

Power, Poetry, and Women's Rituals in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10, 11

The narrative of Orpheus in Book 10 of *Metamorphoses* has been read as a contemplation on the power of poetry (Hinds, Segal, Johnson). Orpheus' account has also been interpreted as a *mise en abyme* of the entire *Metamorphoses* (Pavlock). By comparison, little attention has been paid to the scene of Orpheus' death at the hands of the Ciconian women in Book 11, except to note its grotesque and humorous elements (Makowski). A closer examination, however, reveals that religious and ritual elements bookend the Orpheus narrative, signaling the importance of probing the framework of marriage, lamentation, and Bacchic ritual within which the entire story unfolds. In this paper, I examine the ritual underpinnings of these two episodes (Orpheus' wedding and lament, 10.1-85 and his death, 11.1-84) and argue that they cast women as a counterpart to Orpheus' poetic model, therefore placing the issue of gender as the heart of the discussion on poetry. By offering female ritual activity as a formidable alternative to Orpheus' poetic voice, the episode presents an image of poetry as a conflict for power between male and female.

More specifically, ritual elements of a wedding gone awry abound in the opening of Book 10, foreshadowing the sad outcome of Orpheus' marriage to Eurydice (compare the similar account of the wedding of Tereus and Procne, 6.428-38). Orpheus summons Hymenaeus but does so in vain (*nequiquam*, 3); Hymenaeus is described as wearing his ceremonial attire (*croceo uelatus amictu*, 1) but without the ritually required solemn words, joyful faces, and lucky omen (4-5). The ritual framework of mourning is introduced after the death of Eurydice, as Orpheus' song is now a lament (*defleuit uates* 12). This early description of Orpheus as both a *uates* and a mourner is reinforced after Eurydice's second loss, where he is described as observing funerary customs and wearing mourning garb (73-75), trappings normally pertaining to women. As a result, Orpheus, the most powerful of poets, is presented as usurping a mode of female expression to achieve his greatest poetic feat.

In Book 11, both Orpheus' voice and his physical self are overpowered and ultimately destroyed by the Ciconian women. Here too, ritual plays a pivotal role: the women are portrayed as Bacchantes (4-5; 6; 15-17) whose voices and instruments drown Orpheus' song (18-19). They attack and kill the poet with their religious accouterments (a spear wreathed with leaves, 7-9; their Bacchic wands, 28); their religious clamor kills the beasts that Orpheus had charmed (20-22); they perform ritual *sparagmos* but not on animals wild, as Bacchic narratives normally prescribe, but domestic (38). Once again, ritual has gone awry, with the Bacchantes turning against the civilizing farmers and slaying a suppliant. Indeed Orpheus' suppliant status indicates his utter powerlessness as a poet, rendered explicit in the tragic inefficacy of his song to avert his dismemberment (40). The narrative calls out the sacrilege for what it is (*sacrilegae*, 41) and Bacchus avenges Orpheus by transforming the maenads into trees, deprived of any voice (77-84).

The religious framework within which the women's killing of Orpheus takes place offers their ritual voices as analogous to Orpheus'. Perverted, aggressive, and destructive, the women's religious expression stands in complete contrast to poetry whose primary

function is to tame and civilize (15-20). What is more, it demonstrates a formidable ability to overpower and destroy the male poetic voice. As we have seen in Book 10 however, Orpheus too had encroached upon female expression by adopting the trappings of feminine ritual lament. As a result, the Bacchant's voices are raised to the same level as that of the greatest poet, caught up in a power conflict with him, vying for supremacy. At Orpheus' death, lamentation is no longer the province of women but is delegated to wild nature (44-49). The final silencing of the maenads by Bacchus indicates that, precarious though it may be, female religious expression is as powerful as it is dangerous. The paper will end with some reflections on the implications of this reading for our understanding of generic tensions between epic and elegy within the *Metamorphoses*.

Select Bibliography

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750 words