

ORPHEUS DESCENDING

Jenny Dooley



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APOLLO'S
Gift

After Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, gave birth to her first and only child, she and her husband, King Oeagus, held a celebration in honour of their newborn son. Calliope wore a violet-coloured wreath on her head and a long white robe. The only sign that her son, Orpheus, was with her was a small bundle of blue-white silk held carefully in her arms.

They were in an open area among the mountains of Thrace where everyone could sing and dance, but Calliope's high-backed stone chair was kept in the shade of the trees to protect the child from the midday sun. King Oeagus stood next to his wife while relatives and friends came and laid gifts at their feet, wishing them and their child everlasting happiness.

The other eight Muses came, each bringing a gift from the art or science they had influence over. When they had left their gifts with the others, they all sat beside Calliope and Oeagus to wait for Apollo, the god of music and light. He, of all the gods, could tell men their futures. Yet he spoke through the Muses, and they were like children to him. His arrival would be the highlight of the celebration.

A light music came through the movement of the trees' leaves. It was so light that it could hardly be heard, yet everyone heard it and stopped what they were doing. A wind began to blow and with it, the music was carried closer to people's ears. It passed through their ears and filled their bodies, making them feel that the earth below their feet and everything about

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them was moving to the same beautiful rhythm.

Apollo walked from the forest into the open area where the celebration was taking place, and they saw it was he who was playing this music on a lyre he held in his hands. He walked through the crowd of people up to Calliope, where he placed the lyre at her feet.

“Calliope, my Muse of epic poetry, you have brought a son into this world with Oeagus, a man of Thrace. Because of your influence over the art of poetry, and because the Thracians are the most musical of people in Greece, I give your son the instrument which is closest to my heart. With it, he will be able to combine the poetry you have given him, with the music his father has given him, to create songs no other human on earth will be able to match. This is what will define your son.

“He will be able to go places no other man can go because of his music. He will give men strength in times of despair; heroes will be led on in their journey because of his playing; and he will experience both love and loss, and his joy and sorrow will be heard through the sound of his lyre.”

“And when he is taken from this earth, he and his lyre will be placed together so that all men will be able to see and remember where music and poetry combined.”

Calliope opened the silk cloth protecting the child from the sun and held his face up for Apollo to see. Apollo kissed its forehead, and that kiss passed the power to combine music and poetry into Orpheus’ body. From that day forward, this power would come out through his lyre, and hold both humans and animals — even nature itself — spellbound.

CHEIRON AND
Jason

Orpheus played his lyre and sang songs every day until the time he was sixteen, and he had become the greatest musician anyone had ever heard. He liked to walk through the mountains and forests of Thrace while he played, and the trees would move slightly from side to side to the rhythm of his music. Orpheus saw many wild animals such as mountain lions, bears, foxes and deer. He would stop and play for them, and he was amazed to see that they would lie close to him, with their eyes closed, breathing softly as they listened to the peaceful sound of his music.

Although he loved playing his lyre, Orpheus felt that there was something missing from his life. He spoke of this to his father.

"I feel that there is no adventure in my life. Every day is the same. My music comes from inside me, but it is based on the experiences I have in the world. It seems time for me to leave Thrace and see things which will make me more creative."

"It is natural for a boy your age to feel such things, and you are right. You should go out and see more of this world. But you must wait for the opportunity to come. It will, but you must be patient!"

Orpheus accepted his father's advice, but it did not make it any easier for him to live with that restless feeling inside him. He returned to the fields of Thrace, playing his lyre for whoever or whatever could hear him until one day he saw something he