

Feminizing Orpheus: Metapoetics, Grief, and Nightingale in *Georgics* 4

How to interpret the figure of Orpheus in Virgil's *Georgics* is fiercely debated (e.g. Johnston 1980 vs. Lee 1997). A reading focused on both cultural concepts of gender and gendered symbols provides additional insight into Virgil's Orpheus. This Orpheus loses his status as a Roman *vir*, by losing the ability to act and perform *labor*. Further, Virgil directly contrasts Orpheus' effeminate loss of *labor* with Aristaeus' virile ability to put away his grief, control his emotions, and save the bees (Thibodeau 2011).

While Orpheus' manliness is explicitly stripped away when he loses the ability to take action and is acted upon (Skinner 1997), Virgil also implicitly feminizes Orpheus, already dangerously effeminate by virtue of being a Thracian singer (Johnston 1980), by surrounding his death with imagery and concepts associated with femininity: excessive grief, cold, and Catullus' nightingale simile. Since the concept of *labor* serves as a metapoetic allegory throughout Virgil for the ability to craft poetry (Henkel 2009), Orpheus' loss of *labor*, through feminization, renders Orpheus, and by extension Hellenistic poetry, into fertile soil for Virgil and his Roman farmer to work upon, sowing new seeds of poetry.

Virgil portrays Orpheus' grief as unending and constant--a grief which pulls him away from people and public life. Yet for a Roman *vir*, appropriate grief occurred without any public demonstration (Seneca *Ep. Mor.* 99.4). Withdrawing from public life and from duty was a social sin: Luceius attacks Cicero for abandoning public life in his grief (*Fam* 5.14-6), and Cicero actively works to return to public life (*Cic. Att.* 12.18-31).

On the other hand, feminine grief was expected to be constant and unending; in fact, Roman legend asserted that Numa needed to establish a law limiting the duration of female grief (Pluarch *Numa* 12.3; Hope 2011). Excessive feminine grief removes a woman from society and

is dangerously transformative (Gentilcore 2010; Eur. *Medea* 24-35). Orpheus' excessive mourning betrays his masculinity and yields to latent femininity.

Further heightening the feminine, Virgil surrounds his Orpheus with freezing words and imagery, while descriptions of cold are distinctly lacking from Hellenistic accounts of Orpheus' death (e.g., Phanocles, *Frag.* 1 Powell). These words are noteworthy as Roman medicine linked cold to women and heat to men (Varro *l.41.4*, Galen *De Semine* 1.16). Directly surrounding the nightingale simile are words such as: *frigida* (506), *gelidis* (509), *Hyperboreas glacies* (517), *Tanaimque nivalem* (517), and *Rhipaeis* (518). The concepts of grief, cold, and femininity are often tied to one another in poetry (e.g. Ovid *Tristia* 3.14, Eur. *Medea* 931), while masculinity is represented as an ability to set away cold grief and act (e.g., *Iliad* 24.524). Vergil's freezing landscape intensified the connection between Orpheus' grief and feminine grief, and is unsettling, since Roman men constantly feared "becoming 'womanish'" (Skinner 1997).

Orpheus' death scene is centered around the simile of Catullus' pathetic, grieving nightingale. The nightingale is acted upon, powerless to do anything, a clear picture of feminine grief. But more importantly in *Cat.* 65, Catullus uses the nightingale as a clear moment of authorial "feminization" (Wray 2001). The symbolic feminine nightingale together with frigid grief and excessive mourning imply a loss of manhood. Virgil explicitly removes Orpheus last vestiges of manliness when Orpheus loses the inviolability of both his body and his possessions. Inviolability of body was the truest sign of a Roman *vir* (Skinner 1997). Orpheus, like the nightingale crying for its young, is acted on by the Roman farmer (511-13), and is torn apart without action by the Ciconian women, *discerptum latos iuvenem sparsere per agros* (522).

Virgil highlights the negative aspects of Orpheus' grief by comparing his grief to that of a woman, through both explicit descriptions of how Orpheus grieves and through the symbolic

imagery of the cold and the nightingale. This symbolism effectively emasculates Orpheus, causing Orpheus to lose the title of poet through inaction. Conversely, Aristaeus, continuing his *labor*, performs the *bougonia* which permits him, and symbolically Virgil, to take up Orpheus' lost mantle.

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