BEFORE YOU READ
Orpheus and Eurydice

Meet the Author: Betty Bonham Lies
Betty Bonham Lies was born in 1935. She wrote poetry all through her childhood, but she gave it up when she reached college. “In the dark ages of the fifties,” she said, “we read only dead, white European and American male poets. We were told, in effect, you can’t write poetry unless you’re a man.”

Thirty years later, Betty Lies, who is a teacher, rediscovered her own muse. Today she writes poetry and retells classical myths, especially those that feature women. She has also written a book for teachers of creative writing called The Poet’s Pen: Writing Poetry with Middle and High School Students.

Build Background: The World of Myth
Greek mythology is a huge body of stories about the gods and heroes of ancient Greece. The myths involve a big cast of characters—both mortal and immortal—who star in their own stories and reappear in the stories of others. They also cover a vast mythical landscape that extends from Mount Olympus, the home of the gods, to the Underworld, where the god Hades and his wife Persephone preside over the spirits of the dead.

Many characters from Greek myth are mentioned in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice that you’re about to read. Some you’ve already met in the Odyssey. Some will be new to you, and their mention here may inspire you to read more about them.

• Over the centuries, people have read Greek myths and interpreted them in different ways. What do you think accounts for the enduring appeal of myth?

• Do you enjoy reading myths? Why or why not?
Orpheus and Eurydice

BETTY BONHAM LIES
ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

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In the very early time of the world, gods mingled more freely with mortals than they do in these later days. So it was not surprising that the Muse Calliope, she who inspires epic poetry, gave birth to a son whose father was a mortal man. He was the king of Thrace, the most musical of all the people of Greece. Calliope named her son Orpheus, and from his infancy, she and her sister Muses were his teachers. Even before he reached manhood, he was accomplished in all the arts, but especially in poetry and music.

When Orpheus made music, all the world stopped to listen. Wild beasts drew near him, so entranced they put aside their fierceness. Trees gathered around to hear his beautiful notes. Rivers stopped flowing along the banks so that they could hear Orpheus, whose music was more harmonious than theirs. The very rocks softened when he touched his lyre.¹

Orpheus drew the most wonderful music from his instrument. With his gift he could embolden people to do deeds they didn’t dream they had in them. When he sailed on the Argo with Jason to search for the Golden Fleece,² it was his lyre that heartened the men on those nights when they lost courage and despaired of reaching their goal. It was his lyre that soothed and calmed them when quarrels threatened to sow disharmony. It was his lyre, singing louder than the sultry song of the Sirens, that saved the Argonauts,³ who might have left their bones on that dangerous island as so many other sailors had.

But music was not enough. Something was missing in Orpheus’s life. He knew what it was when he met the wood nymph Eurydice and for the first time felt the joy of love. She returned his feelings, and happily agreed to become his wife.

¹ lyre: a stringed instrument of the harp family

² Jason to search for the Golden Fleece: Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece is one of the hero quest tales of Greek mythology. Finding the Golden Fleece was considered an impossible task. Jason was sent on this quest by Pelias, the son of Poseidon and a mortal woman, because Pelias thought that Jason was the man the oracle warned would be his downfall.

³ Argonauts: the heroes who sail with Jason in the great ship Argo
Orpheus invited Hymen, the god of marriage, to bless the wedding with his presence. Hymen came, but his words were not auspicious, and the omens he brought with him were not happy ones. The torch smoked, bringing tears to the eyes of the wedding party. When it was swung, it would not blaze into flame.

And the omens proved true. The loving couple’s happiness was all too brief. Their marriage was not an hour old when Eurydice, walking across the meadow with her bridesmaids, innocently trod upon a viper, who struck out at her and stung her on the foot. At once, she was carried away to the Underworld, the dark region of the dead.

Orpheus was distraught. Grieving, he bore the young body of his beloved Eurydice to the grave, and the music he played tore at the hearts of everyone who followed. It was whispered among their friends that the gods were jealous and would not let a mortal man and woman live together in immortal happiness. Whether that is true or not, the bereft husband was inconsolable. How could he live without his wife, the other half of his soul? Orpheus determined to perform an unthinkable act, an act no mortal man had ever attempted. He would do this for his love: he would follow her into the Underworld, and there he would beg the dark powers to give her back to him.

So Orpheus set out, taking with him only his songs and the lyre with which he would accompany his plea. He found the crack in the dark cave that leads to Hades, the realm of death, and he followed it down, deeper and deeper. Soon he saw the River Styx, which separates the Underworld from the world of the living. As he approached, he played on his lyre, and hearing his sweet song, the boatman Charon could not resist it. He agreed to ferry Orpheus to the other side of the river, even though the living should not be allowed to cross.

Then, at the mouth of Hades, Orpheus played and sang to Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the entryway to keep away those who have not died. Cerberus dropped his three heads low, ceased snarling for a moment, and let him pass. Once inside, Orpheus searched through the long dark passageways, calling for Eurydice and plucking the strings of his lyre. The shades of the dead, among whom he searched for his wife, drew just out of sight as he went by.

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4 The torch smoked: Torches were part of casting omens to predict the success of a marriage. Hymen is often depicted with a marriage feast torch in his hand.
Frightened but determined, Orpheus continued, winning his way by the beauty of his music. As the dark passages opened up for him, his music gave a moment of relief to many of the souls who suffer eternally to pay for the sins they have committed in the upper world.

Over there was Sisyphus, who for a lifetime’s deeds struggles endlessly to push an enormous boulder up a hill. When he reaches the top, it rolls back down again. Orpheus passed and he played, and for a moment Sisyphus was able to sit upon his rock to rest.

And a little farther along, there was Tantalus, whose unspeakable offense against the gods dooms him to torture by burning thirst and stabbing hunger, while he stands neck-deep in a pool of water that recedes from his lips every time he stoops to drink, and just within reach of luscious grapes that wither away when he stretches to pick them. Orpheus passed and he played, and Tantalus too was given a moment of rest.

So were the Danaides,\(^5\) who stabbed their husbands on their wedding night, and for that deed must try eternally to scoop up water in a sieve. Next he saw the fiery winged wheel, on which Ixion spins in torment forever because he committed mankind’s first murder, the murder of his brother. At Orpheus’s song, for a moment the wheel ceased its spinning.

Even the Furies—the terrible goddesses who inflict these punishments and who keep the dead from escaping Hades to return to the upper world—even they were moved. Orpheus passed and he played, and for the first time ever, the faces of these dread powers grew wet with tears.

At last, Orpheus stood before the thrones of Hades, the dark-browed king of the Underworld, and his queen, Persephone, her fair face veiled by the shadows of that terrible place. What could he say to the god and goddess of death that would persuade them to give Eurydice back to him? He plucked the strings of his lyre, and put his whole heart into the song that would plead his cause:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{You who rule this dark and silent world} \\
&\text{are masters of all who walk on the Earth.} \\
&\text{Every one of us will come to you,} \\
&\text{even the most beautiful and best loved belong to you at last.}
\end{align*}
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\(^5\) **Danaides**: These are the fifty daughters of King Danaus of Argos. They were married in one ceremony to fifty suitors, and they acted on their father’s instruction when all but one of them murdered their husbands on their wedding night.
You are the creditor who must always be paid.
We only belong to the upper world for a short time,
and then we are yours forever and ever.
But there is one who came to you too soon,
a bud that died before it ever grew into a flower.
I tried to bear the loss, but it was too great.
O king, I could not bear it. Love was too strong.
Hear me and weave again the web of life,
put together the threads cut from the loom too soon for my Eurydice.
I ask you only for a loan, and not a gift to me,
for she'll be given back to you when her years are full.

Orpheus's music was so compelling that even the ice-hard heart of Hades melted. Persephone whispered a plea in his ear, and tears flowed from his eyes. Just this once he had to yield before the force of love.

Hades called for Eurydice, and she came forth from among the newest shades, still limping from her wound. Orpheus's wish was granted. But there was one condition: she must follow in his shadow and he must not pause, or speak, or turn to look on her until they reached the upper world.

Of course, Orpheus agreed, and at once the couple turned away from the throne of death to begin their difficult journey. Through dark and tortuous passageways, through the chill of death, they made their way in terrible silence. Orpheus listened with all his being to hear the footsteps of Eurydice in the shadows behind him. At each step he desperately wanted to turn, to make sure she was still there, and even more, he longed to look upon her face. But he controlled his yearning and kept going, up and up, until utter darkness began to change to only black, then gray, and then lighter gray, and at last he could see the light of day ahead.

Some people say that what happened next was just a moment of forgetfulness. Others maintain that Orpheus had reached the sunlight and turned to help Eurydice, believing she was out, too. There are those who think he didn't trust Hades, and had to see that she was really there, or that he couldn't hear her steps and was overcome by a terror that she was no longer following him. But you might believe—and I believe it too—that his great love for her overwhelmed him. He could not keep himself from turning around, just to see her beloved face at last.
At the very instant he turned, Eurydice was snatched away for the second
time, this time forever. He heard a faint cry—"Farewell!"—and knew that it
held no tone of reproach. How could she blame him when his only fault was
loving her too much?

Desperately, Orpheus stretched out his arms and called her name:
"Eurydice!" But it was too late. His arms clasped the cold air, and a long deep
sigh echoed from the darkness. He would never see her again while he lived.

In vain, Orpheus tried to follow his bride. But this time the Underworld
was firmly closed to him. No other mortal had broached it once, and certainly
he was not going to get a second chance. The power of his music failed him at
last. Charon turned a deaf ear to his pleas, and all the gods agreed that a living
mortal could not enter the world of the dead again.

For seven days and seven nights, Orpheus remained at the entryway, unable
to sing or even speak, taking no food or drink, wishing for death. But even
death refused him. Finally, he had no choice but to get up and go back into
the world. Once there, he avoided every scene of joy, and turned his back on
women, although there were many maidens who would have liked to make
him forget Eurydice.

Orpheus traveled into the mountain forests, seeking solitude or the com-
panionship of beasts rather than men. Although he still played his lyre, he
played only to melt the hearts of tigers, to move the mountains and the oak
trees. His songs were so sad that no human could bear to listen to them.

One day, as Orpheus slept in a clearing, a band of Maenads, women driven
to madness by their worship of Dionysus, came upon him and demanded that
he join their revels. Horrified, he refused them. In their fury, they closed in on
him like hunters on a deer. First they stoned him, then smashed his precious
lyre. Finally, in a frenzy they tore his body to pieces and threw him into a stream.
From there he floated out to sea, and people say that as he floated he still sang
the name of Eurydice. His body was washed ashore on the island of Lesbos. There
it was buried by the Muses, who lamented for their beloved Orpheus.

And to this day, the nightingales sing more sweetly on that island than
anywhere else in the world.

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6 Maenades: What these female devotees of Dionysus do to Orpheus is characteristic for
them. In their wild frenzy, they typically tear animals apart and devour their flesh.

7 the island of Lesbos: This island is the birthplace of the poet Sappho, who is sometimes
called the "Tenth Muse" or the "mortal Muse."
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Think and Discuss
1. Hades grants Orpheus’s request to give Eurydice back to him, but there is one condition. What is that condition?

2. Hyperbole is a figure of speech. It is an extravagantly exaggerated description or statement. Lies uses hyperbole when she describes the beauty of Orpheus’s music. With a partner, look back at the text and find examples of hyperbole. Discuss the effect of hyperbole on the story.

3. The song Orpheus composes to plead his cause employs an extended metaphor. Identify the two things compared by the metaphor. Then tell if you think the metaphor is an effective one, and why or why not. (For a definition of metaphor, see the Glossary of Literary Terms.)

4. In preparation for retelling a myth, Lies reads every version of the story she can find. Her explanation of why Orpheus turned to look back at Eurydice is evidence of that. Of all the reasons that have been given, do you think Lies chose the right one? Explain.

5. A myth like “Orpheus and Eurydice” has been retold many times. Each retelling may use different words and include different details, but the basic events of the story remain the same. Create a story map like the one below to record the events that are critical to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and would appear in every version.

Write to Understand: Retelling the Myth
Review the critical events of the Orpheus and Eurydice story you recorded on your story map. Then use these events to help you retell the story in your own words.