

Orpheus: Thracian bard, son of Moses, or mosaic villa decor?

From obscure beginnings, in the course of the fifth century BCE Orpheus emerged as a fashionable symbol of primitive and magical otherness in Athenian culture, especially in tragedy (Freiert 1991). In the wider Hellenic world at the same time, the name of Orpheus was being used as a brand of authority for heterogeneous, pluralistic, and syncretizing poetry and speculation both religious and cosmological in nature (West 1981; Detienne 2002). Orpheus thus becomes an important locus for issues surrounding the evolution of a culture of textuality in the classical and Hellenistic periods (cf. Derveni papyrus). In Alexandria Orpheus was co-opted by at least some hellenized Jews in order to forge a composite Jewish/Greek monotheism (Friedman 1970). This trend, of cooptation for negotiating ethnic-cultural authority in a pluralistic world, came to be reflected in the rich tradition of Orpheus the founder and teacher of secret rites. By the Roman period Orpheus was both native and other, both pre-cultural primitive and preeminent culture-bringer. In the Roman empire, moreover, he was popular with Augustan and later poets (that is, at the center of empire), *and* as an iconographical figure with Jewish, Christian and ethnically diverse colonials at the margins of Roman society and practice/belief (in mortuary iconography as the lyre-playing Orpheus/David/ Christ, cf. Friedman 1970). Then again, between the second and sixth centuries CE the “Orpheus and the animals” motif in the medium of mosaic proliferated across the entire Roman empire, from Britain to Syria to Africa (Harrison 1962).

The exceptionally rich and complicated reception history of Orpheus, spanning over a thousand years and the entire Mediterranean world and beyond, offers therefore a unique testing ground for questions of changing styles and competing fashions. What is it about Orpheus that enables such a wide diversity of symbolic uses over time and in different places and/or social levels? Is it the “same” Orpheus who is the spokesman of homosexuality in Ovid, a symbol of benevolent cosmic hope in early Christian catacombs, and a fixture of pastoral decor in wealthy Roman villas? Again, should we understand the function and meaning of the “Orpheus and the animals” mosaics to be “the same” in such widely differing contexts as Roman Britain, Spain, Africa, and Syria? Was it a marker and gesture of Romanness in provincial areas, or might it have had local and ethnically distinct meanings? In non-Greco-Roman, Indo-European areas like Gaul and Britain there is the possibility that Orpheus the magical lyre-player struck native chords of resonance (evidenced in later Anglo-Saxon receptions of Orpheus). In this paper I will explore these and other possible questions of contemporary theoretical relevance (ethnicity, cultural difference, competing styles, etc.) that arise when we summon up the Orpheus tradition over the long-term, across large geographical areas, and in diverse artistic media and social contexts.

Select Bibliography

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