

Lyra: Myths and Retcons(tellations)

Intro

Jordan: [Music]

Jordan: [Music] Hi, I'm Jordan.

Kit: And I'm Kit.

Jordan: Welcome to On Starry Time, where stars plus lines

Kit: equal stories.

Jordan: Today we're going to be continuing our exploration of the constellation Lyra, with a focus on the history and myths of this constellation.

History and Background

Kit: The word lyra is the latin word for lyre, which is a musical instrument that falls into the lute family, I found out.

Jordan: It is a stringed instrument that was played in ancient Greece, kinda like a guitar, as in it was strummed rather than plucked like a harp. But it does look kind of like a little

lap sized harp.

Kit: Other cultures, however, didn't necessarily associate this part of the night sky with a lyre at all.

Jordan: Pretty understandable, considering it looks nothing like a lyre To find out what it does look like, or at least according to mine and Kit's interpretation, feel free to check out last week's episode on the astronomy and cosmic background of Lyra.

Kit: Yeah, so we mentioned in that last episode that this part of the night sky has also been seen as a vulture or an eagle, and maybe they're diving or they're carrying a harp, and that is from Arab astronomy, uh, that sort of ancient interpretation of this part of the night sky.

Jordan: And among some Aboriginal clans, this was also seen as a bird, but instead of a vulture or an eagle, it was imagined to be a malleefowl, a chicken sized bird that lives in Australia.

Kit: Meanwhile, the Incan people saw this as Urcuchillay, which is a llama deity that watched over animals.

Jordan: Urcuchillay. Excellent pronunciation.

Kit: Yeah, I was very intrigued by this character. I definitely think that this is worth a deeper dive. And in fact, Lyra was one of the constellations covered on Judy Volkler's website, which I've brought up before, which has sort of aggregated lots of different stories about the night sky. And so there was a ton of interpretations of this part of the

night sky, and, of course, of Vega specifically, which is that bright star we talked about last week.

Jordan: Vega is the fifth brightest star in the northern hemisphere. It's extremely bright and prominent. Whether or not you can develop a lyre constellation from it, that depends on your socio cultural norms. But the star itself, Vega, you're gonna see it.

Kit: And you're probably gonna create stories about it. So I will definitely be sure to post, um, the website that aggregates all of those different stories from all around the world in different periods for anybody who wants to go into a deeper dive on this part of the night sky.

Myth retelling

Jordan: So, even though we have a range of different interpretations of this vague assortment of intersecting lines, we'll be focused today on the Greco- Roman story of this lyre.

Kit: And as always, there are numerous versions of the myth and the different parts of the myth. So we've decided to just sort of borrow across different sources to construct a general narrative, and we'll point out if there's some big divergence or something else we want to add. But I guess we should just start with the most obvious question, which is, whose lyre is it?

Jordan: This is the central question that leads us to the main character. The lyre in the night sky, the constellation, is said to belong to Orpheus. And if you're familiar with

some of the works of Strabo or Plutarch, Ovid, Plato, you might have heard of Orpheus before.

Kit: Ever heard of him?

Jordan: Orpheus was a famous musician who may or may not have been a real guy but was immortalized in myth.

Kit: So it does seem like many ancient accounts believed he was a real person, whether or not they believed what happened in the myth was real, they believed he was a real musician. But Aristotle was like, nah, this guy's fake.

Jordan: Yeah. No. Aristotle was not buying into this. And to make matters more confusing, if we try to trace back Orpheus's family tree, it's quite confusing. He might be a descendant, indirectly, of Apollo, and his mother might be a muse. His origins may be Thracian, or perhaps maybe they were Macedonian.

Kit: Yeah, it is very ambiguous here.

Jordan: In the end, though, those details don't really matter. What does matter is that during his early years, Orpheus somehow met Apollo, who decided to teach him how to play the lyre. And Orpheus was so good at playing the lyre that it was said he could charm anything. Lizards, amphibians, birds, even rocks.

Kit: I don't know what that means to charm a a rock.

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Jordan: Orpheus did, and that's all that matters. Okay. You know, he's just a classic rock charmer. Anyway, Orpheus takes his studies very seriously with Apollo. He learns how to shred on this lyre in a way that no one had ever seen before. And using this special skill, somehow, it's actually quite unclear how, somehow he ends up hanging out with the Argonauts and Jason of the Argonauts fame.

Kit: So we'll probably discuss this myth in the future in greater depth. But the snapshot is that Jason and his Argonauts have to go find the golden fleece of our very beloved friend Chrysomallos aka Aries the ram. In order to, I guess, uh, uh, claim a throne or something? I don't know.

Jordan: Kit, they're on a quest.

Kit: Right.

Jordan: So the Argonauts, like all heroes on this ship, get called at or called to by the siren. And the sirens we've seen in the Odysseus myth, they got some great bangers. But lucky for the crew of the Argo, Orpheus takes out his lyre and plays so loudly and so quote, compellingly, the ship sailed by unscathed. No need for people to plug their ears with seashells.

Kit: Wax, with wax

Jordan: With wax.

Kit: With seashells!

Jordan: The next most famous part of Orpheus' life is related to the death of his wife, Eurydice. It is said that Eurydice is killed by a viper's bite while fleeing from a satyr or while dancing with nymphs on her wedding day. And after her death, Orpheus is bereft and plays such sad music that the nymphs and other gods, some minor gods, some major gods, suggest he try to go to the underworld and get her back. For the most part, it does go well for him. He is so charming and is able to play the lyre so compellingly, he is able to persuade Hades and Persephone to allow him to take Eurydice back to the world of the living, but only under one condition, which is that he does not look back until they are both in the living world, which, of course, Orpheus well, he's not able to do. He doesn't do it. He looks back and he loses Eurydice for good.

Kit: I did read in some other versions of the myth that he wasn't actually shown, uh, his wife, and instead he was shown sort of a false image of her. And then when he was unwilling to die and wanted to bring her back to the living, he was punished with this false hope of being able to bring her back, knowing that he never actually would. So that's another sort of iteration of the myth.

Jordan: Orpheus returns from the underworld alone and in a very grieving state.

Kit: And this brings us to the third popular myth related to Orpheus. His death. So there are basically two versions of his death in the myth, and they're basically the same, but the reason is different. So in the first, it says that Orpheus remains in mourning and forsakes all gods except for Apollo. Dionysus is affronted by this, sends his followers, a group of women called the Maenads, and the Maenads rip him to shreds.

Jordan: Me personally, huge fans of the Maenads.

Kit: In the second version of the myth, he's also torn apart by a group of women who worship Dionysus. But this time they're angry because when Orpheus comes back, he forsakes all women and starts taking only men as lovers. And so these women tear him apart and throw his still singing head and lyre into the river where it is eventually found on another island and is buried in and a shrine is built to this hero slash musician.

Jordan: And in the end, the muses, or perhaps Zeus himself, puts his lyre in the sky and Orpheus finally joins his beloved Eurydice in the underworld.

Myth Analysis

Kit: So these are the three popular myths about Orpheus. We've got something around the Argonauts, we've got something around going down to the underworld, and then we've also got these versions of his death. And this gives us our explanation for how slash why his lyre gets into the night sky. And I think one of the most interesting parts of this myth to me was how different Orpheus is as a hero than the demigods or the heroes that we've seen so far in the night sky who are known for their physical strength or hunting prowess.

Jordan: For sure, Orpheus is a very different character than say, Orion or Hercules, who we covered in other stories.

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Jordan: He's a musician, he's an artist, and yet he still possesses great power. But it's a very different archetype, more in line with like Loki or other trickster heroes. And

Orpheus's power is his music, in fact.

Kit: Yeah. And he is one of the very few Greco- Roman heroes who survives a trip to the underworld. Um, the others include Hercules,

Jordan: Who is, let's mention, a son of Zeus and actively being protected and punished for brutally murdering his family.

Kit: Mhm. That's part of why he's in the underworld trying to redeem himself. Um, Theseus has also been to the underworld who we haven't really met on the pod yet, but he's like perhaps a son of Poseidon and he actually gets stuck there and needs to get rescued by Hercules when Hercules is down there. And then of course Odysseus makes a partial trip, a little, little trip, um, down there to the sort of borderlands. But by and large there are a few other heroes, but by and large, this is not a place mortals are permitted to go and certainly not a place that they're able to come back from.

Jordan: The difference is between this and the original story, the first quest with Jason, where he's not really the main character, he's more of a side supporting character, in this story, the journey is Orpheus is alone, and it ends in tragedy, leading him to either the same place or an even worse place than where he was when he started. Having to lose someone he loves not once, but twice.

Kit: Yeah. And having to lose this person twice because of his own

Jordan: hubris

Kit: mistakes. Yeah. And I guess that's kind of the lesson of this myth, this idea that

there is no overcoming the boundaries between life and death. Um, love does not conquer all when you are a mortal.

Jordan: Yeah. This myth has always kind of been confusing to me, whether it's Orpheus and Eurydice or Lot and Lot's wife in the Old Testament, there's something that I think is trying to be said about the inevitability of death and how grief affects us all differently and how loss cannot be resisted or stopped and how meditating or looking back on this trauma is not helpful.

Kit: Yeah. And I agree. I think that this myth is difficult in some ways. It's so enduring and it's so popular. Right. And it does have these elements of a love story, a loss, grief, these kinds of things. But it is difficult to sort of know in the way that it's such a tragic ending to know exactly what it's trying to teach us.

Jordan: We can contrast the story of death and loss we see in the Persephone Hades myth, which is a story of divine death and rebirth and restoration. However, in Orpheus we see something lacking, or we see a conversation with that myth that reinforces the boundaries and differentiation between the mortal and the divine.

Retconstellations

[Music] Welcome back to our segment, retconstellation. In this segment, we reimagine, reboot, and revise the myths of our monthly constellation in hopes to modernize, subvert, or deepen the story of our monthly constellation or sometimes Kit, all we do is make them a little less cringey. Will you start us off this week?

Kit: So, I kind of struggled with inspiration for this one. I think, obviously, the most straightforward idea is to shift the focus to Eurydice, but we already have those retcons. Margaret Atwood has a retcon. Sarah Ruhl has a play on it. There is just like, this has been done. So I didn't really want to go that route. And honestly, when you look up this myth on Wikipedia, just all of the retellings are very, very extensive. And so I was like, all right, well, this portion of the myth is not, is not the place. Um, it's been done. But then there's not much there there in the Argonaut story or the death story. And so I decided that I needed to just, instead of ret constellationing, I needed to re-Bootes

Jordan: I like what you did here. I'll let you cook.

Kit: Like the constellation Bootes. Okay, so

Jordan: B o o t e s. For our audience.

Kit: A hard reboot. I'm not mad at the original myth or necessarily the enduring themes, especially in light of the retcons out there. So I wanted to

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Kit: keep in the theme of showing the power of music, but in my myth, we're going back to the podcast extended universe to visit our good friend Sagittaria the centauress who founded the Amazons in my Sagittarius retconstellation.

Jordan: Season one, listen!

Kit: As we all remember, Sagittaria also took in Auriga, a charioteer who was great

friends with Pricus's goat children. So after saving the Amazon village from attackers with her goat drawn chariot, Auriga falls in love with the village musician, Lyra. Lyra is kind and smart and beautiful, but when a drought destroys the crops and starves the livestock, Sagittaria asks Auriga to take a collection of weapons and find somebody to trade so they can have some food and not, you know, die. Lyra, having traveled widely as a bard, agrees to accompany Auriga. And on their travels, Auriga gets into a fight with a snotty prince, and the king of the area they're visiting takes Auriga prisoner. Lyra, not speaking the language of the kingdom, uses her musical prowess to communicate with the king and his family, and ultimately is able to free Auriga. So the Amazons begin a productive trade with the kingdom that saves them from starvation, and they are ultimately saved by the incredible musical stylings of Lyra. Tada. The end.

Jordan: Kit. It ties in back to the previous mythological extended universe of the pod. I'm glad that we have a Lyra character now here. She is kind, she is smart, she is beautiful. Um, I think this is great. Ties right back in. Lyra uses music to communicate across boundaries, much like our friend Orpheus did between the living and the dead. So I think this takes the main element, the transcendence of art, and brings it into your personal wheelhouse. Your personal mythology. To create something really magical.

Kit: Thank you. All right, Jordan, where did you go with this reconstellation?

Jordan: So my reconstellation is pretty simple. Orpheus shreds. Keep shredding and shredding and shredding and the records that he makes live on after his death.

Kit: Um,

Jordan: You could just say it sounds like you didn't do the assignment.

Kit: Um I'm not going to say that I think that your retcon is pointing to sort of a, uh, broadening of this myth and the idea that each of us, right in our own way, could have Orpheus's energy about us. And again, just this idea, I think both of us actually moved away from this question about grief and loss and what it means to look back and instead actually tried to emphasize just how powerful music is. But not just music, just art in general. And I think that we both pulled that part of the myth forward as opposed to some of these other parts of the myth that maybe didn't resonate as well with us.

Jordan: Kit, that's a very forgiving interpretation.

Oracle AI

And now it's time to see where our Oracle took this myth in our last segment of myths and retconstellation: Oracle AI.

Kit: Yes. So we asked the Oracle to retell us the myth of Orpheus. Just said, what is the myth of Orpheus. And it retold the Orpheus Eurydice myth. It didn't even mention the trip with Jason, and it had only the briefest mention of the death by mob of women. So there was, there was some stuff missing from the just sort of retelling of the myth.

Jordan: Okay, did you ask the Oracle if there were any problematic themes in the myth? Was they able to identify anything?

Kit: So I did. And here's what was listed. Gender dynamics. Um, just in the sort of the passive role of Eurydice. And then the next ones mmm we have problematic element two, Orpheus's actions. And there was something in this explanation that it was like, oh,

Orpheus's actions are being portrayed as weakness or selfishness. I was like I don't really know how that's problematic. Then this sort of, the third one was themes of possession or control of Eurydice and death, which I'm like, is basically just gender dynamics still. And then number four from our Oracle was lack of diversity. Ummmm.

Jordan: All right, Oracle. Okay.

Kit: So, we then asked for a one paragraph retelling of the myth that addresses these problematic elements and attempts to modernize the myth. Alright, Jordan, would you, uh, be willing to give voice to the Oracle?

Jordan: So saith the Oracle:

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Jordan: In a modern retelling of the myth of Orpheus, Eurydice is a talented musician in her own right, not merely a passive figure. When tragedy strikes and she dies, Orpheus, consumed by grief, embarks on a journey to the underworld, not to possess her, but to understand her fate and perhaps even find closure. Along the way, he confronts his own insecurities and learns to trust in Eurydice's agency, realizing that true love means respecting her autonomy, even in death. As they make their way back to the world of the living, Eurydice encourages Orpheus to let go of his need for control. But his lingering doubts lead him to glance back, fearing the unknown. And in that moment, Eurydice empowered by her own choices, decides to stay in the underworld, no longer bound by the expectations of others. Through this quote modern retelling, the myth explores themes of love, loss and autonomy, challenging traditional gender dynamic and, as the Oracle would say, embracing diversity and agency in the face of

adversity.

Kit: I'm not sure the analysis provided by the Oracle makes any sense, but I do like some elements of the ret- con

Jordan: Yeah, I feel like it started off good.

Kit: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Jordan: And then there was a clear pivot point

Kit: And then it sort of fell apart. So I guess we still have a job.

Jordan: I would say that, Kit, except I think I did the exact same thing as the Oracle. I was gonna say this makes no sense, but you know what, Oracle? I did the same thing. So I'm not gonna say I'm better than you this time. I'm just gonna say I see you. Thankfully, Kit has an extended universe, and she was able to recombine this myth and retconstellation it into a broader sense of meaning than I or the Oracle was able to do.
[Music]

Outro

This brings us to the end of our episode of the week. Please join us next week for the pop culture segment of our exploration of the constellation Lyra.

Kit: This has been Kit

Jordan: And Jordan.

Kit: Sisters, lovers of stars and stories,

Jordan: And we'll see you next time

Kit: On Starry Time.

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