

“THEIR HAPPINESS ... WAS SHORT”:  
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI’S *ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE*

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“I now & then launch into a design irrespective of contingencies,” Dante Rossetti told Thomas Gordon Hake on 20 July 1875, “& [I] should like to show you one I am now making of ‘Orpheus and Eurydice’” (*Correspondence* 7:59). This statement in a letter written in London while he was making plans for the “desperate dash” to the seaside that took him to Aldwick Lodge near Bognor Regis in Sussex on 18 October 1875 (see *Correspondence* 7:55, 108-09) appears to be Rossetti’s only mention in writing of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, a project that never came to fruition and that survives only in two pencil drawings: a preparatory study in the British Museum and a compositional sketch in the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.<sup>1</sup> Solitary and brief as it is, however, Rossetti’s statement to Hake is significant for two reasons: it indicates that he was pleased enough with his design to want to show it to his friend and it suggests that the subject of the design was of enough interest and perhaps importance to him that he was planning to undertake it whether or not it found a purchaser (“irrespective of contingencies”) and could thus help to alleviate his precarious financial situation. For these two reasons alone there is justification for examining *Orpheus and Eurydice* in detail and for wondering why, in the summer of 1875, Rossetti chose to make the picture for its own sake rather than for financial reward.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 10:1-77, and its two salient events are succinctly described by John Lemprière in the entry on Orpheus in his *Bibliotheca Classica; Or, A Classical Dictionary*, which Rossetti on at least one occasion<sup>2</sup> drew upon for information:

Eurydice was the only ... [nymph] who made a deep impression on the melodious musician [Orpheus], and their nuptials were celebrated. Their happiness,

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