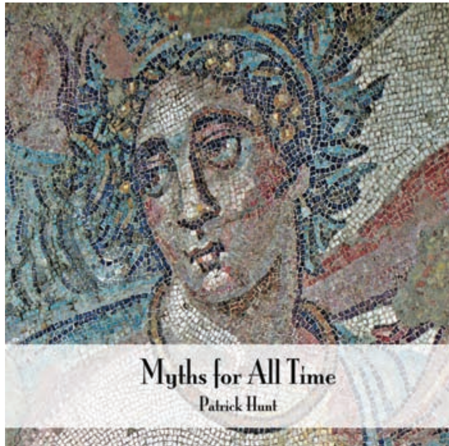

Myths for All Time

By Patrick Hunt

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- Orpheus and Eurydice

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MYTHS FOR ALL TIME

Selected Greek Stories Retold

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Acknowledgments

"…Whose fruit burnished with golden rime
hung amiable, Hesperian fables true,
if true here only…"

Milton, *Paradise Lost* 4.248

I cannot remember who first read myths to my young ears, but I honor that one as if a prophet. I have loved mythology from my earliest memories, and am certain they helped form and anchor my soul. When I lived in Greece as a young archaeology graduate student at the American School of Classical Studies, Athens, I felt as if I was at home in a landscape that was already part of my being. Greek mythology came even more alive in that familiar topography where Mt. Parnassus rises above Delphi, where Oedipus battled with his destiny at the place I stood, a crossroads whose three dusty roads still meet en route to Thebes with Mt. Kithairon looming on the horizon, and where I climbed to Mycenae rich in gold with the great Lion Gate yet guarding the fabled walled citadel. It was not only a haunted dream when I took the oars of modern boats or sailed the same wine dark seas between the Greek Isles of the Aegean, as everything echoed myth while being very much real at the same time. The sense of wonder I always experience when immersed in Greek mythology even now after decades of study is as deep as it was when these stories were first read to me or when I found them in my childish readings.

I was fortunate as a young man that my tentative myth palindromes were encouraged by Martin Gardner, writer and sage who ran his monthly column "Mathematical Games" in *Scientific American* for years when I was growing up. Gardner had some of these first myth palindromes published for me in *Word Ways* in 1981. I am grateful to Jennifer Marsh, Editor of the *Bulletin of Classical Studies* in London in the late 1980's, who published my myth poems in Classical Association publications. I am indebted and also grateful to Richard Martin at Stanford, who asked me to teach mythology, a domain he knew far better, and he also generously asked me to illustrate his wonderful *Myths of the Ancient Greeks* book in 2003. I am also grateful to the Sun Valley Writers' Conference in 2005 for inviting me to share several sessions on "Myth's Deeper Truths". Last but not least, I thank my children who let me tell myths to them as bedtime stories growing up, and I thank my many brilliant students at

Stanford. I am sure my children and students in my Stanford courses over the years have taught me more about Greek Mythology than I ever taught them.

The twelve myths retold here are some of my favorites. At different times I have carefully drawn all of them, imitating Greek vase painters with pen and ink in order to better observe how the ancient artists understood and arranged them by iconography, i.e., the system of visual literacy in a time when few read texts. Some of these same drawings formed the illustrations for Richard Martin's book, while others became illustrations in my *House of the Muse* (2005). Of this small book, may Tennyson's dictum be said:

"Wearing his wisdom lightly, like the fruit
which in our winter woodlands looks a flower…"

not because its wisdom is light or its water shallow, because many great rivers start out as shallow trickles from high glaciers, but rather because these myths are not mine but belong to all.

Stanford, 2007

Exploring Greek Mythology

Introduction

"About the gods I cannot say either that they are or that they are not, nor how they are constituted in shape; for there is much which prevents knowledge, [such as] the unclarity of the subject and the shortness of life."

Protagoras, *On the Gods*

Although Greek myths are not just for Greeks thousands of years ago, but rather for all time, they nonetheless mostly derived from that landscape. The land of Greece with its many islands, washed by the blue Mediterranean Sea on nearly all sides, is an ancient land, rich in stories that have lasted for thousands of years. So many like me have found in Greece a shimmering in the very air as if there is still a haunting presence of something numinous, an indefinable magic that makes the myths somehow more real even though we may not knowingly have a drop of Greek blood in our veins.

These stories form a priceless treasure that became a foundation for Western culture, art and history. Without these tales of Greek mythology, not only our history but also our imaginations and our art would be that much poorer. With these myths, we better understand our own time and place. This is not just because nearly every great writer for thousands of years somehow made reference to the Greek myths or incorporated some of the stories into their own literature and history, but also because these watershed stories became the backbone of how we think about real and imaginary history.

Greek myths are essentially metaphysical stories of the human imagination where almost anything can happen, although to read the skeptical Pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras above is to acknowledge that empirical rationalism was equally part of balanced Greek thinking about myth. In these respects Greek myths are no different than any other outgrowth of cultural or wishful thinking. But in other respects they are very much clothed in ancient Greek culture and values, some of which have survived in only fragmentary fashion. Greek gods were never just mere superhumans or megalomanic extensions of human behavior. As a famous and lovely Sappho fragment (101) shares on mortality and immortality:

"Death is an evil; we have the gods' word for it;
they too would die if death were a good thing." [1]

In myth the deeply philosophic Greeks tried to state that the gods' virtues and vices were not shaped in human proportions because they were not conditioned by the brevity of life or the tragic nature of mortal beauty. Goethe also wisely perceived this in his myth encounter between Beauty and Zeus:

" 'Why do I pass away, O Zeus?' was Beauty's question.
'Only in what us passing,' the god said, 'have I made beautiful at all.' [2]

How did these Greek tales evolve? One of the ways is that ancient people tried to explain nature in the best way possible. Stories were easy vehicles for understanding natural phenomena. For example, the greatest Greek gods were three powerful brothers who divided the known world between them. One ruled the sky, Zeus, and was responsible for thundering storms, especially in the mountains with rain to water the land. Another ruled the sea, Poseidon. This was so very important in Greece, more so than other lands because the Greeks were a seafaring folk who sailed and fished everywhere they could. No place in Greece was more than fifty miles from the sea. Some places in Greece were even much easier to reach by sea than overland. Poseidon also caused earthquakes in a rocky land. The third brother, Hades (or Aidoneus), ruled the Underworld, which was inevitable because every human eventually reached his kingdom at death. These are just a few examples of how myths originated. [3]

Who were the Greeks?

The ancient Greeks called their land *Hellas* and called themselves *Hellenoi* or the People of Hellas. Their ancestors had been living in the Balkan Peninsula surrounded by the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea already for hundreds of years when a series of disasters destroyed most of the Achaean culture around 1200 BC. Their fortress cities were abandoned and their population was greatly diminished. But from about the tenth century BC onward Greek population began to grow again. Their new city states were built over the mostly-forgotten ruins in Argos, Athens, Corinth, Sparta, Magara, Thebes and other places. They remembered the dim past as a Golden Age of Heroes whom they claimed as their ancestors in the songs of their bards, stories told and handed down for many generations. Their land became too

small for their rising populations, and being seafarers, they set out to find new places to set up colonies, moving east and west across the Mediterranean to Sicily and South Italy in the western direction and eastward what is now western Turkey, which they called Ionia.

By the Archaic period in the seventh century BC Greeks had colonized a wide territory across the entire Mediterranean from east to west and made contact with Egypt and the Near East, also borrowing some of their ideas and art. By the Classical period they had begun a form of democracy in some of their city-states like Athens and laid the foundations of Western philosophy. By the Hellenistic period after Alexander the Great, they had conquered the known cosmos and also absorbed influences from all over the world. The Romans physically conquered the Greeks in the mid-second century, around 146 BC, but the Greeks also "conquered" the Romans culturally and intellectually because their influence was immense on Roman art, architecture, literature, religion and mythology, philosophy and many other endeavors. After this, they never regained their independence in the ancient world, but became a major force in the rise of Christianity.

Why were they important?

As a people and as individuals, the Greeks were pioneers. Socrates and Plato were called the fathers of philosophy. Herodotus and Thucydides were called the fathers of history. Aristotle and Theophrastus compiled the first encyclopedias by gathering much reliable information from every possible area of human activity and created foundations of modern science and geography in the many books they compiled. Pythagoras, Euclid and Archimedes were called the fathers of mathematics. Sappho is still often named the world's greatest lyrical poet. The Greeks created the first public libraries where information was treasured and stored for humanity. They gave us the nine divine women Muses; goddesses who were thought to inspire creativity. The Greeks also tried to keep memory of the past alive in museums. The New Testament in Christianity was written first in Greek. Greek medicine became the foundation of modern medicine in individuals like Hippocrates, Dioskorides, Galen and Celsus. Greek also became the first language of science and medicine because the Greeks recorded so many ideas we use and take for granted today. The idea in the Trojan War of "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" is ironic because they have so cleverly gifted the world in immeasurable ways.

How have they influenced the world?

The Greeks left a huge legacy that can hardly be measured. This is because so much of the world has built on the foundations of Greek culture. In politics, democracy is the immediate gift of Greece even though it arose in a different form. In music and the arts, they not only gave themes and subjects from their myths and stories but also began art forms in areas of architecture, mosaic, sculpture, painting, poetry, and many other media. Greeks provided templates for drama in tragedy and comedy that still form the core expressions in theater. In philosophy, Greeks pioneered an exchange of dialogue and founded schools of thought like Rationalism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism, Hedonism, Cynicism and many others, creating systems for understanding the basics of ontology and phenomenology. In international affairs, Greeks introduced the idea of diplomacy in the Olympics whereby athletic striving made positive competition between states in a time of peace instead of war. In economics, the Greeks borrowed and improved upon the first Western system of money in stamped coins that could be traded all over the ancient world. Many of our athletic activities and the balance of intellectual and physical excellence are based on their ideas. Our Western languages today – even English – may contain as much as 20% of their current vocabularies from ancient Greek, not only in technical dictionaries but in commonly-used spoken words. These are only a few of the areas in which the Greeks influenced Western culture and the world. So much of our history and culture have derived from Greek ideas that it would be impossible to recognize our civilization today if we tried to remove all the Greek sources of Western culture.

How did they communicate their myths?

The Greeks first communicated their myths in songs and poems, originally not written down but sung orally before audiences in a time when few could read. These oral events were creative opportunities for poets and musicians to add their own details from common knowledge, although new details could be added if the artists built on already known ideas. When the Greek language was developed enough to be written down using a new alphabet, probably betwen the eighth and seventh centuries BC, this gave a great stimulus to preserve the myths in a more permanent poetic form. But artists, especially sculptors, had already begun the same task, first in small bronze and larger limestone and then marvelous marble sculptures. The larger stone sculptures were often made to decorate the outside of temples or make statues

of gods and heroes, and the smaller bronze sculptures were often offerings or for public and private shrines.

When Greeks began to experiment with painting on vases, these vases – often left in tombs or made for celebrations – became the medium for many mythological scenes. Some were given as prizes in athletic competitions. Both men and women used the ceramic vases for everyday tasks as well, but vase paintings became a major form of showing Greek myth. Greek wall painting has not survived as well, but we know from ancient writers that they presented many of their myths in wall painting as well as in surviving floor mosaics, the latter less likely to be destroyed by wear and tear underfoot than wall paintings or on walls that later fell or were torn down, whether replaced or not. The Greeks also shared many of their myths in their dramas. Greek literature was perhaps the greatest surviving means of expressing the myth stories from the Archaic period roughly between 700-500 BC and refined in the Classical period roughly between 500-300 BC. The Hellenistic world put the finishing touches on most Greek myths after 300 BC, codifying them into recognizable form.

Literary Sources

Greek mythology depends greatly on ancient primary sources, mostly from the greatest surviving Greek literature. Homer and Hesiod are two of our earliest and best literary sources on Greek mythology. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (circa 7th c. BC) tell the stories of the Trojan War and what followed. Homer shows how Greeks imagined the character of gods like Zeus, Apollo and Athena and tales of heroes like Achilles and Odysseus. Hesiod (also 7th c. BC) tells the birth of the gods in his *Theogeny* and *Works and Days* as well as the stories of Pandora and others. These two poets form much of the roots of Greek mythology since most other known sources follow, quote from and seem to grow like branches from their roots. The so-called Homeric Hymns, nearly all by unknown writers, extend this early work with material on individual deities such as Demeter, Apollo, Aphrodite, Artemis, and other deities and heroes.

Other great Greek poets and playwrights who added to the early stories include the sixth c. BC poets Bacchylides, Sappho, Pindar and the fifth c. BC dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. Each of these writers, whether in tragedy like the first three or via comedy like Aristophanes, tells myth detail in personal style that blends into the body of Greek mythology to make a whole. Later poets like Kallimachus and Apollonius of Rhodes provide extended myth detail in the fourth and third centuries BC. A great second century BC classic is Apollodorus's *Library of Greek Mythology* (although some doubt his authorship,

hence a possible author is Pseudo-Apollodorus). Fragments of Greek myth are also extant from references to lost literary works or even scholiasts and ancient literary critics whose commentaries on earlier poets or dramatists give us added rich details, ever more cohesive in one sense in attempting to resolve dilemma or contradiction in genealogies and landscapes.

Artistic Sources

As mentioned, almost countless artistic references to Greek mythology are also commonly found on Greek black or red figure vases, especially in the sixth century BC of the Archaic Period or the fifth century of the Classical Period. These visual references often recall dramatic excerpts or poetry, some no longer extant, and as such may be what is called *ekphrasis*, and are thus visual quotations, although this term is equally or better often understood the other way around with verbal descriptions of ancient works of visual art. Sculpture is another common medium for myth reference. For example, the famous Glykon Farnese Hercules (or Heracles) is a colossal Hellenistic marble statue that depicts one pivotal moment from his last labor of the Apples of the Hesperides. Even more prolific are the sculpted temple pediment groups and individual metopes (individual frieze sculptures framed above the peripteral colonnades). For example, the Contest of Athena and Poseidon adorned the Parthenon West pediment in the Classical mid-5th century BC, and the famous metopes from the Selinunte Temple C in the Archaic 6th c. BC in Sicily show, among others, Perseus slaying Medusa with Athena's help, or Actaion being killed by his own hounds with Artemis from the same site, to name only a few. Less prolific are surviving Greek paintings and mosaics, although examples survive from Pella and Vergina in Macedonia, for example, with Hades Abducting Persephone in tomb painting and mosaics of Dionysus on panthers. The best extant book to date on Greek myth in art in English is probably T.H. Carpenter's *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece,* 1989. Connecting mythology and art, iconography, as mentioned often here, is a study of the system of visual literacy whereby gods, heroes and monsters were known by their visual clues known as attributes, especially important when textual literacy was lower than today and most people just as cleverly "read" art.

Writing myth: mythology or mythography?

Those who write myth directly, adding new details or fleshing out new material in a fictive way consistent with prior myth, could be called true *mythologers*. But those who write *about* myth or add commentary could equally be called *mythographers*. Sometimes the same person does both tasks. While Homer or Sophokles are obvious examples of *mythologers*, a modern scholar like H.J. Rose (see below) who analyzed and categorized already-written myth is an example of a *mythographer*.

Modern mythologers have continued to develop from Homer and Hesiod and Greek literature. For several hundred years now, good texts in English carry on the traditions of Greek mythology into English literature. *Bullfinch's Mythology* is one early modern source of retelling the myths. More recently, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* made mythology more accessible to generations of Americans. Other myth tellers include Robert Graves with his *Greek Myths*, although while a fine poet, he is easily criticized by scholars for taking liberties. Very recently Richard Martin in his superb *Myth of the Ancient Greeks* has produced a lasting collection of impeccable but accessible myth retellings. Martin is both a creative mythologer in his own right while also fulfilling the task of an encyclopedic mythographer. Other editions of Greek myth (primarily mythography) include a range of versions, from the abbreviated but very clear Lucilla Burn's *Greek Myths* to the already-noted scholarly H. J. Rose's *Handbook of Greek Mythology* and Richard Buxton's new *Greek Myths* midway between. One of the most useful for critical analysis and study is the landmark Mark Morford and Robert Lenardon text *Classical Mythology* in its successive editions.

Perhaps one of the most magical versions of selected Greek myth is found in the fiction writing of Mary Renault, novels like *The Bull From the Sea* and *The King Must Die*, where her writing clearly falls into the category of mythology rather than mythography. Bernard Evslin's writing for young adults could also be called mythology as he retells these stories in readable fictive form.

This present book is both alike and different from others: Its emphasis is on retelling the stories in as natural a way as possible, as if they were happening right before the reader's eyes and other senses with dialogue and description. Thus, such retelling might fall into the category of mythology. In this way, the myths told here may read like fiction while retaining the core of each Greek story. At the end of this book, however, some brief analyses of myths will fit into the category of mythography.

What is Mythology?

Myth may be almost impossible to define. Whatever it is, myth transcends description partly because it is at the imaginative roots of human yearning and is a complex nexus of all literary, philosophical, psychological, and even religious human experience; at times myth is both bound by culture and at other places universal to all human experience. It is almost always easier to tell a myth than to interpret or understand it.

Mythology deeply affects the way we think by providing examples of human triumphs, hopes and ordeals retold in the form of memorable stories. Sometimes myth helps us to understand our own humanity more easily than through history. Joseph Campbell wisely suggested that one difference between myth and history is that history is real but not necessarily true whereas myth is true but not necessarily real. History may actually happen around us but we do not always know the true details even when we are in the middle of its life experiences. Myth does not happen as we know it but its stories may reveal or distill some truth about human existence otherwise not so accessible.

We often refer to some of the common stories in mythology even when we do not realize the original source. For example, phrases or figures of speech like "Between a rock and a hard place," "Herculean Labors," "Oedipus Complex," "Achilles Heel," "Siren Song," "Riddle of the Sphinx," "the Golden Touch," "Narcissism," "Music to soothe the savage beast" and "Trojan Horse" are just a few of the many ideas illustrating the long and pervasive influence of Classical myths from the Greeks and Romans in our culture.

The word ***myth*** may have originally meant "word or speech" from the Greek *mythos*, including the idea of a proverb. It came to mean "tale, story or narrative" without a suggestion of being true. For the most ancient Greeks, *mythologos* may have first meant to "tell word for word" since both *mytho*s and *logos* carried that similar idea of something said or spoken. By the time of Plato around 400 BC*, mythologos* had come to mean storytelling like Homer, as most likely beautiful fiction but with a possible kernel of historic truth.

Types of Myths

In Greek mythology as in most global mythologies, there are at least seven types of myth as in most cultures. They are not necessarily in this order or chronology of setting them down in written form, since myth may be handed down orally by bards or in song for many

generations before they become somewhat fixed in literary forms. One myth category included here is that of ***origin*** myths (cosmology or cosmogony) and how things were created or came to be. For example, there is the story of how Gaia developed out of Chaos or how Okeanos covered the watery world. There are also ***explanation*** myths (pre-science and natural history) offering narratives of why the world operates a certain way like the succession of the seasons, including the abduction of Persephone by Hades into the Underworld and the procession of winter into spring, or explaining perceptions of how the sun moves across the sky. ***Religious*** myths (divine hierarchies) tell about gods and goddesses who were worshipped in antiquity, such as Zeus, Poseidon, Hera or Artemis, even though this religion may no longer be current. Additionally, ***ancestor*** myths (dynastic) relate the great families or reputed lineages of ancient kings and queens and their earliest offspring. For example, Greek and Roman myths relate a legendary history of the House of Atreus or House of Kadmos and the story of Aeneas. Also, ***hero*** myths (heroic or superhuman individuals) tell the ordeals and victories of great personae, heroes and heroines like Heracles, Medea, Perseus, Antigone or Theseus. There are ***moral*** myths (didactic or morality) that instruct or exhort virtues like *areté* (excellence, mainly displayed manly courage and esprit), extolling honor and love of homeland or condemning vices like *hubri*s (extravagant and damning pride) and setting forth taboos and injunctions against unacceptable human behavior while recording but often helpless against similar divine misbehavior. Last but not least, there are just generally poignant ***fables*** (*fabulae*) and beautiful or tragic love stories like Cupid and Psyche or Pyramus and Thisbe or Apollo and Daphne. It is entirely reasonable to expect that many myths combine more than one category in their stories.

How Myths Change over Time

We tend to think the stories as we know them arrived complete or fully thought out. But that simply isn’t true. A Greek living around Homer’s time around the seventh century BC) might not recognize a lot of details that had been added by the third century BC when details of the myth became more fixed. And a Greek living in the Roman Era might have a similar reaction looking only at older versions from the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

Myths change through time, evolving in the hands of their storytellers. Greek myths may not be part of our recent culture and so we often see the finished product rather than a story in process. It is also possible that a much later Greek after Homer might not recognize some of the forgotten, lost or pruned details that earlier Greeks told as important details of

a known myth, although myths tend to grow rather than shrink. As myth grows and adds or deletes information, often encoding cultural values alongside like the virtues or pride of one's homeland, so does the visual imagery of a myth persona. For example, Athena in her earliest surviving pictorial versions may only carry a sword and shield. Later versions add her aegis snaky breastplate that is even later shown with its Gorgoneion (Medusa head) and her owl is included in late images as well.[4] In fact, a myth may develop to explain how Athena obtained the symbol by the story of Perseus' victory over Medusa. Athena's patronage of a city like the city of Athens named in her honor may include myths of sponsorship like her contest with Poseidon to determine who would be the primary civic god. Myths also often combine elements of what were originally different local or regional gods into more complex national or international gods, as seen in Artemis and her Roman counterpart Diana or Dionysus and his Roman counterpart Bacchus and his Etruscan parallel Fufluns.

Myths from one culture may be adopted, borrowed or fit into myths of another culture. This happened when Etruscan and Roman cultures either already had something similar in place or were greatly influenced by the Greeks whom they admired and even with whom they competed, often adapting Greek myths to be folded into their own legends, especially when they were convenient or just too beautiful to ignore.

How should Mythology Be Read?

There are different schools of thought about how myths should be read. But perhaps it is best not to suggest a rigid interpretation or prescribe only one way to read them, because they are timeless and universal, not bound by culture, era or place. Some think they should only be read as stories today, partially because our culture is so different in many ways. Others believe myths were also intended to teach values, many of which we still share today, and therefore myths ought to embody symbolic or allegorical value as parables or earthly stories with deeper meanings. Others look a myth as a form of history of thought or literary history where poets first recorded events that may or may not have really happened, like the Trojan War. Or even if the myths contained current philosophies or religions, it is unlikely those systems of belief were set in concrete. It is likely that the myths often represented alternative stories not always eagerly accepted by formal priesthoods of a cultic religion, especially if the gods acted more like humans.

Regardless of how we read them, myths are ultimately good stories, capable of being retold over and over without ever losing their ability to move us. Great myths contain certain

universals that appeal to all humans. Sharing them elevates the very best poets and storytellers. Every human generation creates its own mythology or refines earlier myths and sometimes these survive and take on life of their own. Sometimes myths fade because they are not remembered, understood or retold by successive generations. The greatest myths survive the longest because they reach the deepest into the human soul. However many times retold in different ages and languages, the great myths will last as long as there are humans to be moved by them, to laugh and delight in them or to be saddened and weep at their beauty.

Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus of Thrace was the most gifted musician of all humans in the world, loved by Apollo – some say his father - for whom he played so skillfully that the gods even listened whenever Orpheus picked up his kithara, a special lyre made from a tortoise shell and also a gift from Apollo, who had loved his mother Calliope, one of the great nine Muses who inspire all the arts.

If he sat down in the wild Thracian woods, Orpheus strummed or plucked the strings of his lyre and its music drew beasts together who would normally be enemies. The fierce lion would lie down and a rabbit would sit listening as well alongside, its big ears mostly still. A panting wolf would crouch down on its paws and hind legs, forgetting to look at the mountain goat it had just chased into this very clearing where Orpheus played. Now the goat didn't even notice the wolf because its ears were filled with the most soothing music that calmed its heartbeat. A bear lumbered into the glade, its huge face sticky with honey. It sat down with a heavy sigh and merely licked its furry paw with a huge red tongue. Even the birds, usually trilling overhead, listened with their tiny heads bent downward at this song below that thrilled them coming from Orpheus sitting against the tree trunk. The music of Orpheus softened the wild hearts of predators and prey alike, its sound drifting along the sunbeams that fell through the deep forest. If he noticed his audience, Orpheus just nodded and continued his music.

One living tree spirit, like all dryads who could take human form, picked up her willowy roots from the stream and followed him. She was young Eurydice, and falling in love with Orpheus and his music, she relinquished her willowy dryadic nature to become fully human. Orpheus loved Eurydice too with her supple arms and soft hair with a mossy wreath. They were wedded, but Hymen, the god of weddings attended on an evening he was unhappy because he had been caught in a torrent of rain, and his wet torch wouldn't light at their festivities. This was an ill omen, but the guests forgot it because the groom played such lovely wedding hymns composed for the festivity, and big bears brought baskets of berries and honeycombs for the guests in gratitude for the music that made them feel less like beasts in their shaggy natures. The shy naiads who were the bridesmaids whispered amongst themselves.

"They look so beautiful together. So in love!"

A few months later, Eurydice was with her naiad friends who had come up from their springs to play in the grasses by their ferny pools. The girls were picking irises among the

waterfalls when barefoot Eurydice stepped on a fanged viper, which twisted around and bit her deeply, injecting its venomous juices into her soft foot. She swooned and fell with her eyes closing as the deadly poison sought her veins. The viper slipped away unseen into the grasses and some of the weeping naiads gathered around the dying girl while others went to find Orpheus who was making new strings for his lyre.

"Eurydice!" the running bridegroom cried out as he ran frantically to the scene. But it was too late. Eurydice could only just raise her sad eyes to his shocked eyes one last time before death overtook her and her soul sighed out of her limp body.

Orpheus let out a wail, tore at his hair and was disconsolate for days, refusing to move from the quiet stream. Even after the dryads and naiads buried Eurydice under her former tree, which also dropped its wilting leaves and died, Orpheus could not play his lyre for days because his heart was broken. His lonely spirit mourned and his lyre sat unplayed by his side, his hands listless.

Finally out of habit as his hands absently brushed the strings, a few tones hummed out and Orpheus remembered his sorrow by picking it up and playing just a bit. But the sounds were so mournful – as if his instrument sympathized - it brought additional tears to his eyes. Then Orpheus began to play in earnest to assuage his sorrow, and the cascading sounds of the saddest song hummed through the woods, their notes carried by the wind over the hills and mountains.

"What is this sad music?" the high mountains asked each other, shaking their craggy heads where pine trees over their rocky foreheads waved to the music as if slowly dancing in empathy to the loss of Orpheus. It was beautiful music, but brought tears to the eyes of every being who had ever lost loved ones. The sound of Orpheus' loss even reached the clouds in the sky, carried there by breezes, and the clouds listened with dewy eyes until a light rain wept between the rainbows arched into the distance over the rolling forests.

At last the sound of Orpheus' lament for Eurydice reached the rocks and caves of deepest earth, echoing down to the very Underworld. There it touched the ears of Hades himself, god of the Underworld, who noticed Orpheus for the first time.

Suddenly Orpheus realized he had a sympathetic divine ear far below. He had a fantastic idea that barely brightened his spirit for the first time in weeks.

"Perhaps I could go down there and try to find Eurydice," he wondered aloud to himself. So he set off to find the deep cave that leads to the Underworld.

Orpheus played his mournful lyre as he traveled, and birds swooped overhead to lead him to the entrance of the Cave to the Underworld, although they would not enter it with their tiny shuddering hearts. The trees turned their leafy crowns to follow the sound of his sad song. Just before him now was the dark entrance of the cave going down into darkness and the birds

fled.

As he entered and went ever downward, his song echoed off the rocks. Passing by deep pools with dim glowing stalactites of phosphor, Orpheus' eyes gradually became accustomed to the darkness as slightly dripping water sadly kept monotonous time to his tune. His footsteps went down and down until the passage opened up a bit into a vast cavern. There was a huge arched portal ahead and there waiting Orpheus saw the gleaming eyes of Hell's Watchdog, Kerberos widen and rise as the monster stood up with a deeply menacing growl until Orpheus slightly altered his thrumming and the monster relaxed. It was such a sad tune that even an unbidden tear ran down one of the monster's three bristly snouts. Kerberos stood up as Orpheus passed by, but even though he raised all three heads and sniffed at the strange smell of a living being, the monster did not attack and Orpheus crossed the threshold of the Underworld, playing all the while.

There the cavern was so wide Orpheus could not see its limits. The only light came from torches along the road whose flames flickered as he walked by because he had substance and moved air currents unlike the dead. Pale fields of asphodel flowers nodded as he walked by. Black sluggish streams flowed slowly under white poplars and now Orpheus noticed faceless shadows of the dead approaching and watching him from a distance, but they never came too close as they peered from around trees. He knew they were listening to his song, perhaps the first music many had heard in eons, because some barely nodded to the rhythm of his mournful cadence.

Orpheus approached the black palace of the god of the Underworld. It shone with gold and silver and was studded with gems from the deep mines of its god, rising above him to disappear into the shadowy invisible cavern roof. No one stopped him, still playing his lyre, as he strode into the very throne room of Hades, who sat on his throne with his queen Persephone at his side. He could even feel her sadness as she looked at him. Then Orpheus stopped strumming his lyre when he stood before the God of Death whose face was so dim despite the great flowing beard that resembled glacial ice. Orpheus could not see the god's eyes which were darker than the blackest coal, but he felt their curiosity and coldness go through him with a fearful trembling.

"Why did you stop playing, Orpheus? I know why you are here." The voice of Hades was the deep sound of a distant earthquake underfoot, the grating sound of a tombstone as it opened, and struck fear into Orpheus. This was madness, he thought.

"Yes, it is madness" Hades rumbled. "But you came anyway. You wish to see your wife Eurydice?"

"Yes-s-s," stuttered Orpheus. "Is that possible?" he dared asked.

"If you play more for me, Orpheus."

Orpheus placed his lyre to his arms again and began to play, this time a different song but just as sad. Then as he played he watched the sympathetic eyes of Persephone look behind him and follow something moving toward him. He turned and his heart almost stopped as his hand fell from the strings. It was Eurydice! But how different! She was so pale and dim he could see right through her and she could not come any closer. Her eyes were weeping and she appeared unable to lift her arms toward him. No sound came from her moving lips but he could read his name there.

"Play!" came the Death God's command, and he did, quickly returning to his lyre. Orpheus played his heart out there, so full of love and loss that he moved Queen Persephone to tears. She too mourned her mother's loving absence, and the poppies in her hands fell to the floor. Orpheus felt the powerful desire of Hades to possess him and turned it into another part of his music, richly dark and moving, filled with plangency as if every note were a gem plucked from the god's mines, stolen and almost angry but deeply sorrowful. Hades almost laughed, a sardonic smile across his dim face for the first time as he spoke incredible words to the ears of Orpheus.

"You move me, Orpheus, and I thought my heart was dead as this kingdom of mine. I'll make a bargain with you, mortal."

Orpheus listened hard as he strummed, not believing his ears at first.

"If you want your wife back, you'll have to play your very best. Far, far better than this music. If you please me, Eurydice will accompany you back to earth, and her life will return when she passes outside this cavern high above into the sunlight. But on one condition…"

Orpheus tried not to look at Eurydice but he could feel her grief lighten alongside him as he played. Hades continued with a sly look on his features that Orpheus could barely read.

"…You must not look back, Orpheus! Eurydice will follow behind you all the way, a little back. She will then have the rest of what you mortals call your short life. The journey back will be long and you must only look ahead. But you have to move me like never before, make this cold heart beat to your music. Agreed?"

Orpheus could only nod assent. Persephone nodded too, almost pleadingly.

"Now I want to hear the saddest song in the world. Play!"

Orpheus concentrated with all his might on his lyre and plumbed the depths of his soul to play for Hades. He remembered his first disbelieving shock at finding Eurydice dying and put that rippling sorrow into his music. He added all his loss and heart wrenching numbness as he felt the god of death listening hard. He probed and found the divine sorrow of Persephone who missed her mother Demeter, and this caused even the god of death to sigh as her warm tears fell on his cold clenched hand. Orpheus reached out beyond the palace into the fields and woods where all the dead shadows of the once living were listening. He didn't know how, but

he gently pulled their compounded sadness and their memories of life into his music, making it even more complicated with counterpoint and notes that seemed to rise and fall with all the broken dreams and heartbreak of everyone who had ever lived. The music of Orpheus was so laden with despair and the missing of loved ones, the hunger to be touched again, the lost sunlight of life flashing through his beautiful music that all other sound stopped in the Underworld and Hades slumped on his throne, his great hoary head in his hands. As the most beautifully sad music that had never before or since been played came to a climax and then its last notes faded into echoes, Orpheus thought he even saw a tear fall on the white beard of Hades himself, who was so very still.

Orpheus dared not breathe and the echoes almost ceased. He knew Persephone was sobbing quietly. Hades did not say a word or even lift his head. But he lifted his hand and dismissed Orpheus with an outward wave. Orpheus did not want to miss his only chance. He looked ever so quickly over at the shadow of Eurydice and knew she was just slightly more substantial, less diaphanous as if the dim light was reflecting more. She nodded with what must have been hope, although the dead were hopeless he knew. Shuddering, Orpheus turned quickly and almost stumbling ran out of the palace. He ached to look back, but he didn't. Holding his lyre and barely strumming he fled along the way he had come, feeling the now the grateful sympathy of all the shadows around as he left the huge cavern and returned through the Gate of Hell. Kerberos raised his head and barely growled as Orpheus ran by, listening for a second growl behind him. It didn't come, and this worried him. He heard no footsteps behind him and gritted his teeth, Could he trust the word of the God of Death? He knew he had to. But it became increasingly difficult as he ascended, softly plucking his lyre all the way.

Finally Orpheus passed the dripping pools with their glowing rocks and the cave was touched by the light of the world far above. The cave above gradually brightened until he had to squint his eyes that had grown accustomed to darkness. But he was going mad with fear that Eurydice was not behind him, and he desperately wanted to turn around to check and see for himself. Still he didn't.

Orpheus burst out into the sunlight with his hands over his face shielding his blinded eyes, almost tumbling down over the rocks and gravel. He could take it no longer. He turned around with hungry eyes to the cave entrance from a little outside and below. There! Tears of joy sprang from his eyes.

Eurydice was there inside the cave, only a few yards to go. As beautiful as he had ever remembered her, she was becoming alive again. She was just about to pass into the light but the most horrified look came over her face as she reached out to him. Her mouth opened to shriek but no words came out. She hadn't made it. Orpheus had turned and looked too soon! Of course, Fool, he told himself, the dead have no footsteps!

"Eurydice!" he screamed. But Eurydice faded before his eyes and disappeared.