

Myth of Orpheus as in Metamorphoses by Ovid

The enticing narrative of Orpheus, his love towards Eurydice, the spell bounding songs he sings in lament and his tragic end collaborate to make the Myth of Orpheus one of the finest narratives in the world. There are different versions of the tale and is seen in Virgil's "Georgics" also. However, Ovid sought to present the tale with his own touch of mysticism, wonder and deeper versions of relationships that were uncommon to that day. The Myth of Orpheus is seen in the Book-X of Metamorphoses and extends a bit to the Book-XI also, where in there is description of the death of Orpheus.

Orpheus, a famous bard and musician who could enchant anything with his lyre was getting married with his lover Eurydice. He calls out for Hymen, marriage deity, as tradition believes without the presence of Hymen a marriage would be barren and relationship sober. Hymen does arrive, but doesn't seem to be happy and even his torch appears dull. The people who attended the marriage thought of it as an ill omen. Unfortunately, the unexpected happens as Eurydice falls lifeless in a garden because of snake bite. The grief of Orpheus because of the loss of his wife is unexplainable and he can't digest the idea of living without his wife. After wailing, complaining and lamenting he decides to enter Tartarus and convince the king and queen of the underworld to give his wife back.

Orpheus takes his lyre and enters River Styx, convinces the ferry man with his song and stands in front of Proserpine and Pluto and starts to gently persuade the king and queen of the underworld. He plucks his lyre and sings of the love between Pluto and Proserpine, mortal fate of humanity and asks to release his wife to life her full years and states that every mortal is destined to come back to the underworld. As he implores with his song the spirits shed tears, the vultures destined to peck on the liver of Tityos stopped, Sisyphus stopped to push the boulder and even the Furies wept for the first time. With words so powerful and music so lamenting Orpheus moved everyone in the underworld and the king and queen accepted the appeal of the bard and summoned Eurydice.

However, they grant her life back on one condition – to never look back while taking her out of the underworld and reach the Vale of Avernus. If Orpheus by any chance looked at her, she would return to Tartarus forever.

Orpheus with no delay took the led Eurydice to the human world. He was so excited, full of love and eagerness and he couldn't hold his desperate wish to see her beautiful face again. As he exits the Vale, he immediately turns back and she is still inside the underworld and is taken back to the dark world forever. Orpheus desperately tries to grab hold of her but all he could grab was air and she could only whisper with the faintest of voice "farewell".

The Myth of Orpheus doesn't end with the second death of Eurydice, but continues further and Orpheus tries to re-enter the underworld. However, this time the ferryman of River Styx doesn't allow him to pass. So, he laments at the bank for days cursing his fate and finally decides to leave to the mountains of Rhodope. However, consumed by grief he couldn't stop from playing laments and his songs attracted many trees which moved and came near to him.

The story of Cyparissus:

Amongst the many trees that came together, there was one which was not a tree initially but got metamorphosed due to the cruel fate that befell on him. Cyparissus when a boy adored a stag which is considered to be sacred and it had antlers so big that they could provide shadow to the stag without a tree. The stag was so beautiful with golden tipped horns, jewelled collar, silver amulet on the forehead and pearl pendants to the ears. It was not fearful to anyone and accepted to be stroked even by strangers. Above all Cyparissus loved the stag and rode on it with pride. He would bring many flowers and decorate the antlers with garlands and looked after it as a precious companion. Unfortunately, fate's cruel hand turned against Cyparissus and he becomes the cause of death of the stag. Cyparissus while hunting in the woods throws a spear that accidentally pierces the body of the stag resting under a tree.

Cyparissus was distraught with the death of the beloved stag and overwhelmed by grief wanted to die, but Apollo tried to console the boy. Although, Apollo could successfully deviate the boy from the thoughts of death Cyparissus he prayed the gods to enable him to mourn till the end. The poor boy wept till all the blood in his body drained and by the blessing of the gods he started to turn green and became a tree. Cyparissus still moans the loss of his beloved stag and grows wherever there is mourning by men for the loss of loved ones.

The songs of passion by Orpheus

As Orpheus was playing his lyre many beasts, birds and trees gathered around the man. He once again set to sing and remembers Jove, Calliope and his mother. He indicates that he won't be singing of the great battles in the past but would touch on a gentle note about the matters of love and frenzy. The theme of homosexuality is seen throughout the Greek and Roman mythologies. Even in the Myth of Orpheus we see such elements and even absurd incest relations too, which are observed through the songs of the bard.

The song on Ganymede by Orpheus

Ganymede was a Phrygian youth with a form so attractive that even the King of gods, Jupiter fell in love with the boy. Jupiter couldn't resist the thought of having Ganymede for himself and took the guise of an eagle. He went down to the Trojan land and abducts the youth who after landing on Olympus becomes the permanent cupbearer to Jupiter.

The song on Hyacinthus by Orpheus

Phoebus Apollo once adored a youth named Hyacinthus so much that he often left his place at Delphi and he remained in the city of Sparta. Apollo even abandoned his lyre, arrows and the regular duties laid on him. He would serve the youth, carry his nets, tend to his hounds and took the pleasure of the moments they spent together in the wilderness. On an unfortunate day, Apollo and Hyacinthus anoint themselves before playing discus. Being a god Apollo threw the discus to the clouds and it took some while before it got to the Earth. Hyacinthus recognizing the return of the discus enthusiastically ran towards it, but the

discus which fell from a great height rebounded from the Earth and struck the face of the youth.

Apollo was mortified by the incident and took the youth into his arms. He went on with his efforts to heal the youth with all the medicine he could possibly image, but all his efforts were of no use. As a lily bright will fall down withered by cutting the stem, so did Hyacinthus went pale and faded away into the underworld. Phoebus laments bitterly for the loss of his beloved youth and blames himself for his death. He declares that Hyacinthus will forever be remembered through his songs and links the fate of Aias to the flower Hyacinthus is going to become. No sooner Apollo uttered those words Hyacinthus metamorphosed into a flower of deepest red resembling the shape of lily with engraving "ΑΙΑΙ". These letters of mourning can be seen on the Hyacinthus flowers and Sparta celebrated festival of Hyacinthia in the honour of their son Hyacinthus.

The song on Cerastae and Propoetides

Cerastae were men who were cursed to have horns on their heads because of misbegotten deeds. Propoetides were women belonging to Amathus a city in Cyprus. They sacrificed guests who visit them before the altar of Jupiter. Venus couldn't bear the manslaughter and being the patron goddess of the islands of Cyprus, she wanted to abandon the whole place. However, she realises that the blame is only on Propoetides hence she makes to grow horns on their heads. But, this doesn't stop the women from blasphemy and they spread the word that Venus is not a goddess. Venus outraged by their behaviour makes them as prostitutes who sell their body for money. The Propoetides are considered as the first prostitutes of the world. But their demeanour doesn't change and Venus turned the Propoetides into stone granite.

The song on Pygmalion

The Myth of Orpheus by Ovid reaches to a poetic pinnacle with the description of Pygmalion followed by the stories of Myrrha, Venus and Adonis. Pygmalion was the resident of Cyprus who witnessed all the crimes of the Propoetides and chose to live the life of a bachelor for many years. Pygmalion was a great sculptor and after years of labour he created an adorable ivory statue outrunning any feminine beauty on Earth. With such beautiful face and limbs, Pygmalion fell in love with the ivory statue. The statue felt so real that the boy after sessions of observation felt as if the statue's about to move.

"Art was concealed by art to a rare degree. Pygmalion's

Marvelling soul was inflamed with desire for a semblance of body.

Again and again his hands moved over his work to explore it."

Pygmalion became so passionate about the statue that he often fondled it, kissing the lips and felt that the statue is kissing him back. He gently moved over the limbs of the statue as if any force would harm the gentle and snowy skin of the female semblance. He would whisper sweet talks and even bring gifts that are suitable for a woman such as pebbles, shells,

birds and flowers. Pygmalion often put dress on the statue and decorated it with jewellery and admired the body of the female statue.

On the season of Venus festival where everyone was enjoying their holiday, Pygmalion went to the altar and asked nervously to grant the gift to wed a woman similar to the ivory maiden he created. Venus, present at the festival heard the beseeching of Pygmalion and understood the intention behind the pleading of the boy. As Pygmalion was standing near the altar the flames went up three times symbolizing the acceptance of Venus and the boy returned home to look at the statue. The female statue was placed in a couch, he kissed her and felt warmth. Pygmalion kissed the statue again and gently fondled her and realized that the ivory is becoming soft. Pygmalion with a mixed emotion of joy and doubt went to touch the whole body, which he admired so much and to his fortunes the statue turned into living flesh. Pygmalion couldn't thank Venus enough and the woman he desired so much over the years stood before his eyes. Pygmalion, with the blessing of Venus, married his lover and bore a child Paphos and her name is given to an island.

The song on Myrrha

The daughter of Pygmalion, Paphos was blessed with a boy named Cinyras. He grew in full health, married and begotten a child named Myrrha. She was the most beautiful lady on the island and there were flocks of suitors who would come and ask her hand. However, Myrrha already chose a man as a husband and it was none other than her father Cinyras. She kept her passion towards her father within her but was in a state of perplexity about the sins she committed by thinking like that and about quenching her passion. Myrrha questions herself:

“Will you play the role of your mother’s supplanter and father’s mistress?

Will you be known as your own son’s sister and brother’s mother?

Will you feel no fear of the Furies, those sisters with black snakes writhing...?”

As she was in a perplexed state about her feelings towards Cinyras, he comes to ask about her marriage and enquires about her interest towards any of the suitors. She looking at the face of her father bursts into tears, unable to explain her situation says that she wants as her husband a man like her father. Cinyras couldn't interpret the darker meaning of her words marks that those are words of a dutiful daughter. Myrrha, overcome by guilt and unable to subdue her passions decides to kill herself. She decides to hang herself and when she was strangling an old nurse saves her. The old nurse asks Myrrha to explain the misfortunes that befell on her which led to the situation. Initially Myrrha hesitates, but she explains her passion towards Cinyras and without getting succeeded in her trails it is useless to live. The old nurse protested the idea of Myrrha and asked her to banish any such hideous thoughts against the laws of nature. But, Myrrha felt that there are only two ways – to die or to sleep with her father. The old woman fearing that Myrrha would end her life accepts to help her.

At that time, all the married women were celebrating the festival in honour of Ceres. The festival was conducted nine days and the women don't have intercourse with the men. The

wife of King Cinyras – Cenchreis, was also a part of the celebrations and the King was restless to enjoy the fruits of an intercourse. The old nurse went to the King to introduce about a young girl equally aged to her daughter longing to be with Cinyras. The King without knowing who the girl was; accepted for the unholy union of bodies. Myrrha couldn't help but to enjoy herself with her father and went away before the dawn and they met for several nights during the festival days. Cinyras was too eager to see who the maiden was, who was in such passion to share bed with him. So, he took a torch and to his utter disgust finds out that it is none other than his beloved daughter Myrrha. Cinyras outraged by the sight of his daughter took his sword and decides to kill her. However, Myrrha escaped from the unerring sword of her father and took with her the seed of Cinyras. The King doesn't want to leave Myrrha alone and pursues her all over the land. She runs to many countries and being pregnant cannot run further. Therefore, she pleads to the gods to save her and transform her to a form which is in between life and death. The gods took pity on pregnant Myrrha and transformed into a tree. The bones of Myrrha became wood, arms became branches, fingers became twigs, skin became bark and blood became sap. Myrrha after the completion of months bore a child inside the trunk and to this day the tree's sap is considered as the tears of Myrrha.

The song on Venus and Adonis

Goddess Lucina finds out about the baby inside the tree trunk and helps the baby to come out of the trunk by chanting spells to help delivery. The Myrrh tree cracks and the bark splits as the baby who is found out to be a boy that comes out. Lucina and the naiads anoint the boy with the sap of the tree and took care of him. The boy was named Adonis and he became a spirited youth with a handsome face which could attract the goddess of love herself.

Venus was so much attracted towards Adonis and there is a reason for her passion towards the youth. One day when Cupid wearing his quiver went on to kiss his mother and by accident an arrow grazes the breast of Venus. Since then, she couldn't resist herself from developing passion towards Adonis and disappeared from the skies to be with Adonis. She changed her attire resembling a huntress, more like Diana and hunted with Adonis. Venus always counselled the youth to stay away from cruel animals and do not hunt for glory. Adonis asks of the reason when Venus takes him under a poplar tree and presses her cheeks to his chest and begins to narrate the story of Atalanta.

Atalanta, a young girl who could outrun any man on Earth and can outmatch in beauty any face on Earth went to ask the oracle about a husband. The Oracle promptly advises to not marry and remove the thoughts of getting married as that could lead to her demise. Atalanta went on to live in the deepest of forests and rejected any suitor by setting a condition. The condition was to win a foot-race against her and if the man loses she will have his life. Many suitors charmed by the beauty of Atalanta accepted the terms and decided to race with her.

A crowd gathered to witness the race and among the crowd was young Hippomenes who couldn't understand the decision of those men who are willing to sacrifice their lives for a woman. As soon as Hippomenes saw the face of Atalanta he feels so excited and wants to

compete as well. As the last lap is complete she wins by a fair distance and all the suitors accept their fate. At this moment, Hippomenes comes to the fore to challenge Atalanta to a race. She is equally attracted by the form and demeanour of Hippomenes, but resists the temptation as she remembers the words of the Oracle. However, Hippomenes pursues her further with an undeterred mind. Atalanta accepts the challenge and Hippomenes prays for Venus to help him win the race. The goddess at once appeared before Hippomenes with three golden apples and instructions were given about the timely use of the golden apples during the race.

As the race began the pair went in such speed that they could easily skim the entire ocean. Hippomenes was encouraged by the crowd and Atalanta held back whenever she had a chance to cross the boy. When it came to the final moments Atalanta overcome by pride wanted to cross the youth and Hippomenes threw the first apple. The gleaming distraction works and Atalanta falls behind; however, with her swift feet she gathers pace and crosses Hippomenes. The youth repeats the process and again Atalanta falls back and again she crosses him. Hippomenes with only one apple left prayed for Venus and threw the last apple with great strength. However, Atalanta was not attracted to the apple this time and Venus cast a spell to ensure the girl went for the apple. Further, she made sure that the apple is heavier so that it could consume a little time while lifting it and reduce her pace while running with it.

With all the factors against her Atalanta lost to the young Hippomenes. They marry and to the surprise of Venus, Hippomenes doesn't even remember to offer thanks to the goddess. Venus who had goodwill towards the pair gets angry with them. When the two were passing the temple of Cybele, they feel tired and try to rest. Suddenly, Hippomenes feels an urge to have intercourse with his wife and they find a shelter near the temple which contained many wooden idols for worship. Overcome by lust, Hippomenes performed the most profane of acts and Cybele turned them into lions so cruel in form when compared to the gentle form they had when in human shape. Cybele, mother of gods, doomed them to drag her chariot forever.

Venus through the tale of Atalanta explains her aversion towards such cruel beasts and why they need to be avoided. Such beasts do not run showing their tails, but fight back at the hunter. As Adonis is too precious to even get injured, Venus implores the youth to stay out of sight from such animals and she returns to the skies.

Adonis sets off to hunting again and his hounds pick the trail of a wild boar. Adonis hurls his spear towards the boar and it pierces into the body of the boar. The beast removes the spear with his crooked snout and attacks Adonis. The youth runs for safety; but, the wild boar with its powerful tusks stabs at his hunter fatally. Adonis falls down with pain and his groans are heard by Venus riding on her swan chariot. She came back to the spot where Adonis fell dead and beat her breasts by looking at her lover drenching in his own pool of blood. Venus made sure that her lamentation for the youth lasted for eternity and she transforms the blood of Adonis into a plant with red flowers with small life span. They are called to this day as anemone or the wind flower, which symbolize the short span of life spent by Adonis on Earth.

The Death of Orpheus or the end of Myth of Orpheus

With such heart melting songs Orpheus was enchanting the entire forest and whatsoever that existed in it. To his misfortunes, one of the Maenads recognizes him as the man who rejected to sleep with them. She tells others and they decide to take revenge on Orpheus. However, the lyre proves too powerful a weapon and the stones they hurl at him couldn't touch the bard. All the stones end up at the feet of Orpheus. The Maenads loyal to Bacchus recognize the glorious abilities of Orpheus and his lyre tried to surpass the sound of his voice and that of his lyre. They used Phrygian pipes, drums, bells, they clapped and shrieked loudly so that the voice of Orpheus or the music from his lyre cannot be heard no more.

They kill beasts, birds and reptiles that were in their way and finally turn to Orpheus. They use their thyrsus to attack Orpheus and attack the bard in a very brutal manner. Still not sufficed with their ways they get farming tools such as hoes, rakes, mattocks from a nearby farm and they even kill the oxen to grab hold of their horns so that they could kill Orpheus. The bard couldn't speak and his timeless voice couldn't utter a word when the time was most dire to him. His limbs were torn apart and the Maenads took pleasure in scattering the limbs of Orpheus. The forest nymphs took pity of the drastic end to Orpheus, the trees, birds, beasts and the entire forest wept with the passing of Orpheus. The head of Orpheus and his lyre were thrown into the river of Hebrus and the lyre seemed to produce a sorrowful moan which echoed across the river.

The lyre and the head mingled in the sea and reaches to a place called Methymna which is a part of the coast of Lesbos. In the Ovid's version of the Myth of Orpheus, Apollo saves the head of Orpheus from being bitten by a snake and the spirit of Orpheus gently glides into the underworld. Orpheus, aware of the place searched for his wife Eurydice and finds her at last. Orpheus was mighty satisfied with her presence and he knew that they could walk hand-in-hand and he could look back at his lover without the fear of her disappearing.

In other versions of the Myth of Orpheus, the women of Lesbos bury the head of Orpheus with proper rites and the lyre was taken by the Muses themselves to place the instrument amongst the stars so that Orpheus will be remembered eternally.

The Revenge on Maenads

Bacchus, aware of the impious deed of his own Maenads didn't want to spare them. He was very much fond of Orpheus and in the same forest he bonds the women with the help of tree roots. They try to get themselves out of the bond, but their limbs gradually start to get covered with bark and they could feel the pain of losing their former shapes. Finally, they get metamorphosed into oak trees and the death of Orpheus was avenged by Bacchus.

{Thus ends the Myth of Orpheus as seen in Metamorphoses by Ovid. The tale is very captivating and reading through the lines of Ovid makes it even more interesting and sorrowful. As mentioned before, there are other versions of the Myth of Orpheus, which can be tried so that one can compare the difference between different texts and find different ends to the infamous Myth of Orpheus.}