

Eurydice Dramaturgy: Relating Myth to Christian Audiences

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Purpose and Goals

As part of a Christian institution, the Northwestern College Theatre Department values the integration of faith with artistry. We believe that all truth is God's truth and seek to produce work that glorifies Him and points others to His truth, even if that work would not be deemed distinctly "Christian." For our audiences, however, connecting their Christian faith to the stories they saw onstage is not always an easy feat. As the production dramaturg (literary advisor and researcher) for this spring's production of *Eurydice*, one of my main goals was to assist in this task. While *Eurydice* is inspired by a deeply old myth from the Greco-Roman tradition, many of its themes are incredibly similar to ideas upheld in the Christian tradition. This presentation outlines these connections by first explaining the mythos surrounding the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, then discussing Biblical parallels to this myth in the tale of the death of Lot's wife and the harrowing of hell theology, before finally comparing and contrasting the Christian, Jewish, and Greek understandings of life after death.

Orpheus and Eurydice Mythos

While the stories that make up the canon of Greek mythology have a vast quantity of sources, the major two versions of the Orpheus myth are Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) and Virgil's *Georgics* (30-37 BCE). The overall framework of these tales are the same: Eurydice dies on the pair's wedding day, Orpheus travels to the Underworld to get her back, Hades relents but tells Orpheus not to look back at Eurydice until they are out of the Underworld, and Orpheus looks back, losing his wife forever. There are, however, deviations between the two:

METAMORPHOSES: In his version of the myth, Ovid makes sure to foreshadow Eurydice's demise by describing all the signs of bad luck that appear during the couple's wedding. He describes the god of marriage being in a bad mood and the ceremony torches continuously flickering. Ovid also gives the myth a happy ending. After Orpheus dies, he and Eurydice reunite in Elysium (paradise of the Underworld) and are together forever.

GEORGICS: Virgil provides more depth to the death of Eurydice. He explains that she was running from unwanted advances from the demigod Aristaeus when she was bit by a snake. Unlike Ovid, Virgil does not give Orpheus and Eurydice a happy ending. When Orpheus is killed by female servants of Bacchus, his decapitated head continues to cry out for his bride.

Biblical Parallels: The Death of Lot's Wife

The Bible contains its own story warning against looking back while in flight. While fleeing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God orders Lot's family to not look back, but Lot's wife, like Orpheus, cannot resist the temptation. As a result, she turned into a pillar of salt. But why? Popular interpretations of the story are:

1. FAILURE TO LET GO: Daniel Durken in the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* notes how Lot and his family linger for some time in the city before fleeing despite the imminent danger they faced.

2. MEANT FOR PROTECTION: In *Sodom and Gomorrah: History and Motif in Biblical Narration*, Weston W. Fields suggests that God commanded the family to avoid looking back to keep them from wanting to return to the city out of pity or to perhaps protect them from the divine presence of God which would have killed them (hence the demise of Lot's wife).

3. A MOTHER'S GRIEF: In her book *Reading Genesis: Beginnings*, Beth Kissileff explains how a midrash (Hebrew commentary) states that Lot's wife (named Irit) had two daughters that stayed behind. Therefore, Irit looked back out of a hope that her girls were following (like Orpheus). Based on the theories of 13th century Rabbi Radak, Kissileff theorizes that the residents of the city were turned into pillars of salt and posits that perhaps Irit's fate was a merciful act from God which allowed her to follow her daughters in death.

Biblical Parallels: The Harrowing of Hell

The Harrowing of Hell is a Christian doctrine of the Patristic and Medieval period that posits during the three days Christ was dead, he descended into Sheol to bring the saints of the Old Testament to heaven. The earliest documentations of this belief are from the first and second century, making it only about a century from than the writings of Ovid and Virgil.

ORIGINS: Christian texts from the 1st and 2nd century like *The Odes of Solomon* and *The Gospel of Bartholomew* describe Jesus' descent to the Sheol where he broke its gates open and freed its captives. In the 4th century, this belief continued to be illustrated in *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, and in 650 CE the phrase "he descended into hell" made its way into the Apostles Creed.

PASSAGES: Many passages have been used to promote the idea of the harrowing of hell, but the most common are Ephesians 4:8-10 which suggests Christ descending to hell or Sheol during death and passages in 1 Peter which suggest Christ's preaching to the dead.

RECEPTION POST-REFORMATION: Augustine did not believe in the harrowing of hell, but he was mostly alone in this belief until protestant theologians like John Calvin and Martin Luther. Now, most modern theologians interpret the harrowing of hell passages as metaphorical.

Christian Hell

In the New Testament the word hell is used twelve times and directly translates to "gehena," a section of land outside south Jerusalem. Gehena, or the Valley of Ben Hinnom was used as a spot for child sacrifice to the god Molech in the Old Testament. In Jesus' time, Gehena was essentially the garbage dump of Jerusalem, so Jewish writing from the time describes it as being continuously on fire. Because of the place's grotesque history and appearance, Jesus used it as a metaphor for the afterlife that awaited those who would not heed his teachings. The following are the most common description in the New Testament of Hell:

1. FIRE: In Mark 9:43, Jesus describes the "unquenchable fire" of hell and associates hell with fire several times throughout the Gospels. Revelation also speaks of a lake of sulfur within hell.

2. DARKNESS: Both 2 Peter 2:17 and Jude 1:13 describe hell as a place of "utter darkness." Jesus also describes the darkness of hell in Matthew 8:11-12.

3. SUFFERING: In Matthew 8:11-12, Jesus also warns that hell will be filled with "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Jewish Sheol

Predating Christianity, the early Jewish tradition believed that all of the dead (good and evil) resided in a place called Sheol. This realm was completely absent from God, located in "the deepest place in comparison with Heaven's height." The dead, forgotten by God, existed merely as "shades" without feeling or memory. Later, in about the 7th century BCE, Sheol began to look more and more like Christian Heaven and Hell, a view that solidified more in the final centuries before Christ's birth. Isaiah and Daniel both give descriptions of Sheol that seem more and more like Hell, for example. Eventually, Sheol seemed to shift from an indiscriminate realm of darkness, to one divided into different compartments based on levels of morality. The book of Luke, for example, references "Abraham's Bosom" as a realm of Sheol which was a place of blessing.

One of the most common descriptors of Sheol is water. Psalms, 2 Samuel, Jonah, Job, and The book of Enoch (a Hebrew apocalyptic work) all use water imagery in reference to Sheol and death. Darkness is another common image used to describe Sheol in both the Book of Enoch and the Psalms.

Greek Hades

Originally, the Greek underworld looked much like Sheol-grey and empty, but by the time of Plato (4th BCE), the underworld had transformed into a place of reward and punishment. Upon entering the underworld, the dead would be ferried to the gates of Hades by the boatman Charon. Here, three judges would decide their fate. The virtuous would remain in the paradise of Elysium, the evil would be punished in Tartarus by the Furies, and the ordinary person would live in the Asphodel Meadow where they, like the shades of Sheol, would reside as ghosts, remnants of human beings.

Rivers and water play a critical role in the landscape of Hades. In total, five rivers that flow through the underworld and each has its own purpose. The Styx (hate) is the most famous, where Achilles was dipped and what the gods swear oaths on. The Lethe (forgetfulness) is the river the dead dip themselves in to forget their past lives. Charon most frequently ferries the dead across the Acheron (misery) (although in some myths this is the Styx). The dead who have no coin to pay Charon reside on the shores of the river Cocytus (wailing). Finally, the Phlegethon (fire) flows through the pits of Tartarus.

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