

## Gender, Agency, and Authorship in Voigt's *Orfe* and Block's "Orpheus"

As a Classicist, I find something special in the relationship of children's literature to Greek and Roman mythology. While "literature for grown-ups" may be punctuated here and there with works engaging Classical myth, children's literature offers a steady stream of texts presenting, using, and transforming ancient tales. It is in children's literature that Classical myth continues to be a living tradition. Within children's literature we can broadly gesture to at least four different approaches to myth. Of course, anthologies of stories are a staple offering, but there are also works like the Percy Jackson series which incorporate diverse mythological elements in a new narrative. We could use Stephanie Spinner's *Quiver* (a rendition of the myth of Atalanta) as an example of a third category: texts which reinvent an ancient tale within a re-envisioned antiquity or otherwise imaginary setting. And lastly we have works like *The Fat Girl* (written by Marilyn Sachs and inspired by Pygmalion) which transplant mythological stories into modern-day environments. In all of these categories, authors see the perennial potential of myth: although authors use ancient elements, they also vary them so that the myths can say—in part—what the authors want them to say. In its variety of engagement with Classical myth, children's literature attests the malleability that lies at the heart of myth as a discourse amenable to adaptation and transformation. Children's literature based on myth participates in the long-standing, dynamic conversation between what a story has traditionally said and what an author would like it to say now.

Despite the range of experimentation we find in children's mythological literature, one kind of transformation is relatively rare: authors almost never change the gender of the characters in the mythological stories. I find this lack-of-tinkering striking, and perhaps it is a marker of the degree to which we use gender and notions of gendered behavior as primary

indicators of identity—whether they’re indicating the identity of a character or of a whole story. For instance, in *The Fat Girl*, we know that the main character, Jeff, is the stand-in for Pygmalion partly because he’s a he; similarly, we know that the story itself is a rendition of the Pygmalion myth partly because it concerns a male who tries to fashion a female according to his aesthetic ideals. We may consider ourselves separated from the ancient Greeks and Romans in many ways, but in maintaining the gender distinctions of these traditional stories we’re more similar than different. Here I will consider two texts which do change the genders of characters as they retell the myth of Orpheus: Cynthia Voigt’s novel *Orfe* and Francesca Lia Block’s “Orpheus” story in the *Girl Goddess #9* collection. Both of these texts fit into the last category I mentioned: they both take a myth and translate it into contemporary and non-fantastic terms; Voigt’s *Orfe* is set in 1990s New York, and Block’s “Orpheus” is set in 1990s Los Angeles. In some ways I may be critical of the repercussions of the gender changes in these texts—but I want to say up-front that any critique is grounded in an underlying appreciation of Voigt and Block’s willingness to push at this particularly tenacious, and potentially limiting, parameter of myth.

Our understanding of the myth of Orpheus comes primarily from the Roman poets Vergil and Ovid.<sup>1</sup> Although Vergil and Ovid’s versions differ in a number of ways, they both assign agency along gendered lines. Eurydice is consistently passive: she is killed by a snake, won from death by Orpheus, and returned to the dead when Orpheus looks back at her during their ascent from Hades. In Vergil’s account, Eurydice does act in a few instances, but even then she is reacting to the prior actions of men: she encounters the fatal snake because she is running away from an unwanted pursuer, and she delivers a parting speech to Orpheus after he has looked back and lost her. By contrast, the ancient Orpheus is active: he charms inanimate

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<sup>1</sup> Vergil, *Georgics* 4.453-525; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.1-85 and 11.1-66.

objects with his music and convinces the gods to bend the rules of the Underworld. Even when Orpheus is less than efficacious, his actions shape events. He looks back and loses his spouse, and his choice to eschew female company after the second loss of Eurydice leads to his death at the hands of the Thracian women he has spurned. Vergil and Ovid give us an Orpheus who may not always be successful, but who exercises his agency to an exceptional degree. When Voigt and Block retell this story, female characters are cast as Orpheus figures—but the switch in gender is not accompanied by a tidy transfer of active and passive roles. When Orpheus becomes a woman, she no longer has such emphatic agency.

Don't get me wrong: Voigt's Orfe is still decidedly special. Although she does not defy the boundary of life and death, she does refuse to recognize the limiting (and cruel) rules of the school-room and play-ground where we (and the narrator, Enny) first meet her. She prompts others to activity. She encourages Enny to stand up to bullies and then later, when Enny is in college, to become the manager of her band. Orfe's music also motivates its listeners: people want to dance when they hear it—and afterwards they want to donate food, say hello to a stranger, do something. Since she serves as a motivator, Orfe might seem like a powerful actor or exerciser of agency, but Voigt presents her as an unmoved mover of others more than one who moves herself. Voigt's Orfe is important because she inspires others. Her message and her music are more than, bigger than—and maybe even other than—herself.

Orfe's boyfriend is Yuri, and this male, modern-day Eurydice is more active and empowered than his ancient, female counterpart. In his relationship with Orfe, he is the more experienced partner; he takes on the role of patient teacher as Orfe learns about her love for him. Yuri cooks dinners, does most of the talking, and proposes marriage. But Yuri's agency is complicated by an addiction to drugs—and his addiction is the Underworld to which he is bound.

Yuri pulls himself out of the cycle of addiction once because of his love for Orfe. Orfe serves as a kind of motivational beacon for him—again, not acting herself so much as inspiring someone else to act. Voigt’s Yuri has more ability to self-determine than Vergil or Ovid’s Eurydice, and even when addiction compromises his autonomy, Voigt presents addiction as a push-pull between compulsion and choice.

Yuri’s exercise of choice becomes crucial at a turning-point of the story. Friends from Yuri’s days of addiction come to the wedding celebration, and the cake they give to Yuri is laced with dope. When Yuri returns to the drug-house, Orfe goes to the house as well. Her music and love almost succeed in getting Yuri to leave, but as they are walking down the hall of the house, someone reminds Yuri, “It hurts, man. You know how bad it hurts” (151). Yuri’s resolution is dissolves. He looks back to his past and is lost to Orfe forever. At this critical moment in the myth, agency has migrated to remain with the male character. We could even say that Voigt has heightened the agency of the male character at this important point. When the ancient Orpheus looks back, it could be interpreted as a temporary lapse of judgement or control. Voigt makes sure that Yuri’s looking back counts as his decision.

After Yuri’s relapse, Orfe plays one final concert with her band. When her fans climb the bleachers to try to reach her, the structure collapses and Orfe dies. Orpheus’ ability to charm through music becomes fatal for Orfe. Although Orfe dies, her music lives on. Enny tells us that the rest of band, using Orfe’s last compositions as a springboard, leap into musical history. Orfe’s music doesn’t identify her as much as exceed her. Voigt does much to depersonalize Orfe’s art: the young Orfe hopes to perform music that is “like fire, like ice” (10); Enny tells us that one of Orfe’s songs “floated like light” (26); and the music of the final concert is described as the song of the cosmos, “maybe what the stars and planets call out to one another across the

empty reaches of space” (144). Orfe becomes the medium for an elemental or transcendent force, and in her death she is figured more as a martyr than a hero. This is a marked difference from the ancient Orpheus, whose music testifies to his own virtuosity. Music is the particular expression of the ancient Orpheus’ heroism; like Hercules’ strength, it’s his identifying attribute. But musical ability is not, ultimately, something Voigt’s Orfe has; instead, music—temporarily—has her, and she is in its service.

With Francesca Lia Block’s short story “Orpheus,” we jump from the east coast to the west coast. In Block’s rendition, the city of Los Angeles looms as the Underworld which holds the young woman narrator. Indeed, Los Angeles has destroyed her model friend, Jacaranda, who is already dead at the start of the story. The narrator sees a possibility for escape in a charismatic musician whom she calls “Orpheus.” Although the one night she spends with him feels revelatory, the inspiration he seems to offer is not ultimately enabling: she feels chronically insufficient, silent, “strangled” (177). And she becomes (literally) love-sick. This Orpheus is not going to rescue our narrator.

Indeed, the narrator’s naming of the musician “Orpheus” ends up being largely an ironic red herring. When the narrator later meets him in a hip club, people treat him more like a celebrated denizen of the Underworld than one who crosses its boundaries and breaks its rules. Although the narrator holds out a final hope that she will spend one more night with a man whose music might “resurrect” the city (180), he leaves the club with another woman. The narrator watches him go—and he, not giving her a second thought, does not look back. In the ancient myth, the look back leads to separation, but here it would have brought the two together. In a way, the musician’s choice of companion for the evening confirms his non-Orphic status: in

the ancient myth, Orpheus spurned the Thracian women, a decision which led them to attack and dismember him; in Block's story, the musician chooses to go home with a woman whose recent role in a music video had her pretending to slaughter the lead singer. This non-Orpheus opts for a Thracian woman over our narrator.

Though she can imagine herself as Eurydice, the narrator must become her own Orpheus. She will take herself to Berkeley, enroll in a creative writing program, and find a voice for herself as well as for girls like her dead friend Jacaranda. To the extent that the narrator is presented as writing this story, we know she has succeeded—and though Jacaranda cannot really be brought back to life, our narrator does reanimate her artistically: not only does the narrator commemorate her friend, but she reports Jacaranda's thoughts as direct speech, making her alive on the page. We can contrast this with some photographs of Jacaranda taken by a vampiristic male photographer who presents her as frozen on film even when she's still alive.

Block complicates the agency of the ancient Orpheus by making the narrator both Orpheus and Eurydice, rescuer and rescued, subject and object. The last sentence of the story—conveying the narrator's feelings right after the musician has not turned back to look at her—crystallizes the ambivalent state of her agency. She writes, "I stand here waiting. To disappear or sing" (181). Simultaneously Orphic and Eurydicean, the narrator could become a subject who discovers her own song, or she could vanish in the absence of the musician's gaze. In this final sentence Block presents these as opposed possibilities, either the one or the other. Because the narrator has not disappeared, we may be tempted to see the trajectory of the story as one which has moved the narrator from passive object to active subject...but I don't think it's that easy of a call. Even when imagining her empowered self, the narrator builds fashion and looks into her self-description. The entire story is only seven pages long (with generous spacing and large

font)—and yet in that time the narrator describes two different outfits she actually wears and another two which she imagines wearing in the future. Here is the narrator's vision of herself at Berkeley: "I will go to campus alone dressed in antique silk slippers and beat-up cowboy boots and gypsy beads, and I will study poetry. I will sit on the edge of the fountain in the plaza and write" (179). And her vision of her return to LA: "Someday I will come back down here and find him. I will wear white charmeuse satin and a crown of gardenias and baby's breath. I will be barefoot on stage" (179). She thinks about what she will do as much as she thinks about what she will look like doing it. Of course, we can interpret the narrator's clothing as a form of self-expression, a tangible sign of her making-of-self both inside and out, but there is a tricky balance here, and I feel like it may tip toward the narrator treating herself partly as an object, a phenomenon to be pictured, seen, and admired, even in her own mind's eye. This kind of tension between the narrator as both subject and object, active and passive, is present throughout the story and, with these flashes forward, beyond it.

Compared to their ancient counterparts, the female Orpheuses of Block and Voigt are relatively more successful. Although Voigt's Orfe does not rescue Yuri from the drug-house, it is through no fault nor short-coming of her own: do as she might, it's up to Yuri. And if we judge by the story's very existence, Block's narrator succeeds in rescuing herself and bringing Jacaranda back to life on the page. And yet, almost paradoxically, despite their relative efficacy, neither of these female Orpheuses is endowed with the persistent and heroic agency of the male mythological figure from antiquity. We might attribute this partly to the fact that Voigt and Block set their stories in the present day. Agency can't be as starkly assigned in "the real world" in which multiple people are simultaneously acting, acted upon, and reacting. The mythological Orpheus seems all the more an active subject because he is paired with a Eurydice who is made

ultra-passive, even by ancient standards. By contrast, Voigt and Block create Eurydice figures who have the capacity to act, and the result is a dynamic interplay rather than a strict dichotomy.

Voigt and Block may also temper Orpheus' traditional heroism in order to valorize a different activity: the writing of one's own story. Block's narrator chooses her own future and becomes a double author—not only of the text we read, but also of the life she decides to live. In this regard, she is like Enny, Orfe's business-major best-friend who narrates Voigt's novel. Enny may tell us explicitly about Orfe, but she simultaneously tells us a lot about herself and the choices she has made. Orfe is undoubtedly a catalyst for Enny's actions, but Enny stands up for herself on the play-ground and later perseveres as the band's manager, making her way amid sexists and jerks; she breaks up with a boyfriend who belittles her; and she maintains her integrity when she realizes that she, too, loves Yuri. Voigt and Block give us narrators who have human limitations and conflicting desires, but these young women own their experiences, make a bid for themselves, and claim their own voices. The self-authorship of real-world women replaces the marvelous acts of a mythical man.

Rebecca Resinski

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