

Orpheus

NOTES

Orpheus is born with the gift of music; and although he is part mortal, his talent rivals that of the Muses and the divine performers. Orpheus' mother instills this musicality within him, raising him in Thrace, a city that fosters only the best musicians. For Orpheus is indeed one of the best musicians, and no one can resist the power of his song and voice.

Orpheus finds many opportunities in his life to use his talent for helping others. Sailing with Jason and the Argonauts on the great Quest of the Golden Fleece; Orpheus saves heroes, calms irate tempers, and arouses weary rowers simply by the sound of his voice and lyre. Had Orpheus not been with them on this Quest, the Argonauts would have most certainly failed.

Few are able to resist the power of Orpheus' song; especially not the beautiful maiden Eurydice whom he woos and eventually marries. This is to be a fleeting joy, however, as after the wedding during a walk through the fields, Eurydice is stung by a viper and killed instantly. Orpheus is devastated and helpless, for even his song cannot bring her back. His tremendous grief motivates him to travel to the underworld to try to find her. He believes that his song will charm even the keeper of the dead so he can carry his love back from Hades into the land of the living.

Orpheus' journey is successful; his music manages to soothe even the harshest of guardians, bring tears to the dread goddesses, and arouse the interest of the ruler of Hades and his queen. He is even able to pass unscathed by the three-headed dog-creature, Cerberus, who guards the underworld. No one has previously accomplished such a feat. Orpheus dares more than anyone ever has for his love, and he is rewarded.

Under the spell of Orpheus' song, the ruler of Hades grants him Eurydice. He only names one condition: Upon leaving the underworld, Orpheus must not look back upon his love as she follows him, until they reach the upper world. Orpheus agrees to this, and begins the journey out of the underworld.

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Orpheus knows that Eurydice must be behind him, and he aches with his whole body to turn to look upon her face. As they near the upper world and the light grows brighter, Orpheus cannot stand it any longer and he decides that time enough has passed. He turns to look upon Eurydice, but as he does so he notices that she is still in the shadows of the underworld, and he is only able to steal one fleeting glimpse of her as she slips back into the darkness reaching for him, crying, "Farewell!" Orpheus has looked back too soon, and he has again lost her.

He tries desperately to run after her, but angry gods block his path. It will be impossible for him to pass through to the underworld a second time, and he knows it is hopeless. His desolation is overwhelming as he returns alone to the land of the living. Orpheus, now a broken man, wanders the lands alone with only his song and lyre to comfort him. Everywhere he goes, he plays his tunes and brings joy to the rocks and trees and rivers that hear him.

Finally, after much wandering, a band of evildoers comes upon him, yet they are not impressed or lulled by his music. Instead, they kill Orpheus, wickedly tearing him limb from limb and cutting off his head, which they throw into the river. It is said that the severed head of Orpheus floats down the river until it reaches a shore where the Muses discover it. They bury it at the base of Mount Olympus, and to this day the birds sing more sweetly there than anywhere else in the world.