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ORPHEUS AND WOMEN ON 5TH CENTURY BCE ATHENIAN VASES

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Introduction

In Greek myth, Orpheus is a musician with incredible talent, his music so beautiful that it charmed the beasts and guardians of the Underworld, and eventually Persephone and Hades themselves, into allowing his dead wife Eurydice to returning to the living realm. When he defied their singular rule of not turning to look back at her and she was then banished to the Underworld forever, Orpheus returned to the mortal realm, began to worship Helios instead of Dionysus, and was promptly killed by Thracian women sent by Dionysus. Alternatively, it has been told that Orpheus, wrought with heartbreak, could not make himself love another woman and instead turned to the love of men, which angered the Thracian women so much that they killed him. At any rate, an overwhelming majority of literary retellings and visual representations of the myth place Orpheus at the center of the story: the viewer or reader follows him as he experiences loss, travels into the Underworld, retrieves his bride, loses her once more, lives on in misery, and is eventually killed by women within his own community. This is undoubtedly reflective of the patriarchal society in which the myth was born. This paper looks to explore visual representations of the women with whom Orpheus interacts, particularly Eurydice and the Thracian women who kill him, by studying 5th century BCE Athenian decorated vases. In some tellings of the myth, Eurydice is his nameless bride; similarly, Eurydice is very rarely depicted on visual arts, even during scenes in which it would make sense to see her. When she is seen, she is only identifiable by her connection to Orpheus. This lack of representation of her character mimics her lack of autonomy found in the myth, especially compared to the abundance of scenes featuring the murderous Thracian women. In fact, though we have rich surviving detail of the
myth of Orpheus, “Athenian vase-painters depicted only three episodes in the following chronological order: 1. his death; 2. the musician Orpheus who charmed the wild Thracians, and 3. his oracular head.” A vast majority of the visual representation of Orpheus, then, includes his interaction with Thracians. For the Thracian women, they are often portrayed as hysterical, spear-wielding attackers. Orpheus, though often less active, always remains at the center of the scene, the protagonist of the visual story. A wide discrepancy exists between the interests of the Athenian consumers of the myth, who were interested in the Thracian women’s murder of Orpheus, and the Roman consumers of the myth, who focused more on the romantic connection between Orpheus and Eurydice.

**Orpheus in Myth**

The myths of Orpheus, like every Greek myth, originally were transmitted orally. The most ubiquitous version of the myth that survives today is that told by Virgil, though Ovid’s version is also fairly popular. It is important to note that both are Roman sources from the 1st century BCE, three hundred years after the pottery in this paper was created; no Greek literary sources of the myth seem to survive. A summarized version of the myth is as follows: On the night of her wedding, Eurydike (in Greek, “wide justice”) was bitten by a serpent and killed. Her husband, Orpheus, widely known as the greatest musician to grace the earth, was heartbroken. Overcome with the need to reunite with his wife, he traveled to the edge of the world to a gate to the Underworld. He was able to pass the gatekeepers such as the ferryman of the river Styx Charon and the three-headed guard dog Cerberus by playing them his music, which was so

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1 Schoeller 1969; Garezou 1994
2 Tsiafakis 271
beautiful even they were entranced. Orpheus came to Hades and Persephone, the god and
goddess of the Underworld, and plead that they return Eurydike to him alive. The gods, also
moved by the beauty of his song, granted his request, but warned him that he could not look back
at Eurydike as she followed him out of the Underworld, lest she be lost to him forever. As he
reached the last step, he turned to look back at her, fearful that he might have lost her on the way,
and in this moment she disappeared, banished to the underworld for the rest of time. Orpheus,
enormously grief-stricken, stayed in the Underworld, and refused to leave the banks of the River
Styx for seven days while he sang tragic poetry of his lost love. When he returned to Thrace, he
could no longer bear to be in the company of women, for they reminded him of his dead wife, so
he instead surrounded himself with men. His beautiful music easily intoxicated his male
compatriots. The women of Thrace then became angry with him, because he was monopolizing
time with their husbands, so they violently killed him. They severed his head from his body, but
even that could not stop his mouth from singing his tortured tale (see fig. 6). “‘Eurydice,’ the
voice itself and the cold tongue called out as life fled, ‘Ah, poor Eurydice.’ ‘Eurydice’ the banks
echoed along the entire stream.”

**Eurydike**

In the myth as told by both Virgil and Ovid, Orpheus serves as the actor within the story,
while Eurydike is passive. The story tracks Orpheus’ journey, and he is the clear protagonist. His
“fatal backward glance is the emotional climax of the story” placing the emphasis on his decision
rather than any action taken by Eurydike. Different authors of the story in turn treat her

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3 Virgil 4.525-27
4 Segal 137-38
autonomy differently. In Virgil’s account, Eurydike cries out, in an altogether-unidentifiable mix of anger, sadness, and regret. She blames the “dementia” and “furor” of her husband’s love as the cause for his irreparable mistake.⁵

“Orpheus,” she said, “what terrible madness has destroyed both you and me, in my sadness? Look, the cruel fates call me back, and sleep covers my swimming eyes. And now farewell: I am carried off surrounded by endless night, as I stretch my strengthless hands to you, hands, alas, no longer yours.”⁶

In Ovid’s account, however, Eurydike only gets one word: “farewell.”⁷ Ovid acknowledges that she does not lament, because, as he explains, “for what could she lament about save that she had been loved?”⁸ Eurydike exists less as a character of her own and rather as the object of Orpheus’ love and desire. She is an “impotent pawn” with no agency, her fate held at the mercy of the men around her: Charon, Hermes, Hades, and most certainly Orpheus.⁹ She could be replaced with a material object and the story would still function, though arguably less effectively, given our propensity to identify strongly with romantic relationships.

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⁵ Segal 137
⁶ Vergil, G. 4.494-498, trans. Dillon
⁷ Ovid 10.62
⁸ Ovid 10.60-61
⁹ Sword 408
Fig. 1: South Italian Kalpis, 410-390 BCE, Museo Nazionale Archeologico, courtesy of the Getty Open Content program

Representations of the myth are often found on funerary vases. The themes are both comforting and disturbing: the desire to go to the Underworld to retrieve a lost one is arguably human nature, and the realization of the futility of that quest is similarly natural to men. Its popularity is also, in part, due to Eurydike’s virginal status. Funerary art for young women who died before marriage is common. Eurydike was most certainly a virgin. While the exact time of her death varies between myths, the range is during her actual wedding to up to a few hours afterwards, while still celebrating the ceremony. There is no reasonable time during which Eurydike and Orpheus could have consummated their marriage before she perished. Bridal veils
were common in Greek marriages. In figure 1, we see the hand of Orpheus reach out to the veiled Eurydice. Greek brides were virgins, and the virginity of a bride was “highly prized.” Language surrounding the loss of a woman’s virginity was often framed in the language of “imminent sacrifice” and is not conceived of something that is “given” or “taken” or “lost” as is often the case with modern terminology, but rather something “untied.” While Eurydike and her virginity are certainly interesting and engaging subjects for the Athenian literary audience, they were clearly not captivating visually, as essentially zero vases survive that depict Eurydike. Figure 1 is the only vase with a clearly identifiable Eurydice in the Beazley Classical Archive. It is not Athenian but South Italian, but is necessary for this paper to highlight the one representation of Eurydice.

**Thracian Women**

Thracians are both othered and exoticized by Athenians. As with all non-Greeks, they were considered “barbarians”, and Thracians in particular were known for fierce and noble warriors and prosperous lands. Indeed, the people from Thrace were often considered rich and beautiful, and, in many ways, blessed by the gods. Thrace itself carried a kind of mysticism to Athenians, who were attracted to myths and stories that originated there. Given the sense of remoteness from Athens, Attic vases portraying Thracians were not exactly accurate depictions of Thracian culture, but rather focused on specific themes and modes that repeated. The

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10 Reynolds 26
11 Reynolds 48
12 Reynolds 42
13 Tsiafaki 262
14 Tsiafaki 262
15 Sirbu 237
Athenian understanding of Thracian culture is a bit cloudy: while it is known that there were some Thracians living in Athens, and that Thracian mercenaries were used by Athens during the Peloponnesian War, which suggests that Athenians had face-to-face experience with the culture, the depictions of Thrace and Thracians seem to fall into a constructed narrative.\footnote{Sirbu 239}

Athenian pottery portraying Thracians was popular during the first quarter of the 5th century BCE, and dwindled from there.\footnote{See Sirbu 237: “After analyzing a sample of approximately 200 Greek vessels from the Beazley Archive depicting elements which refer to Thracian origin, we remark that 120 of them may be roughly dated in the first 3 quarters of the 5th century and less than 20 in the end of the century and in the 4th century BC.”} This is likely due to increased trade and socialization between Greeks and Thracians via Macedonia, where archaeological records attest the popularity of Thracian pottery and housewares.\footnote{Sirbu 238} Among pottery depicting Orpheus, an overwhelming amount features his death at the hands of the Thracian women. This is interesting, given that our most popular versions of the myth spend little time on the interaction between Orpheus and these women. Eurydice is much more present in the Roman literary versions of the myth, and, as discussed previously, in many ways acts as the object of Orpheus’ love and gaze, yet she is rarely represented visually, and she isn’t even named in Greek until the 2nd century BCE.\footnote{Gantz 723} This would suggest that Romans are more interested in Eurydice, but Greeks more in the Thracian women.

It seems that an Athenian obsession with Thracians in general can explain the disparity between the amount of representation of Eurydice and the Thracian women, yet not totally: Eurydice is also a native Thracian, as was Orpheus, presumably. There must have been something fascinating, then, about the behavior of the Thracian women that Eurydice did not
portray, perhaps in the brutal way in which they kill Orpheus (see figure 2, which depicts a scene in which four Thracian women congregate to kill Orpheus). Their war-like, violent, and borderline mad depictions stray from the typical representations of ideal Greek femininity, which is domestic and docile. Very few pieces of material culture exist that depict Thracian women in any kind of domestic or servile position.\(^{20}\) Also worth noting is that representations of Thracian women on Athenian pottery are almost entirely limited to scenes of their murder of Orpheus; outside of this myth, they do not interest the Athenian consumer.\(^{21}\)

![Fig. 2: Attic kylix, 500-450 BCE, Cincinnati Art Museum, 1979.1, courtesy of Beazley Classical Archive](image_url)

Thracians are often easily identified on Attic vases. Thracian men had specific “costumes” that identified them quickly, and certainly emphasized their status as “non-Greeks.”\(^{22}\) This included an *alopekis*, an animal pelt cap (see figure 3), a thick woolen mantle called a *zeira*,

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\(^{20}\) Sirbu 239  
\(^{21}\) Sirbu 238  
\(^{22}\) Sirbu 237
fawn-skin boots, and crescent-shaped shields. Orpheus is almost always wearing an *alopecis*, and often has long curled or braided hair, though he is most easily identified by his lyre.

Thracian women, on the other hand, did not have distinctive clothing but instead were identified by tattoos, which were extremely rare in the Greek world (see the arms of the Thracian women in figures 8 and 9). Tattoos, according to Herodotus, were a sign of high birth in Thracian culture, as opposed to markings of servitude and slavery for Greeks.

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23 Tsiafakis 266
24 Tsiafakis 267
25 Herodotus 5.6, Sirbu 239
Orpheus is often pictured with his lyre, an identifying symbol. In many ways, Orpheus is defined by his ability as a musician; he is famous for it, then, without needing to know the parts of his myth associated with women. As an argonaut, he was a vital crewmember because his music could rival the enticing sounds of the Sirens. For Eurydice and the Thracian women, on the other hand, their identity within the mythological canon is inherently tied to that of Orpheus.

Earlier representations of the death of Orpheus tend to be more violent than later ones. Orpheus’ Thracian killers are most often pictured with spears, and often we see Orpheus being actively stabbed. In figure 2, he gestures to one of the women, who prepares to hit him with what

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26 Tsiafakis 271
seems to be a large rock, while three others hoist spears to stab him, and one pierces his chest, where he bleeds. Another spear protrudes from his torso and, while likely thrown by the woman to Orpheus’ right, looks as though sent from above. Their anger and intent to kill is clear.

*Fig. 5:* Attic amphora, 500-450 BCE, San Antonio Art Museum, 86.134.65, courtesy of Beazley Classical Archive

It is worth noting that the “madness” of the Thracian women is not clearly delineated. It is arguable that Athenian viewers would interpret the actions of the women as insane because they stray so far from the actions of the typical woman. Indeed, even in other stories of “deranged” women in the Greek literary canon, such as that of Medea, it is made clear that Medea is not a Greek woman but Colchan, and Euripides has Jason assert that no Greek woman
would have done what she did. However, as the ironically-named classicist Eurydice Kefalidu elucidates, representations of the Thracian women differ from those of commonly-accepted “mad” women. The hallmark of an insane woman, she argues, is a tossed-back head. Other visual cues include disheveled hair and clothing, and ecstatic positions among the decoration, where the head or sometimes feet overlap with decorative borders and create a breaking-out effect. This is a common way of depicting *maenads*, female followers of Dionysus who were often depicted as mad women taken over by a Dionysiac frenzy. During said frenzies, *maenads* were known to engage in dismemberment of individuals, not unlike the death of Orpheus.

![Figure 6](image)

*Fig. 6:* Attic amphora, 500-480 BCE, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung, 8732. Courtesy of Kefalidu 2009.

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27 NEEDS CITATION FROM MEDEA
28 Kefalidu 94
29 Ibid.
While Orpheus’ Thracian murderers do display the disheveled hair and clothes, as well as a forward-moving feeling of propulsion, they never toss back their heads. Kefalidu argues that the Thracian women, while impassioned, were in no way mad. Their rapid movement and precise wound infliction implies that they were “angry, furious, and were seeking revenge but were fully conscious of their actions.” The Thracian were not always disheveled, however; in figure 5 we see a woman who is fairly put-together, and walks with a purpose while holding a double-sided axe. Her posture and movement give a sense of purpose and intent. The use of weaponry also implies a sense of premeditation, as opposed to the *thyrsoi* that conventionally “mad” women yield on Attic vases (see figure 6, where she holds this weapon). Kefalidu argues that this is indicative of a purposeful choice of the painters, as “all the female cold-blooded murderers on Attic vases carry some kind of weapon.”

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**Fig. 7:** Attic hydria, 475–425 BCE, attributed to Polygnotos group, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung, BS481, courtesy of Beazley Classical Archive

30 Kefalidu 94
31 Kefalidu 94
The Thracian women, while not portrayed as mad, were portrayed rarely outside of the context of a “mad” act. In figure 7, we see the floating decapitated head of Orpheus approaching the people of Lesbos, who will fish it out of the water. Here, Orpheus’ head will interact with Lesbian women, though this is not explicitly stated in the myth. The woman behind his head holds a lyre very near his face. It is unclear whether she herself is a musician, which would be rare, or if she is offering the instrument to him, which would not make much sense given his lack of body. Still, this is an uncommon portrayal of a woman near Orpheus, as she is not occupied by the idea of death (either through her death, as with Eurydice, or with killing him).

Fig. 8: Attic amphora, 475-425 BCE, British Museum, London, 1873.0820.363, courtesy of Beazley Classical Archive
Later in the 5th century BCE, less emphasis is placed on the actual killing of Orpheus. Around 450 BCE, the emergence of exploring other themes within the myth, such as Orpheus’ charming of the Thracian men, becomes popular (see figure 11). Unlike the Orpheus of figures 2 and 4, who sits nearly motionless on the ground as standing women attack him, the Orpheus of figure 8 is actively running away. He has been stabbed through the torso and continues to flee, though he reaches a hand out to his attacker.

Fig. 9: Attic amphora, 475 BCE, Paris, Musee du Louvre

Fig. 10: Attic amphora, 475-425 BCE, Munich, Antikensammlungen
Figures 9 and 10, which are different pieces but portray almost the exact same scene, and were likely from an Athenian pottery workshop, portray an Orpheus mid-fall as he looks back at his attacker, a fierce Thracian woman with arm tattoos and a short-sword who is clearly ready to kill him. He lifts his lyre, perhaps as a kind of last-minute weapon. In figure 11, we see Orpheus in a very similar position, though here his lifted lyre is being seized by a woman holding a scythe, while another stabs him in the chest. The act of the woman taking his lyre, his most significant identifier, seems to act as a further “death blow” by taking his identity.

Fig. 11: Attic bell krater, 475-425 BCE, Harvard University Arthur M. Stackler Museum, 1960.343, courtesy of Beazley Classical Archive
Conclusion

To many modern readers, the most poignant part of the Orpheus myth is his failure to retrieve Eurydice from the Underworld. This aspect of the myth in particular has been most often translated into adaptations within popular culture, such as Camus’ *Black Orpheus* and Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge*. For Athenians, though, the Eurydice segment of the myth is not nearly as captivating as the that of the death of Orpheus at the hands of the Thracian women. While this may have something to do with the unusual nature of their murder of Orpheus, it cannot be entirely due to this in a post-Medea Athens. Perhaps Athenian audiences find scenes of violence to be more engaging on pottery as opposed to scenes of love and loss, or perhaps easier to paint, but this, too, is a weak argument. Eurydice, though Thracian, is very similar to a Greek woman: she is obedient, domestic, and a calm victim. The Thracian women, on the other hand, are exotic both because of their birth and because of the way they behave. Greeks and Romans were interested in different parts of the Orpheus myth, though both focused on interactions between Orpheus and women. Greek audiences were focused on depicting Orpheus’ interactions with the sexually aggressive “other”-- the Thracian women. Roman sources, as understood through literary sources, were interested in the connection between Orpheus and his passive virgin wife, Eurydice.
Fig. 12: Attic krater, 440 BCE, Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen, 3172. Courtesy of Tsiafakis 2009.
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Works Cited


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