

Orpheus:

A Closet Drama in Three Acts

The Characters

Orpheus, a musician
Eurydice, an oak nymph and his intended bride
First Shepherd
Second Shepherd
Third Shepherd
First Ciconian Woman
Second Ciconian Woman
Third Ciconian Woman
A Guide
Charon, the ferryman of Styx
Hades, the king of the underworld
Persephone, his queen
Calliope, mother of Orpheus
First Woman of Lesbos
Second Woman of Lesbos

The Sister Wood Nymphs of Eurydice
The Eight Sister Muses of Calliope

Act I

Scene I

[lights up on Orpheus reclining with his lyre in the woods of Thrace – he plays and sings, listened to by wood nymphs and the first and second shepherds]

Orpheus:

*When Phoebus set this gold lyre in my hand,
Each note did seem to me as stranger's speech,
Each lyric line a sweet phrase out of reach,
And music's art a loved but foreign land;*

*And said I sadly such, but god replied:
"Thy mother shall thee teach the ways of words:
From foremost Muse the rich verse shalt thou learn
Whilst my own wisdom serve as perfect guide*

*"In bending to the strings thy fingertips –
And thus mightst thou transform to bard divine
Beneath a living sun and sacred skies:
A font welling with beauty, from whose lips*

*"All heaven's songs with glory shall proceed.
And therefore languish not, dwell not in gloom:
My music shalt thou play until thy doom,
Whene'er it come – the mournful melody*

*"And gladsome strains alike." So of good cheer
My heart swelled; and that lock which sealed the door
'Twixt me and poetry aligned its wards,
And through that first gate stepped I, free of fear:*

*A prince of Thrace, and pupil of those chords
And rhyming turns which startle and bewitch.
The lucid lessons sped without a hitch;*

The eagle of my art flapped high and soared,

*For bold Calliope from morn 'til eve
And Phoebus eke taught ever by my side,
Showing the paths to where sweetness abides,
Those golden paths where souls, o'erwhelmed, shall weep*

*Upon their trek to bright Elysian groves
After the scythe hath swept their lives from earth –
Those tears which stain the land that breeds rebirth,
Those tears which gorgeous asphodel shall soak*

*Amidst the feet of poets true who live
And entertain the blessed ones on those swards.
No lover took I while I plied my chords,
No scions to the future did I give,*

*For ever always music proved my love,
And sweet perfection in my melody
My only longing: errors made me weep,
But to such constant course I closely stuck,*

*Until at last the student was released,
Now past his years of youthfulness' full bloom.
Apollo said: "Oh take thy song and tune,
And seek a worthy peace and worthy ease,*

*"Now thou hast mastered all: a wife and home,
A place where children shall, in time, attend
Those happy notes thy throat and taut strings lend –
Some place to be the last verse of thy poem.*

*"Go, Orpheus, and seek!" And so I left
My mother and the god, with rich sounds crammed
In brain and fingers. O'er the silent lands
I played my way... 'til here I came to rest:*

This selfsame bower, this shepherds' paradise,

*This haunt of all ye nymphs – ye pleasant souls! –
And made this idyll-copse my fair abode,
Extracting from all listeners such sighs*

*As should keep leaves and stalks in constant sway
And waft wide Thrace's stretch with loving breath.
But my own sighs joined not with thine – unless
I should meet one who snatched my heart away...*

*As did indeed – oh glad event! – transpire:
There lives one nymph, one goddess-shape, who's stol'n
My love from being music's all alone:
Now meek Eurydice, as well my lyre,*

*Hath ownership o'er inmost citadel
Which forms the stronghold of my fleeting years.
One month it's been since first I fondly peered
Into her bashful eyes – and down a well*

*Did seem to plummet, towards I know not where –
Except, where'er it be, she also dropped.
But hush, oh bard! and let thy strains be stopped –
To look towards love's strange depths, I should not dare.*

First Shepherd:

See, Orpheus, thy oak nymph comes in haste,
Fain to repair her tardy audience.

[*enter Eurydice*]

Eurydice:

I am too late! I see it in these eyes –
Shepherds' and sister nymphs' – which stare at me,
Chiding my dilatory daisy-bed,
My sluggard ears which heard not song begin
Beneath sleep's quilt – e'en though the one who sings
Is mine intended, and I ought have been
The first here settled.

Orpheus:

Think not that these eyes –
Not mine, at least – do chide thee: no, they smile
At how breathless thou art, how thou upbraid'st
Thy blameless self for sleep's blank innocence.

Eurydice:

It was the poem, I know, thou wrot'st of late
With lavish diligence – it told thy youth,
How thou didst learn the ways of strains and lyre:
Thou told'st me thou wouldst sing it late this morn –
And yet I come too late. I blame the grape;
I blame Sleep's tight embraces.

Thy soft lines

Even through slumber startled me: I ran
And saw the woodland beasts far off ahead
Move towards thy notes, as fain as I to list,
By virtue of four legs more swift than I,
Though love impelled my speed. Then, I declare –
If dream-thought lingered not past when I woke –
I saw while I was dashing, plants and trees
Run madly towards thy song! Aye, first they strained
And bent, as though a wild wind pressed them down,
Eager to move towards music – desp'rate, crazed –
Stretching their limbs and twigs, until at last,
Frustrated they were anchored, 'gan they then
To pull up roots from earth which clung so fast –
And with those feet, they hastened where we went,
Outpacing me! – and seemed it quite absurd,
Bested by yew, by ficus, tamarisk! –
Hoping to hear as much, as close they could,
Those leafy things thy stanzas.

Far behind

They left me, beasts and shrubs, somehow so fleet,

While I, thy love, seemed hindered in the knees,
And somehow slow and hampered... as when we
In dreams grope towards some good so clumsily,
By unknown checks restrained, made lost, or slowed –
Or when, indeed, we flee some terror's grasp,
Some torment close behind us... but mid-run
Our legs and feet 'gin falter steadily,
'Til soon the horror's breathing on our neck.

Orpheus:

Thou must have dreamt these things, my love – no beasts
Nor walking flora's come: either thou sawst
Such strange sights whilst thou lay'st yet in thy bed,
Sleep's phantom land observing – or thou kept'st
Some remnant of its spell within thy brain
While thou didst run, and thought'st such prodigies
A real part of the world.

Eurydice:

It must be so –
I feel abashed... now doubly.

Orpheus:

I might guess
Our matrimony, so near to begin,
Confounds thee somewhat, and thy nervous heart
Imparts thee sweet confusions.

Second Shepherd:

As my eyes
Confound me bravely – 'less in truth arrive
Three raving women through this yonder grove:
Three devotees of Bacchus, drunk with lust,
Whose fiery aspect something ill portends.

[enter the Ciconian women]

First Ciconian Woman:

Roving the hills, imbibing, loose of robes,
Swearing our love of pleasure, came to us
Such melodies of strings we ne'er have heard
For subtle beauty, and such voice and poem
Could not release our senses: ravished thus,
We've hastened here, unable else to do,
So mad desiring close to draw our ears
To lyre's music – and how hard we groan
That measures cease!

Second Ciconian Woman:

Why dost thou not play more,
Man with thy instrument? Thou lured'st us here,
And now dost torture us? leav'st us bereft
Of such exquisiteness?

Third Ciconian Woman:

We heard thy tale,
Musician – and we see how handsome thou'rt,
Thy skin and face like Youth's divinity,
Thy form a perfect song-shape to the eye –
Such that we somewhat less mourn stanzas' end,
Now that our glimpse of thee redeems the loss.

Orpheus:

What have ye in your heads? You loom too close,
Ye libertines of woodlands.

Second Ciconian Woman:

In our heads?
What have we ever else but riot, drink,
And our own pleasure?

Eurydice:

Heavens! They intend
To steal my love away!

Third Ciconian Woman:
A rival! Oh,

Let's beat her!

First Ciconian Woman:
Grab her hair!

Second Ciconian Woman:
Tear at her face!

[they approach Eurydice – Orpheus moves to protect her]

Orpheus:
[to shepherds] My friends – your fists and staves!

[the shepherds chase off the women, while the nymphs hide for terror – the lovers find themselves alone]

Eurydice:
I feared they'd bear
Thee off by force, and have their way with thee.

Orpheus:
[teasing] What way, my love?

Eurydice:
Lascivious, and wrong.

Orpheus:
Wrong in itself? Or wrong since I have pledged
Myself to thee alone?

Eurydice:
Now thou dost play
Philosopher, as well thy strings?

Orpheus:
I play

Whate'er I play, only to play with thee:
Thou art my favorite harp; the one the god
Set in my fingers hath not thy delights,
Not half thy sweet responses.

Eurydice:
Yet I am

Oft out of tune, and harsh.

Orpheus:
Even thy jars

Have more the world in them than strings which charm
These hinterlands to slumber.

Eurydice:
Now thou find'st

Too much in one fond girl... I think I must
Not see thee 'til the wedding.

Orpheus:
Thou mightst leave

And see me not – yet then I might thee blame,
For even absent thee, my mind presents
Thy constant figure, and if thou seest not
Poor Orpheus likewise, I'll 'gin to doubt
Whether thou lov'st me.

Eurydice:
Now, no more of wit:

Keep thy tongue silent, and keep to thyself
'Til morrow. We'll meet here again at dawn
To solemnize our hearts' bent.

Orpheus:
Thou mightst leave;

I shan't – this very plot I'll sleep upon,
Impatient of the morning, restless e'en
While sinks my soul in rest.

Eurydice:
Adieu – and play
Upon thy harp now; I'm an instrument
Gone from thy hands – until I shall be set
Once more in them, forever.

[exit Eurydice]

Orpheus:
[sits and plucks his lyre absent-mindedly] Hymen, teach
This new song to me – one I only start
To learn with feeble mast'ry. I shall be
Thy studious pupil, if thy lessons reach
This heart in tumult, anxious to acquire
All that thou know'st: somewhat my eagerness
Misserves me in its zeal, and I misfoot
Thy steps of strange progression...

But, no mind.
Some skills demand our practice – while some else
Merely our suff'ring heart, forbearing's strength,
And soul which can with its mad self sit still.

[he stretches on the grass and falls asleep – lights down]

Scene II

[lights up on Orpheus – he wakes]

Orpheus:
Just ere the dawn... Is this how seemed the world
When first created: gold and soundless, pure –
A newborn of time's womb? This stillness breathes
More fine than any descant. Every song
And lyre I lay aside before its grace,
Before the sky's throne, winds and bright-rimmed clouds –

Before this strange dark silence, shade which lives
Yet in the west. Nothing seems to stir
Except myself. The birds keep yet abed,
The robin rests his throat – though I might swear
I've heard his song, the starling's too, these hours,
Sparrow's and lark's. It seems so solemn now,
So eerie-somber, while the great skies pass
In this full quiet – as though sadness bids
The land keep voiceless, mute with its gold thoughts
In dreams' cold kingdoms.

[he plays softly – enter First Shepherd]

First Shepherd:
[aside] Now's the last I'll see
Of this man while his thoughts yet breathe full young,
For I bring grievous news. He's not aware
I'm near yet... I shall let him play his tune,
His wordless song which praises gentle earth,
Praises his life. I'll linger on this hill,
Letting him yet believe that all is well.

[Orpheus finishes his music]

Oh say, friend, list to me.

Orpheus:
How dost thou, man?
Are thy companions risen?

First Shepherd:
List, poor man...
Listen to doleful words.

Orpheus:
Doleful? What dole
When this day I shall marry, and all ye
Of fields and woods shall celebrate sweet rites

Of joyful union?

First Shepherd:
Words which shall undo
Such revelries.

Orpheus:
Speak then – though I now dread
Why thou hast come.

First Shepherd:
When thou hast heard, thou'lt swear
The Fates have pledged themselves thy foe.

Orpheus:
Speak out.
These ears can bear to hear thee.

First Shepherd:
Then, I say –
Thy love is dead.

Orpheus:
She – dead? Eurydice?

First Shepherd:
Is't so.

Orpheus:
Tell me what fell.

First Shepherd:
The hap was cruel –
A stray blow from fiend Fortune. When she woke
One hour ago, I was already up,
Sound sleep eluding me most of the night.
I watched her some ways off... She'd made much wreaths
And wedding crowns and bracelets all last day

Together with her sisters – these lay strewn
All o'er the grassy plots where they had slept,
Sweet flower-circlets. Now, I heard her speak
Somewhat with sister nymphs, saying they'd need
Of more for celebrations – for from far
All 'round would cousin dryads come that day:
Many the guests, and all would have their need
Of handsome decoration: so she 'gan
In one rank field to pluck all flow'rs she found,
Her kin elsewhere, on other swards. All still,
Soundless the land, I heard her every step,
Each swish of dress, each rip of bloom from stalk,
Her humming aimless ditties.

Suddenly

A cry she gave – and flowers fell from hand.
She straightened up, looked down. Her form 'gan sway,
As when a ship doth list; and I approached,
Wond'ring what was. She seemed to touch her foot,
But straight collapsed; and then I rushed to her
And saw her in the grass. Her breath came quick,
Her skin grew pale; and though she looked at me,
She could not move her lips.

I saw a snake

Wriggle away through flow'rs – and suddenly
The realization struck. From out her foot
Four small red holes seeped blood. I held her in
Mine arms while closed her eyes.... I need not speak
What happened then.

Orpheus:

Where is she?

First Shepherd:

Where she lay,
Among soft weeds – but while we speak, the hands
Of my two fellows wrap white cerements

Around her sadly. None knows yet but they,
And thou, and I, what's happened.

[*kneels*]
This bitter news far, wide.

Orpheus:
Soon shall spread

First Shepherd:
All those who'd thought
A marriage festival would grace this morn
Will look upon her corpse, and sadly set
Their wedding gifts around her.

Orpheus:
Even now
Her soul flits down to where the boatman waits,
But shall not pass 'til she's within her grave.

First Shepherd:
What dost thou wish?

Orpheus:
No company. No talk.
I'll hide some hours.

First Shepherd:
I dread the rising sun
Which shall reveal to all the grim event.

Orpheus:
Go thou, tend to my love.

First Shepherd:
Thou wilt not come
To look on her?

Orpheus:
I could not bear the sight,

Not now.

First Shepherd:

Go where thou know'st thy pain shall get
Some balm of solitude. I will go back
To join my fellows who attend the nymph
And tell the dismal tale as folks arise.

[exit shepherd – Orpheus moves aimlessly – he leans against a tree]

Orpheus:

I'd lie down, but an anxiousness forbids
My rest or sleep. I must move here and there,
Or lean and deep respire... Is this thing grief,
This trembling and this helpless wandering?
Some of that poison sure hath breached my veins
Which killed Eurydice.

Oh! Just the name,
And seems she here before me! Real as life,
But only figment – figment which yet glints
As though in radiant heyday.

Past the god
Who gave my instrument – beyond his tier
Within the heavens – I have sensed there lives
Some quiet tenderness upon the sky:
A gaze, a mind, a heart, an unthought thing...
But farther vastly than the sea floor's reach
Or utmost height of mountains. My love was
To me a little mouse, a little hare,
The gentlest thing beneath the wide, wide vault
Which is, at last, a coffin's lid o'er all.
The meek things die; they suffer while that gaze –
Which might not e'en be gaze – moves not a whit.
I breathe, I breathe... my life's within me yet –
But oh! how frail this shell which keeps it in!

[enter the Guide, a nondescript young woman]

Who art thou, girl?

Guide:
I have a name, but I'll
Not tell thee straight away.

Orpheus:
Be gone, I wish
No company.

Guide:
Thou wilt say otherwise
When thou learn'st where I'll lead thee.

Orpheus:
I would stay
Just where I am, and pass not 'fore the sight
Of all the pitying world.

Guide:
We'll not walk down
A road where most souls go – at least not while
They care to pity any but themselves.

Orpheus:
What mean you?

Guide:
Man who sorrows, I shall take
Thee to a place thou mayst see thy beloved.

Orpheus:
Leave me alone. I'll not.

Guide:
E'en if thou mightst,

By going to her, bring her back with thee?

Orpheus:

The place her soul has gone, one may not hope
To bring her back.

Guide:

If thou wert anyone
But such a bard as thou'rt, it would be so.
If thou com'st with me, I will show a way
Thou'lt have thy love again.

Orpheus:

Much I misdoubt
Such thing... yet what else might I think to do
In my condition: short of breath, afraid,
Unable to sit still?

Guide:

Enfold thy hand
With mine – I'll lead thee slowly down this way,
Which is, thou seest, a smooth and sloping path
Down to a calm, bright country.

Orpheus:

Past that way
There are the lower vales, ambiguous space,
And dark mists circling rocks.

Guide:

That is the place
Thou mightst recover her.

Orpheus:

Somewhat I fear
Those ridges, edges of that darkling tract,
Those sharp rocks, knife-like mountains, and such drops
As toward deep shadows plummet.

Guide:

Fog and smoke

And fumes and ghashtier breeze groan and lament
While pass they through the towers of stone which rise
Like pillars 'neath the world.

Orpheus:

Already thou

Begin'st to lead me, tugging at my hand.

Guide:

All that thou seest, and I see, is that stretch
So light and golden, leading down to dark.

Orpheus:

There's naught within mine ears now but a voice
Which saith: "Thou goest the way thy dread demands."

[*exeunt*]

Act II

Scene I

[lights up on the entrance to Hades, a dim and sinister portal – enter Orpheus and his guide]

Orpheus:

I feared our coming hither – now I quail
E'en more 'fore what thou show'st me. In this pit
All's quiet, save a low, unnerving moan
Which is wind's warning: "Move not towards this door;
It swallows thee." Down, down we went, and now
We stand halfway to horrors. Oft in dreams
Viewed I this threshold: frame and lintel look
Designed by mighty fate and stark decree,
The counterpart to heaven – hard as truth,
Inevitable as reason. Bronze-hard laws
Proclaim the uselessness of trek we've made,
For demons gibber: "All who pass this way
As ghosts, shall not return."

My love hath been
Interred by now, and so her soul hath crossed
That flood whose farther shore no living wight
Has ever viewed. The bitter deluge cleaves
Her shade from mine.

Guide:

Did not I say thou hast
Good cause for hope – more so than any soul
Else 'mongst the world, who might be parted from
Their most beloved?

Orpheus:

Explain then. What repeals
Harsh pitiless ways of gloom-land?

Guide:
Why – thy harp.

Thy very harp in hand.

Orpheus:
I did forget
I carried it... But, how –

Guide:
Thou dost know how.
What bars thee from thy love? The boatman wards
All those unburied, with no coin on tongue,
From passing o'er his river – but if thou
Conduct'st thy strings and voice such way as charms
Sweet fellows of the woods, and speak'st thy plaint
In doing such, with sorrow in thy chords
Such as no music's known – on earth, below,
Or in the heavens – then thou mayst just jab
Enough his dark soul that he'll punt thee 'cross
And set thee on far margin.

Orpheus:
It may be
Just as thou sayst... But what of terrors past
That Stygian swell? those horned things of much teeth,
The many-headed, ravenous for meat,
Who breed and hide in holes, torment the dead,
And would my trespass punish?

Guide:
Trust as well,
If thou keep'st at thy art, they shall submit,
Baffled and mollified. Did not the nymph
Who was so near thy bride, tell that wild beasts
Did long to hear thee? Brutes as well as gods
Thy magic harmonies, so subtly strummed,
Can soften to admiring – loosen hate,
Restrain their rage: for anything which thinks

And aught that feels, somewhere inside its life,
Hath pity and beauty's mem'ry.

Orpheus:

If I go,

Wilt thou come with me? For I'd hardly know
My way, e'en if, as sayst, dark things should drop
Before my harp's bright beams.

Guide:

It must not be,

Sweet man – for look thou what's been sternly traced
Upon this granite slab above the door:
“Relinquish Hope, all you who'd enter here.”
And therefore must I never cross this gate,
E'en though this far I've led thee.

Orpheus:

I cannot

Climb up such steep as just now we've gone down,
E'en were I bride to find, and break her bonds.
The dark inhabits all... Yet, I am calm,
As was I not when first Eurydice's
Sharp fall to lowest gloom was told. I breathe
And stand in utter stillness – harp's as light
As sunshine in my hand, and glows as doth
A torch of pure gold dawn.

Guide:

It shall thee lead

To where the lord and lady of this keep
Shall hear thy plea.

Orpheus:

My soles attach themselves

By turns to lower, lower steps which yearn
Towards utter blackness... Now the doorsill yawns
And I descend.

Guide:

Thy helplessness hath brought
Thee thus far, and shall bring thee farther still.

[exit Orpheus – lights down]

Scene II

[lights up on the shore of Styx – enter Orpheus]

Orpheus:

I am alone. I'd thought a grievous crowd
Of those not buried sure would wander here,
Imploring their sad need into mine ear,
Since I, still living, might when once above
Find corpses and, with blankets of the earth,
Wrap close those bodies. But it is a beach
All blank of consciousness... The ripples press
With pulse against the shingle, while the walls
Of granite and of darkness soar above –
The stone behind me, and infinitude
Black o'er the river.

Waves hypnotically
Pour on from out of nothing. I do fear
What apparition might this stream produce
From shadows: all the silence seems to wait
In expectation of a ghastly thing.

[enter Charon in his ferry]

Charon:

What's this? A man with glowing lyre in hand –
And still alive. Thou wishest death, perchance,
But not to slay thyself? 'Tis common, that;

Though few think here to travel, and few find
The proper route this way while yet they breathe.

Orpheus:

Thou'rt not so terrible. I'd feared a shade
Of flaming eyes and lacking any flesh:
Robed skeleton, fell wraith. But thou look'st mild,
Mysterious – like soul weary with years,
But keeping all he's seen concealed, unsaid.
Thou'rt ashen gray all over, as though dust
And cinders cloaked thee finely, cloth and skin.
I am a living man, but thou mistak'st
My cause – I do not come t'embrace that dark
Shrouding each region yonder: I would claim
One back from this dim pit, for she fell down
Just when her joyful dawn 'gan turn mid-morn
And ought she have enjoyed her bloom of day,
And I with her.

Most cruel, undue, unfair,
How Fate hath ta'en her! At her bridal hour,
Plucking those very blooms would grace the nymphs
Her sisters, who'd her nuptials attend,
A viper of the weeds, unseen, her foot
In innocence disturbed – then venomed tooth
Lashed out in brutal instinct, sent its ill
Fast swirling through her veins, undoing life
Of almost-bride, undoing bliss of groom,
Revealing monstrous face behind that mask
Which Nature wears – her peace and beauty all
Disguise that cloaks her horrid head! her eyes
And nose which hunt for prey, and fangs which feed
On her own children!

Ogress Nature I

Thy lord and lady shall plead to constrain –
Reverse her awful deed, cast back that one
So late clamped in her jaws, for pity's sake.

And for to ransom her who has my love,
I'll gladly sound these strings, which charmed the earth
And undid natural law.

Charon:
Such law undid?

How so?

Orpheus:
Thou look'st upon the very hands
And harp which drew wild animals to list
To harmony and concord, when ere this
The untamed and unbeautiful blood-feast
Was all their world – somehow my lyre's sound
Entered like silver needle through the brain
Of each fierce creature, and made understand
What's savage, something higher. Such heard I
From my own dear intended; what is more,
She claimed the trees and foliage moved swift
To gather towards my notes... I disbelieved,
Thinking her dreaming – but no more misdoubt,
For somehow, I know strumming shall sedate
All fiends I find here – and if such as ye
Might fall before these golden sounds, why not
Mere flora and the brutes?

Charon:
Thou think'st I'll fall
Before thy instrument, as though it were
Some sword to fright the dead or those who guard
Grim paths to Hades' kingdom? Thou'lt not cross
This gloomy tide; 'tis law, by him decreed
Who drew worst lot of three.

Orpheus:
I think I'll play
And watch for thy response.

Charon:
Play on, and sing.

Orpheus:

[plays and sings slowly]

*The steps lead ever downward past this sea,
Down sloping stones and drops to bitter shelves
Where long ago the carnal-greedy fell,
Where whirlwinds and tourbillions cause them grief.*

*A million souls impaled lie in a briar,
And oh! how fondly would I join their pain
With mourning loud, if love I can't reclaim:
Bleeding for woe, pinned fast to central fire.*

*Immensities of space! – through night, so swift
Fly gibbering faces, heads propelled by wings,
And devil-shapes which flutter in thick rings
Above the castle towards which sorrows drift.*

*A terror stalks this earth, stalks seas and skies.
The mountains worn by rain, the stars which spend
Their flame, flow ever onwards towards some end –
Which is an endless, endless, muted cry.*

[Charon has slumped in his ferry]

He sleeps – or rather, in a trance he's leant
Against his punting pole. My harp hath charmed
This foremost sentry... Now, if I move soft
In how I enter boat, disturb not guard,
Move hands of his – I might just take his stick
And push us both across the black-foam tide.
I'll act his office, enter where she weeps,
My tear-eyed sweet one, somewhere 'midst this dark.

[lights down as Orpheus pushes off in the ferry]

Scene III

[lights up on the throne room of Hades and Persephone – enter Orpheus]

Hades:

Who comes before us?

Orpheus:

One who'd have thine ear,
Oh prince of Erebus.

Persephone:

Thou dar'st approach
Us dreadful pair?

Hades:

Few living, and none dead
Make bold as thou dost.

Persephone:

Seest thou flames and spires,
Oh rash man? Hear'st thou cursing, gnashing mouths,
This terror all around thee?

Orpheus:

I do hear
And see, dire queen.

Hades:

He bows low toward the ground
For horror, and for meekness.

Persephone:

I would call
My ministers of torment.

Orpheus:

They are here

Already: everywhere, they follow me.

Hades:

Thou bear'st in hand a lyre.

Orpheus:

'Tis the means

By which I crossed that gulf of boundless black
The boatman keeps – and by which Cerberus
Was made to cease his bark, and nod three heads
In stupefied enchantment.

While I walked

And played, and sang, the dark forms of this world
Drew close to listen: flying shapes like birds,
Or bats or insects – but not quite such things –
Landed upon my shoulder, or hopped round
As trod I gently 'cross the barren floors,
By plucked chords fascinated; while all those
Chimeric foot-beasts, ground's subconscious crowd,
Likewise did trail me, giving up their growls,
And followed me in innocence like whelps
Trailing a parent. Fiends turned gentle things
Within my circle – imps which should have lunged
To thieve my spirit dawdled in their dens,
Enchained by guiltless ardors, blissful dreams;
And each blaspheming creature, mad, grotesque,
Did seem to slip his cruelty.

Thus I came

Down spiraling stairways, leaving beasts behind
As steps grew narrow, slipp'ry – all this way
(Long years of walking, seemed it) until shone
This castle's fires, far distant. Now I kneel,
Revealing key by which I turned thy door:
One humble soul, one simple man of song
Who strong implores compassion.

Hades:
For thyself?

Fear'st thou some torment after thou shouldst die
For heinousness in life – and so thou begg'st
Forbearance, while yet fleshed?

Orpheus:
Aye, for myself –

And for one else: compassion, though not 'gainst
Such agonies as here the wicked dure
In endless retribution: no, I plead
For mercy for an innocent – and for
Her innocent beloved, who with her grieves
That they are sep'rate.

Persephone:
Thou speak'st of a death
Of one was precious to thee.

Hades:
Some mischance
Now binds her to our bleakness.

Orpheus:
Nature seemed
So vernal-mild, like spring... yet in each sleeve
And fold she hides a dagger: One such sting,
So well concealed – e'en on that first of days
Of happiness forevisioned – from its sheathe
With causeless rancor drew she, and she struck
One named Eurydice.

Persephone:
Below she clings
Fast to a stone, and weeps.

Orpheus:
Why should this world

Give life to love? Why slay us? crush our necks,
Cast us below, to darkness?

Persephone:
Well thou weep'st...

I weep as well.

Hades:
This gloomy land thou seest
Hath lived forever: since the world was made
These doors and halls have stood here. Fire may surge,
Or ocean flood, or frost, and sweep those realms
Of passing life above – but souls who sigh
And soft lament here, ever shall endure
'Neath adamantine roofs.

Orpheus:
I'll not believe
Thou tell'st me truly.

Hades:
Even I, a god
And king of subjects, like a fleeting wraith
Pass through this emptiness.

Orpheus:
Whate'er thou beest,
Or whate'er truth may be, I would put forth
My anguish and my wish.

Hades:
Thou wouldst reclaim
Thy love.

Orpheus:
For just that term she ought have lived;
Then she'll be thine again.

Hades:
My law is set,
And not for pity moves.

Orpheus:
Thou hast a heart:
Against my expectation, thou didst speak
Somewhat in sympathy... If thou art king,
Thy law is thine own will, and thou mayst break
Thine orders, as thy heart breaks.

Hades:
Should it break,
This crown I would renounce, flee castle's chair,
Be god of nothing. Love I understand,
And pity – but they serve the sorrow here,
And labor as my subjects.

Orpheus:
Thou shalt not
Let even one, most innocent in life,
Pass from thy chains some merest fleeting time –
Some years, some months – ere to the dark returns
Her gently glowing spirit?

Hades:
It shall glow
More brightly here – her sorrow is her soul;
Thy sorrow, thine.

Orpheus:
Thou art the horrid type
Of all man's cruelties: tyrants, murderers
From thee learn wickedness.

Hades:
It is the world,
Its origin immortal, which doth teach

This suffering unending.

Persephone:

Husband, think

How bold this man must be – what tender, sweet,
And awful strength divine he holds in him
To brave our kingdom. If he were to play
And sing to thee, thou surely wouldst relent,
Just as relented minions and those guards
Spaced 'cross our fearful empire.

Hades:

What song might

Sway eons-old remorselessness? I reign:
I say, musician, that thy love shall stay
'Til e'en the dark shall crumble.

Orpheus:

Oh relent,

Ye awful night! A thousand million years
Might pass, and disappear – and still I'd not
See her I love again.

Hades:

I view that hell

What yawns below thee.

Orpheus:

Useless is this harp,

Useless this music!

Persephone:

Husband – thou mayst reign,

But I as well bear scepter. Whilst I bide
These months beside thee, sitting on grim throne,
And coldness blows above, my word shall lift
An equal height to thine.

Hades:
'Tis true I reaped
Thy springtime self, my sovereignty to cleave
For winter's term – say on what thou dost wish
For sad musician... But if we divide
In our decrees, I fear one rod shall snap
And one crown break and tumble.

Persephone:
I proclaim
He take his love with him.

Hades:
This realm shall quake
And cave – thou bidst a thing unnatural.

Persephone:
Yet hear the rest: he shall not claim unearned
So dear a treasure. Let him prove how great
The love within him yearns, and he shall live
Once more with his intended.

Orpheus:
Whate'er be
Thy test or trial – speak.

Persephone:
[*to Orpheus*] When thou walk'st back
The way thou cam'st, back towards the realms of light
And sky and weather, as thou tak'st thy bride
Thou must not glimpse her. You shall go before
And she behind; and neither mightst thou speak
To her, nor she to thee. When thou hast reached
The sun or stars once more – and she as well –
Then thou mayst look upon her form again,
And greet her as a soul renewed to life,
And have thy love... But if thou once but look'st
On sweet Eurydice ere she's emerged

From lair of shadows – then shalt thou have lost
Thy sweet one for all time.

Hades:
This sentence I
Shall not oppose.

Orpheus:
I love thy word, oh queen:
How shudder all my nerves, how throb my veins –
How desp'rate was I! Oh, where doth she stay?
Where might I find her? And, another thought:
Thou sayst, queen, we mayn't speak while we depart
And neither might I turn to look on her –
But how, then, might I know she follows me,
And that 'tis not illusion, this bright hope,
This keen and anxious joy?

Persephone:
Thou know'st not one
Thing in this world. Just follow what I've told,
And look back when 'tis safe.

Hades:
We've granted more
Than thou hadst right to hope for.

Persephone:
Once begin'st
Upon thy leave, keep vision straight ahead.
Thy road goes winding, narrow, steep, and long.

Orpheus:
I shall do this, and trust she tracks my steps.

[Hades and Persephone vanish – lights down]

Scene IV

[lights up on Eurydice, sobbing in a dark place – enter Orpheus]

Orpheus:

Am I asleep? I look on thee again,
And do begin to think these worlds unreal –
Yet wondrous in so being! I'd accept
A thousand dreams o'er waking.

[he approaches]

Eurydice:
Love of mine?

Art come? How is this?... Oh, I fear, I fear –
Thou must be –

Orpheus:

No, I live. My harp I took
Across great granite regions, fields of stone
Where no man lives, and entered through that door
Thou took'st when thou wert taken from sweet light;
And as a living man did brave that night:
Firm front against the cold, mantel wrapped round,
Passing the eerie slabs.

Vast sea of hell
I played my lyre to cross, subduing him
Who asks for coin; and 'fore that awful pair
Who here hold sway, I did present myself,
Not fearing fire, not fearing what they'd bid
I must endure for thee, or for such rash
And reckless trespass. Ere I came to them,
I saw, sprawled 'cross the acres 'fore their tower,
Tityos: he who dared, on Hera's urge,
To try to Leto ravish. Now he howls
While vultures tear his liver; and all time
So shall he scream, enchained to blood-stained ground,

His torture all his being.

Sisyphus,

I saw him too – frustrated by his rock
That will not sit – it seeks the lower ground
Each time he perches it: He chased his stone,
Unhappy, cursing, toiling, chained somehow
To task that he might leave, if he but chose –
His grumbling filled my ears, and where I thought
At first to offer kind and soothing words,
I let him be, and hastened on my way,
Not trusting such deep sorrow as he spoke
Would chain me not as well.

These were the sights
Did nearly cast me back – what mind might dream,
Enact such tortures, even 'pon those souls
Most vile while living? Crimes last not for aye:
The body heals, or dies... the mind forgets...
For what, such torments? ceaseless, crammed with hurts
Which shall not close? I feared such pain whilst I
Made past the threshold towards high double throne,
For I did challenge Death itself, and dared
Dark boundaries to rupture.

Eurydice:

Yet thou'rt here,
Alive and whole, thy lyre not e'en scratched,
As beautiful as when I saw thee last –
Nay more so, for now boldness makes thee gleam,
And courage lends its luster to thy brow,
And love hath made thee angel-shining, grand:
More beauteous than gods. My hands I must,
Though they are cold and ghostly, hold thee with,
And use to press thee to me.

[*they embrace*]

Orpheus:

I still feel

The blood and heart inside thee: thou'rt not dead –
No, not at all! How many shades who live
In these dim regions throb still with their life,
As thou dost, warm and soft: a pining wight,
Gentle and yearning? Clasp me once again;
Clasp me amidst this gloom.

Eurydice:

I would embrace

Thee ever – fold thy soul into mine own –
And I begin to.

Yet, how long mightst thou
Remain with me? Though space and distance close
To naught at all – yet still, a wall's between
Our spirits: From this place I must not leave;
No, not e'en from this corner: 'tis decreed
By cruel king and his consort – no one goes
Who once hath been enslaved.

Orpheus:

Oh no, but hear

Concession I have won e'en from that lord
Who seemed as firm as steel: his lady swayed
His stubbornness, for she took pity on
Our anguish, and she argued well with him,
And did extract exception in our case:
This chance, this chance so excellent: thou mayst
Come back with me to life!

Eurydice:

How might it be?

Stern Fate undone?

Orpheus:

'Tis so.

Eurydice:
Doth even that
Foundation of all things buckle and bend,
Upsetting nature – spilling back its dead,
Reversing time, untying knot which binds
All flesh, all spirit?

Orpheus:
One small rip in things –
Which shall be mended after thou shalt pass
Back into summer's sweetness: that is all
Hath been permitted. Firm remains that hall
Which is three sisters' home; and strong yet stands
That tower of nature, destiny, and law.

Eurydice:
Then I may quit this gloom – walk hand in hand
With thee to sunlight?

Orpheus:
Yes... but I must tell
What terms the queen emplaced: I'll go before,
And thou shalt follow, for I must not look
On thee before thou com'st unto the light;
And neither might we speak 'til then. If I
Or thou do break these things, thou shalt remain
Where thou art now, no more to be reclaimed.
Such said the queen.

Eurydice:
Why so?

Orpheus:
Such hardship is
The price we bear for how fate hath been rent:
My proof of faith, submission of our souls,
Endurance of our hearts, our wracking nerves.
But I do trust that naught shall go awry:

I'll not look back 'til I am well outside
And thou must be as well... Clap hands o'er lips
And do not lose me.

Eurydice:
Walk with steps so slow
I cannot help but dog thee.

Orpheus:
And mine eyes
Shall swerve not from strict path.

Eurydice:
So then – turn round,
And trust in how Fates guide us.

Orpheus:
I shall look
Once more on thee once trial's gone behind,
And thou'rt restored to gladness.

Eurydice:
Lead, and pray
With every step, 'tis true, our miracle.

[Orpheus turns and exits, followed by Eurydice – lights down]

Act III

Scene I

[many years later – lights up on the second shepherd, an old man, weeping in the woods – enter the first shepherd, also old, and the third shepherd, a young man]

First Shepherd:

Oh friend, thou weep'st. Thy fountain-face doth wet
Two rose-red patches.

Second Shepherd:

If I weep, 'tis for
Most worthy cause the gods know.

First Shepherd:

Gods may know,
But we do not.

Second Shepherd:

Look ye in yonder swale,
In whose deep gully winds the Hebrus stream,
Just past this screen of poplars, rich with sun
On this rich day, when none might evil think
Hath crushed life's jewel of sweetness.

First Shepherd:

I shall see. *[exits]*

Third Shepherd:

Thou art o'ercome.

Second Shepherd:

There is no comfort now:
Not here, on surface, seeming bright and glad –
Nor in the gloomy shade, nor under rocks

And all dark places.

[*a distant sound of wailing*]

Third Shepherd:
Faintly, there blows in
On wind, some strange lamenting.

Second Shepherd:
It arrives
From past the poplars.

Third Shepherd:
Slightest hint of sound –
So slight, I thought I dreamt it.

Second Shepherd:
Women's howls:
The agony of grief.

Third Shepherd:
Such noise as one
Would think to hear at hell's door – sure, not here
Amidst these rustling branches.

[*enter first shepherd, carrying Orpheus's lyre*]

First Shepherd:
Oh bewail!
Bewail such loss!

Third Shepherd:
What is't?

First Shepherd:
Bewail such end
Of life of best 'neath heaven!

Third Shepherd:
Tell me what

Thou sawst.

First Shepherd:
A sight which seems from hell misplaced:
Arms, legs, strewn all about – nearby, the chest,
The stripped trunk – and all flowers flecked with blood,
The grass soaked deep. No head did I descry;
But this I found, and it doth tell me whom
Those grieving women murdered.

Third Shepherd:
It was those
Lamenting in the woods, committed such
Appalling act?

First Shepherd:
With every sob, they spoke
Their guilt, and cursed themselves.

Second Shepherd:
The lyre thou bear'st...
It doth recall the very voice and strains
Of he who played it when we two were young,
And in his sadness, vanished.

Third Shepherd:
Whom mean'st thou?
Why was he slain?

Second Shepherd:
His name was Orpheus;
And those who slew him, those who e'en now wail
In agonized repentance, I did view
Destroy him for his sating not their lusts,
But holding high, aloof, from loyalty
To his long-dead beloved.

First threw they stones
And sticks at him, demanding that he lie
In their embraces – but such objects hurled
Themselves away from him, for so they loved
The staves he ever warbled, strains he played,
And so would hurt him not.

Then those who'd thrown –
Ciconian women, drunk with Bacchus' grape,
And now more drunk with fury – heaved themselves
Upon that man oblivious to them,
Who still did play, lost look upon his face,
As though he cared not what him might befall
So long as when he died, his fingers touched
Those strings which were his last love on this earth –
Did hurl themselves, I say, so long denied
That handsome man through life, then 'gan to tear
Within an instant – so swift, I'd no chance
To intervene – his body, as she-wolves
Might rooster tear, their prey. All hands him seized;
His head, wrenched off his neck, flew from fierce hands
Of lust-mad raving ones, tumbled through grass
Then lost was in the curling Hebrus wave,
While all the rest of him a rag doll looked
As when dogs tear such toy.

Limbs strewn about,
The weeds and flowers steeped in gore, that scene
Of sudden silent turned... and, horror-struck,
Wood nymphs 'gan wail; and soon did join their sound,
As gradually they took in what they'd done,
Those rueful lusting women.

Third Shepherd:
Woeful 'tis –
So sick'ning-woeful. I'll not go that way
To view such sight.

First Shepherd:
The man played aching sweet:
Fair in his face, past handsome in his songs.
But life to him was only sweet in morn;
Not midday, no – nor eve.

Third Shepherd:
His name I'd heard,
And something vaguely of how much was loved
Before my time. Of how his midday gloomed
And led to such a dusk, I fain would hear.

First Shepherd:
Young friend, know first: he had, when 'bout thine age,
A love, as thou mightst. Named Eurydice,
She was an oak nymph doting on her beau,
All innocent of fangs which nature hid,
Who, on the morn when married was to be,
And gath'ring blossoms, bought too soon her bed
In hall which is our common final inn –
For viper's tooth her found.

This sweet young bard,
Heartsick, with lyre's aid those thresholds crossed
Barred 'gainst all else – for music was his charm,
His heartsick music, casting gentleness
And drowsy rapt'rous transport 'pon fierce heads
Which would oppose him... And from king and queen
Who sit at death's own heart, its beating core
Spuming with blood and flame, he won this chance
To bear his love with him: that if she walked
Behind him on their trek to outer light
Up from her dungeon, while he not once glanced
Behind him, 'til the sun shone on her face
With all death's dark behind her, then he'd win
His love to be with him – at least 'til when
Such proper time as she'd be called to gloom:
Her old-age passage down to where we rest.

Now, the saddest thing thou e'er shalt hear
Is what befell next: High ascent once climbed
And doorsill crossed, musician stood outside
Amongst the happy wilderness which knows
The blue vault for its roof: he waited long,
Walking a goodly space from prison's door,
So that his love had plenty time to pass
Into the sun as well, ere he should look
To welcome her revival.

But for all

His cautiousness, when eyes he turned upon
That portal in the rock – to his deep grief,
He found his sweet one yet beneath that shade
Which lingered 'neath the door: the lintel still
Hung o'er her head; and with an anguished look
But not a sound, she vanished from his sight,
Retreating back to shadows.

Long he walked

And long he mourned, poor bard: this place he left,
Wand'ring the world; and nothing heard we here
Of Orpheus or what his deed might be –
Until such time we noted he'd returned,
And heard vague word he'd journeyed in the north,
Singing amongst the Hyperborean race:
Those giants who age not, know not disease,
And live frozen in health and happiness –
And heard we too he had with Jason sailed
Upon that charmed ship that sought the fleece,
Strumming his strings and warbling with much verve
To drown out sirens' voices while they crooned
From three isles to enchant bold sailors' hearts
And dash their quest on shore rocks.

Nothing more

Came to our ears – not news, and not that lush

Heart-aching art of his, though he lived near,
Somewhere amongst the beasts and flora wild,
Hid 'midst the leaves. Of late, his song returned
So faintly, in the twinkling of the eve,
Or sometimes of a dawn – much softer then,
Like music of a bird which would not show
Its shape to any man; and words he sang
No ear could then discern.

Now song is done,
Voice ended, music's apex toppled low,
Crumbled and crushed; and harp I hold in hand
The only relic of that poet's staves:
That beauty of sweet heaven, chanted, strummed.

[*enter the sister wood nymphs of Eurydice – they sing*]

Wood Nymphs:

*Ye three who mourn, we mourn as well for him
Who from death's pit our sister nearly gained
To live with him – but think not staves he sang
Forever have been lost to regions dim,*

*For heard we, when 'gan bobbing head to roll
Upon the winding flood, his soft lips chant:
That voice which charmed each human, beast, and plant –
Though stranger now were lyrics which he told*

*Than any song before... The head spun round
While on the foam it floated; then not long
It was 'til those now harpless notes had gone,
Had vanished round a bend – such soothing sound*

*As we did miss, for it had softened grief.
The dream-like river bears that singer still:
Sharing his music while it gathers rills,
Floating his music towards the briny reefs,*

*Swirling a gorgeous thing, a god-like man,
Which soon shall gurgle in the sea's white froth –
Unless, could be, 'tis borne up and 'tis tossed
Unto a shore, unto another land.*

[exit wood nymphs – the land darkens slightly]

Third Shepherd:

I seem to see, from out the sky's deep wells,
Nine forms who bear the starlight for their dress
Descend to us.

[enter Calliope and her eight sister muses]

Calliope:

Oh ye who loved that man
So bloodily destroyed – brush tears away,
Undo your mourning. Orpheus yet lives:
Lives he amongst us, 'mongst we goddesses
Where inspiration's waters flow and foam
On Helicon's pure height. His spirit dwells
Within our golden temple; and that god
Who taught him how to play, to sing, compose,
Dwells with him, by his side – together they
Bring melodies to rooms and sacred halls
Such as no mortal's heard, nor ever shall.

[exit the muses except Calliope]

They go to gather him – to lift his limbs
In tender arms, and bear him, dream-like slow,
To foot of Mount Olympus, where his grave
Shall hear the nightingales every age –
Hear gentle songs which speak of love for him.

First Shepherd:

This is a joyous word... Yet, what of her
Whom he did nearly rescue? Shall for aye

Those two rest sundered, one placed 'midst the tops
Of high celestial beauty, while his wife,
Or nearly wife, remains a des'prate shade,
Confined to ceaseless darkness? Seems this none
Of heaven for the poet – though may be,
Heaven in truth is lonely, and our loves
To fade are always fated, leaving naught
But some cold, bright endurance.

Calliope:
It must be:

It hath been ordered. By the clock of sun
And moon and stars – by body of the earth –
By waking of those meek things under light,
By innocence, by joyous lives they lead,
By deaths they die – it shan't be otherwise,
Such melancholy fate. Give tears, give tears...
My son shall ever pine for her he loved,
And she for him.

Oh shepherd, give his lyre.

[she takes it]

This golden harp, brave gift of Phoebus' grace,
Within the sky I'll set, and it shall be,
Of nights, a monument to star-bright bard,
E'en while his head yet sings upon this earth –
E'en while it ceases, closes lips, breathes not.

[lights down]

Scene II

[lights up on the shore of Lesbos – a woman is pulling in a fishing net – she discovers the head inside, and takes it out to examine it]

First Woman of Lesbos:
Oh sister, come and see what I have found!
Thou'lt not believe 'tis true.

[enter second woman of Lesbos]

A handsome head!
Some fiend did murder on this sweet-faced youth –
Aye, murder, for I'll not believe 'twas just,
His execution.

Second Woman of Lesbos:
Could be any isle
From 'round this sea he's floated. Still so fresh
And white his countenance, I'd say he's been
No more than five days perished.

First Woman of Lesbos:
Strange to say,
But little while ago, I thought I heard
Some singing, faint and sweet, upon the main,
Far off upon the swell. The sea I searched,
But no boat saw.

Second Woman of Lesbos:
The same thing I discerned,
But thought I dreamt it.

[they gaze at the head in thought]

First Woman of Lesbos:
'Tis sent by the gods,
I am convinced.

Second Woman of Lesbos:
My piety doth urge
We treat it gently.

First Woman of Lesbos:
Come – I know a place,
Not far, where we shall tuck what we have found
Within a little cave – half-seal the door,
Then build a rock shrine over.

Second Woman of Lesbos:
And I'll tell
The isle our deed, and singing strange we heard.

First Woman of Lesbos:
A priestess shall I urge to keep that spot,
And listen closely, through dark hours and bright,
To hear what sounds inspire her – and if sweet,
Like music, may she riddle out what words
Come softly to her ear.

Suchwise she'll list
To what the Fates and what the gods might send
Inside her brain: suchwise she'll prophesy
Such golden meaning as this head might sing.

[lights down]

Finis

