Margot. K. LOUIS. Persephone rises, 1860-1927. Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality

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REFERENCES

M. K. Louis’s book-length study of the myth of Persephone in Victorian and early Modernist literature is devoted to writers’ reinterpretations of this complex Greek figure using contemporary historicist “mythic criticism” “seek[ing] to see how myth operates, within its cultural context” [...] how a mythical allusion or pattern of mythical echoes within a literary text operates within that text’s cultural context’ (xi).

Why did the multi-faceted figure of Persephone return in English-speaking cultures? Or rather, when? At a literary history level, it appears that Romanticism played an important role as well as J.J. Bachofen’s Das Mutterrecht (1861) laying emphasis on matriarchal organization of societies, not to mention the discovery of the “Leyden manuscript” of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter in 1777 in Russia. More fundamentally, the reemergence of the myth can be understood as a manifestation of what M. Gauchet terms the autonomization of Western societies which, in this case, was translated as a fascination with deep and hidden forces within the individual psyche and cultures giving rise to the symbol of a life-giving and appalling underworld. As a corollary, the undermining of the religious faith led to new questions and approaches to death and resurrection, while, at the same time and as another result of the autonomization process, the alteration in the position of women led to fresh views on marriage, rape, and mother-daughter relationships. As M. Louis writes, “the myth of Persephone provides the ideal nexus for these movements; by studying the tale as it is explored, celebrated, and recreated in literature, we can understand how these developments are connected” (x). The return of the Persephone figure is thus to be located both within the (relative) decline of Christianity and within a “shift in sensibility” which made the human condition appear incompatible with the concept of an omnipotent and benevolent god. One answer was fin de siècle pessimism, the other was indebted to the rediscovery of fertility cults across the globe by late nineteenth-century anthropologists and led to the contemplation of primitive ritual in order to regenerate Westerners’ shaken faith in life. It is in this context that other female perspectives on gender appeared, making use of the figure of Persephone to voice modern questions.

The book begins by an outline of two general mythographic trends in the nineteenth century, namely the increasing respect for ancient Greek paganism as an expression of spirituality combined with a diminishing consideration for the Olympian gods of the Homeric mythology, and the consequent rise of Persephone as a chthonic goddess. Chapter 1 goes back along the historical road and provides an exploration of the classical and English heritage of texts concerning Persephone. M. Louis provides short readings of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Claudian’s De raptu Proserpinae before highlighting some allusions in Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton which show how
the myth was perceived as a prophetic affirmation of the Christian doctrine, a sardonic illumination of the relationship between sexes and as a vehicle for gender concerns. When Persephone re-emerged in Romantic literature, it was as an avatar of the Romantic self, losing and regaining the original closeness to Mother Earth as is shown in M. Shelley’s verse play Proserpine (1820, pub. 1832). Within two decades, she had become a formidable embodiment of the maturing mind of humanity, in M. Fuller’s “conversations” on mythology.

Chapter 2 is devoted to examining how J.J. Bachofen and J. F. Mc Lennan’s theory of the “marriage by capture” (Mc Lennan Primitive Marriage, 1865) offered new ways to see Persephone’s story, as marriage began to be seen as a violent institution, creating a bond between men and women at the expense of the mother-daughter relationship. Poems by Jean Ingelow (“Persephone” 1862) and Dora Greenwell (“The Garden of Proserpine” 1869; “Demeter and Cora” 1876) translate this approach into a tragedy of sexual initiation affecting the daughter’s growth but they also show how mother and daughter can overcome their alienation. The Mid-Victorians used the myth to articulate sexual and gender anxieties.

In chapter 3, M. Louis examines the development of a rival tradition in Persephonic poetry focusing on the figure of the goddess as the queen of the underworld between 1860 and 1900 in order to answer one fundamental spiritual question: does death offer immortality or oblivion? For poets like Swinburne (Poems and Ballads 1866), W. Pater (“The Myth of Demeter and Persephone” 1876), D. G. Rossetti and the feminist revolutionary and atheist Mathilde Blind (“The New Proserpine” 1895), Persephone became the embodiment of a world deprived of hope and of a meaningless linguistic system. However, Lewis Morris, Meredith, the Canadian Isabella Valancy Crawford (Malcom’s Katie, 1884, an epic poem of love on the frontier) and Tennyson (“Demeter and Persephone” 1887, the last English text to attempt to seek Christian undertones in the myth) employ the same trope to attack this nihilistic vision of life while W. Sharp (“Persephoneia” 1903), A. Stringer, M. Pickthall (“Persephone Returning to Hades” and “The Little Fauns of Proserpine”) expose the terms of the debate without attempting to resolve it. At the turn of the century, R. Bridges (Persephone: A Masque 1904) and E. Wharton (“Pomegranate Seed,” a 1912 verse play and a 1936 short story) turn it into a mother-daughter quarrel centering on Persephone’s hostility towards her mother as she comes to a knowledge of the underworld. Their texts illustrate the new tendency to deal with the myth through philosophically fragmented discourses and structured debates, turning Persephone into an embodiment of the alienation of the modern spirit informed by Schopenhauerian philosophy. Bridges and Wharton also show an attempt to close the gender gap and combine issues raised by the Victorians.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the social and aesthetic value of fertility. Skillfully contrasting Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles and Cather’s My Ántonia M. Louis studies how fertility may be rewarded or punished by modern institutions. Her reading pits Hardy’s celebration and lamenting of fertility to Cather’s powerful affirmation of life as she revises her much admired predecessor. The last chapter is devoted to Persephone’s overwhelming popularity among Modernist writers who see her as a mythological correlative for the alienated psyche. She becomes a “bad girl”, emotionally disturbed, a neurotic, and her ascent is an ascent out of deathliness. The chapter provides insightful readings of W. Carlos Williams’s Kora in Hell (1917–8), D.H. Lawrence’s first and third versions of Lady Chatterley’s Lover calling for a regeneration of society and turning
Persephone into a prisoner of the underworld of industrial capitalist society seeking escape. For D. H. Lawrence, Persephone represents the modern psyche who must be released from her false Hades (her legal spouse) by her true Hades who meets her in the sacred marriage. The female modernist poet Amy Key Clarke (Persephone: A Masque, 1925) showing Demeter going to the underworld to seek her daughter and Katharine Bradley (“Pomegranates” 1911, pub. 1936), dismiss the female victimization brought about by mythology and embrace the vision of an erotic, self-liberating Persephone. The analysis of H.D.’s Her (1927 pub. as HERmione, 1981) and Asphodel (1921–2, rev. 1926–7, pub. 1992), is quite convincing: through sequences of dialogues, debates and quarrels, H. D. attacks female collusion in patriarchy, depicts fertility as a nightmarish world of submission, depression and self-erasure, and the mother-daughter bond as a fetter that Persephone has to break by devising a different connection to women to achieve real freedom. Two Koré’s liberating and self-liberating figures create a new familial structure, and here, the myth is seen both as an exponent of the warped personal relations in Western societies and as a tool to create another society.

It comes as no surprise that the author concludes that each generation responded to the shifting contingencies of its own era and to its predecessors to create a new version of the ambivalent goddess. But those responses exemplify the deep cultural changes in attitudes to the material world, to sexuality, reproduction, to gender and ethics, to family and to spirituality. M. Louis convincingly argues that the ambivalent figure of Persephone enabled writers to question spirituality, deity, society. The thorough bibliography of texts devoted to her is evidence to her prominence in modern literature and this jargon-free study is worthwhile reading and meditating.