

The Sweetest Music

The youngest Muse, Calliope, had a son called Orpheus who played the sweetest music on earth. Wild beasts lay down and purred when they heard him play, and even the trees tore their roots out of the earth and followed after him when they heard his songs. Orpheus was in love with a girl called Eurydice, and on their wedding day his happy music made even the stars dance in the sky. But that night, as they were going home from the wedding party, Eurydice tripped and stepped on a poisonous snake which bit her in the heel. She fell down and died immediately, and Hermes whisked her spirit down to the Underworld.

Orpheus wept and wept so much that he almost lost his beautiful voice. He could not live without his Eurydice, so he decided to go down to Tartarus and get his wife back. Bravely he entered the dark entrance to Hade's kingdom, and as hope came back to him, he began to sing again.

The Underworld had never heard such music. The shimmering notes of the lyre sped downwards, and unlocked the barriers of death. Even the fierce three-headed dog Cerberus lay down and listened to Orpheus' song of love and loss.

Tartarus was still and silent. The souls of the dead no longer fluttered and whispered. Charon the old ferryman stilled his oars. Hades himself wept tears of pity as he heard Orpheus play.

"You may have your Eurydice back," he boomed. "But there is one condition. If you look back even once to see if she is following you up to earth, she will have to stay here forever. Only when you are both safely in the land of the living may you turn around." Orpheus agreed at once, and he and Eurydice swiftly set out for the earth above. The journey seemed to take a long time, and Orpheus was not at all sure that Eurydice was behind him. As he reached the light of day, he couldn't bear it a moment longer and he turned around. Eurydice had not quite reached the entrance. Orpheus shrieked with grief as Hermes dragged her down once again into the Underworld – this time forever. He ran weeping through the woods, playing a terrible sad lament, until he ran into a group of the Maenads.

"Join our dance," they cried, but Orpheus was crying so much that he didn't hear them, and so they tore him apart in a rage, and flung him into the river. In after times it was said that his head and his lyre floated on, still singing and playing, until they landed on the island of Lesbos and were taken up to the heavens and honoured among the stars. The Muses gathered up his torn body and buried it in a grove, and there the nightingales still sing more sweetly than anywhere else in the world. After the funeral, Orpheus's soul raced down to Tartarus, where he joined his beloved Eurydice forever.

(Atticus the Storyteller's 100 Greek Myths; Lucy Coats and Anthony Lewis)