The Mythography of Proserpina: Geography and Power*

Sarah SPENCE
University of Georgia
sspence@uga.edu

For the New York Meds, with gratitude

I take as my starting point that the task at hand is to worry the line we draw between history and myth. As with the other pieces in this special issue, I assert that the Homeric tradition supports the notion that many of the figures and events in Homer's epics and in those who are influenced by Homer, including Palaiphatos and Hyginus, are seen as both historic and mythic. More than that, these Homeric and post-Homeric texts enable the crossover between genres: by looking at the Homeric sources we see evidence of history as myth and vice versa. So, for example, if we look at Palaiphatos (probably late fourth c. BC) we see that when he treats of the episodes from Homer, he does not question their historicity at all: the Trojan

War took place and Ulysses traveled through the known world, whereas with Hyginus (1st c. BC-AD), it is precisely the Trojan War and the voyages of Ulysses as such that introduce the realm of fable and myth. While our conception of Homeric heroes as entirely mythic figures is recent and modern, with the ancients, the characterization was more complicated.

My focus will be on the Roman Proserpina and her earlier Greek counterpart, Persephone. In this article I will trace the main early versions of her story, starting with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and continuing into medieval accounts, themselves based largely on the account in Ovid's work (*Met.*5 and *Fasti* 4), concluding with the treatment in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. It will be my contention that the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, long recognized as the textual origin of the myth, informs the later versions of the myth in ways that have not been fully acknowledged. While the focus on seasons and mother-daughter relations has been studied at length,[1] it is my contention that the *Homeric Hymn* introduces the importance of geography into the myth, and of traversing a geographic expanse.[2] This interest in traveling the earth continues into the Roman versions of the myth, where it is then supplemented, if not supplanted, by a parallel interest in traveling across time. This additional focus on time begins with Ovid but is then carried into the medieval versions of the myth. Nonetheless, whether time or space, all versions studied are rooted in the geographic crux explored in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.

***

The ancient myth is roughly tripartite: The young girl Persephone is abducted by the god of the Underworld. Her mother goes in search of her and ravages the world in the process through drought. Once found (in some versions she is not) Persephone is allowed to return, but only at a cost, since she has eaten some (the number varies: in some it is 3, in some 6, in others 7) pomegranate seeds. The myth in all its variants, nonetheless, is about the earth and its centrality to life and pleasure. In all versions Persephone is abducted while picking beautiful flowers; in most versions her mother's journey to find her is a long and geographically detailed progress throughout the known world.

Let us look at the Homeric Hymn first. The first thing to notice is that the myth draws our attention to three locations: Olympus, Earth, and Hades:

---

*I am grateful to the two anonymous readers for their thoughtful review.

[1] Useful here is the edition of Foley.

[2] The existing scholarship on the *Hymn* does discuss Attica and Eleusis. But the importance of geography broadly speaking, including journeying through space and time, is underplayed.

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER[3]

I begin to sing of Demeter, the holy goddess with the beautiful hair.
And her daughter [Persephone] too. The one with the delicate ankles, whom Hadês seized. She was given away by Zeus, the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide.
Demeter did not take part in this, she of the golden double-axe, she who glories in the harvest.
She [Persephone] was having a good time, along with the daughters of Okeanos, who wear their girdles slung low.
She was picking flowers: roses, crocus, and beautiful violets.
….
It happened on the Plain of Nysa. There it was that the Lord who receives many guests made his lunge.
He was riding on a chariot drawn by immortal horses. The son of Kronos. The one known by many names.
He seized her against her will, put her on his golden chariot,
And drove away as she wept. She cried with a piercing voice,
calling upon her father [Zeus], the son of Kronos, the highest and the best.
But not one of the immortal ones, or of human mortals,
heard her voice. Not even the olive trees which bear their splendid harvest.

In these first twenty lines we have the two divine locations, Olympus and Hades, identified by their leaders, Zeus and Hades, and earth is identified with the Plain of Nysa and then characterized as a place of beauty in terms of both Persephone and the flowers that grow there. In addition to the view of the cosmos this opening provides, then, we also are made to focus on the geography of earth. This theme continues: first Persephone is taken from the Plains of Nysa, then her mother Demeter travels the world looking for her, visiting many places and creating narratives of her own origin that are, also, rooted in a sense of place. First there is the cosmic view:

So long as the earth and the star-filled sky
were still within the goddess's [Persephone's] view, as also the fish-swarming sea [*pontos*], with its strong currents,
as also the rays of the sun, she still had hope that she would yet see
her dear mother and that special group, the immortal gods.

Then specific landforms on earth are mentioned:

The peaks of mountains resounded, as did the depths of the sea [*pontos*],
with her immortal voice.

It is here that Demeter hears her, and she responds again in relation to the earth's geography:

She sped off like a bird, soaring over land and sea,

[3] Translation by Gregory Nagy, https://uh/edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html.

looking and looking. But no one was willing to tell her the truth [*etêtuma*],
not one of the gods, not one of the mortal humans,
not one of the birds, messengers of the truth [*etêtuma*].
Thereafter, for nine days did the Lady Demeter
wander all over the earth, holding torches ablaze in her hands.

Searching for Persephone Demeter creates her own narratives, again rooted in travel and geography:

"…. I am from Crete, having traveled over the wide stretches of sea
against my will. Without my consent, by *biâ*, by duress,
I was abducted by pirates. After a while,
sailing with their swift ship, they landed at the harbor of Thorikos. There the ship was boarded by women
of the mainland, many of them. They [the pirates]
started preparing dinner next to the prow of the beached ship.
But my *thûmos* did not yearn for food, that delight of the mind.
I stole away and set out to travel over the dark earth of the mainland, fleeing my arrogant captors. This way, I stopped them
from drawing any benefit from my worth without having paid the price.
That is how I got here, in the course of all my wanderings. And I do not know what this land is and who live here.

Set against this horizontal motion, though, we continue to hear of the vertical action of the gods as they move from Olympus to Earth and down to Hades:

First, [Zeus] sent Iris, with the golden wings, to summon
Demeter with the splendid hair, with a beauty that is much loved.
That is what he told her to do. And she obeyed Zeus, the one with the dark clouds, the son of Kronos,
and she ran the space between sky and earth quickly with her feet.
She arrived at the city of Eleusis, fragrant with incense,
and she found in the temple Demeter, the one with the dark robe.
…
After that, the Father sent out all the other blessed and immortal gods.
They came one by one,
they kept calling out to her, offering many beautiful gifts,
all sorts of *tîmai* that she could choose for herself if she joined the company of the immortal gods.
But no one could persuade her in her thinking or in her intention [*noêma*],
angry as she was in her *thûmos*, and she harshly said no to their words.
She said that she would never go to fragrant Olympus,
that she would never send up the harvest of the earth,
until she saw with her own eyes her daughter, the one with the beautiful looks.
But when the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide, heard this,
he sent to Erebos [Hadês] the one with the golden wand, the Argos-killer [Hermes],
so that he may persuade Hadês, with gentle words,
that he allow holy Persephone to leave the misty realms of darkness

and be brought up to the light in order to join the *daimones* [the gods in Olympus], so that her mother may
see her with her own eyes and then let go of her anger.
Hermes did not disobey, but straightaway he headed down beneath the depths of the earth,
rushing full speed, leaving behind the abode of Olympus.

This verticality is reiterated when Hades pretends to return Persephone to Demeter, feeding her pomegranate seeds before taking her to earth:

Swiftly she set out, with joy. But he [Hadês]
gave her, stealthily, the honey-sweet berry of the pomegranate to eat,
peering around him. He did not want her to stay for all time
over there, at the side of her honorable mother, the one with the dark robe.
The immortal horses were harnessed to the golden chariot
by Hadês, the one who makes many *sêmata*.
She got up on the chariot, and next to her was the powerful Argos-killer,
who took reins and whip into his *philai* hands
and shot out of the palace [of Hadês]. And the horses sped away eagerly.
Swiftly they made their way along the long journey. Neither the sea
nor the water of the rivers nor the grassy valleys
nor the mountain peaks could hold up the onrush of the immortal horses.
High over the peaks they went, slicing through the vast air.
He came to a halt at the place where Demeter, with the beautiful garlands in the hair,
was staying, at the forefront of the temple fragrant with incense. When she [Demeter] saw them,
she rushed forth like a maenad down a wooded mountainslope.

It is up to Persephone herself to link the two together, speaking first of earth, then of Olympus and Hades. She, like her myth, embodies the narration of the intersection of geographies, divine and mortal, an intersection reiterated by her mother:

He [Zeus] assented that her daughter, every time the season came round,
would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist underneath,
and the other two thirds in the company of her mother and the other immortals.
So he spoke, and the goddess [Rhea] did not disobey the messages of Zeus.
Swiftly she darted off from the peaks of Olympus
and arrived at the Rarian Field, the life-bringing fertile spot of land,
in former times, at least. But, at this time, it was no longer life-bringing, but it stood idle
and completely without green growth. The bright grain of wheat had stayed hidden underneath,
through the mental power of Demeter, the one with the beautiful ankles. But, from this point on,
it began straightaway to flourish with long ears of grain
as the springtime was increasing its power. On the field, the fertile furrows

began to be overflow with cut-down ears of grain lying on the ground,
while the rest of what was cut down was already bound into sheaves.
This happened the moment she [Rhea] arrived from the boundless aether.
They [Demeter and Rhea] were glad to see each other, and they rejoiced
in their *thûmos*.
Then Rhea, the one with the splendid headband, addressed her [Demeter]:
"Come, child, Zeus the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide, is
summoning you
to come to the company of that special group of gods. And he
promised *tîmai*
that he would give you, which you could receive in the company of the
immortal gods.
He [Zeus] assented that your daughter, every time the season comes
round,
would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist
underneath,
and the other two thirds in your company and that of the other immortals.
He has assented to all this with the nod of his head.
So come, my child! Obey! Do not be too
stubborn in your anger at the dark-clouded son of Kronos.
Straightaway make the harvest grow, that life-bringer for humans."
So she spoke, and Demeter, she with the beautiful garlands in her hair, did
not disobey.
Straightaway she sent up the harvest from the land with its rich clods of
earth.
And all the wide earth with leaves and blossoms was laden.

Viewed through the lens of geography this myth offers new insights. Ranging from Olympus to Hades, which serves to define the earth in the middle, the story offers a particularly spatial representation of the intersection of mortals and divine. That is, what we are offered here is a celebration of what is essentially a mythic topography: if history and myth on some level explore the intersection between mortals and the divine, what we experience in this tale is the projection of that nexus onto the spatial plane. The myth of Persephone connects history to myth through geography.

It will be apparent that my take on this myth is different from that of many. My approach does not focus on agriculture, female maturation, or ritual celebration, precisely because the reception of this myth, first in the Hellenistic and Roman traditions, then the medieval, does not focus on these elements.[4] Once the myth leaves the world that includes the Plains of Nysa, its role as etiological tale withers away; instead, the tradition focuses on the intersection of mortals and immortals, as in many of these stories, yet in this myth in particular, the intersection is placed squarely within the context of the geography of earth. We will interrogate here what this does for the locations, what it does for the mortals, and what it does for the divine in an

[4] For further on this see my forthcoming *Return of Proserpina* (2023).

effort to see how the line between history and myth is troubled precisely by the accounting of this mortal's journey.

Through the myth and through the travels, the topography of known lands takes on a new significance. The annual rituals are a part of the picture, certainly, but for the myth's reception, as we shall see, those rituals disappear, while the intersection of the earth, of geography, and of the journey does not. In this myth Demeter abandons Olympus to search for her daughter. She is divine but becomes part of the mortal world in her travels.

While I was originally going to focus on Cicero's historicizing of the myth, which I will touch on, I found myself drawn time and again to the role of geography as a way in to the relationship of history and myth. The more I worked on my recent book on Sicily, which also focuses on Proserpina, the more I became aware of the truth of what Alessandro Barchiesi has named "geopoetics," that is, the significant role geography plays in the ability of poetry to impact the world[5]. Proserpina, the Latin name for Persephone, is a key example of this, I would argue, not only because geography is central to her mythology, but because the geography chosen becomes itself central to the world of which she is part.

Let us now follow through the geography of the myth a bit. After the *Homeric Hymn* we are offered the version by Apollonius. Largely based on an Odyssean geography, nonetheless Persephone plays a role as we see her with her friends as the Argonauts sail by.

> The brisk wind propelled the ship, and soon they spotted the beautiful island of Anthemoessa, where the clear-voiced Sirens, the daughters of Achelous, enchanted anyone who moored there with their sweet songs and destroyed him. Beautiful Terpsichore, one of the Muses, had slept with Achelous and bore them. At one time they looked after Demeter's mighty daughter and played with her while she was still a virgin. (*Arg.* 4.891-99)

What is striking here is that Demeter's journey, so prominent in the early version, is here transferred to that of the Argo. This is all we hear of the myth: we see Persephone before she is abducted, before her mother goes in search of her. Yet all of that is pointed to as the Argonauts travel on their epic journey in search of something as allusive, if not elusive, as what Persephone herself will become. We still have a journey, it is still tied in passing to Persephone, yet it has modulated to an epic journey throughout the known world in search of the golden fleece. The mention of Persephone here is key, in that it gives Homeric shape to the journey—one of several, no doubt—as it offers a framework via Persephone for understanding the parameters of the Argonauts' journey. The myth of Persephone, in short, infuses the story of the Argonauts with the geographical necessity that marks

[5] BARCHIESI (2017)

that myth. Not as an etiological tale or even a maturation myth, Persephone's myth here serves the purpose of guiding our reading of the Argonauts on their journey across the known world.

Critical here also is the fact that the island where she is seen is also near the location of Scylla and Charybdis. As Scylla and Charybdis take on a specific location at the straits of Messina, the channel between Calabria and Sicily, so the island of Persephone's abduction becomes identified with Sicily. This identification becomes specific first in Diodorus Siculus, then more explicit in Cicero's orations against Verres, which serves in many ways as the portal for the transformation of the myth from Hellenic to Roman, even as Cicero insists that the abduction takes place on Sicily. Cicero accomplishes this in the context of this oration by assimilating Hades to the corrupt governor of Sicily, Verres, and likens the destruction of the island by the governor to the myth of Persephone, now the Roman Proserpina:

> *Non illi decumarum imperia, non bonorum direptiones, non iniqua iudicia, non importunas istius libidines, non vim, non contumelias, quibus vexati oppressique erant, conquerebantur; Cereris numen, sacrorum vetustatem, fani religionem istius sceleratissimi atque audacissimi supplicio expiari volebant; omnia se cetera pati ac neglegere dicebant. Hic dolor erat tantus, ut Verres alter Orcus venisse Hennam et non Proserpinam asportasse sed ipsam abripuisse Cererem videretur.* (*Verr.* 2.4.50.111-12)
>
> It was not his excessive exaction of tithes, not the plundering of goods, not the unfair courts, not this man's acts of persistent lust, not his violence, not his rudeness, of which these troubled and oppressed people now complained: the holiness of Ceres, the antiquity of her rites, the sanctity of her temple, this is what they wished atonement for through the punishment of this utterly unscrupulous and brazen man: all else they said they were ready to endure and ignore. So great was their distress that one might imagine that Verres, another Orcus, had come to Henna, and not abducted Proserpina but carried Ceres herself away.[6]

Henna, or Enna, is in the center of Sicily; Cicero here asserts that it was the location of Proserpina's abduction.

Note that Cicero too does not discuss Ceres' journey; his point is to link the myth to the geography, again made possible first by the Greek myth, then by the Hellenistic adaptation. The importance of geography to the *Homeric Hymn* is here carried forward to make a historic point. Correcting the wrongs done by the governor of this all-important province will be akin to the negotiation and resolution surrounding Proserpina's recovery. While Cicero is the first to make this essential identification, Ovid confirms it: in his version of the Proserpina myth, which quotes from Cicero, the myth, still set on Sicily, is likewise cast as a myth of empire.

---

[6] Texts as listed in bibliography. Translations my own except where indicated.

> *Prima Ceres unco glaebam dimouit aratro,*
> *prima dedit fruges alimentaque mitia terris,*
> *prima dedit leges; Cereris sunt omnia munus.*
> *illa canenda mihi est; utinam modo dicere possim*
> *carmina digna dea! certe dea carmine digna est.* (*Met.* 5.341-45)
>
> Ceres was the first to overturn the clod with a curved plow. She was the first to give grain and fruitful crops to the lands. She was the first to give laws: all these things are the gift of Ceres; she must be sung by me. Would that I could sing songs worthy of the goddess! Surely the goddess is worthy of a song.

Note how Ovid borrows strongly from Cicero, especially in his use of the repeated word *primum/a*:

> … *primum quod omnium nationum exterarum princeps Sicilia se ad amicitiam fidemque populi Romani applicavit. Prima omnium, id quod ornamentum imperii est, provincia est appellata. Prima docuit maiores nostros quam praeclarum esset exteris gentibus.* (Cicero, *Verr.*, 2.2.1.2)
>
> … the first of which is that Sicily was the first of all foreign nations to offer herself in friendship and loyalty to the Roman people. She was the first of all to be called province, that embellishment of empire. She was the first who taught our forefathers how splendid it is to govern foreign people.

Ovid's version is subtly different, in ways that will become critical to the medieval adaptations, even as it shows clear sympathy with the original Greek versions. In both accounts Persephone/Proserpina's abduction is, as we have seen, rooted in the centrality of the land; in both it is perceived as a power play. Yet in the *Homeric Hymn* it was Zeus and Hades who decide on the abduction, while here it is Venus:

> "*arma manusque meae, mea, nate, potentia*" *dixit,*
> "*illa, quibus superas omnes, cape tela, Cupido,*
> *inque dei pectus celeres molire sagittas,*
> *cui triplicis cessit fortuna novissima regni.*" (*Met.* 5.365-68)
>
> "My arms and hands, son, my power," she said, "take those weapons, Cupid, with which you conquer all things, and shoot swift arrows into the heart of the god to whom fell the latest lot of the triple kingdom."

The fact that it is Venus who instigates the abduction is crucial, since through it Venus proposes to conquer the underworld. Although phrased in geographic terms, this also opens the door to seeing the myth in temporal terms: introducing love into the underworld means nothing less than owning the future. The imperial programme here includes not just space but time; ruling the underworld, she also comes to rule all the unborn and dead, since every mortal will visit Hades at least twice. It is a tremendous powerplay on the part of Venus, and one that, as we shall see, evolves into

certain accounts of salvation history. The abduction of Proserpina, in Ovid's hands, becomes an expansion of the power of love into the underworld, which, through Venus' reading of the *Homeric Hymn*, if you will, grants the geography a numinous quality that history cannot discard. This is an even more deliberate abduction than the one described in the *Homeric Hymn*. The historic becomes traceable to a cosmic myth even as the concrete meaning reinserts the fabulous back into reality.

To put this another way, mythic use of geography in general starts with being in one place and going somewhere else. There is a continuity of during and after even as there is a sense of mystery such a move introduces. As we move to a place, we make sense of reality and mystery. But history is more abstract: what did that mean? The gods often serve to help explain the existential thing, not the ideological one, to make sense of where you are. In this particular myth, geography anchors myth to history, but the mythic connections also infuse the geography with the presence of the otherworldly, and, as a result, bring the human closer to the divine.

And it is Ovid's version that gets picked up in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages in various forms, complete with the emphasis on the importance of love and the temporal. But the geographic element is never lost sight of. Claudian's account in the *De Raptu Proserpinae* (late 4th c.) for instance, also sets the myth on Sicily (though significantly places the abduction on the volcanic Etna, not the idyllic Enna).[7]

> *in medio scopulis se porrigit Aetna perusti*
> *Aetna Giganteo numquam tacitura triumphos,*
> *Enceladi bustum, qui saucia terga revinctus*
> *spirat inexhaustum flagranti vulnere sulphur*
> *et quotiens detractat onus cervice rebelli*
> *in dextrum laevumque latus, tunc insula fundo*
> *vellitur et dubiae nutant cum moenibus urbes…*
>
> *hic ubi servandum mater fidissima pignus*
> *abdidit…*
> *iam linquitur Aetna*
> *totaque decrescit refugo Trinacria visu.* (*DRP* 1.143-149; 1. 179-80; 190-191)
>
> In the middle, Etna extends itself with half-burned cliffs, Etna which will never remain silent about the victory over the Giants, the pyre of Enceladus, who, bound at his wounded back, breathes inexhaustible sulphur from the flaming wound and whenever it shifts the burden with its rebellious neck on the right and left side, the island is then plucked from the foundations and the uncertain towns nod with their walls…Where the most faithful of mothers has hidden her loved one in this place for safekeeping…now Etna was left behind and all Sicily grows

[7] Or, as HINDS (2016) argues in "Return to Enna," on both Etna and Enna.

smaller as the view recedes.

Yet Proserpina's mother's journey is even more important for Claudian than it is for Ovid, as it marks the reaches of the empire at that time, an empire anchored in the west and in Sicily as first province. In this Claudian returns, perhaps unawares, to the geographic expansiveness of the Homeric original.

> *… quamvis mergatur Hiberae*
> *Tethyos et rubro iaceat vallata profundo.* 320
> *non Rheni glacies, non me Riphaea tenebunt*
> *frigora, non dubio Syrtis cunctabitur aestu.*
> *stat fines penetrare Noti Boreaeque nivalem*
> *vestigare domum; primo calcabitur Atlans*
> *occasu facibusque meis lucebit Hydaspes.* 325 (*DRP* 3.319-25)
>
> … though she be sunk in the lap of the Spanish Ocean or lying fenced round in the depths of the Red Sea. Not the ice of the Rhine nor the Riphaean cold will hold me back, nor will the Syrtes delay me with its uncertain tides. I am resolved to penetrate the bounds of the South Wind and to track down the snowy home of the North; I will trample upon Atlas where the sun first sets and Hydaspes will shine bright with my torches.

But we also need to look at the much later *Ovide Moralisé*, where the return becomes significant again but for new reasons. In two texts that draw on Ovid's version of the Proserpina tale, the *Ovide Moralisé* and Dante's *Purgatorio*, early fourteenth-century texts that are nearly contemporaneous, the myth comes to play a role that is rooted in Ovid's work, but turned to a new end.[8] Whereas in Ovid's version geography is significant for its temporality, in these two medieval texts that temporality becomes the focus of the tale: the myth of Proserpina comes to lay claim not to the land of Sicily but to the land of the future and the redemption of the soul. In the high Middle Ages we find the Proserpina myth used to discuss penitence and redemption in general.

First a quick look at a passage in the fifth book of the *Ovide Moralisé*:

> Que l'ame en torment remaindroit 3415
> Une piece et s'espurgeroit
> Et sa penitance feroit
> Des sept grains qu'ele avoit mengiez,
> C'est des sept creminaux pechiez
> Dont elle estoit ains entechie 3420
> Et, quant el seroit espurgie,
> Si s'en istroit de purgatoire,
> Pour estre em pardurable gloire
> Aveuc l'Iglise trihunphant. (*Ovide* 5.3415-24)
>
> That the soul would remain in suffering

[8] SPENCE (2023), *Return of Proserpina*, chap. 5.

A while to be purged
And do its penance
For the seven seeds she had eaten,
That is, the seven mortal sins
By which it was stained,
And when it has been purged
It will leave purgatory
To share eternal glory
With the church triumphant.

In the *Ovide*, which elsewhere shows clear evidence of borrowing from Ovid, Proserpina can return after she has redeemed her soul for the seven seeds she has eaten. The story is set on Sicily, but the journey per se is that of the soul after the renegotiation between Jupiter and Proserpina's mother. This is a journey of time, certainly, since it takes place in the future, but it is time perceived in spatial terms: Proserpina can return to the land above only when she has atoned for her sins. As in Ovid, the geographic journey is supplemented by a temporal one, but unlike Ovid it is the temporal element that takes precedence.

Likewise in our final example from Dante's *Purgatorio*. Here the canticle begins with a direct reference to Ovid's telling of the Proserpina tale in *Metamorphoses* 5, then returns to the tale when the pilgrim nears the top of the mountain. *Purgatorio* begins with an invocation that points us directly to the Proserpina passage in the *Metamorphoses*:

Per correr miglior acque alza le vele
omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele;
e canterò di quel secondo regno
dove l'umano spirito si purga
e di salire al ciel diventa degno.
Ma qui la morta poesì resurga,
o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono;
e qui Calïopè alquanto surga,
seguitando il mio canto con quel suono
di cui le Piche misere sentiro
lo colpo tal, che disperar perdono.
Dolce color d'orïental zaffiro,
che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto
del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro,
a li occhi miei ricominciò diletto,
tosto ch'io usci' fuor de l'aura morta
che m'avea contristati li occhi e 'l petto.
Lo bel pianeto che d'amar conforta
faceva tutto rider l'orïente,
velando i Pesci ch'erano in sua scorta. (*Purg.* I.1-21)

To course across more kindly waters now
my talent's little vessel lifts her sails,
leaving behind herself a sea so cruel;
and what I sing will be that second kingdom,
in which the human soul is cleansed of sin,
becoming worthy of ascent to Heaven.
But here, since I am yours, o holy Muses,
may this poem rise again from Hell's dead realm;
and may Calliope rise somewhat here,
accompanying my singing with that music
whose power struck the poor Pierides
so forcefully that they despaired of pardon.
The gentle hue of oriental sapphire
in which the sky's serenity was steeped—
its aspect pure as far as the horizon—
brought back my joy in seeing just as soon
as I had left behind the air of death
that had afflicted both my sight and breast.
The lovely planet that is patroness
of love made all the eastern heavens glad,
veiling the Pisces in the train she led.[9]

The poet-narrator identifies himself as a sailor, cutting through the seas of poetry, leaving behind the cruel landscape of *Inferno* and entering the second realm where *la morta poesì resurga*. In addition, in these lines, Dante not only invokes the Muses, but focuses specifically on Calliope and her poetic competition as related in *Metamorphoses* 5,[10] where Ovid's story of the Pierides, who become magpies, challenged the Muses to a competition of voice and artistry. The Muses agreed, and appointed Calliope to tell their tale, and the tale she tells is that of the abduction of Proserpina.[11] As we have seen, Ovid frames Proserpina's abduction with the observation that of the Olympians only Hades has not fallen prey to Venus' powers; as a result, Venus charges Cupid to cause Hades to fall in love and the tale of Proserpina, in Ovid's hands, is initiated, if not explained, by the introduction of love into the afterlife.

[9] The text is that of Petrocchi; the translation is that of Allen Mandelbaum. Both can be found at https://digitaldante.columbia.edu.
[10] Dante will return to a discussion of Sicily in *Par.* VIII.67-70.
[11] The discussions of LEVENSTEIN (2008) and MERCURI (2009) are particularly useful here.

I have argued elsewhere at length that this mountain is assimilated to Mt. Etna and the journey takes place at least on some level on Sicily.[12] Be that as it may, significant for our argument here is the fact that near the top of the mountain of Purgatory, we find several significant mentions of Proserpina. First Venus is mentioned in *Purgatorio* XXVII in a setting that reminds us of Ovid's Proserpina:

> Ne l'ora, credo, che de l'orïente
> prima raggiò nel monte Citerea,
> che di foco d'amor par sempre ardente,
> giovane e bella in sogno mi parea
> donna vedere andar per una landa
> cogliendo fiori; … (*Purg.* XXVII.94-99)

> It was the hour, I think, when Cytherea,
> who always seems aflame with fires of love,
> first shines upon the mountains from the east,
> that, in my dream, I seemed to see a woman
> both young and fair; along a plain she gathered
> flowers…

More specifically, though, in the next canto Dante greets Matelda near the top of the mountain of Purgatory with

> "… Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era
> Proserpina nel tempo che perdette 50
> la madre lei, ed ella primavera." (*Purg.* XXVIII.49-51)

> "…You have reminded me of where and what—
> just when her mother was deprived of her
> and she deprived of spring—Proserpina was."

Dante here uses the myth to suggest something borne out by the rest of *Purgatorio*: the further up the mountain Dante travels, and so forward in space and time, the more he also approaches the timeless purity of the earthly Paradise found at the top of the mountain. It is, I would argue, significant that Proserpina appears at this point in Dante's tale, not in *Inferno* or *Paradiso*. In both these medieval iterations hers is a tale of the process of redemption.

---

[12] This argument is complex, and developed at length in chapters 6 and 7 of my *Return of Proserpina*. In brief, Dante's allusive identification of the mount of Purgatory with Mt. Etna begins in *Inf.* 26. There Ulysses is said to see Purgatory, a claim later confirmed in Paradise. Yet Vergil, who ventriloquizes Ulysses, infuses the narrative with quotations that refer to Sicily, since he believes that Ulysses goes no further than Etna, a belief that gibes with the story of the diaspora of Greek heroes outlined in *Aen.*11. 252–295. The association between Purgatory and Etna then continues into the second canticle, where, through references in the opening canto to the Proserpina tale of *Met.* 5 in particular we continue to be led to see the two mountains as connected, and the story of Proserpina as a tale rooted in the introduction of love into the afterlife.

Further support of this reading of the myth of Proserpina can be found in Renaissance texts, starting with Boccaccio. In the *Genealogy of the Gods*, Boccaccio offers an overview of the medieval interpretations of the Proserpina myth (book 8, chapters 4 and 6). Not only is Boccaccio the first editor and commentator on the *Divina Commedia*, he also prides himself on being one of the first Italian authors to have benefited from the Homeric tradition that Byzantine scholars in Florence were introducing at the time. His treatment of the Proserpina myth and related descriptions of both Sicily and the Underworld, while largely drawn from Cicero and Ovid, also references other ancients, including Vergil and Statius. That Boccaccio's mythography was based largely on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, both in *Allegoria mitologica* and *Genealogia deorum*, as Graziani has noted, was blatantly geopolitical is made clear in his spatio-temporal approach to the myths.[13]

The centrality of geography to the *Homeric Hymn* about Persephone—Earth v. Olympus and Hades; but then the journey of Demeter as well—enables the future adaptations of the story, via Cicero, Ovid, and medieval texts, to walk on both sides of the history/myth line while also insisting on the inseparability of those two through the specificity of the geography. I have also argued here that this myth may also show something else. As it enters into medieval retellings the specific geography does not change: it is still set on Sicily. But the importance of that geography fades and as it becomes a myth focused not so much on place but on time, even if time in a particular spot. So the *Ovide* version is about Sicily, but it is also about redemption in the future; Dante's version is likewise about atonement, set as it is at the top of Purgatory. For this aspect I think we need to credit not just Homer but also Ovid whose story is geographically specific, very much so, but also opens the door to seeing the myth as a myth of time. Proserpina's story is rooted geographically but it also establishes temporal parameters, and when they shift from the past and present into the future, they continue the blurring between the real and the fictitious, translated onto a temporal plane. As Augustine makes clear in the later books of the *Confessions*, there are really two temporal modes, present and non-present, and those two modes correspond to the real and the fictitious. Venus uses Proserpina to conquer the underworld, a place, but also the afterlife, a time, an aspect highlighted in the medieval interpretations. And yet, in the end, I think the temporal version of this is but a variation of the spatial and geographic one which stems from the Homeric tradition and enables the geographic purpose of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* to persist through the medieval variants of the myth.

[13] See GRAZIANI (2015, 2018). Further work remains to be done on the development of these associations in the Renaissance. See, for example, CONTI, *Mythologia*, Bk. 3, ch. 16, where Ovid's influence is clear, alongside that of Dante.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

APOLLONIUS OF RHODES (2009), *Argonautica*. RACE, W. H. (ed. and trans.). Loeb Classical Library 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CICERO (1917/2017), *Orationes. 2nd ed.* PETERSON, W (ed). 5 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CLAUDIAN (1993), *De Raptu Proserpinae*. GRUZELIER, C. (ed. and trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CLAUDIAN (1969), *De Raptu Proserpinae*. HALL, J. B. (ed). Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 11. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

DANTE (1966/1967), *La* Commedia *secondo l'antica vulgata*. 4 vols. G. PETROCCHI, G. (ed.). Milan: Mondadori.

Homeric Hymn to Demeter. NAGY, G. (trans) https://uh.edu'~cldue/texts/demeter.html

Homeric Hymn to Demeter (1994), H. FOLEY (ed) Princeton: Princeton University Press.

OVID (2004), *Metamorphoses*. R. J. TARRANT (ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ovide Moralisé (1920), C. DE BOER (ed). Verhandelingen der köninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen New Series 21. Amsterdam: Johannes Müller.

Secondary Sources

BALDO, G. (1999), « Enna: un paesaggio del mito tra storia e religio (Cicerone, *Verr*. 2, 4, 105–115) », in AVEZZÙ, G. and PIANEZZOLA, E. (eds), *Sicilia e Magna Grecia: Spazio reale e spazio immaginario nella letteratura greca e latina*, Padua: Imprimitur, p. 17-57.

BARCHIESI, A. (2017), « Colonial Readings in Virgilian Geopoetics: The Trojans at Buthrotum », in RIMELL, V. and ASPER, M. (eds), *Imagining Empire*, Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag Winter, p. 151-65.

BAROLINI, T. (2014), « *Purgatorio* 1: The Sapphire Sea ». *Commento*

Baroliniano, Digital Dante. New York: Columbia University Libraries.

BAROLINI, T. (1984/2014), *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the* Comedy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

BROWN, Jr., E. (1971), « Proserpina, Matelda, and the Pilgrim ». *Dante Studies*, 89, p. 33-48.

CARRAI, S. (2007), « Matelda, Proserpina e Flora (per *Purgatorio* XXVIII) ». *L'Alighieri : Rassegna dantesca* 48, 30, p. 49-64.

CHANCE, J. (1994), *Medieval Mythography*, vol. 1. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

CHARLET, J.-L. (ed) (1999), *Le Rapt de Proserpine*. Paris : Les Belles Lettres.

CIAVORELLA, G. (2011), « *Purgatorio* XXVIII: Matelda », *Critica Letteraria*, 39 CL.1, p. 3-37.

GRAZIANI, F. (2015), « La confabulation poétique de Boccace », *Polymnia*, 1, p. 194-211.

GRAZIANI, F. (2018), « *La république du genre humain* : l'ethnologie mythographique de Boccace », in GRAZIANI, F. and ZUCKER, A. (éds), *Mythographie de l'étranger*, Paris : Garnier, p. 71-95.

HALL, J. B., (ed) (1969), *Claudian, De Raptu Proserpinae*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

HAWKINS, P. S. (1991), « Watching Matelda », in JACOFF, R. and SCHNAPP, J. T. (eds), *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante's* Commedia, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 181-201.

HAYS, G. (2014), « The Mythographic Tradition after Ovid », in MILLER, J. F. and NEWLANDS, C. E. (eds), *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, Chichester: Wiley & Sons, p. 129-43.

HINDS, S. E. (1987), *The Metamorphosis of Persephone: Ovid and the Self-Conscious Muse*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

HINDS, S. E. (2016), « Return to Enna: Ovid and Ovidianism in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae* », in FULKERSON, L. and STOVER, T. (eds), *Repeat Performances: Ovidian Repetition and the Metamorphoses*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 249-278.

LE GOFF, J. (1991), *La naissance du Purgatoire*. Paris : Gallimard.

LEVENSTEIN, J. (2008), « Resurrecting Ovid's Pierides: Dante's

Invocation to Calliope in 'Purgatorio' 1.7-2 », *Dante Studies*, 126, p. 1-19.

MERCURI (2009), « Ovidio e Dante: le *Metamorfosi* come ipotesto della *Commedia* », *Dante: Rivista internazionale di studi su Dante Alighieri*, 6, p. 21-37.

POSSAMAÏ, M. (2006), *L'Ovide moralisé : Essai d'interprétation.* Paris : Champion.

RIMELL, V. and ASPER, M. (eds) (2017), *Imagining Empire*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

ROMANO, D. (1980), « Cicerone e il ratto di Proserpina ». *Ciceroniana*, 4, p. 191-201.

SALMERI, G. (2011), « The Emblematic Province: Sicily from the Roman Empire to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies », in FIBIGER, P. BANG and BAYLY, C. A. (eds), *Tributary Empires in Global History*, Cambridge imperial and post-colonial studies series, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 151-168.

SPENCE, S. (2023), *The Return of Proserpina: Cultural Poetics of Sicily from Cicero to Dante*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

VAN PETEGHEM, J. (2018), « The Vernacular Roots of Dante's Reading of Ovid in the *Commedia* », *Italian Studies*, 73, p. 223-39.

VASALY, A. (1993), *Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

WORMAN, N. (2015), *Landscape and the Spaces of Metaphor in Ancient Literary Theory and Criticism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.