

Ovid's Orpheus and the Uses of Parody

Scholarly consensus (e.g., Otis 1970; Leach 1974; Anderson 1982; Neumeister 1986; Segal 1989; Spencer 1997) holds that the story of Orpheus as Ovid tells it in the *Metamorphoses* (10.1-147, 11.1-84) is a parody of Virgil's famous narrative at the end of the *Georgics* (G. 4.453-527), but discussions of parody in this episode have done little more than call Ovid's *Orpheus* (shorthand for "the story of Orpheus") "parody" and see how Ovid changes his Virgilian model. My paper will explain what parody accomplishes and why Ovid engages in it. Taking a Bloomian approach, I see the function of parody as twofold (Bloom 1997 [1973]). First, parody defends the poet against excessive influence by avoiding direct competition with the model. We see this avoidance repeatedly in Ovid's narrative: Ovid eliminates or deflates the parts of the story that Virgil tells most brilliantly and expands the parts that Virgil tells briefly or not at all. Second, parody, which is usually critical to varying degrees, allows the later poet to contest the poetic authority of the precursor by finding some flaw in the precursor's work and at the same time to lay claim to authority of his own.

Drawing in particular on the work of Hutcheon 2000, Rose 1993, and Genette 1997, my paper will define "parody," something which previous discussions of this episode have failed to do, and then provide a few examples of Ovid's changes to Virgil in order to establish that parody is in fact what Ovid is engaged in and what the nature and tone of his parody are. The parody is ironic and playful and tends to deflate moments of high pathos in Virgil by narrating them perfunctorily and by transferring Virgil's grand rhetoric, which Virgil uses to mark moments of high emotion, to incongruous contexts in the story. For instance, when Orpheus is lamenting Eurydice for the first time, Virgil's narrator (Proteus) apostrophizes her with anaphora (G. 4.464-66):

ipse [Orpheus] cava solans aegrum testitudine amorem

te, dulcis coniunx, **te** solo in litore secum,

te veniente die, **te** decente canebat.

Ovid reduces his account of Orpheus' grief to the terse *quam* [Eurydice] *satis ad superas postquam Rhodopeius auras / deflevit vates* (Met. 10.11-12). With Virgil's rhetoric goes his pathos.

This same Virgilian passage also figures in an instance of Ovid's textual recycling, for Ovid uses Virgil's apostrophizing and anaphoric *tes* to express nature's lamentation for Orpheus (Met. 11.44-49):

Te maestae volucres, Orpheu, te turba ferarum,

te rigidi silices, **te** carmina saepe secutae

fleverunt silvae, positis **te** frondibus arbor

tonsa comas luxit; lacrimis quoque flumina dicunt

increvisse suis, obstrusaque carbasa pullo

Naides et Dryades passoque habuisse capillos.

Despite the nature of the situation, Orpheus' death by dismemberment and the lamentation for him, this passage is ironic, playful, and deflating, because Ovid's apostrophizing expresses the grief of birds, beasts, rocks, and trees rather than that of Eurydice's husband. The incongruity of such a picture makes it mildly comic, especially considering that Ovid combines these personifications with the loftiest of styles and registers.

Ovid's *quam satis* etc. is one of those instances in which Ovid avoids trying to match or outdo Virgil on Virgil's terms. Another noteworthy instance is Ovid's reduction of Eurydice's

famous parting speech to Orpheus after he has looked back (*illa 'quis et me' inquit 'miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu, / quis tantus furor?' etc. G. 4.494-98*) to a mere *vale* (*Met.* 10.62). While allowing Ovid to avoid competing on Virgil's terms, which is a no-win situation, because no matter how well Ovid competes, the competition would still be on Virgil's terms, parody provides its own reason for this avoidance: it implicitly rejects the model as somehow flawed. The parodist knows more or better than the precursor.

Works Cited

- Anderson, W. S. (1982). The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid. In J. Warden (Ed.), *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth* (pp. 25-50). Toronto: U of Toronto P.
- Bloom, H. (1997 [1973]). *The Anxiety of Influence* (2nd ed.). Oxford: OUP.
- Galinsky, K. (1975). *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Berkeley: U of California C.
- Genette, G. (1997 [1982]). *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. (C. Newman, & C. Doubinsky, Trans.) Lincoln: U of Nebraska P.
- Hutcheon, L. (2000 [1985]). *A Theory of Parody*. Urbana: U of Illinois P.
- Leach, E. W. (1974). Ekphrasis and the Theme of Artistic Failure in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. *Ramus*, 3, 102-42.
- Neumeister, C. (1986). Orpheus und Eurydike: Eine Vergil-Parodie Ovids. *WJA*, 12, 169-81.
- Otis, B. (1970). *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Rose, M. A. (1993). *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Segal, C. (1989). *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Spencer, R. A. (1997). *Contrast as Narrative Technique in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen.