

2022

## The Underworld's Influence on Vergil's Male Protagonists, Aeneas and Orpheus

Stacey Kaliabakos

*College of the Holy Cross*, [akalia23@g.holycross.edu](mailto:akalia23@g.holycross.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kaliabakos, Stacey (2022) "The Underworld's Influence on Vergil's Male Protagonists, Aeneas and Orpheus," *Parnassus: Classical Journal*: Vol. 8, Article 4.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j/vol8/iss1/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics Department at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Parnassus: Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

## The Underworld's Influence on Vergil's Male Protagonists, Aeneas and Orpheus

*“Si potuit manis accersere coniugis Orpheus / Threicia fretus cithara fidibusue canoris,”*<sup>1</sup>

said Aeneas to Apollo's Sibyl, his predestined guide on his journey through Vergil's Underworld. These lines are more significant than a mere evocation of an ancient myth-- Orpheus, another one of Vergil's protagonists, serves as a stark reminder of loss, pain, and suffering that Aeneas simultaneously experiences and escapes throughout *the Aeneid*. Both of these characters have their stories and trajectories transformed for the better or for worse by their time in the Underworld. On the one hand, Aeneas emerges from the ivory gates of the Underworld understanding his destiny as the founder and father of Rome. On the other, Orpheus emerges as a failure, a prophet who was blind to his own fate, succumbing to mourning his deceased lover, fated to die in violence. The intriguing parallels between Orpheus and Aeneas have enamored Classicists for years, and with good reason. It is indubitable that Vergil has used the Underworld to mark the divergent turning points in the stories of Aeneas and Orpheus and to also emphasize that while on the surface they may be similar, the two men are, in fact, quite different.

In Vergil's Underworld, the “ethical scores” of the dead-- or even those who are passing through-- are settled.<sup>2</sup> The people who have done good deeds in their lifetimes attain their

<sup>1</sup> “If Orpheus brought out his dead wife's spirit / With melting sounds strummed on his Thracian lyre” (*Aeneid VI*, 119-120), translation by Sarah Ruden.

<sup>2</sup> <https://louisecharente.wordpress.com/2013/06/25/virgil-and-the-underworld/>

coveted beautiful afterlives and happy endings in Elysium. On the other hand, those that have done evil in their lives are physically punished for eternity. Vergil is able to establish what his Underworld looks like and how it functions in his writings by building upon Roman theological

ideas regarding their gods in addition to originally Greek philosophies. After Vergil crafted this specific Underworld, it became the normalized version of it, especially in the west, and has even been adopted into conventional Christian theology and art.<sup>3</sup> The idea of the afterlife as a place to take care of ethical scores is very powerful, and Vergil's notion of this has transcended through the ensuing millennia. We as readers can see the importance of ethics and its ties to predestination in the Underworld in the cases of both Aeneas and Orpheus.

Aeneas's journey to and through the Underworld in Book VI can be split into three parts: Aeneas' arrival at Cumae and preparations for his descent into the Underworld (lines 1-263); his actual journey through the Underworld to Elysium (lines 264-678); and his encounter with Anchises, when he discusses what lies beyond the grave and how a line of great future Roman heroes display the inevitable splendor and influence of Rome (lines 679-901).<sup>4</sup> With the encouragement of the Sibyl and having picked the necessary golden bough, he traverses the River Styx on Charon's boat. Afterwards, Aeneas enters what is known as the realm of Limbo, where we can see those who endured untimely deaths, such as infants, people who were unjustly condemned to die, suicides, and those who died in the name of love. It is here where he meets Dido, the once beautiful and powerful queen reduced to a mere shade of what she was in life.

Aeneas is shocked upon finding out that Dido is dead. Still experiencing bitter love for the Phoenician Queen, he calls out to her, saying:

“infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo

<sup>3</sup> <https://mirabiledictu.org/2018/02/18/our-winter-of-the-aeneid-the-underworld-and-twin-gates-in-book-vi/>

<sup>4</sup> Ganiban, Randall T. *Vergil Aeneid Books 1-6*.

venerat extinctam ferroque extrema secutam?

funeris heu tibi causa fui? per sidera iuro,  
per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,  
inuitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi.  
sed me iussa deum, quae nunc has ire per umbras,  
per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam,  
imperiiis egere suis; nec credere quivi  
hunc tantum tibi me discessu ferre dolorem.  
siste gradum teque aspectu ne subtrahe nostro.  
quem fugis? extremum fato quod te adloquor hoc est.”<sup>5</sup>

(Book VI, 456-467)

Aeneas begins his speech by addressing the deceased queen as “infelix,” or “unlucky” Dido. It is interesting that the hero utilizes this word first in his speech. A man not particularly known for his ability as an orator, Aeneas may be unaware of how insensitive he seems here, since he himself is the root of Dido’s unhappiness. The Trojan goes on to ask if he had actually been the cause of her death-- another relatively abrasive question. What possible reason, other than the sudden and initially unapologetic abandonment by her lover, could have driven Dido into such a devastating act as suicide? Additionally, he even goes on to attempt to excuse himself from any blame, saying that his destiny forced him to leave and that the fates essentially were responsible for her death. Although it may seem that Aeneas does, to a certain extent, have genuine concerns

<sup>5</sup> “Poor Dido, then the messenger was right-- you stabbed yourself and brought about your own end? And it was my fault? By the stars, the high gods, and any truth below the earth: my queen, it was against my will I left your country, and by the orders of the gods, who now compel me to pass through this shadowed squalor, these depths of night. No, I did not believe that I would bring you so much pain by leaving. Stay here-- don’t back away, but let me see you. Who are you running from? Fate gives me this last chance to speak to you.” (*Aeneid VI*, 456-467), translation by Sarah Ruden.

for Dido's well-being, it should have been at the front of his mind to maintain a tactful and respectful manner towards Dido's evident emotional turbulence in this situation ("illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat / nec magis incepto vultum sermone movetur").<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that Aeneas should-- and must-- carry much of the blame for Dido's suicide. Using his "destiny" as a pardon is not what a true hero should do. Finally, almost at the end of his address, Aeneas gives Dido several direct commands, telling her to stop and stay with him. Rather than commanding her in this bitter moment with such rashness, it probably would have been better for him to use more soothing or kind words so that they could possibly have a productive conversation. I would argue that Vergil has Aeneas speak to Dido the way he does in order to highlight that Aeneas is used to commanding others (in a militant sense) with confidence. This is his folly-- Dido is not just another one of his companions, she is (in her mind) his wife. A less intense approach could have involved a more delicate appeal to her emotions. After Dido's refusal to answer him and her return to Sychaeus, a relatively saddened Aeneas continues on his journey, quickly forgetting Dido and her fate. Would someone who was truly in love give up so easily?

Orpheus and Eurydice arguably endure an even more tragic fate than the mainstream ill-fated lovers, Romeo and Juliet. In *Georgics IV*, Vergil elects to detail the heart wrenching myth in his own words, his rendition only superseded in fame by perhaps Ovid's version of the tale. Orpheus and Eurydice were a happily married couple; however, Eurydice was fated by the gods to live a short life. While running along a river bank, a serpent attacked and bit the young woman, killing her with its poison shortly thereafter. Orpheus, consumed by grief, turned to the lyre and his gift of music, bestowed to him by his father, Apollo, and mourned every day for his beloved. Unable to bear his pain, however, he decided to journey to the Underworld to strike a

<sup>6</sup> "Her eyes stayed on the ground, her face averted, as changeless in expression, while he spoke" (*Aeneid VI*, 469-470), translation by Sarah Ruden

deal with the god of the dead. Using his formidable musical skills, Orpheus was able to convince him to allow Eurydice back to the human world, but under one condition, demanded by Proserpina: he was not to look back at her, or else all of his efforts to get her back would be fruitless. Their journey back home went well, up until they were nearly to their destination-- a “madness” overtook Orpheus, and, distrustful of the promise the gods had made, he looked back at Eurydice. Crying out to him, she lamented his poor choice, and was taken back to the depths of the Underworld. Orpheus tried to cross back over through the River Styx, but was not allowed to. Devastated by his failure, he lived the rest of his life in misery, eventually succumbing to death by the hands of Bacchus’ maddened Maenads.<sup>7</sup>

It is said that perhaps Vergil was the original author who put the devastating twist-- the backwards glance-- in his telling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth:

“Vergil’s version of the Orpheus story is unlikely to have been canonical at the time of the composition of the *Georgics*... In portraying Orpheus failing at the eleventh hour, Vergil seems to be following a little-known variant of the myth, if not rewriting the story completely.”<sup>8</sup>

But why would Vergil do this? At the moment when Orpheus-- a man who, to our knowledge, has made no transgressions that would warrant such a devastating end to his life-- has successfully traversed the Underworld twice over to take back his wife, he makes one small error that costs him everything. It’s almost as if he were unable to control himself, forgetting the seemingly simple rule set forth by Proserpina: “Restitit Eurydicenque suam iam luce sub ipsa / immemor heu! victusque animi respexit.”

<sup>7</sup> [https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195397703/student/archives/vergil\\_aristaeus/](https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195397703/student/archives/vergil_aristaeus/)

<sup>8</sup> Gale, Monica R. “Poetry and the Backward Glance in Vergil’s *Georgics* and *Aeneid*.”, 333-334

(490-491, *Georgics IV*)<sup>9</sup>It is unfortunate and heartbreaking, but purposeful on Vergil's part. "Respexit," from the verb "respicio," can have a multitude of conventional meanings, such as "to look back, look behind, look back upon."<sup>10</sup> However, it can also have another meaning, according to Lewis & Short, which is "to have a care for, respect." It almost seems as if Orpheus cared so much for Eurydice that it was his undoing. (Interestingly, this word is actually found in Book VI of *the Aeneid*-- just not in reference to Dido, and with the regular definition of "to look back." It can be found not long after Aeneas encounters Dido in line 548, which says "Respicit Aeneas subito et sub rupe sinistra."<sup>11</sup> This underscores the evidently small to nonexistent amount of remaining love Aeneas harbors for Dido.) The very act of looking back towards Eurydice in frantic love essentially *destroys* their love. However, Eurydice calls out to him claiming that it is Orpheus' madness that is their undoing:

"Illa, Quis et me, inquit, miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,

quis tantus furor? En iterum crudelia retro

Fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus.

Iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte

invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non tua, palmas!"<sup>12</sup>

(*Georgics IV, 494-498*)

<sup>9</sup> He stopped and looked back at his Eurydice now under the light itself, alas, forgetful, and conquered in his mind. <sup>10</sup> Lewis & Short Entry "respicio"

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=respexit&la=la&can=respexit0&prior=animi&d=Perseus:text:1999.02.0059:book=4:card=453&i=1#Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=respicio-contents>

<sup>11</sup> "Aeneas turned, and right there to his left stood a fortress" (*Aeneid VI, 548*), translation by Sarah Ruden<sup>12</sup> "What terrible madness has destroyed both you and me. Hear! A second time the cruel fates call me back and sleep covers my swimming eyes. Farewell. Stretching out my powerless hands to you, I am borne away, enveloped in endless

night, yours no longer.” translation via

[https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195397703/student/archives/vergil\\_aristaeus/](https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195397703/student/archives/vergil_aristaeus/)

Although his action does seem mad, it can be argued that Orpheus did, ultimately, act out of pure love and longing for Eurydice. After his error and Eurydice’s second death, the demigod was never the same. Unable to carry on as before and unable to get over her death, he wasted away. The fates had a tragic death in store not only for Eurydice, but for Orpheus as well. When looking at the happy couple, it is hard to imagine how this ending could possibly be fair. What lesson could Vergil have in mind with the backward glance?

Many different parallels can be drawn between Aeneas and Orpheus. After all, their personalities and characteristics were crafted by the same author, Vergil, and they are both the male protagonists of their respective tales. Despite each having an immortal parent, they both are not always favored by the gods, having to endure immeasurable horrors in their lives. But where these characters seem to be different, they are entirely divergent. One is known for his dedication to love, and one is known for abandoning his love. This is an irrefutable fact-- but what truly sets the men apart is what they do after realizing what they have done wrong to lose their beloveds.

Aeneas’ strength (and his weakness) is that he does not look back for Dido. Although he does experience a certain level of anguish in seeing Dido in the Underworld, his emotional speech does not go much farther than producing futile (and late) tears of woe that really have no implications on where his journey will take him. Dido was used-- not just by Aeneas, but by the gods as a tool in the founding of one of the greatest cities on earth. Her despair and sacrifice were fated-- Aeneas knows that and uses it to his advantage. Aeneas’ journey in the Underworld also forces him to decide what is of more value to him: public duty or personal interests. Monica R. Gale notes that “[Aeneas is] turning from the



individuals who made up his past to dedicate himself to a largely unknown future. It is striking and perhaps not coincidental that neither Dido nor Creusa is mentioned by Aeneas after he leaves the Underworld.”<sup>13</sup> After speaking to Dido and Anchises in particular, Aeneas understands that he cannot afford to look back on the past-- he must push forward to achieve his destiny. He knows that if he were to truly care for Dido, like Orpheus cares for Euridyce, he could not fulfill his fortune.

Orpheus’ story tells us that sometimes, love is so strong that it can be destructive. His inability to move past Eurydice after almost getting her back in the Underworld tells the readers how intense his love for her was. Their bond was so strong that Orpheus, with his god-given music skills and talents, deliberately chose a life of solitude in order to stay true to his dead lover. His journey through the Underworld proved how far he would go for his one true love, and his failure underscored his unwillingness to love anyone else-- he cared for Euridyce too much for that. In contrast to Aeneas, however, he did not have a crucial destiny to fulfill. It is unknown whether having another important task in his life following the demise of Eurydice would have changed his trajectory after losing her in the Underworld, but most readers would probably agree that Orpheus’ love was simply too strong to be swayed by anything else the fates could have had in store for him. Aeneas-- the prototypical Roman-- trampling Carthaginian Dido and her broken heart serves as a parallel to the Roman trampling of Carthage in the Punic Wars. Through Aeneas, Vergil conveys a personification of the harsh mentality of a conquering Roman in contrast to the ruinous and tragic queen representing a ruinous and tragic enemy.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Vergil’s Orpheus is not Euridyce’s fated enemy; therefore, he has no need to move past her if he believes he belongs to her for eternity. Orpheus’ future is naught *without* Eurydice, while Aeneas’ future is naught *with* Dido. Ultimately, Vergil’s seemingly similar

characters come to their respective realizations about their futures after their time in the Underworld, where their fates are sealed. Though the future may be more difficult to comprehend than the past, Aeneas is ready to take it on, but Orpheus has no future without his past, lost love.

<sup>13</sup> Gale, Monica R. "Poetry and the Backward Glance in Vergil's Georgics and Aeneid.", 340

<sup>14</sup><https://mirabiledictu.org/2018/02/18/our-winter-of-the-aeneid-the-underworld-and-twin-gates-in-book-vi/>

## Bibliography

Ad Astra Per Mundum. *Talking through Dido: the failure of forthright tenderness in Aeneid 6*.

2019,

<https://adastrapermundum.com/2019/04/02/talking-through-dido-the-failure-of-forthright-tenderness-in-aeneid-6/>. Accessed December 3, 2020.

Gale, Monica R. "Poetry and the Backward Glance in Vergil's Georgics and Aeneid."

*Transactions of the American Philological Association*, no. 133, 2003, pp. 323-352.

JSTOR. Accessed November 19, 2020.

Ganiban, Randall T. *Vergil Aeneid Books 1-6*. Indiana, Hackett Publishing Company, 2012.

Mirabile Dictu. *Our Winter of the Aeneid: The Underworld and Twin Gates in Book VI*. 2018,

<https://mirabiledictu.org/2018/02/18/our-winter-of-the-aeneid-the-underworld-and-twin-g>

[ates-in-book-vi/](#). Accessed December 2020.

Perseus Latin Word Study Tool. *Respicio Entry*.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=respexit&la=la&can=respexit0&prior=animi&d=Perseus:text:1999.02.0059:book=4:card=453&i=1#Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=respicio-contents>.

Ruden, Sarah. *The Aeneid by Vergil*. Yale University Press, 2008.

“Virgil and the Underworld.” *My MOOC Blog*,

<https://louisecharente.wordpress.com/2013/06/25/virgil-and-the-underworld>. Accessed November 15, 2020.

“Virgil (Aristaeus).” *The Story of Aristaeus*, Oxford University Press,

[https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195397703/student/archives/vergil\\_aristaeus/](https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195397703/student/archives/vergil_aristaeus/). Accessed November 15, 2020.

