

Damian Pierzak

Servius's view of the myth of Orpheus

Scripta Classica 9, 99-105

2012

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Damian Pierzak

University of Silesia, Katowice
Faculty of Philology

Servius's View on the Myth of Orpheus

Abstract: Servius himself did not concern scholars to larger extent. The idea of the following paper is to make some observations on the grammarian's *persona* and, more specifically, regarding his mythological studies. The description of Orpheus by Servius shows some of the peculiarities of the way in which author of the *Commentaries* deals with such material.

Key words: Servius, myth, Orpheus, *grammatici*

Before the more serious consideration of the topic, it has to be stated at the outset that the Servius's *Commentaries* on Vergil's *Aeneis* rarely were an object for studies and thus many aspects of this monumental work remain obscure until today, or hardly touched. R. Kaster observes that nowadays only the scholars concerned with Vergil read Servius, and even they often miss some of the peculiarities of his text.¹ The problem with reception of the *Commentaries* is connected with the nature of the grammarian himself on the one hand, and with too high expectations of the present readers on the other. The former issue was discussed already in antiquity with various results. Suetonius brings the authority of Cornelius Nepos that rather *litterati* than *grammatici* were in the eyes of the people the well-spoken and educated men. Grammarians were considered by Greeks to be the interpreters of poetry.² Further in *de grammaticis et rhetoribus* we can find

¹ R. Kaster: "The grammarian's Authority". *Classical Philology* 1980, 75 (3), pp. 216–241.

² Cf. Nep. ap. Suet. *Rhet.* (4): *litteratos vulgo quidem appellari qui aliquid diligenter et acute scienterque possint aut dicere aut scribere, proprie sic appellandos poetarum interpretes, qui a Graecis grammatici nominentur*. Seneca Minor calls them "Guardians of the Latin language", see:

more statements, e.g. that in the archaic Rome grammarians taught rhetoric too. Nevertheless, as we know today, in the Republic and later, *grammaticus* and *rhetor* had distinguished areas of occupation.³ Even the Roman educational system included grammarians as the elementary teachers and rhetoricians on the higher grade. This opposition leads to the nature of Servius's aims. He was, in the largest extent, teacher of the younger Romans,⁴ who lived in the time of the Late Empire. His commentary is rather prescriptive than critical consideration of Vergil, in relation to his hypothetical pupils.⁵ We must keep in mind that the commentary does not correct the text of *Aeneis* (e.g. with phrases like *nos dicimus, debuit dicere*, etc.), but alludes to the obsolete and vernacular usage of language.

The discussed problem can be extended onto another matters, like the plot, characters, rhetoric, and so on. We decided to make some observations on mythology in the *Commentarii*. It is undoubtable that we find Servius as a great source on different aspects of Greek and Roman culture. Let us take some closer look on how he presents a myth to the readers. Our example will be Orpheus, because this personage, as described by Servius, seems quite representative against the background of the whole mythological context. The material is not too extensive, concerning two testimonies.⁶ We will try to focus on these passages with regard to its language and other features as precise as possible, to establish more general concept of the matter.

First issue, as well as the second one, is connected to book 6. It is strictly focused on the story of Orpheus and his wife, or lover, Eurydice. Servius brings out that myth while describing Aeneas's descent into the underworld. It is said to be an example of less justified *descensus ad inferos*:

VI 119. SI POTUIT MANES nititur exemplis quae inferiora sunt per comparisonem, ut ipse videatur iustius velle descendere: nam Orpheus revocare est conatus uxorem, hic vult tantum patrem videre. Orpheus autem voluit

Sen. Ep. 95, 65: [...] *his adicit* (sc. Posidonius) *causarum inquisitionem, aetiologian quam quare nos dicere non audeamus, cum grammatici, custodes Latini sermonis, suo iure ita appellent, non video*. For grammar as knowledge of poetry, see also D.T. 1, where Dionysius Thrax goes one step further, including the studies on writers (συγγραφεῖς) – mostly historians, as we can presume (cf. Plut. *Caes.* 47, where he calls Livy by this term, and see also: *LSJ*, s.v.).

³ See R. Kaster: "The grammarian's Authority"..., p. 221: "*figurae* occupied a kind of no-man's land in the passage from the school of the *grammaticus* to that of *rhetor*, falling a bit beyond the grammarian's goal and a bit short of the rhetorician's main concern." Kaster quotes the relevant passage from Quintilian; cf. Quint. *Inst.* IX 3, 2.

⁴ Cf. Quint. *Inst.* I 4, 1: *Primus in eo, qui scribendi legendique adeptus erit facultatem, grammaticis est locus*; I, 9, 1: *Et finitae quidem sunt partes duae, quas haec professio* (sc. *grammatici*) *pollicetur, id est ratio loquendi et enarratio auctorum, quarum illam methodicem, hanc historien vocant*.

⁵ See R. Kaster: *The grammarian's Authority*..., p. 226ff.

⁶ All mythological stories among the *Commentaries* were collected by J.P. Taylor, see: J.P. Taylor: *The Mythology of Virgil's Aeneid According to Servius*. New York 1917. On Orpheus, cf. p. 57.

quibusdam carminibus reducere animam coniugis: quod quia implere non potuit, a poetis fingitur receptam iam coniugem perdisse dura lege Plutonis. Quod etiam Vergilius ostendit dicendo 'arcessere', quod evocantis est proprie.

Aeneas is only willing to see his father, while Orpheus, casting spells with his music, tries to conjure the soul of his wife and to take her back with him into the light. It is of course impossible, because the law of Hades is grave (*dura lex Plutonis*). Let us see how exactly the grammarian puts the words describing mythological persons and gods. It is obvious that to expose particular informations and facts was not his aim at the first place. Servius does not ask questions usual to, for instance, a modern scholar, whose field of study and specialization are myths, such as these below:

More urgent, as well as being likely to yield its solution earlier, than the question 'Was Orpheus a real man?' is the question 'Did the Greeks believe he was?' Was he to them a man or a god or a god-man or demi-god? And if the last, in what sense?⁷

But what he does, and it will be the clue, is using some kind of vernacular language in particular situations. The words *a poetis fingitur receptam...* can be, although not quite doubtless, trace, which leads to the better understanding. Let us try, aside from the main purpose, to count some similar phrases according to other myths, and to examine briefly what the commentator meant writing them. These are concerning Iuppiter himself:

I 42: physici Iovem volunt intellegi [...].

I 394: (de aquila) quid ideo fingitur; ut testatur Lucanus; Alii dicunt [...].

III 104: ut Sallustius dicit, ideo fingitur; fabula haec est [...].

IV 638: et sciendum Stoicos dicere [...].

And on Theseus and the Minotaurus:

VI 14: sane fabula de hoc talis est; alii dicunt; dicendo autem Vergilius 'ut fama est' ostendit requirendam esse veritatem [...].

⁷ W.K.C. Guthrie: *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement*. London 1952 [repr. 1993], p. 3. Nor does Servius divide myths into the groups, like G.S. Kirk did, e.g., sketching *Basic Concerns Underlying the Conventional Structure*, where he puts the story of Orpheus and Eurydice under the label of "attempts at retrieval from the underworld", see: G.S. Kirk: *Myth. Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Cambridge 1970, p. 195 (cf. also: p. 259). For the general informations on the myth of Orpheus, cf. recent F. Graf: "Orpheus: A Poet Among Men". In: *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*. Ed. J. Bremmer. London 1987 [repr. 1990], pp. 80–106.

The presented sentences are Servius's device to create an excuse for the scope of the issues he delivers. He depends on the more or less particular authorities to make clear the image of his own objectivity.⁸ He refers to the well-known and respected authors of the past, mostly Varro and Sallust, to make sure that he cannot be accused of too expansive thoughts on the one hand, and on the other, he assures his readers of his own knowledge of the tradition and its "secondary literature." Especially the last quoted phrase (*requirendam esse veritatem*) allows us to think that the fable is doubted either by both Vergil and by Servius and still requires examination to be considered as true. We can only presume that the grammarian did not believe that Orpheus existed as a real person, because of not such a strong emphasis of *a poetis fingitur*, but we can at the same time imagine that it was rather a literary *topos* for him than the legendary past, in which he seems to believe. The story of Eurydice as told here presents a good match with the common plot.⁹ This could serve as evidence that Servius not only made an excuse for general nature of the myth's possibility of being fact or fiction, but also that he did not seek for any ethical aspects of the story. His intention was only to present Aeneas as *iustior* on his way to Hades. Orpheus, since Vergil mentioned him, has to be described by *commentator* for the sake of his pupils. But it remains a comparison, nothing more. Plato, for example, saying that the gods, beyond love are especially pleased by devotness and virtue, alludes to Orpheus in the following words:

[...] Ὀρφέα δὲ τὸν Οἰάγρου ἀτελῆ ἀπέπεμψαν ἐξ Ἄιδου, φάσμα δειξάντες τῆς γυναικὸς ἐφ' ἣν ἦκεν, αὐτὴν δὲ οὐ δόντες, ὅτι μαλθακίζεσθαι ἐδόκει, ἅτε ὦν κιθαρῳδός, καὶ οὐ τολμᾶν ἔνεκα τοῦ ἔρωτος ἀποθνήσκειν ὥσπερ Ἄλκηστις, ἀλλὰ διαμηχανᾶσθαι ζῶν εἰσιέναι εἰς Ἄιδου.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. J.P. Taylor: *The Mythology of Vergil's Aeneid...*, p. 5: "His exegesis Servius is fond of introducing by such formulas as «fingitur», «ideo fingitur quod» or similar expressions, thus apparently indicating his belief that the fables were deliberate inventions due to perfectly reasoned efforts to symbolize physical phenomena [...]". On the poets, who "design," cf. e.g.: Ov. *Met.* X 1–85; XI 1–66; Verg. *Aen.* VI 119ff; Sen. *Herc. Fur.* 569; *Herc. Oet.* 1061ff; Luc. *Orpheus* 328 acc. to: *Orphicorum fragmenta*. Ed. O. Kern. Berolini 1922, p. 19 (henceforth *OF*).

⁹ Cf. e.g. "Apollod." *Bibl.* I 3, 1 = *OF*, test. 63: [...] ἀποθανούσης δὲ Εὐρυδίκης τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ δηχθείσης ὑπὸ ὄφραως, κατήλθεν εἰς Ἄιδου θέλων ἀνάγειν αὐτήν, καὶ Πλούτωνα ἔπεισεν ἀναπέμψαι. ὁ δὲ ὑπέσχετο τοῦτο ποιήσειν, ἂν μὴ πορευόμενος Ὀρφεὺς ἐπιστραφῆ πρὶν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν παραγενέσθαι· ὁ δὲ ἀπιστῶν ἐπιστραφεὶς ἐθεάσατο τὴν γυναῖκα, ἣ δὲ πάλιν ὑπέστρεψεν).

¹⁰ Plat. *Symp.* 179d. For Some other view on Orpheus' influence on Plato, cf. F.M. Cornford: "Plato and Orpheus". *The Classical Review* 1903, Vol. 17 (9), pp. 433–445. On *phasma* see esp. p. 444, n. 2. For the wife's apparition as a punishment for Orpheus' cowardice, see: F. Graf: *Orpheus: A Poet Among Men...*, p. 81. Cf. also R.G. Edmonds III: *Myths of the Underworld Journey. Plato, Aristophanes, and the 'Orphic' Gold Tablets*. Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 123, fn. 31: "[...] the popularity of all the different versions of his story attests to the reso-

The philosopher, having even said that it was only 'the shade' (φάσμα) of his wife the gods send him to follow. He was convinced that men who are not ready to sacrifice themselves in the name of love should be condemned by the gods. On the contrary, he has elucidated the human devoteness giving the example of Alkestis, Admetus's wife who went to the underworld in order to save her husband's life. Plato, therefore, sought for the moral meaning of the fable, or at least exposed some of the Orpheus's weaknesses.¹¹ Fulgentius, the Christian commentator of Vergil better known as the Mythographer, goes even further in his exclusive exegesis of the story. He claims that the names of characters are connected with music. Therefore Orpheus is 'matchless voice' and Eurydice stands for 'deep judgement'.¹² With this in view, it is likely to say then that Servius's assumption was only to explain the narrow ground of the myth in scale that the particular verses of the *Aeneis* could be understood.

Second issue concerns Orpheus alone, when as a priest with his instrument on the Elysian Fields he accompanies the spirits in their afterlife of joy:

VI 645. NEC NON THREICIUS LONGA CUM VESTE SACERDOS Orpheus Calliopes musae et Oeagri fluminis filius fuit, qui primus orgia instituit, primus etiam deprehendit harmoniam, id est circulatorum mundanorum sonum, quos novem esse novimus. E quibus summus, quem anastron dicunt, sono caret, item ultimus, qui terrenus est. Reliqui septem sunt, quorum sonum deprehendit Orpheus, unde uti septem fingitur chordis. 'longam' autem 'vestem' aut citharoedi habitum dicit, aut longam barbam: nam e contrario inberbes 'investes' vocamus. 'sacerdos' autem, quia et theologus fuit et orgia primus instituit. Ipse etiam homines e feris et duris composuit: unde dicitur arbores et saxa movisse, ut diximus supra.

The description above seems, in contrast with the first one, to fit some real person in the eyes of the commentator. Servius, although he could have not believed in the journey into the underworld, tells about being the son of the muse and the river as it was acceptable. This passage essentially matches the view of

nance with many audiences in the Greek tradition of this motif of recovering a lost loved one from death."¹¹

¹¹ Compare also Ovid's statement, less strict though, with Orpheus himself making an excuse: *Met.* X 25 sq: Posse pati volui, nec me temptasse negabo:
Vicit Amor.

55–59: Nec procul afuerunt telluris margine summae:
Hic, ne deficeret, metuens, avidusque videndi,
Flexit amans oculos: et protinus illa relapsa est,
Bracchiaque intendens prendique et prendere certus
Nil nisi cedentes infelix arripuit auras.

¹² For the Greek words ὄρεια, φωνή and εὐρύς, δίκη. For more informations, cf. Fulg. *Myth.* III 10, and *Fulgentius the Mythographer*. Trans. by L.G. Whitbread. Ohio University Press 1971, p. 96ff.

Orpheus's roots and achievements as given by the tradition.¹³ The distinction into the three main parts apparently arises: background, music invention and magical skills. Especially the digression on 'harmony' is problematic. *Sonus circularum mundanorum* refers perhaps to the nature of Orphic movement as the source of the Pythagorean philosophy. And in both cases the music was said to be connected with the whole universe in some sort of relation. Despite of the *anastron* and *terrenus*,¹⁴ which are 'lack of sound', according to Aristoxenus' theory, we may assume that it is familiar with the heptatonic scale of music.¹⁵ It leads, finally, to the number of strings, and Servius claims that it was seven.¹⁶ This story told by the grammarian holds marks of the treatise for schoolboys, because of its clarity and consistency. There are nine circles, with two of them soundless, so, as we can tell, it is obvious that Orpheus must have been presented with the instrument with seven strings. And thus, the word *fingitur* in this passage does not mean less probability, but a simple fact. The next sentence shows apparently, how the grammarian's proclivities were maintained by Servius in every possible situation. Firstly, the commentary focuses on the most probable solution that *longa vestis* means just 'long robe' common with the musician. Forthwith though he continues with some hard to understand addition. The fact that negation *investis* really means 'beardless' has nothing to do with our passage, unless we remind ourselves that we are not meant to be the exact readers of Servius's text. In such circumstances it seems reasonable to believe that the grammarian took his chance to point out some question of lexicography being engaged in linguistic instructions. We can prove it by searching for *vestis* in other places through the *Aeneis*. It appears that nowhere else Vergil could have use that expression for beard.¹⁷ There remains a strong impres-

¹³ See e.g. P. Grimal: *A Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology*. Basil Blackwell 1990, p. 315ff. Occasionally his mother was said to be Polhymnia or, more rarely, Menippe.

¹⁴ The highest and the lowest tone, the former connected with the sky (starless?), and the latter regarding the ground/earth.

¹⁵ Cf. S. Hagel: *Ancient Greek Music; A New Technical History*. Cambridge University Press 2010, pp. 3ff. The Orphic cosmology depended on the number seven, cf. Procl. *In Plat. Tim.* 34a. In: *OF*, fr. 313: καὶ γὰρ ἡ μονὰς καὶ ἡ ἑπτὰς ἀριθμοὶ νοεροὶ τινες, ἡ μὲν γε μονὰς αὐτόθεν νοῦς, ἡ δὲ ἑπτὰς τὸ κατὰ νοῦν φῶς. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ὁ περικόσμιος νοῦς μοναδικός τε καὶ ἑβδομαδικός ἐστιν, ὡς φησὶν Ὀρφεύς. Cf. also: F.R. Levin: *Greek Reflections on the Nature of Music*. Cambridge University Press 2009, p. 6: "The notion that music owes its life to mathematics, and that the universe, by the same agency, owes its soul to *harmonia* – the attunement of opposites – took hold of human imagination from its first utterance and has transfixed it for the millenia." For *harmonia* cf. also Suidas, s.v.: [...] ἔστι δὲ ἀρμονία συμφωνία τῶν χορδῶν [...].

¹⁶ Since we know that the number of strings (for lyres as an instrument ascribed to Orpheus) was from five even up to twelve (mostly seven perhaps, but there is no reason to rule out other testimonies), see: M.L. West: *Ancient Greek Music*. Oxford University Press 1992, p. 50, passim. Cf. also *OF*, test. 57.

¹⁷ Mostly *vestis* means clothes in general (I 639, II 722, 765, III 483, IV 648, V 112, 179, VI 406, VII 167 248, 349, IX 26, 614, XII 609, 825), sometimes it means priest's robe or clothes significant in case of prayer or funeral (V 685, VI 221, 645, X 539, XII 169, 769), women's dress in several cases

sion, however, that the grammarian wished his students to keep in mind the fact of Orpheus being, the inventor of orgies and misteries, since he repeats it in some sort of climax syntax.¹⁸ And there is the last sentence, in which, again, Servius objects to the sincerity of what he talks about by using the peculiar manner (*unde dicitur*). It is possible that a person like Orpheus invented some cults, sung, and had his influence on music, whereas it is hard to believe in his power to move trees and rocks by playing the instrument.

To sum up, as it was already said, in describing a particular myth, Servius attempts to cover the whole aspects of the story and he is critical in his judgement, but only in sake of fable's possibility of being real, not ethically. He explains clearer only things that have stronger connection with Vergil's text. Sometimes he adds irrelevant information, because his primal aim is to teach intended readers an elementary knowledge. We must remember that the commentary is not divided in any regular way for the mythological data, grammar, rhetorics, etc. And, finally, as we can see, this particular grammarian to some extent lacks the self-confidence. Whenever he is not sure of something, he does not present his opinion, but he calls other authorities, or, more frequently, hides his own uncertainty using NCI syntax.

(I 404, IV 139, 518, 687, IX 488) and one time it is a metaphor regarding the river Nile (VIII 712). Beard is always named literally (*barba*): II 277, III 593, IV 251, X 838, XII 300.

¹⁸ In fact, it seems unincidental, because plenty of ancient testimonies mention exactly that matter, cf. *OF*, testt. 90–104.