he judged to be in contrast with Alcestis, in fact, that the gods consequently (τοιγάρτοι διὰ ταῦτα) had him killed by women (ὑπὸ γυναικῶν).<sup>26</sup> Plato was not the first to challenge Orpheus’

<sup>25</sup>Original: Kern 13; Gruppe 1158; Ziegler 1274; Lee 1964: 401; 1965: 403; Robbins 17; Dronke 203; implied by Bury ad loc; Guthrie 31; Touchette 81. Traditional: Heurgon 33; Linforth 19; especially Sansone (see below).

<sup>26</sup>Moulinier 34 is certainly seeing too much Orphism and not enough Orpheus in the text when he argues that it is not so much the bard as magic itself which is defeated by the gods. Phaedrus throws in a parenthetical insult to Orpheus that he acted as one would expect from a lyre-player. That Plato may side with Phaedrus on this is suggested by Diotima’s later (208d) use of Alcestis and Achilles as examples of heroic pursuit of fame for virtue—Orpheus is left out here as well; cf. *Rep.* 10.620d where the soul of Orpheus avoids being born from a woman

“manliness,” a charge which may pre-date the *Alcestis*. The scholiast on Apollonius’ *Argonautica* 1.23 remarks that there was some question in the sources as to why Orpheus, weak as he was (ἀσθενὴς ὢν), sailed with the heroes. Herodorus, we are told, explained this by saying that there were two different Orpheuses, and Pherecydes explicitly denied that Orpheus had taken part in the adventure. And apparently at some point the bard was given a more heroic spirit, for amidst Pausanias’ accounts of his death (9.30.6) is found a reference to his suicide at the loss of Eurydice (αὐτόχειρα αὐτὸν ὑπὸ λύπης αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι).<sup>27</sup>

Plato’s contrast between Alcestis and Orpheus is remarkably similar to that drawn by Euripides between Alcestis and Admetus. Whether Alcestis’ motives in the drama included the kind of “love” Phaedrus suggests is not specified by the text, but regardless of her reasons we have already seen that Alcestis’ actions are manifestly considered by all concerned to be noble. The chorus never criticizes Admetus’ decision or actions, but there are clear indications that he may be found lacking in courage by the community. Shortly before his entrance, the chorus addresses “the son of Pheres” and observes that the loss of such a wife is enough to make him stab himself, and more than enough to make him hang himself (226–229). The chorus is certainly not suggesting here that he should commit suicide either out of grief or to join Alcestis, but this is not the last time that the subject of his possible death will arise. Immediately after his allusion to Orpheus, he looks forward to their future together in the underworld, bidding his expiring wife to wait for him there. He will have the children bury him next to Alcestis’ body so they will never again be apart (363–68). The perfect wife is to move ahead and prepare their final home for her long-lived husband (καὶ δῶμ’ ἐτοίμαζ’, 364), who will be along, if not shortly, at least eventually. Again, there is no reason to believe Admetus is being insincere, but certainly it requires a good deal of concentration to ignore the irony in this “subterranean domestic felicity” (Segal 1989: 18). His death will not be a lonely one now, since Alcestis has gone ahead to arrange the details. This fantasy is expressed in the same tone as his later plea to his breathless wife (she has only four verses left in life) that she take

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because he was killed by them. Segal 1989: 17 suggests that Orpheus’ failure reveals “Plato’s view of the inadequacy of poetry and rhetoric to represent reality...” For my purposes here the philosophical import of Phaedrus’ comments are not of concern, for Orpheus is a blatant failure. On the role of his speech, see Nola with bibliography.

<sup>27</sup>All of this gets a bit tricky. Robert 403 n.6 suggests that the reference in Pausanias to Orpheus’ suicide may in fact derive from the *Symposium*. Thus this tradition would represent a reaction to Phaedrus’ charges and a defense of the bard. For the un-heroic nature of Orpheus, see Nagy 208–9, Detienne 104–105, Robbins 17–20 and Linforth 7–8.

him below with her (ἄγου με σὺν σοί, πρὸς θεῶν, ἄγου κάτω, 382).<sup>28</sup> Alcestis is dying because he did not have the courage to accept his fated end. This is not reading Phaedrus' Orpheus back into Euripides, nor merely citing the much-discussed scene with Pheres, Admetus' sharp-tongued father (especially 694–698, 716–718), where each accuses the other of cowardice (ἄψυχία). Admetus himself later realizes that he has opened himself up to charges of cowardice, although he sees it coming from “enemies” and the “wicked.” It will be said that unwilling and without the courage to die (οὐκ ἔτλη θανεῖν, 955; οὐ θέλων / θανεῖν, 958–59) he fled Hades out of cowardice (ἄψυχία, 956). No doubt it was at least partially from this realization, along with the grief at his wife's death, that he attempted to throw himself into his wife's tomb and so give Hades two “most faithful” souls (895–902). If in fact Orpheus' cowardice—he too did not “dare to die”—was the standard reading, or even a familiar variant, of his tale in the fifth-century, then Admetus' wish to become another Orpheus would match well his own behavior. Orpheus went to the underworld to bring back his wife. His musical skills earned him the gift of his wife, but his hesitancy to die resulted in his ultimate failure. Admetus too loses his wife from his own hesitancy to die, and his well-attended and thus doomed attempt at suicide (has he read no tragedy?) merely emphasizes his own similar cowardice.<sup>29</sup>

Isocrates' *Busiris* (11.7–8) adds nothing conclusive to our analysis. Isocrates chastises Polycrates for his anachronistic and misguided argument that Busiris emulated Aeolus and Orpheus. Not only did Busiris live long before them, but his actions were perversions, not imitations, of their deeds. Aeolus sent strangers who stumbled upon his land back to their homelands, whereas Busiris sacrificed and killed anyone who came his way. Similarly, Orpheus can hardly be compared with the brutal highwayman: ἄλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐξ Ἀϊδου τοὺς τεθνεῶτας ἀνήγεν, ὁ δὲ πρὸ μοίρας τοὺς ζῶντας ἀπώλλυεν (11.8). Orpheus used to lead up the dead, while Busiris was in the habit of dispatching the living before their time. The oddities of the plural and imperfect have been satisfactorily explained by happy-ending critics here as encomiastic generali-

<sup>28</sup>Cf. 380, 384, 386, and von Fritz 29–30. Knox 334, in criticizing Burnett's generic approach to the drama, points out that one regular feature of “dissuaders” is to offer their own life in place of the victim; he concludes that not even Euripides could add an irony so sharp to the scene.

<sup>29</sup>See Nielsen 97. In Lucian's version of the tale, Laodameia agrees with the recently deceased Protesilaus to follow him back to the underworld. That is, Laodameia once again provides a standard by which to judge Admetus' actions, as well as those of Phaedrus' Orpheus; see *DM* 23.2 and Jouan 320, 325.

zation or (less likely) as a reference to Orpheus' role as founder of Orphism.<sup>30</sup> But in either case, Isocrates' obvious grasp for parallelism has destroyed any chance of our determining if Orpheus led up one or many, or if he did it once or often, or if he ever made it all the way back with anyone. There is thus no compelling reason to conclude that Orpheus was successful in bringing the dead back to life, much less that he lived happily ever after with his wife. Graf (31) argues that it "is difficult not to see that he did not mention the outcome in order to avoid endangering his *recherché* comparison." In fact, if we really want to maintain the parallelism in these two expressions, we should conclude that Orpheus undertook a particularly futile quest. Aeolus, about whom we are well informed, attempted to send Odysseus and his men back to Ithaca, but in fact he failed. Odysseus' crew opened Aeolus' gift of winds which shot the ship back to Aeolia. The king greeted Odysseus' second arrival quite differently—he refused to receive him, driving away the "cursed" Ithacan. If we applied this to Orpheus, the tale would read remarkably like that of Virgil and Ovid: Orpheus attempted to return home (with his dead wife) but something happened at the last moment to destroy his hopes; his second descent was blocked because the gods refused to allow him to enter (Virg. *G.* 4.502–503; Ovid *Met.* 10.72–73). All of this is well beyond the text, but it is at least as probable as the unexpressed success of Orpheus' quest. Again, it is clear that the bard led someone (probably his wife) up from the underworld, but there is no reason to assume that she made it out.

The longest extant fragment of the Hellenistic poet Hermesianax is found in Athenaeus (*Deipn.* 597b–599b = fr. 7 Powell; text from Gulick). Hermesianax of Colophon, as one of the speakers informs us in a discussion of famous courtesans, wrote three books of elegies after gaining the love of Leontion. The third book contained a catalogue of love affairs which is now quoted. The first and longest tale is that of Orpheus, who led up (ἀνῆγαγεν) from Hades the Thracian Agriope (or Argiope). This is the first appellation for Orpheus' wife in the tradition, and her name is not Eurydice. This should not be a matter of great concern, however, for the tale, as we have seen, is concerned with Orpheus' powers of song and his overcoming the rulers of the underworld. His wife exists as a vehicle for his quest to Hades. Moreover, mythological nomenclature is notoriously flexible. At some point the wife gets the name Eurydice

<sup>30</sup>Generalization: Heurgon 12; Bowra 119–120; Lee 1965: 404 n.8; Linforth 20–21. Orphic connections: hinted at by Dronke 206 n.21; Touchette 82 n.25; see in general West 29–33. The Orphic *Argonautica* (40–42) tells us that Orpheus went to the underworld because of the love for his wife (δὲ ἔρωσ' ἀλόχοιο, 42), but there is no suggestion that he succeeded in—or even made the attempt at—raising the dead.

and it sticks (Heurgon 13–27; Bowra 122). Orpheus braved the terrors of the underworld, and by playing the lyre (κιθαρίζων) he managed to persuade (ἐξανέπεισε) every sort of god. The emphasis is clearly once again on the confrontation of the underworld by Orpheus, for Hermesianax doubles the reference to the crucial moment of success: through his song (ἀοιδιάων) Orpheus persuaded (ἀνέπεισεν) the rulers that Agriope should catch the soft breath of life (Ἀγριόπην μαλακοῦ πνεῦμα λαβεῖν βίотου).

Critics have taken the by now familiar approach to this passage: the verb ἀνήγαγεν and the reference to the “breath of life” suggest that Orpheus’ wife was restored to life (Heurgon 13; Bowra 120; Touchette 82 n.27). Once again we must be careful not to jump to conclusions. The text does suggest that Agriope is restored to life. Orpheus gets his wish in every extant account—his wife (or some facsimile thereof) is handed over to him and he leads her up. We have yet to hear of his arrival with her out of the underworld, however. But would not any reasonable reader conclude that his obvious powers of persuasion and his “leading her up” mean that she has a second happy life with her beloved? The context will suggest otherwise, as we shall see, but there is a more important methodological swamp worth exploring at this point. A quick survey of the versions of the tale with a blatantly *unsuccessful* outcome should keep us from making such hasty assumptions.

It proves little that Hermesianax tells us that Orpheus’ wife was restored to life, given a second breath. A commonplace in the tragic version of the Roman poets describes how Eurydice dies, comes back to life, and dies one final time. She lives *again* and dies *again* (*iterum*: Virg. *G.* 4.495; Ov. *Met.* 10.60; [Sen.] *Her. O.* 1083, 1089; *iterata*: Stat. *Theb.* 8.59; *rursus*: *Met.* 10.63). She is taken a *second* time, or by a *second* death (*rapta bis coniuge*, *G.* 4.504; *gemina nece coniugis*, *Met.* 10.64). Clearly it is believed, or at least expressed rhetorically, that Eurydice is alive the moment she is reclaimed by her husband. The question becomes whether she will *remain* alive, and the answer is always in the negative.<sup>31</sup> Thus there is no reason to assume that the reference

<sup>31</sup>Manilius says that Orpheus brought tears to Dis and “even an end to death” (*morti denique finem*, 5.328). Critics have found in this late reference a remnant of the successful earlier version; Lee 1965: 405; Dronke 206; Touchette 82 (who concludes that “it is clear that Orpheus gained the object of his quest—Eurydice”); Bowra 118. But the only thing that is clear is that Orpheus’ quest results in a new life for his wife, an “end to her death,” but this does not mean she does not die a second time. The emphasis is on Orpheus’ musical powers to overcome death in *any* fashion. That Manilius has this in mind is shown by his earlier reference to the same episode. Orpheus made his way through the shades themselves and overcame the infernal laws through his song (*domuitque infernas carmine leges*, 1.327). This says nothing about Eurydice’s ultimate return to the surface, but everything about Orpheus’ musical ability to charm the

to coming back to life in Hermesianax's tale refers to a successful reunion back on earth. Indeed, the burden of proof is on those who make the argument that Orpheus and Eurydice live happily ever after, for there is not one single reference in classical antiquity to this post-mortem marital bliss. It must always be remembered that the so-called evidence for the completely successful Orpheus is found entirely in fragmentary or brief allusions such as the one in Hermesianax. Unlike the extended poetic versions or the unambiguous prose statements found in later authors recounting Orpheus' ultimate failure, these early texts are often found (or worse yet, treated) out of context. One could easily cull lines from nearly every tragic version of the story which, taken by themselves, would argue for a successful Orpheus. Here are a few of the possibilities:

haec eadem [Orpheus' lyre] potuit, Ditis, te vincere, coniunx,  
Eurydicenque ultro ducendam reddere.

This same lyre was able to overcome you, wife of Dis, and even to restore Eurydice to be led back.  
(*Culex* 286-7)

iamque pedem referens casus evaserat [Orpheus] omnis,  
redditaque Eurydice superas veniebat ad auras  
pone sequens...

And now Orpheus had passed through every misfortune on his return, and Eurydice, restored to him, was approaching the upper airs following behind...  
(*Georgics* 485-7)

κατέσχε δὲ δόξα ὥς εἰς Ἄιδου κατάβοι [Orpheus] ἔρωτι τῆς  
γυναικὸς Εὐρυδίκης, καὶ ὥς τὸν Πλούτωνα καὶ τὴν Κόρην ᾠδαῖς  
γοητεύσας, δῶρον λάβοι τὴν γυναῖκα.

The prevailing opinion was that Orpheus descended to Hades because of the love for his wife Eurydice. He charmed Pluto and Core with his songs, and took his wife as a gift.  
(*Conon Narr.* 45)

Immites potuit flectere cantibus  
umbrarum dominos et prece supplici  
Orpheus...

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lords of the dead. As Bowra himself notes, Manilius' starting point in both these passages is his description of the constellation of the Lyre, and he concentrates on its power (all the other traditional Orphic elements of trees, forests, etc. are included in these catalogues). There is no happy-ever-after here, nor in Horace's *C.* 1.24.13-18, which also ignores the details of Eurydice's escape from death.

Orpheus was able to bend the pitiless lords of the shades with his song  
and suppliant prayers... (Seneca *Herc. Furens* 569–71)

tandem mortis ait [to Orpheus] “vincimur” arbiter,  
“evade ad superos...”

At last death’s master said to Orpheus, “We are won over. Ascend to the  
upper world...” (*Herc. Furens* 582–83)

Quae vinci potuit regia carmine,  
haec vinci poterit regia viribus.

The same royal court which could be overcome by [Orpheus’] song will  
be able to be overcome by [Hercules’] strength (*Herc. Furens* 590–91)

...cum vinceret inferos  
Orpheus carmine funditus,  
consumptos iterum deae  
suppleat Eurydices colus.

When Orpheus completely won over the powers below with his song,  
the Fates renewed once again Eurydice’s unravelled threads of life.  
(*Herc. Oet.* 1079, 80, 83, 84; Zwiernlein’s *OCT*)

κατήλθεν [Orpheus] εἰς Ἅιδου θέλων ἀνάγειν αὐτήν, καὶ  
Πλούτωνα ἔπεισεν ἀναπέμψαι.

Orpheus went down to Hades wishing to lead her up, and he persuaded  
Pluto to send her back. (Apollod. 1.14–15)

Keep in mind that everyone of these authors immediately and unequivocally goes on to state that Orpheus lost his wife back to the world of the dead. Taken out of context, though, each could be used to support the theory of the fully successful quest. Indeed, it would be hard to read most of these passages in any other way. Virgil provides a particularly interesting example. In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, the wandering hero asks the Sybil to take him to meet his father in the underworld. There is good precedent for this, he argues, and hopes the prophetess will take pity on him (*Aen.* 6.116–120):

gnatique patrisque,  
alma, precor, miserere (potes namque omnia, nec te  
nequiquam lucis Hecate praefecit Avernis),  
si potuit manis arcessere coniugis Orpheus  
Threicia fretus cithara fidibusque canoris...



Kind Sybil, please take pity on a son and father (for you have limitless power, and Hecate did not set you over the Avernian groves to no purpose). If Orpheus could summon the shade of his wife by trusting in the tuneful strings of his Thracian lyre...

This passage makes defenders of the successful Orpheus a bit uncomfortable. Bowra, for example, observes in a note (118 n.2) that the passage is “concerned only with Orpheus’ descent and is not relevant” to the question.<sup>32</sup> But certainly the lines are as convincing as any of the previous testimony: Aeneas tells the Sybil, someone who should know, that if Orpheus (he subsequently adds Pollux, Theseus, and Hercules) was able to fetch the shade of his wife, he should be able to make the journey down below as well. Should this not imply that Orpheus prevailed? Would it not be “inappropriate” to conjure up a failed mission as a precedent for his own descent to find a loved one?<sup>33</sup> The problem, of course, is that no reader wants to believe that the same poet who composed the end of the fourth *Georgic* could switch to a happy ending a few years later. Indeed, Horace’s *Ode* 1.24, addressed to Virgil and published after the *Georgics* and before the *Aeneid*, can use Orpheus’ quest as a paradigm for the ultimate impossibility of returning the dead to life. Either Virgil has transformed the myth (not impossible, but unlikely in such a brief allusion) or the reference here is once again to a fruitless quest. Yet the language is nearly identical to several of the other partial references to Orpheus’ quest which the commen-

<sup>32</sup>Most other scholars ignore it, although Heurgon 29 defiantly claims that this passage refers to the triumph of the “Orphée amoureux.” The dangers of selective reading can be seen most clearly in Bowra’s comments on a passage from Statius. As Amphiarus drives his chariot into a chasm opened to the underworld, Dis grows angry at another unauthorized encroachment (and the accompanying bright lights) into his realm. In exasperation he recalls the incursions of Pirithous, Theseus, Heracles, and finally Orpheus:

Odrysiis etiam pudet heu! patuisse querellis  
Tartara: vidi egomet blanda inter carmina turpes  
Eumenidum lacrimas iterataque pensa Sororum;  
me quoque—sed durae melior violentia legis. (*Theb.* 8.57–60).

Bowra 118 cites only verses 57–59, however, and suggests that they may contain a hint of the successful version. “[I]f in fact Dis triumphed soon enough over Orpheus, he surely makes too much of his weakness in yielding to these entreaties and shows an unwarranted disregard of what really happened.” Touchette 82 apparently follows him, despite Dronke’s 206 n.22 accurate assessment of the force of verse 60—the tabu proved stronger than Pluto’s mercy, and Orpheus failed to get his bride to the surface.

<sup>33</sup>*Arcessere* (probably to be preferred to *accersere*) means “to summon” or “to fetch” or “to invoke” (Servius ad loc.: *quod evocantis est proprie*); see Kissel *ad Pers.* 2.45. There is a great deal of difference which of these translations is chosen. Was Orpheus able to “fetch” his wife back to the surface, or only able to “summon” her shade to him in the underworld? The *OLD* makes a questionable choice, apparently following the successful variant of Orpheus’ quest (despite the *Georgics*), as it translates “to bring back from the dead,” listing only this passage with this meaning.

tators want to take as evidence for the fully successful journey. Bowra is right, of course, to observe that Aeneas is not concerned here with Eurydice at all, but with Orpheus' own descent and successful return to the surface. But the allusion to the object of his quest is disquieting. In fact, it supports the suggestion that ancient authors were fully capable of referring to the first half of Orpheus' quest without concern for the results. Aeneas wants to make the catabasis. He is concerned only with a safe journey down and back up, not about the object or results of the parallel quests he cites. Similarly, Hermesianax specifies neither the safe arrival nor second death of Agriope. In itself the passage could be read either way, although the argument of this paper is that there is no reason to find a reference to a positive result, because none can be shown ever to have existed. More to the point, the context suggests that Orpheus' love was ultimately anything but happy.

Given the few bits of information we have about Hermesianax's collection and the fragments themselves, it would be startling to conclude that the tale of Orpheus is meant to convey the blessedness of a successful love. In typical Hellenistic fashion, the poet seems to have put together tales which reveal the overwhelming power and destructiveness of passion. After reviewing the evidence, A. A. Day (20) concludes that it "is possible to conjecture...that Hermesianax in the first book wrote of the *tragic* loves of shepherds, lamenting the victims of the overmastering passion" (emphasis his). Included here would be the suicide of Menalcas (death by precipice) at failing to gain the love of Eupippe, as well as Polyphemos' failure with Galatea. The second book seems to have moved from the fields to the palaces with the same theme: "no one...can escape the tragic cruelty of love" (Day 21). The tragic tales of Arsinoë, Leucippus, and probably Eurytion and Attes were recounted here. Thus we are not surprised to find in this long fragment from the third book an account of the destructive passions and consequent sufferings of poets and philosophers. This negative presentation of love is expressed in terms of both the direct pains endured by the individuals and their subsequent wandering. Hesiod, Homer, Mimnermus, Antimachus, Alcaeus, Anacreon, Sophocles, Philoxenus, and Euripides all suffered greatly in disastrous and in some cases even lethal love affairs. The passage ends with examples of philosophers (Pythagoras, Socrates, and Aristippus) overwhelmed by love. No one can turn away the terrible, raging commotion of love, since even the wise are buried by the emotion as if run over by an awesome charioteer (οὐδ' οἷδ' αἰνὸν ἔρωτος ἀπεστρέψαντο κυδοιμὸν / μαινόμενον, δεινὸν δ' ἦλθον ὑφ' ἡνίοχον). The one positive note emerging from this pathetic catalogue is the fame which derives from the sufferings of poets, a point which all love poets are quick to point out to their

mistresses (and Hermesianax has dedicated this collection his Leontion). But given that in this list there is not one unambiguously happy tale, and indeed most are presented as tragic stories which demonstrate the cruel dominance of love, it would be strange to read such a merry conclusion back into the opening tale of Orpheus. The point of the story is that Orpheus, armed with only his lyre, was willing to brave the dreaded elements of the underworld because of his passion for his lost Eurydice. In other words, Hermesianax suggests that this terrifying adventure could be undertaken because passion compelled the bard to ignore the dangers.<sup>34</sup> There is no reason to believe that his trip back up was prosperous, and the depressing nature of the following tales certainly suggests that Orpheus' wandering was in vain as well. At best, we are left with another case of the interest in the first half of the story overshadowing the consequences, but the balance of the context hints strongly at a futile adventure.

Perhaps the strongest case for Eurydice's successful return to life on earth is found in Pseudo-Moschus' *Lament for Bion* (Moschus III). At the end of this poem the poet advises the dead Bion to play a Sicilian song for the Sicilian queen of the underworld (122–26):

οὐκ ἀγέραςτος  
ἐσσεῖθ' ἃ μολπά. χῶς Ὀρφεὺ πρόσθεν ἔδωκεν  
ἄδεα φορμίζοντι παλίσσυτον Εὐρυδίκειαν,  
καὶ σὲ Βίων πέμπει τοῖς ὥρεσιν. εἰ δέ τι κήγῶν  
συρίσδων δυνάμαν, παρὰ Πλουτέϊ κ' αὐτὸς ἄειδον.

Your song will not go unrewarded. Just as Core once before gave Eurydice, rushing back, to Orpheus for his sweet harping, you too, Bion, she will send to the mountains. And if I had some of this power in my piping, I would have played in Pluto's house myself.

Heurgon (16) finds the key here in *παλίσσυτον*, imagining that we are to see the joyous skipping of Eurydice (the first time she is given this name) as she darts towards the light. But certainly the fact that she “rushes back” does not need to mean that she makes it to the surface. Ovid's Eurydice tears up the road (*carpitur...trames*, *Met.* 10.53), only to disappear forever just before she reaches the exit. Moreover, the word order suggests that she may be rushing back to her sweetly-strumming husband just as much as Heurgon's unmentioned light. If we take Moschus to mean that Eurydice also was sent to the hills, then this can indeed be taken as the first reference to her restoration to

<sup>34</sup>As Dronke 203 notes, this can be read as a criticism of Plato's suggestion that Orpheus was a coward to make the trip alive. There is no reason to follow Dronke in believing Plato is re-working an *early* version of the tale represented here by Hermesianax.

the world of the living. But the Greek does not quite say that. Eurydice is given back to *Orpheus*, not the hills. This is unexceptional. Eurydice is always given back to Orpheus. *Bion* will be sent to the hills. How exactly is the parallelism meant to be taken? The emphasis here, as Graf notes (82), is on the power of song. He suggests that the poet may be hoping to be more successful than Orpheus, since his song is dearer to the fellow Sicilian than Orpheus' had been. But certainly both *songs* are imagined to be successful. It is the results of this initial success which are in question. Orpheus obtained his request—the return of his wife—from Persephone for his playing, and Bion will obtain his request for playing—a new life in the hills. The entire poem, in fact, is a hymn to the power of music. With Bion's death, music itself has left the earth. All is silent. The Strymonian swans announce the truth: the Dorian Orpheus is dead (ἀπώλετο Δώριος Ὀρφεύς, 18). Orpheus becomes the symbol for song itself. Shortly before verses 122–26, the poet wishes he had the power of Orpheus, Odysseus, and Alcides to go down to Tartarus (115–118). If he had come to the house of Pluto, he could have seen Bion, and heard what he was singing (τί μελίσδεαι, 118–119). And the poet concludes the poem by humbly suggesting that if he had any ability at the pipe, he himself would have sung in the presence of Hades. Clearly Orpheus represents the ultimate talent for music which Bion also possessed and towards which the modest poet strives. Orpheus had persuaded the powers to let his wife return, and Bion could persuade them to “send him to the hills.” We are back to the same issue. There is no mention made of Eurydice's safe return, just of Orpheus' acquisition of her. Bion has no one to acquire but himself—he can make his own appeal—so his is a one step process. The poet could have said, “Just as Eurydice was sent back to the hills to live with Orpheus because of his effect on the underworld, so you will be sent back too.” But he doesn't. Certainly it is unfair to expect poets to be so exact, but those who argue for a safe return must overlook the fact that no text in antiquity actually tells us that this was the case.

In the midst of his discussion of Heracles' exploits, Diodorus makes a brief digression into the life of Orpheus. His biography ends with the bard's underworld adventure (4.25.4):

...διὰ τὸν ἔρωτα τὸν πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα καταβῆναι μὲν εἰς ἄδου παραδόξως ἐτόλμησε, τὴν δὲ Φερσεφόνην διὰ τῆς εὐμελείας ψυχαγωγήσας ἔπεισε συνεργῆσαι ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις καὶ συγχωρῆσαι τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ τετελευτηκυῖαν ἀναγαγεῖν ἐξ ἄδου παραπλησίως τῷ Διονύσῳ· καὶ γὰρ ἐκείνον μυθολογοῦσιν ἀναγαγεῖν τὴν μητέρα Σεμέλην ἐξ ἄδου, καὶ μεταδόντα τῆς ἀθανασίας Θυόνῃν μετονομάσαι.

Because of his love for his wife Orpheus dared quite incredibly to descend to Hades. Having won over Persephone through his melody, he persuaded her to assist his desires and to allow him to lead up his dead wife from Hades in nearly the same fashion as Dionysus. For the myths also relate that Dionysus led up from Hades his mother Semele. He gave her a share in his immortality and called her by a new name, Thyone.

Some happy-ending critics have co-opted this account to their cause, noting the comparison to Dionysus' successful recovery of his mother and concluding that Eurydice must have made it back as well.<sup>35</sup> Diodorus says nothing of the kind, however. Dionysus, a god, is said to have led Semele out of Hades and turned her into a divinity, a change in status so abrupt that she required a new name. Orpheus persuaded Persephone to allow him to lead his dead wife out of Hades. All Diodorus tells us is what every other account tells us: Orpheus convinced the infernal powers to release Eurydice and to allow him to lead her up. Whether he actually accomplished the second stage of this quest simply is not revealed. The differences between Dionysus and Orpheus are suggested by Diodorus' use of *παράπλησίως* rather than a word implying exact comparison like *ὁμοίως*. Orpheus' quest is certainly similar, or "about equal," to the achievement of the god, but not identical. The emphasis on Semele's new status may in fact hint at Orpheus' failure, for resurrection is directly connected with divinity, and no one has suggested that Eurydice becomes a goddess. Diodorus does not mean his comparison to be exact. Both Orpheus and Dionysus dared to enter the underworld in attempts to recover their loved ones. That is where the similarity ends, at least as far as we can tell. His real concern, it turns out, is merely with the catabasis itself and not the individual motivations, for he uses this digression as an introduction to Hercules' own descent to the underworld, a quest attempted only under compulsion and for a three-headed monster.

Diodorus' partial analogy between Orpheus and Dionysus is revealing. Authors often compare and contrast mythological figures for one particular aspect of their adventures without implying a complete similarity. We have already run across Aeneas' citing of precedent (Orpheus, Castor and Pollux, Theseus and Heracles [6.116–23]) for his own desired descent. His point is obvious: he wants to be able to go to the world of the dead while still alive, and return in a similar condition. The details of the various stories—Orpheus' failure, the alternating death (*alterna morte*) of the Dioscuri, Theseus' foolish entrapment, and Heracles' encounter with Cerberus—are simply not an issue,

<sup>35</sup>Especially Heurgon 8–9; Lee 1965: 404 and Touchette 82 merely include it in their lists of success without comment. Bowra 120 n.1, however, concludes that since Diodorus "does not say what the outcome was, his evidence is not relevant to our problem."

other than to suggest the difficulty of the task (*hoc opus, hic labor est*). This is equally true of two post-Virgilian references to Orpheus which are sometimes said to reveal the long-lived alternate version of a completely victorious quest. Both Plutarch (*Amat.* 17, 761e–762a) and Lucian (*DM* 23.3) mention Eurydice, Protesilaus, and Alcestis in the same breath as individuals who received special dispensation from Hades. But the inclusion of Protesilaus here should have prevented such hopeful speculation among critics.<sup>36</sup> As we saw earlier, the accounts of his return agree that he was restored for a very brief period. In fact, Lucian's Protesilaus asks for only a short time with his wife (πρὸς ὀλίγον) and is granted one day (μίαν λαβὼν ἡμέραν). He reminds Pluto of Eurydice and Alcestis (a relative) as precedents for releasing the dead because of love (δι' αὐτὴν ταύτην τὴν αἰτίαν). He does not expect the outcome for him to be the same as that of Alcestis (another lifetime with his spouse), so why should he be concerned with the outcome of Orpheus' request? He merely wants Hades to release him, which the gods had arranged for the other two. Indeed, his choice of words might be taken to indicate the different results for the two cases. He notes that the underworld powers handed over Eurydice to Orpheus (παρέδοτε), but they sent along (παρεπέμψατε) Alcestis as a favor to Heracles. As far as the text itself goes, we can be sure only that Eurydice made it as far as Orpheus. There is certainly no reason to conclude from this that she arrived safely at the surface. Similarly, Plutarch simply lists the tales of Alcestis, Protesilaus, and Orpheus' Eurydice to observe that Hades can be controlled by Love alone of the gods (*Amat.* 17, 761e–f). He later (762a) adds that there must be some truth that lovers are able to return to the light even from Hades, but this is in the context of a criticism of these stories. The association of the three is based upon their being granted a reprieve from death. It tells us nothing of the next stage in their stories. Whether or not Eurydice herself ever saw the light of day after her death is not addressed.<sup>37</sup> In fact, there simply is no classical text which tells us anything about Eurydice after

<sup>36</sup>Alcestis and Protesilaus remain closely linked through late Roman times, especially on coffins, where there is no suggestion of resurrection but rather of loving spouses reunited after *both* are dead; see Blome.

<sup>37</sup>The same is true of Pseudo-Heraclitus' *De Incred.* 21, where Heracles' descent and retrieval of Cerberus are compared to Orpheus' with Eurydice. The words themselves indicate only the descent (κατελθὼν) and accompanied ascent (ἀνῆλθεν ἀνάγων). No conclusion is given for either. We know what happened to Cerberus. And Eurydice? Cerberus made it out of Hades but was swiftly returned. Are we to take this to mean that Orpheus quickly sent his wife back as well? Clearly the points of comparison are the initial descent, the obtaining of the object of the quest, and the return trip. Nothing can be concluded about the ultimate success of the adventure. In fact, the author's rationalizing point is that neither of these really happened, but should be understood as expressions for being saved from danger.

she recovers her life. We see Alcestis standing next to Heracles, Protesilaus meets Laodomeia, Asclepius, Semele, and Hippolytus are or become gods, and the traditional explorers of the underworld (e.g. Odysseus, Heracles, Aeneas) have many more adventures on the planet in store. Eurydice alone is missing what one would expect to be the most important point in her story, the reunion and renewed life with her husband on earth. This can be explained most easily by simply concluding that it never happened. The reunion is in the underworld, as both our literary and artistic evidence demonstrate (Schmidt).

Eurydice dies a tragic death. Orpheus persuades the gods to release her, but she never arrives home. What happens along the way? Where do things go wrong? Sansone (55) is certainly right when he notes that there is no unambiguous evidence for the turning tabu before Virgil.<sup>38</sup> Still, if we must take a guess, Ziegler's conviction (1269 n.1) seems unobjectionable, that the tabu played a central role in the tale from early on. The original command, however, was not merely to avoid gazing back at Eurydice, but to avoid looking back at all.<sup>39</sup> This old folk motif, that one should divert one's eyes from the divine (especially the powers of the underworld), is found in Homer and even earlier in other cultures.<sup>40</sup> But the texts we have examined suggest that the cause of Orpheus' failure may have varied in the early development of the myth. And this matches what we know of the development of other mythological tales in the hands of poets who twist the details for their own literary and thematic purposes. The basic and unchanging myth told of Orpheus' initial musical victory over the gods and of his ultimate failure to bring his wife back to life. Authors were free to alter elements such as the reason for his failure and the degree to which he could be held responsible. This type of literary manipulation of myth is what we have come to expect from the classical authors. In the Oedipus myth, to pick a famous example, non-Sophoclean accounts relate that after the horrific revelation, the king remained in Thebes with sight intact, remarried, and eventually died in battle. The myth of Actaeon is another one of many myths to reveal a similar transformation over time.

<sup>38</sup>Sansone, agreeing with Dronke 201, suggests Virgil may have invented it. Kern 25 and Bowra 116 lay its creation on the ubiquitous Hellenistic poet.

<sup>39</sup>Guthrie 31 notes that such ideas, although old, had a "recrudescence" in Hellenistic times, and seems to favor an invention by "Alexandrians." It is possible that the original prohibition may have been against oral and tactile as well as visual contact; cf. *Culex* 289–93.

<sup>40</sup>E.g. *Od.* 5.350; 10.528; for other classical references, see Thomson *ad* Aesch. *Cho.* 98, Gow *ad* Theoc. *Id.* 24.96, Pease *ad* Cic. *Div.* 1.49, and Rohde 325–6 n.104. For other cultures, see the references in Thompson's *Motif Index* (C331–331.3, C953, F81.1). Particularly interesting is Hultkrantz's study of the motif in the North American Indian tradition. These cultures are much more comfortable with the dead among with the living, but even here in only one out of six tales is the searcher successful (140).

The unalterable kernel of the tale was the story of a hunter's transformation into a deer and his death in the jaws of his hunting dogs. But authors were free to suggest different motives for his death: inappropriate wooing of his aunt Semele in competition with Zeus, a hubristic boast, the accidental and innocent viewing of a goddess, or inquisitive and erotic voyeurism (Schlam; Heath). Orpheus, too, may have been supplied with several excuses—although the tabu against turning back was probably a favorite from the beginning—but *always* for the same unfortunate fact: his victory over the rulers of the dead is temporary and ultimately fruitless. It is not until the medieval period that he gains a complete victory, and then only with the help of his conflation with Christ.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>See Dronke, Erwin, Vicari, and Friedman (especially Chapter III, pp. 38-85).



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