



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. I

2014

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

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**Malta Classics Association,**

The Department of Classics and Archaeology,

Archaeology Farmhouse, Car park 6,

University of Malta, Msida

[classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com](mailto:classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com)

**[www.classicsmalta.org](http://www.classicsmalta.org)**

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## From the Editor

Four years ago, the Malta Classics Association was founded with the aim of disseminating and furthering Classical Studies, and especially, the Greek and Latin languages – a daunting task, indeed, considering that the Classics Studies were only limited to University courses, and stood completely outside the curriculum of pre-tertiary education. Ever since its inception in 2010, the Association has successfully striven and has been instrumental in raising awareness of such an important aspect of Education, and its efforts are now bearing fruit. Moreover, the general public's response has been encouraging – membership has steadily increased, the web-site frequently accessed, Classical Studies introduced as a new subject in post-secondary education at the Junior College of the University of Malta, Naxxar Higher Secondary School and Gozo Higher Secondary School, and the public lectures held under the auspices of the Association have always been well-attended.

Inspired by that famous Latin proverb, *verba movent, scripta manent*, the Malta Classics Association has now taken this additional initiative of publishing its own annual Journal, *Melita Classica*, in which both local and foreign Classicists can find an appropriate forum wherein the fruit of their literary endeavours and their researches can be published. In this wise, no constraints are being made on contributors, save that the material submitted pertains generally to Classical Studies and Languages. Contributors are thus most welcome and are encouraged to submit original articles or material for future publications – writing guidelines are printed at the end of this journal.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, I wish to thank all the contributors to this first issue of *Melita Classica*, and earnestly hope that our readers would find the studies offered profitable and enjoyable.

**Fra Alan Joseph Adami O.P.**

**Editor**

classicsmaltasoc.editorial@gmail.com

## **Descent into Hades: Orpheus, Odysseus and Aeneas<sup>1</sup>**

*Prof. Peter Vassallo*

This paper will deal with the blending of mythology and poetry in the classical world and will be concerned with one of the most fascinating and elusive aspects of man's encounter with the realm of death, the underworld, or the chthonic. I shall focus on three legendary heroes in Greek and Roman mythology. The first is Orpheus, musician, hero, founder of a cult and later victim. The second, Odysseus, one of the prominent Homeric heroes whose wanderings around the Mediterranean brought him everlasting fame, and the third, Aeneas, a Trojan hero, appropriated by Virgil as the legendary founder of Rome. The common thread of the narrative is the link with the underworld – all three heroes at one stage in their lives feel compelled (or are advised) to visit the dreaded Hades, the chthonic shadowland.

A few preliminary observations on the geography of Hades as the ancient Greeks conceived the underworld are appropriate.

The name *Hades*, the god of the dead or death personified, in Greek meant 'unseen' [*aides*] and it was applied to the chthonic world below as well as to its divine ruler who had abducted the maiden Persephone [*kore*] and made her his queen, a role she finally accepted after a deal was eventually struck with her mother Demeter, goddess of the cornfield. Hades is the ancient Greek conception of life after death. The first region of Hades / Tartarus contained the cheerless Asphodel fields where souls of heroes, neither virtuous nor evil, stray among the hordes of less men who flit around like bats. Their only delight is the libations poured to them by the living which for a while make them feel themselves as living men and women.

Beyond these mirthless meadows lies Erebus where close by the arriving souls are judged by the three judges: Minos, Rhadamantus

1 Malta Classics Association – Public Lecture, St James Cavalier 22 February 2013

and Aecus, stern but fair, at a trivium, a place where three roads meet. After judgment the souls are led to their everlasting abode. To the Asphodel meadows if neither good nor evil; to everlasting punishment in Tartarus, if evil (tormented and scourged by the Furies, the Erynnes, hideous crones with snaky hair); and if virtuous to the blissful orchards of Elysium. Hades was surrounded and confined by five awesome rivers: Styx forming the actual boundary between Earth and Underworld; the Acheron river of woe over which the surly Charon would ferry the souls of the dead if they paid their coin; Phlegethon the frightening river of fire (flow of volcanic lava); Cocytus the river of lamentation and then Lethe the river of amnesia. The entrance to Hades was guarded by the ferocious three headed gigantic dog Cerberus who would deter souls from trying to escape to the upper regions.

A significant aspect of the culture of the ancient Greeks was their concern for the rites of the dead – in their view this was the last honour given to the dead so that they might not wander restlessly on the banks of the Acheron yearning hopelessly for the Elysian fields. The burial ceremonies were elaborate and the graves considered sacred – not to be profaned. It was considered disgraceful to deprive people, even enemies, of the honour of burial. One recalls here the passage in the *Iliad* recounting Priam's pathetic plea to the wrathful Achilles for the body of his son Hector. The closing of the eyes was the first service of affection. Agamemnon, in the *Odyssey*, laments that his treacherous wife after murdering him did not deign to close his eyes. An *obolos* [Greek coin] was placed into the mouth of the deceased to serve as a passage fee to Charon. The body was burned on a pyre and sacrificial sheep killed – the fire was put out with wine, the ashes then collected in urns. As we shall see later Elpinor entreats Odysseus to bury his body and Palinurus, the steersman who fell into the sea, will be eventually given his burial rites by Aeneas and a mound in his honour.

I shall begin with the legend of Orpheus as it was popularly known. According to the ancient Greeks he was the son of the Muse Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, and whose haunting music on his lyre, a childhood gift from Apollo, is said to have charmed wild beasts and even inanimate stones and trees. His father Oeagrus was a Thracian river god and Orpheus is connected with Thrace, known then as

a wild region of ancient Greece. He eventually married the lovely Eurydice a Thracian dryad who met an untimely death when she trod on a poisonous serpent while fleeing from the advances of the lustful Aristaeus. The fate of Eurydice is tied up with Orpheus's descent into the world of the dead to reclaim her from the dreaded abode of Hades as he sought entry into the underworld which opened at Aornum in Thesprotis.

The Orphic myth itself invites an interpretation on three levels. The first is the power of love which is resonant even after death and which makes the hero pursue his beloved wife through the most unfamiliar and hostile territory. Another interpretation of the Orphic myth is linked with the power of music itself – its ability to enchant – that is to seduce by sound – akin to the power of magic itself. Orpheus's lyre is significant – it denoted the emergence and eventual predominance of the stringed instrument over the barbarous beating of a drum – the softening of the hearts through melody and the consequent opening up to civilized way of life in primordial times. Orpheus sings and his song touches both human and non-human warriors as well as beasts, stones and trees. All are swayed to the music of the gods which he mediates and to the seductive music of time.

The third Orphic symbol (as proposed by the eminent classical scholar W.K.C. Guthrie) has to do with the shifting of values within primitive societies the eventual transition from a warlike tribe to an agricultural community.

Orpheus the son of the river God is associated with primitive irrigation and farming, a peaceful and more civilized occupation which was gradually replacing the hunting of wild animals.

It is significant that Virgil should include a digression on Orpheus in the *Georgics* which is in fact a pastoral poem on the virtues of farming as a dignified occupation for soldiers returning from a military campaign.

Orpheus could also be considered as a figure of the primitive Thracian *shaman* the magician who claimed power over nature and who understood the language of birds and animals and who it is claimed could communicate with the spirits of the dead.

Our first record of Orpheus the musical bard derives from Apollonius of Rhodes (c. 250 BC) who in his *Argonautica* shows Orpheus as a member of the expedition with Jason to recover the golden fleece. He plays a minor but important part in pacifying the quarrel (by means of his soft music) between two of Jason's men (Idas and Idmon) with the 'bewitching music of his lyre'. But it was Virgil (Publius Virgilius Maro) who in the *Georgics* (c. 25 BC) popularized the myth of Orpheus' attempt to recover his beloved Eurydice from the realm of the dead. Virgil focuses on the extraordinary musical powers of Orpheus, his being disconsolate at the loss of Eurydice, his attempt to win her back with the help of his lyre and the impact of his music on the inhabitant of Hades and that last fatal gaze on the threshold. Virgil retained some of the details in the old myth such as the entrance to Hades which was thought to have been situated in Taenarus – the southernmost part of ancient mainland Greece.

Virgil's version in *Georgics* concentrates on the pathos and drama of the scene and the effect of his melodious music on the horrid guardians of Hades and relates how the shades of young and old assembled to hear his song – even Death's very abode and inner realm of the Shades was entranced by his music – and the ferocious watchdog Cerberus gaped open its triple mouth and the awesome furies with snakes entwined in their tresses paused to listen attentively.

Quin ipsae stupuere domus atque intima Leti  
 Tartara caeruleosque implexae crinibus anguis  
 Eumenides, tenuitque inhians tria Cerberus ora...  
 (Verg. *G.* 4.480-482)

Pluto and Proserpina are moved with compassion and grant him his wish – but on that condition (a sort of taboo) that he must not gaze upon his wife while in the realm of the Underworld – not until the rays of sunlight had touched his eyes. Eurydice followed him drawn by the dulcet sound of his music – but then that last fatal amorous gaze (or did he doubt if Eurydice was still following, according to one version – for he suspected it was a cruel joke played by Pluto) and she faded away from his grasp.

After his tragic loss Orpheus retreats to the wilderness, rejecting human company, where he finds some consolation in the mournful music of his lyre.

According to Ovid he shuns the company of women and turns to homosexuality. He is later torn to pieces by the frenzied female worshippers of Dionysius – the Maenads who, according to one version, were enraged by his misogynistic antagonism to women. Another version explains his death as the fury of these Maenads who cannot endure the ‘insufferable harmony of his music’. A possible explanation, I would suggest, is the dichotomy between the Apollonian strain in ancient Greek culture and the Dionysian, as originally perceived by Nietzsche in his tract on *The Birth of Tragedy* – the eternal tension between the rational harmonious measure and orgiastic intoxication of chaotic vital energies.

In this case of Orpheus’s dismemberment, the Dionysiac instinctual forces suppress the modulations of classical harmony ‘that Doric architecture exposed in sound’. However, the myth also celebrates the emergence of harmony after the dismemberment of the poet/musician – the severed head floating on the river goes on singing as it were and filters into later resonances into the 20th century, e.g. in musical composition of Offenbach *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858); in film, Jean Cocteau’s *Black Orpheus* set in the *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro; and, in theatre, Tennessee Williams *Orpheus Descending* (1957). More recently the French theorist Maurice Blanchot in *The Gaze of Orpheus* (1966) interestingly interprets the Orpheus myth as an allegory of silence – the authority of the negative, the limits of literature and the necessary failure of art. Eurydice represents, for Blanchot, the silence that Orpheus must, and can not attain because oblivion surrounds the literary space on every side and the writer knows death intimately and lives on the brink of silence – the demon urges him to annihilate all literary forms. ‘... for him (Orpheus) Eurydice is the limit of what art can attain; concealed by a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death and the night all seem to lead. ...’ The drift of argument is that Orpheus (the artist, writer) can descend to this dark point and can draw it to him and draw it upwards but only by keeping his back turned to it. The depth of the

work as it were reveals itself, paradoxically, by concealing itself in the work.

I would now focus on Odysseus' descent into Hades.

Homer's account of the descent into Hades comes after Odysseus encounter with the enchantress Circe who had turned his men into swine but her magic had no effect on Odysseus because of the magic herb that Hermes had propitiously given him. Perceiving his supernatural powers, Circe takes him as her consort. When Odysseus eventually departs, or is allowed to depart, Circe advises him to consult the renowned oracle Tiresias in Hades. Thus Homer enhances Odysseus's heroic dimension in that he is intrepid enough to undertake this encounter, this time in the dreadful realm of shades. Only one Greek hero, the strongman Heracles, had ventured into that dreadful abode and had in fact carried off the monstrous dog Cerberus to the upper regions all the way to the court of the astounded Eurystheus. This understandably was his last great exploit (labour) and eventually led to his apotheosis. Odysseus carefully follows Circe's advice and instructions as to the ritual to be observed in order to summon the spirit of Tiresias.

The narrative of Homer's epic dramatizes the tension of centrifugal and centripetal forces which dominate the hero's life and the episodes narrated bring out the dynamics of this conflict within Odysseus himself – the yearning to return to his wife and child in Ithaca after the ten year siege of Troy and his craving for adventure and the thrill of encounters with the perilous which mark the stature of the hero in ancient times. In these vicissitudes the gods participate – Poseidon ever antagonistic and intent on thwarting Odysseus's homecoming, and Athena coming to the rescue in moments of difficulty or anxiety. Circe, as she directs him to the grove of Persephone with its black poplar trees and aging willows in the lost frontiers of the world where the Cimmerians live in perpetual darkness, makes it clear that a visit to the most renowned prophet of old, now a shade in Tartarus, was mandatory because Tiresias would be in a position to prophesy the fate in store for him. Homer's device of introducing the adventure of visit to Hades, precisely in the middle of his epic narrative, serves two narrative purposes – one analeptic, looking back on things as it were as

well as filling in the gaps, the other proleptic in that it gives a foretaste of adventures and anecdotes still to come. Odysseus observes Circe's instructions in his attempt to communicate with the spirits of the dead. He scrupulously digs a trench with his sword 'a cubit long and a cubit wide' pouring libations (honey milk and wine) to the dead. Then slitting the throats of sacrificial sheep he pours the blood into the trench and this brings the shades of the dead swarming from Erebus the place of darkness. The first shade is Elpenor who was inadvertently left behind on Circe's isle and who tells of the actual circumstance of his death – when drunk he fell off a ladder from the roof of Circe's palace. He pleads with Odysseus to raise a burial mound for him. Other shades approach eager to drink the blood but Odysseus keeps them at bay with his sword. The shade of Tiresias approaches who warns him about the dangers ahead, the vengeful anger of Poseidon, his struggle with the insolent suitors of Penelope. Here we have an instance of Homer's handling of the device of anticipation, giving his listeners a sample of what is to come. The encounter with his mother serves to provide moments of considerable pathos when Odysseus tries to embrace his mother in vain with her shadow slipping through his arm and causing him anguish: 'Mother, why do you avoid me when I try to reach you.'

A gallery of famous women walk by as Odysseus stares in amazement followed by illustrious warriors and leaders which affords Homer artistic possibilities of a sort of interim flashback to what has happened to the Greek leaders in the meantime. Homer here exploits the dramatic possibilities of an encounter with the dead heroes. Agamemnon, once proud and arrogant, now approaching in dignified sorrow, gives an account of his brutal murder by his wife Clytemnestra. She had stabbed him with a sword and, the ultimate insult, did not shut his eyes in death. He warns Odysseus against the treachery of women, especially wives.

Two heroes make their appearance: Achilles honoured as a god among the living is now hailed by Odysseus as a prince among the dead. A compliment which Achilles brushes aside with the bitter remark 'I would rather be a serf in the house of some landless man ... than king of all these dead men that have done with life'.

Homer's introducing the episode of the encounter with Aias (Ajax) serves the purpose of reminding listeners of the rivalry and resentment which beset the Greeks during and after the siege of Troy. Aias had lost the contest with Odysseus for the splendid armour of Achilles after the latter's death at the hands of Paris. Both had risked their lives, under a shower of missiles and arrows, to retrieve the corpse from the Trojans. The winner of the close contest was Odysseus which enraged Ajax who felt insulted to the point that he momentarily went insane, and falling into a dumb rage, furiously slaughtering sheep and cattle, thinking that they were his Greek rivals. Then, in a moment of self-awareness, he sought the honourable action to take, and fell upon his sword. The encounter with Odysseus brings out a fact about human nature – that a real or imagined insult rankles beyond the grave into the shade of eternity. Odysseus is conciliatory and expresses his regret he had accepted the arms of Achilles, but Ajax enveloped in his own resentment walks away without speaking a word.

I should like to concentrate on Aeneas's descent into the Underworld as treated in Book VI of the *Aeneid*.

When Virgil appropriated Aeneas as a legendary founder of Rome he gave him heroic stature as the patriotic Trojan who is resolute in following the dictates of the Gods to found a great city. The political slant is evident because Aeneas in Virgil's portrayal of him, is the embodiment of the aspirations and the destiny of the greatest ancient city in the world at the time in the age of the Emperor Augustus (29 BC). The Romans are made to feel proud of their destiny supposedly ordained by the Gods and of their lineage which descended from the redoubtable Trojans and from the Trojan *pious Aeneas*, a combination of a strong sense of duty and piety and affection. In the *Aeneid* the founding the city of Rome, as ordained by the Gods, was an extremely difficult and hazardous undertaking: *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem* (Verg. *Aen.* 1.33).

Virgil, as scholars have pointed out, modeled his epic to a large extent on Homer and to give his hero stature he devised a visit to the Underworld and the visit provides a watershed in the plot since the narrative is both analeptic and proleptic. It also affords emotional and dramatic possibilities resulting from encounters with the spirits of

the dead. The scene of the underworld is transposed from Southern Greece to the shores of Cumae north of the bay of Naples whose entrance is from a hundred fissures in the volcanic rocks around near Lake Avernus: *quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum* (Verg. *Aen.* 6.43). Here is the haunt of the Sybil the oracle of old whom Aeneas wishes to consult. She insists on his plucking the golden bough sacred to Persephone which will act as a sort of talisman – this is a stroke of genius on Virgil's part because it give a sense of inaccessibility to ordinary mortals and Aeneas is made to perform a sacred rite, for though descent through the cleft in the rocks may seem easy, the Sybil promptly tells him that the retracing of one's steps is a difficult task indeed: *sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, hoc opus, hic labor est.* (Verg. *Aen.* 6.128-9).

The descent into the halls of Dis gives Virgil the opportunity to describe the horrific aspect of this inhospitable region as Aeneas and the Sybil tread cautiously on: the infernal chamber of horrors; the monsters of old Briareus, the giant with a hundred arms, and the beast of Lerna hissing horribly; the encircling hideous rivers of Tartarus and the bubbling lake of Acheron and the souls of the dead yearning to be ferried over by the grim surly Charon dressed in filthy rags.

Three encounters in succession afford dramatic possibilities – the first, Palinurus, Aeneas's helmsmen who was swept into the sea and who now pleads for a decent burial. Even more dramatic is the encounter with Dido, queen of Carthage who had shown Aeneas hospitality and who had fallen deeply in love with him, but following the stern commands of the Gods he was compelled to leave her (in spite of her entreaties) out of a certain *pietas*, a strong sense of duty, to his mission to found the great city of Rome as the gods had ordained. This encounter enables Virgil to give considerable affective power to narration and to underline the notion that the will of the Gods must be obeyed at all costs and in any circumstance. He is constrained (or so he claims) to break the heart of a woman who is overwhelmed with grief at his parting. Dido's angry plea with the departing Aeneas:

Nec tibi diva parens generis, nec Dardanus auctor,  
 perfide, sed duris genuit te cautibus horrens  
 Caucasus Hyrcanaeque admorunt ubera tigres.  
 (Verg. *Aen.* 4.365-7)

is strongly reminiscent Patroclus' angry words to Achilles who sulked in his tent after the Achaeans have urged him to return to battle.

Virgil here is attempting to justify his hero's rather caddish behaviour – moral obligation and resolve are stronger than the display of feelings of sentiment and love. In his adaptation of romance of Aeneas and Dido, Virgil had departed from the traditional account of Dido's death. Accordingly, she slew herself rather than be married to the repulsive king Iarbas. Virgil brilliantly adapts the tale of Dido to his advantage by making her curse Aeneas and his progeny and declare eternal enmity between the people of Carthage and the Romans. Thus he cleverly predicts the historical Punic Wars. Tearfully, Aeneas now explains his motive for leaving Dido – in sorrow she had taken her life – and now, in the darkness visible, she with glazed expression on her face kept her eyes on the ground disdaining to look at him and moves away in silence. An incident which is arguably one of the memorable snubs in literature! Virgil's hero is more than an epic hero but must embody the primal virtues of Augustan Rome where duty to one's country was to be prized above all other virtues.

The final encounter and Virgil's purpose in making Aeneas visit the underworld is the meeting with his father Anchises and it is placed at the end of the book as a dramatic climax. Here emotional, philosophical and political motives are made to converge .

It is *pietas* (obligation to the Gods and to the state) which pulls the narrative back on course because, unlike Odysseus, Aeneas cannot dally in the realms of love and romance – his purpose compliant with Roman *gravitas* is to found the Roman people. The *Aeneid* is single-mindedly concerned with this overriding purpose to the point that the poet is compelled to eradicate prolonged scenes of romance; such as those found in Homer – in Odysseus's affairs with Circe, Calypso and Nausica – The encounter with Anchises in the nether regions touches on a note of filial and fatherly affection which would have

appealed to the Roman sense of *familias*. Furthermore this encounter serves the purpose of giving the reader a sense of the seriousness of Roman philosophical thought which is derived from the Greek – Anchises unexpectedly expatiates on the tension between mind and matter which sets all things in motion – this is broadly a synopsis of the Pythagoras’ notion of creation and the relation of the soul to the afterlife. And lastly, it explains the rationale of Hades itself and the reward of the virtuous in the plains of Elysium, the actual place where father and son are conversing.

The political aspect of the poem – Rome founded by the decree of the Gods above and by an ordained noble survivor of the house of Priam of Troy is now evident. The narrative focuses on the procession/ or pageant of Roman souls from the Alban kings to Romulus to the Roman kings, and further ahead, waiting reincarnation among them, Augustus himself and his nephew Marcellus. Virgil provides an apt occasion to write a tribute to his patron. Among the souls in procession are two Romans named Marcellus –the older was consul five times and killed the Gallic chieftain Viridomarus in single combat, thus becoming the third Roman to win the *spolia optima*. The younger Marcus Marcellus was the son of Augustus’ sister Octavia adopted by Augustus in AD 25 who was tragically cut off from life, at a tender age of 19, before he could win lasting fame.

Anchises points to him tearfully and predicts the great grief the untimely death of this young noble Roman will cause the Roman race. In life he will be Marcellus: *heu, miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas, tu Marcellus eris* (Verg. *Aen.* 6.882); but he is unfortunately destined to become one of those ill-fated Romans whose life-span is that of unfulfilled renown.