

**Illustration 8.** Text excerpts, *Orfeo ed Euridice*

*Favola in musica* in a prologue and five acts. Libretto by Alessandro Striggio

after *Euridice* by Ottavio Rinuccini Premiere 24 February 1607, Mantua (Palazzo Ducale)

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**Cast**

LA MUSICA (Soprano)

ORFEO (Tenor or Baritone)

EURYDICE (Soprano)

MESSENGER (Mezzosoprano)

HOPE (Mezzosoprano)

CHARON (Bass)

PLUTO (Bass)

PROSPERINE (Soprano)

APOLLO (Tenor or Baritone)

A NYMPH (Soprano)

ECHO (Soprano) CHORUS of Nymphs and Shepards, infernal Spirits

**Place:** Fields of Thrace and the Underworld    **Time:** Mythological time

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Act II conclusion

FIRST SHEPHERD

See, O see, Orpheus, how all around  
the woods and the meadow smile.  
Then continue, with your golden plectrum,  
to sweeten the air on so blessed a day.

MESSENGER

Ah, bitter blow! Ah, wicked, cruel Fate!  
Ah, baleful stars! Ah, avaricious heaven!

FIRST SHEPHERD

What mournful sound disturbs this happy day?

MESSENGER

Alas! Must I then,  
while Orpheus delights heaven with his music,  
pierce his heart with my words?

THIRD SHEPHERD

This is the gentle Sylvia,  
fair Eurydice's sweetest companion  
Oh, what sadness is in her face!  
What has happened now? Ah, ye gods above,  
do not avert your kindly gaze from us!

MESSENGER

Shepherd ' cease your singing,  
for all our gaiety has turned to pain.

ORPHEUS

Whence do you come and whither are you going?  
Nymph, what news do you bring?

MESSENGER

I come to you, Orpheus,  
as an ill-fated bearer of tidings  
still more ill-fated and more tragic.  
Your lovely Eurydice ...

ORPHEUS

Alas! what do I hear?

MESSENGER

Your beloved bride is dead.

ORPHEUS

Woe is me!

MESSENGER

In a flowery meadow,  
with her other companions,  
she was wandering, gathering flowers  
to make of them a garland for her tresses,  
when a treacherous snake  
that was lurking in the grass  
bit her in the foot with its venomous fangs.  
And lo, immediately her fair face  
lost its colour, and in her eyes that lustre  
with which she put the sun to shame grew dim.  
Then we all, horrified and dismayed,  
were around her, seeking to revive  
her ebbing spirits  
with cold water and powerful spells;  
but alas! all was in vain,  
for opening her drooping eyes a little  
and calling for you, Orpheus,  
after a deep sigh  
she expired in my arms; and I was left  
with my heart full of pity and fear.

FIRST SHEPHERD

Ah, bitter blow! Ah, wicked, cruel Fate!  
Ah, baleful stars! Ah, avaricious heaven!

SECOND SHEPHERD

At the bitter news  
the unhappy man seems dumb as a stone,  
for through excess of grief he cannot grieve.

FIRST SHEPHERD

Ah, he who did not feel pity for your adversity,  
wretched lover, bereft of all your happiness,  
would surely have the heart of a tiger or bear.

ORPHEUS

You are dead, my life, and I still breathe?  
You have gone from me,  
never more to return, and I remain?  
No, for if my songs have any power at all  
I will surely descend to the deepest abyss and,  
having softened the heart of the King of Shadows,

will bring you back with me to see the stars again.  
Oh, if malign destiny denies me this,  
I will remain with you in the company of death.  
Farewell, earth! Farewell, sky, and sun, farewell!

CHORUS of NYMPHS & SHEPHERDS

Ah, bitter blow! Ah, wicked, cruel Fate!  
Ah, baleful stars! Ah, avaricious heaven!  
Let not mortal man trust  
in fleeting and frail happiness,  
for soon it flies away, and often  
the precipice is close to the highest summit.

MESSENGER

But I, who in my tongue  
have borne the knife  
that has slain Orpheus's loving heart,  
abhorrent to the shepherds and the nymphs,  
abhorrent to myself, where shall I hide me?  
An ill-omened creature of the night, I will forever  
shun the sun, and in a lonely cavern  
lead a life in keeping with my sorrow.

**Sinfonia**