Margot K. Louis

Reviewed by Andrew Radford.

Margot Louis rises to her subject. In this compelling and carefully pondered study, which--after her death in 2007--was seen through the press by Lisa Surtridge, she shows how an array of nineteenth and early twentieth century Anglo-American writers re-wove the fabric of ancient origins, narrative applications and scholarly inference that has sustained the Persephone myth. Like Elizabeth T. Hayes’s fine collection of essays (Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature [1994]), Louis provides a pellucid and subtle analysis of what might seem at first “a confusion of warring voices and incompatible impulses, as each writer tries to tug the goddess in one direction or another, making her serve the writer’s own agenda.” (ix) Ample research has already shown how the partially submerged myth of Demeter-Persephone shapes William Carlos Williams’s Kora in Hell into a complex ritual sequence. Anglophone writers as diverse as Toni Morrison, Doris Lessing and Carol Rumens have also mobilized the myth to mark stages and ruptures in the female life cycle. Yet as Louis explains in her elegantly crafted introduction, few commentators have addressed with precision the degree to which the myth infused Victorian poetry; or whether the nineteenth century spawned an artistic cult of Demeter and Persephone that the modernist avant-garde inherited and rigorously recalibrated. “Whether Persephone figures the desire for annihilation, the tragedy of slaughter, the freedom of a new version of womanhood, or the power of regeneration” she is--writes Louis--what the Modernist poet “can and must be.” (110)

To start with, Louis surveys “two general mythographic trends in the nineteenth century”: first, the growing fascination with ancient Greek paganism as a condition of spiritual possibility rather than the pernicious superstition denigrated by earlier Christian commentators; second, an increasing stress on Greek chthonic ritual as a source of multiplied perception or “mystical” insight (xii). Such trends, Louis convincingly contends, throw into sharp relief Persephone, “this forgotten child of the Olympians” (xii). As a repository of occult tropes by which Anglophone writers could relocate themselves culturally, she could even be used ( in H.D.’s case) to restore a forgotten legacy, the myth of “matriarchal origins.” (135) Louis does not try to
explain why the modernist ambition to “make it new” required the imaginative excavation of purported historical and cultural beginnings, gazing far “backward” in time and space for guidance. Instead, what she describes so vividly, especially in the early chapters, is how the story of a youthful goddess in flux, “wandering between two worlds”, from subterranean gloom to springtime revival, resonated forcefully with an anxiously self-questioning coterie of Victorian writers and cultural commentators. “All ages are ages of transition”, Tennyson complained, “but this is an awful moment of transition.” (Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son, II, 701) What unifies the disparate close readings in Louis’s monograph is the strong sense of a divinity that can epitomize transitional or “twilight” states of mind.

In Chapter 1, Louis first scrutinizes the three most significant primary classical sources for the Persephone tale: the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the version of the tale in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and Claudian’s De raptu Proserpinae. In Louis’s account, the Homeric Hymn emerges as the most evocative source for nineteenth-century writers, who find in this version of the story an especially acute rendering of maternal deprivation and grief as well as of the search for retributive justice. This chapter also gauges the emergence of the goddess in Romantic literature as “an avatar of the Romantic self” (xii): something hardly recognized by scholars such as Guy Davenport, who thought neither the eighteenth nor the early nineteenth century saw anything worth salvaging in her story. Romantic explorations of Persephone, such as Mary Shelley’s closet play Proserpine (1832), chart her growth from a callow child to an embodiment of the “maturing mind of humanity” (xii). As Louis reveals, Mary Shelley and the women writers she influenced revelled in Persephone’s darkly inscrutable presence. While historians, theologians and philosophers all extracted intellectual sustenance from the goddess, none could assert the myth as sign or symbol of any single intellectual pursuit. Louis’s sense of the deity’s indeterminacy nicely harmonizes with Luce Irigaray’s seminal construction of the “Kore-Persephone” who “escapes perspective. Her depth, in all its dimensions, never offers itself up to the gaze, whatever the point of view may be. She passes beyond all boundaries.” (Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 115)

Rolling through centuries of literature, Persephone gathered plenty of moss. As shown by the best-known allusions to Persephone in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, the myriad versions of the myth and the perplexity attending the names of
Kore, Demeter, and Persephone endowed the goddess with a dizzying array of associations. Her riddling ambiguity – is she a tragic victim of unprovoked male violence or a venturesome self only partially captured by patriarchy? – served poets such as A. C. Swinburne and Lewis Morris well as they amplified one or another facet of the narrative. Walter Pater, canvassing the intricate mechanisms at work in the genesis and evolution of ancient myth, affirmed that the creative procedures underpinning Demeter-Persephone disclosed a community’s halting endeavours to comprehend, express and enshrine its own most searing impressions. Indeed, as D. H. Lawrence would proclaim in novels such as Kangaroo (1923) and The Plumed Serpent (1926), a myth survives – however modified – only insofar as it can delineate the cultural values required for its continued existence.

In sharp contrast to Josephine Donovan’s After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow (1989), and Christine Downing’s essay collection The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Demeter Myth for Our Time (1994), this book indicates how the study of Persephone was enriched by the nascent sciences of humankind such as archaeology as well as by the emerging discipline of comparative religion. According to Louis’s second chapter, J.J. Bachofen’s theory of primitive matriarchy and John McLennan’s concept of “marriage by capture” as the foundation of patriarchal marriage adumbrated a new way of construing Persephone’s story: it cryptically exposes matrimony as a fundamentally punitive institution that fashions a bond between man and wife “at the expense of an original bond between mother and daughter.” (47) Poems by Jean Ingelow and Dora Greenwell in the 1860s and 1870s trace the embittering and tragic implications of such a development. Here Louis aims not so much to identify the exact textual sources used by these poets as to show how they deploy allusions to Demeter and Persephone as recognisable and exemplary images in fin-de-siècle Britain.

In Louis’s delicately nuanced close reading of Ingelow’s poetry, we see how this unjustly neglected writer crafted a perception that the more frequently-anthologised interpretations by Swinburne, Meredith and D. G. Rossetti fail to distil. In Ingelow’s hands, the myth becomes a searching, sardonic critique of the mid-Victorian gender politics that perpetuate the secondary cultural and social status of women. Yet knowing how Victorian male writers deploy timeless archetypes that tend to naturalize gender oppression, Louis clearly perceives what a classical myth can be made to suggest about the status of Victorian women. Because of the deity’s
wordless – albeit only seasonal – enslavement to her spouse, Ingelow’s Persephone may also appeal, as Louis implies, to male fantasies of power, patronage and privilege.

Such fantasies, according to Louis’s third chapter, imbue a rival tradition in Persephone poetry from the 1860s to the end of the century. Various contemplation, the goddess in her “darkest aspects” as queen of the underworld rather than as victim of marital abduction, Swinburne and George Meredith broach fundamental questions about the nature of mortality and the tentative hope of an afterlife in an age of seismic political ferment and spiritual unease. Thus Louis expertly sets her close analyses within the context of pessimism as a cultural phenomenon dominating avant-garde thought during the 1890s.

In chapter four Louis shifts the focus from theological and philosophical dilemmas to pressing social and aesthetic concerns. As “early Modernist novelists” (xiii), Thomas Hardy and Willa Cather manipulate the mythic material so as to reinvent their own milieu and to negotiate – often with fierce panache – the proliferating meanings of regionalism, gender, history, caste, and narrative form. Each of them chronicles how “fertility” is tainted, enriched or regulated by financial, political and marital institutions. That Hardy adroitly weaves the Persephone myth into the imaginative fabric of Tess of the d’Urbervilles is by no means a new discovery. More than twenty-five years ago, G. Glen Wickens set out with intellectual verve Hardy’s detailed alertness to the ancient narrative as well as his abiding interest in late-Victorian ethnographers such as E. B. Tylor and Andrew Lang (“Hardy and the Aesthetic Mythographers,” University of Toronto Quarterly 53.1 [1983]: 85-106). But Louis sheds light on Hardy’s enigmatic ambivalence toward female fecundity and on the final imprint of a pessimistic worldview that also resonates through Swinburne’s Proserpine lyrics.

On Cather Louis sparkles. With remarkable flair, she shows that My Antonia is haunted by--and ruthlessly reappraises--core motifs from Hardy’s most famous novel. Though Cather reads Tess as both a novel and a “performed drama” (xiii), she does not share her admired predecessor’s intractable sense of deprivation: My Antonia ends rather with a bracing celebration of fecundity and the sensuous immediacy of felt experience, an ebullient note that many of Hardy’s Edwardian acolytes – such as the novelist of regional Shropshire Mary Webb – persistently ignore. Louis also demonstrates how men react to the fallen woman in Tess and My Antonia. In
construing the eponymous protagonist of Tess through the distorting lens of a touristic and trivializing dilettantism, the scholar-gypsy Angel Clare shows that what Persephone personifies for art, ritual, and mystical experience has been irrevocably lost. As Louis notes, the ways in which the men apotheosize, repudiate and return to the heroines underscores the grievous limitations and “self-deceptions of the mythopoeic imagination itself.” (xiii)

Chapter five chronicles Persephone’s overwhelming popularity among poets and novelists from the first three decades of the twentieth century. A Persephone figure trapped in the chthonic realm of a capitalist society seeks – and in D.H. Lawrence’s oeuvre finds – a partial release from this imprisoning milieu. In pursuing the “dark gods” Lawrence tries to overhaul stagnant conventions prioritized by the life of unflagging domestic duty, and to refresh them with potencies drawn from a primordial and dateless past. His treatments of Persephone, we are hearteningly reminded, include The Lost Girl (1920), a novel that many major studies of his corpus have passed over in faintly embarrassed silence. The Lost Girl supplies myriad iterations of the underworld and of Persephone’s exacting journey into that subterranean site as well as sundry accounts of Persephone’s responses to those separate odysseys. To some extent, Lawrence’s stringently revisionist treatment of the goddess reveals his wonder at the sheer resilience and bewitching fascination of this ancient narrative.

Lawrence and H.D are juxtaposed not only to each other another but also to late-nineteenth century archaeologists and especially to Jane Ellen Harrison, whose anthropological approach to the classification of early Greek art and religion both shaped – and became transmuted by – Victorian literature. For H.D., Harrison turned an ancient and (to some) recondite Hellenic heritage into an urgent and modern experience that might irradiate personal and cultural imperatives. Like Lawrence and nearly all the other writers treated in this chapter, H.D. was influenced by Harrison’s theories that a component of “make-believe” links all religious and artistic intuitions, and that by means of physical enactment the ceremonial achieves a shift from individual appetite to communal need. H.D.’s keen awareness of the Persephone myth in her poems, Louis shows, was not capricious or unique; rather it revelled in the contemporary interest generated not only by the immense third edition of J. G. Frazer’s Golden Bough, but also by publications specifically on Greek religion and drama fashioned by the Cambridge Ritualists. Likewise well aware of this
“Cambridge School,” Lawrence first mentions it in 1913. For Lawrence, Louis contends, the Persephone myth embodies a merger of mother, daughter, and the earth’s overflowing ripeness that cannot be obliterated by the narrative of cruel and predatory male control placed over it.

Louis fails to explain, however, that Lawrence’s distinctive treatment of the myth is meant as a robust riposte to Hardy’s *Tess*, whose heroine never transcends the traumatic consequences of her ‘underworld’ experience. Lawrence faults Hardy’s novel because after the night of her rape/seduction [see http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hardy/heffernan.html] Tess cannot rise from the ashes of her ravaged reputation. A similar fate awaits the Persephone figure Mrs Forrester in Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady* (1923), who dies foiled by a society that demonizes her spirited insouciance. Lawrence was determined that his retelling of Persephone’s plight in *The Lost Girl* and in his 1920s poems would not duplicate the anguished pattern of *Tess*, in which Hardy tailors the mythic material to stress the ruthless abridgement of women’s control over their own words, bodies, and destinies.

Like Lawrence’s *The Lost Girl*, H. D.’s duology *Her* and *Asphodel* throws a great kick at misery by dramatizing “a return to feeling and physicality.” (128) Symbolised by Persephone’s resurrection, her mysteries and myth are thereby infused with a redeeming spiritual largesse that undercuts dour Christian precept as well as the cheerless uniformity of English provincial living. H.D. thus unearths originary moments of female empowerment in order to envisage contemporary cultural change. In H.D.’s questing heroines, Louis suggests, we find a self-liberating Kore, while Demeter’s domain of Eleusinian profusion is “a nightmare world” of negation, self-erasure and existential emptiness (130).

Overall, Louis’s book illuminates how feminist appropriations of the Persephone myth restlessly redefine the “New Woman” as a priestess with occult access to a wellspring of animistic vigour. In her conclusion Louis poses a key question for fellow scholars of literary modernism to ponder: does H.D.’s apparently “radical” Persephone figure, who is impatient of constraint and conversant with the primordial mysteries of the lush physical universe, merely repackage one of the most humourless and hidebound conceptions of woman as “womb”, “body” and “Nature” (133)? Yisrael Levin’s scrupulously arranged appendix details the sheer abundance of Victorian and modernist works which employ the Persephone motif; and to this list could be added more recent re-imaginings such as Robert Kelly’s *The Book of*

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