

AN ORPHIC TIMELINE

by the Staff and Friends of the
Rosicrucian Research Library

The figure of Orpheus and the Mysteries of Orphism originate in Greek Antiquity and have continued to influence the Western world to the present day. In this timeline, we trace major events and figures in the Orphic tradition, from its earliest mentions to the present day. The figure of Orpheus, in philosophy, spirituality, and the arts is perhaps one of the most enduring and pervasive in history, as the many Orpheum Theaters today attest.

GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY

8th– 7th Centuries BCE and before

- Traditional Greek religion, as represented in Homer, Hesiod, and other sources viewed the relationship between humans and the Gods and Goddesses as problematic at best, and often adversarial. Humans are generally thought to be either without souls, or having insignificant essences that will only survive in a kind of grey half-life after death in the realm of Hades, like chittering bats (the origin of our phrase: “like a bat out of hell”). Only the great semi-divine heroes, such as Hercules, Jason, or Theseus would live a full after-death existence, in the Elysian Fields. The concept of a mortal



Archelaos of Priene, Apotheosis of Homer. Marble relief, probably from Alexandria, 225-205 BCE. British Museum. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen, Wikimedia Commons.

seeking union with the divine would have seemed to be hubris (overweening pride) in traditional Greek religion.¹

6th Century BCE—Origins of Orpheus and Orphism

- At the beginning of the 6th century BCE, we begin to find in Greek culture a number of semi-mythical figures (based on people who may have actually existed) who shared certain qualities that were radically different in Greece.

These include:

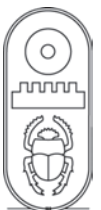
- Coming from the North
- Experts at fasting
- Ending plagues
- Predicting the future

All these qualities later show up even more strongly in Pythagoras. These figures taught the worship of a mysterious northern god—the Hyperborean Apollo (Apollo gave Orpheus his lyre)—and experienced soul travel and bi-location (being in two places at the same time). It was at this time that trade routes had opened up between Greece and lands to the north, including Ukraine and Bulgaria, where there was a deeply rooted shamanic culture. Orpheus’s experience of being dismembered is similar to what many shamans say they experience in their “dreams.” When Orpheus looks back, there are two possibilities: either he was a failed shaman or he did not really look back.²

- The earliest surviving mention of “Famous Orpheus” is by the poet Ibykos (530 BCE). He is known as a Thracian king, and a poet and singer of universal renown,



Orphic Egg sketch, from Jacob Bryant, *A New System* (London, 1775).



who can bend all nature, and even the gods to his will, with his music.

- In addition to the figure of Orpheus, evidence suggests that at about the sixth century BCE, an unknown philosopher/theologian, by legend Orpheus himself, began to rework the Greek mythic cycles surrounding the creation of the world (“theogonies”) and the myths of Dionysius in order to reform the Dionysian Mysteries into one which would emphasize personal transformation into Divinity through an ethical life and meditation on the Mysteries. Rather than overthrow the Dionysian Mysteries and other Greek myths, they were reinterpreted and transformed from within. This approach became known as Orphism and the Orphic Mysteries.
- This new approach marked a radical evolution of Greek Religion, one of divine union and purity: “To become a god was therefore incidentally as it were to attain immortality. But one of the beautiful things in Orphic religion was that the end completely overshadowed the means. Their great concern was to become divine now. That could only be attained by perfect purity. They did not so much seek purity that they might become divinely immortal; they needed immortality that they might become divinely pure. The choral songs of the Bacchae are charged with the passionate longing after purity, in the whole play there is not one



Dionysos, Ariadne, Satyrs and Maenads. Attic red-figure calyx-krater, ca. 400-375 BCE, From Thebes. Louvre Museum. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen, Wikimedia Commons.

word, not one hint, of the hope of immortality. Consecration, perfect purity issuing in divinity, is, it will be seen, the keynote of Orphic faith, the goal of Orphic ritual.”³

- The first of the Orphic Theogonies, the “Protogonos Theogony,” is composed ca. 500 BCE, named for the central role of the god Protogonos (later Phanes) in this cycle. His name means “first born.”
- The philosopher Eudemus also mentions another theogony “of Orpheus,” derived from the Mysteries of Bacchos and Kore.

5th Century BCE

- Bone tablets in Olbia (a Greek colony on the Black Sea) are carved with Orphic inscriptions: “Life. Death. Life. Truth. Dionysus. Orphics.”⁴
- Onomakritos (c. 530-480 BCE), an oracle compiler of Athens may have edited the existing Orphic texts. Pausanias later attributes to him the addition of the Titan’s murder of Dionysius into the mythic cycle.
- Characteristics of Orphism emerging:
 - Principle Deities include The Great Mother, Phanes, Dionysus (in several guises).
 - Humans are made of the flesh of the murderous Titans, and the Divine Spark of Dionysus. Therefore, human souls are Divine, but trapped in flesh, and caught in the cycle of Reincarnation.
 - An ascetical, ethical way of life (including vegetarianism) and Orphic Initiations will free the soul to reunite with the Divine.
 - Orphism connected to Death and Resurrection, through Dionysus, and also association with the Eleusinian Mysteries.
 - Similarities with Pythagoreanism; but whether one influenced the other, or independent development, is unclear.

4th Century BCE

- Gold leaves with Orphic funerary inscriptions placed in graves from Thurii, Hipponium, Thessaly, and Crete, with



Orphic Gold Tablet found at Cecelia Secundina



Orpheus Petitions before Hades, 1591, illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.

aphorisms, prayers, and instructions for the departed such as: “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this. I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grand me cold water flowing from the Lake of Memory.”⁵

- Circa 340 BCE: During the reign of Philip II of Macedon, a Greek theologian writes a commentary on the Protoponos Theogony, showing very early evidence of textual analysis and sophisticated theological discussion, previously thought not to have existed before the Neoplatonists beginning in the third century CE. The papyrus scroll was burned as part of a funeral ritual, at Derveni in Macedonia, northern Greece.

3rd–1st Centuries BCE

- “Hieronyman Theogony” (third century) composed, harmonizing Orphic themes from the Protoponos Theogony with Stoicism and Hellenistic thought, showing Water to be the original element.
- The “Testament of Orpheus” (third-first centuries BCE), a Greek poem probably from the Jewish community in Alexandria,



Orpheus in a Roman Era Mosaic panel in Jerusalem.

makes Orpheus a disciple of Moses, who would eventually recant his paganism and adhere to the Mosaic God on his deathbed. This would be used by Jewish and Christian apologists in later years.

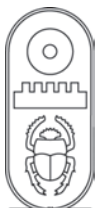
1st Century BCE–1st Century CE

- The classic version of the Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was written by Virgil in his *Georgics* (29 BCE). In this now familiar story Eurydice is pursued by Aristeus, and is killed while fleeing him. Orpheus journeys to Hades to beg for her release. His art is so touching that permission is given, so long as he does not look back at her until they are out of Hades. At the last moment, he doubts, and turns to see her fade from his grasp.
- Ovid’s version of Orpheus and Eurydice is published in his *Metamorphoses* (8 CE).

2nd– 6th Centuries CE

- Pausanias (second century CE) says of Orpheus: “In my opinion Orpheus excelled his predecessors in the beauty of his verse, and reached a high degree of power because he was believed to have discovered mysteries, purification from sins, cures of diseases and means of averting divine wrath.”⁶

Building the Argo for the Voyage to the Golden Fleece. From the J. Hatzigeorgiou Collection.



- The *Orphic Hymns*, a cycle of eighty-seven short hymns were composed, probably in the late third century,⁷ and are the most complete Orphica that have survived to the modern day.
- An Orphic version of the story of Jason and the Argonauts was written by an unknown Neoplatonic author between the fourth and sixth centuries CE. Another version had been written by Apollonius of Rhodes in the third Century.⁸ It is Orpheus's music that saves the sailors from the Sirens, and the poem contains hints of the Orphic Theogonies.
- Neoplatonists continue to rework older Orphic themes, including the composition of the Rhapsodic Theogony from earlier materials, probably in the fifth century CE: "Zeus became first, Zeus of the bright lightening last. Zeus is head, Zeus middle, and from Zeus all things have their being. Zeus became male. Zeus was an immortal maiden. Zeus is foundation of earth and starry heaven. Zeus is king, and himself first Father of All."⁹
- Images of Orpheus appear in Christian burial art in tombs and catacombs, and even an image of Orpheus crucified survived from the third-fourth centuries CE. Orpheus and Christ symbolism blend during this period, as the good shepherd with a lyre, especially in amulets.
- Early Byzantine Psalters begin to conflate Orpheus and David the King.¹⁰
- Proclus, a fifth-century Neoplatonist, proclaims, "All the Greek's theology is the offspring of the Orphic mystical doctrine."¹¹



Sketch of "Bacchic Orpheus" Crucified (third-fourth centuries CE). Formerly in the Pergamum Museum (Berlin), lost or destroyed in World War II.

- Boethius (480-525 CE) uses Orpheus as a major example in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, as one who, on the path to Enlightenment, looks back, and loses all he has gained. This would prove to be an important interpretation of the myth carried into the Western Middle Ages: "These fables teach every one that would flee from the darkness of hell and come to the light of the True Goodness not to look towards old sins, so as again to commit them as fully they once did. For whosoever with entire will turneth the mind back to the sins left behind, and then doeth them and taketh full pleasure in them, and never after thinketh of forsaking them, that one shall lose all former goodness, unless there be repentance."¹² Humans are destined to the Stars (heaven), reminiscent of the admonitions of the fourth century BCE Funerary Gold Leaves.



Orpheus/David from an illustration for a homily "On the Sacred Light," by Bishop Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen), fourth century CE.

Western Middle Ages

- Western Medieval commentators continue to work with the Orpheus Myth, including:
 - Remigius of Auxerre (tenth century);
 - Notker Labeo (eleventh century);
 - Arnulf of Orléans (twelfth century);
 - John of Garland (thirteenth century);
 - Giovanni del Virgilio (ca. 1325)
- William of Conches a superb scholar of the twelfth-century School of Chartres, where there was an upsurge of interest in Greek Philosophy at the time, studied all of the ancient accounts he could find of Orpheus, and concluded: ". . . the

Woodcut of Eurydice at the Gates of Hell, from *Ovide Moralisé* (thirteenth-fourteenth centuries).



Allegory of Orpheus . . . proves that as long as the attention is occupied with temporal things, one can neither know or delight in the highest good.”¹³ William’s use of myths as “integumentum” or a “covering” which points to higher levels of meaning, mirrors the Victorine school of scriptural interpretation.

- Nicholas Trivet (fourteenth century) concentrates on the reconciliation of Wisdom and Eloquence embodied in Orpheus.
- Peter of Paris, ca. 1309, begins the process of the movement away from the ancient sources and the transformation of the myth into a Medieval Romance.
- By the time of the anonymous Franciscan commentator in *Ovide Moralisé* (late thirteenth–early fourteenth centuries), the story is thoroughly Christianized in a moralistic bent, and a happy, spiritual ending is created.¹⁴
- Dante (1265-1321) uses the traditional four levels of meaning, echoing many medieval commentators on Ovid in his *Convivio* (1294-1307), in discussing Orpheus: “The second [sense] is called allegorical, and this is disguised under the cloak of . . . stories, and is a truth hidden under a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that Orpheus with his lyre made beasts tame, and trees and stones move towards himself; that is to say, that the wise man by the instrument

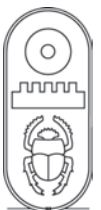
of his voice makes cruel hearts grow mild and humble, and those who have not the life of Science and of Art move to his will, while they who have no rational life are as it were like stones.”¹⁵

- Several late medieval courtly romances use the Orpheus story. These begin to give psychological depth to the characters, and draw on both the ancient texts and the medieval commentators, emphasizing the drama of the situation. Eurydice’s honor is reestablished. Only two full romances survive intact:

- *Sir Orfeo* (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) Middle-English narrative poem blends the story of Orpheus with Celtic myth and folklore, having Orpheus’s wife abducted by the King of Faeries: “Sir Orfeo was a king of old / in England lordship high did hold; / valor he had and hardihood, / a courteous king whose gifts were good.”¹⁶
- Robert Henryson’s (1430-1506) *Orpheus and Eurydice*.

RENAISSANCE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

- **1423:** *Orphic Hymns* brought from Constantinople by Giovanni Aurispa. Giovanni Aurispa was an Italian historian who traveled to Constantinople in search of ancient Greek texts. In 1423, Aurispa arrived in Venice with 238 volumes saved from the warfare in Constantinople, including Plato, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Xenophon, and Plutarch. Scholars theorize that the *Orphic Hymns* were included in this collection. Forty years later Marsilio Ficino would translate them into Latin.¹⁷
- **1462:** Marsilio Ficino translates the *Orphic Hymns*. Ficino, nicknamed the “Second Orpheus,” translated the *Orphic Hymns* and performed them on a lyre as a form of spiritual healing (what we would call *music therapy* today). Much like Orpheus, Ficino was an inspired mystic, poet, musician, and theologian. He revived Neoplatonic philosophy and was the first to translate Plato and the *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin,





The Platonic Academy of Florence: (l-r): Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano, Gentile de' Becchi. Detail from a fresco *Zachariah in the Temple* 1486-1490, by Domenico Ghirlandaio, in Santa Maria Novella, Cappella Tornabuoni, Florence, Italy.

providing the philosophical and mystical foundation for the artistic and intellectual breakthroughs of the Renaissance.¹⁸

- **1474:** Poliziano's *Orfeo*, performed at Carnival with stage design by Leonardo da Vinci. Angelo Poliziano was an Italian humanist and poet in the middle of the fifteenth century. He spent most of his life in Florence, the center of Italian humanism, working for the Medici family. *Fabula di Orfeo*, one of the earliest operas, was written in several verse forms and was probably intended to be half-sung, and half-spoken. As architect and engineer, Leonardo da Vinci created elaborate stage sets and designs for plays and spectacles. One of the performances he designed was for Poliziano's rendition of *Orfeo* in Milan. The set included a mountain that opens to a cave and a contraption to allow Pluto to rise from under the stage. In addition to his many talents in the arts and science, Da Vinci was a musician and played the lyre. In Florence, he was exposed to the revival of Greek and Neoplatonic philosophy driven by Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.¹⁹

- **1600:** Jacopo Peri's opera *Euridice*. *Euridice* was performed at the wedding of Maria de Medici and Henry IV, and is the first opera whose music survives to this day. The name *Eurydice* means "wide-justice" or "wide-ruling," making her a suitable model for performance at the wedding of a future queen of France who was born in Florence.

Orpheus, the first great poet, is present at the birth of the new art form of opera and has inspired over sixty operatic works. In Peri's version, Eurydice and Orpheus are reunited.²⁰

- **1607:** Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. Considered the first popular opera, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is an enduring work and performed to this day. While its first performances were for small, elite crowds, *L'Orfeo* was soon performed outside of Mantua, making it the first opera to be performed in several cities. Never before had drama and music been performed on such a large scale. *L'Orfeo* set the standard for what audiences would expect in future operas: large instrumentation, emotional drama, and a large-scale production.²¹

- **1762:** Christoph Willibald Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Gluck composed this opera for the emperor of Austria as courtly entertainment in Vienna. Court officials interpreted Gluck's happy ending as a good omen for the emperor's well being. It celebrates the power of love and virtue in honor of the ruler. Gluck sets a new direction for opera, avoiding the virtuosic vocal display of the day in favor of simple, affecting music that is striking in its natural emotion and Classical era elegance. Gluck's operatic reforms, beginning with *Orfeo ed Euridice*, have exercised significant influence throughout the history of opera and heavily influenced the popular works of Mozart, Wagner, and Weber. In both the Italian and French versions, Orfeo's lyre is represented by the harp, and it was this use of the instrument in 1774 that is usually thought of as introducing the harp to French orchestras. In Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*, Gluck's music is broadcast over the radio in the car that transports Orpheus to the underworld.²²

19TH & 20TH CENTURIES

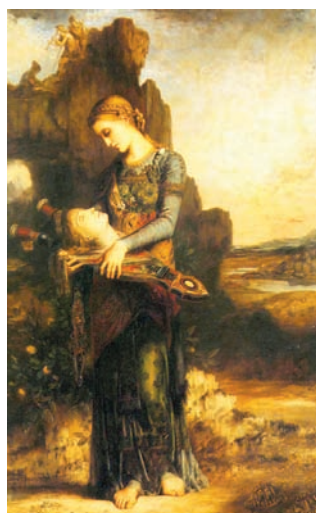
- **1858:** Jacques Offenbach's satiric operetta, *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Offenbach's operetta is an irreverent parody and satire that culminated in the risqué *galop infernal* that formed the model for what became the "can-can." It shocked some in the audience at its premiere. Other targets of satire, as

would become typical in Offenbach's burlesques, are the performances of classical drama and the scandals in society and politics of the French Second Empire.²³

- **1865:** Gustave Moreau's painting *Orpheus* and the beginnings of French Symbolist art. "How admirable is that art which, under a material envelope, mirror of physical beauty, reflects also the movements of the soul, of the spirit, of the heart, and the imagination, and responds to those divine necessities felt by humanity throughout the ages."²⁴

Moreau was an early representative of what came to be known as the Symbolist art movement, which encompassed painting, poetry, and literature. For the Symbolist, the inner vision of reality was the prime source of truth, beauty, and inspiration. While inspired by traditional classical subjects of Greek myth, including Orpheus, the Argonauts, and the Odyssey, artists such as Moreau transform them into strikingly original visions taken from the depths of their being. Moreau painted deeply personal retellings of the Orpheus myth, including the discovery of his singing; oracular head and lyre on the isle of Lesbos; his lamentation at the tomb of Eurydice; his death; and his gifts of art, poetry, and music.

One of his most fascinating works is a ten-panel polyptych in the Musée de Gustave Moreau in Paris, entitled *The Life of Humanity*, in which he integrates the three ages of humans (Golden/Silver/Iron) with



Orpheus,
Gustave Moreau, 1865.

Greek, Judaic, and Christian themes. The work can be viewed as an altar, with the first set of three paintings representing three phases each of the Golden Age of Adam/Paradise, the Silver Age of Orpheus, and the Iron Age of Cain. In *Against the Grain*, author Joris-Karl Huysmans described Moreau as ". . . the mystic, the Pagan, the man of genius who could live so remote from the outside world as to behold, here and now in Paris, the splendid, cruel visions, the magic apotheoses of other ages."²⁵

Moreau's work greatly inspired Joséphin Péladan, who invited him to participate in the first [Salons de la Rose+Croix](#) of Paris in 1892. Although Moreau declined, his students and followers submitted works that explored dreams, myth, lyricism, poetry, and mysticism. His work embodies the essence of the [Symbolist](#) movement that would embrace a diverse set of inward-seeking artists such as Odilon Redon, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Paul Gauguin, Gustav Klimt, and Edvard Munch, as well as poets and writers such as Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Edgar Allen Poe, and Paul Valéry.²⁶

"In this art, scenes from nature, human activities, and all other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial Ideals."²⁷

- [Orpheum Theaters](#) open throughout North America—first as live theaters, and later as movie houses. Today, many continue to promote the arts in testimony to Orpheus's enduring power.

- **1911: Orphism Art Movement:** "This is the voice that came from light which Hermes Trismegistus cites in his *Pymander*."²⁸

Orphism as an art movement introduced a feeling of poetry, warmth, and abstraction to the serious and strict approach to cubism practiced by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Orphism centered around a group of fin de siècle Parisian poets and artists, including Francis Picabia, Robert Delaunay, and



Marcel Duchamp, and influenced the Blue Rider group, including Paul Klee and Vasili Kandinski.

Guillaume Apollinaire, the lyrical poet who gave the movement its name and defined its spirit, strongly identified with Orpheus, seeing in him a symbol of purity, a spiritual voice of light, the artist with divine character, and a revealer of mystery in life. He described Orphism as a pure art expressing sublime meaning. The movement also aimed to express the ideals of Simultanism—the existence of an infinitude of interrelated states of being which was expressed through innovative use of color.²⁹

Apollinaire published one of the finest twentieth century illustrated books, *The Bestiary: or the Parade of Orpheus*, a collection of whimsical poems accompanied by bold woodcut engravings in which Orpheus introduces the birds, insects, and fish of a curious bestiary. A cloaked Orpheus with lyre in hand opens the collection, shown with Egyptian obelisk and pyramid in the background. (See page 36.) Once again, Orpheus is present at the beginning of an influential art movement that would later inspire surrealist, dada, abstract, and modern art.

- **1922:** Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. "Although we miss him, let the rose bloom every year for him. He's Orpheus, and his metamorphosis is everywhere Once and for all, it's Orpheus when there's song."³⁰

In this collection of fifty-five sonnets, Rilke searches, remembers, and accepts Orpheus as the source of spiritual guidance and revealer of the transcendent natural divinity present in all things. Profoundly touched by the death of a young girl attracted to dance



Orpheum Theater, Sioux Falls, SD. built in 1913. Photo © Sioux Falls Arena-Orpheum Theater.

and music, Rilke composed the first book of twenty-six sonnets in a single flash of inspiration without changing a single word. In the sonnets, themes of grief, death, art, and transcendence are encountered through meta-physical poetry.

In a separate work, *Requiem for a Friend*, Rilke offers a fresh interpretation of the Orpheus myth in which his returning gaze on Eurydice is

seen as an act of salvation that frees Eurydice to return to the underworld where she can bring spring to eternity. Rilke was a restless traveler, ever devoted to his art. In his travels he visited Egypt, Russia, Switzerland, and Paris. While in Rome, Rilke composed three narrative poems, one of which was titled "Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes":

"Be ahead of all leaving as though it were behind you Know conditions of nonbeing, the endless ground of your vibration down in you: one day you'll be fully fulfilled."³¹

- **1950:** Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*. Cocteau was one of the most versatile twentieth century artists who embodied the spirit of Orpheus in his films, plays, novels, poetry, drawings, ballets, and many artistic endeavors. In his play and film,



Orpheus and the Sirens, Raoul Dufy, from *The Bestiary, or the Funeral Procession of Orpheus* by Guillaume Apollinaire (1911).

Orphée (part of his [Orphic Trilogy](#)), Cocteau presents Orpheus as a French poet who falls in love with Death/Persephone of the Underworld in his quest for artistic transcendence. The film updates the Orpheus myth in many witty and surreal ways, using clever cinematic techniques and dreamlike special effects. Orpheus receives his inspired poetry over the radio of a car that transports him between earth and the underworld. Mirrors represent the doorway between worlds. In one fascinating scene, Orpheus passes his hand through a mirror that turned to liquid, allowing him to pass through it. In reality, filming a gloved hand dipping into a vat of mercury created the effect.

“The closer you get to a mystery, the more important it is to be realistic. Radios in cars, coded messages, shortwave signals and power cuts are all familiar to everybody and allow me to keep my feet on the ground.”³²

For Cocteau, the artist seeks to transcend life and death through art, and will pay any price to gain it. In a striking variation from the traditional myth, Orpheus abandons Eurydice in favor of his artistic muse who reigns in the underworld. In Cocteau’s own words, the key theme of *Orphée* concerns “The successive deaths through which a poet must pass before he becomes, in that admirable line from Mallarmé, ‘changed into himself at last by eternity.’” For Cocteau, poetry was a quality essential to every act of creativity, indeed without it, no such acts could truly be called Art. Throughout his life he elevated and exalted this basic ideal until it became an esoteric and spiritual entity in itself.

- **1957:** Tennessee Williams’s play, *Orpheus Descending*, also translated to film in *The Fugitive Kind*, starring Marlon Brando and directed by Sidney Lumet.

The play is a modern Southern Gothic retelling of

the ancient Greek Orpheus legend and deals with the power of passion, art, and imagination to revitalize and give new meaning to life. The story is set in a dry goods store in a small Southern town marked by conformity. Into this scene steps Val, a young man with a guitar, a snakeskin jacket, and a questionable past. He gets a job in the dry goods store run by a middle-aged woman named Lady, whose elderly husband is dying. She finds herself attracted to Val and to the possibility of new life he seems to offer. Val, representing Orpheus, symbolizes the forces of energy and eros, which have the power to create life anew. Val goes by the nickname “Snakeskin,” from the snakeskin jacket he wears.

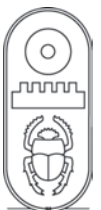
“He played so good that he broke the stone-cold heart of a Texas governor and won himself a pardon out of jail. His name is written in the stars.”³³

- **1959:** Marcel Camus’ film, *Black Orpheus*, retells the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in a context of 1950s Rio de Janeiro during Carnival, and features the first appearance of Bossa Nova classics from Antonio Carlos Jobim.³⁴ Carnival dancing and music tell the story in a warm, personal, manner filled with both tragedy and humor. It is an interesting coincidence that one of the meanings of the word *Carnival* is “farewell to meat,” and precedes the period of time during which many Christians fast and give up eating meat, echoing the vegetarian practice of ancient Orphics.

Some [highlights of the film](#) include Orpheus singing to the children and animals. It is Orpheus’s song that makes the sun rise each day. His guitar is inscribed, “Orpheus is its master,” and is given to each new Orpheus when the previous one dies. The film’s portrayal of his meeting and falling in love with Eurydice



Civic Statue of Jean Cocteau in Villefranche-sur-Mer. Photo by Berthold Werner, Wikimedia Commons.



is one of the most moving additions to the story. A number of striking images are presented in the final scenes, including Death chasing Eurydice through train tunnels of glowing red light, and the presence of shamanic tradition shown in the underworld. In *Black Orpheus*, Orpheus is engaged to another woman named Mira (a Maenad) and must hide his love of Eurydice. In the end she kills Orpheus in anger by throwing a stone at him that knocks him over a cliff.

• **1962:** *The Derveni Papyrus* from ca. 340 BCE is discovered at a tomb near Thessloniki: it is the oldest Greek literary papyrus yet found. The Derveni Papyrus, found in Derveni, Macedonia, in 1962, contains a philosophical treatise that is an allegorical commentary on an Orphic poem in hexameters, a theogony concerning the birth of the gods. It was burned on the Macedonian noble's pyre during the reign of Philip II, making it Europe's oldest surviving manuscript deciphered to date.³⁵

Endnotes

¹ For example, see Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 476: "Before passing to these it may be well to emphasize one point—the salient contrast that this new religious principle, this belief in the possibility of attaining divine life, presented to the orthodox Greek faith. The old orthodox anthropomorphic religion of Greece made the gods in man's image, but, having made them, kept them aloof, distinct. It never stated in doctrine, it never implied in ritual, that man could become god. Nay more, against any such aspiration it raised again and again a passionate protest. To seek to become even like the gods was to the Greek the sin most certain to call down divine vengeance, it was 'Insolence.'"

² David Ulansey, Ph.D. (professor in the Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness Program at California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), San Francisco), in discussion with Julie Scott, 2003, in Greece. For the reference to Orpheus not looking back, see Ralph Abraham, "Orpheus Today," *Rosicrucian Digest* Vol. 87, No. 1 (2008), 42-47.

³ Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 477.

⁴ Alexander Fol, *The Thracian Dionysos: Invocation and Faith* (Sophia: New Bulgarian University, 2002), 200 ff.

⁵ Gold Tablet (2:6-9) from Petelia (Strongoli), in Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.

⁶ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 9. 39. 1-7, W.H.S Jones, trans., (London: W. Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1918-35).

⁷ Apostolos Athanassakis, *The Orphic Hymns* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1977), viii. Thomas Taylor version (1792) available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cl/hool/index.htm>.

⁸ Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, translated by R.C. Seaton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912): <http://ia331324.us.archive.org/2/items/theargonautica00830gut/1argn10.txt>.

⁹ Excerpt 168 from the *Fragments of the Rhapsodic Theogony* (from Porphyry and others), translated and edited by W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (London: Methuen & Company, 1934), 140.

¹⁰ John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 147.

¹¹ Proclus, *Theologia Platonica*, i, 6 (Testamenta. 250 in Otto Kern, ed., *Orphicorum Fragmenta* [Berlin: Weidmann, 1922 (1963)]).

¹² Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* Book 3 Meter 12 in *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius*, Walter John Sedgfield, trans., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1178&layout=html#chapter_78802.

¹³ William of Conches, *Commentary on the Consolation of Philosophy*. Cited and translated in Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 105.

¹⁴ Discussion in this section indebted to Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 86-145.

¹⁵ Dante, *Convivio II*, 1, William W. Jackson, trans., Dante's *Convivio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 73. Cited in Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 88.

¹⁶ Sir Orfeo l. 25-28, J.R.R. Tolkien, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 170.

¹⁷ D.P. Walker, "Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists" in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 16, No. 1/2. (1953):100-120.

¹⁸ Angela Voss, "Marsilio Ficino, the Second Orpheus" in *Music as Medicine: the History of Music Therapy since Antiquity*, edited by Peregrine Horden (Vermont: Ashgate, 1988).

¹⁹ F.W. Sternfield, *The Birth of Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gustave Moreau, cited in Genevieve Lacambre, *Gustave Moreau: Magic and Symbols* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999).

²⁵ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969).

²⁶ Jean Moréas, "Le Manifeste du Symbolisme," *Le Figaro*, Sept 18, 1886, cited in Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1972).

²⁷ F.W. Sternfield, *The Birth of Opera*.

²⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le Bestiaire ou Cortège D'Orphée* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977).

²⁹ Judith E. Bernstock, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

³⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Translated by Willis Barnstone (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1986).

³³ *The Fugitive Kind*, MGM, 1959.

³⁴ *Black Orpheus*, Criterion Collection, 1959.

³⁵ Gabor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).