

Modern Feminism in Rewrites of the Orpheus and Eurydice Myth

by Amelia Earl

The Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, mentioned in fragments dating as far back as 500 B.C.E., has reappeared frequently in western literature in the centuries since its appearance in Virgil's *Georgics* (29 C.E.), the earliest surviving complete text. While historically scholars and artists have focused on Orpheus in the story and viewed Eurydice as a two-dimensional character, more modern scholars, authors, and artists have begun to view her differently. This paper will explore the way two prominent authors, Margaret Atwood and Sarah Ruhl, have rewritten the myth through the lens of feminism to reflect the issues of our time. While Atwood and Ruhl employ different strategies, both use a focus on Eurydice to highlight the women in spaces once thought silent.

Atwood's rewrite (1987) focuses less on specific characters and more on rewriting the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice to show toxic masculinity. The paper explores how Atwood achieves this in "The Orpheus and Eurydice Cycle" by creating a Eurydice who feels trapped and controlled by Orpheus. Examining the methods Atwood uses, such as using Eurydice's first-person voice and describing her disdain for Orpheus, makes evident the way her Eurydice reflects modern feminism.

In contrast, in Ruhl's rewrite of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, *Eurydice* (2003), the author focuses on the story of Eurydice herself to give her agency. The paper examines the specific strategies Ruhl employs to accomplish this task, including providing space for this agency through scenery and time changes, control over both of her deaths, and her added father figure. Ruhl uses these methods to reflect and shape the female voice.

The talk concludes by noting the common impact both retellings have. Despite their different approaches, both authors change central events of the myth, reexamining Eurydice's motivations, and reinterpret Orpheus' role in her life. While Ruhl does so to focus on Eurydice's story and Atwood does so to show the harm of the patriarchy, both modern feminist rewrites succeed in reimagining the ancient myth for the modern age.