

The Failure of Orpheus: The Difference Between *Lex* and *Praecepta* in Vergil's *Georgics*

Why does Orpheus fail where Aristaeus succeeds? I argue that Orpheus' failure and Aristaeus' success are not dependent on opposing character traits but on the nature of their respective tasks. Aristaeus succeeds because his *praecepta* are harmonious with Nature, while Orpheus fails because he seeks an unnatural control, defying the law—the *lex*—of Nature.

Many scholars base their interpretations of Vergil's *Georgics* on the comparison of Orpheus and Aristaeus—of failure and success. Some understand the difference to be a willingness to learn or an ability to follow directions (Clare 1995, O'Maera 2001, Conte 2007). Others argue that Orpheus' undoing is his lack of caution or control (Perkell 1978, 1989, Otis 1964, Seaton 1983). But such interpretations ignore the differences between the task each attempts and the instruction each receives. Scholars often refer to each task as a "resurrection" (e.g., Mackenzie 2019), but it is only Orpheus who seeks to resurrect Eurydice; Aristaeus, by contrast, seeks to replace his lost bees. These differing goals manifest themselves in the instructions the two receive. Cyrene offers Aristaeus *praecepta* (4.448, 548). Orpheus, however, fails when he breaks Proserpina's *lex* (4.487). I argue that the difference between these terms explains the failure of Orpheus.

In the *bugonia*, Aristaeus follows specific *praecepta*. Despite its association with the teachings of didactic poetry, the word *praecepta* only occurs once outside of this epyllion: where Vergil describes practical duties, such as sweeping the threshing floor and vigilance against pests (1.176–177). Such mundane instructions equate Aristaeus' *bugonia* to practical knowledge for anyone seeking a hive of bees. Orpheus, however, fails to uphold Proserpina's *lex*. Vergil emphatically mentions this *lex* within the description of Orpheus' failure: "And Eurydice was

approaching the upper world, following behind—for Proserpina had given this law (*legem*, 487)—when suddenly madness seized (*dementia cepit*, 488) the careless lover ... and he stopped and looked back at Eurydice” (4.486–491). Orpheus’ *dementia* is usually understood as a sudden moment of weakness—his turn—but the other occurrences of the expression *dementia cepit* in Vergil’s poetry (e.g., Pasiphae’s passion for the bull, *Ecl.* 6.47) reveal *dementia* to be a harmful, unnatural desire. With this understanding, it is clear that Orpheus’ *dementia* extends beyond his momentary lapse: it is his passion for Euridice driving him to defy death—to defy Nature. Vergil confirms this connotation through the word *lex*: elsewhere in the *Georgics*, the poet associates *leges* with the natural order (e.g., Nature imposes *leges* regarding what lands provide what resources, 1.56–63). The emphatic placement of Proserpina’s *lex* marks Orpheus’ attempted resurrection of Eurydice as contrary to that natural order. His famed ability to manipulate Nature (4.510) underscores the true cause of his failure: Orpheus seeks control. Unsatisfied with any other lover, Orpheus enters the underworld to bend the natural order to his will.

Vergil contrasts Orpheus’ *dementia* with Aristaeus’ *experientia* (*dementia cepit*, 4.488; *experientia cepit*, 4.316). *Experientia* is the “skill gained by practice” (*OLD*, s.v. 3)—that is, trial and error. Aristaeus succeeds where Orpheus fails, therefore, because of the allowance for failure. The *bugonia* is not a perfect solution: it does not solve the cause of Aristaeus’ loss but merely provides the opportunity to try again. Nor does the *bugonia* control natural forces (such as death); it instead generates a new hive after falling prey to those forces. Aristaeus may lose his bees again but, at that time, he will begin anew with another *bugonia*. Orpheus fails because, unlike Aristaeus, he is unwilling to replace his loss or to try again. Loss is inevitable, and the human race must be able to endure that loss and to begin again. Orpheus, however, is not. That is his *dementia*.

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