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AUGUSTAN POETRY AND THE AGE OF RUST

MUSIC AND METAPHOR IN ANAÏS MITCHELL'S *HADESTOWN*

THOMAS E. JENKINS

ANAÏS MITCHELL'S *HADESTOWN*, a musical version of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as narrated by Virgil in the fourth book of the *Georgics* (G. 4.453–527), has witnessed a particularly circuitous route to the Broadway stage. Indeed, it began with a 2010 concept album that responded, through classical reception, to two contemporary events in the American landscape: the continuing American occupation of Iraq (through 2006 and beyond) and the financial crisis of 2008, the so-called Great Recession.¹ Composed in an American folk-rock idiom—with echoes of Dixieland jazz, country, Woodie Guthrie, and Bob Dylan—*Hadestown*'s initial album nabbed a number of critical accolades, including a rave from the *Times*' Dan Cairns: “a multi-layered, sensationally good and endlessly absorbing ‘folk opera.’”² While a few critics caviled that plot was not the album's especial virtue—“There's clearly a narrative, even if it isn't easy to follow,” observed the BBC's John Lusk, correctly—there was the germ here of a more ambitious project.³ Eventually, Rachel Chavkin—the breakout director of the innovative Tolstoy adaptation *Natasha, Pierre, & The Great Comet of 1812*—signed on to help shape the concept album into a full-length evening of theater. The successful Off-Broadway production, at New York

¹ B. Hallenbeck, “*Hadestown* 2016: Anaïs Mitchell's *Hadestown* Reborn Off-Broadway,” *Burlington Free Press*, April 16, 2019, <https://eu.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/2019/04/16/anais-mitchells-hadestown-reborn-off-broadway/84198858/>.

² D. Cairns, “Anaïs Mitchell *Hadestown*,” *Times*, April 25, 2010, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/anais-mitchell-hadestown-0wzwl5q9d6p>.

³ J. Lusk, Review of *Hadestown*, by Anaïs Mitchell, BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/rqcg/>.

Theater Workshop in 2017, received a full recording in album format; subsequent reworkings of the show premiered in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and at the National Theatre in London ahead of a Broadway premiere in the spring of 2019. In June 2019, *Hadestown* won a slew of Tony Awards, including Best Musical, Score, Set Design, and Direction. (André de Shields won a Tony for his role as the narrator, Hermes; of the principal cast, Eva Noblezada, Patrick Page, and Amber Gray were all nominated.)

This essay proposes to examine *Hadestown* as an act of extraordinary literary translation, from classical Latin to contemporary *American*. And so by translation, I do not mean simply a word-for-word translation but rather one in the sense that theorists of reception employ: a process of linking culturally relevant signifiers from the source language to the new.⁴ There are (literal) Orphic themes and images on the stage, of course, but there is also a metaphorical translation to a distinctly American *mise-en-scène*. As Mitchell observes in a lengthy blogpost: “When I play *Hadestown* songs in my own shows, I usually introduce [*Hadestown*] as quick as I can saying, ‘It’s based on the Orpheus myth, and set in a post-apocalyptic American Depression era ...’”⁵ It is worth pulling apart the interwoven strands of Mitchell’s own interpretation of *Hadestown* as a reception: it is both strictly temporal (the Great Depression) and economic/political (dystopian plutocracy). The first strand—the classics and the Great Depression—has surprisingly generated its own spatial field in artistic reception, and so Mitchell continues a tradition of “thinking through” the American Great Depression while (counterintuitively?) thinking through Latin poetry.

As a comparable example of the use of the Depression as the basis for an eco-critical classical reception, there is the powerful version by Tom Biby and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm (fig. 1). These illustrators

⁴ For an illuminating guide to categories within classical reception, see Hardwick (2003:9–10), who distinguishes between translation, adaptation, and refiguration, while noting the semantic slippages between the three. For Hardwick, translation can be used metaphorically—such as “translation to the stage” (10)—and it is in that sense that Mitchell has translated Virgil (and to some extent, Ovid).

⁵ A. Mitchell, “The Long-Winded Story of *Hadestown*,” in “Anaïs Mitchell—*Hadestown*,” Basement Rug, March 3, 2010, <http://basementrug.com/3424>.

translate the drought of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* to America's Dust Bowl and conclude with an evocative image of a tired farmer pausing from his pointless exertions on the parched heartland landscape. As the artists note, "Here is Lucretius' tale of the earth overtaxed and of lands too choked to bear fruit, retold with a twist: from the perspective of American farmers during the Great Depression."⁶ Book 2's devastating drought—illustrated by billowing clouds of dust—illuminates the *American* consequences of Nature's fickleness: in Lucretius's golden age, "Nature itself gave forth its sweet fruits and happy crops—which scarcely now swell even with the application of our toil (*labor*) ... But now the fruits are drying up and serve only to increase our toil (*labor*)" (Lucr. 2.1161–1163). This development is terrible enough; but then Lucretius—and Biby/Fetter-Vorm—transfer the desolation of the landscape to the desolation of the *landscaper*: as the caption in figure 1 reads, "Now see the ancient ploughman shake his head and sigh again that the work (= *labores*) of his tired hands has come to naught ..." (= Lucr. 2.1164–1165).⁷ I have emphasized the repetition of *labor* in the Latin text to underscore the link in the Roman poetic imagination between landscape and labor, a link emphasized by Biby/Fetter-Vorm and (as we shall see) by both Virgil and Mitchell. For all these artists, the essence of existence may be ceaseless, and at times literally fruitless, *labor*.⁸

But the Depression was, of course, an economic as well as natural disaster. In his surprising and endlessly inventive version of Ovid's Erysichthon episode from the *Metamorphoses*, poet James Lasdun hits upon a similar translation of ecological disaster—but ties it even more firmly to American capitalistic greed.⁹ In Ovid's version—adapted from Callimachus's *Hymn to Demeter*—Erysichthon's felling of Demeter's sacred tree is accomplished for the sheer and unadulterated joy of it: the king spurns the divinity of the gods (*Met.* 8.739–740) and chops

⁶ Kick 2012:140.

⁷ "The Ancient Plowman," © Tom Biby and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, 2007; Kick 2012:147.

⁸ For a passionate, Marxist-tinged investigation of *labor* in the *Georgics*, see Geue 2018; Geue argues that *labor* is central to the poem both in its presence but also (crucially) in its *elision*—the labor of agricultural slaves that is necessary but literally unsung.

⁹ Lasdun 1994. Further citations in the essay are to page numbers.

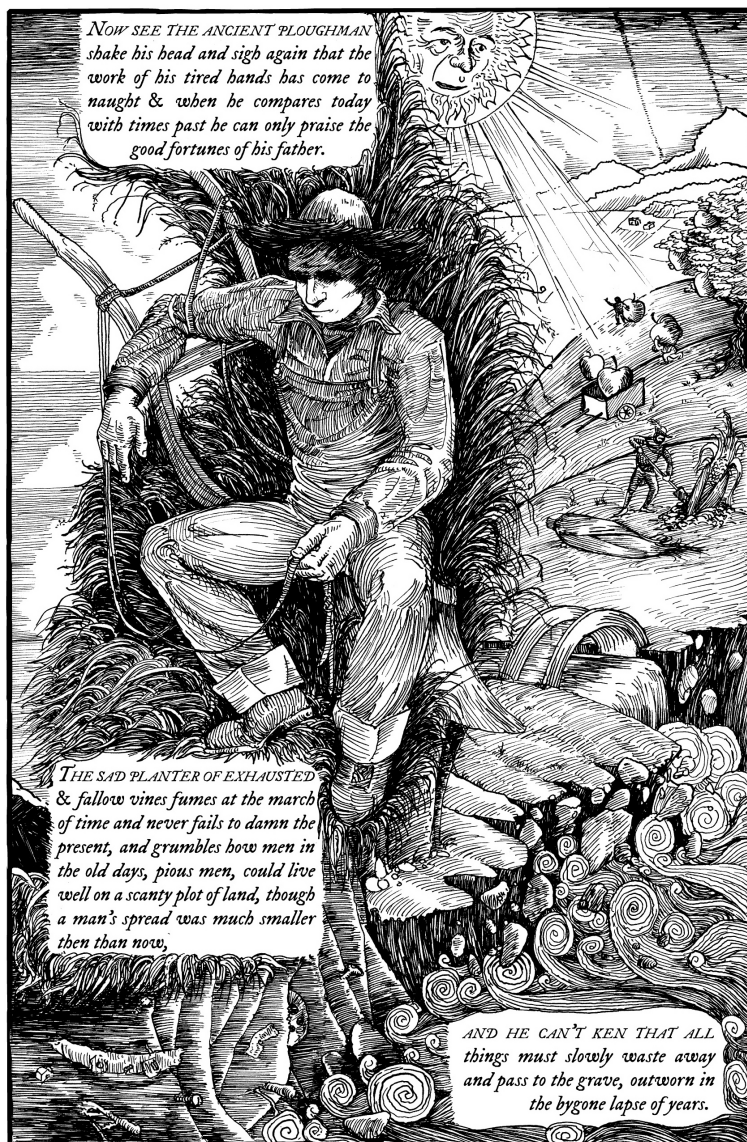


Figure 1. "The Ancient Plowman," © Tom Biby and Jonathan Fetter-Vorm, 2007.

down the tree to prove his power. The king's terrible comeuppance—he is so hungry, he eats himself—is the delicious finale to this morality tale: autophagy as lesson for us all. Lasdun's modern-day version preserves the moralistic tone of Ovid's myth but appends to it a *different* moral: here, Erysichthon's vendetta against trees is part of a real-estate mogul's entrepreneurial ambitions, as he deforests large swathes of (apparently) upstate New York, traditionally sacred to the Iroquois tribes. In an invocation to the goddesses, Lasdun makes explicit the translation between ancient and modern divinities: "Demeter, Ishtar, Ceres, / Papothewke ..." (205), and it is with distressingly modern technology—a roaring chainsaw—that Ceres's dogwood comes crashing down. But it is the central episode that most firmly ties this text to Biby/Fetter-Vorm's image (fig. 1). An acolyte of Ceres is sent to fetch the goddess Hunger: in Ovid's original poem, Fames appropriately inhabits a barren tundra on the outermost rim of Scythia (*Met.* 8.788).¹⁰ In Lasdun's version, however, Ceres's messenger must pass through a Depression Era evocation of America's blighted heartland: "[She followed] a thin / ooze of mud-coloured sludge / that crawled across a desolate moonlike plain / of exhausted farmland; barren / skeletal orchards, rusting silos, / Dry irritation pipes crisscrossing meadows / of dust ..." (206–207). But this is not *just* an environmental wasteland but a man-made one, with "strip-mines, foundries, factories" adding oil and pesticides to the water and *creating* this depressed landscape, one directly linked to the avarice of Erysichthon (and his ilk). Scarcity and plutocracy go hand-in-hazmat-glove.

The genius of *Hadestown*, as classical reception, is that it combines *all* of these themes: it tackles the Great Depression, climate change, plutocracy, *and* the tragedy of wasted labor, including love's labors lost. And it does so with the most infectious score since Cole Porter: including a toe-tapping number by the Fates and a brilliant mosaic of arias for its main characters. In addition, *Hadestown* not only juggles the wasted labor of Orpheus but the blighted dreams of Persephone, here

¹⁰ This episode is a terrific example of the pathetic fallacy in Ovid, in which landscape mirrors the ethical or aesthetic character of its denizens. For a monograph-length treatment of this trope, see Segal 1969.

trapped in a difficult marriage to the King of the Dead. It thus combines a tale dripping with political implications—the iron rule of Hades over a polluting factory town—with the timeless and perhaps even sentimental overtones of Roman love elegy.¹¹ Ultimately *Hadestown*’s hipster sensibility shines through: Hades might be a ruthless corporate overlord, but even he is not immune to the charms, and the power, of a downtown, West Village Virgil.

The interpretative heart of Mitchell’s show—what makes it tick as *art*—are the competing visions of *Hadestown* as a semiotic space. In Ovid and Virgil, the underworld is a place of unalloyed terror, the unknowable made frightful: *loca plena timoris* (*Met.* 10.29), as Ovid evocatively terms it. (Virgil’s “infernal maws,” *Taenarias fauces* [*G.* 467], sound equally uninviting.) Mitchell’s choral Fates, however, sing a different tune:

Everybody dresses in clothes so fine
 Everybody’s pockets are weighted down
 Everybody sipping ambrosia wine
 It’s a goldmine in *Hadestown*

From “Way Down *Hadestown*”

There is much to note here. The ancient conflation of *Ploutos* (Πλούτος; wealth) with Pluto is in full force.¹² *Hadestown*—at least on the Fates’ Pollyanna view—is a place replete with riches: sartorial, numismatic, culinary, and economic. It is a *literal* goldmine: a descent not to hell but to a helluva lifestyle. Hades, as leader and company foreman, has

¹¹ The subjectivity of Persephone in Augustan Latin texts is mostly occluded: Ovid treats the etiological aspects of her assault twice (once at *Fast.* 4.417–620 and again at *Met.* 5.341–661), while Propertius and Tibullus focus on her numinous powers of mercy (*Prop.* 2.28.47 and *Tib.* 3.5.6). In her rewriting of Persephone into a modern and desperate housewife, Mitchell seems to be creating a revisionist, “realist” version of the Augustan *scripta puella*, an elegiac trope famously analyzed by Wyke 1987. (On Wyke’s reading, many modern critics are seduced by the notion that they are reading of a *real*, “flesh and blood” elegiac mistress [47]; in a sense, Mitchell makes that illusion “real” by creating a fleshed-out Persephone—though she is assuredly a wife, not a mistress *per se*.)

¹² See especially Oosterhuis 2013:113–116, with a survey of the ancient conflation. Oosterhuis concludes (based on Mitchell’s concept album): “*Hadestown* benefits from that conflation as it allows Hades to take an even greater metaphorical role. He is wealth, commerce, and cold, unfeeling capitalism” (116). That symbolism became even more pronounced in the piece’s productions following the inauguration of Donald Trump.

managed (through the “mass media” of the Fates) to broadcast to the upper world a vision of his town as an upper-class utopia, where all needs are met (particularly shelter and food), and everybody is blessed. But it is the bohemian Orpheus—toiling in a day job as a barista—who offers a gimlet-eyed version of the great down below: “Everybody hungry, everybody tired / Everybody slaves by the sweat of his brow / The wage is nothing, and the work is hard / It’s a graveyard in Hadestown.” This is a clever bit of imagery: the verse first disputes the metaphors employed by the Fates—not ambrosia but hunger; not finery but sweat; not a goldmine but a graveyard. The last metaphor is particularly pointed: the *classical* Hades is a literal graveyard, filled with souls; the American Hadestown is a metaphorical graveyard, filled with the walking, proletariat dead. Critic Adam Feldman lauds the “intensity of [Hadestown’s] eco-Marxist vision of solidarity and the liberating potential of art”—a verdict that also glances at *Hadestown*’s reflections on aesthetics.¹³

Here, too, we have the first inkling that Mitchell combines capitalistic and environmental critiques in her examination of Hades, both place and king. In the Latin texts, it is striking how many images of regency and monarchy cluster around Hades and Persephone, including *regem* (Verg. *G.* 4.469), *tyranni* (4.492), *ipsae domus* (the “court,” 4.481), and the breathless run of royal terminology in the *Metamorphoses* (10.15–16; 10.30; 10.35; 10.46; 10.47, all featuring the root of *reg-*, “to rule”). Clearly, Hades, as a politician, is not particularly amenable to alternative forms of netherworld governance. But who rules—*regit*—in America? Mitchell’s answer: the CEO. Indeed, *Hadestown*’s Hades lords over his dominion as if a 1920’s company town, such as Pullman, Illinois, or Hastings, Maine.¹⁴ In fact, nearly every aspect of *Hadestown*’s lyrics works on three intertwined levels: the political, the economic,

¹³ A. Feldman, Review of *Hadestown*, by Anaïs Mitchell, *TimeOut New York*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/hadestown-review-broadway>.

¹⁴ On the expansive social engineering of Pullman and his company town, see Reiff 2000: “For almost as long [as its defenders praised Pullman], its critics had excoriated the town as representing the worst excesses of a capitalist society where one man and his company could dominate every aspect of a worker’s life in their dual roles as landlord and employer” (8).

and the environmental. Thus Orpheus's perceptive reframing of the rumors of underworld wealth, with my own backward-facing translation (translating "back" into Latin) in parentheses:

King [*rex*] of silver
 King [*rex*] of gold
 And everything glittering
 under the ground

 Hades is king [*rex*]
 of oil and coal ...
 King [*rex*] of mortar
 King [*rex*] of bricks
 The River Styx is a river of stones
 and Hades lays them high and thick
 with a million hands that are not his own
 With a million hands, he builds a wall

From "Epic II"

Here, Mitchell preserves the emphasis on kingship already found in Ovid and Virgil but ties this power explicitly to *labor*: Hades is a king not of subjects but of laborers, a million hands. (It is also a nifty synecdoche, as in the term *farmhand*.) In the next song ("Chant"), we meet these dispossessed "hands": the wretched "workers" who "keep [their] head low" as they toil to convert Hades's geological property into material wealth and prosperity. Michael Krass's costume design of the London and Broadway productions (fig. 2) makes clear the proletariat aspect of these workers' existences with safety goggles, tool belts, blacksmith aprons, and other necessary implements.

But while the workers drone on (ah, *le mot juste*), Hades boasts of the source of his considerable power in a misguided bid for his wife Persephone's continued affections:

I built a foundry
 in the ground beneath your feet
 and there I fashioned things of steel
 oil drums and automobiles

And then I kept that furnace fed
with the fossils of the dead

From “Chant”

If much of *Hadestown* seems lyrical and atemporal, this particular lyric comes across, contrariwise, as prosaic and pointed: an indictment of 20th- (and now 21st-) century industrialization. In its evocation of steel, cars, and oil, it is reminiscent of the hellscape of Lasdun’s *Erysichthon*, a geography destined for blight and hunger. But for Hades, this hunger is not human but mechanical, as he feeds the living machines with the remnants—the fossils—of the dead. The evocation of fossil fuel must be intentional as well: human labor as interchangeable with coal. And Hades’s link to the specter of climate change is made explicit, as Persephone remarks that “up above / the harvest dies and people starve / Oceans rise and overflow / it ain’t right and it ain’t natural.”



Figure 2. *HADESTOWN* by Anaïs Mitchell. Workers in Hades: Shaq Taylor, Beth Hinton- Lever; Sharif Afif; Alesha Pease; Seyi Omooba. Directed by Chavkin; Set designed by Hauck; Costumes designed by Krass; Lighting designed by King; Choreographed by Neumann; at the National Theatre, London, UK, 1 November 2018. Credit Helen Maybanks/ArenaPAL.

Hades's great aria—"Why We Build the Wall"—shares in common with Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* an extraordinary shift in *meaning* engendered by monumental events. In 2001, Zimmerman's play—her stage version of Ovid's epic—was preparing for its off-Broadway premiere after a successful run in Chicago. The attack on New York's Twin Towers occurred during rehearsals, and suddenly the meaning of a classical reception *changed*—more properly, *metamorphosed*—instantly and irrevocably. As Zimmerman recounts in a 2002 interview with Bill Moyers, "There are at least two stories in the play where someone goes away, off to work basically, and is suddenly taken from the earth—just destroyed. And I remember on our first public performance, which was the 18th [of September], just sort of shaking and trembling off stage about showing this and dragging the audience through this story, including the dying prayer of a man saying, 'I only pray my body is found. Just let my body be found.'"¹⁵ Most powerfully, the myth of Ceyx and Alcyone is now read as a metaphor for the missing dead in the rubble of the Twin Towers. What had been a more general rumination on loss now possesses a specific, American referent: the terror attacks on 9/11. In the same way, it is hard, in 2020, to imagine "Why We Build the Wall" as referring to anything *other* than American President Donald Trump's repeated exhortation to build a border wall between Mexico and the United States. The London and Broadway production design even features a tattoo of a wall on Hades's muscular forearm (figure 3), a gesture that transparently connects America's physical might to its most prominent political symbol.

Let us now look at the song's lyrics (ruthlessly excerpted) through two sets of interpretative lenses, pre- and post-Trump:

Why do we build the wall?
 My children, my children
 We build the wall to keep us free

How does the wall keep us free?
 The wall keeps out the enemy

¹⁵ M. Zimmerman, interviewed by Bill Moyer, *Now PBS*, March 22, 2002, https://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript_zimmerman.html.

Who do we call the enemy?
The enemy is poverty
And the wall keeps out the enemy
And we build the wall to keep us free

Because we have and they have not
My children, my children
Because they want what we have got

What do we have that they should want?
We have a wall to work upon
We have work and they have none
And our work is never done

Let us first interpret this song *post-Trump* (which is how many critics of the Broadway premiere took it). In a Trumpian worldview, the enemy



Figure 3. HADESTOWN by Anaïs Mitchell. Patrick Page as Hades. Directed by Chavkin; Set designed by Hauck; Costumes designed by Krass; Lighting designed by King; Choreographed by Neumann; at the National Theatre, London, UK, 1 November 2018. Credit Helen Maybanks/ArenaPAL.

are foreigners (of any ilk) but particularly Mexicans, whom Trump infamously smeared on the campaign trail in 2015 as drug runners and rapists.¹⁶ Trump's notorious solution—an "artistically-designed" 2000-mile long border wall—even inspired his *Game of Thrones*-themed tweet, "The Wall is Coming," of January 5, 2019.¹⁷ In "Why We Build The Wall," the song's endless invocation of "freedom"—long a conservative rallying cry—would (on a Trumpian reading) signify the preservation of American economic liberty against the encroachment of Latin American societal ills, including crime, narcotics, and even welfare. A wall is then necessary to preserve the integrity of the American experiment, which rewards hard work and self-reliance (or self-labor). It is easy to read the penultimate stanza as Mexicans wanting (and thus *stealing*) what we Americans have got.

But this song was composed pre-Trump, and it is worth pondering in that light as well: after all, we shall all eventually be post-Trump. (Even Trump will be post-Trump.) The last stanza points us in a new interpretative direction: after all, it is not a Trumpian ideal—at least notionally—that we will *always* be building a wall. In theory, we could (and should) *finish* the wall. Rather, it is *Hades's* fantasy (and ideological position) that labor is its own reward: labor/*labor* and life are indivisible. Through working and building, we maintain the division between the haves and the have-nots: labor determines status, which determines the worth of a life.

So the climax of *Hadestown* features a fascinating sociopolitical twist: how might a song of Orpheus persuade a Libertarian Hades to bend his economic principles? It has long been observed that Virgil's and Ovid's versions of Orpheus's song are inverted negatives of each other: Virgil is long on affect, short on content, while Ovid is the other way around.¹⁸ So in Virgil, the shades are moved by Orpheus's song (G.

¹⁶ B. LoGiurato, "The Long, Wild Ride to Iowa: How Donald Trump Set the Presidential Campaign on Fire," *Business Insider*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-presidential-campaign-iowa-caucus-polls-2016-1?IR=T>.

¹⁷ D. Trump, Twitter post, January 5, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1081735898679701505>.

¹⁸ For instance, Otis argues that Ovid intentionally avoids the *ethos* and *pathos* of the Virgilian version and investigates the genres of parody and comedy instead of tragedy:

4.471 *cantu commotae*), first stupefied by its beauty (G. 4.481 *stupuere*) and then sliding into immobility; even the hellhound Cerberus holds its tongue(s). Orpheus ascends, victorious, and this affect *substitutes* for the song, its charm (and efficacy) proven by the audience, not the song itself. Ovid, contrariwise, info-dumps a surprisingly prolix song of Orpheus, beginning with a rolling invocation to the masters of the Dead (*Met.* 10.17 *o positi sub terra numina mundi*) and next following the contours of a Ciceronian court case. (He even bluntly declares: *causa viae est coniunx* [*Met.* 10.23] to seal the generic reference.) But then an interesting twist: not only does Orpheus tout the power and efficacy of *Amor*—which we might expect—but he ties it specifically to the *amor* between Persephone and Hades, which we might not. In vatic vein, Orpheus contends that unless the story of Persephone's rape is fake news (*Met.* 10.28 *fama mentita*), *Amor* joined Persephone and Hades together as well: *vos quoque iunxit Amor* (*Met.* 10.28–29).¹⁹ Thus Orpheus relies on identification and empathy as a tool of persuasion: the song works not because it is universal, but because it is *specific* to its audience of a loving (or at least love-possible) royal couple.

Given these different emphases in its two primary ancient Roman versions, the song of Orpheus presents a challenge for Mitchell as a reception artist. She has figured Hades as a proto-Trump and Orpheus as a proletariat laborer, and so neither ancient “solution” to the shape or content of the song seems quite right. Virgil reveals the *effect* of the song, not the song itself, but that solution would be anticlimactic in a contemporary Broadway musical where the power of performed song is paramount. Ovid transforms the song into a brilliant forensic display piece, but that choice does not fit Mitchell's characterization of her millennial protagonist—her Orpheus may be many oh-so-American things, but Clarence Darrow is not one of them. Instead, Mitchell turns

“Orpheus' long speech to Pluto and Prosperina (X, 17–39) is the king of amusing *suasoria* that Ovid thoroughly enjoyed” (1970:184). Lively expands on that interpretation, with a list of inversions and subversions that signal how “Ovid seems to challenge every detail of Virgil's famous version” (2011:100).

¹⁹ See especially Guestella (2017:167–184) on the depictions of *Fama*, “rumor,” in Virgil and Ovid; Guestella argues that Ovid, in particular, emphasizes the *unknowability* of rumor's origins: false because unsourced (183).

to poetic *imagery* as an agonal tactic: having constructed Hades/Trump at the center of a constellation of eco-Marxist images (including the exploitation of fossil fuel, climate change / global warming, barrier walls and concrete, and a literal sweatshop), Mitchell's Orpheus fights fire with water: he employs a different *style* (a countertenor lullaby as opposed to Hades's *basso profundo* rumblings) as well as an entirely different tonal world, with images drawn from pastorals, from love elegy, even from Sappho. (Roses and flowers—which featured prominently in the musical's staging—might well be drawn from Sappho's *Fragment 2*, with its apple-boughs and roses). In *Epic 3*—Orpheus's famous “song”—Orpheus conjures a world of imagery *first* (“King of shadows / king of shades”), thereby laying the groundwork for his competing imagistic world, of what a world *could* be. In a meta-theatrical twist, Hades is surprised by this song (“Oh, it's about me?”)—this is a new reception, more Hades-centric than even Ovid's. Orpheus continues: “[H]e fell in love with a beautiful lady / Who walked up above / In her mother's green field / He fell in love with Persephone / Who was gathering flowers in the light of the sun.” This insertion is clearly Mitchell's intertextual allusion to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, in which Persephone gathers roses, crocuses, violets, iris blossoms, and hyacinths (ll. 6–7)—but Orpheus (or Mitchell) cannily elides the subsequent detail: that the narcissus was used a lure by Gaia to allow for Hades's ambush and assault (ll. 8–20).²⁰ Instead, Orpheus employs *empathy*, drawing a comparison across difference: “And I know how it was because / He was like me / A man in love with a woman.”

There is a germ of Ovid's version but here made more pointed—and perhaps uncomfortably alluding to a fraternity of men desiring women. But at this point, Mitchell springs a surprise: Orpheus launches into a vocalize of, in effect, pure music: “La la la la la la.” The tune is set in a high register, childlike and whimsical, and in a semiotic vacuum: there are no longer flowers, sunlight, shadows. Simply *la la la la la la*. And then the audience experiences a redoubled surprise with Hades's response:

²⁰ Given the Augustan subtext of *Hadestown*, this detail might even be more specifically a reference to Ovid's version of the rape of Persephone starting at *Fast.* 4.419, particularly the flower-picking sequence of 429–444.

“Where’d you get that melody?” Hades clearly *knows* that melody; and we will learn he once *sang* that melody (he may even have been the first). Orpheus then is a type of *Hades redivivus*, or more accurately, a Hades rejuvenated. When he first met Persephone, Hades conflated epistemology and desire: “It was like she was someone you’d always known / It was like you were holding the world when you held her”—words that exactly echo *Eurydice’s* song of love to Orpheus earlier in the musical (“All I’ve ever known is how to hold my own / but now I wanna hold you.”). So Orpheus not only draws connections between himself and Hades but (surprisingly) between *Eurydice* and Hades, refiguring Hades as a lovestruck (and tongue-tied) singer: “So you opened your mouth and you started to sing: La la la la la la.”

Having established what a pre-Libertarian Hades might have sounded (and felt) like, Orpheus then attends to the climax of his song, which both acknowledges and undercuts Hades’s metaphor world, a world so carefully established throughout the architecture of the musical. Orpheus wonders where Hades’s “heart” has gone—a heart Hades possessed while a man but abandoned “now that the man is king.” Orpheus then cleverly paints the material rewards of Hadestown as curses instead: “[T]he more he has ... the greater the weight of the world ... / see how he labors beneath that load ... / So he keeps his head low, he keeps his back bending / He’s grown so afraid that he’ll lose what he owns / but what he doesn’t know is that what he’s defending / is already gone ...” The gold and diamonds of Hadestown are figured as weight, and it is *Hades*, now, who is the true sufferer of *labor*: the song of Orpheus even harkens back to the workers’ “Chant” (“Low, keep your head, keep your head low”), with its evident evocation of American prison chain gangs. Riches did not bring happiness: when penniless, Hades possessed pleasure, youth, and a metaphorical “treasure inside of [the] chest”: a heart. The young Hades reaching out for *Persephone* had—in both material and emotional senses—“nothing to lose.”

Having torpedoed Hades’s free-enterprise-based metaphor world with a sly combination of historically-grounded argument and song, Orpheus simply waits for the results. At which point, Hades muses, “la la la la la.” Orpheus responds, “la la la la la.” And *Persephone*, affected by this lyrical evocation of her shared past, chimes in, “la la la la la la.”

Orpheus's song—or, more accurately, Mitchell's song—has rolled back time to simpler days without *labor*, without riches, without loss, without even words. We are back, as in a golden age, to a time when *amor* (love) need not compete with *labor* because *labor* simply does not exist. (In this, Orpheus's song obliquely alludes to Virgil's all-giving earth (G. 1.127–128)—before *labor improbus* makes its late and unlamented appearance).

At the performance I attended in May of 2019, the final moments of *Hadestown* drew gasps from the audience, partly because of the effective staging of the dénouement and partly because Americans, weaned on television such as *America's Got Talent*, could not process that a winning song might nonetheless culminate in tragedy. It is worth pondering why Mitchell preserves this classical ending when she might—as in Gluck's famous operatic version—tack on the happiest of conclusions instead. (In that work, the goddess *Amore* takes pity on Orpheus after he loses Eurydice *again*; she resurrects Eurydice to great fanfare, if not to particularly great sense.)²¹ But having firmly tied Orpheus's tale to a capitalist and eco-critical framework, Mitchell *could not* alter the ending: the forces of capitalism and climate change are not arcing towards a happy ending in American *reality* and so cannot be honestly portrayed as such in art. Thus, for Orpheus, “Doubt Comes In” reflects a diffidence in himself as refracted both through Eurydice (“Who am I to think that she would follow me into the cold and dark again?”) as well as Hades (“Who am I to think that he wouldn't deceive me just to make me leave alone?”); he thus falls into Hades's trap, set in the song “His Kiss, the Riot.” Hades correctly intuits that this millennial Orpheus can only thrive as part of a corporate body (of laborers, of artists, of millennials) and that divorced from “the safety of a crowd,” Orpheus will buckle to doubt. Indeed, Orpheus loses confidence in his own powers of prognostication and even perception (“I used to see the way the world

²¹ The reception history of Orpheus in music is vast: for a good starting place on the enlightenment and post-enlightenment refiguring of Orpheus in Western music, see Agnew 2008. On Gluck's transformation of a “gloomy” myth into other affective modes (including high-spiritedness), see especially Agnew 2008:121–122. On the reception history of Orpheus in opera as well as film (including *Rabbit Hole* and *Slumdog Millionaire*), see Solomon 2019.

could be / But now the way it is is all I see and ..."). To ascertain reality, Orpheus turns around.

The rest, as they say, is history. Or rather, tragedy. The narrator, Hermes—something of an emotional wreck himself—recognizes the weirdness of singing, and *re*-singing, "a tragedy": "Cause here's the thing / To know how it ends / And still begin to sing it again / As if it might turn out this time / I learned that from a friend of mine." And then Hermes's singing falters, as the god simply speaks: "[Orpheus] could make you see how the world could be." Yes, it is a sentimental conclusion to the evening, made even more so by the surprise toast to Orpheus during the curtain call: "We Raise Our Cups." And, yes, Mitchell might be accused of promoting an oversize veneration of the misunderstood artist, a bohemian stance that would not be out of place in, say, fin de siècle Paris. But what saves (and elevates) *Hadestown* is its razor-sharp evisceration of contemporary pillars of conservative economic thought, including competition, efficiency, fossil-fuel reliance, and nativism. By weaving together these strands as a *system*, Mitchell has, intentionally or otherwise, created a spectacularly political piece of art, one that stresses the tragedy of the solitary artist, or the solitary person, fighting the system—and losing. It is the transplantation of heartless tragedy into the depressed American heartland. And the only succor, then as now, is *carmen* (song) (G. 4.514).

This volume is dedicated to Richard Tarrant, whose teaching and wisdom has touched so many of us. Many years ago, in a lecture on Virgil's *Aeneid* delivered to Trinity University undergraduates, Richard observed—and I quote this from memory—"In my lifetime, the greatest change in the field of classics has been the shift of *modern* perspective: from the classical authors as 'masters' to the classical authors as peers." In other words, for many aspects of human inquiry—particularly in ethics and the humanities—we have reconsidered the notion (and even the desirability) of an answer flowing ineluctably from classical texts. Rather, we have an apprehension of Virgil and Ovid as colleagues in inquiry, who observe, describe, and critique the worlds and even underworlds around us. A happy corollary to this observation is that our fellow artists—rarely fearless in transforming antiquity—have

taken the spirit of classical observation to realms of inquiry unheard of, including those of climate change and income inequality.

In *Hadestown*, the god Hermes has the last word, but for this chapter on *Hadestown*, it seems only fitting that Richard should. So from an email of October, 2019, here are Richard's *ipsissima verba*, penned after watching the musical *Hadestown*: "By the end I was hooked. (I even got a little moist in the eye when Hades and Persephone did their little dance.)" And so we raise our cup to Orpheus and Richard Tarrant: heroes, both.

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