

Ovid *Metamorphoses* 5.341-661 Proserpina episode

Ceres was the first to turn the glebe with the hooked plowshare; she first gave corn and kindly sustenance to the world; she first gave laws. All things are the gift of Ceres; she must be the subject of my song. Would that I could worthily sing of her; surely the goddess is worthy of my song.

“The huge island of Sicily had been heaped upon the body of the giant, and with its vast weight was resting on Typhoeus, who had dared to aspire to the heights of heaven. He struggles indeed, and strives often to rise again; but his right hand is held down by Ausonian Pelorus and his left by you, Pachynus. Lilybaeum rests on his legs, and Aetna’s weight is on his head. Flung on his back beneath this mountain, the fierce Typhoeus spouts forth ashes and vomits flames from his mouth. Often he puts forth all his strength to push off the weight of earth and to roll the cities and great mountains from his body: then the earth quakes, and even the king of the silent land is afraid lest the crust of the earth split open in wide seams and lest the light of day be let in and affright the trembling shades. Fearing this disaster, the king of the lower world had left his gloomy realm and, drawn in his chariot with its sable steeds, was traversing the land of Sicily, carefully examining its foundations. After he had examined all to his satisfaction, and found that no points were giving way, he put aside his fears. Then Venus Erycina saw him wandering to and fro, as she was seated on her sacred mountain, and embracing her winged son, she exclaimed: “O son, both arms and hands to me, and source of all my power, take now those shafts, Cupid, with which you conquer all, and shoot your swift arrows into the heart of that god to whom the final lot of the triple kingdom fell. You rule the gods, and Jove himself; you conquer and control the deities of the sea, and the very king that rules the deities of the sea. Why does Tartarus hold back? Why do you not extend your mother’s empire and your own? The third part of the world is at stake. And yet in heaven, such is our long-suffering, we are despised, and with my own, the power of love is weakening. Do you not see that Pallas and huntress Diana have revolted against me? And Ceres’ daughter, too, will remain a virgin if we suffer it; for she aspires to be like them. But do you, in behalf of our joint sovereignty, if you take any pride in that, join the goddess to her uncle in the bonds of love.” So Venus spoke. The god of love loosed his quiver at his mother’s bidding and selected from his thousand arrows one, the sharpest and the surest and the most obedient to the bow. Then he bent the pliant bow across his knee and with his barbed arrow smote Dis through the heart.

“Not far from Henna’s walls there is a deep pool of water, Pergus by name. Not Caÿster on its gliding waters hears more songs of swans than does this pool. A wood crowns the heights around its waters on every side, and with its foliage as with an awning keeps off the sun’s hot rays. The branches afford a pleasing coolness, and the well-watered ground bears bright-coloured flowers. There spring is everlasting. Within this grove Proserpina was playing, and gathering violets or white lilies. And while with girlish eagerness she was filling her basket and her bosom, and striving to surpass her mates in gathering, almost in one act did Pluto see and love and carry her away: so precipitate was his love. The terrified girl called plaintively on her mother and her companions, but more often upon her mother. And since she had torn her garment at its upper edge, the flowers which she had gathered fell out of her loosened tunic; and such was the innocence of her girlish years, the loss of her flowers even at such a time aroused new grief. Her captor sped his chariot and urged on his horses, calling each by name, and shaking the dark-dyed reins on their necks and manes. Through deep lakes he galloped, through the pools of the Palici, reeking with sulphur and boiling up from a crevice of the earth, and where the Bacchiadae, a race sprung from Corinth between two seas, had built a city between two harbours of unequal size.

“There is between Cyane and Pisaeon Arethusa a bay of the sea, its waters confined by narrowing points of land. Here was Cyane, the most famous of the Sicilian nymphs, from whose name the pool itself was called. She stood forth from the midst of her pool as far as her waist, and recognizing the goddess cried to Dis: “No further shall you go! Thou canst not be the son-in-law of Ceres against her will. The maiden should have been wooed, not ravished. But, if it is proper for me to compare small things with great, I also have been wooed, by Anapis, and I wedded him, too, yielding to prayer, however, not to fear, like this maiden.” She spoke and, stretching her arms on either side, blocked his way. No longer could the son of Saturn hold his wrath, and urging on his terrible steeds, he whirled his royal sceptre with strong right arm and smote the pool to its bottom. The smitten earth opened up a road to Tartarus and received the down-plunging chariot in her cavernous depths.

“But Cyane, grieving for the rape of the goddess and for her fountain’s rights thus set at naught, nursed an incurable wound in her silent heart, and dissolved all away in tears; and into those very waters was she melted whose great divinity she had been but now. You might see her limbs softening, her bones becoming flexible, her nails losing their hardness. And first of all melt the slenderest parts: her dark hair, her fingers, legs and feet; for it is no great change from slender limbs to cool water. Next after these, her shoulders, back and sides and breasts vanish into thin watery streams. And finally, in place of living blood, clear water flows through her weakened veins and nothing is left that you can touch.

“Meanwhile all in vain the affrighted mother seeks her daughter in every land, on every deep. Not Aurora, rising with dewy tresses, not Hesperus sees her pausing in the search. She kindles two pine torches in the fires of Aetna, and wanders without rest through the frosty shades of night; again, when the genial day had dimmed the stars, she was still seeking her daughter from the setting to the rising of the sun. Faint with toil and athirst, she had moistened her lips in no fountain, when she chanced to see a hut thatched with straw, and knocked at its lowly door. Then out came an old woman and beheld the goddess, and when she asked for water gave her a sweet drink with parched barley floating upon it. While she drank, a coarse, saucy boy stood watching her, and mocked her and called her greedy. She was offended, and threw what she had not yet drunk, with the barley grains, full in his face. Straightway his face was spotted, his arms were changed to legs, and a tail was added to his transformed limbs; he shrank to tiny size, that he might have no great power to harm, and became in form a lizard, though yet smaller in size. The old woman wondered and wept, and reached out to touch the marvellous thing, but he fled from her and sought a hiding-place. He has a name¹ suited to his offence, since his body is starred with bright-coloured spots.

“Over what lands and what seas the goddess wandered it would take long to tell. When there was no more a place to search in, she came back to Sicily, and in the course of her wanderings here she came to Cyane. If the nymph had not been changed to water, she would have told her all. But, though she wished to tell, she had neither lips nor tongue, nor aught wherewith to speak. But still she gave clear evidence, and showed on the surface of her pool what the mother knew well, Persephone’s girdle, which had chanced to fall upon the sacred waters. As soon as she knew this, just as if she had then for the first time learned that her daughter had been stolen, the goddess tore her unkempt locks and smote her breast again and again with her hands. She did not know as yet where her child was; still she reproached all lands, calling them ungrateful and unworthy of the gift of corn; but Sicily above all other lands, where she had found traces of her loss. So there with angry hand she broke in pieces the plows that turn the glebe, and in her rage she gave to destruction farmers and cattle alike, and bade the plowed fields to betray their trust, and blighted the seed. The fertility of this

land, famous throughout the world, lay false to its good name: the crops died in early blade, now too much heat, now too much rain destroying them. Stars and winds were baleful, and greedy birds ate up the seed as soon as it was sown; tares and thorns and stubborn grasses choked the wheat.

“Then did Arethusa, Alpheus’ daughter, lift her head from her Elean pool and, brushing her dripping locks back from her brows, thus addressed the goddess: “O thou mother of the maiden sought through all the earth, thou mother of fruits, cease now thy boundless toils and do not be so grievously wroth with the land which has been true to thee. The land is innocent; against its will it opened to the robbery. It is not for my own country that I pray, for I came a stranger hither. Pisa is my native land, and from Elis have I sprung; I dwell in Sicily a foreigner. But I love this country more than all; this is now my home, here is my dwelling-place. And now, I pray thee, save it, O most merciful. Why I moved from my place and why I came to Sicily, through such wastes of sea, a fitting time will come to tell thee, when thou shalt be free from care and of a more cheerful countenance. The solid earth opened a way before me, and passing through the lowest depths, I here lifted my head again and beheld the stars that had grown unfamiliar. Therefore, while I was gliding beneath the earth in my Stygian stream, I saw Proserpina there with these very eyes. She seemed sad indeed, and her face was still perturbed with fear; but yet she was a queen, the great queen of that world of darkness, the mighty consort of the tyrant of the underworld.” The mother upon hearing these words stood as if turned to stone, and was for a long time like one bereft of reason. But when her overwhelming frenzy had given way to overwhelming pain, she set forth in her chariot to the realms of heaven. There, with clouded countenance, with dishevelled hair, and full of indignation, she appeared before Jove and said: “I have come, O Jupiter, as suppliant in behalf of my child and your own. If you have no regard for the mother, at least let the daughter touch her father’s heart. And let not your care for her be less because I am her mother. See, my daughter, sought so long, has at last been found, if you call it finding more certainly to lose her, or if you call it finding merely to know where she is. That she has been stolen, I will bear, if only he will bring her back; for your daughter does not deserve to have a robber for a husband—if now she is not mine.” And Jove replied: “She is, indeed, our daughter, yours and mine, our common pledge and care. But if only we are willing to give right names to things, this is no harm that has been done, but only love. Nor will he shame us for a son-in-law—do you but consent, goddess. Though all else be lacking, how great a thing it is to be Jove’s brother! But what that other things are not lacking, and that he does not yield place to me—save only by the lot? But if you so greatly desire to separate them, Proserpina shall return to heaven, but on one condition only: if in the lower-world no food has as yet touched her lips. For so have the fates decreed.”

“He spoke; but Ceres was resolved to have her daughter back. Not so the fates; for the girl had already broken her fast, and while, simple child that she was, she wandered in the trim gardens, she had plucked a purple pomegranate hanging from a bending bough, and peeling off the yellowish rind, she had eaten seven of the seeds. The only one who saw the act was Ascalaphus, whom Orphne, not the least famous of the Avernian nymphs, is said to have borne to her own Acheron within the dark groves of the lower-world. The boy saw, and by his cruel tattling thwarted the girl’s return to earth. Then was the queen of Erebus enraged, and changed the informer into an ill-omened bird; throwing in his face a handful of water from the Phlegethon, she gave him a beak and feathers and big eyes. Robbed of, himself, he is now clothed in yellow wings; he grows into a head and long, hooked claws; but he scarce moves the feathers that sprout all over his sluggish arms. He has become a loathsome bird, prophet of woe, the slothful screech-owl, a bird of evil omen to men.

“He indeed can seem to have merited his punishment because of his tattling tongue. But, daughters of Acheloüs, why have you the feathers and feet of birds, though you still have maidens’ features? Is it because, when Proserpina was gathering the spring flowers, you were among the number of her companions, ye Sirens, skilled in song? After you had sought in vain for her through all the lands, that the sea also might know your search, you prayed that you might float on beating wings above the waves: you found the gods ready, and suddenly you saw your limbs covered with golden plumage. But, that you might not lose your tuneful voices, so soothing to the ear, and that rich dower of song, maiden features and human voice remained.

“But now Jove, holding the balance between his brother and his grieving sister, divides the revolving year into two equal parts. Now the goddess, the common divinity of two realms, spends half the months with her mother and with her husband, half. Straightway the bearing of her heart and face is changed. For she who but lately even to Dis seemed sad, now wears a joyful countenance; like the sun which, long concealed behind dark and misty clouds, disperses the clouds and reveals his face.

“Now kindly Ceres, happy in the recovery of her daughter, asks of you, Arethusa, why you fled, why you are now a sacred spring. The waters fall silent while their goddess lifts her head from her deep spring, and dries her green locks with her hands, and tells the old story of the Elean river’s love. “I used to be one of the nymphs,” she says, “who have their dwelling in Achaia, and no other was more eager in scouring the glades, or in setting the hunting-nets. But although I never sought the fame of beauty, although I was brave, I had the name of beautiful. Nor did my beauty, all too often praised, give me any joy; and my dower of charming form, in which other maids rejoice, made me blush like a country girl, and I deemed it wrong to please. Wearied with the chase, I was returning, I remember, from the Stymphalian wood; the heat was great and my toil had made it double. I came upon a stream flowing without eddy, and without sound, crystal-clear to the bottom, in whose depths you might count every pebble, waters which you would scarcely think to be moving. Silvery willows and poplars fed by the water gave natural shade to the soft-sloping banks. I came to the water’s edge and first dipped my feet, then in I went up to the knees: not satisfied with this, I removed my robes, and hanging the soft garments on a drooping willow, naked I plunged into the waters. And while I beat them, drawing them and gliding in a thousand turns and tossing my arms, I thought I heard a kind of murmur deep in the pool. In terror I leaped on the nearer bank. Then Alpheus called from his waters: ‘Whither in haste, Arethusa? Whither in such haste?’ Twice in his hoarse voice he called to me. As I was, without my robes, I fled; for my robes were on the other bank. So much the more he pressed on and burned with love; naked I seemed readier for his taking. So did I flee and so did he hotly press after me, as doves on fluttering pinions flee the hawk, as the hawk pursues the frightened doves. Even past Orchomenus, past Psophis and Cyllene, past the combs of Maenalus, chill Erymanthus and Elis, I kept my flight; nor was he swifter of foot than I. But I, being ill-matched in strength, could not long keep up my speed, while he could sustain a long pursuit. Yet through level plains, over mountains covered with trees, over rocks also and cliffs, and where there was no way at all, I ran. The sun was at my back. I saw my pursuer’s long shadow stretching out ahead of me—unless it was fear that saw it—but surely I heard the terrifying sound of feet, and his deep-panting breath fanned my hair. Then, for spent with the toil of flight, I cried aloud: ‘O help me or I am caught, help thy armour-bearer, goddess of the hunt, to whom so often thou hast given thy bow to bear and thy quiver, with all its arrows!’ The goddess heard, and threw an impenetrable cloud of mist about me. The river-god circled around me, wrapped in the darkness, and at fault quested about the hollow mist.

And twice he went round the place where the goddess had hidden me, unknowing, and twice he called, 'Arethusa! O Arethusa!' How did I feel then, poor wretch! Was I not as the lamb, when it hears the wolves howling around the fold? or the hare which, hiding in the brambles, sees the dogs' deadly muzzles and dares not make the slightest motion? But he went not far away, for he saw no traces of my feet further on; he watched the cloud and the place. Cold sweat poured down my beleaguered limbs and the dark drops rained down from my whole body.

Wherever I put my foot a pool trickled out, and from my hair fell the drops; and sooner than I can now tell the tale I was changed to a stream of water. But sure enough he recognized in the waters the maid he loved; and laying aside the form of a man which he had assumed, he changed back to his own watery shape to mingle with me. My Delian goddess cleft the earth, and I, plunging down into the dark depths, was borne hither to Ortygia, which I love because it bears my goddess' name, and this first received me to the upper air."

"With this, Arethusa's tale was done. Then the goddess of fertility yoked her two dragons to her car, curbing their mouths with the bit, and rode away through the air midway between heaven and earth, until she came at last to Pallas' city. Here she gave her fleet car to Triptolemus, and bade him scatter the seeds of grain she gave, part in the untilled earth and part in fields that had long lain fallow. And now high over Europe and the land of Asia the youth held his course and came to Scythia, where Lyncus ruled as king. He entered the royal palace. The king asked him how he came and why, what was his name and country: he said: "My country is far-famed Athens; Triptolemus, my name. I came neither by ship over the sea, nor on foot by land; the air opened a path for me. I bring the gifts of Ceres, which, if you sprinkle them over your wide fields, will give a fruitful harvest and food not wild." The barbaric king heard with envy. And, that he himself might be the giver of so great a boon, he received his guest with hospitality, and when he was heavy with sleep, he attacked him with the sword. Him, in the very act of piercing the stranger's breast, Ceres transformed into a lynx; and back through the air she bade the Athenian drive her sacred team."