

**“We Know Your Tricks, Jupiter”:
Offenbach’s Disparagement of Love in *Orphée aux Enfers***

by Annie Tvetenstrand ‘16
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In Jacques Offenbach’s irreverent 1858 opera, *Orphée aux Enfers*, Orpheus and Eurydice are a bickering and hateful married couple that can’t wait to be rid of each other, and Olympus is a world rife with adultery and moral looseness. Offenbach is widely acknowledged as the father of operetta: his work served as a predecessor to many future cheeky operatic parodies. Despite recognition of the opera’s influence in the musical world, relatively little has been written on the opera’s radical interpretation of the Orpheus myth itself. While Offenbach and librettist Hector-Jonathan Crémieux set out to parody Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), they do so through returning to ancient interpretations of the myth, integrating still more mythology where Gluck pared his opera down to its bare elements. *Orphée aux Enfers* presents a disparaging view of love through two major interpretive choices: firstly, it introduces the character of Public Opinion, who motivates the plot in the absence of Orpheus and Eurydice’s love, and secondly, it includes a wide swath of examples of Jupiter’s infidelity, calling into question the sustainability of love—specifically, heterosexual love—throughout a marriage. *Orphée aux Enfers*’s view of love is far more cynical and less reverent than the view put forth by previous operatic interpretations of classical myths. In this way, *Orphée aux Enfers* is Ovidian in tone, juxtaposing high and low culture and presenting ideals only to knock them off their pedestals.

Although Orpheus is absent from the works of Homer and Hesiod, he was a popular figure during the lyric period: Pindar names Orpheus as the bard aboard the Argonaut (*Pyth.* iv.

315. s. 176). Aeschylus mentions his power over trees (*Ag.* 1612-3), and Euripides refers to Orpheus a great deal, discussing his relationship with the muses and his power over nature (*Rhes.* 944-6). Of the ancient sources, however, only Virgil and Ovid offer a complete account of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: Virgil in book 4 of the *Georgics*, and Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*.

In Ovid's account of the myth in the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus and Eurydice's wedding day is interrupted by tragedy: Eurydice is bitten by a snake and perishes. The mourning Orpheus travels to the underworld and makes a musical and vocal appeal to Proserpina and Pluto, asking for his wife to be returned to the world of the living. He explains that because of his love for her, he is unable to endure life without her. The gods are moved to tears by his plea and allow him to lead Eurydice back to life on one condition: as he leaves the underworld, he cannot look back to see her. As they approach the upper world, he turns back, anxious that she might slip and fall, and she evaporates with a single "Farewell." In second mourning, Orpheus swears off women and becomes interested in young men instead. He sits on a wooded hill, playing his lyre and singing tales of other mythological figures (X.1-857).¹ However, a group of furious Maenads finds him on the hill. Angered at his rejection of women, the Maenads attack him and sparagmostically tear him to pieces. The story has a strangely peaceful ending, as Orpheus rejoins Eurydice in the underworld where they spend their days walking together (Ov. *Met.* XI.1-94). It seems to be a somewhat passionless existence, but it is refreshingly devoid of the violence and danger that sent both of them to their deaths.

When opera was first being developed in Italy in the early 17th century, composers gravitated towards classical themes. The classical world was in vogue then, and the ambiguity

¹ Ovid, and Charles Martin, *Metamorphoses* (New York: W.W. Norton &, 2004).

² Orrey, Leslie, *A Concise History of Opera* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1972), 14.

³ Orrey, *History of Opera*, 63.

⁴ Ewans, Michael, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England:

surrounding the production of plays in antiquity made classical enthusiasts yearn for representations of myth on the stage: the operatic chorus lent itself particularly well as an analogue to the Greek chorus. Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607) is among the earliest operas and was soon followed by a slew of other operas focusing on classical themes, several of them also about Orpheus.² Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), with a libretto by Ranieri de' Calzabigi, followed in the tradition of classically themed operas, but represented a departure from the rest of 18th century opera. Gluck sought to bring opera to a "beautiful simplicity" in his work, focusing on simple and clear melodies rather than showiness that characterized the popular contemporary *opera seria* style.³

According to Michael Ewans, Gluck saw Greek tragedy as particularly conducive to the virtue of clarity: while *Orfeo* was not based on an ancient tragedy, Gluck's later operas interpreted several of Euripides' plays. Ewans characterizes Greek tragedy as "economical," referring to the pared down plots devoid of subplots and dozens of secondary characters.⁴ *Orfeo ed Euridice* follows in a similar vein: the opera features only three named characters—Orpheus, Eurydice, and Amor—and deliberately omits secondary characters found in ancient interpretations of the myth, even major figures such as Proserpina and Pluto. Additionally, Gluck trimmed excessive vocal displays, further simplifying his work. Gluck and Calzabigi play up the theatrical tragic elements of the myth in its interpretation. Ewans cites Gluck, along with Wagner and Tippett, as tapping into Greek tragedy as a way to break free from a "mediocre surrounding

² Orrey, Leslie, *A Concise History of Opera* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1972), 14.

³ Orrey, *History of Opera*, 63.

⁴ Ewans, Michael, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007), 2.

culture.”⁵ The term “mediocrity” implies an impulse to move towards high culture, to elevate oneself above a mass of lesser or unworthy artists.

Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* was Offenbach’s primary target when he set about to write *Orphée aux Enfers* nearly a century later. *Orphée aux Enfers* was not merely a new interpretation of an old myth, but a reaction against and synthesis of a variety of influences. Offenbach demonstrates a keen ear and fluency with contemporary Parisian culture, reflecting the potpourri of art that characterized the shift from the 18th to 19th century, a time of upheaval in the music world.⁶ Precipitated by capitalism, a rift was growing between “commercial” and “serious” art.⁷ As a result, the art and music world splintered into a large variety of genres, creating the need for artists to specialize: no longer could one singular work or artist embody all, or even the majority of the popular styles of the day.⁸ Offenbach studied and wrote in the midst of many styles of music: in addition to displaying a literacy with operatic history, his work shows the influence of vaudeville productions and *cafés-concerts*, early music halls that were known for their “catchy” and “danceable” music.⁹ The juxtaposition of styles aids the opera in its satire: *Orphée aux Enfers* lampoons any impulse towards high culture. The mockery is well demonstrated in a successful advertising ploy: when one critic called *Orphée* “a profanation of holy and glorious antiquity,” Offenbach and Crémieux integrated his words into a speech by Pluto in the opera. The move was strategic, and Paris, excited by the gossip, rushed to the theater.¹⁰ The opera drives home the point that no one and nothing--especially not love--is above judgement.

⁵ Ewans, *Opera from the Greek*, 1.

⁶ Traubner, Richard, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 2003), 6.

⁷ Scott, Derek B, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

⁸ Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis*, 4.

⁹ Traubner, *Operetta*, 10.

¹⁰ Traubner, *Operetta*, 35.

Although *Orfeo ed Euridice* and Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers* tackle the same source text, they promote radically different ideologies. Lawrence Venuti uses the term "interpretants" to describe the interpretive choices a creator makes when developing an adaptation of a source text, resulting in the conveyance of one or more particular ideologies.¹¹ While Gluck and Calzabigi's interpretants point to the purity and high cultural aspects of the myth, aligning it more closely with Greek tragedy, Offenbach and Cremieux's interpretants degrade the ideal of love and mock high society. Venuti's methodology does not focus on assessing the adaptation's fidelity to the source material: rather, it prioritizes the examination of these interpretants for their role in the construction of meaning. As such, Venuti's methodology is particularly useful when examining the dramatic way that *Orphée aux Enfers* transforms the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Orphée aux Enfers begins with the figure of Public Opinion introducing herself. Eurydice enters, gathering flowers for her lover, the shepherd Aristeus (Act I, Verses of the Pretty Shepherd). Orpheus, seeking out his *own* secret lover, finds and chastises her. Orpheus is a vain violin virtuoso, and as punishment, he plays his latest composition for her, knowing that she hates hearing him play. When Eurydice declares that she is leaving him for Aristeus, Orpheus threatens to plan a trap for him (Act I, Concerto Duet). Eurydice warns Aristeus of the danger, but her warning is unnecessary: Aristeus is, in fact, the god Pluto in disguise. When Pluto reveals himself to Eurydice, she welcomes the idea of an adventure with her new lover and gladly dies (Act I, Melodrama). Orpheus learns of her death from a note she scrawled ("I'm leaving home because I'm dead") and he rejoices, but his glee is cut short: Public Opinion arrives to compel him to beg the gods to return his wife. Orpheus quickly relents (Act I, Finale).

¹¹ Venuti, Lawrence. "Adaptation, Translation, Critique." *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (2007): 25-43.

Meanwhile, all of the gods are bored on Mount Olympus. Jupiter arrives and chastises them all for their sexual indiscretions, at which they bristle and call him out for his hypocrisy (Act II, Uprising Chorus). Orpheus arrives, shoved along by Public Opinion, and appeals to the gods for his wife's return. The gods are moved by his words and music, and they all take a trip to the underworld to rescue Eurydice, where they dance the "Infernal Galop," better known to a modern audience as the "Can-Can" (Act IV, Infernal Minuet and Galop). Upon meeting, Jupiter and Eurydice have become infatuated with each other, and Jupiter imposes the condition that Orpheus must not look behind him as he leads her from the underworld. He nearly succeeds, but Jupiter throws a lightning bolt and the startled Orpheus turns around, losing Eurydice and infuriating Public Opinion. Jupiter transforms Eurydice into a bacchante, and the opera ends with Eurydice pledging her devotion to Bacchus and singing in praise of intoxication as the party thunders on (Act IV, Finale).

While Gluck's Orpheus was aided in his search for Eurydice by the powerful figure of Amor, Offenbach's was dragged down to the underworld by Public Opinion. This substitution of one powerful figure for another emphasizes the complete lack of affection between the married couple: Orpheus is compelled to seek his wife by purely external circumstances. He acts in spite of his hatred for his wife, not because of his love. Public Opinion is an imposing presence: sung by a mezzo-soprano, her voice stands out from those of the other singers and she commands the fear and respect of mortals and gods alike.

Public Opinion introduces herself as "an improvement on the chorus of ancient theater": as she puts it, rather than sit idly by and comment on the action going on, she throws herself into the fray, embodying and acting upon the desires of the public (Act I, Shepherds' Chorus). Her self-comparison to the chorus places the opera in the context of Greek tragedy. However, in

improving upon the chorus, Public Opinion has become an entirely different figure. While the choruses in Greek tragedy are almost purely reactive, Public Opinion is a self-driven character. She says that she is carrying out the will of the public, but as the public is not represented by any figure in the opera, she is, for all intents and purposes, a lone agent. None of the main characters are on her side: she acts against the wishes of Orpheus, Eurydice, Jupiter, and Pluto.

Public Opinion's power over Orpheus works to desecrate love in two main interactions. The first interaction occurs just after Orpheus learns of Eurydice's death. After chastising him for his lack of devotion towards his deceased wife, she declares that honor should come before love, and the chorus echoes her decree (Act I, Finale). Public Opinion's voice pierces and impels. Orpheus barely attempts to resist Public Opinion: upon realizing his fate, he cries that honor is playing a trick on him, and dissolves into tears: "Me joue un vilain tour-oh-oh-oh..."¹² His indignation rapidly turns to despair and then to resignation. Public Opinion's proclamation of "Honor before love" seems to give the journey a more noble purpose, but Orpheus' apparent reluctance comically undercuts the valor of the intent.

The second desecration of love comes when Orpheus arrives before the gods to plea for Eurydice's return. The scene unfolds with a tediously long march as the gods repeatedly sing "Il approche!" in anticipation (Act II, Finale). Orpheus expresses his trepidation, but Public Opinion compels him forward with menacing punctuations of "Avance! Avance! Obéis-moi!" sung in declarative, descending arpeggios. When Orpheus finally reaches Jupiter, he asks Public Opinion once more if he really has to carry through with the task, at which she commands him to speak. Orpheus' plea to the gods is sung to the famous melody that Gluck's Orpheus sings in lament over his Eurydice: "Che farò senza Euridice."¹³ The melody would have been instantly

¹² Dessay, Natalie. *Orphée Aux Enfers*. Orchestra De L'Opéra National De Lyon. EMI Records Ltd., 1998, CD.

¹³ Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis*, 101.

recognizable to any audience of the time, and the direct musical reference heightens the humor of the scene. Compared to Gluck's impassioned and grief-stricken Orpheus, Offenbach's Orpheus is a whiny, weak, and pliable figure.¹⁴ While Gluck's Orpheus goes on to repeat her name over and over again, Offenbach's Orpheus cannot bear to spit out more than a single sentence in praise of his Eurydice, and he begins to play Gluck's melody on his violin. But this is enough for the gods. Whether they are gullible and easily moved by his false plea or simply bored and looking for an excuse to embark on a journey to the underworld, it is unclear. In any case, Orpheus' false expression of love for Eurydice is sufficient to propel the plot forward. In both the Gluck and Ovid, the sheer monumentality of Orpheus' task emphasizes the depths of his love, but by converting love to Public Opinion, Offenbach frames Orpheus' journey as one of vanity and cowardice. He doesn't have the power to stand up to Public Opinion, fearful of what her condemnation of him would do to his reputation.

The 1997 Théâtre de la Monnaie Brussels production of *Orphée aux Enfers* portrays Public Opinion as a cleaning woman, equipped with a toilet brush and sporting a bad perm.¹⁵ It is clear she is wearing a fat suit, although it is poorly done: the meager costuming is intended to heighten the humor of her appearance. She fumbles her way through the first row of audience members and goose-steps up and down the aisles as she urges him to march with her to the underworld. Even though she is a powerful force, she is one that the audience is encouraged to laugh at: the fact that such a bumbling figure can strike such fear into the hearts of man and god heightens the irony of the situation.

While Offenbach and Crémieux alter the myth of Orpheus from its most common versions, they include additional mythological stories, particularly ones that center around

¹⁴ Traubner, *Operetta*, 39.

¹⁵ *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Directed by Herbert Wernicke. Performed by Alexandru Badea and Elizabeth Vidal. Brussels: Image Entertainment, 1997. DVD.

Jupiter's affairs. At the opening of Act II, the gods are tired, bored, and snippy: when Jupiter scolds them for their bad behavior, several goddesses and gods jump down his throat to criticize him. Diana, Venus, Minerva, and Cupid use a slew of textual evidence to humiliate Jupiter (Act II, The Metamorphoses Rondo).¹⁶ Minerva begins by accusing Jupiter of seducing Alcmena by disguising himself as her husband. Diana follows up by reminding him of his seduction of Europa by turning into a bull. Cupid brings up Danaë and Jupiter's transformation into a golden rain, and Venus claims that she witnessed Jupiter take advantage of Leda through his transformation into a swan. Each ends his or her presentation of evidence with sharp laughter and the words, "Don't act so good-goody: we know about your tricks, Jupiter!" Though brief, each of their displays of evidence is backed up by at least one of Ovid's texts, in addition to a variety of other ancient sources: the story of Alcmena is related in Ovid's *Amores* (i.13.45), and the tales of Europa, Danaë, and Leda are all mentioned in his *Metamorphoses* (ii.1171-1204; vi.153-8). By sticking to the facts and presenting a variety of examples, Minerva, Diana, Cupid, and Venus frame Jupiter's actions as undeniable indications of his character. Pluto finishes the song by drawing attention to the metamorphic aspects of Jupiter's indiscretions, stating that because Jupiter is too ugly to find someone in his own form, he needs to transform himself in order to seduce women.

The accusations mirror Ovid's text not only in content, but also in form. They follow the story-within-a-story format of the *Metamorphoses*. The goddesses' anecdotes about Jupiter are amusing stories in their own right, but placed in the context of their attack on Jupiter, they underscore his hypocrisy, undermining the patriarchal figure and the ideal of fidelity in love. In the same way, Ovid's nested stories play off of each other, supporting a larger point or

¹⁶ The part of Cupid is written for a soprano and performed by a woman: while the character of Cupid is still presented as male, the attacks on Jupiter are uniformly high in pitch, giving the music a feminine character.

underscoring tensions within another story. Ovid's framing of the Orpheus myth illuminates aspects of the story, calling into question the ideal of pure heterosexual love and, with it, normative gender relations.

Ovid precedes the myth of Orpheus with the love story of Iphis and Ianthe: Iphis, born a girl but secretly raised as a boy, falls in love with Ianthe. As the wedding approaches, she prays to become a man, and her prayers are answered. When Orpheus sings after Eurydice's death, his songs relate several myths. The first song describes how Jupiter, having been taken with lust for Ganymede, transforms himself into an eagle and steals him away to Olympus, where, "in spite of Juno's objections," he is appointed to be Jupiter's servant (X.213-9). The next song focuses on Hyacinthus, continuing a theme in *Metamorphoses* of Apollo's continual failures as a lover. While his pursuit of the unwilling Daphne is perhaps the most famous example, his romance with Hyacinthus ends similarly unsatisfactorily (but also somewhat comically): Hyacinthus is killed by a stray discus thrown by Apollo (X.220-283). Orpheus' next song describes how Pygmalion, disgusted with the "sordid indecency" (X.312) of women, sets out to create the ideal woman, sculpting a statue out of ivory. He kisses and strokes this statue, seeing the inert and unresponsive statue as the nearly perfect lover. Pygmalion prays to Venus for a wife like his statue, and Venus brings the statue to life to fulfill his request (X.316-68).

These stories question the traditional view of devoted love that the Orpheus myth alone proposes. Jupiter's indiscretions with Ganymede point to the fallibility of marital love. This myth indicates not only Jupiter's infidelity towards Juno and the failure of their love to sustain their marriage, but also his indiscretion: Jupiter has a reputation for his frequent and poorly concealed affairs. The pederastic relationships in the tales of both Ganymede and Hyacinthus indicate an imperfect alternative to perfect heterosexual love: neither myth ends wholly satisfactorily. The

myth of Pygmalion also shows anxieties regarding the sustainability of ideal love. Pygmalion's veneration of the silent and immobile statue speaks volumes about his lack of faith in a real, living woman to serve as an adequate wife. He does not have trust in the viability of natural-born love. Additionally, the myths of Ianthé and Pygmalion, the only stories with unambiguously happy endings, underscore the impossible lengths required to achieve the ideal heterosexual love: both pairs of lovers required divine intervention.

Both the content and nested form of the Orpheus myths in the *Metamorphoses* and *Orphée aux Enfers* serve to call into question the strength of love as asserted in the Orpheus myth alone. The *Metamorphoses* juxtaposes the myth with dissenting stories, and *Orphée aux Enfers* places the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice in the context of real, unglamorous, married life. The myth of Orpheus in the *Metamorphoses* is not experienced in isolation: rather, it is encompassed by a variety of other myths and, in turn, encompasses several myths itself. The songs Orpheus sings point to the impossibility of a natural, true, perfect love, and are similar in theme to the goddesses' accusations against Jupiter. While Jupiter insists that the gods should behave themselves appropriately, they argue that appropriate behavior is nowhere to be found on Olympus or, for that matter, in the entirety of the mortal world. *Orphée aux Enfers* also posits a theory of why marriage exists if lasting love does not: the fear of Public Opinion maintains relationships where affection fails. By showing venerated gods and mortals falling prey to their passions, *Orphée aux Enfers* recontextualizes the Orpheus myth into a relatable, realistic, and jaded satire, showing the audience the humorously human flaws in heroes and divinity alike.

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