

# Tragic Orpheus. Orpheus on the Stage of the Old Attic Theater

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**Abstract:** The article offers an analysis of the information about the figure of Orpheus on the stage of the Old Attic theater in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. They are systematized in several groups around the mythological motifs characterizing the Thracian musician: The magical power of Orpheus' word-song; Orpheus enchanting wild animals, which is closely associated with the myth of the Argonauts; the myth of the katabasis of Orpheus. In ancient times, magic was almost always negatively associated with the religious practices of someone else, a foreigner, the Other. It is a term that distinguishes these practices from the norm and a means of defining the Otherness embodied in the figure of Orpheus. Along this line, the reserved and even negative attitude towards Orphism and the related religious movement in classical Athens developed. These characteristics transform the figure of the Thracian into inconsistent, conflicting with the canons of good tragedy, defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, and explain why it appears on the stage of the Old Attic theater unsystematically and in associative terms.

**Key words:** Orpheus, Old Attic Theater, Otherness, Aristotle, *Poetics*

**Ключови думи:** Орфей, староатически театър, другост, Аристотел, Поетика

Between 467 and 406 BC Aristius, son of Pratinas, created and staged his play *Orpheus*, which is the only stage work known to us, presenting the Thracian singer as a protagonist on the stage of the Old Attic theater. Only one verse in a trimeter is preserved from it<sup>1</sup>: ἦν μοι παλαίστρα καὶ δρόμος ξυστός πέλας, which Pollux cites in his *Onomasticon*:

Pollux, 9, 43: λουτρῶνες, ἐφ' οἷς καὶ παλαίστραι καὶ δρόμοι ξυστοί. – εἴρηται δὲ καὶ ἐν τῷ Ἀριστίου Ὀρφεὶ ἦν μοι παλαίστρα καὶ δρόμος ξυστός πέλας<sup>2</sup>.

In this short fragment, one of the characters says that he had a *palaestra* and a racetrack nearby. It is not clear whether the work was a tragedy or satyr play, but it is known that Aristius was the author, in addition to many satyric dramas, and of three tragedies, among which researchers hypothetically put the drama *Orpheus*<sup>3</sup>, along with *Antaeus* and *Atalante*.

**Figure 1.** Attic red-figure column krater by the Orpheus Painter, Antikensammlung Berlin, ca. 450/40 BC  
(Source: <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/eye-tunes-the-sound-of-music-in-ancient-greece/>)

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August Meineke<sup>4</sup>, however, senses an unmistakable satyric flavor in the preserved fragment. The mention of a palaestra and a racetrack further arouses skepticism about a possible tragic interpretation of the figure of the Thracian singer. However, Ul. von Wilamowitz-Mörlendorf<sup>5</sup> even admits that it was Aristius who introduced the failed end of the story with the Orpheus descent to Hades to bring out his dead wife. Supported by K. Ziegler<sup>6</sup>, he suggests that Orpheus failed to bring back to life his wife Eurydice, whose name is unknown in literature before the 1st century BC, when her figure appears in the poem *Lament for Bion*, attributed to Moschus. Only at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC the story will appear in the third book of the poem of Hermesianax of Colophon, dedicated and named after his beloved Leontion, where the name of Orpheus' wife was first mentioned, but as Agriope (Athen., 597b-599b). There is no indication of the existence of a singer's wife as a reason for going down to the Underworld before Phaedrus' speech at Plato's *The Symposium* (Plato, *Symp.*, 179d), which dates back to 385-370 BC. According to him, The gods 'sent empty away Orpheus, the son of Oeagrus, and presented to him an apparition only of her whom he sought, but herself they would not give up, because he showed no spirit; he was only a harp-player, and did not dare like Alcestis to die for love, but was contriving how he might enter Hades alive; moreover, they afterwards caused him to suffer death at the hands of women, as the punishment of his cowardliness'. That is why the gods did not honor him like Achilles, the son of Thetis, to send him to the Islands of the Blessed. Some researchers perceive in this Phaedrus' replica a reflections from and a kind of commentary on the play of Aristius, while others perceive it as a pure invention of Plato<sup>7</sup>.

Very little is known about Aristius. He was famous primarily for his satyric dramas, which were surpassed only by those of Aeschylus (Pausan., 2, 13, 5). In 467 BC he won second prize with the drama *Tantalus* of his father (whose debut

dates back to 500/499 BC) in a competition with Aeschylus<sup>8</sup>, who had then eventually won first prize with his tragedy *Seven Against Thebes*. It is believed that Aristius presented this work after the death of his father<sup>9</sup>. If the reconstruction of IG 22 2325 is correct, Aristius won first prize with his work on the City Dionysia around 460 BC. The formal end date of the poetic activity is 406 BC, when the last Dionysia with Sophocles was held. In Sophocles' biography is mentioned that Aristius competed with him. Apart from the drama of Aristius, the Old Attic tragedy (and also comedy) in the Classical era does not pay much attention to the figure of Orpheus as a protagonist and does not know any other similar work.

Around 387 BC on the stage of the Middle Attic comedy appears Antiphanes (ca. 408-334 BC), considered the most important poet (along with Alexis) of his theatrical era. He is the author of more than 200 comedies, 130 of which are known only for titles and fragments and most of which are preserved in Athenaeus<sup>10</sup>.

It is important that he was the author of a comedy entitled *Orpheus*, which – in a hypothetical order – we could assume was a paratragic exemplification<sup>11</sup> of the tragedy or satirical drama of the same name by Aristius. In addition to the title of the comedy, a short fragment (frg. 180, p. 250 Edmonds) of it is preserved, also quoted by Pollux in his *Onomasticon* and by Hesychius:

Pollux, 10, 172: [π. βύσματος]: τοῦτο δὲ βύστραν ἔτεροι κεκλήκασιν, ὡς Ἀναξανδρίδης Κιθαριστρίᾳ<sup>12</sup> καὶ Ἀντιφάνης Ὀρφεῖ·  
'βύστραν τιν' ἐκ φύλλων τινῶν'

Hesych. βύστραι αἱ τῶν λαχάνων ἐνθέσεις· ἔνιοι δὲ τοὺς ἐκ τῶν λαχάνων ψωμούς<sup>13</sup>.

From Pollux's brief comment, it is clear that Antiphanes in his comedy *Orpheus* mentioned 'bites of some leaves'. To this phrase, Hesychius adds in

<sup>1</sup> P.Ox. 2256, fr. 2; Pollux 9.43; Nauck, TGF p. 727, fr. 5.

<sup>2</sup> P. Ox. 2256, fr. 2; Pollux 9.43; Nauck 1839:727, fr. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Wilamowitz 1932: 195-196; Welcker 1941: 966.

<sup>4</sup> Meineke 1839: 504.

<sup>5</sup> Wilamowitz 1932: 195-196.

<sup>6</sup> Ziegler 1939: Sp. 1268-1293.

<sup>7</sup> Sansone 1985: 55-59 with lit.

<sup>8</sup> Suda s.v. Αἰσχύλος, Ποατίνας; Hypot. Aeschyl., *Septem*; P.Ox. 2256, fr. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Pickard-Cambridge 1927: 31.

<sup>10</sup> Meineke 1839: 304-340.

<sup>11</sup> Lozanova 2005: 349-358.

<sup>12</sup> Kock 1884: 23, frg. 143.

<sup>13</sup> Kock 1884: 85, frg. 180; Edmonds 1959: 250.

his *Lexicon* that βύστροι means 'vegetable bites' or, according to some other authors, 'loaves made from vegetables'. Whether we can perceive here an ironic allusion to the vegetarian way of life and the meatless (non-breathing) food of the followers of Orpheus, as Euripides suggests in his tragedy *Hippolytus* (Eurip., *Hipp.*, 952-955), we can only guess.

There are several tragic works in which a laconic allusion is introduced to certain stable mythological motifs from the peripetia of the singer – above all the motif of his *katabasis* or journey Beyond; the motive for his participation in the Argonaut campaign, which integrates most of his dominant characteristics; the motive for his death at the hands of Thracian women. The images on the red-figure vases from the Classical age expressively complement these allusions to the mythological roots of the tragic scene<sup>14</sup>.

The mythological motifs from Orpheus' peripetia are most intensively exploited in the works of Euripides (ca. 484–406 BC), although very fragmented and in an associative aspect. These tragedies can be broadly organized in the following chronological order:

*Alcestis* (438 BC) – second prize at the City Dionysia

*Medea* (431 BC) – third prize at the City Dionysia

*Hippolytus* (428 BC) – first prize at the City Dionysia

*Erechtheus* (422 BC)

*Hypsipyle* (411-407 BC)

*Iphigenia in Aulis* (405 BC) – first prize at the City Dionysia (awarded posthumously)

*The Bacchae* (405 BC) – first prize at the City Dionysia (awarded posthumously)

*Cyclops* (? BC) – satyr play

*Rhesus* (? BC)

Dominating the tragic allusions to Orpheus is the motif of **magic power of Orpheus' word-song**, which is most often integrated into the myth of its enchanting impact on living and non-living nature and the myth of its descent into the Underworld<sup>15</sup>. All are united in the myth of the Argonauts, in whose context the Thracian singer appears at the earliest. Alberto Bernabé evaluates the magical properties of Orpheus' song as the most characteristic attribute of Orpheus' mythology<sup>16</sup>.

The enchanting effect of Orpheus' song has been exploited by Aeschylus, who in his tragedy *Agamemnon* (1629-1632) opposes the Orpheus' voice to the irritating barking of the Argives elders:

Ὀρφεὶ δὲ γλῶσσαν τὴν ἐναντίαν ἔχεις.  
ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἦγε πάντ' ἀπὸ φθογγῆς χαρᾶ,  
1630

σύ δ' ἐξορίνας νηπίους ὑλάγμασιν  
ἄξι: κρατηθεὶς δ' ἡμερώτερος φανῇ.

You have a tongue opposite to that  
of Orpheus.

For he led all things in delight at his  
voice,  
but you, after exasperating me with  
your infantile howling, will be led  
away<sup>17</sup>.

Jason in the tragedy of Euripides *Medea* (v. 543) mentions in a similar context Orpheus' beautiful and wise word-song:

εἴη δ' ἔμοιγε μήτε χρυσὸς ἐν δόμοις μήτ'  
Ὀρφέως κάλλιον ὑμνῆσαι μέλος,  
εἰ μὴ 'πίσημος ἢ τύχη γένοιτό μοι.

May I have neither gold in my house  
nor power to sing a song sweeter  
than Orpheus', if it would be my fate  
to never be renowned!

The tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis*, composed between 408 and 406 BC, but staged during the City Dionysia in 406 BC by the son or nephew of the tragedian, Euripides Junior, winning first prize, introduces this motive as an allusion. In it Iphigenia describes the magical power of Orpheus' song over nature in her doomed plea to her father. She regrets that she does not have the power of Orpheus, so that she can use magic spells to make the rocks follow her or enchant anyone she wants with her eloquence:

1211 εἰ μὲν τὸν Ὀρφέως εἶχον, ὦ πάτερ,  
λόγον,  
πεῖθ' ἐπάδουσ', ὥσθ' ὁμαρτεῖν μοι  
πέτραις,  
1215 κηλεῖν τε τοῖς λόγοισιν οὐς ἐβουλόμην,  
ἐνταῦθ' ἂν ἦλθον...

### **Iphigenia**

If I had the eloquence of Orpheus, my  
father, to move the rocks by chanted  
spells to follow me, or to charm by  
speaking anyone I wished, I would  
have resorted to it. But as it is, I'll bring  
my tears – the only art I know...<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Schoeller 1969.

<sup>15</sup> Lozanova 2020: 23-39; Lozanova 2021: 14-34.

<sup>16</sup> Bernabé 2017: 117.

<sup>17</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1629-1632 = *Orph.* 946 Bernabé.

<sup>18</sup> Euripides 1891: Vol. II.

In a very similar way, the motif is woven into the song of the Bacchantes in the tragedy *Bacchae* (vv. 560-565), which won the first prize at City Dionysia in 405 BC:

**Χορός**  
 πόθι Νύσας ἄρα τὰς θη-  
 ροτρόφου θυρσοφορεῖς  
 θιάσους, ὦ Διόνυσ', ἡ  
 κορυφαῖς Κωρυκίαις;  
 560 τὰχα δ' ἐν ταῖς πολυδένδρεσ-  
 σιν Ὀλύμπου θαλάμαις, ἐν-  
 θα ποτ' Ὀρφεὺς κιθαρίζων  
 σύναγεν δένδρεα μούσαις,  
 σύναγεν θήρας ἀγρώτας.  
 565 μάκαρ ὦ Πιερίᾳ...

#### Chorus

Where on Nysa, which nourishes wild beasts, or on Corycian heights, do you lead with your thyrsos the bands of revelers? [560] Perhaps in the deep-wooded lairs of Olympus, where Orpheus once playing the lyre drew together trees by his songs, drew together the beasts of the fields. [565] Blessed Pieria....<sup>19</sup>

This motif is clearly perceptible at least from the end of the Archaic and the beginning of the Classical age<sup>20</sup>. It is very probable that it even dates back to the Late Minoan period (13<sup>th</sup> century BC), because his reflections can be traced in the fresco from Pylos palace / temple (?) depicting a singer with a lyre, tentatively called 'Orpheus'. A similar argument offers a remarkable image on a pyxis representing a musician with a lyre enchanting the birds that fly over his head (1300–1250 BC, LM IIIB) found in a tomb near Kalami, today in the Archaeological Museum of Chania. They seem to visualize the verses of Simonides of Ceos, one of the earliest poetic accounts of Orpheus preserved in his fr. 62 (second half of 6<sup>th</sup> – first half of 5<sup>th</sup> century BC), which places the analyzed motif in the context of the mysterious journey of the Argonauts.

Simonides, fr. 62 (PMG 567 Page)<sup>21</sup>:

τοῦ καὶ ἀπειρέσιοι  
 πωτῶντ' ὄρνιθες ὑπέρ κεφαλᾶς,

ἀνὰ δ' ἰχθύες ὀρθοὶ  
 κυανέου ἕξ ὕδατος ἅλ-  
 λοντο καλᾷ σὺν ἀοιδᾷ.

... Above his head innumerable birds  
 flitted, and fish leapt straight out of  
 the dark blue water at his beautiful  
 song...

The visualization in fine arts precedes the emergence of the mythological theme in the literature. The earliest direct reference is a scene described by Otto Kern<sup>22</sup>, depicted on a cup from his own collection, which he dates to the turn of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. In it, the figure of Orpheus appears surrounded by birds on a branch overhanging his head and a deer at his feet. The image is known only from the description of Otto Kern, in which there is no reason to doubt.

The motif of *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* is closely associated with **the mythology of Argonauts** and a journey to the Otherworld<sup>23</sup>, in the context of which the figure of Orpheus and the magical power of his word-song appear first. This is not about the usual μουσική τέχνη, but about *psychagogia* (ψυχαγωγία)<sup>24</sup> and katabasic poetry, about the enchanting power of his music to touch the souls of the dead and be their guide in the Otherworld. *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals* is a widely interpreted theme in many images that became especially popular during the Roman Imperial era<sup>25</sup>.

According to *The Orphic Argonautica* (Ὀρφῆως Ἀργοναυτικά; 4<sup>th</sup> century AD), when Jason set out to assemble his crew of kings and heroes, he first sought Orpheus in Pieria, on the highest peaks of Libethra, while he skillfully played his guitar and sang sweet songs in his unpleasant cave, stroking wild animals and winged serpents:

*Orphic. Arg.*, 71-73:  
 Ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ συνάγειρεν ἀγακλειτοὺς  
 βασιλῆας,  
 Θρήκην εἰς εὐπωλον ἐπείγετο διὸς Τήσων,  
 καὶ μ' ἔκικεν κιθάρην πολυδαίδαλον  
 ἐντύνοντα,  
 ὄφρα κέ σοι μέλπων προχέω μελίγηρυν  
 ἀοιδὴν,  
 κηλήσω δέ τε θήρας ἰδ' ἐρπετὰ καὶ  
 πετεηνά<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Euripides 1850.

<sup>20</sup> Simon. Fr. 62; Ap. Rhod. *Arg.*, 1, 23-34.

<sup>21</sup> *Orph.* 943 Bernabé; *Simonides* 2014: fr. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Kern 1938: 188, n. 2; see Schoeller 1969.

<sup>23</sup> Lozanova 2020: 23-39; Lozanova 2021: 14-34.

<sup>24</sup> Watson 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Lozanova 2021: 14-34.

<sup>26</sup> Gesner 1764: 20.

The motif of the **magical powers of Orpheus**, who rules not only living but also non-living nature, is closely related to the **mythology of his katabasis**. According to *The Orphic Argonautica*, Jason persuaded the Thracian musician to join the Argonauts because he was the only one who could show them the ways to the sea, i.e. for a guide (mystagogos/ μυσταγωγός), but also a priest (Val. Flacc. *Arg.* 186-187), and a magician. And the other heroes did not want to go on a journey without him (*Orphic. Arg.*, 77-95). Here the anonymous poet 'Orpheus' introduced a clear allusion to his previous journey Beyond, to the world of the dead, from which the singer from 'horse-breeding Thracia' managed to return successfully with mystical knowledge of the world beyond that of mortals. Jason's choice to look for him first before all the other heroes is due to the fact that only he among the mortals had dared to go to the dark fog, down in the bowels of Hades, and only one of the mortals found the way back (*Orphic. Arg.*, 90-95):

- 90 ... Οὐ γὰρ δὴ πλῶσαι πρὸς βάρβαρα  
φῦλα μέδονται  
νόσφι σέθεν· καὶ γὰρ ῥα ποτὶ ζόφον  
ἤερόεντα  
95 νείατον εἰς κευθμῶνα, λιτῆς εἰς πυθμένα  
γαίης,  
μοῦνον ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων πελάσαι καὶ  
νόστον ἀνευρεῖν·  
ὦν ἔνεκεν ξυνήν τε δύνει Μινύαισιν  
ἀρέσθαι  
καὶ κλέος ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπ' ἔσσομένοισι  
πυθέσθαι.

In the basic structure of the preserved variants of *Argonautica* are introduced regions associated with the characteristics of 'otherness' and the Otherworld, marked by monsters and fantastic figures, inherent in space beyond the borders of the civilized world<sup>27</sup>. The ritual nature

of the Argonauts' journey is well defined and emphasized, which makes the presence of the figure of the priest-mystagogos and prophet (μάντις) Orpheus extremely important for a successful journey far to the East, to the palaces of the Son of the Sun, but also for a successful return. Because at the heart of the Argonauts' journey is coded the idea of traveling to the Otherworld, beyond the world of mortals<sup>28</sup>.

**The motives for katabasis** and the death of Orpheus are first perceived in a theatrical context indirectly in the retelling of Pseudo-Eratosthenes, in his work *The Catasterismi* or *Constellations, Placings Among the Stars* (*Catasterismi*, 24), citing Aeschylus' tragedy *Bassarai*. According to him, 'refusing honor to Dionysus, Orpheus recognized Helios as the greatest of the gods and called him Apollo. He would awaken in the night, climb Mt. Pangaeum in the early dawn, and there await the sunrise, in order that he might have the first glimpse of Helios'.<sup>29</sup> This caused the wrath of the deity, who sent him the Bassarides, and they tore him apart and scattered his parts everywhere. The text gave reason to G. Hermann<sup>30</sup> to assume that the whole tragedy may have treated the theme of the death of Orpheus, which was met with fully understandable skepticism by I. Linforth<sup>31</sup>.

D. Sansone<sup>32</sup> even admits that this tragedy has generated the unfortunate development of the story of Orpheus' descent into the kingdom of Hades. Unfortunately, it is impossible to separate the original fragment of Aeschylus from the entire text of Pseudo-Eratosthenes in order to draw general conclusions about the plot of *The Bassarai*. Problems are also created by the mythological context of the whole tetralogy *Lycurgia*, in which the tragedy *Bassarai* was thematically integrated. It could be allowed only a possible typological comparison of the motives that treated the problem of opposing the deity and the corresponding punishment for the God-fighters.

<sup>27</sup> Krevans 2000: 69-84; Hunter 1989: 10-12; Karanika 2010: 391-410; Sistakou 2008: 311-340; Stephens 2008: 96-97, etc.

<sup>28</sup> Lozanova 2021: 14-34; see Lozanova 2020: 23-39.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted from the translation of Linforth 1931a: 13.

<sup>30</sup> Hermann 1831: 316-317.

<sup>31</sup> Linforth 1931: 11-77; cf. more balanced Deichgäber 1939: 231-309.

<sup>32</sup> Sansone 1985: 53-64.





**Figure 2.** Orpheus in the Underworld (detail): the *Krater* from Altamura, about 350 BC, Apulia, South Italy; National Archaeological Museum of Naples, 81666 (Source: <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/ancient-vase-presents-a-whos-who-of-the-underworld-2/>)

The earliest surviving unequivocal mention of Orpheus' journey to the Underworld is in Euripides' tragedy *Alkestis* (438 BC), where Admetus mentions Orpheus' success in enchanting the gods of Hades:

Euripides, *Alkestis*, 357-359:

εἰ δ' Ὀρφέως μοι γλῶσσα καὶ μέλος  
παρῆν,  
ὥστ' ἢ κόρην Δήμητρος ἢ κείνης πόσιν  
ὑμνοῖσι κηλήσαντά σ' ἐξ Ἄιδου λαβεῖν,  
κατῆλθον ἄν, καί μ' οὐθ' ὁ Πλούτωνος  
κύων  
οὐθ' οὐπὶ κώπη ψυχοπομπὸς ἄν Χάρων  
ἔσχον, πρὶν ἐς φῶς σὸν καταστήσαι βίον.

If I had the voice and music of Orpheus so that I could charm Demeter's daughter or her husband with song and fetch you from Hades, [360] I would have gone down to the Underworld, and neither Pluto's hound nor Charon the ferryman of souls standing at the oar would have kept me from bringing you back to the light alive.<sup>33</sup>

The grieving husband's claim is obvious: he would like to have the magical powers of Orpheus to plead before the chthonic gods for Alkestis' return from the world of the dead. Admetus, however, does not even hint that Orpheus went to the Underworld to look for his wife. The figure of Orpheus' wife is also missing in early images of the singer in the kingdom of Hades on the remarkable funerary vessels from South Italy such as The Underworld crater from Altamura (ca. 350 BC; National Archaeological Museum of Naples, N°81666); the red-figure volute crater now in the Toledo Museum of Art (Ohio, USA); the red-figure amphora by Ganimede Painter, Antikenmuseum Basel and Sammlung Ludwig (BS 453).



**Figure 3.** Orpheus in the Underworld: the *Krater* from Altamura, about 350 BC, Apulia, South Italy; National Archaeological Museum of Naples, 81666 (Source: <http://www.alaintruong.com/archives/2018/10/31/36830038.html>)

<sup>33</sup> Euripides 1994.

The situation is similar, which reveals the image of the descent of Odysseus in Hades depicted by Polygnotus in the Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi from the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>34</sup>. From the detailed description of Pausanias (10.30.6) it is clear that Orpheus was depicted sitting on a hill; in his left hand he held a lyre, and with his right he touched a willow, leaning against a tree. There is no trace of a wife among the mythological figures around him. Orpheus is depicted on surviving early antique vases surrounded by men<sup>35</sup>, alluding to closed, secret male societies<sup>36</sup>.

In the presence of female figures, he is represented mainly in the scenes of his brutal death. An exception is the famous copy of a relief in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples with the three figures identified by inscriptions such as Hermes, Euridice and Orpheus, whose original is dated to the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. However, it is doubtful whether the inscription belonged to the original or was added later when the copy was made<sup>37</sup>.



**Figure 4.** Funerary vessel with Orpheus playing his lyre before the Deceased (detail), Apulia, South Italian, 340–320 BC; Red-figure *amphora* attributed to the Ganymede Painter; Ludwig Collection – Loan of Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation, Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig  
(Source: [https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/ancient\\_underworld/inner.html](https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/ancient_underworld/inner.html))

<sup>34</sup> Stansbury-O'Donnell 1990: 213-235.

<sup>35</sup> Graf 1987: 80-106; Bremmer 1991: 13-30.

<sup>36</sup> Fol 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Sansone 1985: 61.

<sup>38</sup> Euripides 1891.

Although nowhere in the words of Admetus it is explicitly stated whether Orpheus managed to bring back the dead, resp. his wife to life, in another work, (Pseudo-) Euripides' tragedy *Rhesus*, it is clearly stated that the Demeter's daughter, Persephone, owes to the Muse, the mother of the Thracian king, to release his soul:  
ὀφειλέτις δέ μοι τοὺς Ὀρφέως τιμῶσα  
φαίνεσθαι φίλους (v. 966):

Euripid., *Rhes.*, 962-966:

He (Rhesus – AN) shall not go into earth's dark soil; so earnest a prayer will I address to the bride of the nether world, the daughter of the goddess Demeter, giver of increase, [965] to release his soul; and, debtor as she is to me, show that she honors the friends of Orpheus.<sup>38</sup>

What is the mythological precedent for this special privilege, not inherent in Hellenic religious ideas, we can only guess in a hypothetical order.

The figure of the Thracian musician in this tragedy appears in the Muse's mourning over the dead body of his son, the Thracian king Rhesus (vv. 890-982), but in the context of the mysteries he founded and the belief in life after death. She mentions the Thracian origins of Orpheus in connection with the muses, the founding of the Athenian mysteries (Pseudo-Euripid. *Rhesus*, vv. 944, 946), and asks Persephone to free her son from death because of her obligations to Orpheus, although they remain unclear:

(Pseudo-) Euripid., *Rhes.*, 944-946:

And yet we sister Muses do special honor to your city, your land we chiefly haunt; and those dark mysteries with their torch processions were revealed by Orpheus, cousin of this dead man [945] whom you have slain.

Theseus hints at these ritual aspects in his ironic remark to Hippolytus in the tragedy of the same name:

Eurip., *Hipp.*, 952-955:

ἤδη νυν αὖχει καὶ δι' ἀψύχου βορᾶς  
σίτοις καπήλευ' Ὀρφέα τ' ἀνακτ' ἔχων  
βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν  
καπνούς:  
ἐπεὶ γ' ἐλήφθης.



Continue then your confident boasting, take up a diet of greens (ἀψύχου, i.e. meatless, non-breathable food – AN) and play the showman with your food, make Orpheus your lord and engage in mystic rites, holding the vaporings of many books in honor. [955] For you have been found out<sup>39</sup>.

Beyond the dramatic strategies of the passage, there is an important emphasis on the association of the Orpheus' figure with vegetarianism and the distribution of the 'whole bunch of books' attributed to him in Plato's dialogue *The Republic* (Plato, *Resp.*, 364b-e). Fr. Graf suggests that it was these begging priests and soothsayers, who sold 'at the rich men's doors' the magical lead tablets of spells and curses (κατάδεσμοι)<sup>40</sup>, which were widespread in the Hellenic world, as well as the orphic tablets with instructions to the initiates for the journey to the afterlife, containing magic passwords and spells<sup>41</sup>.

Plato criticizes with undisguised irony the begging priests spreading the Orphic texts (*Resp.*, 364 b-c; 364 e – 365 a). He finds occasion elsewhere to express delicately his contempt for 'spell sellers' (*epoidai*; ἐπωιδᾶι) and 'curses sellers' (*katadesmoi*; κατάδεσμοι), who claim to be able to manipulate divine forces<sup>42</sup>. In his dialogue *The Statesman* or *Politician* (*Plt.*, 280f) he introduces for the first time the notion of μαγευτική (τέχνη) in the replica of 'the Stranger', an anonymous philosopher from Elea, as dealing with antidotes and spells:

...καὶ δὴ καὶ τὴν μαγευτικὴν τὴν περὶ  
τὰ ἀλεξιφάρμακα κατ' ἀρχὰς εὐθὺς  
διωρισάμεθα σύμπασαν...

However, he presents Socrates quoting Orpheus as an authority on cosmogony with Homer and acknowledging the tradition that places him among the highest ranks of poets (*Cratylus*, 400c, 402b, *Apology* 41b).

In the extraordinary light of his magical skills, Orpheus will be presented in *The Orphic Argonautica*, where he plays an amazing role of protagonist, placing Medea in the position of a passive and astonished observer. In the remarkable episode of the abduction of Golden fleece he summons the

terrible goddess Hecate. With mysterious spells and magical acts, as if taken from the recipes of the *Magic Papyri*, the insurmountable gates of the fence, where the ever-watching dragon guarded the Golden fleece, opened and the sacred grove appeared before the eyes of the Argonauts.

Orpheus then combined his divine voice with the sounds of his lyre from a turtle shell, plucking the lowest string and summoning the god of sleep to put the ever-watching dragon to sleep. And he immediately obeyed him. So Jason managed to take the Golden fleece and hurried to his ship.

Orpheus's books are scarce mentioned in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC by the comedigrapher Alexis (Athen., 4.164 b – c), in which we can perceive a possible reflection of a tragic prototype on the paradigm of paratragic exemplification. Orpheus' word is alluded to in the song of the chorus of the tragedy *Alcestris* (v. 968), to which the scholiast adds that in some sanctuary of Dionysus in Thracia there were writings of Orpheus on tablets (Schol. ad Eurip., *Hec.*, 1267). This information is associated with a verse preserved by Philochorus in the first book of his *On Divination* (Περὶ μαντικῆς), in which Orpheus shares, that he prophesies, because the truth is in his heart. Evidently, these are predictions written on tablets, as was the tradition in the famous sanctuaries with prophets as in Delphi<sup>43</sup>.

'Aeschylus' in the Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs* (1032–1033) mentions the Thracian musician and singer in a similar ritual context and suggestion, undoubtedly associated with the mystery cult in Athens: Orpheus taught Athenians to worship and refrain from killing, and Musaeus – of treatment of diseases and oracles:

Ὀρφεὺς μὲν γὰρ τελετὰς θ' ἡμῖν  
κατέδειξε φόνων τ' ἀπέχεσθαι,  
Μουσαῖος δ' ἐξακέσεις τε νόσων καὶ  
χρησμούς...

In the lost tragedy *Hypsipyle* (Ὑψιπύλη), possibly created between 411–407 BC, Euripides exploited the myth of the Argonauts, depicting them rowing under the sounds of the Thracian lyre of Orpheus<sup>44</sup>. Fortunately, many fragments and a partially preserved *hypothesis* have been preserved from the work, which allow its more complete reconstruction at least in its first part<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Euripides 1995.

<sup>40</sup> Faraone 1991: 3–32.

<sup>41</sup> Graf 2008: 19.

<sup>42</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 572e; Plato, *Politician*, 280e; see Plato, *1 Alc.* 121e – 22a; cf. Aristotle, *Met.* 14.4.5, 1091b8.

<sup>43</sup> Hdt., 7, 111, 1–2; Lozanova 2019: 137–163.

<sup>44</sup> TrGF frg. 752g.1–17 Nauck; Bond 1963; Wiles 2005: 189–207.

<sup>45</sup> Nauck 1839; *Oxyrynchus Papyrus*, 852.



The involvement of Orpheus in the expedition of Jason and the Argonauts was caused not so much by his musical, but by his magical skills and the supernatural power of his musical performances, charged with the power of mystical *psychagogia* (ψυχαγωγία). *Hypsipyle* is one of the latest works of Euripides and therefore composed very precisely. At the heart of the plot is the mythological precedent for the founding of the Nemean Games. The first part of the drama presents the figure of the heroine and her fate until her exile and life in slavery in Nemea. She is the daughter of Thoas, son of Dionysus and king of the island of Lemnos. The Argonauts stopped and stayed on the island for a while, detained by the Lemnian women, and Hypsipyle gave birth to two sons of Jason, who died and entrusted them to Orpheus to be raised in Thracia. Euneus received musical training, while Thoas was trained in military arts (frg. 759a). The mimetic performance of the character directs the audience to the Orphic *kitharoidia*, a musical aesthetic with Dionysian ritual context in Athens. The Thracian origins of Orpheus and his 'otherness' are clearly defined in the tragedy.

It is known that Aeschylus was also the author of a tragedy *Hypsipyle*, of which nothing but the title has survived (Aeschylus, *Hypsipyle*, frg. 40 Mette: Αἰσχύλος δὲ ἐν Ὑψιπύλῃ ἐν ὅπλοις φησὶν αὐτὰς ἐπελθούσας χειμαζομένοις ἀπειργεῖν, μέχρι λαβεῖν ὄρκον παρ' αὐτῶν ἀποβάντας μιγήσεσθαι αὐταῖς). The theme of the Argonauts' stay on the island of Lemnos was also interpreted by Sophocles in his tragedy *Lemnian Women* (Λημνίαι, frgs. 384-389 Radt), which, according to A. C. Pearson<sup>46</sup>, probably included the mooring of the ship Argo, but not the battle between the Argonauts and the Lemnian women (Σοφοκλῆς δὲ ἐν ταῖς Λημνίαις καὶ μάχην ἰσχυρὰν αὐτοῖς συνάψαι φησὶν; Schol. Ap. Rhod., *Arg.* 1.769-773). Some researchers have suggested that both dramas were satyr plays<sup>47</sup>. Aristophanes in his comedy of the same name probably followed them in paratragic terms<sup>48</sup>. The name of Orpheus is missing in the scarce fragments preserved from the drama of Sophocles and the comedy of Aristophanes. Whether they omitted his figure in the dramaturgical interpretations of the myth, or the later authors and commentators who quoted the dramatic passages, did not find it necessary to mention this detail of the plot, will remain a mystery for a long time.

Again, magical skills are attributed to the Orpheus' word-song in the only surviving satirical

drama *Cyclops* of Euripides (Euripid., *Cycl.*, 645), in which the chorus of satyrs sings about some magic spell of Orpheus, so wonderful that the fiery chief would rise alone to the skull of Polyphemus and would set the one-eyed son of earth on fire:

Euripid., *Cycl.*, 645: ἀλλ' οἶδ' ἐπωδὴν  
Ὀρφέως ἀγαθὴν πάννυ, ὥστ' αὐτόματον  
τὸν δαλὸν ἐς τὸ κρανίον στείχονθ'  
ὑφάπτειν τὸν μονῶπα παῖδα γῆς.

Coryphaeus  
645 ... But I know  
an incantation of Orpheus so wonderful  
that the firebrand  
all on its own will march up to his skull  
and set the one-eyed son of earth on fire.

In such spells seems to reflect an aspect of the use of Orphic poetry in classical Athens as a magical tool, suggesting that these texts influenced mythology at the time. It is possible that this aspect gave rise to the sceptical and even negative attitude towards Orphism, the related religious movement and followers of Orpheus (οἱ ἀμφὶ Ὀρφέα) in classical Athens.

This attitude is perceptible in Theseus's replica to his son Hyppolytus from Euripides' tragedy of the same name (Eurip., *Hipp.*, 952-955), and in a peculiar commentary on Phaedrus in Plato's *The Symposium* (Plato, *Symp.*, 179d).

Similar suggestions can be seen in the verses of Euripides' *Alcestis* (v. 966) and the comments of the scholiast on them about the Thracian tablets that Orpheus' word fulfilled. Perhaps the prejudices caused by these circumstances were the reason why the figure of Orpheus was not placed on the Old Attic stage and its interpretation as inappropriate for a tragic protagonist.

Heraclitus of Ephesus, the earliest ancient Hellenic author, who is said to have mentioned the word *magos* (μάγος), places the term not accidentally in the context of Orphic-Dionysian mysteries. It is preserved fragmentary by Clement of Alexandria in his *Protreptikos* (2, 22, 2) at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. When asked who Heraclitus's prophecy was about, Clement of Alexandria made the following note:

**Heraclitus, DK 12 B 14** (Diels, Kranz 1952) =  
**Clement, *Protreptikos* 22:**  
Ἡράκλειτος ὁ Ἐφέσιος; ὕνκτιπόλοις,  
μάγοις, βάκχοις, λήναις, μύσταις,  
τούτοις ἀπειλεῖ τὰ μετὰ θάνατον, τούτοις

<sup>46</sup> Pearson 1917: 51-56.

<sup>47</sup> Pearson 1917: 52.

<sup>48</sup> Aristophanis 1846: 491-493, frgs. 324-341.

μαντεύεται τὸ πῦρ: 'τὰ γὰρ νομιζόμενα  
κατὰ ἀνθρώπους μυστήρια ἀνιερῶσι  
μυθῶνται.'

Against whom does Heraclitus of Ephesus utter this prophecy? Against 'night-roamers, magicians, Bacchants, Lenaeon revellers and devotees of the mysteries'. These are the people whom he threatens with the penalties that follow death; for these he prophesies the fire. 'For in unholy fashion are they initiated into mysteries customary among men'.<sup>49</sup>

It seems that Heraclitus' expression is a reaction against the begging priests (ἀγύρται, γοηταί, καθαρχαί) who practiced purifying rituals against payment and their private Orphic-Dionysian secret rites, and did not concern what we would have qualified with the literal sense of the word *sorcerer* and *magic*. The same suggestions can be found in the passage of Plato's *The Republic* (364 b-c; 364 e, 365 a) about Orphic begging priests.

During the Antiquity, magic was almost always associated with religious practices of someone else, Other, some foreigner; this is a term distinguishing these practices from the norm i.e., from their *own* practices which are a religion; a means to define Otherness. That was also the line of evolution of the concept of magic from the name of a group of foreign priests μάγοι. There are also two terms defining the professional practitioners of sorcery: *magoi* (μάγοι) and charmers/soothsayers (γόητες)<sup>50</sup>.

The word μάγος (*magus*) appeared in the ancient Greek language usually associated with the notion of a 'priest', i.e., religious professionals, particularly specialised in prophesying and soothsaying; interpretation of dreams<sup>51</sup> and omens<sup>52</sup>; possessing knowledge about the divine<sup>53</sup>, but also indicating suspicious actions of foreigners<sup>54</sup>.

Aristotle in his reflections on the means of achieving a good tragedy in *Poetics* (1452b-1453a<sup>55</sup>) explicitly believes that a perfect tragedy should

imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation.

However, a good tragedy should not be shown on stage:

– the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity; it merely shocks us;

– nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear.

– nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes, – that of a man who is not eminently good and just, – yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.

[1453a] Nor again the passing of a thoroughly bad man from good fortune to bad fortune. Such a structure might satisfy our feelings but it arouses neither pity nor fear, the one being for the man who does not deserve his misfortune and the other for the man who is like ourselves – pity for the undeserved misfortune, fear for the man like ourselves – so that the result will arouse neither pity nor fear.

In the successful plot the change must be from good to bad fortune, and it must not be due to villainy but to some great fault of the protagonist, or of one who is better rather than worse<sup>56</sup>, and who has somehow affected the deity (albeit unconsciously) with some action. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous. This happens with famous mythological and dramatic characters such as Lycurgus, Pentheus, Tamyris, Phineus, but only once in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC – with Orpheus.

Clarifying the feelings of pity and fear<sup>57</sup>, which are manifested towards an innocent or considered innocent by the viewer character, is possible in the context of the problem of apparent

<sup>49</sup> Clement of Alexandria 1919.

<sup>50</sup> Graf 1994: 20-28; Rives 2002: 270-90.

<sup>51</sup> Hdt. 1.107-8, 1.120, 7.19; Dinon *FGrHist* 690 F 10 = Cicero, *Div.* 1.46.

<sup>52</sup> Hdt. 7.37.

<sup>53</sup> Hdt. 1.132, 7.43, 7.113; Xenophon, *Cyr.* 4.5.14, 7.5.57, 8.1.23, 8.3.11.

<sup>54</sup> Xanthus *FGrHist* 765 F 31 = Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.2.11.1; Sotion frg. 36 Wehrli = Diog. Laert. 1.7; Hdt. 1.140; Strabo, 15.3.20; see. Nock 1933: 164-189 = Nock 1972: 308-324; Nock 1972: 516-526; Bremmer 2008: 235-248; Kingsley 1995: 173-210.

<sup>55</sup> Aristotle 1932.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle 1932.

<sup>57</sup> Dirmeier 1940: 81-92; Schadewaldt 1955: 129-171.

undeserved suffering, in the context of the agonal discourse between innocence and guilt, good and evil, crime and sin. Defining the last two categories is always difficult. The crime is related to behavior according to some norms determined by a specific community; it is of a public nature and as such is related to a specific cultural and historical assessment and criteria.

Sin as thinking-behavior towards the deity is associated as neglecting ritual obligations that embody man's desire to be free from *original sin*. Even the Ten Commandments confirm that secular crime stems from ritual transgressions. Sin, after all, is related to the transgression of moral / ritual obligations to the Deity. However, when sin and crime are violations of contradictory norms or requirements, the problematic situation of the

borderline between fundamentally different cultures, perceived as thinking-behavior, arises<sup>58</sup>.

The figure of Orpheus the Thracian and the mythological events associated with him do not find a place in this dramaturgical model. These circumstances and regularities would explain to some extent why this figure in ancient dramatic poetry in ancient dramatic poetry, charged with magical supernatural skills and connotations of otherness, is treated scantily and fragmentary as inappropriate for tragic interpretation except in comparative terms. Her transformations in the following epochs will inscribe her in the mythologem of breaking the oath before the deities of the Underworld, which will generate the sinister but non-tragic (according to Aristotle's poetics) end of the singer.

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<sup>58</sup> *Lozanova* 2003: 75-80.

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## Трагическият Орфей. Орфей на сцената на староатическия театър

Ваня Лозанова-Станчева

Статията предлага анализ на сведенията за фигурата на Орфей на сцената на староатическия театър през 5. в. пр.Хр. Те са систематизирани в няколко групи около митологичните мотиви, характеризиращи тракийския музикант: магическата сила на Орфеевото слово-песен; Орфей, омагьосващ дивите животни, който е тясно асоцииран с мита за аргонавтите.

В древността магията почти винаги е била асоциирана в негативен план с религиозни практики на някой Друг, някой чужденец. Това е термин, който разграничава тези практики от нормата, и средство за дефиниране на Другостта, въплътена във фигурата на Орфей. По тази линия се развива резервираното и дори негативно отношение към орфизма и свързаното с това религиозно движение в класическа Атина.

Тези характеристики трансформират фигурата на тракиеца в несъответстваща на каноните на хубавата трагедия, дефинирани от Аристотел в неговата *Поетика*, и обясняват защо на сцената на староатическия театър тя се появява несистемно и в асоциативен план.

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