

CALLIOPE'S SONG: THE RAPE OF PROSERPINA

"My song is of Ceres, first to furrow the soil with the
 ploughshare,
 first to give corn to the earth and nourishing food to
 mankind,
 first to give laws; all things are the gift of bountiful Ceres.
 She is my theme. I pray that my song may prove to be
 worthy
 of this great goddess. Surely the goddess is worthy of song. 345
 "The enormous island of Sicily lies heaped high on the
 limbs
 of the giant Typhon,* who dared to aspire to a throne in
 the heavens.
 Often the monster strains and struggles to rise from his
 prison;
 but Cape Pelórus, closest to Italy, weighs on his right
 hand, 350
 Pachýnus his left, while his legs are crushed beneath
 Lilybaëum.
 Etna presses on Typhon's head; laid out on his back,
 he belches lava and vomits flame from the angry volcano.
 Often he fights to shift the earth which is forcing him down
 and to roll the cities and massive mountains away from his
 body. 355
 The earth then goes into tremor and even the king of the
 shades
 is afraid that the crust of the earth will crack and a chasm
 be opened
 to let in the daylight and frighten the quivering spirits
 below.
 It was fear of such a disaster that prompted the monarch of
 Hades*
 to rise from his gloomy realm. In his chariot drawn by black
 horses 360

he toured round Sicily, carefully inspecting the island's foundations.
 Once he'd assured himself that nothing was giving way and his fears were dispelled, he was sighted wandering hither and yon by Venus enthroned on her mountain of Eryx. Fondly embracing her winged son, Cupid, she said to him: 'You, dear child, are my weapons, my hands and the source of my power. Now take your invincible shafts and shoot those swift-flying arrows to pierce the heart of the god whom fortune allotted the final share in the world's three kingdoms.*
 You can subdue the gods of the sky and even Jove; it is you who vanquish the sea-gods, including their sovereign Neptune.
 Why should the underworld lag behind? And why not extend the empire of Venus and Cupid? A third of the world is at stake.
 As it is, we are losing respect in heaven because we have been too soft. Your power and prestige are diminished along with my own.
 You can see that Minerva and also the goddess of hunting, Diana, have firmly rejected me. So will the virgin daughter of Ceres, if we allow it to happen; her hopes are the same as the others'.
 Now, in the name of the power we share, if you take any pride in it, make that goddess her uncle's wife!*' So Venus commanded.
 Cupid opened his quiver. Next, at his mother's bidding,

he chose from his thousand arrows a single one, but the sharpest and surest he had, the shaft which responded best to his bow. Then resting his pliant weapon against his knee, he bent it, shot the barbed reed and wounded dusky Dis in the heart.
 "Not far from the walls of Sicilian Henna you'll come to a deep lake, Pergus by name. It is haunted by swans; you won't hear more of them singing along the gliding streams of the river Caÿster. The water is wreathed all round by a garland of forest, where foliage offers an awning against the burning rays of the sun; the branches provide a delightful coolness; the well-watered soil is a flowery carpet of Tyrian purple; and spring is eternal. One day, Prosérpina, Ceres' daughter, was there in the woodland, happily plucking bunches of violets or pure white lilies, filling the folds of her dress or her basket in girlish excitement, vying to pick more flowers than her friends – when Pluto espied her, no sooner espied than he loved her and swept her away, so impatient is passion. In panic, Proserpina desperately cried for her mother and friends, more often her mother. Her dress had been torn at the top, and all the flowers she had picked fell out of her loosened tunic, which only served to increase her distress, poor innocent girl!
 Her abductor was off in his chariot, urging the horses forward, each by his name, and shaking the rust-dyed reins of their long-maned

necks. They galloped across deep lakes and the pools of
 Palíca,
 reeking with sulphur and boiling up through a crack in
 the earth,
 405 to Sýracuse, where the BÁCchiadae* from the isthmus
 of Corinth
 had built a new city between two harbours, the great
 and the smaller.

“Syracuse boasts two springs, Arethúsa and Cýane,
 either

side of a bay that is almost enclosed by narrow
 promontories.

410 This was the place where Cyane lived, most famous of
 all
 the Sicilian nymphs, who also gave her name to the
 fountain.

She rose from the midst of her pool as far as her waist
 and recognized
 whom the god was abducting. ‘Halt where you are!’
 she cried.

‘You cannot take Ceres’ daughter without her mother’s
 permission.

415 You ought to have asked for her hand, not stolen her. I
 was loved,

if I may compare the small to the great, by the river
 Anápis;

but I was won not by terror like her but by prayer and
 entreaties.’

So speaking, Cyane stretched her arms to the right and
 the left

and barred the way forward. Containing his anger no
 longer, Pluto

420 roared at his fearsome steeds, then brandished his
 royal sceptre

with all the strength of his arm and hurled it into the
 depths

of the pool. As it struck the bottom, it opened a tunnel
 to Hades.

“Cyane, deeply distressed by the goddess’ abduction
 and also

the trespass against her spring, felt inconsolably hurt.

She brooded in silence and wasted away in her tears to

nothing,

dissolving into the water she’d lately ruled as its guardian
 spirit. Her limbs grew sodden, her bones started to bend,
 her nails let go of their firmness. First to melt were her

slightest

features: the dark green hair, the fingers, the legs and the
 feet –

it doesn’t take long for the slenderer members to change
 into waves

of chilly liquid. The next to go were her shoulders and
 back,

her sides and her breasts, as they vanished away into
 insubstantial

rivulets. Nothing solid remained, when lastly the lifeblood
 coursing her weakened veins was taken over by water.

“Meanwhile Proserpina’s mother anxiously searched for
 her daughter

over the world, by land and by ocean, but all to no purpose.

Neither the dewy dawn nor the evening star ever found
 her

at rest. She lit two torches of pine in Etna’s volcano
 and bore them in either hand to illumine her sleepless way
 through the darkness of frosty night. When the stars were

dimmed by the kindly

day, she continued the quest for her child from west to east.

Tired by her journey, she wanted to drink and hadn’t yet
 moistened

her lips at a spring, when she happened to notice a
 straw-roofed cottage

and knocked on its humble door. Out came an old woman,
 who looked

at the goddess and, when she had asked for some water,
 provided a sweet brew

sprinkled with toasted barley. As Ceres drank what she
 450 gave her,
 an insolent, coarse-looking boy strolled up in front of
 the goddess,
 burst into laughter and jeered, 'What a greedy female
 you are!'
 Deeply insulted, she rapidly threw what was left of her
 drink
 in the prattling idiot's face and drenched him in barley
 mixture.
 His soaking cheeks were instantly covered in spots,
 455 and his arms
 were transformed into legs. As his body changed, it
 acquired a tail
 and shrank to a tiny size which made it comparatively
 harmless,
 shorter in length than the smallest lizard. Bewildered
 and weeping,
 the poor old woman attempted to catch this
 extraordinary thing,
 but it scampered away into hiding. The name that we
 460 give it derives
 from the patterning found on its skin: we call it the
 star-speckled newt.
 "Listing the lands and the seas where the goddess
 went on her travels
 would take too long. No countries were left for her to
 explore.
 At last she returned to Sicily; there, in the course of her
 wanderings,
 she came to Cyane's pool. If the nymph had not been
 transformed,
 465 she'd have told the whole story. But much as she
 wanted to tell it,
 her lips and her tongue were gone and she had no
 means of expression.
 Evidence, though, could be pointed out. Proserpina's
 girdle,

well known to her mother, had accidentally dropped into
 Cyane's
 sacred pool and still lay floating on top of the water. 470
 Once she recognized this, as if the truth of her daughter's
 abduction had dawned on the goddess at last, she wildly
 tore
 at her unkempt hair and beat on her breasts again and
 again.
 She still did not know where Proserpina was, but she cursed
 every region
 on earth as ungrateful and ill deserving her gift of the
 crops – 475
 Sicily most of all, where she'd finally found the traces
 of what she had lost. And so she savagely wrecked the
 ploughs
 that furrowed the soil in Sicily's fields. Her bitterness drove
 her
 to slaughter the cattle and farmers alike. She instructed the
 fields
 to default on the dues that they owed, and blighted the
 fruits of the earth. 480
 Sicily's worldwide fame as a fertile country was ruined
 and given the lie: as the first shoots sprang from the earth,
 they would perish
 at once, destroyed by the scorching sunshine or torrents of
 rain;
 stars and the winds had a baleful influence; birds would
 greedily
 gobble the seed as it fell on the soil; while the harvest of
 wheat
 was choked by the thistles and tares and the indestructible 485
 twitch grass.
 "Then the nymph whom the river Alphéüs had loved,
 Arethusa,
 raised her head from her waters and, brushing her
 streaming locks
 away from her forehead, she said: 'Earth mother, you've
 searched for your maiden

daughter throughout the world. Abandon the endless
 490 struggle
 and calm your anger against the land which has served
 you so faithfully.
 Sicily's free from blame; she wasn't happy to witness
 your child's abduction. It's not for my native country
 I'm pleading
 as I am a foreigner here; I was born at Pisa in Elis.
 495 But Sicily is the land that I cherish above all others,
 the land that I look on as home. Kind goddess, have
 mercy and save it!
 The story of why I left Elis and crossed such a large
 expanse
 of ocean to Syracuse here, I shall tell in a timelier
 hour,*
 when you are relieved of your troubles and able to
 smile again.
 500 This much must suffice for now: the earth opened up
 to afford me
 a way and I was conveyed underneath its bottommost
 caverns,
 until my head rose and I saw the stars I had missed for
 so long.
 Then, while I was gliding under the earth in the flood
 of the Styx,
 I chanced to set eyes down there on your own lost
 505 daughter, Proserpina.
 Sad she appeared, to be sure, and the fear still showed
 on her face;
 but yet she's the queen, the most powerful lady in all
 the underworld,
 consort supreme to the sovereign lord of the regions
 infernal!
 "Hearing these words, Proserpina's mother was
 long dumbfounded,
 as though she were stone or struck by thunder; but
 510 when the force

of her shock was dispelled by the strength of her grief, she
 drove her chariot
 straight to the realms of the sky. With a countenance
 clouded with fury,
 her hair let loose, exuding malice, she stood before Jupiter,
 telling him firmly: 'I've come to plead for my flesh and
 blood,
 great Jupiter, mine and your own. If her mother merits no
 favours,
 at least be moved as a father; and don't think any the less
 515 of your child, I beg you, because she was brought into being
 by me.
 Now look, the daughter I searched for so long at last has
 been found,
 if finding means more certainly losing or merely
 discovering
 where she is. I'm willing to bear her abduction, so long as
 520 he gives her back. A bandit husband is hardly a match
 for a daughter of yours, if she is no longer a daughter of
 mine.'
 "Jupiter answered: 'Your child remains a pledge of our
 bond
 and a charge that I share with you. But please use words
 which accord
 with the facts of the case. Lord Pluto hasn't committed a
 crime
 525 but an act of love. No need for us to feel shame at the
 marriage,
 if only you will accept it, Ceres. Setting aside
 all other advantages, Pluto is Jupiter's brother, no less!
 And what of the rest? He and I were allotted different
 kingdoms,*
 but otherwise we are equals. Still, if you're so concerned
 to see them divorced, Proserpina shall be restored to the
 heavens –
 530 on one condition: no morsel of food must have touched her
 lips

while she stayed in Hades. These are the terms decreed
by the three Fates.'

'"Jupiter made his point, but Ceres was still
determined

to have Proserpina back. The Fates, alas, were
against it.

The girl had already broken her fast. While taking an
innocent

535 stroll in the orchard, she'd plucked a crimson fruit
from a hanging
bough; then peeling off the yellowish rind, she had
picked out
seven pomegranate seeds and crunched them between
her teeth.

No one at all observed her eating, except for one,
Ascálahus, son of Orphne, a well-known nymph in
Avérnus

540 (she's said to have borne him in hell's dark woods to
her lover Ácheron*).

Seeing, he turned informer and cruelly prevented
Proserpina's

homeward return. The queen of Érebus* wailed in
distress

and transformed the tell-tale witness into a bird of ill
omen.

Sprinkling his hateful face with a handful of
Phlégethon* water,

she turned it into a beak with feathers and great round
eyes.

545 Removed from his former self, he was mantled in
tawny wings.

His body grew into his head and his nails into long
hooked talons.

Scarcely ruffling the plumage which lay on his
motionless arms,

he was changed to an odious bird, the prophet of
doom and sorrow,

the indolent screech-owl, a dreadful portent to all
mankind.

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"Ascalaphus surely deserved the reward that he won for
his tattling.

But strange to tell, Achelóüs' daughters, the Sirens,* were
given

the feet and feathers of birds, though they kept the faces of
girls.

How so? Perhaps these maidens, renowned for their
prowess in singing,

were there with Proserpina while she was picking her
springtime flowers.

555

After they'd searched in vain for their mistress throughout
the world,

in order to show the sea how deeply they felt their
bereavement,

they prayed for the power to cross the waves on wings for
their oars.

The gods were kind, and the suppliants suddenly found that
their limbs

were covered with golden plumage. But lest their
beguilingly soothing

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singing should die and so much musical talent be wasted,
the Sirens retained their maiden faces and human voices.

"Jupiter settled the conflict between his brother and
grieving

sister by splitting the rolling year into equal parts:
Proserpina now, as the only divinity common to both
realms,

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spends six months* on the earth with her mother and six
with her husband.

Once she returns, her heart is so light and her face is so
happy.

A moment ago, she'd have struck even Pluto as sad, but
now

she is glowing with radiant smiles, like the sun which
570 was formerly hidden
behind a blanket of rain clouds and then emerges
victorious.