

Ovid's Orpheus Revisited
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This paper discusses the Orpheus episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (10.1-85 and 11.1-66) as it relates to the corresponding episode in Vergil's *Georgics* (4.453-527). It examines previous interpretations of the Ovidian version of the story, and attempts to identify the way in which Ovid is reworking the Vergilian material. It argues that Orpheus' character is described positively: so far from his portrayal being subverted by the narrator of the poem, as most scholars have suggested, there is enough textual evidence to support the view that Orpheus is rather depicted as a sincere and emotionally involved lover.

The idea that Ovid's version is less satisfactory when compared to the Vergilian is long-standing and has proved hard to counteract. Fränkel (1945) found it distasteful; Otis (1970²) considered it a Vergilian parody. Segal (1972) seems to have been the only one who attempted to defend it: he argued that Ovid depicts Orpheus as emotionally shallow, not because he was less competent in his art than Vergil, but because he "directly challenges the lofty, tragic style which Vergil created for the Roman epic,"¹ so that the episode functions as an expression of the poet's Anti-Augustan feelings.

More recent treatments attempt to justify what they consider an emotionally shallow Ovidian Orpheus by arguing that Ovid uses him as a means to express his views on contemporary Roman issues: Anderson (1982) reads Orpheus as "a particularly ironic comment on poets and their personalities, on the poetic environment of Augustan times."² Most recently, VerSteeg and Barclay (2003) have argued that Orpheus uses legal language because Ovid intended to ridicule the rhetorical and legal practices of his day.

This paper will propose a different reading of the Ovidian Orpheus. First, it will address the arguments that Ovid has portrayed the main character in a negative light, and will attempt to show that, when read closely, the text reveals a much more consistent and attractive character sketch of Orpheus than most scholars seem to have been willing to accept. Second, it will discuss whether Ovid is using his Orpheus story as a vehicle for political or social commentary. Finally, it will examine Ovid's structuring of the episode as it relates to the Vergilian version: despite following closely the order in which Vergil presents the various events in his narrative, Ovid is deliberately expanding on those elements that Vergil mentions only briefly, and is laying less emphasis on those aspects of the story on which Vergil has already elaborated.

Bibliography

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¹ Segal (1972) 474.

² Anderson (1982) 36.