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## Proserpina: Death and the Maidens

### I. Introduction

Unlike most gods in the ancient world, the goddess Proserpina is a character whose role in the lives of people changes on season and by the name one calls her. In some stories she is Kore, a virgin girl and daughter of Demeter, and in others she is Proserpina, bride to the Lord of the Underworld. In the main myth attributed to her, her role is secondary to that of her mother Demeter whose mourning affects the entire world, and only when Proserpina is returned to her does the earth begin to bear fruit again. In some interpretations of the rituals regarding the myth, most popularly read in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, after her marriage to Pluto, Kore no longer exists, but since the one known as Proserpina is bride to Pluto and has dominion in the Underworld, the one that returns to earth is not Proserpina, but in fact the goddess Demeter herself (Parca 172). This interpretation leaves Proserpina with three names, three roles and three identities: Kore the maiden daughter, Proserpina the bride, and Demeter the Earth Mother. Each aspect corresponds to one of the key roles in the lives of women, especially for women in the Greco-Roman society, and it also serves as an agricultural allegory (a seed planted in the earth for a season, then sprouting out as a grain during the harvest).

The division of three amongst feminine deities is not unique here, but rather quite common in the Greco-Roman world (e.g., the fates). And while each aspect of the goddess is of interest, for this paper only her role as bride will be examined, especially as the bride to the god of the Underworld making her *de facto* goddess of the dead.

### II. Source Materials

The primary sources that have been examined in the past in understanding Proserpina's role in the lives of men and women in the ancient world are spread out across the genres. There are literary and epigraphic writings, in addition to a flood of artistic renderings and artifacts. Not including the Homeric texts, the artifacts and writings uncovered that deal with the goddess Proserpina begin in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and continue into the first century AD and span across the Mediterranean. Supplemental texts from the second century AD that may shed light on Proserpina are also reviewed.

From Lokri we have evidence that they served Persephone (the Greek Proserpina) as their main deity and had their own version of their her marriage to Pluto that is contrary to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* that is read among the cult of Eleusis that are found on tablets there which date to likely to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Zuntz 164). Also in Lokri there are an array of vases and terracotta statues of Persephone that date to 510 BC (Zuntz 163). From Thurii and Crete we have the Gold Leaves of Orphic cult initiates which reference the goddess and were placed in their graves from around the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE (Graf 12-16).

Aside from the hymn attributed to Homer, other mythological sources come from the *Odyssey* by Homer (a text that at latest is dated to 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE but likely older, but was known by all Greeks) and the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD Latin poets Ovid and Vergil give us the *Metamorphoses*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid* both Vergil (Powell). Literary sources from Athens like the early 4<sup>th</sup> BCE *Phaedo* by Plato, which gives the account of Socrates's death, shares philosophy about the soul and afterlife are reminiscent to the accounts in Orphic cult, despite not

addressing the goddess outright. Death is also explored in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century comedies of Aristophanes, especially in his *Frogs* (Ogden)<sup>1</sup>.

In respect to Proserpina as bride, accounts of young women who die and become restless dead searching for their husbands also becomes relevant to research and there are both fictional and seemingly nonfictional accounts for both of these things such as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD book *Mirabilia* by Phlegon of Tralles (Ogden 159). In some 4<sup>th</sup> century Papyri Graecae Magicae (PGM) ghosts are also called upon, and in the case of love spells, the object of desire (most often a woman) is often requested to act like how one might conceive the ghost of an unmarried girl might, until she finally fulfills the desire of the spell-caster, that is has sexual relations with him (Ogden 233). Given that the Kore metaphorically dies when she is taken down to Underworld, it seems likely that these young girls have some kinship with the goddess Proserpina in some way. I will go into more detail on that later.

### III. Maiden to Chthonian Queen, the Biography of a Goddess

From the myths and poems of Homer, Ovid and Vergil we gain an understanding of how the Greeks and Romans viewed the goddess. Since the words of Ovid and Vergil came much later, one can only assume how much of their story was known to the previous generations as they may have been retellings or complete revisions of “classical” myth.

From the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* we learn quite a bit. First, that she is the daughter of Demeter (Ceres?) and Zeus (Jupiter) and she was taken from the earthly realm one day while she was picking flowers, because her father had given her away to his brother Hades (also called Pluto and Dis, both meaning “enricher”) to marry—neither the mother nor the daughter apparently knew this, as the story tells us (Powell 229). While she is there, Demeter mourns and

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<sup>1</sup> Since I was only naming off the sources, I did not feel a need to give a direct passage from Powell and Ogden’s respective texts. Ogden is a sourcebook, and all that is mentioned above pertains to him on various pages. Powell is a textbook that has lengthy excerpts from the myths and poems listed above.

goes to Eleusis for a while before wrecking infertility upon the earth. Eventually, Zeus allows for Persephone to return to her mother to appease her, however, it is learned that while she was in the Underworld she ate a pomegranate seed (Powell 240) and so it is that for a third of the year Persephone must return to the Underworld to be with her husband, and during that time Demeter again does not allow for the earth to bear fruit, until Persephone is again at her side (Powell 241).

In the Lokri variation that was mentioned before, Demeter does not mourn her daughter and it appears as though the match between Proserpina and Pluto is one that at first is reluctant, but after some mild interference by Venus and Eros, the maiden does become a loving spouse to her surprise husband (Zuntz 164). According to Zuntz, the people of Lokri were familiar with Demeter and actually had temples to the goddess, and in other artifacts it seems as though they were familiar with the myth of Eleusis, however, they did not consider it apart of the canon associated with *their* Persephone (Zuntz 166).

From the *Odyssey*, we have Odysseus's ascent into Hades in book 11 and from there we have a multitude of references to Persephone. First, when he is told to go to the land of the dead in book 10 by Circe, she tells him to speak with Tiresias "[f]or to him alone did Persephone grant retention of his wits after death" (Ogden 179; Homer 10.494-495). After speaking with Tiresias, Odysseus sees his mother and tries to hug her, but when he cannot he asks if she is merely an illusion brought to him by the Queen of the Underworld. She tells him she is real, but explains that the bodies of the dead are gone when they are burned on the funerary pyre and only the spirit remains (Powell 305; Homer 11.210-222).

In Vergil's *Georgics* we are told the story of Orpheus and his journey into Hades to retrieve his dead bride Eurydice. Orpheus was a famous poet who played upon the lyre and sang sweetly; he was said to be the son of a Thracian king and a Muse. He only ever loved one

woman, Eurydice, and after she died on the day of their wedding he descended into the Underworld. In the story, it is his singing that melts the cold heart of Proserpina who then gives him a chance to revive his dead bride, under the condition that he does not look back at her. Of course, in the end, he does and she is sucked back into Hades just as she was about to breathe in the air of the living (Powell 310-312; Vergil *Geo.* 4.457-527).

Vergil also wrote the epic *Aeneid* which, like the *Odyssey* and *Georgics*, gives us a descent into Hades story, but here we learn also about the restless dead who are “debarred from Hades proper” (Ogden 148). Among the categories are what we have come to call the “untimely dead.” The untimely dead are essentially those who are killed before their time, that is when still young (Ogden 148; Vergil *Aen.* 6.325-30). For a woman in Greco-Roman society, an untimely death was one that happened before she was married and therefore unable to have a child. These spirits are called *agamoî* (Ogden 146). I bring this into account because in no logical narrative does Proserpina ever give birth to a child—male or female. There are stories where Persephone is raped by her father Zeus and Dionysos is the offspring from that union; however, the maternal parentage of Dionysos is traditionally given to Semele, and that case is the one that makes most sense (Zuntz 86). Dead girls who fail to conceive or give birth, therefore have a double connection to Proserpina as she is both the goddess of their new home and also childless.

#### IV. Greco-Roman Afterlife

The Ancient Greeks and Romans were just as concerned with the life to come as many people apparently still are today. From the *Odyssey* we learn from Achilles that an eventless, long life is far better than an excited but short life because life after death was so dreary (Powell 306; Homer 11.473-491). In some other myths, men try to beat out death by telling their wives not to bury their bodies so that they might return to the earth (Powell 307).

What could be done to change this, since it is known that all things that live must eventually die? The obvious response is to create establish new religions and cults that ensured the initiates a better afterlife, or perhaps even a chance at being reincarnated and live again. And this is of course what happened. The following is a presentation of a couple of the mystery cults of the ancient Greeks and how they pertain to the myths of Proserpina and the goddess herself.

If we return to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is there that we have the sacred narrative for one of the ancient mystery cults known as Orphic cults. Little is known about this cult aside from the fact that its teachings are likely based in a legendary Orpheus. The artifacts we have to tell us about this ancient mystery are the gold leaves or gold tablets which were buried with the initiates of the cult. In a number of them, they either invoke the goddess by name or tell the initiate that he or she will be presented before the Queen of the Underworld and it is up to them to say the right things and possibly get another chance at life or, at the very least, remember their previous life (Graf 13-17).

There is some suggestion in scholarship that there may be a version of the Orphic myth in which Eurydice is successfully brought back from the Underworld (Zuntz 298). But even if this is not the case, it is still obvious that the people initiated into the cult are hoping to gain some kind of better reward when they die than what is standard for the Greeks. Be it a chance to live again as this Hollywood ending allows or even an attempt to make it out of Hades, or simply get the best real estate in the Elysian fields, as indicated in Tablet 3 of Graf and Johnston's collection of Gold Tablets, "to [the] holy meadows and groves of Persephone" (Graf 9). In some of the tablets, it claims that you must tell Persephone that the "Bacchic One himself released you" (Graf 37). The "Bacchic One" may be a name for Dionysos, who also had mystery cults, and according to the Orphic myth Dionysos is the son of Persephone (see above); however, it may

also refer to Orpheus himself as he was ripped apart by the Maenads, followers of Dionysos (Powell 312; Vergil *Geo.* 4.520-527).

Another mystery cult which associates with the goddess Persephone are the Eleusinian Mysteries, which get their name from their place of origin: Eleusis, a village about 14 miles from the city of Athens (Powell 242). This is where the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* comes from and celebrates. Although Demeter plays the starring role in the myth and Persephone is merely a passive character who gets manhandled and traded by the leading men in her life, both are praised on equal ground in the cult as the Two Goddesses (Parca 165). Like the Orphic cult, it too offers its followers a better chance at an afterlife, perhaps because it is in this myth that Persephone returns to her mother from the Underworld, a not-so subtle visual of resurrection. A separate practice within the mystery was the Thesmophoria, a secret ritual for women only to celebrate the goddess Demeter. Kevin Clinton suggests that the Thesmophoria predates the mystery cult itself and is in fact the cult's origin, but later just became a secret three-day holiday (Parca 165). During the Thesmophoria, the women take on the role of Demeter and mourn for the loss of her daughter, refusing to eat during the first two days, but feasting on the third which symbolizes Persephone's return from the Underworld (Parca 172). This festival is perhaps one of the few times when mothers are reunited with their daughters after they have married, so it seems obvious to use this story to show their joy in seeing their mothers and daughters again (Parca 178).

#### V. Images of the Goddess

Images of the goddess Proserpina are available throughout the Mediterranean. She is often seen as the companion to her husband, sitting enthroned in the Underworld carrying around either a pomegranate or some grain (fig 1). Iconic imagery from the *Homeric Hymn* are also seen

on pottery throughout Greece, especially the scene where she is returned from the Underworld, lead by Hermes, and received by her mother. The rape of Proserpina (fig 2), on the other hand, is more often seen in sculpture than other mediums. Found at the base of La Mannella in Lokri there are Janiform (double-headed a la Janus) busts with two female faces (fig. 3). The two faces are not identical. The obvious guess at the two faces are Demeter and the Kore, but some scholars (named Marcade) have suggested that it may instead be the double nature of the chthonian divinity. That is, Persephone and Kore (Zuntz 154).

VI. Power and Purpose, What the Myths, Mysteries and Masterpieces Tell Us (i.e., My Scholarly Opinions and Educated Guesses)

So, now that we have mapped out the stories, cults and imagery that is associated with the goddess Proserpina, what does this all tell us about the goddess in terms of her identity and her purpose for the Greeks and Romans?

From her mythological biography, it can be said without reaching too far that she is the archetypical daughter. That is, she is without much agency in the world as a maiden, but when she becomes a wife she gains dominion over the house as its mistress and has power over all the unwed children as well as the slaves. As a dutiful wife, she keeps the affairs of the home in order. We see this by the fact that in almost all of the tablets associated with Orphic cult, it is the Chthonic Queen, not the King, that is invoked to gain favor and hope to try and have another chance at life. In the myths of Orpheus and the epic of Homer, it is Proserpina/Persephone who grants the heroes their boons. It is she, not Pluto, who allows Orpheus to try and have another chance at love with his too-soon dead bride. Further, Circe tells Odysseus that it is Persephone who allowed Tiresias to keep his wits about him in the afterlife, while all other dead are mere

shadows of their former selves. Perhaps this ability to keep one's mind is what the initiates of Orphic cult are truly after when they say to drink from the spring of memory?

On the obverse, Proserpina herself may represent the girls who died before they gave birth as she is suddenly snatched from her loved ones while doing the rather girlish activity of picking flowers and is never able to produce a child from her marriage to Pluto. According to Powell, if Greek girls died before they were married they were said to be "Hades' bride and a wedding vase was placed over her grave as a memorial" (Powell 242). If this is true, then it is understandable why the Lokri did not have Persephone return from the Underworld, as once dead she could not return.

If we follow both schools of thought: Persephone as dead daughter and Mistress of the Dead, who decides who may come and go from the Underworld, then it seems to give further credence to the ghosts of young girls being said to return to the upper world to try and copulate with men to produce the offspring they were never given the chance to have (Ogden 159; Phlegon of Tralles *Mirabilia* 1). It is not inconceivable to see Proserpina as a kindred spirit who may be sympathetic to their goal and allow for them to have what she was never able to have herself.

A reason behind her barren marriage might be that because as Queen of the Dead she cannot give birth, lest she be eternally separated from her immortal child as she is to her mother. However, it should not be seen that she is not a giver of life. Just as she allows for dead spirits to return to the world, it is she who causes the grain crop to grow. This conclusion may be derived either by her return to her mother in the classic myth causing Demeter to allow the earth to bear fruit again, or because as an earth goddess herself, that is the goddess within the earth is the cause for the seed to turn into a sapling and eventually into a full stalk of grain. The images of her bearing wheat suggest her ability to do this, since, as Zuntz suggests, it is unlikely that her

bearing grain is merely a reminder that she is the daughter of Demeter, and this reading allows for the areas in Greece and Rome where Proserpina does not return to her mother at the end of the story. So, though unable to bear children of her own, Proserpina becomes the surrogate mother to the world, ensuring that life continues.

Additionally, if life continues so does the cycle of death. She is thusly making her husband's realm vaster than that of any other gods.

Another note on Proserpina as seen in the lives of women, according to Plato's *Phaedo*, as well as other sources, it is the women who wash and prepare the dead bodies for the funerary practices (Ogden 147; Plato 81c-d). I do not think it is too far a stretch to say that it is because of the nature of Persephone as a goddess who moved between the earth and the Underworld that women were shrouded in this idea of "otherness."

## VII. Conclusion

The Greco-Romans were very much aware of the goddess Proserpina in all her many roles she played. The part she played as the Queen of the Dead was perhaps the one the ancients were most intrigued with as they saw her as the judger of their spirits and where they might be able to go and roam to, either because she was the giver of such amenities, or she held the key to the Lord of the Underworld's heart and he allowed for her to have favorites among the people. Dozens of conclusions may be reached about how Proserpina was viewed in the eyes of men and women, and perhaps how the Greeks and Romans interacted with the goddess on their terms and on hers. All that is known in the end is that they respected and praised her and knew that if they ever needed anything when it came to the afterlife, it was to go to her, not her husband.

Appendix



(figure 1, Hades and Persephone enthroned with grain and cock)



(figure 2, Rape of Proserpina by Bernini, Galleria Borghese, Rome.)



(figure 3, Janus-faced female deity)

## Works Cited

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