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## INTRODUCTION

# Trying

THE WORK OF THIS BOOK began with a single question: How do words produce action? And, more particularly, how do early modern English writers conceptualize the unseen “force” of verbal eloquence? For, while there is widespread consensus in early modern Europe that eloquent language possesses a force that can alter the world, its power cannot be directly perceived. As Erasmus observes in the *Adagia* (1508), verbal eloquence has a “secret natural force [*occultam vim*].”<sup>1</sup> Erasmus names this hidden force with the Greek word *energeia*, a term that signifies action, strength, and vigor. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century natural philosophers—including occultists and experimentalists—are deeply invested in accounting for the secret actions of occult forces such as sympathy and antipathy, but the particular qualities of verbal *energeia* are not explained by these accounts. Rather, it is the arts of rhetoric and poetics—that is, disciplines derived from the language arts of the *trivium*, not the “secret” or hermetic arts or the natural and physical sciences—that attempt to account for an orator’s ability to move audiences without physical contact. Surprisingly, these arts use the Orpheus myth to transform the force of verbal eloquence into an object of knowledge for Renaissance science.<sup>2</sup>

In the Greek tradition, Orpheus is the first poet, and one of the earliest embodiments of the idea of language as power.<sup>3</sup> According to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus’s lyric harmonies are so enrapturing that they move the gods of the Underworld, and cause trees, animals, and stones to change their natures in order to follow the singer. Arthur Golding’s early English translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1567) describes the power of Orpheus’s song as follows in a famous scene from the myth:

[1]

Such wood as this had Orpheus drawn about him as among  
The herds of beasts, and flocks of Birds he sat amidst the throng.  
And when his thumb sufficiently had tried every string,  
And found that, though they severally in sundry sounds did ring,  
Yet made they all one harmony, he thus began to sing . . .<sup>4</sup>

This image of the Ur-poet encircled by enchanted animals and trees emblemizes the ability of harmonious song to order the world (Figure 0.1). For Renaissance interpreters, the Orpheus myth both dramatizes the practice of eloquence (in telling the tale of a poet who can work wonders with his art) and provides a theory of that practice (in suggesting that eloquence can be defined as speech with the power to move a recalcitrant audience). As William Webbe puts it in his *Discourse of English Poetrie* (1589), Orphic eloquence “[draws] as it were by force the hearers eares euen whether soeuer it lysteth.”<sup>5</sup>

By providing a parable of the hidden force of verbal eloquence, a parable that accounts for an orator’s ability to move audiences without physical contact, the myth of Orpheus enables the epistemology of the early modern language arts. In the sixteenth century, as I will argue, the English arts of rhetoric and poetics use the tale of Orpheus to transform the force of verbal eloquence into an object of knowledge. Moreover, in describing the power of verbal eloquence to “draw” audiences, Ovid’s version of the Orpheus myth in his *Metamorphoses* provides English philosophers, poets, and rhetors with a conceptual lexicon that allows them to explore the physical and metaphysical capacities of verbal *energeia*. Through Ovid, early modern writers develop an understanding of *energeia* as a force that acts at a distance, binding, drawing, softening, and scattering its audiences. These discoveries emerge through a series of poetic trials, experiments with the verbal materials of Ovid’s poem. In the late sixteenth century, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and Francis Bacon, among many others, put their thumbs upon the myth, “trying” its sundry sounds just as Arthur Golding’s Orpheus tested—“tried every string” of—his lyre. Such trials of Orpheus allow English writers to sift, strain, and extract the constituent features of verbal eloquence from Ovid’s poem. These writers draw on Ovid’s myth of Orpheus not only to make singular poetic harmonies but also to make trial of (that is “test,” “explore,” and “examine”) the force that animates both Ovid’s writing and their own. Through such trials, the Orpheus myth becomes a crucible for refining early modern poetry and poetic theory.

The Orpheus myth thus provides a way for early modern English poets and rhetors to conceptualize *and* enact the force of eloquence. The results



FIGURE 0.1. Orpheus mosaic by Marcello Provenzale in the Galleria Borghese, Rome (1618). Photo credit: Album, Alamy Stock Photo.

of these trials are dangerously ambivalent; first, because that force is startlingly erotic, and second, because it places the poet-rhetor in a position of simultaneous supremacy and subservience. For many Renaissance interpreters, the Orpheus myth represents the dominance of verbal eloquence over all things. Eloquence is for them a powerful instrument, and teachers of rhetoric depict it as functional, constructive, and progressive. “Neither can I see,” the English rhetorician Thomas Wilson writes in his *Art of Rhetoric* (1560), “that men could have been brought by any other means, to live together in fellowship of life, to maintain cities, to deal truly, and willingly obey one another, if men at the first had not by art and eloquence, persuaded that which they full oft found out by reason.” Men who wield such eloquence can “be taken for half a god,” Wilson concludes.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite the charisma of this fantasy, the Orpheus myth prompts some sixteenth-century poets and philosophers to conceive of eloquence, not as an instrument that they make and control, but rather as a force that passes through them from elsewhere. Their Orphic trials discover that the ecstatic force of eloquence entraps *poets* as well as their audiences, as when Shakespeare writes that “Orpheus’ lute was strung with poets’ sinews.”<sup>7</sup> This startling

image collapses the distinction between poet and instrument while also suggesting that the dominance of the eloquent man cannot be disentangled from his susceptibility to the trying fingers of other players. Indeed, Renaissance literature emphasizes the aesthetic and erotic charge sparked by this conjoining of potency and vulnerability in the figure of the poet.

These early modern trials of Orpheus—sixteenth-century attempts to define and produce the force of eloquence, a force that turns out to be explicitly erotic—wrestle with many of the theoretical problems that also preoccupy the natural sciences. That is to say, what might seem to a modern reader to be strictly literary inquiries into the nature and effects of artful language are in fact also reckoning with thorny natural philosophical conundrums, including the relationship between form and matter and the distinction between the manifest and the occult. The most interesting of these is the problem of action-at-a-distance, a phenomenon whereby an object is moved, changed, or affected without any apparent physical contact, as in instances of magnetic attraction.<sup>8</sup> This book will show how the problem of action-at-a-distance informs the practice of rhetoric: the skilled rhetor must develop techniques that allow the practitioner to manipulate the occult relations between the world's parts so as to act on things from afar.<sup>9</sup> This produces an early modern idea of eloquence as a quasimagnetic force. The sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century poets, dramatists, and philosophers included in this study express such techniques of rhetorical control through the imagery contained in Ovid's myth of Orpheus, as when Francis Bacon describes the charm of Orpheus's song as a *vinculum*, or "bond."<sup>10</sup> The Orpheus myth helps Bacon name the hidden connections that allow the philosopher to alter and manipulate the natural relations of the world. In Bacon's subsequent writings, the "bond" refers both to the force that joins form and matter in nature *and* to the capacity of human art to reform nature.<sup>11</sup> This coordination of Ovidian myth and experimental philosophy promises to make the Baconian natural philosopher master of the invisible chains that bind and draw elements of the natural world. And although the language arts are not Bacon's focus, his Orphic trial reveals how early modern natural philosophers co-opt the preternatural force of eloquence to their own ends.<sup>12</sup>

*The Trials of Orpheus* thus claims that the Orpheus myth is an instrument of knowledge production for early modern rhetoric and poetics, helping writers to posit the force of verbal *energeia* as an overwhelming action-at-a-distance.<sup>13</sup> The force of verbal eloquence thus conceived is so powerful that it becomes attractive to natural philosophy at large. This book will further argue that the Orpheus myth functions so well to explain

the force of *energeia* and its preternatural effects because it also provides Renaissance poets with an aesthetic concept of the sublime, a Greek theory of poetic influence that is still largely underestimated in studies of classical reception in early modern England.<sup>14</sup> In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid expresses the power of Orphic song in terms of the Greek sublime, claiming that power on behalf of a Roman literary tradition. This merger explains the ambivalent results of the trials of Orpheus for the early modern poet—superiority and subjection. For, in using Ovid’s poetry to uncover and lay hold of the preternatural operations of *energeia*, the early modern trials of Orpheus depict the encounter with classical literature as a sexually charged ravishment and dispossession rather than an orderly cultural inheritance. This model of artistic creation suggests that in order to make poetry, one must first submit to possession by a larger force.

Such a vision of the poet bound by the forces of art resonates very closely with ancient Greek ideas of poetic ecstasy, and I argue that Ovid’s myth of Orpheus mediates the transmission of this paradigm of poetic power from archaic Greece to Augustan Rome to sixteenth-century England. As such, early modern trials of the Orpheus myth depict the effects of eloquence in the very same terms as the ancient theory of the sublime (*hypsous* in Greek, *sublimis* in Latin): Orphic poetry produces rapture, astonishment, entrancement, and thralldom. Like the ancient sublime, the myth coordinates conflicting extremes of emotion so as to inspire and overwhelm. The trials of Orpheus thus constitute a vestigial Greek poetics in early modern England, received and reconstituted through the medium of Ovid’s Roman poetry. Importantly, this Orphic poetics is not strictly stylistic or aesthetic but also provides techniques for resolving fundamental problems in history and philosophy, including the relationship of present to past, the ontologies of matter and form, and the processes whereby cosmos emerges from chaos.

By making pagan myth and rhetorical figuration techniques of knowledge production and vehicles of poetic inspiration, early modern writers forge intimate bonds with their classical exemplars as well as their future readers. In this way, the Orpheus myth enables a kind of conservation of poetic force capable of linking Sappho to Ovid to Shakespeare in a circuit of influence and transmission larger and more durable than the career of any single author or the domain of any one literary culture. The early modern trials of Orpheus examined in this book depict literary transmission not as a progressive or productive activity, which results in the stabilization of a coherent tradition, but rather as a propulsive and disorienting process characterized by absorption, subjection, and transformation. In

sum, as the forthcoming chapters will detail, the Orpheus myth simultaneously reveals the ontology of verbal *energeia*, organizes a sublime model of classical influence and reception, and embodies an eroticized theory of literary transmission as action-at-a-distance.

### *Orpheus, Famous-of-Name: Transporting the Myth from Greece to Rome to England*

*Orpheus his [eloquent and learned] tongue surmounted all other, so sweete, so smooth: so fayre, so filed: so gallant, so goodly: so passing, so pleasant: so leading, so learned. It entised, and procured: it delited, and allured: it moued, & rauished: it pearsed, & pleased; it persuaded, and preuayled . . .*

—FRANCIS CLEMENT, *THE PETIE SCHOLE* (1587)<sup>15</sup>

Musician, poet, magician, priest, philosopher, lover, lawgiver, and teacher. Orpheus the spellbinder is a legendary figure of ancient myth, and his fragmented story has taken shape over millennia.<sup>16</sup> The earliest Orphic legend encompasses a set of stories and religious rituals that circulated in ancient Greece and were ascribed to the Ur-poet Orpheus. He is an invention of oral tradition: the first written allusion to Orpheus, in a fragment of lyric poetry from the sixth century BCE, proclaims him already famous (*onomaklyton Orphēn*, “Orpheus famous-of-name”).<sup>17</sup> His origins remain a mystery. The mythic Orpheus is a shaman, patron of a religious movement based on his songs and teachings, which survive only in fragments.<sup>18</sup> The ancient Greek poet Pindar names Orpheus the son of the Muse Calliope and Oeagrus, king of Thrace, though other sources suggest that Apollo himself is his father. Thus, Orpheus is not entirely human and not entirely Greek, in that Thrace was thought of as a half-civilized northern tribe. All the early stories agree that Orpheus was endowed with divine skill in music; he was the first human cultivator of the lyric art. His song was so enrapturing that animals, trees, and stones would dance to its harmonies; some said his music could divert the course of rivers.<sup>19</sup> This skill won Orpheus passage with the Argonauts on their journey to capture the Golden Fleece. Orpheus earned his place in that heroic company by drowning out the dangerously enticing song of the Sirens with his own music, winning the Argo safe passage on its journey to Colchis. After returning from this adventure, Orpheus resided in a cave in Thrace, civilizing its barbarous inhabitants. Or, some legends claim, he traveled to Egypt. Or, as the Greek tragedian Euripides

suggests, he took a wife, descending to the Underworld in order to win her back from death itself.<sup>20</sup>

There is scant evidence for the existence of a historical Orpheus, yet his name pervades ancient Greek literature, philosophy, and religion.<sup>21</sup> Works attributed to Orpheus include hymns to the gods, didactic poetry, and epic narrative. However, only a few of these texts survive in anything like a complete form—a collection of Orphic hymns; the Orphic *Argonautika*; and the *Lithika*, a didactic poem on the properties of stones—and all these date from the Roman imperial era, that is, long after the supposed life of Orpheus. The name “Orpheus” evokes the mystical element in Greek religion; however, very few of his actual precepts are documented in written sources. Similarly, most archaic Orphic poetry survives only in fragments and allusions to earlier works. Rather than the name of a historical person, “Orpheus” seems to have been a label one might place on a text in order to associate that text with mysterious and sacred knowledge. Apart from poetry ascribed to Orpheus himself, ancient Greeks also used the term “Orphic” to designate certain extraordinary or strange religious phenomena (*orphika*), including both sacred rites and cosmogonic myths that are vehicles of sublime truths.<sup>22</sup> Thus, even in ancient Greece the name “Orpheus” connoted the authority of antiquity and direct divine inspiration and knowledge; it was a name assigned to an array of rituals and myths in order to confer that authority and sense of magic upon them.

As the founder of a mystery cult, Orpheus frequently appears in Greek poetry as a poet-shaman whose song works a kind of magic on its audience.<sup>23</sup> Orpheus thus provides a mythic embodiment of the power of oral poetry to hold its hearers spellbound in “pleasure” or “delight,” as Homer terms it (*terpsis, hedone*).<sup>24</sup> Ancient literature offers divergent responses to the apparent magic of Orphic eloquence: the Greek tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides associate the pleasure of Orpheus’s song with the humanizing power of art and civilization, while Plato regards Orpheus’s verbal magic with great suspicion. Plato’s *Ion* and *Protagoras* (ca. 390–399 BCE) cite Orpheus as an incarnation of the most disturbing attributes of oral song: its power to move large audiences by producing irrational emotional responses that preclude the philosophical search for truth.<sup>25</sup> Thus the treatment of the Orpheus myth in Greek texts establishes the quasisupernatural influence of Orphic song while also indicating a potential conflict between the power of eloquence to move its audiences, the philosophical pursuit of truth, and civic investments in stability. These divergent responses to the power of Orpheus’s song, alternately approving and suspicious, indicate the competition between what Stephen Halliwell

delineates as the two distinct paradigms of poetic value in ancient Greece: ecstasy and truth. Halliwell gathers together elements of the Homeric lexicon of song in order to describe the ecstatic experience of poetry: *terpsis* (“pleasure,” “gratification”), *himeros* (“uncontrollable desire,” “craving,” “lust”), and *thelxis* (“entrancement,” “bewitchment”). As Halliwell notes, these Homeric images of song establish affinities between poetry and erotic passion as well as divine mind control; all these elements feed into ideas of the power of Orphic song.<sup>26</sup>

To sum up these various Greek strands of the myth: the earliest Orpheus is the prophet and high priest of a mystery religion as well as a hero who could claim close kinship with the gods. This kinship endowed him with certain godlike powers, wielded through his music, which was capable of charming even nonhuman audiences. Orpheus was also a guardian of secrets and mysteries, and he was reportedly transformed into an oracle after his own violent death. As my summary of this material highlights, even in classical Greece (ca. 500–336 BCE), Orpheus was *already* a mythic figure. As an Argonaut, Orpheus participated in a heroic venture that took place during the age of heroes several generations before the Trojan War, which the Greeks imagined to have occurred sometime in the thirteenth century BCE. Pindar called him the “father of songs” (462 BCE).<sup>27</sup> Orpheus is thus both ancient and mysterious.

It is only with the arrival of the Romans, who conquered the Greek Empire and reshaped its pagan mythology in their own interests, that the fragmented bits and pieces of Orphic legend become elaborated and incorporated into a complete, harmonious story about the life of Orpheus himself.<sup>28</sup> The great Augustan poets Virgil and Ovid gather together the dispersed Greek mythic material and shape it into the narrative of Orpheus most familiar in the Renaissance as well as today. These Roman versions of the Orpheus myth can be found in Book IV of Virgil’s *Georgics* (29 BCE) and Books X and XI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 CE). For this reason, we should think of the *tale* of Orpheus as a set of classical Greek stories that are mediated and reshaped by the rhetorical training and cultural ambition of Roman *poetae*, poets who shared the widespread Augustan aspiration to create a syncretic literary corpus that would encompass both archaic Greece and contemporary Rome.<sup>29</sup> This Roman mythography of Orpheus marshals a diffuse field of Greek myth and transforms it into a single narrative with new inflections. And though Orphism as a religious practice continues into the Greco-Roman era, Virgil and Ovid depict Orpheus as first and foremost a *poet*.

In the Roman iterations of the myth, Orpheus marries a nymph named Eurydice, only to see her killed by a snakebite on their wedding day. Virgil writes that Eurydice is fleeing a likely rape by Aristaeus when she is struck by the snake. Refusing to lose his wife, Orpheus pursues Eurydice's shade to the Underworld, where his pleading song moves the gods of the dead to return his bride. There is no barrier his song cannot breach, even that between life and death. However, this triumph is short-lived. The rapt gods grant Orpheus's wish, but on terms he cannot keep. The gods of Hades agree to release Eurydice on the condition that Orpheus not look back on her face until they reach the surface. At the threshold of the living world—either in doubt or joy—Orpheus turns backward to gaze at his wife, losing her a second time. Though Virgil gives Eurydice a short lament, in Ovid's version she vanishes without ever uttering a word in the poem other than "*vale* [goodbye]." Stunned by this second loss, Orpheus lingers on the banks of the Styx for seven days, but to no avail. For the first time, as Ovid writes, his prayers fail him (*orantem frustra que iterum transire volentem*).<sup>30</sup>

Heartbroken, Orpheus wanders the Thracian countryside in mourning. In both Virgil's and Ovid's telling, the second loss of Eurydice vitalizes Orpheus's song with the force of disappointed grief. "For seven whole months," Virgil writes, "he wept, and in the caverns chill / Unrolled his story, melting tigers' hearts, / And leading with his lay the oaks along."<sup>31</sup> These songs no longer open passage to the Underworld—that way is now barred to Orpheus—but they charm the beasts and trees, who surround the stricken bard.

Ovid follows the Hellenistic poet Phanocles in claiming that Orpheus's lamenting song reveals the practices of male love to the Thracians, teaching them to reject the love of women. Ovid's Orpheus likewise renounces women in his grief, transferring all his love to boys. The *Metamorphoses* thus amplifies the strain of misogyny threading throughout ancient Greek accounts of Orpheus, which stress how women, alone among all creatures, remain stubbornly hostile to Orpheus's music.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Virgil's Orpheus, who sings always of his "lost Eurydice" (IV.519), for Ovid it is Orpheus's lyric music on other erotic themes that draws trees, beasts, and stones to follow him. In Ovid's telling, Orpheus sings the tales of Jupiter and Ganymede, Apollo and Hyacinthus, Pygmalion and Galatea, Cinyras and Myrrha, and Venus and Adonis to his wild audience in Thrace. Venus herself sings the tale of Atalanta, in a further song within the song. These tales unfurl across the entirety of Book X of the *Metamorphoses*, which concludes with the death of Adonis and his transformation into a flower.

The poem only returns to Orpheus after a break between books, when, at the beginning of Book XI, we learn his violent fate.

Despite the power of Orpheus's song—a power that is variously returned to in many of these nested tales—the poet and his audience are torn apart by a howling band of Bacchantes in revenge for his disdain of women. This violent *sparagmos* (to “tear,” “rend,” or “pull in pieces,” an act associated with the Maenads or Bacchantes, female followers of Dionysius) punctuates ancient tales of Orpheus, inscribing the limits of his song's power. According to the Greek playwright Aeschylus, the Maenads tear Orpheus to pieces because he worships the rival god Apollo. Ovid indicates that the women murder Orpheus because of his scorn for them; their violence expresses rage against his misogyny as well as, perhaps, sexual jealousy. Dismemberment, however, does not quiet his voice, and Orpheus's severed head and lyre continue to murmur their fading song. Fragments of this music are picked up by the wider landscape in reverberative echoes. Eventually head and lyre float down the Hebrus to the island of Lesbos, the home of the archaic Greek lyricist Sappho. There Apollo protects the head from the bite of a snake and gives it the power of prophecy. Bacchus then punishes the murdering women by transforming them into trees.

Through the interventions of Virgil and Ovid, the power of Orpheus becomes intimately associated with the mighty strength of verbal eloquence, though music will perennially have a powerful rival claim on him.<sup>33</sup> This identification coordinates certain scenes from the myth of Orpheus with Roman defenses of rhetoric and its value to the state. Such assertions of the civic value of rhetoric mobilize the dichotomy between the barbarous and the civilized in order to assert that the skilled orator wields a power that can transform one into the other. Indeed, Cicero tells the readers of his handbook for orators, *De Inventione* (ca. 88–91 BCE), that it was an eloquent orator who first founded civilization:

*Nam fuit quoddam tempus cum in agris homines passim bestiarum modo vagabantur et sibi victu fero vitam propagabant, nec ratione animi quicquam, set pleraque viribus corporis administrabant . . . Quo tempore quidam magnus videlicet vir et sapiens cognovit quae materia esset et quanta ad maximas res opportunitas in animis inesset hominum, si qui seam posset elicere et praecipiendo meliorem reddere; qui disperses homines in agros et in tectis silvestribus abditos ratione quadam compulit unum in locum et congregavit et eos in unam quamque rem inducens utliem atque honestam primo propter insolentiam*

*reclamantes, deinde propter rationem atque orationem studiosius audientes ex feris et immanibus mites reddidit et mansuetos.*

For there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals and lived on wild fare; they did nothing by the guidance of reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength. . . . At this juncture a man—great and wise I am sure—became aware of the power latent in man and the wide field offered by his mind for great achievements if one could develop this power and improve it by instruction. Men were scattered in the fields and hidden in sylvan retreats when he assembled and gathered them in accordance with a plan; he introduced them to every useful and honourable occupation, though they cried out against it at first because of its novelty, and then when through reason and eloquence they had listened with greater attention, he transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk.<sup>34</sup>

Cicero argues that before rhetoric, there could be no civil culture. Quintilian likewise promotes this vision of the orator as a founder of civilization in the *Institutio Oratoria* (ca. 95 CE).<sup>35</sup> Such origin myths align rhetoric with civilization, gentility, law, and urban culture, opposing it to the barbarism, savagery, disorder, and provincial obscurity of unruly people and unruly speech. The conversion from one to the other is achieved through the forcible movement and subsequent restraint of large audiences, unruly masses of so-called savage people who are fundamentally transformed by the force of eloquence.

Horace's *Ars Poetica* (19 BCE) describes Orpheus in precisely the same terms used to define Cicero's Ur-orator, coordinating the Greek myth with a Roman idea of eloquence's civic purpose, while (like Virgil and Ovid) simultaneously using Orpheus in order to claim for poetry rhetoric's ability to enforce motion. Horace writes (followed by Ben Jonson's English translation),

*Silvestris homines acer interpresque deorum  
Caedibus et victu foedo deterruit Orpheus,  
Dictus ob hoc lenire tigris rabidosque leones.*

...

*fuit haec sapientia quondam  
publica privatis secernere, sacra profanis,  
concubitu prohibere vago, dare iura maritis,  
oppida moliri, leges incidere ligno.  
Sic honor et nomen divinis vatibus atque  
carminibus venit.*<sup>36</sup>

*Orpheus*, a Priest, and speaker for the gods,  
First frightened men, that wildly liv'd in woods,  
From slaughters and foul life; and for the same  
Was Tygers said, and Lyons fierce to tame:

...

This was the wisdom that they had of old,  
Things sacred from profane to separate;  
The public from the private; to abate  
Wild ranging lusts, prescribe the marriage good,  
Build townes, and carve the lawes in leaves of wood.  
And thus at first, an honor, and a name  
To divine Poets, and their verses came.<sup>37</sup>

Horace's poem was hugely influential from the medieval period onward, setting the stage for Orpheus to become the prototype of the humanist artist-as-civilizer and the poet-as-*vates*, or priest.<sup>38</sup> The idea of Orpheus-as-civilizer is more purely iconographic than narrative, relying on the power of the image of Orpheus surrounded by spellbound animals to transmit its vision of eloquence.

Because of these influential poetic treatments, the Orpheus myth survived the breakup of the Roman Empire, and the details of his story proved amenable to reinterpretation in a succession of radically new cultural situations.<sup>39</sup> In later iterations of the myth, Orpheus's nonhuman audience was usually understood to represent the barbarous or irrational elements of human society, while his music was interpreted as an incarnation of the civilizing force of wisdom, art, and, in a new phase of the myth, Christian revelation, which together would convert all savage creatures.<sup>40</sup> Though some early Church Fathers decried Orpheus as a heathen barbarian and a founder of pagan religion, others treated Orpheus as a type of Christ. Early Christian art often blended the figures of Orpheus, David, and Christ, keeping the myth available for use by successive Christian cultures.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the ninth and tenth centuries the Orpheus myth tended to be retold as either a moral allegory (following Boethius, who regards Orpheus as a moral example of how man should not neglect the salvation of his soul) or as an allegory of the *artes* (following Fulgentius, who interpreted Orpheus and Eurydice as symbolic representations of *eloquentia* and *sapientia*).<sup>42</sup> The myth was steadily and inexorably Christianized, such that by the time of the fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisé*, the story of Orpheus could be fully assimilated to that of Adam-Christus.<sup>43</sup> Later medieval poets also occasionally treated him as one of their own: the

Orpheus of the fourteenth-century *Sir Orfeo* is a troubadour and courtly knight singing for his lost love. Orpheus's cultic significance waned during this long period, though it was revived by the Florentine humanist philosopher Marsilio Ficino, who gave Orpheus a central role in his Neoplatonic theology and musical cosmology.<sup>44</sup> Orpheus was revered as a *poetus theologicus* by Neoplatonic alchemists, who, like Ficino, interpreted the Orpheus story as an allegorical figuration of the ritual cycle of loss, death, and rebirth that produces enlightenment.<sup>45</sup>

In its figuration of the civilizing force of learning, Horace's Ciceronian mythography of Orpheus expresses what would become one of the fundamental tenets of Renaissance humanism. First, it dramatizes the power of eloquence to convert savagery into civility. Second, it draws on pagan myth so as to transmit such civilizing learning from one language culture to another. Many early modern English allusions to Orpheus follow Horace in merging the Orphic poet and the Ciceronian orator. "*Orpheus* assembled the wilde beasts to come in heards to harken to his musicke, and by that meanes made them tame," George Puttenham tells his readers in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), noting that in this way the most ancient poet first "brought the rude and sauage people to a more ciuill and orderly life."<sup>46</sup> Arthur Golding mobilizes the very same mythography when he explains in the verse epistle to his translation of the *Metamorphoses* that the movement of the rocks and trees in response to Orpheus's song signifies

That in his doctrine such a force and sweetness was implied  
That such as were most wild, stour, fierce, hard, witless, rude and bent  
Against good order, were by him persuaded to relent  
And for to be conformable to live in reverent awe  
Like neighbours in a commonweal by justice under law.<sup>47</sup>

These interpretations of the Orpheus myth wed Cicero's and Horace's civilizing frame with Ovid's emphasis on the ability of Orphic song to enforce motion.<sup>48</sup> In a memorable early modern allusion to the myth, Sidney likewise yokes the force of Orpheus's song with motion in the third song of *Astrophil and Stella* [ca. 1582], "Orpheus' voice had force to breathe such music's love / Through pores of senseless trees, as it could make them move."<sup>49</sup> Such a conception of Orpheus-as-civilizer expresses an integral feature of both the sixteenth-century language arts and humanist pedagogical theory, and the image of the orator-civilizer appears in sixteenth-century texts of all kinds.<sup>50</sup>

As the English allusions quoted above suggest, the Horatian mythography of Orpheus helps secure a particular conception of verbal eloquence as

civically productive in the sixteenth century. Humanist pedagogical theory and practice further cemented the identification of the Orpheus myth as a representation of the socially beneficial power of verbal eloquence. As early modernists well know, sixteenth-century notions of artful language are shaped by humanist investments in classical culture, such that pedagogues regularly insist that eloquence properly resides in the pure Greek and Latin of a small number of classical exemplars. These humanist pedagogues are miming an imperial politics of linguistic difference, as Ian Smith has argued, according to which so-called savages and barbarians can be exiled to the margins of culture.<sup>51</sup> The sixteenth-century school system was designed to transfer a *proper* classical eloquence to early modern England and, in so doing, prepare generations of schoolboys to reconstitute the civic and cultural achievements of the ancient world in their own commonwealth.

This educational program was the vehicle of the so-called “translation of learning and empire [*translatio studii et imperii*]” from Augustan Rome to Tudor England. Such a program justified itself with the central claim of the Roman art of rhetoric: that eloquence eradicates barbarity, forges civil community, and ensures social order.<sup>52</sup> A corollary of this identification of eloquence and social stability was the belief that a rhetorical education produces masculine virtue (Roman *virtus*). This image of the virtuous orator-civilizer proved to be crucial to the ideology of Renaissance humanism, attesting to the social and political utility of the *studia humanitatis* while also establishing the social stature and cultural importance of the humanist man of letters.<sup>53</sup> Though this ideology of rhetorical cultivation was nominally available to all English subjects, as Patricia Akhimie has emphasized, it primarily served the interests of a dominant social group—literate, landed men—and required the corresponding stigmatization of certain kinds of social difference.<sup>54</sup> In this way, as Smith also details, classical rhetoric and humanist pedagogical theory established a powerful conceptual template for imagining the outsider, one that shapes a racial vocabulary, ideology, and praxis in the early modern period. The structural opposition between the civilized and the barbarous, central to the Orpheus myth, is fundamental to European discourses of racial difference during an era of colonial expansion and global commercial exchange.<sup>55</sup>

The classical-humanist paradigm of civility as that which comprises an upper-class, European, masculine *virtus* and differentiates such individual subjects from an unruly mass of barbarous racial, sexual, and religious outsiders has an enduring and destructive power. Yet the transfer of

classical rhetoric to the heart of the English educational system, however, also undercut this civilizing paradigm in a variety of ways. First, at the level of social reproduction, while this education claimed to prepare young men to serve the state, in actuality such an instructional system was of little practical use to the vast majority of students. In point of fact, the humanist school readied young men for courtly careers that largely did not exist, meanwhile neglecting instruction in the methods of accounting and arithmetic that would have been advantageous for the aspiring sons of prosperous yeomen, burgesses, country gentry, and professional men who generally populated the grammar school classroom.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, by publicly mixing boys of different social positions, the early modern classroom intervened in the class hierarchy it was supposedly designed to stabilize, granting the “cultural capital” of early modern gentlemen to students from a range of social stations.<sup>57</sup> In a related complication, this schooling promised to produce and equip proper English gentlemen, distinguishing them from unruly and undesirable outsiders (such as women, foreigners, religious and racial others, and the lower sorts), when in fact the texts that students were asked to absorb via imitation frequently put considerable pressure on normative conceptions of race, gender, erotic practice, and social class.<sup>58</sup>

Ovid’s Orpheus is both a figure for this transfer of “civilization” from the classical world to the early modern present, with all the contradictions thus entailed, and a means of achieving that transfer. Ovid’s poetry featured prominently in the English schoolroom, both as a model of Latin eloquence and a source of knowledge about ancient myth. This gave the form and the material of the *Metamorphoses* outsized authority in the development of sixteenth-century writing and subjectivity.<sup>59</sup> Schoolchildren were taught Latin composition by translating Ovid into the vernacular and back again, from Latin verse, to English prose, to Latin prose.<sup>60</sup> Methods of instruction fostered an intimacy between English schoolboys and Ovid’s poetry: as Lynn Enterline’s work has revealed, students were encouraged to speak in the voice of Ovidian characters, often crossing genders in order to generate intense affect.<sup>61</sup>

This immersion in Ovid’s poetry was a calculated risk on the part of Christian pedagogues, and Ovid did indeed prove to be a problematic exemplar.<sup>62</sup> As Enterline, Heather James, and others have noted, schoolmasters struggled to reconcile the eloquence of Ovid’s poetry, and hence its corresponding pedagogical value, with the sexual immorality of his verses.<sup>63</sup> Schoolchildren were carefully instructed to read Ovid for the beauty of his language, as well as the sententious wisdom contained

therein, and to discard the rest; however, the wanton appeal of Ovid's poetry proved too enticing to be forestalled by such restrictions, as the work of sixteenth-century poets makes abundantly evident.<sup>64</sup> The practices of the humanist school thus allowed Ovid's poetry to encroach upon Ciceronian allegorizations of the Orpheus myth, unsettling them through a Greco-Roman preoccupation with ecstatic poetic experience. In such ways, what went by the name of virtuous schoolroom discipline often produced the inverse of what it promised, inculcating what Enterline calls a series of "habits of alterity" at the heart of schoolboy identity.<sup>65</sup> Though instruction in Latin literature should, like Horace's Orpheus, "abate" wild-ranging lusts, in many instances it channeled that lust into exciting new forms of expression.<sup>66</sup>

The Orpheus myth thus expresses the myriad contradictions inherent to humanist ideology and pedagogical practice, even predicting many of the more antisocial effects described above. The myth dramatizes the ability of an eloquent man to forge civilization, to be sure, but it also emphasizes the ability of the forces of barbarousness to pull apart such communities. Though sixteenth-century rhetorical and poetic manuals tend to foreground Orpheus's ability to tame savagery, English poets often dwell instead on the disturbing, bloody conclusion of the myth. As John Milton notes in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, "the barbarous dissonance / Of *Bacchus* and his Revellers, the Race / Of that wild Rout" overrun the Thracian Bard "[i]n Rhodope, where Woods and Rocks had Ears / To rapture, till the savage clamor drown'd / Both Harp and Voice."<sup>67</sup> Orpheus could be and was used to represent a newly assertive English vernacular, but this identification of the myth with an insurgent vernacular poetics allowed other elements of his story to acquire a disturbing interpretive force. Catherine Nicholson emphasizes how the dismemberment of Orpheus gruesomely inverts Cicero's fantasy that the orator will gather together a scattered mankind; this "outcast Orpheus" presides over many of the most significant vernacular poetic innovations of the sixteenth century.<sup>68</sup> Though the figure of Orpheus could be adopted to signal an English poet's assumption of eloquent authority, the details of Orpheus's life and death required that such poets find "privilege through abjection and authority in surrender," in Sean Keilen's words.<sup>69</sup> The Orphic poet is a god among men *and* a figure of violent, unwilling surrender. The force of eloquence binds savage and vagrant individuals into communities *and* foment the violent dissolution of those communities. The Orpheus myth thus epitomizes a bivalence in eloquence itself, simultaneously establishing and undercutting the functional rationale of Renaissance poetics and rhetoric. The

work of English poets suggests that this bivalence is, ultimately, a primary source of eloquence's power and longevity.

*Literary Method: Philology, Natural Philosophy,  
and the Orphic Bonds of Eloquence*

*Orpheus is a philologist when he sings.*

—WERNER HAMACHER, *MINIMA PHILOLOGICA*, THESIS 74<sup>70</sup>

As the above history suggests, Ovid's Orpheus mediates the literary connection of ancient Greece to Augustan Rome to early modern England. In a practical sense, this connection is forged by humanist pedagogy, which renders Ovid's poetry integral to the English educational system and thus to vernacular letters. At a more abstract level, the story of Orpheus *is* the story of humanism; Ovid's Orpheus myth captures the combination of dependency and emulation that characterizes the relationship of humanist scholars to their Roman exemplars and, at a further remove, the literary dependence of Roman culture on that of the conquered, yet still culturally superior, Greeks. The great Roman authors, including Lucretius, Catullus, Virgil, and Horace as well as Ovid, labored to transmit the traditions of ancient Greece and, in so doing, consolidate the achievements of their own culture. This project is doubled and thus intensified in Renaissance Europe, which adopts a position vis-à-vis Roman culture similar to that which the Romans adopted toward Greece. For this reason, as Thomas Greene puts it, "Renaissance art requires us to penetrate its visual or verbal surface to make out the vestigial form below, a revived classical form or a medieval form transmuted by a classicizing taste."<sup>71</sup> The Orpheus myth survives as a work of art because of these successive, aspirational acts of translation, and its mythic structure also theorizes such chains of cultural transmission and exchange as an ongoing passage of force. And, as this book will show, the English trials of Orpheus discover traces of the Greek sublime within Ovid's poetry.

The time-folding power of the Orpheus story—which has a proven ability to connect artists working at great distances from one another—subtends the three interrelated foci of this book: the conception of verbal *energeia* as a preternatural force that acts at a distance, the possession of early modern poetry by the sublime force of its classical models, and the elaboration of a theory of literary transmission as the erotic subjection of poets to the inscriptions of their predecessors. Though these topics ostensibly address different areas of contemporary academic study—classical

reception studies, early modern literary criticism, ancient and modern poetic theory, literature and science studies, and the history of sexuality—my book asserts that these fields of inquiry meet on the terrain of the Orpheus myth. Early modern readers regarded Ovid's *Metamorphoses* not only as a compendium of usable thematic material, literary genres, and poetic styles but also as a source of ancient wisdom on history, philosophy, and science. More than that, Ovid's poem encourages its modern readers to conceive of poetic and rhetorical form as a topic of serious philosophical import. Ovid's early modern readers eagerly studied the *Metamorphoses* as a philosophy of form, akin to Lucretius's more obviously "scientific" poem *De rerum natura*. For example, as Liza Blake has shown, Arthur Golding's early English translation of the *Metamorphoses* mines Ovid's poem for its natural philosophical content, finding within the poem a systematic physics that Golding terms a "dark philosophy of turned shapes."<sup>72</sup> Ovid's primary theme—metamorphosis, or the change of bodies into new forms—describes both the topical material and verbal method of the verse itself and the primary law of nature: "*caelum et quodcumque sub illo est, inmutat formas, tellusque et quicquid in illa est* [the heavens and whatever is beneath the heavens change their forms, the earth and all that is within it]" (XV.454–455). In other words, Ovid's poem encourages its readers to integrate the diverse practices of human art and the restless motions of the natural world under the rubric of a single figure or theme, as early modern poets do with the myth of Orpheus.

Each of the literary-philosophical phenomena examined in this book—the mythic structuring of sixteenth-century epistemologies of *energeia*, the amalgamated formation of an early modern theory of the sublime, and the poetic enactment of a model of literary influence that requires the sexual subjection of the poet to the forces of art—is enabled by the action of hidden bonds that yoke entities separated by a gap of time and space. For this and other reasons, philology is a critical practice ideally suited to account for the action of the Orpheus myth in Renaissance culture. The noun "philology" is derived from the Greek terms *philos* ("love," "affection," "beloved") and *logos* ("word," "reason"); it signifies a "love of words," or perhaps a "love of talking." In the ancient world, philology became associated with the *study* of language, including the arts of rhetoric, grammar, and emerging forms of textual scholarship. Philology's traditional objects of study include texts, languages, and the phenomenon of language itself. In its most generic sense, "philology" denotes the recovery and study of ancient texts; it is a polymathic, text-based discipline that requires comparative linguistic study and incorporates the historical reconstruction,

editorial emendation, and critical interpretation of classical literature.<sup>73</sup> In its renewed, contemporary form, philology has been described by Sheldon Pollock as “the discipline of making sense of texts,” though philologists might plausibly use their method to examine people, places, and things as well as language and literature.<sup>74</sup> The phrase “new philology” often denotes a critical method that focalizes problems of language and textuality but situates those problems in the context of broader matters of politics, history, ideology, and culture.<sup>75</sup>

For scholars of premodern epistemologies, philology has a double relevance in that it is a scholarly discipline central to early modern culture *and* a vibrant method in critical practice today. Though the practice originates in the ancient world, in its Renaissance iteration, philology presumes the existence of a gap that separates the scholar from their historical object of study. As Greene writes, for Renaissance humanists,

[philology is a science] designed to deal systematically with the otherness and distinctiveness of ancient literature. Philology, queen of the *studia humanitatis*, testified to the humanist discovery that cultural styles and verbal styles alter with time, like languages. Thus the first problem for the humanist was to deal with the temporal, cultural, and stylistic gap between the text and himself. Fully to bridge that gap required an effort of subreading that would unearth the alien presence carried by a text in all its subtle integrity.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to developing the habit of “subreading” for the vestigial presence of alien forms, humanist philologists also depicted their scholarly projects as the healing of a cultural dismemberment.<sup>77</sup> For example, Andrew Hui quotes a passage from Giovanni Boccaccio’s fourteenth-century *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (1360–74) in which Boccaccio promises,

I will collect [*vastum litus ingentis naufragii fragmenta colligerem sparsas*] the remnants of the pagan gods strewn everywhere in a nearly infinite number of volumes, and once found and collected, even if they are ravaged and half eaten by time and nearly worn to nothing, I will reduce them to a single corpus of genealogy [*unum genealogie corpus*].<sup>78</sup>

Hui notes that this image of philological practice as the gathering and assembly of dispersed and scattered fragments evokes the aftermath of an Orphic *sparagmos*, and thereby pictures the restorative work of the scholar in mythic terms.<sup>79</sup> *Sparagmos* is indeed a common trope of philology: as Greene notes, the Italian humanist and philologist Angelo

Poliziano prefaces his *Fabula di Orfeo* (ca. 1480) by linking the vulnerability of the text as well as its creator to dismemberment. The Orpheus myth prompts Poliziano to render the body of the poet indistinguishable from that of his work, and to conceive of poetry and philology as forces of recollection.<sup>80</sup> These Renaissance philologists draw on classical myth in order to figure their aims and methods, aspiring to create a “single corpus” out of the textual fragments of a far distant classical past. In this sense, the contamination and fragmentation of the classical tradition *is* the conveyance and dissemination of that tradition, as Gerard Passannante has eloquently argued.<sup>81</sup>

A careful study of the epistemologies of Renaissance eloquence, which is the point of embarkation for this book, reveals the multiple points of contact between the philological cultural project and the metaphysical questions and scholarly procedures of early modern natural philosophy.<sup>82</sup> The nature of the *force* of verbal eloquence—which the philologist recovers through the recollection of ancient fragments—provides the common ground of these otherwise seemingly disparate intellectual pursuits. “Eloquence” is the sixteenth-century term for the textual riches left behind by the vanished classical world. Although early moderns closely associate eloquence with Latin literature, the term (from *eloqui*, “to speak out”) more generally signifies “forcible speech,” verbal expression that can move an audience.<sup>83</sup> Such expression is more than simply talking or writing: eloquence can only be produced by art.<sup>84</sup> This idea of eloquence as artful verbal persuasion originates in the classical art of rhetoric, and it also shapes the medieval grammatical tradition, which determined the “force” or “virtue” that words had in their operations upon one another.<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, such a conception of eloquence is adopted wholesale by Renaissance poetics to designate the moving force of poesy. This propulsive force is key: eloquence is often described by English rhetors as a flood or stream that moves others by its might.<sup>86</sup> Yet despite the vividness of such metaphors, the moving force of eloquence itself is hidden. This results in the persistent association of verbal eloquence and outright magic.<sup>87</sup>

The early modern language arts vigorously assert the power of verbal eloquence to alter human behavior and prompt material change in the world. In keeping with these assertions, the discourses of rhetoric and poetics often describe their own linguistic operations in terms of “force.” “Such force hath the tongue,” writes Wilson, “and such is the power of eloquence and reason, that most men are forced even to yield in that which most standeth against their will.”<sup>88</sup> But despite such confident assertions of the omnipotence of the eloquent orator-poet, the qualities and operations

of the force of verbal eloquence remain elusive. This is a long-standing tension in rhetorical theory: as the ancient sophist Gorgias declares in his *Encomium of Helen* (ca. 414 BCE), “Speech is a powerful ruler. Its substance is minute and invisible, but its achievements are superhuman.”<sup>89</sup> Renaissance humanists are keenly aware of the inverse relationship between eloquence’s world-changing power and the secrecy of its operations: one of Petrarch’s letters memorably describes how “certain familiar and famous words . . . transfigure my insides with hidden powers.”<sup>90</sup>

To adopt the terms of premodern natural philosophy, the force of eloquence is *occultus*, or hidden, observable only in its effects.<sup>91</sup> It cannot be seen with the eye or measured by any instrument. Moreover, eloquence works at a distance: the object of eloquence is moved without being physically touched by the orator-poet’s body. How should the language arts represent such “hidden powers,” as Petrarch names them? This practical dilemma indicates an even thornier epistemological problem: how do you produce knowledge about forces that act at a distance and are not discernible to human sense?

First, you must name them, and as already stated above, the technical concept elaborated by the Renaissance arts of eloquence for the penetrative force of persuasion is *energeia* (action, force, vigor), a concept borrowed from Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian and given a new prominence in early modern rhetoric and poetics as a term for the “liveliness” or vitality of style.<sup>92</sup> In the commentary on his *Adagia* (first published in 1500, expanded in 1508), Erasmus writes that, “the spoken word . . . has a secret natural force, better conveyed by the Greek term *energeia* [*occultam vim atque, vt Graece dicam melius, energeian*].”<sup>93</sup> Sixteenth-century descriptions of *poesis* borrow this very terminology in order to assert the forceful effects of the figured language of poesy. For example, Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy* (ca. 1579) and Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) both use *energeia* to refer to the physical efficacy of eloquence, what Sidney calls its “forcibleness.”<sup>94</sup> Puttenham asserts that the formal techniques of the art of rhetoric produce the *energeia* of eloquence, noting that “figure breedeth” the “strong and virtuous operation” of poesy.<sup>95</sup> Henry Peacham’s *Garden of Eloquence* (1577) concurs, declaring that, “by Figyures, as it were by sundry streames, that great & forcible floud of Eloquence, is most plentifully and pleasantly poured forth by the great might of Figures which is no other thing then (wisdom speaking eloquently) the Oratour may leade his hearers which way he list, and draw them to what affection he will.”<sup>96</sup> When alluding to eloquent language’s “forcibleness,” early modern writers physicalize the encounter between the poet-rhetor’s words and the bodies

of his audience, and the medium of that encounter is what Sidney calls “the material point of poesy.”<sup>97</sup>

The “figures” of rhetoric marshal and unleash the moving power of eloquence, as these early modern poetic and rhetorical manuals testify. Derived from the Latin term *figura*, the figures of English rhetorical discourse are aural-visual linguistic forms that give ideas perceptual shape and animation. This vernacular concept of “figure” conglomerates a variety of classical and Christian ideas of form. As Eric Auerbach explains in his magisterial study of the ancient concept of *figura*, the vocabulary of ancient Greek enabled philosophers and poets to make subtle distinctions between the form or idea that “informs” matter (*morphē, eidos*) and the purely perceptual shape of matter (*schēma, typos*). Roman authors condense this rich technical vocabulary into the single term *figura*, resulting in the use of *figura* as the “imprint [*typos*] of the seal,” the perceptible form of a body (rather than its structural principle).<sup>98</sup> Then, in the hands of such Roman writers as Lucretius, Cicero, and Ovid, *figura* expands in new directions, both absorbing the plastic meanings of *forma* (derived from the Greek *morphē*) and expanding in the direction of *imago, effigies, species, and simulacrum* (image, copy, statue, portrait). Crucially, for Auerbach, this semantic change means that the conceptual “force” of *figura* is more plastic than that of the Greek *schema*, and this dynamic combination of visual iconicity and energetic action is crucial to Renaissance conceptions of “figure.”

While Roman authors were dilating *figura*’s meanings until it might encompass both ideal and perceptible form, Cicero, Quintilian, and the anonymous author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* also began to use *figura* as a technical term within the art of rhetoric in order to designate forms of discourse that deviate from normal or ordinary usage. This usage had the effect of likening linguistic expression to the human body; as Quintilian explains, *figura* means “any shape in which a thought is expressed—just as our bodies, in whatever pose they are placed, are inevitably in *some* sort of attitude.” Noting that such shapes may be purposefully constructed by the rhetor, Quintilian concludes that we should “take a Figure to be an innovative form of expression produced by some artistic means.”<sup>99</sup> Thus, even as *figura* expanded to absorb the diverse Greek senses of form, it also condensed into a narrowly technical term within the discourse of rhetoric, as a means of classifying artistic forms of speech. Early modern English writers inherit this simultaneously expansive and constricted sense of *figura* as both phenomenal form and ornamented language. The word-concept figure/*figura*, as Judith Anderson and Joan Pong Linton have argued, simultaneously invokes forcefulness, action, and energy as well as form,

image, and pattern.<sup>100</sup> Figures are substantial and iconic, but they are also vehicles for an energetic force that may destabilize the formal structures established by figuration. This tension is fundamental to Renaissance theories of eloquence, and my arguments will persistently emphasize the jointly visual and verbal aspects of the early modern figures for *energeia*.

Despite its audible and observable constituents (figures of speech) and its effects (an audience that is moved), the attractive *force* exerted by eloquence itself remains elusive in the discourses of rhetoric and poetics. Early modern culture is saturated with grandiose depictions of rhetorical power, but it's difficult to find any clear explanation of *how* eloquent language moves large audiences, creating and transforming social bodies. Some of the most apt articulations of this epistemological dilemma come in the writings of moralists who worry about the insidious power of the public theater to deform human behavior. As the antitheatricalist Stephen Gosson warns in *The School of Abuse* (1579),

[t]he height of heaven is taken by the staff; the bottom of the sea, sounded with lead; the farthest coast, discovered by compass; the secrets of nature, searched by wit; the anatomy of man, set out by experience. But the abuses of plays cannot be shown, because they pass the degrees of the instrument, reach of the plummet, sight of the mind, and for trial are never brought to the touchstone.<sup>101</sup>

Adopting Gosson's protoscientific language of sounding, discovery, and experience and turning it toward rhetoric and poesy more generally, we might ask, how far can the force of eloquence travel, and how long does it last? What happens when that force contacts the bodies of its audience? Does the poet or orator retain control over that force once it has been unleashed? How does that force move through poet, instrument, and audience? Do these various media of transmission change the nature of the force of eloquence?

Since its first appearance in the poetry of early Greece, the myth of Orpheus has provided a *kind* of answer to such questions. Though it might seem perverse to treat ancient myth as if it were a logical axiom or an experimental proof, the Orpheus myth operates in precisely this fashion: it allows rhetors and poets to figure and thus conceptualize the process whereby eloquent language acts upon its objects at a distance. Images of Orpheus taming wild beasts make the preternatural force of eloquence manifest to early modern science by giving it an evident set of relationships and thereby a formal structure. Orphic myth thus has an operational function within the sixteenth-century language arts: it provides an emblematic image of

eloquence's action-at-a-distance. This image also usefully bolsters the civilizing pretensions of the language arts, in that it sharply distinguishes skilled orators from their barbarous audiences.

In this way, the Orpheus myth serves the epistemological ambitions of the language arts, helping them to theorize the operations of eloquence (by manifesting an object of knowledge that would otherwise remain unknown) as well as to train students in the art of persuasion (by exemplifying core techniques of the rhetorical system). At the very same time, however, the Orpheus myth also undoes those very priorities. Ovid's tale of Orpheus asserts the formative power of verbal eloquence, but it also insists that that song's power to remake the world cannot be disentangled from its own dissolution, as when Orpheus is torn apart by the Bacchantes and must continue to sing even after his head has been severed from his body. In this myth, the force of eloquence consumes its own artifacts, audiences, instruments, and even, at last, its maker. Sixteenth-century poets draw attention to the total subjection of the poet to the forces of art, returning often to the attenuated music made *after* the *sparagmos* of the poet, as in H. F.'s *The Legend of Orpheus and Euridice* (1597), which dwells on the continuing motion of the scattered limbs of Orpheus's "mangled corse / Rented in shiuering peeces."<sup>102</sup>

Early modern writers are attuned to the Orpheus myth's marriage of creation and disintegration as the joint effects of verbal power. Moreover, they give the dissolving force of eloquence equal weight to its creative effects, using elements of the Orpheus myth to depict verbal eloquence as that which softens the body, makes audiences sexually wanton, and disorders political communities. The mythos of Orpheus's song thus pulls writers along two different poetic and epistemological trajectories simultaneously. One is generative—that song secures the authority of poet-orators, allowing them to forge stable communities and transmit knowledge—while the other is dissolute—it entices its audiences to ecstatic pleasures, compromising the civilizing authority and bodily integrity of poet-orators. Ovid's myth of Orpheus *insists* that these divergent motions—consolidation and disintegration—are twinned aspects of a larger story about how art operates in the world.<sup>103</sup>

In this way, the concerns of the natural philosopher (the ontology of natural forces and the interactions of matter and form) bleed into the concerns of the poet and philologist (the verbal mechanisms of literary influence and transmission). The early modern trials of Orpheus suggest that all such inquiries in the sixteenth century are motivated by the work of eros, or desire. Eros is in fact already implied by the term

*philology*—a “love of words”—and such desire animates engagements with the Orpheus myth at all levels and timescales. For Renaissance Platonists, eros is a spiritual force that mediates between soul and body, and between the intelligential and sensory worlds; eros names a desire that is both sexual and intellectual, integrating all vital human functions with higher cosmic regions.<sup>104</sup> This conciliation of erotic desire and philosophical inquiry via the concept of eros means that *all* intellectual endeavors can be understood to operate according to principles of attraction. Philologists, philosophers, and poets are affiliated by what Andrew Hui calls “the play of desire across vast historical and physical expanses.”<sup>105</sup> Jeffrey Masten has productively attended to the erotic rhetoric that suffuses the long history of philology, showing how “there is rarely philology without sex.”<sup>106</sup> Masten’s important argument helps us discern that to practice philology is to *participate* in a history of sexuality. Or, to put it another way, to practice philology is to mediate the transmission of eros across time. Sixteenth-century readers of Ovid felt the truth of this observation keenly. My term for the nature of this participation is “trial,” which names a form of poetic production that is simultaneously a physical—even erotic—experience *and* a mode of philosophical and philological inquiry.

Ovid’s poem undergoes such trials by sixteenth-century writers, who find in Ovid’s tale of Orpheus an ideal crossroads for the study of rhetoric, poetry, eros, inspiration, and the philosophy of matter and form. These diverse strains of thought run all throughout classical antiquity—they are evident in the works of Homer, Sappho, Democritus, and Plato—and the *Metamorphoses* draws together threads from such ancient Greek sources and renders them integral to the Orpheus myth. For this reason, early modern poets and philosophers can turn to Ovid’s poem, not only for formal techniques useful to the aspiring poet and pleader, but also for philosophical insights about the operations of attraction and sexual desire, the rhetorical potential of language, the relationship between past and present, and the ontology of the physical universe. The compositions of English poets reveal how such vast and varied realms of thought can be accessed in and through Ovid’s verse. As they confront Ovid’s poetry, these writers deploy a philological method capable of producing ideas of great ambition and scope as well as powerfully affecting poetry. The early modern trials of Orpheus indicate the centrality of literary practice to the constitution of premodern cosmologies and philosophies. They thus prompt modern scholars to rethink the intimate bonds that connect poetry and natural philosophy in the sixteenth century.

## *The Figurative Itineraries of Orphic Eloquence: Temptare and the Trial*

My study of the English trials of Orpheus does not proffer a comprehensive claim about the meaning and function of the Orpheus myth in English literary culture, nor does it survey all or even most of the allusions to Orpheus in sixteenth-century writing.<sup>107</sup> I focus primarily, though not exclusively, on literary and philosophical texts produced in English between about 1580 and 1610. Within this archive, I do not examine extended translations or treatments of the Orpheus myth but rather, much like Greene's humanist "subreader," find Orphic strains singing out at local moments in larger works and traditions. My argument gathers together these scattered and diverse engagements with Ovid's myth of Orpheus so as to assert the epistemology of Renaissance rhetoric, make manifest an occulted theory of the sublime in the early modern period, and recover an eroticized theory of literary transmission from early modern drama, poetry, and philosophical prose.

Like the Orpheus myth itself, the movement of my argument is always multidirectional: my key terms arise in Ovid but are given life and dimension in sixteenth-century texts, and these meanings then find new resonance in the *Metamorphoses* itself when my text encounters it once again. The forward and backward directionality and temporality that characterize this motion and connect poets working at great distances from one another is the subject of chapter 1: "Meandering." This chapter uses the figurative motions of the meander, a line that must move backward in order to travel forward, to trace the presence of the Greek sublime in early modern English poetry and poetic theory. The backward turn is the paradigmatic gesture of the Orpheus myth: Orpheus's fatal turn back returns Eurydice to the Underworld and also becomes a sign of the persuasive force of Orphic song. The figure of the meander appears in the poetry of both Virgil and Ovid and also frames multiple Romano-British Orpheus mosaics, and this chapter shows how the meander expresses the time-bending power of the Orpheus myth, which reverses cause and effect in its symbolic depiction of literary transmission. I argue that Sappho is the "transumed," or hidden, link that joins Orpheus to Ovid in the text of the *Metamorphoses* and thereby enables the construction of a literary genealogy that connects ancient Greece to Augustan Rome to early modern England. Ovid's tale of Orpheus passes through Sappho so as to transmit what Longinus terms the "nervous force" of the sublime to readers of the *Metamorphoses*. Crucially, these transumptions do not empower

successive generations of “modern” poets, but rather transform these poets into instruments for the transmission of literary history.

Chapter 2, “Binding,” continues to recover the vestigial forms of ancient poetics within early modern thought by examining three mythic figures of the forceful action of *energeia*: Plato’s image of a magnetized chain of rings, Lucian’s emblem of the chain of Hercules Gallicus, and Ovid’s myth of Orpheus. I argue that these figures constitute a significant technique for making eloquence visible as an object of knowledge in the sixteenth century. Francis Bacon’s works, particularly *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), attest to the epistemological function of these mythic emblems of eloquence in early modern thought. This is particularly evident in the figure of the *vinculum*, or chain, which Bacon uses to designate the “bonds” of Orpheus’s song. Bacon’s work also confirms how the figure-making abilities of language both transmit the force of eloquence and enable philosophers to examine its operations. Such figures are both objects and instruments of theoretical inquiry in the sixteenth century.

After these first two chapters, I turn to the more explicitly poetic trials of Orpheus in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Early modern poets fixate on the “binding” strength of Orpheus’s song, as detailed in Bacon’s *corpus*, and engage Ovid’s tale of Orpheus as a figuration of the enthralling force of verbal eloquence. Chapters 3 and 4 specify the function and texture of such enthrallments as a kind of Renaissance poetic theory. Chapter 3, “Drawing,” examines the integration of this Orphic force with concepts of eros in the English *epyllia*, long narrative poems on Ovidian themes. These poems, briefly and massively popular in the 1590s, entangle desire and poetic force so as to depict wantonness as both the vehicle and the profit of *poesis*. Glancing briefly at Francis Beaumont’s *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* (1602), as well as Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593), the chapter focuses primarily on Thomas Lodge’s *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589) and Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (1598). The entanglements of eloquence and desire in these poems suggest that in order to harness the power of Orpheus’s song, the English poet must become thrall to a larger force. The wanton force of poetic eloquence ultimately meanders before and beyond its putative source—the would-be Orphic poet—suggesting that poesy is a kind of feedback loop through which desire circulates without any apparent site of origin or rest.

Having established the “drawing” force of verbal eloquence, which places makers and audiences in thrall to desire and to language, chapter 4, “Softening,” specifies the dissolute texture of that thralldom. I begin by examining the complicated virtue of softness and softening in the classical and early

modern language arts, in order to track how the complex gendering of the Orphic figure shapes conceptions of verbal persuasion and literary transmission in early modern England. Ovid's revaluing of softening *as* poetic force reveals how normative sex/gender configurations fail to account for the gender or the desires of the Orphic poet. I then explore the elaboration of a "soft" poetics in Marlowe's English translation of Ovid's *Amores* (ca. 1599), which presents softness as the very ground of poetic invention. Chapters 3 and 4 thus both attend to the ways in which English poesy integrates poetic making and sexuality in the figure of the Orphic poet. The complex combination of activity and passivity required of that poet then stymies attempts to gender poesy as a strictly masculine pursuit. Together, these chapters demonstrate how the early modern trials of Orpheus constitute a discourse of sexuality that exceeds normative categories of gender. These two chapters engage the tale of Orpheus in segments, dilating on successive scenes from the myth: the binding and drawing of animals followed by the softening songs Orpheus sings to his captive audience.

Chapter 5, "Scattering," continues to dwell on the enchainments of Orphic song, which operate as a force that, although it may be aestheticized and eroticized, yet remains violent in its dominations. The conclusion of Ovid's Orpheus myth—the dismemberment of the poet, the scattering of his body, and the fettering of the Bacchantes—make this violence abundantly clear. The fragmented pieces of the Orpheus myth in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) designate the scattering of Ovid's Orpheus as the transmission of poetry but at the price of dismemberment and rape. With the backward-turning force of the meander, *Titus* and *Lucrece* help us see that Ovid's Orpheus myth has redefined the position of the eloquent poet, such that he is carried away by his own song, rendered a victim of its binding and scattering force. Additionally, Shakespeare's trials of Orpheus expose the instability of the assumptions so often used to identify barbarous racial outsiders in the classical and early modern periods.

My conclusion, "Testing," returns to the larger historical and philosophical questions that emerge from the English trials of Orpheus by examining how Bacon and the French philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne draw on Ovid's tale of Pygmalion in order to reckon with the problem of knowledge at the turn of the sixteenth century. Allusions to Orphic song in Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605) and Montaigne's "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (trans. 1603) demonstrate, once again, the complex interactions of the enterprises of philosophy and *poesis* in the early modern period. In their trials of the Pygmalion myth, Bacon and Montaigne express two divergent routes for modernity and its "progress." In pursuing

these admittedly epistemological concerns at the level of rhetoric and myth, this conclusion proposes an adjustment to the terms by which literary studies and the history of science converge and interact. Montaigne's "sounding and testing [*sonder et essayer*]" of the figure of Pygmalion indicates that Orphic myth is not exclusively an instrument of epistemology: it is a scientific object itself, for Montaigne and for the modern intellectual historian and poetic theorist.<sup>108</sup> Montaigne's "Apology," like other early modern trials of Orpheus, treats literary form as both an engine of knowledge production and a category of ontology.<sup>109</sup> In such a paradigm, the techniques of the literary scholar cease to be "rhetorical," in the sense of ornamental or purely stylistic, and become, instead, fundamental.

Like so many early modern philosophers, poets, and playwrights, these chapters put the Orpheus myth on trial, testing and handling the story in much the same way that Orpheus himself produces his lyric harmonies by "trying" different chords with his thumb. Ovid's verb *temptare* provides the Latinate origin for such multiple meanings, as it includes the senses of to "test" or "try," and also to "handle," "incite," or "rouse."

*Tale nemus vates attraxerat inque ferarum  
concilio, medius turbae, volucrumque sedebat.  
ut satis impulsas temptavit pollice chordas  
et sensit varios, quamvis diversa sonarent,  
concordare modos, hoc vocem carmine movit:* (X.143–147)

Such wood as this had Orpheus drawn about him as among  
The herds of beasts, and flocks of Birds he sat amidst the throng.  
And when his thumb sufficiently had tried every string,  
And found that, though they severally in sundry sounds did ring,  
Yet made they all one harmony, he thus began to sing . . .

(Golding X.148–152)

These few lines, quoted in Arthur Golding's translation at the outset of this chapter, contain the crucial features of the Orpheus myth: the ability of his song to "draw" (*attraxerat*) audiences and the palpable physicality of the artist's "touch" (*temptavit*). Those alluring harmonies arise from the force of that touch and the sound it incites (*impulsor* is "one who strikes," "an instigator").

The verb *temptare* suffuses another critical moment in *Metamorphoses* X, when Orpheus describes how Pygmalion caresses the statue that has been recently brought to life by his desire: *temptare* describes Pygmalion's "testing" and "trying" fingers when they stroke his now animated statue (*simulacra*):

*visa tepere est;*

*admovet os iterum, manibus quoque pectora temptat:  
temptatum mollescit ebur positoque rigore  
subsedit digitis ceditque, ut Hymettia sole  
cera remollescit tractataque pollice multas  
flectitur in facies ipsoque fit utilis usu.  
dum stupet et dubie gaudet fallique veretur,  
rursus amans rursusque manu sua vota retractat.  
corpore erat! Saliunt temptatae pollice venae. (X.281–289)*

In her body straight a warmness seemed to spread.  
He put his mouth again to hers and on her breast did lay  
His hand. The ivory waxed soft and, putting quite away  
All hardness, yielded underneath his fingers, as we see  
A piece of wax made soft against the sun or drawn to be  
In divers shapes by chafing it between one's hands and so  
To serve to uses. He, amazed, stood wavering to and fro  
'Tween joy and fear to be beguiled. Again he burnt in love,  
Again with feeling he began his wished hope to prove.  
He felt it very flesh indeed. By laying on his thumb  
He felt her pulses beating. (Golding X.306–316)

For both Orpheus and Pygmalion, the “testing,” “touching,” “rousing” finger makes and marks the point of contact between the artist and an enlivening artwork. These lines convert the extremity of sexual desire into the animating life of art, and the mediating figure of that transformation is the “trying” finger of the Orphic artist.

“Trial [*temptare*]” is thus one of Ovid’s preferred terms for the means whereby Orphic art brings poet, instrument, and audience into contact. For sixteenth-century English writers, the term “trial” also bears important juridical, religious, and scientific connotations. These accreted meanings render trial an epitome of the core concerns of Renaissance eloquence. In a legal sense, a trial is the examination and determination of a cause by a judicial tribunal (when Orpheus pleads for Eurydice before the gods of Hades, Ovid describes his attempt with the verb *temptare* [X.12]). “Trial” could also be used more generally as “the action of testing or putting to proof the fitness, truth, strength, or other quality of anything.” In the sixteenth century the term was increasingly understood in its experimental sense, to refer to a method of investigation that would produce a result ascertained by testing.<sup>110</sup> A “trial” could thus be “evidence” or “proof” of something as well as simply a designation of the experience itself. A “trial” is both an

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