Mary Shelley and the Early Goddess

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Abstract Thesis

For my thesis, I intend to focus on elements of Greek idealism in Mary Shelley’s *Valperga*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Last Man*. I will define “classicism” and seek to understand the ideals of the ancients that are concerned with the assertion of a masculine identity and fear the interference of the female voice in the quest for that assertion. I will show how Mary Shelley’s revisionist history undermines the classical ideals of masculinity in the search for the lost feminine. I will use Shelley’s two plays, *Proserpine* and *Midas* to support my claim that Shelley is interested in revisionist history of ancient mythology and ideals. Looking at Shelley as both a historic, Gothic, and Romantic novelist, I will examine how Shelley uses popular generic traditions to fight against the dominant ideology, turning the conventions of those traditions on their heads in order to make weighty feminist claims that are reminiscent of the works of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft. I will also examine Shelley’s insecurities in her pursuits and how those insecurities are reflected in her writings.
Mary Shelley and the Early Goddess

A Thesis

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by

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Introduction: Classical Revisionism & Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Europe

In writing about the works of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, I am interested in raising questions that seek to place Shelley’s work into the longstanding traditions of not only feminism¹ (specifically the feminism of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft), but also Hellenism, and romanticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. The purpose of this introduction is to first, give a rough overview of the contents of the work itself but, more importantly, to provide a historical basis for understanding the writings which I will consider in the pages that follow. It is not primarily meant as an introduction to the literary theory or texts that I will use to support my claims, although I provide a brief explanation of some of these, but more as a means of putting some of my assertions into the historical context of the periods of Wollstonecraft, Wollstonecraft Shelley, and the ancients against, whom, on some level, both are reacting.

This study will first explore one of Shelley’s lesser known plays, *Proserpine*, published in 1832 but believed to have been written during the Shelley’s’ tour of Italy in 1820. In my discussion of the play, I will establish Shelley’s interest in the tragic form as well as in the adaptation of classical themes to suit feminist ends, in particular, those feminist ends in opposition to the popular nineteenth-century ideology that saw women as naturally coquettish. I will argue that Shelley views women as victims of insatiable male desire- not the other way around, as eighteenth-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau would argue and many conduct novels popular at the time would imply in their very composition. In comparing Shelley’s adaptation of the Proserpine myth with that of Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* is
Shelley’s inspiration, I will look at Shelley’s preoccupation with the pre-classical
mother-goddess figure as a kind of tragic heroine victimized by the patriarchal forces
of the classical Olympian deities that mirror those forces of Shelley’s own time.
Asserting that sensuality and motherhood are innate and inseparable feminine entities,
I will attempt to uncover Shelley’s desire to overturn the nineteenth-century myth that
female sexuality and desire are monstrous and need to be curbed. Just as Shelley’s
mother does in her critique of the theories of Jean Jacques Rousseau, I will argue that
Shelley’s writing is an attempt to overturn those ideologies made popular by the
French philosopher.

My examination of *Valperga* (1823) will continue the argument set forth in
my examination of *Proserpine*, except that it will provide a much more detailed
examination of the mother-goddess, seeking to establish her as a supernatural being
with prophetic powers similar to those of the Cassandra figure in ancient mythology.
Understanding that Cassandra is an archetype for the misunderstood female, I will
parallel Shelley’s work with that of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft whose last
novel, *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman*, posthumously published in 1798, is set in an
insane asylum into which Maria’s husband has unjustly placed her in an attempt to
silence her into submission. In Shelley’s case, the misunderstood prophetess
(Beatrice) stands in for the archetypal “mad woman” of eighteenth-century literature
(Maria) whose “madness” is often determined solely by the gender of her author
(Matthews 87). I will argue, then that Shelley’s work in incorporating myth into the
nineteenth-century novel is to parallel the experience of victimized mythological
women with the nineteenth-century female whose experience has not changed from ancient times to the nineteenth-century present.

Before beginning, it is necessary to provide a closer historical examination of events surrounding those terms (feminism, Hellenism, and romanticism) which I will be referencing so freely. In understanding these as both literary and political terms, a discussion of the politics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century is warranted. In his essay “Literature and Politics,” Michael Scrivener notes that “from the 1740’s-1830s, the major political trends included the challenge to aristocratic power by an array of democratic forces [with which Wollstonecraft’s politics are aligned]” (43).

Ideologically, the American and French Revolutions stood in the foreground of European politics, with the spirit of independence sweeping the nation and the winds of change ushering in an age of enlightenment in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau (The Social Contract, 1762); and the Jacobin writers Thomas Paine (Common Sense, 1776) and William Godwin (An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, 1793). In his discussion of the works of both Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, Gary Kelly writes in his article, “The Politics of Autobiography in Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley,” that “the Enlightenment supported the related movement of economic, social, and institutional modernization based on capitalist individualism. Produced by and furthering these movements were the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century political revolutions that emphasized the rights of individuals” (20).
Wollstonecraft’s political writings are of the same vein as those of her contemporaries in terms of their Jacobin belief in the individual’s power to reason and the consequent need for education reform. She writes:

The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of his own reason. (Wollstonecraft 21)

However, where her philosophies fall outside of the realm of accepted Jacobin politics is in her treatment of the female subject whom the Jacobins assigned “the primarily biological and domestic roles of producing (male) citizens-to-be and dispensing “le lait républicain” to them (Kelly 21). Mary Poovey writes of the role of the eighteenth-century female that “the duties a woman performed in the home directly supported capitalist values. For example, the sympathetic, non-judgmental affections a wife offered her husband helped offset the strains a man suffered in his workplace and thus both contributed to the rewards associated with work and helped a man renew his energies for another day’s labors” (10). The “proper” woman was, therefore, a source of comfort to her husband; the “improper” woman a source of discomfort. In addition to her role as a domestic caretaker, a woman was also expected to carry on the family name and, therefore, maintain the economic security of the male birthright. Poovey notes, “Because of the complex economic and psychological roles of property, a woman could, by one act of infidelity imperil both a man’s present security and his dynastic ambitions. So profound were such anxieties
that philosophers like Samuel Johnson and Jean Jacques Rousseau depicted the [economic] threat women represented as a challenge to the social order itself’’ (Poovey 5). In *Emile* or *On Education* (1755), Rousseau writes:

The same turn of mind that makes a woman of the world excel in the art of being a hostess makes a coquette excel in the art of entertaining many suitors...on what does this whole art depend if not on sharp and continuous observations which make her see what is going on in the men’s hearts at every instant, and which dispose her to bring each secret movement the force needed to suspend or accelerate it? Now, is this art learned? No, it is one of the distinctive characteristics of the fair sex. Presence of mind, incisiveness, and subtle observations are the subtle science of women; cleverness at taking advantage of them is their talent. (385)

Rousseau’s view of women as naturally coquettish and somewhat underhanded, became the predominate one of the nineteenth-century, and it is this view that the feminist movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century fought so hard to subvert. Mary Wollstonecraft refutes Rousseau’s claim that women, due to their ability to ignite male desire are coquettish, manipulative, and subversive. She writes:

I will allow that bodily strength seems to give man a natural superiority over women; and that this is the only solid basis on which the superiority of the sex can be built. But I still insist, that not only the virtue but the knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures, ought to endeavor to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men, instead of
being educated like a fanciful kind of half-being- one of Rousseau’s wild chimeras. (Wollstonecraft 39)

Poovey, on the other hand, sees Rousseau’s characterization of women as natural “coquettes” in terms of the dynastic ambitions of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century male according to the laws of primogeniture. Fear of infidelity and, consequently, wrongful succession were, therefore, the basis for the male construction of what Poovey terms the “Proper” lady and Wollstonecraft terms “modesty” (Wollstonecraft). Consequently, conduct novels, pamphlets, and sermons instructing young girls on how to behave saturated eighteenth and nineteenth century culture.

Rousseau, writing in favor of the moral “reform” of women, advises them to become mothers: “The attraction of domestic life is the best counterpoison [sic] for bad morals...Thus from the correction of this single abuse [not nursing] would result in a general reform; nature would soon have reclaimed all its rights” (46). The image of the mother-figure as an angelic being with abilities to harness male sexuality in favor of the pursuit of capitalist ends is a dominant one in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. The mother-figure is no longer the picture of sensuality, a woman whose very condition is a symbol of her power to influence male actions; instead, she is an almost divine being whose body is not to be defiled by the impurities associated with male desire. Mary Poovey writes that “women were encouraged to display no vanity, no passion, no assertive self at all” (21). Aware of the fears of the eighteenth-century male, Mary Wollstonecraft reverses the
eighteenth-century ideology that pre-supposes innate female coquettishness in order to further her arguments for education reform. She writes:

To render chastity the virtue from which unsophisticated modesty will naturally flow, the attention should be called away from the employments which only exercise the sensibility; and the heart made to beat time to humanity rather than to throb with love. The woman who has dedicated a considerable portion of her time to pursuits purely intellectual, and whose affections have been exercised by humane plans of usefulness, must have more purity of mind as a natural consequence, than the ignorant beings whose times and thoughts have been occupied by gay pleasures or schemes to conquer hearts. (Wollstonecraft 122)

Shelley’s writings are primarily a reaction against the traditional Classical views of women and their role in the state saturating eighteenth and nineteenth-century English culture, a culture undergoing an intellectual and social revolution brought about by a renewed interest or even obsession with Greek culture. The renewed cultural interest in Greece may have also been sparked by an affinity with Greek philosophy and politics—particularly as those politics related to women. As historian G. Lowes Dickinson notes:

...[In Greek culture] marriage should be regarded primarily as a means of producing healthy and efficient citizens. This view is best illustrated by the institutions of such a state as Sparta, where the woman was specifically trained for maternity, and connections outside the marriage tie were sanctioned by custom and opinion, if they were such as were unlikely to lead to unhealthy offspring. (169)
Much like the laws of primogeniture that governed eighteenth and nineteenth-century England, Greek laws sought to maintain stability and tradition in the face of political uncertainty and adversity. Greek philosophers, like those of the eighteenth century were concerned with the instability often created by the male\female relationship which might potentially result in a weakening of the male’s ability to reason. Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, writes of the increasing sexual repression at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

If sex is so righteously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those- reduced to a minimum- that enabled it to reproduce itself? Sex and its effects are perhaps not so easily deciphered; on the other hand, their repression, thus reconstructed, is easily analyzed. (6)

Much like the fear of the nineteenth-century, in *The Republic*, written approximately 370-5 B.C., Plato fears overt sexuality and seeks to curb the rawness of it by making it both “proper” and “modest.” In fact, he even “goes so far as to eliminate the family relation altogether” (Dickinson 170). Meyer Reinhold writes of Plato’s view of love, lust, and the male\female bond:

Love is not only a desire to possess the beautiful, but also a natural desire of all to procreate beauty. People procreate children and love their offspring because of a desire for immortality. The soul too procreates and produces offspring, brain-children, and yields a higher form of immortality...The love of mind for mind, soul for soul, produces a more lasting marriage than physical love. (188)
Like Rousseau, whose *Social Contract* promotes the balance of the well-being of the state with the well-being of the individual and whose writings about women are both influenced by and influential to the idea of a superior statehood, Plato writes about the male/female bond as one of the soul as opposed to one of the body. The production of children, therefore, becomes not an act of personal desire, but of public advancement, and the mother, henceforth, becomes the agent of such advancement. Dickinson writes that “they [the Greeks] recognized that the production of children was a business of supreme import to the state, and that it was right and proper that it should be regulated by law with a view to the advantage to the whole community” (171).

However, motherhood in ancient Greece was not always written in Plato’s terms: “If we only had Homer to give us our ideas of the Greeks, we might conclude from such passages as these, that they had a conception of woman and her relation to man, finer and nobler in some respects, than that of modern times. But in fact the Homeric poems represent a civilization that had passed away before the opening of the period with which at present we are chiefly concerned” (Dickinson 174-75). In fact, the view of women represented in the Homeric poems is that of the Archaic Age in Greece, the pre-Classical period in which female sexuality and motherhood were not separate entities, as Plato would have them be, but intertwined qualities of the female goddess, a figure of prominent cult worship and divinity. In their book *Sacred Sexuality*, an exploration of sexuality in the Classical world, AJ Mann and Jane Lyle write:
They [early “Greeks”] regarded sexual intercourse as the ultimate magical act, and in its thrall they entered the domain and blind powers of the gods and goddesses. For them fertility was not a path to spiritual integration because they were already at one with the spirit world. Fertility required sacrifice; failure to propagate, to find animals for food, or to ensure fertility led to death. In these cults, the Great Mother symbolized life itself. In the earliest known cult figurines the goddess was shown as a heavy- or many-breasted woman baring the source of her sexual energy. (18)

However, with the development of a more advanced and patriarchal civilization, goddess worship was quickly usurped by the worship of Olympian deities who banished the goddess figures to the underworld. The cause of this banishment is secondary, for the purposes of this argument, to the effect. Mann and Lyle write that women became “temptations” to be “resisted.” The early goddess and all associated with her became “ruthlessly suppressed” with celibacy and martyrdom becoming “theological ideals” (30). According to Mann and Lyle, “The origins of this misogyny lay in Classical Greece” (30).

The mythology of the pre-Classical ancients, however, was not suppressed into absolute omission. Remnants of it survived in central myths, festivals, and writings of the Classical period, writings uncovered and re-shaped by Shelley in the nineteenth-century and on which I will elaborate and attempt to link with Shelley’s works later in my argument. Also, references in Shelley’s text and the tone of her writing hint that she is both aware of and sympathetic to the pre-Classical ancient
Greek goddess figure and mourns the loss of the sacred feminine that ushered in the Classical period in Greece.

Philosophies and writings of Classical Greece are undeniably bound up in the central philosophies and writings of eighteenth and nineteenth century-culture, particularly those of Shelley and the other romantic writers in her circle (Percy Bysshe and Lord Byron). During the eighteenth and nineteenth-century, “Greek and Latin were still the staple of education, and most romantic writers were brought up on them” (Levin 20). However, while Neo-Classicism flourished in the seventeenth-century, writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century saw the neo-classical movement as “Latinized” (Levin 20), reacting against such “Latinization” of the classics, they took a greater interest in the works of ancient Greece, forming a movement that was first termed in Harry Levin’s Broken Column (1931) as “Hellenism.” According to Bernard Herbert Stern, who studied Levin’s work and expanded on Levin’s argument in his historical account of Hellenism in Europe The Rise of Romantic Hellenism in English Literature: 1732-1786 (1969), there were three reasons for this shift from neo-classical to romantic Hellenistic thought: the growth of both scientific Greek archaeology and sentimental accounts of Greece written by travelers, and the rise of a “Hellenized body of aesthetics produced by artists, painters, and poets” (1). Hellenism was, therefore, a movement not only of writers but of archeologists, artists, and travelers alike. Perhaps the most notable example of the diversity of the movement is the popularity of the Elgin Marbles which Shelley herself visited in February, 1818 (MSJ 193). A recent biography of Shelley notes, “Lord Elgin’s removals from the Parthenon, which were on the point...
of being put on display as a National Treasure in the British Museum, fired the
country with a new enthusiasm for the ancient world” (Seymour 184). The Shelley’s
were so inspired by these relics of the ancients that they commissioned two life-sized
statues of Venus and Apollo to put at the gates of their personal library.

The Elgin Marbles, standing as one example of the scope of the movement’s
popularity, Hellenism is reflected in a body of work too large to mention in full for
my purposes, but worth noting in part for the purpose of a fuller understanding of the
wider scope of the movement. First, however, I must note that while the movement
took a more in depth look at the ancient Greeks, it was fascinated by all aspects of
untouched ancient culture. A few notable examples of what was eighteenth-century
Europe’s desire to reclaim the beauty of the ancient world are the excavation of the
Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1748), Piranesi’s sketches of ancient relics and
ruins (1755) (Stern 12), and the private excavations and collections of nobles
interested in reclaiming a bit of the ancient past. The England Society of Dilettani
sponsored “classical archæology in Greece and published the results” (Stern 18). The
most acclaimed private collector was Matthew Brettingham, who had a “categolized”
collection, but even George III took an interest in ancient art (Stern 36, 37). Perhaps
one of the most noted books of the eighteenth century is The Voyages du Jeune
Anacharsis (1789), which fictionalizes a 26 year period in Greek history and is told
through the eyes of a young Scythian philosopher who learns about Greek law,
politics, and customs through his travels and intimate discussions with sages. It was
published in five different editions and was translated nineteen times in the ten year
period after its publication (Stern 13).
While the eighteenth-century was primarily intellectually interested in the discovery of ancient ruins and re-discovery of ancient writings, the nineteenth-century took a more in depth interest in the discovery of romantic possibility within these things. Levin writes:

The second Romantic generation [that of Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley], no longer under the necessity of reacting to a Latinized neo-classicism held no bias against the glory that was Greece. Schooled in the fundamental tenants of their predecessors, and yet weary of medieval tinsel, they proclaimed a Renaissance of Greece...the function of the classics as an intellectual discipline came to be neglected and the cult of Greece became a mere enthusiasm in a long series of Romantic obsessions. Poets began to indulge in Hellenic nostalgia. (Levin 21)

Writers in Mary Shelley's circle had a particular fascination with Greece; it became an integral part of the "romance" within their writing. In fact, the feelings that inspired their interests in the Greek classics sprang from much the same nostalgic sentiments of the time as are traditionally associated with the Romantic movement- a deep longing for a simpler time in the face of mass industrialization and economic growth and a strong belief in the symbolic and healing power of nature. Hellenism is a yearning for the "primitive, simple, and idyllic society of the Greeks... They [the Romantics] proclaim that the world was young in those days, that the Greeks were the children of nature" (Levin 29). Greece becomes a symbol of "social and political perfection" (Stern 5). Where Romanticism and Hellenism differ, however, is in their interpretation of "reality." "Essentially the romantic method is the pursuit of a 'true' reality the symbol of which is to be found in the objects of the sense; the classical
method is the pursuit of an "ideal" reality, a symbol in itself, which must be deduced logically" (Stern 3). Whatever their differences, the combined movements of "Romanticism" and "Hellenism" produced some of the most acclaimed poetry of the Romantic circle.\(^{15}\)

As part of a great Romantic circle of writers, whose writings are influenced by the overwhelming forces of Romantic Hellenism, Mary Shelley is a writer whose works cannot be separated from the canon of her contemporaries. Proclaiming that she is a writer both influenced by and contributing to the larger cultural movements of her generation, in the chapters that follow, I will outline the specific pre-Classical, Classical, Roman, feminist, and Romantic influences on Shelley’s writing. Using her journals as a reference and examining in depth two of her lesser known works (Proserpine and Valperga), I will attempt to delve into the complicated psyche of a woman whose past is a haunting revelation of her present and whose mind is a complex puzzle of competing ideological forces of both the ancient past and her Romantic present.

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1 Many critics have researched feminism, Hellenism, and romanticism in the works of Shelley; I wish to discuss how Shelley’s feminism influences her interest in both Hellenism and Romanticism as well.


3 I will focus specifically on Rousseau, for it is his writing to which Wollstonecraft freely refers and refutes in her Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Ed. Carol H. Posten. New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd., Reprinted in 1988.

4 It is perhaps Nineteenth-Century poet Coventry Patmore’s depiction of the “modest woman” as the “Angel in the House” that is the most noted epithet for the proper lady.
Perhaps the most noted conduct pamphlet is Dr. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, first published in 1774.

While culturally, England more resembled ancient Athens at the turn of the century, the patriarchal view of women in ancient Greece was similar in both Athens and Sparta. While it was women in Sparta who were trained for motherhood, the great patriarchal literature comes out of ancient Athens. This literature depicts representative of the oikos as opposed to the polis, and often a man's punishment for loyalty to the oikos over the polis is nothing less than death.

I am referring, in particular, to Rousseau

This was most prevalent during the Classical period in Greece

the image of the proper lady was central to the livelihood of such statehood

I have taken this from the account of Nausicaa in *The Odyssey*

I am referring to the Classical period

In fact, the sacred goddess figure dates back to early Mesopotamian civilization and is passed down to the Minoans and Myceneans (the early Greeks) from their ancestors in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt.

I should also note that while Shelley, in *Proserpine*, is revising a Roman myth, this fact does not negate my argument that she is a writer interested primarily in Greek ideology, particularly as this ideology relates to the subjugation of the female sex. Ovid's writing retains the patriarchal tone of the Greek Demeter\Persephone myth originating in *The Homeric Hymns*

I am referring to The Hunt Circle, a literary circle of Romantic writers of which Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley were a part.

I will name a few: Lord Byron's *Maid of Athens* (1812), *Prometheus* (1816), *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818); John Keats' *On Seeing the Elgin Marbles* (1817), *To Homer* (1848), *Ode to a Grecian Urn* (1820); and, of course, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *Hellas* (1822) and *Hymn of Apollo* (1824).
Chapter One: Mary Shelley’s *Proserpine*

“An Introduction to Classical Revisionism in *Proserpine*”

I first became interested in studying *Proserpine* when I read an article by Alan Richardson entitled “*Proserpine and Midas*: Gender, Genre, and Mythic Revisionism in Mary Shelley’s Dramas.” The little that I had read about the play, prior to this article, brushed it aside as a kind of novice attempt at the classical revisionism so popular with the romantics of the time, a play most likely influenced by the writings of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and a work whose sole intent was the entertainment of the Shelley and Mason (friends of Percy and Mary) children during the Shelley’s tour of Italy in 1821.

Because most Shelley critics view the play more as a historical document than a work worthy of careful interpretive consideration, the play is nearly always studied alongside *Midas*, Shelley’s other children’s play written around the same time. The two were published together in 1922 by Andre Koszul under the title *Proserpine and Midas: Two Unpublished Mythological Dramas*, and it is this text of the plays that is most widely studied. However, it is also important to note that the earlier publication of *Proserpine* sans *Midas* was discovered in 1938 after Koszul’s publication; therefore, I am interested in examining *Proserpine* as a text worthy of study in and of itself. I will not make an attempt to refute the claims of other Shelley critics who have studied *Proserpine* alongside *Midas*, but I hope to read Shelley’s *Proserpine* in such a
way that sheds some new, if not more interesting, light on not only the work but the author herself.

The earliest documented appearance of the Ceres and Proserpine myth is in the *Homeric Hymns*, songs written in honor of the gods; Demeter and Proserpine appear briefly in Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* but the tale of Death's capture and rape of Proserpine and of Proserpine's descent into the underworld is not told in detail until the end of the eight century. While Shelley herself never studied the Homeric hymns, she must have been very familiar with them because by the time of *Proserpine*'s composition in July of 1820, Percy Bysshe Shelley had been studying the hymns for three years, and translating them for two (*MSJ* 176, 191). Shelley's own inspiration, however, most likely comes from her study of the Roman poets Ovid and Virgil, just prior to the composition of *Proserpine* (*MSJ* 665, 681). A portion of Book V of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.) is dedicated to the re-telling of the Demeter/Proserpine myth, while the mother-daughter duo affords brief mention in Virgil's *The Georgics* (30 B.C.) and *The Aeneid* (18 B.C.).

Shelley's version of the myth of Demeter and Proserpine is, therefore, revisionism of revisionism; however, this is not to say, that Shelley is not influenced by the Greeks. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Beginning in 1820, the year that *Proserpine* was composed, Shelley began studying Greek. In that same year, she began transcribing Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, a revision of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (Richardson, 124) and reading the great Greek tragedies (*MSJ* 676). Also, she was clearly influenced by the Romantic Hellenism sweeping throughout England (as is evident in her fascination with the Elgin Marbles).
and influencing those in her own Romantic circle, in particular, Percy Bysshe Shelley whose writings in the years preceding the composition of *Proserpine* were largely translations and revisions of Greek works or dialogues with Greek writers.

Many Romantic writers of the time, like those in her circle, had a complicated relationship with the ancients, particularly the ancient Greeks. For example, Percy Bysshe Shelley often idealizes the classical ancient world, yearning for a simpler and perhaps more idealistic and intellectual time of which Greece is the symbol. In his lyric drama *Hellas* (1821), he writes:

Temple and towers,

Citadels and marts, and they

Who live and die there have been ours,

And may be thine, and must decay;

But Greece and her foundations are

Built below the tide of war,

Based on the crystalline sea

Of thought and its eternity;

Her citizens, imperial spirits,

Rule the present from the past;

On all this world of men inherits

Their seal is set. (333)

Shelley’s contrasts his lamentation for societies dead and gone with his belief in the cultural power of intellectual pursuits, exemplified in the writings and achievements
of ancient Greeks, to withstand the test of time and live eternally in spite of the immortal nature of man.

In his preface to the drama, Percy Bysshe Shelley notes, “We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their root in Greece. But for Greece, Rome, the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors, would have spread no illuminations with her arms, and we might still have been savages and idolaters” (319). However, while he is nostalgic and grateful for the intellectual ideals and democratic values that claim their roots in Greece, he finds some aspects of Greek ideology to be fundamentally flawed. His revision of Aeschylus acts as an allegorical critique of the tyrannical forces represented through the Prometheus myth and seeks to revise these forces to suit the European, democratic sentiments of the times.

Shelley, like her husband, wishes to avoid the conflict between her responsibilities as revisionist and her responsibilities as citizen, in particular as a female citizen and the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft (whose Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary began reading in 1816 and again in 1820, the same year that she began writing Proserpine) (MSJ 314-18). Shelley biographer, Miranda Seymour notes that Mary was “proud” of growing up to be like her mother, both in manners and ideals (328). It would not then be supposing too much to question whether Shelley’s writing is critical, not only of Ovid, but of the patriarchal ideology so representative of the Greeks whom Ovid often idealizes in his writing and whose influence was expanding in her own times.
While Ovid, for Shelley, is merely a likeness of the original, it is certain that the similarities between the Demeter/Proserpine myth in *The Homeric Hymns* and the Demeter/Proserpine myth in Ovid are more abundant that those that exist between the myths of Ovid and Mary Shelley. Ovid’s sympathies like his Greek ancestors are distinctly patriarchal while Shelley’s lie in the same vein of those of her mother-feminist reactions against the dominant male forces of the times. For Wollstonecraft, those forces exist in the popular texts of writers like Rousseau, for Shelley in the renewed interest in classical writers like Plato. *Proserpine*, therefore, serves more as a criticism of her classical roots than a celebration of them. Richardson notes that before writing *Proserpine*, Shelley was helping her husband translate Plato’s *Symposium* in 1818. She was also most probably reading his accompaniment to the translation, “The Discourse on the Manners of Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love.” Richardson notes that in this work:

The two great cultural failures of Greek civilization are described as the ‘twin institutions’ of ‘personal slavery’ and ‘the inferiority of women recognized by law and opinion’: among the Athenians, the male sex, one-half of the human race, received the highest cultivation and refinement; while the other, so far as intellect is concerned, were educated as slaves and were raised but few degrees in all that related to moral or intellectual excellence above the condition of savages. (127)
There is no better representation of the female slave in classical mythology than in the Ceres\Proserpine myth. Ovid’s depiction of the myth begins with a description of the triumph of Olympian god Jupiter [Zeus in Greek] over all other gods and goddesses. While Ovid acknowledges that Ceres is the “creator of all natural law” with “all things in debt to her” (149), he goes on in the next line to demonstrate Jupiter’s overpowering force over all the gods and goddesses alike by re-telling the myth of Typhoeus, a fire-breathing dragon who is the offspring of Gaia, the earth goddess who pre-dates the Olympian pantheon and who is associated with Ceres. In mythology, Typhoeus tries to keep the Olympians from defeating the Titans, but he is ultimately defeated by Jupiter who traps him underground. Mann and Lyle note that “later cultures symbolized the rise of masculine influence by the myths of heroes conquering the dragon. It was believed that the dragon must be killed and cut into pieces by the gods in order to bring birth to the cosmos…” (25). The rise of Jupiter or Zeus is affiliated with the Classical period in Greece, and it is this period that influences Ovid. The Chthonian goddesses, associated with the archaic period of goddess worship are ultimately defeated in the classical period by the higher powers of the Olympian gods, and it is the victory of the Olympian pantheon over the Chthonian earth goddesses that Ovid depicts at the beginning of the Ceres\Proserpine myth. By beginning the myth with a demonstration of Jupiter’s power, he effectively denies the importance of the powers that preceded the Olympians.
Death, in Ovid, is a victim of the wrath of Typhoeus, arch-enemy of Jupiter and kin of the sacred earth mother, who “spits out flames and cinders and shakes the earth” (150). Ovid writes Death as a sympathetic character who travels above the surface, not with intentions of malicious rape but to “save his dark unhappy kingdom” (150). It is only upon being struck by Cupid’s arrow that Death pursues Proserpine, raping her and making her his wife in the underworld. He is absolved of all guilt for his violent crime against the daughter of his sister. In fact, it is Venus who persuades Cupid to strike Death. The purity of her motives absolves her too of the guilt that comes with the perturbation of a violent crime. She wishes only to bring the love inspired by Cupid’s arrow to Tartarus, the lowest region of the underworld. She laments, “Why spare the lands of Tartarus alone? Why not increase my empire and yours? One third of the whole world shall be your prize. In heaven-we’ve lost prestige and with loss comes the failure of love itself...” (150). In spite of her dynastic ambitions, her motives reflect a keen desire to see “love” flourish.

She goes on to demonize goddesses like Diana, the goddess of chastity, and fears that “if we allow her, Ceres’ daughter will remain a virgin until she dies, for even now her models are the moonlight deities” (150). The moonlight deities are the pre-Olympian goddesses whose sexuality is untamed and uninhibited by the forces of marriage which seek to curb female sexuality by restricting it to marriage bed. These were the goddesses who were “able to conceive without the help of the gods,” whose fertility “determined the cycles of time... The fact that the cycle of the moon in the sky echoed the menstrual rhythms of women- the wounds which always healed- reinforced the correlation. Mother Earth was the power that brought life to humanity
in the natural world. She was omnipotent, and thus she had little need for male influence in her world... The Great Goddess had many names: to the Greeks she was known as Mother Earth, Demeter, Rhea, Aphrodite Potnia, Selene, Pallas Athena in her bird and snake goddess form rather than her later Amazonian type, Gaia and Cybele..." (Mann and Lyle 21-22). Ovid’s Venus despises the moonlight deities (even Proserpine’s mother Ceres) because they repel what Ovid portrays as the purity of the marriage bond between the male and female that begins with “love” (150).

Marriage, to the classical ancients, is a sacred bond that promotes the social stability of the polis or state; it does this mostly by curbing the “destructive forces” of female sexuality to the weaker forces of male desire. Isabella Clark notes in “The Gamos of Hera: Myth and Ritual” that a sexually mature girl untamed by the “yoke of marriage” is “wild and unpredictable... This model of the female is articulated in myths associated with the pathenoi [marriageable virgins] and nymphs who reject marriage or the embrace of a male deity in order to devote themselves to the band of Artemis, and a life of roaming free on the mountainside outside the confines of ‘normal’ society” (14). According to Clark, marriage in these myths is associated with “themes of rape and violent subjugation” (14). In classical mythology, then, marriage is a male rite to be enacted by force, if necessary, for the betterment of the social structure as a whole. Therefore, the rape “myth,” becomes a justification of female subjugation in marriage. A woman who will not subject herself to the marriage bond and exercises her sexuality outside of it or, in the case of Diana, even inside of it, is a threat to civilization itself, as marriage is representative of the order that holds civilization in place. A non-subjugated female or, for the purposes of this
argument, a "wild woman," as she is often associated with the natural world on the outskirts of civilization where Artemis was worshipped (Blundell 47) is a dangerous force that, to the ancients, justifies the use of violence against it. In Ovid, Venus says to Cupid, "If you respect the kingdom that we share, marry the youthful goddess to her uncle" (150). Proserpine's marriage is at the heart of the survival of the entire kingdom. Her virginity, while pure and lovely for a time, has now become a threat to the very civilization that nurtured it.

Female sexuality, in classical mythology, is a force that weakens the male's abilities to reason. He is a slave to it, and he cannot control his actions when confronted with it. He cannot, therefore, be blamed for his actions in the face of overt female sexuality; for these reasons, marriage is an essential deterrent from committing acts of uninhibited sexuality which threaten the stability of the state. In Ovid's depiction, Proserpine's sexuality is illuminating, even while innocent, "...filling her basket, then the hollow of small breasts with new picked flowers. As if at one glance, Death had caught her up, delighted at his choice, had ravished her, so quick was his desire..." (151).

Ovid parallels the Proserpine myth with the myth of Arethusa, a nymph and servant of Diana whose sexuality, even while innocent, tempts Alpheus' carnal instincts. Arethusa laments, "Though I was bold enough, I never tried to excel among the local beauties, yet I was known for being beautiful. My looks, though praised, refused to give me pleasure; most girls would find them a sufficient dowry-I blushed as red as any farmer's daughter to get that kind of praise. I felt it wrong to tempt and then allure" (156-57); however, Arethusa's modesty is not enough to protect her from
the uncontrollable and undeniable carnal desires of Alpheus, the river god whose
spies her in private bathing. Arethusa laments:

I tossed all I was wearing on yielding willow boughs, naked I dived, curving a
thousand rings within the waters. And as I thrashed my arms, I seemed to feel a
voice beneath the stream. Then terror took me, and I had climbed the near bank;
from his waters Alpheus cried, ‘Where are you, Arethusa?’ I climbed the
nearest bank while Alpheus Himself called from the waves, ‘Where are you
running, Arethusa, so fast, so fast, where do you run away?’ So echoes of his
depth sea voice came at me, while I, my shift, my dresses left across the stream,
ran naked, as if ripe for him to overtake me. (157)

Arethusa, rather than allowing herself to be ravished by the river god, subjects herself
to a life of misery. She cries, “I, a cataract, poured down into the darkness” (158).
The lesson in her tale is to submit, even in the face of violence, or live a life of
unparalleled misery in the bowels of the earth.

Proserpine will not suffer the same fate as Arethusa, for she submits to Death,
becoming his wife, and is, therefore, afforded a “happy ending.” Even Arethusa has
to admit to Ceres that “she [Proserpine] was like a queen, true wife, regina [sic] of the
dictator who rules the underworld,” (154), and Jupiter, whose blessing is central to
the success of the union, replies, when confronted by an enraged Ceres, “She has
received the gift of love, unhurt, nor will he [Death] harm us as a son-in-law. And if
he has no other merits, then it is no disgrace to marry Jove’s own brother, for all he
needs is your good will, my dear. His great fault is: he does not hold my place, his lot
is to rule over lower regions” (155).
However, in spite of Jupiter's request to respect the marriage between Death and Proserpine, Ceres becomes irrational, "wild," and "savage" when confronted by the rape of her daughter (153-54); she is the archetype of the "mad" woman, the "moonlight goddess" whose sexuality is raw, untamed by the marriage bed. In addition, her status as "mother" is an overt reminder of both her sexuality and powers of fertility. Because these forces are unchecked by the institution of marriage, they are deadly. Ovid represents Ceres as an almost bestial woman. She is an example of the consequences of allowing private, domestic desires to interfere with the well-being of the state; her responsibilities as a mother usurp her responsibilities as a goddess, and for that, civilization suffers. She uses her powers of fertility (the ability to control the fruition of the land), overt symbols of her untamed sexuality, to destroy the harvest. Ovid writes, "With savage hands, she smashed the crooked ploughs that turned the soil and brought dark ruin down on men and cattle" (153). Her powers to destroy the fertility of the earth are symbolic of her powers to destroy the fertility of the state. Destructive sexuality and motherhood, in Ovid's myth, are, therefore, undeniably linked. A mother's love unchecked by male dominion has catastrophic effects on society as a whole.

"Shelley and Tragedy: Shelley's Proserpine"

Mary Shelly, while influenced by Ovid, chooses the form of Aeschylus for her revision of the Demeter\Proserpine myth. While I will agree with Judith Pascoe that Shelley never intended for the play to be performed, as she never pursued the
production of it, her version of Ovid’s myth still, “heightens[s] the emotional content of the stories,... prolong[s] suspense and ... allows[s] for the theatrical realization of human transformation” (182). Shelley was no stranger to reading plays, just as she was no stranger to seeing them. Judith Pascoe notes that, “The Shelley’s reading list...shows her immersed in a private Shakespeare tutorial in the years 1818 to 1819; she read nearly all of Shakespeare’s plays, sometimes on her own, sometimes in tandem with her husband” (183). Pascoe also notes that the Shelley’s were “avid theatergoers” (183). Shelley loved the intellectual possibility of the tragic form. She was “more interested in drama’s ability to express human emotion than in its ability to dazzle an audience with startling visual effects” (Pascoe 185). In choosing to write the myth as tragedy, therefore, Shelley allows her readers to engage in the emotional aspect of the tale.

Shelley’s version of the myth, while inspired by the form of Aeschylus (although not the myth of Aeschylus), is also critical of the female archetypes that Aeschylus writes and that Ovid maintains. Shelley begins the play by reinforcing the almost spiritual nature of the mother-daughter relationship, a relationship that Ovid sees as secondary to that of the husband-wife but was central to the archetype of the pre-Classical goddess figure. Eric Neumann writes of the mother-daughter duo: “The close connection between mother and daughter, who form the nucleus of the female group, is reflected in the preservation of the ‘primordial relationship’ between them. In the eyes of the female group, the male is an alien, who comes from without and by violence takes the daughter from the mother” (306). In the opening lines of Shelley’s play, Proserpine calls out to her mother in desperation, “Dear Mother, leave
me not!” (5). Ceres responds, “My lovely child, it is Jove’s command:-The golden
self-moving seats surround his throne, the nectar is poured out by Ganymede, and the
ambrosia fills the golden baskets; They drink, for Bacchus is already there, but none
will eat till I dispense the food. I must away- Dear Proserpine, farewell!” (6). Ceres
refers to the festival of Bacchus or Dionysus. “Demeter and Dionysus are ‘closely
connected at many points both in myth and cult,’ and their cultic functions both were
particularly associated with women” (Richardson 133). The Bacchic rites of the cult
of Dionysus are similar to those of the Thesmophoria, commonly called the
Eleusinian Mysteries, as the rites were performed by the priestess at Eleusis. Noting
Shelley’s connection with the Romantic Hellenism sweeping England, Richardson
explains the significance of this reference in terms of Shelley’s interest in the pre-
Classical goddess figure:

Shelley seems less engaged in versifying Ovid than in recovering the ritualistic
beginnings of Greek drama, with its roots in Dionysian cult worship and earth
goddess fertility rites...[in Shelley’s time], among the new syncretic systems
proposed to ground classical mythology in cultic practices or fertility rites,
several suggested (in their quite different matters) important links between
Demeter and Dionysus. (134)

As evidence of a growing interest in the pre-Classical goddess figure, Richardson
goes on to cite Jacob Bryant’s chapter on “The Rites of Damater, or Ceres” in A New
System (1774-76), Richard Payne Knight’s A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus
(1786), and Charles Dupois’ “Traite des Mysteres,” part of Origine de tous les cultes
(1794), all of which argue for the study of Greek and Roman texts with an exegesis of
the goddess in mind (134). Shelley may have been following in the footsteps of her contemporaries, and proof that she was aware of the works of her contemporaries lies in the fact that the “Dionysian aspect of Greek culture, popularized by Nietzsche in the late nineteenth-century, was known much earlier among the German authors [Wieland and Schiller] read by the Shelleys” (Richardson 135).

Rather than begin the play with an assertion of Jove’s power over the Titans, Shelley begins it with a lamentation of a mother’s love and the desperation of a daughter’s plea to hold on to that love, symbolic of both her virginity and her sexuality: “Virgin and mother stand to one another as flower and fruit, and essentially belong together in their transformation of one to the other… This unity of Demeter and Kore is the central content of the Eleusinian mysteries” (Neumann 307).

She goes on to write that Ceres leaves Proserpine in the care of Ino, a “dark-eyed” (6) nymph (one who rejects a life of marriage to follow the cult of Artemis), instructing her to tell Proserpine the tales of Syrinx and Daphne, women who, as a result of their stunning beauties, are ultimately conquered by Pan and Apollo, gods who cannot control themselves in the face of such overt sensuality. Ceres’ request stands almost as a warning to Proserpine of the destructive nature of male lust. Shelley goes on in this same section to reference Pandora. She refers to the overtly seductive female (whose beauty, according to classical mythology, tempts Epimetheus, even against the warnings of the gods, bringing death and destruction to the world) as “fair Pandora, mother of mankind” (6). Clearly, right from the start, Shelley intends to disrupt the classical notions of female sexuality as destructive and reclaim them as “fair,” female powers that rightfully pre-date the Olympians and
serve as the “mother[s] of mankind.” The only charge Ceres leaves Proserpine and her nymphs is that they “depart not from each other” (6). Here, Shelley is re-emphasizing the importance of the female bond, unpolluted by male influence, another concept central to the Eleusinian mysteries.

The song “Arethusa,” Ino’s tale that follows Ceres’ exit, is an attempt by Shelley to mirror the structure of Ovid’s re-telling of the myth; however, while the placement of the song within the text is credited to Shelley, the song itself is written by Percy Bysshe Shelley. For this reason, I will not spend too much time on it, as my intention is to claim Shelley as an author worthy of study in and of herself, but I depart from Richardson’s argument and note that Percy Bysshe Shelley’s descriptive imagery of the near capture of the river goddess is consistent with his wife’s sympathies for female virgin archetype. He writes:

The Earth’s white daughter
Fled like a sunny beam,
Behind her descended
Her billows unblended
With the blackish Dorian stream:-
Like a gloomy stain
On the Emerald main
Alpheus rushed behind,
As an eagle pursuing
A dove to its ruin,
Down the streams of the cloudy wind. (10)
The dash may denote a pause that emphasizes the enormity of the darkness that ensues when Alpheus begins to pursue the virginal maiden who is “Earth’s white daughter.” The fact that Percy Bysshe Shelley denotes a specific separation between Arethusa and the “blackish Dorian stream,” may be symbolic of the separation of the patriarchal Olympians from the victimized earth goddesses, as, in Greek mythology, the Dorians descended from Zeus, whose power trumped those of the earth goddesses. The imagery of the eagle and the dove further emphasizes this fact, as at the end of *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid claims Jove’s bird as an Eagle and Cytherea’s (Aphrodite/Venus) as a dove. While symbolic on an intellectual level, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s choice of metaphors also denotes where his sympathies lie. It is clear that Alpheus is pursuing Arethusa against her will; he, like an eagle, hunts his prey and will ravish her in much the same violent manner. By making reference to Alpheus as an eagle and Arethusa as a dove, Percy Bysshe Shelley is essentially referencing both the literal conquering of the virgin-goddess figure and the symbolic usurpation of female will by male desire.

Proserpine’s response to Ino’s song is to thank her for beguiling an hour that “with poesy might make pause to list the nightingale in her sweet evening song” (12). Shelley’s reference to the nightingale is both an example of irony and foreshadowing. In book six of *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid depicts the “evil” deeds of the sisters Philomela and Procne, who, after Tereus rapes Philomela, feed him his own children for supper (182). Both girls then turn into birds, Procne presumably a nightingale (Ferber 137). Shelley is evoking the imagery of Ovid’s violent depiction of Procne and juxtaposing it with a sweeter, gentler picture of the victimized female. She is
perhaps preparing her readers for a more sympathetic reaction to Ceres’ upcoming
revenge than Ovid allows.

Following Greek tradition, Shelley does not depict Proserpine’s rape on stage. However, this does not diminish its effect. In fact, the uncertainty of Proserpine’s whereabouts for both Ceres and the reader, endear the anguished mother to the reader even more. “Instead of celebrating or romanticizing the rape (an attitude firmly established in Attic mythology and all too prevalent today), Shelley condemns it by emphasizing Ceres’ bereavement, the heartsickness of Proserpine’s nymphs, and Proserpine’s own desire to escape from ‘hateful Tartarus’” (Richardson 129). Just prior to the end of Act I, Proserpine sings an invocation to Ceres, as she prepares for her mother a crown made from the freshly blooming flowers of the earth. “Whereas Ovid, for example, portrays Proserpine as an unreflective child, willfully straying after flowers in infantile abandon, Shelley portrays Proserpine as a thoughtful, emphatic adolescent, seeking flowers not for herself, but in order to ‘twine a blooming wreath’ For (her) dear Mother’s rich and weaving hair’” (Richardson 126). The invocation, like the song of Arethusa is written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, as his second and last contribution to the text, but Shelley’s strategic placement of it within the text, just prior to Proserpine’s rape and her separation from her mother, again reinforces the sacredness of the mother-daughter bond:

Thou from whose immortal bosom
Gods, and men, and beasts have birth
Leaf, and blade, and bud, and blossom,
Breath thine influence most divine
On thine own child Proserpine. (14)

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s depiction of the bond between Proserpine and Ceres and Ceres’ “influence” upon her daughter is consistent with his wife’s depiction of the mother-daughter pair. He emphasizes the duality of the mother-virgin, and Shelley’s placement of the invocation within the play (just prior to the temporal separation of the mother-daughter) reinforces the fact that “precisely because Demeter and Kore are archetypal poles of the Eternal Womanly, the mature woman and the virgin, the mystery of the Feminine is susceptible to endless renewal. Within the female group, the old are always Demeter, the Mother; the young are always Kore, the Maiden” (Neumann 309). This was, again, a central “motif” of the Eleusinian mysteries “and hence in all matriarchal mysteries is the heuresis of the daughter by the mother, the ‘finding again’ of Kore by Demeter, the reunion of mother and daughter (Neumann 308). When Ceres returns to find her daughter missing, she laments:

Alas! My boding heart,—I dread the worst...Nights shall not hide her from my anxious search. No moment will I rest, or sleep or pause

Till she returns, until I clasp again

My loved one, my lost Proserpine. (18)

The dash here may represent the enormity of her grief as well as the enormity of the gulf between herself on earth and her daughter in heaven. Her grief is echoed by that of the nymphs whose guilt overwhelms them into almost unbearable agony. “Where Ovid’s version of the myth confirms the male pantheon’s ascendancy and blandly represents rape as an Olympian prerogative, Shelley’s version restores something of Demeter’s pre-Olympian power as Earth goddess, translated into the ethical and
political forces of women united as a community” (Richardson 130). Shelley begins
Act II with a show of the female solidarity between Ceres and the nymphs, as the
nymphs search frantically for Proserpine, fearing the worst, and sorry for Ceres whom
Ino notes:

In her rage has struck the land with blight;

Trinacria mourns with her;- its fertile fields

Are dry and barren, and all little brooks

Struggling scarce creep within their altered banks;

The flowers that erst were wont with bended heads,

To gaze within the clear and glassy wave,

Have died, unwatered by the failing stream.-

And yet their hue but mocks the deeper grief

Which is the fountain of these bitter tears. (21)

Whereas Ovid represents Ceres’ revenge as “savage,” a “betrayal” of duty (153),
Shelley’s nymphs tell a different tale, of a woman in the grips of grief who stands
unsatisfied by her desperate act, the “fountain of these bitter tears” (21), yet neither
Ceres nor any of her female allies remain passive in the face of the abduction.
Richardson notes that “While Ovid’s Arethusa…simply catches sight of Proserpine in
Hades and reports back to Demeter, Shelley’s Arethusa witnesses the rape and
actively tries to prevent it” (129). Similarly, “the powerful show of female solidarity
[that of Ceres, Eunoe, Ino, Arethusa, Iris] forces Jove to compromise on his ‘fixed’
decree, and Proserpine is granted half of each year on Enna with her companions”
(Richardson 130). Ultimately, it is Ceres active questioning of Jove that forces a compromise between the Olympian gods and Chthonian goddesses.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between Ovid and Shelley’s text is the representation of Proserpine’s consumption of the pomegranate which eternally binds her to Death. Ovid writes:

But Proserpine, guileless, innocent,

Had taken refuge in Death’s formal gardens

And, as she strolled there, plucked a dark pomegranate,

Unwrapped its yellow skin, and swallowed seven

Of its blood purple seeds (155).

According to Mann and Lyle, “The pomegranate symbolizes Hades’ seed, or sperm. The seed is bitter, as befits the Lord of the Underworld, but it is enclosed in sweet red flesh which symbolizes his passionate nature. By eating the fruit, Persephone receives his male energies- of her own free will. Having symbolically accepted him, she must become his bride...Persephone, in eating Hades’ fruit has knowledge of him- an old way of describing sexual intercourse” (106-7). While Ovid’s Proserpine eats the seed “of her own free will,” even while “guileless” and “innocent,” (and there is no evidence that this is not the case, as Ovid never gives Proserpine a voice to tell her version of the seed consumption), Shelley’s Proserpine appears to have no knowledge of a voluntary consumption of the seed. She rejoices, “I have no stain of hell. I am forever thine, oh Mother!” (27) Ascalaphus has to explain to her the meaning of the seed consumption. The nature of Proserpine’s understanding of the act is ambiguous. She neither confirms nor denies it, saying only “If fate decrees, can we resist” (28). If
Mann and Lyle’s argument about the significance of the seed in the myth is correct, than, in not writing Proserpine’s confirmation or denial, Shelley questions the validity of a sexual act originating in violence or deception—especially when this act is taken against a woman. Consequently, she also questions the validity of the nineteenth-century mode of woman as coquettish, deserving of the strict constraints of modesty placed on them by men and, instead, makes the woman, not the man, the victim of insatiable desire.

By revising the myth of the rape of Proserpine, Shelley, symbolically, expresses a sense of grief for the scorned goddess, violated by the patriarchal gods of Olympus. She also, in effect, condemns the justification of carnal male lust as well as the archetype of the female temptress promoted by writers like Rousseau. In the following chapter, I will expand more on Rousseau’s indirect influence on Shelley, as well as discuss more in depth the influence of Wollstonecraft on Shelley. I will also introduce another female archetype made popular in Classical Greek myth—the Cassandra figure. In discussing how this archetype appears within Shelley’s own writing as well as in her mother’s, I will attempt to link the presence Cassandra, the misunderstood, “mad” prophet, to Shelley’s own interest in overturning the patriarchal forces of her own day—even with the understanding that she is perhaps doomed to be herself misunderstood.

1 While my argument that the play is historical feminist revisionism is inspired by Richardson, Alan “Proserpine and Midas: Gender, Genre, and Mythic Revisionism in Mary Shelley’s Dramas.” The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond ‘Frankenstein.’ Ed. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther Schor. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. my side-by-side close reading of the actual texts of Ovid and Shelley is my own work.
2 When I refer to “Shelley,” I am referring to Mary Shelley, as she is the subject of my study.

3 Much of what is known about the play comes from Thomas Medwin’s (Percy Bysshe Shelley’s cousin and biographer) *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1847), in which Medwin recounts his memories of the Shelleys in the winter of 1820. He writes:

> Mrs. Shelley had, at this time been writing some little Dramas on classical subjects, of which was the Rape of Proserpine, a very graceful composition that she has never published. Shelley contributed to this the exquisite fable of Arethusa and the Invocation to Ceres [Latin for Demeter]-Among the nymphs gathering flowers on Enna where two whom she called Ino and Uno, names which I remember in the Dialogue were irresistibly ludicrous. She also wrote on Midas-into which .latter, and Pan’s characterized Ode. (252)


4 Even Richardson, whose article provides the basis for much of my study, does not fully separate the two.

5 I have taken this section from the 1832 *Winter’s Wreath*, as discussed in Mary Shelley’s journal. See endnote # 3.

6 Because Mary Shelley uses the Latin names, I will refer to them as such; they are Demeter and Persephone in Greek

7 The date of composition is ca. beginning of the seventh-end of the eighth century B.C.

8 The date of composition is ca. 1,000 B.C.

9 This is, of course, the myth that Mary Shelley recounts in *Proserpine*

10 He began studying the hymns beginning in the winter of 1818, as Mary Shelley notes in her journals. From now on, I will refer to Shelley’s journals as *MSJ*.

11 She began studying Ovid in the spring of 1815 and continued through the spring of 1820

12 I will focus specifically on the presence of Ovid in Shelley’s work, for it is Ovid who provides the basis for the plot structure of Shelley’s text and whom, most critics agree, has the most profound influence on the composition of the play itself.
She began in the winter of 1820 with Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, as noted in her journal.

This group of writers is often referred to as the Hunt Circle (the second generation of Romantics) named after Leigh Hunt. Members include: P. Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats, Vincent Novello, Charles and Mary Lamb, Horace Smith, and Benjamen Haydon.

Some other works of P. Shelley that adhere to the principles of Romantic Hellenism are, to name a few: *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1816), *The Sensitive Plant* (1820), and *The Hymn of Pan* (1820)

This is the revision the same that Mary Shelley was transcribing at the time she composed *Proserpine*.

In other words, Shelley wishes not solely to revise for the sake of revising but to revise with a political purpose in mind.

In fact, she read and finished *Vindication* in the same month as the play itself; it became her companion reading to Ovid.

It is important to note that alongside the works of her mother, she was also reading Rousseau's *Emile ou de l'Education*, a work whose arguments about the destructive forces of female sexuality her mother refutes in *Vindication*.

While the Olympian pantheon is also dominant in Homer, there seems to be more of a recognition in Homer of the displacement of the goddess figure to make room for such a pantheon than there is in Ovid. In Homer, Calypso questions the validity of the double-standard of the pantheon in not allowing a female goddess to have an affair with a mortal while male gods make such activity common practice. There is a sense that the patriarchal actions of such a pantheon have not yet been morally "set in stone," whereas by the time Ovid was writing such actions were unquestioned common practice.

The rape motif is a common one in ancient mythology. To name a few: Death and Proserpine, Alpheus and Arethusa, Pan and Syrinx, Apollo and Daphne, Procne and Philomela, Agamemnon and Cassandra, Beatrice and,

23 Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon to take revenge for the death of their daughter Iphigenia who is
sacrificed in order for the Greek army to find victory in the Trojan War. She chooses the “oikos”
(private) over the polis (public), and out of this choice, made out a mother’s desperation, tragedy
ensues. Aeschylus calls Clytemnestra a “lioness in human form,” and Agamemnon is a man, “caught
by the ruthless falsehood of a wife, in the foul spider’s web bound fast” (94). She is an overtly sexual
woman whose sexuality is the key to Agamemnon’s undoing. “She who hunts is she who shares his
bed” (81).

24 I am discussing the festival of the cult of Demeter
Chapter Two: Dualism and *Valperga*

“An Introduction to Ancient Mythology in *Valperga*”

Like *Proserpine*, Mary Shelley’s *Valperga or The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823),¹ is, in many ways, a generic anomaly in that it challenges the popular patriarchal ideologies of Romantic Hellenism and infuses them with more humanist and feminist value structures. These new ideological structures laud the progress of democratic, feminist² reformers like Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and posthumously published *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* (1797) Shelley read while beginning her writing of *Valperga* and completing her writing of *Proserpine*.³ It is, therefore, my claim that, in writing *Valperga*, Shelley is not solely influenced by the works of the ancients, but also in the works of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, whose archetypal female heroines are victimized in the same fashion as the ancient women of mythology, most notably Demeter and Proserpine.

Shelley began writing *Valperga* between 1820 and 1821.⁴ Perhaps inspired by both the works of her mother and her new found interest in ancient mythology, in particular with the mother-daughter figures of Ceres and Proserpine (whom historians often write as two different aspects of the sacred feminine from ancient times- the Kore)⁵ and the ancient “mad” prophetess Cassandra,⁶ in her portrayal of the female protagonists, Euthanasia and Beatrice, Shelley creates likenesses to both of these mythological archetypes. In doing so, she links the victimization of her own female characters, representations of nineteenth-century women, with that of the ancients. Shelley, like most of the female literary critics of this period, uses her writing to
“condemn the abuse of patriarchy and the traditional construction of masculinity” (Mellor 91).

Shelley may have been particularly interested in reviving figures from ancient mythology to re-assert the validity of the novel as a form (as Sir Walter Scott had done), upholding the same kinds of moral values as ancient myth; the only difference between the two sets of values is that Shelley’s values, like her mother’s, often questions the validity of the patriarchal structures upon which these values are based while, paradoxically, at the same time often glorify the fulfillment of the patriarchal standards of her day. In referring to the great respect for the morality of the classicists, Anne K. Mellor notes in her historical examination of eighteenth and nineteenth-century women’s literature Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780-1830:

In the earlier eighteenth-century, the epic poem had been ranked first among the literary genres, followed by the tragic drama, the Horatian and Pindaric odes, comic genres and satires, and the lesser poetic forms (the sonnet, the ballad). At the lowest level of the literary arts were the various forms of prose fiction: stories, legends, romances, novels. (95)

Mellor also notes that women writers were particularly critical of this assumption, as the novel was predominately associated with females.

In incorporating elements of an ancient Greek myth into the modern form of the novel, Shelley makes a powerful statement about the potential of conveying a message of morality, and a non-patriarchal morality, in a literary form that had previously been associated with “romance” and “sentiment” (Mellor 96). Shelley
asserts the literary validity of the novel which had only gained popularity at the end of the eighteenth-century (Watt 10) and which had been traditionally associated with middle-class women (Watt 43), thereby distancing itself from “respectable forms of literature and scholarship” (Watt 42). Most women writers of Shelley’s time were writing works of what Nancy Armstrong terms “Domestic fiction” (467-475) which clearly distinguished between the “masculine and feminine spheres” (Armstrong 469). Armstrong writes that this fiction, “offered their readers a way of indulging, with a kind of impunity, in fantasies of political power that were the more acceptable because they were played out within a domestic framework where legitimate monogamy- and thus the subordination of female to male- would ultimately be affirmed… domestic fiction could represent an alternative form of political power without appearing to contest the distribution of power that it represented as historically given” (471). Shelley’s women, however, do not exist solely in the “domestic sphere but also are powerful figures in the “political”; therefore, Shelley blurs the lines between what is domestic and what is political, between what is masculine and what is feminine. Furthermore, Shelley, in her disassociation of the novel form from a particular gender, criticizes the fundamental patriarchal values that would assume a distinction between masculine and feminine in the formation of literature.

In Valperga, Euthanasia is a woman whose inherited power ultimately becomes an obstacle in the battle for political power over Florence, while Beatrice, when Shelley first introduces her, is a woman whose religious gift inspires even the most political figures of her day. In addition to blurring the lines between the political
and the domestic, in writing mythological archetypes, Shelley undermines what
Armstrong sees as the dominant ideology that the distribution of power is
“historically given” (471), more specifically, that the distribution of power is
“historically given” to men.

One particular aspect of the mythological Kore that is particularly
undermining to popular nineteenth-century views of women is the fusion in the
mother-daughter, two different models of woman, “virgin” and “whore.” This fusion
undermines the ideologies upheld by Rousseau which asserted that a woman was
either one or the other, never both. The existence of both dueling characteristics in
one being shakes the foundation that the two entities are separate, a foundation that
inherently characterizes the female as one-dimensional. Like Wollstonecraft who, in
her novel *Maria or the Wrongs of Women* criticizes the labeling of women who refuse
to conform to the virgin\whore dichotomy as “mad,” in an attempt to subvert the
dominant morality, Shelley parallels Beatrice with the Cassandra figure- a woman
victimized by the passions of man and, therefore, labeled “mad.” Shelley’s Beatrice,
therefore, is written in both the tradition of Wollstonecraft’s Maria and the ancient’s
Cassandra. In Beatrice, Shelley, like her mother, proves that “the female mind was
not only as rational as the male but perhaps even more rational” (Mellor 86).

“Female Sexuality in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century”

As I have noted in both my introduction and my discussion of *Proserpine*, the
misogynistic attitudes of the ancients towards female sexuality and the perpetuation
of those attitudes in the nineteenth-century\textsuperscript{8} is the source of an internal struggle in the writings of both Wollstonecraft and Shelley.\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, before I proceed to further explore Shelley's *Valperga*, I should further comment on the specific eighteenth and nineteenth-century attitudes towards female sexuality, as it is sexuality that is the source of much contention and debate amongst nineteenth-century philosophers (most notably Rousseau and Wollstonecraft), and it is also female sexuality which was the focus of the popular literary form of the novel, for as Nancy Armstrong notes, “The history of the novel cannot be understood apart from the history of sexuality” (468). It is also the debate over a woman’s control over her own sexuality that is at the heart of the creation and existence of the Kore as well as the Cassandra figure.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth-century, the law that prohibited women from possessing any form of property also prohibited a woman’s control over her own body. As historian Daniel Pool notes:

By law, virtually all of a woman’s property became her husband’s upon marriage [not excluding body], his courtship was in some measure a career move as well as a search for a life partner. Thus, to lead him on would be to ask him to make a bad investment of his time... ’Once a woman has accepted an offer of marriage,’ advised *The What- Not or Ladies Handbook* ...,\textsuperscript{10} all she has or expects to have becomes virtually the property of the man she has accepted as husband and no gift or deed executed by her is held to be valid. (181)

Marriage, in the nineteenth-century, is both an economic and physical transaction between husband and wife; he acquires both physical property and a right to sexual
dominion while she, in turn, is provided with what should be a sense of financial and physical security.

Again, Mary Poovey, in her book The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer, provides perhaps the most comprehensive modern study of female sexuality and marriage in the nineteenth-century. She notes the paradox that exists in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century males’ attitudes towards the nature of female sexuality. Quoting Adam Smith, and commenting on the nineteenth-century confusion over the true nature of female sexuality and its role in the domestic sphere, Poovey writes, "At the heart of the explicit descriptions of the ‘feminine,’ angelic women, superior to all physical appetite, resides the ‘female sexuality’ that was automatically assumed to be the defining characteristic of female nature’… the persistence of the assumption that females are fundamentally sexual can be seen in nearly all examples at nearly every level in the conduct material: Defoe, Bernard Mandeville, and Jonathan Swift" (21). Therefore, in order to keep a woman’s sexual desire at bay, a man must be very careful how desirous he allows his wife to become. The concept of modesty is, consequently, a paradox in that it both “assures the world that a female’s sexuality is under control and that it needs to be controlled. Modesty announces purity in a virgin, promises fidelity in a wife, and thus will continue to be a reflection of her husband’s power” (Poovey 22).

Pool notes that as a woman, to conceive of oneself outside of the dichotomy of either the “virgin” (a woman so modest that she borders on prude) (186-88) or “whore” (a woman so immodest that she will be forever denied a suitable social position) (188) “was to move wholly outside of social definition, to risk being
designated a ‘monster’” (Poovey 23)… the employment of “strategies that enabled women either to conceive of themselves in two apparently incompatible ways or to express themselves in a code capable of being read in two ways: as acquiesce to the norm or as departure from it” (Poovey 44) furthered the eighteenth and nineteenth-century archetype of the “mad woman.”

Perhaps most notably discussed in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979), the archetypal mad woman is not innately mad, but deemed mad by what Anne K. Mellor calls in her introduction to Wollstonecraft’s *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman*, “the power of the patriarchy to define what a given society regards as ‘sane’ and to relegate every behavior that deviates from the norm to the category of ‘insane’” (xiii). The woman who chooses to define herself outside of the virgin\whore dichotomy is “mad.” Shelley, therefore, like her mother, is in search of a female identity that is neither one (virgin) nor the other (whore) but like the Kore is a fusion of both the mother-whore and daughter-virgin.11

“Mary Wollstonecraft: Maria: Maria or The Wrongs of Woman and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*”

In Wollstonecraft’s *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Wollstonecraft struggles to create a woman who represents both “virgin” and “whore” and who is labeled “mad” for this “offense.” In fact, Wollstonecraft’s Maria parallels the archetypal mad woman from ancient mythology, so in reading both Wollstonecraft
and the ancients, “side by side,” Shelley may have been doubly influenced in her creation of Euthanasia and Beatrice..

In *Maria* or *The Wrongs of Woman*, Maria Venables, is a woman trapped in an insane asylum, just as women of her day were metaphorically trapped by the confines of patriarchal attitudes towards them. She is placed there by her husband for refusing to be subjugated to the laws of marriage that deny the right of a woman to claim her body or her mind as personal property outside the jurisdiction of male ownership; for this act she is a “whore.” However, prior to this “offense” she is ever the dutiful wife and daughter, modest in all respects. Of Maria’s anguish over her downfall, Wollstonecraft writes, “The lamp of life seemed to be spending itself to chase the vapours of a dungeon which no art could dissipate.- and to what purpose did she rally all her energy?- Was not the world a vast prison and women born slaves?” (11)

Maria does not conform to the dominant laws and social structures of her time. For her acts of defiance (refusing to be sold as a sex slave and running away from her husband), her husband, representative of all those patriarchs who abuse their power over women, punishes her by declaring her insane and placing her within an asylum. She, however, reclaims her own identity, even at the expense of her freedom. “In discussing women’s life writing, Carolyn Heilbrun suggests that because they [women] were ‘(f)orbidden anger [by the laws of modesty], women could find no voice to publicly complain; they took refuge in depression or madness.’ Yet in Wollstonecraft’s text, it is precisely Maria’s daring to express her anger [over a husband who spends all her dowry, goes into debt and then tries to sell Maria into sexual slavery] and her indignation about her experiences of injustice in a patriarchal
culture that results in that culture labeling her ‘insane’; she does not willingly take refuge in madness but is, rather, labeled as mad because of her active disdain for patriarchal authority” (Matthews 88). The madhouse is both a literal madhouse and a metaphoric one that assumes the entrapment of the female within the polarity of the virgin\whore stereotype. For these reasons, women trapped in the patriarchal social structure that denies them identities outside of those created for them by their male counterparts often contemplates suicide, a fact that those patriarchs who declare them mad use as proof of their madness. In *Maria*, Maria herself contemplates suicide after discovering the death of her daughter. Similarly, feelings of anxiety, depression, and entrapment, force a young servant girl in the novel to drown herself in a tub from which horses were meant to drink.

For Wollstonecraft, it is not the nature of woman that is so innately raw as to demand a cultivation of a sense of obedience but rather the nature of man whose natural desires are so brutish and savage that they lead to a tyrannical abuse of power and a vile de-flowering of the female body. Mary Poovey comments on what Wollstonecraft examines through *Maria’s* Jemima, a servant girl in the novel who is forced into a life of prostitution in order to survive that “not women, she [Wollstonecraft] argues, but men are dominated by their sexual desires; men’s insatiable appetites are the root of both economic inequality and social injustice. Arguments about women’s “natural” inferiority, then, are only men’s rationalizations for the superior social position they have unjustifiably seized, and their talk of “natural” female wantonness is merely a cover for their sexual appetite that men both fear and relish in themselves” (Poovey 71).
Female Sexuality in *Valperga*: The Polarity of the Virgin\Whore

To move from the study of Wollstonecraft’s texts to Shelley’s is not a difficult transition. Both authors are sympathetic to the archetypal “mad woman,” whose origins pre-date the eighteenth-century. In fact, the patriarchal sentiments reflected in the images of the literary “mad woman” harken back to the ancient Greek poets whose writings mirror those of their literary descendants. Perhaps the most famous ancient “mad woman” Cassandra appears first in Homer’s *The Iliad* (c.a. 1000 B.C.), but the most notable account of her is Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.). In Aeschylus’ portrayal of the bloody homecoming of Agamemnon after the fall of Troy, Cassandra appears as a shaken prophetess whom Agamemnon has kidnapped from her home of Troy after the Trojan War. Entrusted by Apollo with the “gift” of prophecy, Cassandra is blessed with the ability to see the future but cursed by the inability to communicate it. A jilted Apollo, upset by Cassandra’s broken promise not to use her prophetic powers until she has consummated a sexual relationship with the powerful sun god, curses her for life. Her prophecies, therefore, always go unheeded, and Cassandra’s brilliance is forever mistaken for madness in the mythology of time.

Christa Wolfe, author of a fictional account of the life of Cassandra, notes that Aeschylus’ view of the famed prophetess is patriarchal in the sense that Cassandra, in Aeschylus’ text, makes reference to a deep-seeded guilt for her inability to stop the murder of Agamemnon. The presence of such guilt implies that her cursed fate to be
“misunderstood” is linked with her “sin” of refusing to give her body to Apollo. As he is a male god, he has every right to claim it (Wolfe 151-52).\textsuperscript{14} Much like the eighteenth and nineteenth century notions of property, the Greeks too believed in the right of a man to subjugate the female body and claim it as his own. Barbara Jane O’Sullivan, in her essay “Beatrice in Valperga: A New Cassandra”\textsuperscript{15} reads beyond the patriarchal prejudices of Aeschylus. She writes about the patriarchal struggle of the god Apollo to rise to power as a late-comer in the Greek pantheon. His display of power over Cassandra becomes a victory of the newer order of gods over the old. Of Cassandra, O’Sullivan writes:

Marginalized to the point of being thought mad, even by her own family, she is doomed to practice her art in isolation. Cassandra’s visions and her passion make her a threat to the order and stability of society, for if she is to be believed, too many comfortable assumptions must be questioned. (142)

These assumptions to which O’Sullivan refers are those that enforce the laws of female subjugation within the Greek republic and even in the pantheon itself. From a feminist perspective, Cassandra, like Wollstonecraft’s Maria, is a woman who refuses to submit to the social standards of men, and is forever punished with the curse of “madness.” In making the claim that the usurpation of Cassandra’s power by the sun god Apollo is representational of the larger death of the goddess figures in the face of the birth of a male pantheon of gods, O’Sullivan links Cassandra not only with the eighteenth and nineteenth-century “mad woman” but also with the cults of the female kore.
Like O'Sullivan, Wolfe too identifies the death of Cassandra with the death of the female goddess figure. She writes of the metaphorical loss of feminine ideology as represented in the death of Cassandra:

'To learn through suffering' - this seems to be the law of the new gods, and likewise the way of masculine thought. This way does not seem to love mother nature but to fathom her secrets in order to dominate her, and to erect the surrounding structure of a world of mind remote from nature, from which women are henceforth excluded. Indeed, women are actually to be feared, perhaps because unknown to the thinking, suffering, sleeping man, they are co-originators of the anxieties of conscience which pounds his heart awake. Wisdom against one's will. The gain of culture by the loss of nature. Progress through pain. (216)

This somewhat archetypal notion of the patriarchal fear of the early female goddesses is noteworthy but perhaps less significant than the political dis-ease in both the ancient and Napoleonic world. Perhaps Wolfe's notion of "progress through pain" extends to the Greek vision of war-fare as a means to end, a patriarchal notion that furthered the spread of Greek imperialism in the eighth century B.C. A sense of political instability in both the eighth-century B.C. and the nineteenth-century A.D. seems to be a contributing factor in furthering the spread of patriarchal ideologies that, according to Stuart Curran in his introduction to Valperga, "saw women as the means by which to forward the designs of a patriarchal culture" (Curran Introduction xvi) and female sexuality as a distraction from the imperialistic designs of the warfare of the state. Conquering the female body, therefore, became a metaphor for the
larger imperialistic designs of two cultures obsessed with furthering their political ideals though violence and blood-shed.

Wolfe attributes the cause of the Trojan War not to the unfaithfulness of Helen but to the Achaean’s struggle to control the sea trade routes across the Bosporus that Troy controlled” (155). Helen becomes a scapegoat for the imperialistic designs of a nation whose literature was a “glorification of a war of piracy” (Wolfe 155). Therefore, the classical mythology that proclaims Helen a “whore,” might be usurped by the eighteenth and nineteenth-century feminist ideologies which state that “arguments about women’s “natural” inferiority, then, are only men’s rationalizations for the superior social position they have unjustifiably seized, and their talk of “natural” female wantonness is merely a cover for their sexual appetite that men both fear and relish in themselves” (Poovey 71).17 Much like Wollstonecraft’s Jemima whose sinful acts are viewed as coquettish by her abusers, Helen suffers the same fate; she is forever demonized in the fabric of myth as a “whore.”

The female, in ancient Greek literature, came to represent man’s loyalty to the oikos (home) and, therefore, a threat to his loyalty to the state. To possess such a loyalty was a weakness that inhibited the designs of imperialism glorified by the individual city-state. Aeschylus’ concern for the victory of Greece in the Persian war, another war of imperialism, prompts him to demonize the Clytemnestra figure because of her inherent connection to the oikos. The slaughter of her daughter Iphigenia is her husband Agamemnon’s final assertion of his loyalty to the state over his loyalty to her, and for this loyalty, Clytemnestra slaughters him. Consequently,
Aeschylus forever vilifies Clytemnestra, describing her as a "vile woman" (91), one who "pollutes his house anew with deadly injury where deepest love was due" (80) and sanctifies Agamemnon.

In writing mythological archetypes, Shelley reclaims the more humanist value structures, described by Wolfe as the value structures of nature, and critiques the nineteenth-century dominant ideologies that seem to place masculine imperialist designs above the more democratic, feminist, and humanist ideologies sought after in the writings of Wollstonecraft. Reminiscent of the archetype of the kore and meant to re-assert the legitimacy of the original "virgin\whore" as a kind of sacred fusion of female sexuality and purity in one being, Euthanasia and Beatrice refute the nineteenth century conception of the female as either "virgin" or "whore"; denying the schism between the two, Shelley employs mythological allusions in the creation of Euthanasia and Beatrice, thereby creating an amalgamation of the principle sacred elements of the kore within both females.

The chapter, entitled "Euthanasia’s Narrative," opens with Euthanasia confessing:

It is strange for one to speak who never before has uttered the sentiments of the heart. With my eyes, I have spoken to the starry skies and the green earth; and with smiles that could not express my emotion I have conversed with the soft airs of summer, the murmurs of streams, and the chequered shade of our divine woods; but never before have I awakened sympathy in a human countenance with words that unlock the treasure of my heart. (107)
Through first person narration, Shelley gives her heroines a voice, and Euthanasia’s somewhat cryptic confession that she has “never uttered the sentiments of the heart,” is Shelley’s own recognition that romantic heroines in eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature have themselves been silenced. Like Wollstonecraft, who gives Maria Venerable, a forum to reject the “labels” that have been forced upon her by an unsympathetic institution, Euthanasia too claims the right to tell her own story. In aligning Euthanasia with the “starry skies” and the “green earth” in addition to the “soft airs of summer,” the “murmurs of the stream,” and the “chequered shade of the divine woods,” Shelley also maintains Euthanasia’s mystical connection with nature that is similar to that of the Kore. “Before the comprehensive human figure of the Great Mother appeared, innumerable symbols belonging to her unformed image arose spontaneously. These symbols—particularly nature symbols from every realm of nature—are, in a sense, aligned with the image of the Great Mother, which, whether they are stone or tree, pool, fruit or animal, lives in them and is identified with them” (Neumann 12).

Further reinforcing this connection between Euthanasia and the mystical Mother-Goddess, Euthanasia recalls the beginnings of her love and comprehension of ancient philosophy, a philosophy that seems much more humanitarian than the ideologies of war-fare often emphasized by the classicists like Homer and Aeschylus. She remembers:

a Greek who once visited us, had related to us what treasures of poetry and wisdom existed in his language, and these were the production of freemen; the
mental history of the rest of the world who are slaves, was a blank, and thus I was irresistibly forced to connect wisdom and liberty together. (109)

For Euthanasia, the head of the castle Valperga, a stronghold against the growing forces of tyrannical imperialism, wisdom and liberty are two ideals that have vanished with the growth of a patriarchal system that upholds the same suffering and war-fare of the pantheon as opposed to the mysticism and humanism of the early goddess. Euthanasia laments, “Alas! I was about the approach the shadow of Rome, the inanimate corpse, the broken image of what was once great beyond all power of speech to express; my enthusiasm changed, and I felt a kind of sacred horror run through my veins” (112). Euthanasia’s horror is a product of her realization that she, like the feminine mystics of the ancient times, is bound to be a victim of the growing social forces that seek to conquer and rule her. In the chapter following the description of Euthanasia’s trip to Rome, Shelley writes of the mental state of her heroine, “Her anxiety, and the combat of feelings which she experienced, destroyed all her peace” (116). Later after Valperga has been conquered, Euthanasia recognizes Castruccio as the “superior force” (406).

Much like her counterpart, Beatrice (whose prophetic powers are much more pronounced then Euthanasia’s as Beatrice is the embodiment of the divine), and the ancient prophet Cassandra, Euthanasia is blessed with the mystical gift of intuition but powerless to pass on the knowledge gained by this gift. Euthanasia sighs:

I can never forget one evening that I visited the Pantheon by moonlight; the soft beams of the planet streamed through the open roof, and its tall pillars glimmered around. It seemed as if the spirit of beauty descended on my soul, as
I sat there in mute extacy; never had I before so felt the universal graspings of my own mind, or the sure tokens of other spiritual existences, as at that moment. Oh! Could I even now pour forth in words the sentiments of love, and virtue, and divine wisdom, then that burst upon my soul in rich torrent- such as was the light of the moon to the dark temple in which I stood- the whole world would stand and listen: but fainter than the moon-beams and more evanescent are those deep thoughts; my eyes glisten, my cheeks glow, but words are denied me.

(113)

Euthanasia’s death, like Cassandra’s is a consequence of her inability to save a people conquered by imperialism. Cassandra cannot stop the Greek forces from conquering Troy just as Euthanasia cannot stop the Luccaean forces from conquering Valperga. Just as Cassandra is linked with the early female kore, so is Euthanasia. In associating her with the moon, Shelley reinforces the spiritual connection between Euthanasia and the mother-goddess. Also, her maternal role in protecting Valperga against the growing forces of destructive imperialism links her with the Mother-Goddess whose “protective power” is the “elementary character of the Feminine” (Neumann 306). Euthanasia even goes so far as to negotiate a peace between Castruccio and the Florentines before agreeing to marry him, proving her maternal desire to protect her people, even at the possible cost of her own happiness.

While the character of Euthanasia also provides an interesting study for the scholar interested in examining the female heroine’s refusal to be conquered, as, according to Curran, the “blond-blue eyed” heroines in Sir Walter Scott’s novels were conquered (xii-xxv), I am more interested in examining Euthanasia’s link with the
prophet Beatrice, a character similar to the archetypal dark-haired, mysterious temptress from Scott’s novels who seeks to pull the hero away from his noble, imperialistic ends. Much like Euthanasia, Shelley also associates Beatrice in *Valperga* with the elements of nature. In fact, Shelley makes a point of noting that Castruccio first meets Beatrice in May, a month traditionally associated with the fertility of the earth and mystical powers of the Kore. Much like her descriptions of the mystical powers of Euthanasia, Shelley is also subtle in crafting the divinity of Beatrice.

Shelley is ambiguous in her description of Beatrice’s somewhat mysterious prophetic powers which are “explained away” by her male counterparts but never quite accounted for by Shelley herself. Shelley notes that Beatrice’s powers stem from her connection with a divine mother-figure, Wilhelmina of Bohemia, the leader of a medieval female cult that asserts the divinity of Wilhelmina, “that as the angel Raphael announced to her mother [Constance of Bohemia] the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, in favor of the female sex” (Shelley 174); however, Shelley never fully validates or denies this claim.

Perhaps it is because Shelley wishes to keep Beatrice’s divinity somewhat ambiguous that, unlike Euthanasia, Shelley does not make the character of Wilhelmina a protagonist of the novel. Rather, she is a secondary character whose story is narrated by the Bishop Marsillio, who denies her divinity and proclaims her a heretic. He recounts, “I preached with animation against this new heresy; it appeared to me so impious, so absurd, so terrifically wicked, that I was touched by the holy impulse as I declaimed against its followers” (174). Barbara O’Sullivan writes:
By sharing the secret of Beatrice’s origins with Castruccio, Marsillio reduces Wilhelmina’s messianism to an entertaining anecdote and gives Castruccio sensitive knowledge which Beatrice herself is denied. Breaking the link between Wilhelmina and Beatrice is thus more than a religious imperative; it is a political maneuver, aimed at undermining the development of a female subculture that threatens the social stability of the patriarchy. (145)

While the forces of patriarchy represented in the character of Marsillio deny the validity of Beatrice’s claims to divinity, and even silence her mother’s story, much as the Mother Goddess was silenced, Shelley herself does not regard Beatrice’s claims as invalid. Like Cassandra and Euthanasia, Beatrice has the ability to prophesize but not the ability to make herself understood. While Marsillio discredits Beatrice’s prophetic powers, Shelley provides a somewhat more ambiguous interpretation of the divinity of the prophet. In asserting that Beatrice knows nothing of her divine” past, Shelley insinuates that Beatrice’s prophetic powers are indeed innate, otherwise, she would not know to claim them as her own. Even though she is ignorant of her maternal lineage, she still believes herself to possess supernatural powers. In fact, Shelley’s first description of Beatrice is anything but earthly. Shelley writes:

She [Beatrice] had thrown off her capuchin, and shone in the light of her divine beauty. Her dress was of the finest white woolen; and in fashion, it partook of the usual dress of the age, and of the drapery of the ancient statues; it was confined at her waist by a silken girdle, and fell about her figure in thick and rich folds; a golden cross glittered at her bosom, on which lay the glossy ringlets
of her hair; on the silver plate bound to her forehead, Castruccio could distinguish the words, Ancilla Dei. (172)

In addition to her association of the prophetess with the ancients, establishing Beatrice in the tradition of the ancient Cassandra figure, and, consequently, the kore figure, Shelley provides a consistently mystic description of Beatrice. Even Marsillio himself is left wondering why Beatrice survives infancy when left in the care of a leper whose very presence inspires the “fear of disease” (180). Marsillio justifies leaving the child with such an “outcast of man and nature” (179) by assuring himself that if her mother is, indeed, “above all the saints of heaven” (178), Beatrice will be protected, and, in fact, when Marsillio returns to the leper’s abode he finds the child, “this morning star of beauty and exceeding brightness, with eyes shining with joy, rosy lips melted into the softest smiles, her glossy hair strewn about her lovely neck, her whole form glowing with the roseate hues of life,” (180) in perfect health.

Yet another marker of Beatrice’s divinity lies in her triumphant ordeal as she mysteriously undergoes and triumphantly overcomes the Judgment of God, an official ritual of the church to determine the divinity or humanity of man. While Marsillio, with little faith in her, seeks out the abbot to ensure her safe passage over the burning coals, Shelley provides no affirmation that the abbot will or does indeed comply with Marsillio’s requests. In fact, Marsillio initially doubts the abbot’s compliance because the abbot will provide no explanation of how he will endeavor to save the prophetess. Marsillio tells Castruccio, “In two hours this ceremony—this mockery begins. I shall not be there; it becomes not my character to be present at such temptations of God’s justice: this is my excuse. But I could not go; I should die if I were to behold Beatrice
bound and suffering. Yet, do you go, and come quickly back to tell me of her success; -go and see if the abbot keeps his word, and if I shall ever behold my child again” (188). Whether or not the abbot, does, in fact, intervene is never clear. Marsillio is doubtful on the day of the trial, and the abbot never confirms nor denies any assistance in the matter. Shelley’s point in providing an ambiguous resolution to the conflict is to provide some doubt for the reader of Beatrice’s humanity; perhaps Beatrice is divine, a goddess of sorts.

One of the factors that facilitates Beatrice’s downfall is that she begins to interpret all of her passions as divine. However, this fact does nothing to discredit her divinity, for more certainly, what brings about Beatrice’s downfall is the loss of her virginity to one who seeks only to exploit her for the purpose of conquering her. Much like Jemima, in Wollstonecraft’s Maria, Beatrice is ruined by a sexual encounter with a man she undeniably trusts. In the tradition of Wollstonecraft, Shelley implicitly denies Rousseau’s argument that women are coquettish and ought to be educated in the ways of modesty. Rather, it is Castruccio who cannot control his savage impulses to vanquish her. “How beautiful she is!” thought Castruccio, ‘and what will become of her?’ He fixed his eyes on the silver plate on her forehead. ‘Yes, she is the Ancilla Dei, a maiden vowed to God and chastity; yet her eyes seem penetrated with love; the changing blooming colors of her face, her form, which is all that imagination can conceive of perfect, appear not like those of the cloistered nun” (199) He takes her, knowing that he will ruin her: “he loved her as he would have loved anything that was surpassingly beautiful; and when, these expressions [feelings of lust for Beatrice], that intimated somewhat of enduring and unchangeable in their
intercourse intruded themselves, they pained and irritated him” (203). Castruccio’s ambiguval treatment of her sacred body is ultimately too much for her to bear. Her steadfast belief in his goodness makes her physically unable to free herself from him, “playfully [innocently] she had bound his head with her own hair and the silken strings entangled with his; she tore her tresses impatiently to disentangle herself from him” (206). Beatrice wishes to both physically and metaphorically disentangle herself from Castruccio, for she knows that Castruccio’s conquest and consecutive abandonment of her will forever strip her of divinity and replace her label of “divine” with the label of “whore.”

Shelley’s dark-haired heroine represents the loss of something sacred in the conquering of the female body for the purposes of carnal and imperialistic lust. Much like the “virgin” goddess figure Proserpine who “eats of Hades fruit” without knowledge of the consequences, so does Beatrice engage in a sexual act with a man who means to deceive. While we may not literally call Castruccio’s deception “rape,” we may infer that had Beatrice understood the consequences of her actions, she would not have begun a sexual affair with Castruccio (her suicide attempts are a good indication of this fact); we may also infer, that Castruccio knows she will not understand, as he refers to her as “a maiden vowed to God and chastity” (199); therefore she has no understanding of sexuality and its consequences. In recounting her story to Euthanasia later in the novel, Beatrice discovers of her fall:

I was a poor simple girl; but I have suffered much; and endurance, and bitter experience have let me into the truth of things; the deceitful veil which is cast over the world, is powerless to hide its deformity from me. I see the cruel heart,
which lurks beneath the beautiful skin of the pard; I see the blight autumn in the
green leaves of spring, the wrinkles of age in the face of youth, rust on the
burnished iron, storm in the very breast of calm, sorrow in the heart of jot; all
beauty wraps deformity, as the fruit the kernel; Time opens the shell, the seed is
poison. (332)

Her reference to a poisonous seed aligns her with Proserpine who “Outwitted by
Hades, persuaded to taste the ‘sweet morsel,’ the pomegranate seeds, she
consummates her marriage with him and belongs to him for at least a part of the year”
(Neumann 308). Shelley also reinforces the connection between Beatrice and
Proserpine when she writes of the “blight autumn in the green leaves of spring,” as
autumn was the season in which Proserpine began her descent into the underworld
after a spring and summer spent on earth.

After Castruccio’s seduction of Beatrice, on her way to Valperga, Beatrice is
repeatedly raped again by a “wicked and powerful enemy” (348). After repeated
victimization, Beatrice begins to conceive of herself as a “mad” woman. She cries to
Euthanasia, “Madness seemed to fall on me” (320). Unable to perceive herself as
either “virgin” or “whore” Beatrice fits the archetype of the eighteenth and
nineteenth-century “mad woman,” struggling to find an identity wholly separate from
the patriarchal conception of the feminine. She dresses poorly, lets her skin get
sunburned, and wanders the countryside searching for an identity. She laments, “But
though life survived these rendering struggles, my reason sank beneath them!— I
became mad” (349). Much like Wollstonecraft’s Maria, she enters into a deep
depression, wailing to a distraught Euthanasia at a loss for how to help her, “Every
word you utter tells me only too plainly what a lost wretch I am. No content of mind exists for me, no beauty of thought or poetry, and, if imagination live, it is as a tyrant, armed with fire, and venom darts, to drive me to despair” (357).

Even the cell in which Beatrice is jailed upon her arrival in Lucca, is reminiscent of the madhouse to which Maria Venerables is confined after her decision to leave her husband. Similarly, Beatrice’s cell, like Maria’s madhouse, is symbolic of the imprisonment of both the female body and the female mind, forced to conform to archetypes of male construction. Beatrice describes the mind as a kind of cave which without the “light” of freedom and knowledge is often dank and barren. “There is an inner-cave, difficult of access, rude, strange, and dangerous. Few visit this, and it is often barren and empty; but sometimes (like caverns that we read of, which are, discovered in the bosoms of the mountains, and exist in beauty, unknown and neglected) this last recess is decorated with the strongest and most wondrous devices” (356). Shelley’s imagery of a barren cave creates a sense of isolation brought about by a sense of female inadequacy in the light of male imperialism. However, even in the midst of such mental depravation, the female, like Wollstonecraft’s Maria, strives to find a sense of self outside of societal constructs. In speaking of the caverns “we read of,” Beatrice implies a sense of female solidarity. Shelley, much like Wollstonecraft, provides hope for the “mad woman” through such solidarity.

Much like the Demeter\Kore, the “‘finding again’ [of the mother figure] signifies the annulment of the male rape, and incursion, the restoration after marriage of the matriarchal unity of mother and daughter” (Neumann 308). While Euthanasia and Beatrice are, of course, not mother and daughter, the sorority and maternal bond
that they share links them together in the same way that Maria and Jemima and Maria and her daughter are linked in Wollstonecraft’s text and the way Demeter and Proserpine are linked in Shelley’s play. Euthanasia and Beatrice share this bond from their first encounter. Euthanasia reassures Beatrice, “that she need no longer fear or hate; that she might again love, hope and trust; and that she, as a tender sister, would sympathize with and support her” (332). Euthanasia feels, “that they were bound together, by their love for one who loved only himself” (333). For Euthanasia and Beatrice, there is relief from “madness” in the knowledge that there exists another who shares the same experience. “Euthanasia was glad to hear her suffering friend talk, however wildly; for she observed that, when she exhausted herself in speech, she became calmer, happier; while if she brooded silently over her own cares, she became almost insane through grief…these two ladies, bound by the sweet ties of gratitude and pity, found in each other’s converse some balm for their misfortunes” (335-36). Perhaps the writings of Wollstonecraft and Shelley are also “balms” that reach back to ancient wounds, seeking to mend and heal them for the sake of future prosperity.

1 Shelley originally meant to title the work The Life and Adventures of Castruccio Prince of Lucca. I will hence forth refer to the work simply as Valperga.

2 By feminist, I mean those that criticizes the victimization of women by the dominant patriarchal institutions of the day.


4 According to Shelley biographer Miranda Seymour, the idea for Valperga was “born” in 1817 at Marlow; “their [Percy and Mary] summer at Bagni di Lucca in 1818 had led her [Mary] to consider the medieval ruler of Lucca, Castruccio Castracani, as a possible central figure…” (252-3). In 1819 and 1820, Shelley read more deeply about the tragic life of Castruccio in Simonde de Sismondi’s Histoire
des Republiques Italiennes du Moyen Age and Niccolo Machiavelli’s *La Vita di Castruccio Castracani da Lucca* (1525) (*MSJ*). Then, according to Shelley’s journal, on August 12, 1820, Shelley and her half-sister Clare took a day trip to Monte San Pelegrino with the purpose of visiting some of the places associated with Castruccio Castracani.


7 It is not my intention to prove in this particular discussion that Shelley, like her mother, often does uphold the patriarchal structures of her time. However, I feel the need to mention it here to avoid misleading the reader into thinking that Shelley’s writing is solely non-patriarchal in nature. While the main argument of this paper does recognize the subtle feminism within Shelley’s works, it is also important to note that her values are complex and often confused with those of her contemporaries.

8 partially due to a renewed interest in ancient attitudes, philosophies, and civilizations

9 The irony, of course, lies in the fact that Wollstonecraft and Shelley, themselves mother and daughter, take an independent interest in the most notable mother-daughter archetype of the ancients.

10 This excerpt from *The Ladies Handbook* was not published until 1859, after the publication of *Valperga*, but the law at the time of *Valperga*’s publication was the same.

11 Neumann’s books is one of the foremost discussion of the Mother-goddess

12 Mary Shelley read the works of Homer in 1820, the year she began composing *Valperga*.

13 *Agamemnon* is the first play in a series if three, *The Oresteia* which recounts the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra after his return from the Trojan War. As previously noted in chapter one, Mary Shelley would have been familiar with the work through Percy Shelley who read it aloud to her in the summer of 1817.

14 Wolfe’s scholarly analysis of the myth of Cassandra is written in *Cassandra* (1984) in the four essays that follow the fictionalized account of the prophetess.
15 Much of my analysis of Valperga’s Beatrice as a Cassandra-figure comes from O’Sullivan’s work in this essay.

16 Wolfe is mostly referring to the epic poems of Homer.

17 I am use the same citation here as earlier to reiterate how the nineteenth century attitudes towards the female coincide with the attitudes of the ancients.

18 I am referring here to heroines like Samuel Richardson’s Pamela or Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders in popular conduct literature of the time.

19 In referring to her in human form, Neumann is discussing her appearance as a mythological figure. Prior to the myth, there existed the worship of mature which was almost always associated with a worship of the feminine.

20 While Homer and Aeschylus also emphasized the importance of poetry and the humanities, Shelley’s intention is to not only emphasize their importance but to declare their importance superior to the importance of war-fare and political violence. Shelley saw the humanities and war-fare as at odds with each other.
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