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Mary Shelley's *Proserpine*: A Daughter Writer's Revision

Kimiyo Shima

Many of the Classical literature have put gender conflict at the core of the plot and allowed their female characters to challenge male authority and the cultural assumptions attached to it. Amongst these texts, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* occupies the illustrative position. The myth (and also Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) are, however, male-generated which would therefore reflect male experiences and insights about the nature of society and inevitably lack a female perspective. In spite of author's sex, the myth of Demeter (Ceres) and Persephone (Proserpine)¹ has not only been studied by classicists but the text has proved itself to be a significant embodiment that is of interest to many modern theoretical perspectives particularly in relation to gender, and the myth also survives as the source for such literary productions as Mary Shelley's *Proserpine* (1820), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1972) or Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), and Adrienne Rich's *Dividing into the Wreck* (1973).² Author's discernment that the myth's subtitle could well have been "How to be a Mother Goddess in a Patriarchal Society" (Arthur 216) has captured the central feminist polemics which try to find ways for women to attain self-definition and identity in a male-centred cosmos.

Mary Shelley's *Proserpine* is of great interest to us, because her mythological drama provides us with a female perspective integrated into its narrative structure. This paper will analyse

the way in which Mary Shelley, a female writer producing her literary works in the early nineteenth century, attached an emphatic vision on what we may call 'ethic of care'³ and made noticeable alteration from Homer's or Ovid's versions of the story. Our analysis will then try to show in what way Shelley's *Proserpine* demonstrates its revisionist responses to the previous male tradition.

(1) Literary Inheritance for Mary Shelley

The problem of women's self-esteem and identity owing to cultural devaluation of their principle has incited a vigorous discourse in psychological and sociological disciplines in the 1970s,⁴ which in effect had great sway with the literary criticism. Chodorow identified a problem for daughters in a Western middle-class family in developing self-esteem. Given the value implications of the dichotomy between mother's regression, passivity, dependence, and lack of orientation to reality, and father's progression, activity, independence, and reality orientation, daughter's personal identification with a mother whose own self-esteem is low makes it harder for the daughter to cultivate self-esteem (Chodorow 263-4). On one level women's plight may well be represented in the struggle that Ceres and Proserpine undergo, and Shelley's rewriting of the myth is not wholly unrelated with her abiding interest for women's development of identity, and with 'anxiety' she may have felt about her literary inheritance not just from male dominated literary tradition, but also from her personal relations with her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and with her husband, Percy Shelley. Mary Shelley's relation with her mother Wollstonecraft was woven through reading her mother's works, as Gilbert and Gubar befittingly call these books, 'her surrogate parents, pages and

words standing in for flesh and blood' (*Madwoman*, 223). Therefore, it would make a special case for Mary Shelley in that Wollstonecraft's influence over her was unexceptionally bounteous and her conscious writing on women's position in society is more than likely to have increased Shelley's awareness of the problem of a female subject in a patriarchal society.

In their insightful essay, 'Forward into the Past,' Gilbert and Gubar, using Freud's account of female psychosexual development and Bloom's notion of 'anxiety of influence,' argued that while a woman writer in the twentieth century oscillates between her patrilineage and her matrilineage of literary tradition, principle option available to the 'daughter writers' in the early nineteenth century – inheriting a male-dominated literary tradition only – was to make a desirous interaction with that tradition. Included in this grouping together with Maria Edgeworth and Charlott Brontë is Mary Shelley, and she is said to have had no 'past' regarding the female genealogy.

It is true that Mary Shelley may not have had a long history of female tradition preceding her writings, with which she could 'affiliate,' and that the anxiety of influence by literary matrilineage was barely viable, but at the same time we will see from the textual evidence that she was not exactly trapped in or imbued with the tradition that only allowed the masculine perspective. I have argued elsewhere that Mary Shelley's employment of Miltonic allegories in *Frankenstein* transformed its signification of gender representation. While 'Eve' in the Western literary productions has often been interlaced with both sin and female sex, Mary Shelley's equating Eve with the masculine aggression in the novel should be read as her radical attempt to subvert Eve's identification with femininity. The same structure is observed in Proserpine. Just as Victor's

sexual penetration into the metaphysical realm of nature represents his status as sinned, for he 'ate the apple' (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 183), Pluto's rape of Proserpine causes death not only of the maiden, but also of plants and living creature on earth. As Gubar points out, '*Proserpine* is a female version of *Paradise Lost* in which the original gold-ripe garden is lost not through any female sin, but because of the interference of a man' (304), and we may say that the myth of Proserpine is the archetype of the symbolic inversion, for it unsettles the crucial polemics of the sinned.

Seeing that the classical tradition was considered in Mary Shelley's age and place as the exclusive heritage of upper-class male (Richardson 127), we are made to believe that her re-writing of the myth was itself her rebellious effort to partake in that project as a woman writer. Firstly, her choice of this particular myth (she has also rewrote a myth called 'Midas') should have a special implication: the myth is about male tyranny, both that of Pluto and of Jove, but it is also about Proserpine's relation to the community of women, especially to her mother, Ceres. Pluto's abducting Proserpine, therefore, may be called a rite of passage: the girl passed from her mother's hands to her husband's, remaining passive during this operation. In *The Hymn to Demeter*, Proserpine's function as an exchange-object is being stressed. Jove's 'giving' (Homer 2) of Proserpine in the absence of Ceres signifies his authority over his daughter. If the controlled exchange of women that defines human culture is reproduced in the patriarchal ideology (Mitchell 413), it is of no bewilderment that the myth remained of interest throughout later Western art and literature. The myth does not simply tell the story of the rape of maiden contrived by patriarchal authority, but of a separation from and a reunion with her mother. Mary Shelley's verse drama,

primarily based on Ovid's version, laments male intervention in a female pastoral paradise (Foley 153) throughout which women's symbiotic community is celebrated with Ceres's fertility and devotion to her child at the heart.

(2) Mary Shelley's *Proserpine*

Koszul remarks in the introduction attached to his edition of *Proserpine and Midas* that Mary Shelley's 'intellectual effort' is 'fairly close adaptations of the Latin poet's well-known tales' (Koszul xxviii). This remark reverberates some critics' view that sees Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the 'passive receptor of male ideas'⁵ or 'monstrous cultural patchwork' (Langbauer 186). On the contrary, her 'revisionist' (Richardson 136) responses to Ovid and to the tradition he represents are observed in many aspects of her drama.

The fundamental alteration from the earlier versions is its narrative form: her dialogic narrative between female characters is the basis of her verse drama, while both *The Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid's poem was told in a third person narrative. Even poems supplied by Percy Shelley is told by a character in her story. Proserpine's attachment to her mother, Ceres, is effectively conveyed to us by quoting one of Percy Shelley's poem in her drama: Proserpine sings the poem while gathering her flowers, 'Sacred Goddess, Mother Earth, / Thou from whose immortal bosom / Gods, and men and beasts have birth, / Leaf, and blade, and bud, and blossom, / Breathe thine influence most divine / On thine own child Proserpine' (Shelley 18). Dialogic exchanges between Proserpine and the nymphs, Ino and Eunoe, attending upon her before the abduction is unexceptionally long. More than 230 lines are spared for their wondering the fields and their exchanges that emphasise their symbiotic relationship, while in *The Hymn to Demeter* the rape

takes place just after 15 lines of the scenery description without these nymphs attending. Although Proserpine in Ovid's version has company, or 'comrades,' when gathering flowers, this scene does not take up more than 13 lines. Proserpine's dear friends are merely mentioned in passing;

[Here Proserpine]

Was playing in a glade and picking flowers,
Pansies and lilies, with a child's delight,
Filling her basket and her lap to gather
More than the other girls, when, in a trice,
Dis saw her, loved her, carried her away--
Love leapt in such a hurry! (Ovid 111)

Ovid's Proserpine and her relations with these girls are elusive and not much dwelt on.

Mary Shelley presumably expanded from the above text using her imagination. Romantic paradise of carefree joy in Shelley's version is portrayed in Ino's enjoyment of the meadow.

How lovely is this plain!--Nor Grecian vale,
Nor bright Ausonia's ilex bearing shores,
The myrtle bowers of Aphrodite's sweet isle,
Or Naxos burthened with the luscious vine,
Can boast such fertile or such verdant fields
As these, which young Spring sprinkles with her
stars; — (Shelley 16-7)

Shelley has Proserpine and the nymphs tell tales to each other, and gather flowers to make a 'blooming wreath' (16) for Ceres. As Richardson points out, Shelley depicts Proserpine as a thoughtful, empathetic adolescent, and not as an unreflective child, wilfully straying after flowers as in Ovid's portrayal (Richardson 126). The empathetic disposition of women is again stressed, when nymphs realise the loss of Proserpine in

the meadow. Ino's fear and despair are shown in their effort to search and her fear she announces: 'Why does my heart misgive? & scalding tears, / That should but mourn, now prophecy her loss? / Oh, Proserpine! Where'er your luckless fate / Has hurried you, . . . / Yet Ino still will follow! Look where Eunoe / Comes, with down cast eyes and faltering steps, / I fear the worst; – (Shelley 22). Ovid was not as keen as Shelley in portraying comrades' psychology or the feelings. While Shelley focuses her attention on the nymphs' fear and anxiety of loss when the abduction took place, Ovid's gaze is set on Proserpine herself portraying her 'torn dress' and falling flowers (Ovid 111), an eroticised description of a maiden.

What Proserpine screams out of such terror carries a specific meaning: Unlike *The Homeric Hymn* in which Proserpine 'call[s] on her father' (3), Mary Shelley follows Ovid's version in emphasising the mother-daughter tie, and this is manifest in Proserpine's call for her mother rather than for her father, and the scene is told by Arethuse in retrospect, which reinforces the dynamics of the daughter's relationality with both mother and Arethuse who represents the female community. Female sexual initiation, as Gubar argues, involves a terrifying separation from the female community (305). Arethuse reports to Ceres that;

I saw the King of Hell in his black car,
 And in his arms bore your fairest child, . . .
 And [she] cried, "My Mother!" – When she saw me near
 She would have spring from his detested arms,
 And with a tone of deepest grief, she cried,
 "Oh, Arethuse!" . . . (Shelley 30-31)

Proserpine's call for her mother and such forced rupture of their bond makes the scene more tragic, whereas in the Hymn, Proserpine's call for her father, who is the source of her

difficulties, sounds merely 'pathetic' (Foley 35). Social implication of patriarchal marriage through which the bride mediates, as a gift, between father and husband, here, is transformed into bride's psychological reality that mediates between mother and husband.

The scene of rape is itself full of sexual connotation. Meadows in antiquity were often a scene of abduction or molestation of women, and are still often associated with sexuality and fertility. Meadows are symbolic of a site inviolable and forbidden, like the sexual organ of a women or girl (Bonney 410). Therefore, the splitting of meadow is already a synecdoche of the rape of female nature; [Pluto] . . . Struck furiously the green earth with his spear, / Which yawned, — and down the deep Tartarian gulph (Shelley 31) Pluto being the King of the Underworld, the 'gulf' that opens to the realm of the dead is the direct pathway from pastoral paradise to death. Shelley accentuates the phallic cast in the scene, while Ovid's depiction renders a fairly objective scene: . . . Urging on his [Pluto's] steeds, . . . The smitten earth opened a way to Hell And down the deep abyss the chariot plunged (Ovid 112).

Another of Percy's poem used in the drama is a tale of Arethuse told by Ino, and it functions effectively as a premonitory subplot of Proserpine's rape. There is a very close parallel between the rape of Proserpine and that of Arethuse.

Then Alpheus bold,
 On his glacier cold,
 With his trident the mountains strook;
 And opened a chasm
 In the rocks;
 And earthquake and thunder
 Did rend in sunder
 The bars of the springs below: — (Shelley 11)

As such, there is again a phallic cast in the way Alpheus's trident strikes the rocks making a cleavage, and also in the way earthquake and thunder rend the bars in sunder. In this song written by Percy Shelley, Arethuse is pursued by the river god Alpheus: Arethuse fleeing like a sunny beam (12), and Alpheus rushing behind like 'an eagle pursuing' (13). Percy Shelley's poem leaves out the subsequent rape, and Arethuse's 'heterosexual alliance' (Smith (a) 21) with Alpheus is displayed at the end, but their 'marriage' implied in the later part of the drama resonates with Proserpine's rape that follows. This passing over the scene brings them closer, for Proserpine's rape is not in fact told until much later by Arethuse. Shelley procrastinates, as in the Hymn, the depiction of the rape itself, which effect is anticipated fear on the part of the reader, the technique often observed in Gothic novels; the 'grotesque submission' to Pluto is to a degree more effectively conveyed by 'silence' than eloquent description.

While Arethuse in *Metamorphoses* merely takes on the role of reporting the incident to Ceres, Shelley grants her and other nymphs the solidarity that forms a feminine alliance, in the hope of recovering Proserpine. They follow Ceres to the cave in eager expectation to see a long lost friend. Proserpine's reunion with the mother and her companions excites her, but when the purity of the 'fairest child of heaven' is questioned by Iris, Jove's messenger, Proserpine cannot escape from her 'stain' (36): she ate pomegranate's seeds. This fruit's double association with sexuality and death, deriving from its multiple seeds and its blood-red color (Foley 57) is worth nothing. Here, Proserpine, having been raped by the King of Hell is no longer a virgin who represents purity and heavenliness. The consequence is thus the fall and the sinned status.

The partial redemption is however realised. Ino says she

would 'leave the light and go with [Proserpine], and Arethuse says she would also 'sink down with [her]' (39) rather than to lose her, and they 'cling round Proserpine' to protect from the Shades of Hell. However amongst the most powerful and devoting is the figure of Ceres, who threatens the masculine authority with her power to withhold fertility and life. Ceres, first, withdraws fertility from the land in anger of her loss of her daughter. Ceres in *The Homeric Hymn* is also given such power, but the threat is placed in her indirect speech: Never, she said, would she mount up to fragrant / Olympus nor release the seed from the earth, / until she saw with her eyes her own fair-faced child (18). On the other hand, Shelley has Ceres speak out directly with her own voice: "Is there no help, great Jove? If she [Proserpine] depart / I will descend with her — the Earth shall lose / Its proud fertility, and Erebus / Shall bear my gifts throughout th'unchanging year" (38). Not only does Shelley grants a direct speech to Ceres, but has her pursue the definitive threat of depriving fertility, while Ceres in the Hymn only in a euphemistic manner jeopardises the life and fertility. Here, the power of a nurturing maternal figure, 'Queen of fertile Earth,' succeeds in muting the power of death. Although the 'fate' of Proserpine is 'sealed by Jove' (41), Ceres and the others are finally able to recover Proserpine. Half the year, Proserpine will stay with her mother and her companions, and the rest she will spend in Hell: Six months with thee [Ceres], / Each moment freighted with an age of love: / And the six short months in saddest Tartarus / Shall pass in dreams of swift returning joy' (42). Here, only the tie between the mother and daughter can flowers be made to spring: Oh, fairest child! sweet summer visitor! / . . . Nor seed of grass, / Or corn shall grow, thou absent from the earth; / But all shall lie beneath in hateful night / Until at thy return, thy fresh

green springs, / The fields are covered o'er with summer plants (43).

Throughout Shelley's drama, the dialogic narrative which Richardson has called the 'discursive exchange' (126) produced a positive effect on the underlying theme of women's relationality, their alliance against authoritative powers. Such symbiotic closeness amongst female community of Ceres and Proserpine has provided modern psychologists and sociologists with an illuminating model / archetype in analysing female identity.

(3) Mary Shelley and 'Ethic of Care'

For later Freudians, often referred to as 'object relations theorists' (including Chodorow) the acquisition of male identity requires separation from the mother at the phallic stage, whereas the acquisition of mature female selfhood requires a continued identity with the mother, and such theory still remains viable for a search of the psychology of mother-daughter relations. Some feminists today such as Carol Gilligan have found the myth of compelling interest, for Gilligan's concern over maturity depended much upon this positive acknowledgement of the daughter's identification with her mother. Freud's depreciation of female's psychosexual development, Gilligan explains, was founded on his 'trying to fit women into his masculine conception, seeing them as envying that which they missed' (6). Female identity formation, she argues, takes place in a context of ongoing socio-cultural relationship since 'mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with themselves,' and women do not define themselves in terms of the denial of preoedipal relational modes. Hence women's maturations are reached through their relational based experience with the mother, and are

realised within interdependent relations as opposed to separation. It is not a mere coincidence that Gilligan pointed out that one of the best known myths most often referred to in relation to the theme of 'care', 'nurturing roles,' or 'interdependence' is this myth of *Proserpine*.

Mary Shelley not only used the dominant motif of this myth to produce a play, but made substantial alteration from the previous versions in a way that emphasises such 'ethic of care.' Proserpine's making a wreath for Ceres, nymphs' desperately searching for Proserpine when lost, Arethuse's reporting to Ceres about Proserpine's whereabouts, and the anxiety and care which is felt by Ceres, Arethuse, and the nymphs all suggest the importance of 'caring' and of 'being cared.' Her play has been characterised as having two contrasting principles. Gubar, for instance, thinks that 'feminine' qualities, including emotional responsiveness, physical spontaneity and instinctual selflessness in Shelley's version are being valued over 'masculine' rationality, competition and control. Mary Shelley's revisionist response to the earlier literary tradition is observed on two levels. First, her emphasis on the relationality both in the narrative structure and in the plot has revealed her critical stance toward dominant ideology that takes it for granted that masculine principle excels the other. Just as the modern social theory such as Gilligan's have allowed us to see the gender difference developed through experience, and to make the positive evaluation of feminine traits that Western culture had long devalued, Mary Shelley in the early nineteenth century presented the crucial aspects of gender that is inexplicably bound up with women's identity formation.

Second, the myth tries to subvert the masculine idealisation of nature. Ceres, as we have discussed, is the representation of nature, and her daughter being the object of male pursuit is

easily perceived as involving both sexual and aggressive approach toward nature. Nature has come to function as a key social code that symbolises the object of male pursuit, gaze and exchange. Shelley's emphasis is put not on nature's "submission to male force" but rather on its power to fight against such masculine aggression. Ceres's threat together with Arethuse's support in Shelley's play has a subversive element. The play mocks masculine idealisation of female nature as easily dominated, and destroys it first by emphasising the forceful power of nature, and second by setting the viewpoint on female characters as opposed to the author.

The era in which Mary Shelley lived held an ideology that denied the maternal power,⁶ for what public sphere represented surpassed domesticity and its principles. What is the meaning of Mary Shelley's effort in rewriting the myth of Proserpine? Her choice of the myth that deals with the patriarchal authority and its matriarchal counterpart reflects her own intellectual attitude that confronts the male-dominated literary tradition itself. Her attempt to locate her own identity is found in the drama. Shelley's desire to mute the literary tradition written from the male perspective is projected onto the story that Ceres's power to mute masculine influence over the daughter. The significance of her identification with the 'mother's values' is manifest in Shelley's willingness to accept the value of feminine relationality and interdependence that lacks masculine aspect of separation not as a failure to identify with the father's values but as a legitimate process of maturity. The long held ideological thought that perceived the relationship between dependence and maturity as incompatible is here denied. Mary Shelley's choice of myth and rewriting it from women's point of view reverses the male gaze from inside out. A daughter

writer's negotiation with the 'male literary tradition' above all has proved to go beyond what many critics had presupposed, and from her journal, we see her *compassion* for others superseding the *passion* for participating in the public concerns of 'reforming the world' (Journal 553). Mary Shelley claims that if she has 'ever befriended women when oppressed,' she has 'with [her] ready sympathy & too eager heart, . . . defended & supported victims to the social system' (Journal 557). The question of whether such attitude is a reflection of what Smith calls 'the ideology of dependent femininity' (Smith (b) 274) remains yet to be seen.

Notes

- 1 In this paper, I shall follow the Roman tradition and use Ceres and Proserpine in referring to their names.
- 2 See Gubar's "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Woman Writers and an Ancient Myth." for further discussion on this.
- 3 In her book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Carol Gilligan introduced the notion of 'ethic of care' that regards women's caring or cared experience as different from men's, whereby credited domestic interdependence on its own terms.
- 4 See Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychology of Gender*. Berkley and Los Angeles, 1978, and Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Penguin Books, 1974, for further discussions.
- 5 Harold Bloom, in his introduction to Chelsea House *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, suggests that what makes Frankenstein an important book . . . is that it contains one of the most vivid versions we have of the Romantic mythology of the self' referring to the works of Blake, Percy Shelley and Byron. According to him, the novel affords a unique introduction to the archetypal world of the Romantics (4).
- 6 In her elaborate work, *Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant gives an account of the ways in which Nature was associated with female sex, and how its image of the nurturing Earth / Mother popular in the Renaissance was

gradually superseded by the new controlling imagery of scientific technology in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

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