Persephone and Demeter

A new dramatisation in seven scenes from Ovid and the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*

Adapted and directed by Patrick Boyd

Semi-staged performances in Latin and Greek with music, images and surtitles

St John’s College (Divinity School Theatre)

Wednesday 18 and Thursday 19 February 2015
7.30 pm
Special thanks are due to the following, without whose support the production could never have taken place:

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Erica Bexley, John Kerrigan, Michael Silk, Oliver Thomas, Dorothy Thompson, Tim Whitmarsh and Ioannis Ziogas contributed the rich and helpful essays in this programme, dealing with the three texts, the myth, and aspects of its ‘afterlife’.

Gillian Jondorf composed the surtitles, helped by Mary Emerson.

Sam Motherwell contributed all the original drawings and took over the final editing and tweaking of the Powerpoint Presentation.

James and Liz Willetts will be creating a DVD of the performance.

Laura Keating organised the reservation of seats by email and Tom Parry-Jones took over the final stage of getting people safely to their seats.

Gemma Leavens and her team made us feel very comfortable in using this venue for the fourth time.

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The incidental music is taken from early 19thC arrangements of Scottish Folk Songs for two violins. The pieces were researched and prepared for performance by Konrad Wagstyl.
The Epic Lay known as the Homeric Hymn to Demeter

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter – ‘Homeric’ in general style rather than authorship – is generally dated within 650-550 BCE. Scholars conjecture that it would have been performed at Eleusis, where the main action is set. In this period Eleusis underwent its first major expansion, including a large initiation-hall, and the beginning of an athletics festival. Such gatherings gave itinerant bards a ready-made audience, and hymns of this sort were preludes to epic story-telling which might well have lasted into the small hours.

Other hymns about the rape of Persephone existed, giving more local colour, but our hymnist decided to tell the story differently – with the Sun-god and Hecate helping Demeter – perhaps to communicate the story better to Eleusis’ newly international set of worshippers.

Nevertheless, one of the aims of the Hymn is to provide aetiologies or just-so stories, explaining the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Thesmophoria ritual, by referring their details back to Demeter herself. She sits silently, veiled on a fleece – like an initiate undergoing preliminary purification. She refuses wine and orders instead a strange potion, later drunk by initiates. She is ridiculed, as were participants in both Mysteries and Thesmophoria. She nurses Demophon in the fire – a preview both of the Thesmophoria’s celebration of nursing, and of the so-called ‘child from the hearth’ who went to the Mysteries at the state’s expense. Demeter orders the building of her sanctuary and the hymnist ends with the blessings of initiation. The Hymn, in other words, explained far more to its original audience than why winter comes every year.

Centuries later, the Hymn to Demeter stood second in a collection of similar hymns, and exercised a moderate influence – notably on Callimachus, Ovid and Claudian. The collection tiptoed precariously through the Byzantine empire, but the Hymn to Demeter never made it to the Renaissance. A single 15th-century copy lay hidden in an Orthodox monastery, before travelling with its owner to Moscow in 1690. There, a local purloined half the manuscript and sold it in 1777 to a German scholar. And so, like Persephone and her initiates, the Hymn returned from the darkness into a blaze of attention.

Oliver Thomas

The Persephone Romance

According to the Homeric Hymn, among the maidens who accompanied Persephone to the shore were Leucippe, Callirhoe and Melite. These are not particularly common Greek names, so the chances of them turning up again by chance are slim. As it happens, however, Callirhoe is the eponymous heroine of the first of the Greek romances, by Chariton of Aphrodisias (first century AD). Leucippe is the heroine of the third, by Achilles Tatius (second century AD); in the course of the story she comes up against a rival called Melite. Why were these earliest European novelists fixated on the Homeric Hymn to Demeter?
The Persephone story is in many ways a romance. It is about an intense yearning born of separation from the object of desire. The pain of unfulfilled desire leads Demeter to the neglect of duty, indeed to the abrogation of her very identity: for without her stewardship of the agricultural soil, Demeter was nothing. (Some Greeks etymologised her name as Gēs mētēr, ‘the mother of Earth’.) The difference of course is that Demeter is a parent not a lover, and her affection is familial rather than erotic.

The romance plot has a distinctive shape. At its heart is the idea of a symmetrical, or near-symmetrical, duality. At the start, a close bond is established between the two protagonists. That bond is then compromised, as the lovers are wrenched apart by circumstance. They surmount obstacles, travel long distances in search of each other, and face down oppressive rivals. At the conclusion, however, they are reunited, and normal order is established. Even so, the end of the romance plot is not simply about a return to the same: it inevitably narrates psychological transformation born of the questing experience.

The story of Demeter and Persephone focuses primarily on Demeter. It is she who articulates the anxiety of separation, she whose divine identity is imperilled by the emotional turbulence she experiences, she who must face down Hades, the deathly rapist who has taken the object of her desire from her. At the end of the story the cosmic balance is restored, as she is reunited with her beloved daughter. The goddess recovers her role as agricultural goddess. But the relationship has also changed irrevocably. Persephone is no longer hers alone; she must share her with Hades. The daughter has been transfigured into a metaphor for plantation: she must spend part of the year under the soil, like the seed, and part of it above, like the crop.

Like all romances, the Persephone story is fundamentally a psychological parable. What is distinctive about it – indeed unparalleled in antiquity – is its focus on the psychology of maternal rather than erotic love. The changes wrought upon Demeter relate not (as in later romance) to her own passage from youthful passion to self-possessed adulthood; rather they have to do with a parent’s coming to terms with the maturation of her own child. What Demeter must accept is that her child is no longer hers alone; and even (though the implicit condoning of his rape jars horribly with modern sexual ethics) that Hades has a role in her life.

There is nothing else in early Greek poetry quite like the Homeric Hymn to Demeter: no other text that deals with the challenges of motherhood (or even parenthood) with such raw energy, or that makes the absent child the object of complex psychological cathexis. It was perhaps inevitable that later writers would translate this challenging, discomfiting but brilliant story into the tamer, more normative register of fulfilled heterosexual romance. In the names they chose for their heroines, however, those founders of the European novelistic tradition recorded their debts to this extraordinary, powerful proto-romance between a mother and her child.

Tim Whitmarsh
Ovid gives two extensive versions of the myth of Persephone: one in the epic *Metamorphoses* and the other in the elegiac *Fasti*. These versions are in constant dialogue with each other and critics point out that taking into account the different genres (epic vs elegy) is key to interpreting Ovid’s tales of the rape of Persephone.

The *Fasti* is an elegiac calendar with each book corresponding to a Roman month (the work is unfinished and stops after Book 6, June). Its main model is the *Aetia* of the Alexandrian poet Callimachus and thus it is concerned with aetiology, i.e., with explaining the origins of religious cults and customs, the names of places and landmarks, and the causes of natural phenomena.

Given that time plays a crucial role in the structure and content of the *Fasti*, the myth of Ceres and Persephone, which offers an aetiology of the cycle of the seasons, is closely related to the broader program of Ovid’s elegiac calendar. The myth of Persephone comprises the main part of April 12 (*Fasti* 4.393-620), which examines the origins of the Games of Ceres. The reason for the Games is obvious, says Ovid: Ceres was the first to introduce men to a better diet. The cultivation of the earth civilised primitive men, by replacing acorns with more nourishing food. Ovid’s aetiological narrative travels through the centuries, from agricultural origins to Roman festivals, linking Greek myth with Roman culture.

After explaining that a sow must be sacrificed to Ceres, Ovid announces that he must talk about the rape of a virgin. The transition may seem abrupt but, as we learn later, sows muddied Persephone’s footprints and thus were reason for the mother losing her daughter. The wandering Ceres sinks into a deep sorrow and Ovid aptly enriches the goddess’s grief through elegy’s traditional associations with lament.

Ceres travels around the world in search of her daughter. The goddess’s travelogue gives Ovid the opportunity to display his learning in geography and his poetic skill by fitting into his verse a catalogue of proper names. At the same time, Ceres’ passing by Cyane is a nod to the reader that the poet refrains from revisiting a topic he dealt with in the *Metamorphoses*. By contrast, the tale of Triptolemus, mentioned briefly in the *Metamorphoses*, is told extensively in the *Fasti*.

Our tale has a happy ending. When Jupiter promises that Persephone will spend six months each year in the upper world, Ceres recovers her spirits and the earth produces a copious harvest. Like the cycle of the seasons, the narrative comes full circle: Ovid returns to the festival of Ceres, which all should attend in white clothes, a colour that symbolizes the end of Ceres’ mourning.
Ioannis Ziogas
Persephone and Demeter in Ovid (B): *Metamorphoses* V

The story of Ceres and Proserpina that Ovid tells in his *Metamorphoses* is complex and multi-layered. It forms an internal narrative sung by one of the Muses to the goddess Minerva while the two are conversing on Mt Helicon. Calliope’s song, in turn, features other speakers: Venus, Ceres, Jupiter, and the two water nymphs, Cyane and Arethusa, whose fates reflect Proserpina’s. All of these stories blend into one another in seemingly infinite regress, making the tale a tour de force of Ovid’s poetic skill. (In our dramatization, alas, the complex ‘layering’ has necessarily been put to one side, because the narratives in the poems had to be merged.)

Ovid begins his Ceres/Proserpina episode in the form of a hymn, which demonstrates not only his knowledge of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, but also his desire to adapt and compete with this earlier poem. Ovid’s version differs both in detail and in style. Unlike the dignified divinities of the *Hymn*, Ovid’s gods often resemble petty human tyrants, whose tireless power-play causes other less powerful beings to suffer. It is because Venus wants to extend love’s empire that Proserpina falls victim to Hades’ lust. Though a goddess, Proserpina is depicted as a fragile young girl, so naive that she grieves equally for the loss of her virginity and for the loss of the gathered flowers that Hades forces to tumble, symbolically, from her lap. The water nymph, Cyane, also endures a kind of rape when Hades plunges through her pool to reach his underworld abode. By the time Ceres arrives at the pool, Cyane can no longer speak, a common consequence of rape and divine violence in the *Metamorphoses*, where changing shape (*mutare*) often involves silencing (*mutus*).

The light and lively poetry of the *Metamorphoses* forms a counterpoint to these dark themes. Ovid’s characters tend to display heightened self-awareness of their own roles within the narrative, or as narrators in their own right. Cyane addresses Hades with charming deference; Ceres sniffs that although Jupiter may no longer care for her, he should at least care for their daughter. Even Calliope, as she sings the tale, draws attention to her editorial choices by declaring that full narration of Ceres’ travels would ‘take too long’. Above all, the story highlights Ovid’s own capacity for invention, his ability to take up old tales and make them new, which is the ultimate, cleverest form of metamorphosis.

*Erica Bexley*
THE PERFORMERS
## The Protagonists

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<td>Demeter</td>
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<td>Persephone</td>
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## The Immortals

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## The Mortals

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## The Narrators

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<td>Martin Worthington</td>
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## Prologue and Epilogue

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<td>Dante</td>
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## The Violinists

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<td>Konrad Wagstyl</td>
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<td>Stephane Crayton</td>
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## The Projection Synchronisers
The Myth in Hellenised Egypt

When Alexander the Great, on his way to conquer the Persian empire, took Egypt and founded the city of Alexandria in 331 BC, the cult of Demeter and her daughter Kore (Persephone) was introduced to the new city. One of Alexandria’s quarters was named Eleusis (after Demeter’s main Greek cult centre) and the cult of the two goddesses proved a popular one, spreading widely throughout the country. In the villages of Egypt, Demeter was now worshipped under her Greek name, transcribed in demotic as *Tmtr3*.

The most striking example of the adoption of this Greek myth comes from the underground burial complex of Kom el Shuqafa in Alexandria. Here, in a chamber dating to the first century AD, the Rape of Persephone was painted on the walls of two separate niches. Now visible only with UV lighting, on the first side wall Persephone is shown with her friends in a meadow. On the broader central panel (as illustrated above), she is snatched away by a bearded Hades in his four-horse chariot, while to the left the goddesses Artemis, Athene and Aphrodite look on. The *kalathos* (basket) on her head establishes the identity of Persephone-Kore. Finally, on the second side (not shown), comes Persephone’s return to life for six months of the year as she emerges from the mouth of the Underworld, watched over by her mother Demeter and the goddess Hecate. This Greek-style illustration of resurrection was a suitable one for a burial place.

However, it did not stand alone. Above the Greek scene of Demeter and Persephone, came a second illustration – an entirely Egyptian-style scene of the mummification of the god Osiris. Guarded by the sister-goddesses Isis and Nephthys, Osiris lies on a lion-shaped couch. Below are the Canopic jars for his organs while the jackal-headed, mortuary god Anubis presides over proceedings. The figures to either side, wearing the double royal crown, are unidentified. As found elsewhere, the resurrection of Osiris, with life breathed into his mouth with a feather, would have been shown on the final side of the niche.

The Alexandrians once buried in this chamber were surely hedging their bets as they presented a dual identity. Above the tomb, in two distinct scenes and styles, death and resurrection came separately illustrated in Greek and Egyptian form.

Dorothy Thompson
Towards the end of his life, Shakespeare wrote a series of plays that have a mythical dimension. *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* do not abandon the social and psychological infrastructure of the major comedies and tragedies, but their mixing of loss with hope, of death with redemption, encourages ancient archetypes to show through their romance plotting.

*The Winter's Tale* shows us how the dramatist achieved these results because it so directly derives from a prose work by the Elizabethan writer Robert Greene. In *Pandosto*, the King of Bohemia harries his wife to death for an imagined adulterous affair with his friend, the King of Sicily, and he casts the child whose paternity he doubts into exile. This daughter, Fawnia, ends up in Sicily, where she is brought up by shepherds. She marries the son of the King of Sicily, and everything works out well enough when they visit Bohemia and her tyrannical father goes mad and dies.

Among the changes made by Shakespeare was the introduction of a sheep-shearing feast at which Fawnia – renamed Perdita – hands out flowers. The feast brings into romance the sort of everyday, non-literary pastoral that was familiar to the dramatist from his native Warwickshire. Yet mythical overtones are audible. Fawnia is a princess of Bohemia; Perdita a lost heir of Sicily. Scholars have wondered why Shakespeare reversed all the locations he found in Greene. *Persephone and Demeter* points us to the answer. Perdita, exiled from Sicily, is a version of Proserpina in Hades, proposing for her suitor Florizel ‘flowers ... from Dis’s wagon’. The play can only come right, bringing her father and her still-living mother back to new life together, when she returns to Sicily bearing fertility through her marriage to the prince.

In his major study *The Culture of Flowers* (1993), the Johnian anthropologist Jack Goody notes that, in early modern England, it was customary to ‘strew’ the grave of a dead person with flowers. These are the strewments that Florizel has in mind when he asks Perdita whether she wants to cover him ‘like a corse’ with violets, primroses and lilies. It is a mark of the closeness of regeneration to death in the play that Perdita replies ‘No, like a bank for love to lie and play on’.

When Milton was writing *Lycidas*, his elegy on the early death of a Cambridge poet, Edward King, he drew on Perdita’s speech. The flowers that he summons up ‘To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies’ tell us that Edward King is dead. Yet the verbal and visual beauty of the strewments as they are drawn from Shakespeare and other pastoral authors allow Milton to raise the thought that his lines are potentially redemptive and will give to both men the faint immortality of fame.

John Kerrigan
The tale of Demeter/Ceres and Persephone/Proserpina has inspired a wealth of poetry, with two notable instances belonging to Germany’s classicising age: Friedrich Schiller’s *Ceres’ Complaint* (‘Klage der Ceres’, 1796) and Heinrich Heine’s *Underworld* (‘Unterwelt’, 1842).

Schiller’s ‘philosophical’ poem (his label) is a dramatic monologue of eleven stanzas. Ceres, searching for her daughter, laments her loss, convinced that Proserpina must be with Pluto among the dead. In Schiller’s ‘philosophical’ perspective, the ancient allegory is inverted, and the poem becomes a meditation on life and death, symbolised by the seasons: ‘Is delightful Spring emerging? / Has the earth renewed itself?’ (‘Ist der holde Lenz erschienen? / Hat die Erde sich verjüngt?’). But a mother’s emotions determine the tone. The goddess even laments her divine condition: unlike a human mother, a divinity can never share her child’s death; and in her closing words reflective pleasure at earthly ‘renewal’ is inseparable from sorrow – ‘My distress and my delight’.

Heine’s very different poem is one of his ‘ballads’ (Romanzen), ironic and deheroising. Proserpina is married to Pluto, but both are less than happy: ‘ “How I wish I was still single,” / Pluto sighs a thousand times’ (‘Blieb ich doch ein Junggeselle! . . .’). Proserpina spends her time grumbling: her new home is all corpses and gibbering ghosts; she yearns for songs and roses, nightingales and the warm sun. Ceres, meanwhile, is still searching, still grieving, and ‘Still declaiming her complaint, which / Every one of you knows well’. Audaciously, Heine is alluding to Schiller’s poem (and enforcing the allusion by using Schiller’s verse rhythm) and, yet more audaciously, he now quotes the first three stanzas of that poem, verbatim (‘Is delightful Spring emerging? . . .’), before switching back to Pluto, and more irony. Pluto begs his mother-in-law to stop complaining: for part of the year she can have her daughter back, and he can have a rest.

Heine’s poem ended thus in its first published version, but shortly afterwards he added a poignant coda of two short stanzas. As the poem in its earlier form deflates Schiller’s ‘Complaint’, this coda deflates his own deflation. In the persona of Pluto still (or perhaps his own persona), now seemingly addressing Proserpina (or perhaps himself), Heine uncovers a ‘hidden longing’ that can never be fulfilled: ‘I cannot make / You young again. That secret ache / Inside your heart cannot be healed: / A failed love, a life failed.’ The malleability of the ancient myth is apparent; so, too, its continuing power to engage the deepest emotions.

Michael Silk
Who’s who?

**Erica Bexley** specialises in Latin poetry and holds a temporary lectureship in the Faculty of Classics. She came to Cambridge the long way, from Melbourne, via America and Greece.

**Anthony Bowen** is a former Orator of the University and Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College. He has been busy with Greek plays since his schooldays.

**Patrick Boyde**, Emeritus Professor of Italian, has adapted and directed a dozen and more plays in Ancient Greek since 2005.

**Diego Bravo** is a Licentiate in Physics from the Balseiro Institute in Argentina, and he has a MSc in Neuroscience from Oxford. He is currently doing a PhD in Neuroscience at St John's.

**Stephane Crayton** is a violinist and composer studying at King's College; he holds an instrumental award and plays with CUCO. He has previously led the symphony orchestras at JRAM and NCO as well as playing in NYO.

**Gillian Jondorf** is a modern linguist who has composed the surtitles for all the Ancient Greek semi-staged productions.

**Dan Juncu** returns to the Synchronisers’ cubicle for the fourth time, bringing his knowledge of Greek from the hills of Romania.

**Meera Juncu** (née Frost) is a graduate of the universities of Sydney and Cambridge. Her doctoral thesis on representations of India in Renaissance Italy is soon to be published by CUP.

**Stacey McDowell** is a teaching Fellow in English at St John's College. Her doctoral thesis was on John Keats and she is currently writing a book on reading and Romanticism.

**Andrew Merritt** is a native of Virginia. He is currently pursuing an MPhil in Classical Philology, knowing himself to be a spiritually imperilled idolater of grammar.

**Thomas Michaels** studied at ETH Zürich, obtaining an MSc in Mathematics and a MSc in Physics, both in 2012. He is presently doing a PhD in Chemistry at St. John’s.

Who’s who? (continued)
Sam Motherwell has drawn the images for many previous productions since 2009. He is past President of the Cambridge Drawing Society, and is still active as a crystallographer.

Aleksandra Szypowska is a second-year Classics undergraduate at Lucy Cavendish College and a student of the Academy for Theatre Practices in Gardzienice, Poland.

Gail Trimble took her BA and D.Phil in Classics at Oxford, won a JRF at Trinity College, Cambridge for her research on Catullus, and is now a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford.

Konrad Wagstyl is an MB-PhD student at Clare College. He has previously led Cambridge University Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra Alba, and Sinfonia d’Amici. He regularly performs with other orchestras and chamber groups, and as a soloist.

James Willetts used to be Principal Teacher of Classics at Ardrossan Academy and is now a documentary film maker. He will be filming the performance.

Liz Willetts is a writer. She has a PhD in English Literature. She assists with the photography and filming.

Martin Worthington is a lecturer in Assyriology in the Division of Archaeology. Raised in Italy, he dabbles in languages and day-dreams of writing a novel.

Ioannis Ziogas is a lecturer at the Australian National University. He studied classics at the University of Thessaloniki (BA and MA) and Cornell (PhD).