

## A Poet's Anxiety in Seamus Heaney's *The Midnight Verdict*

Seamus Heaney's *The Midnight Verdict* is a bold, ambitious—and neglected—work. It is bold in structure: Heaney sandwiches an eighteenth century Irish comic poem between Ovid's account of Orpheus's loss of Eurydice (in book X of the *Metamorphoses*) and Orpheus's death (in book XI). Its ambition is implied in what Heaney observes of Merriman's *The Midnight Court*, from which he takes excerpts to compose *The Midnight Verdict*: it contributes to "the construction of a desirable civilization" (Heaney 1995, 57). No one has yet assessed Heaney's own contribution to the construction of such a civilization in *Midnight Verdict*, which is the aim of the present essay.

To compose *Midnight Verdict* Heaney draws on Merriman's *Midnight Court*. He borrows the female bailiff, who is a monstrous, threatening creature, the judge, Aoibheall, who ultimately condemns Merriman (a character in his own poem) to scourging as punishment, and the young woman who prosecutes the case. But because Heaney omits the defense by the male defendant, *Midnight Verdict* sounds less like a true court proceeding than *Midnight Court*, and more like a diatribe against males.

Heaney's choice of Ovid's narrative of the Orpheus myth over Virgil's conforms to this pattern of hostility. Unlike Virgil, Ovid gives the maenads a voice, and it echoes Merriman's prosecutor, *hic est nostri contemptor!* (XI 7). Ovid (*Metamorphoses* XI 1-43) devotes much more graphic detail than Virgil (*Georgics* IV 520-522) to the slaughter of Orpheus by the maenads. In addition, Ovid's narrative is more congruent with the comic mode of Merriman's *Midnight Court* than Virgil's. Ovid, like Merriman, "exploits almost every opportunity to circumvent pathos" (Anderson 475) by contriving a happy ending and inviting laughter to keep serious matters at an emotional distance. Ovid even

manages to inject comedy into the killing of Orpheus with "*un excès de logique*" (Frécaut 169-170).

Heaney's essay on Merriman, "Orpheus in Ireland," helps us understand what Heaney is doing in *Midnight Verdict*. He sees in Merriman's *Midnight Court* two distinct ways in which the text contributes to "the construction of a desirable civilization." First, for the people of the eighteenth century the poem served the cause of liberation by opposing "sexual repression and a censorship obsessed with sexual morality." More recently, Heaney says, the poem has served the cause of liberation in a different way, as a "paradigm" of the movement to relocate women into the center of consciousness, language, and institutions (Heaney 1995, 53).

But Heaney undercuts both of these aims in *Midnight Verdict* when he associates Merriman's prosecuting women with irrational maenads (Bradley 483). We come closer to the heart of *Midnight Verdict* in Heaney's observation about reading Merriman's poem in company with Ovid's Orpheus narrative. We recognize, says Heaney, a "male anxiety about suppressed female power, both sexual and political" (Heaney 1995, 61). Support for seeing this "male anxiety about suppressed female power" at the center of *Midnight Verdict* comes from a suggestion Corcoran makes, that in fact we have a third Orpheus figure—after Ovid's Orpheus and Merriman—in Heaney himself, yet another poet who has been charged with neglecting women. Corcoran wonders if the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in 1991, for which Heaney had "responsibility," and which was vigorously attacked for its neglect of women (Bradley 483, Crowe), was not a "spur" to Heaney's composition of *Midnight Verdict* in 1993 (Corcoran 187).

But the question remains: Does *The Midnight Verdict* contribute "to the construction of a desirable civilization"? Yes and no. Yes, it helps that in *The Midnight Verdict* Heaney reveals for inspection a male anxiety that fears the consequences of its own acts of neglect. On the other hand, the text is hardly liberating—a favorite word for Heaney in "Orpheus in Ireland"—when, as Bradley notes, it sees women as crazed maenads. Indeed, in rehearsing gender stereotypes (as he does elsewhere, Brearton) without identifying them as such, Heaney makes his reader wonder if he has painted a sufficiently searching portrait.

#### Works Cited

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