

Playing (with) Persephone in Eva Ibbotson's *Dragonfly Pool* and *Company of Swans*

The myth of Persephone is a serious story. In ancient versions, the adolescent Persephone is gathering flowers when she is seized by her uncle Hades to be his bride in the underworld. In response, Persephone's mother Demeter separates herself from the other gods and causes the earth to suffer, though her motive for doing so differs from telling to telling. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Demeter withholds the fruits of the earth to pressure the other gods into action: by imperiling humans' livelihood, Demeter materially threatens the flow of offerings from the humans to the divine. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5.341-661), the goddess of the harvest blights the earth out of sheer emotion, with no real strategy backing her grievous anger. After Demeter has taken a toll on the mortal realm, Persephone is returned—but only temporarily. She has eaten from a pomegranate in the underworld and so is bound to return there for part of every year. While the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* stages a struggle between matriarchy and patriarchy on a cosmic scale, Ovid's version illustrates the dangerous potential of power and emotion to upset universal order.

In its ancient forms, with the unmincing depiction of the abduction of a young and vulnerable female, this myth seems an unlikely candidate for the staple of children's literature it has become. There seem to be two basic ways in which recent adapters offset the narrative risks of the ancient tale. They conflate Persephone's kidnap and return with the cycle of the seasons, making the story an explanation of the seasons, and presenting the violent treatment of Persephone as a dramatization of a natural occurrence. Renditions may also play up the story as a testament to the special intensity and power of maternal love. Now, I'm all for later ages making ancient stories their own, so I'm not faulting retellings for a lack of "fidelity." Rather, I'd like to underscore the *degree* to which we have made this story our own and haven't

completely realized it: people now tend to assume that the main point of the Persephone myth, even in antiquity, was to provide an explanation for the seasons and a demonstration of the mother/child bond.¹ Given the pervasiveness of these views of the myth, I was struck to find that Eva Ibbotson uses the story of Persephone—in not one but two of her novels—in ways which buck the trend.

Ibbotson's treatment of the myth is somewhat different from what we might call an "adaptation." Instead, I'd suggest "appropriation," a term Julie Sanders uses for texts which invite interplay but may be appreciated without necessary reference to a source text (see Sanders chapter 2). Ibbotson does, in fact, explicitly mention the myth of Persephone in the novels I will treat here, but her use of the myth extends well beyond those moments, and she allows her readers to recognize those extensions without requiring them to do so. Both *A Company of Swans* and *The Dragonfly Pool* can be read, enjoyed, and interpreted in ways that don't rely on the myth of Persephone—and yet, Ibbotson offers her readers the myth as a possible and productive hermeneutic lens for the novels.

A Company of Swans was originally published in 1985 and has more recently been reissued as a romance for young adults. The novel is set in the early 1900s and tells the story of Harriet Morton, an intellectually and artistically gifted British girl raised by her humorless father and austere aunt. Though Harriet's father is a Classical scholar at Cambridge who made sure that she learned both Latin and Greek, he does not want her to pursue higher education herself. Nor does he want her to follow her love of ballet. At 18, Harriet can look forward to little and she worries that she will marry her father's choice of son-in-law—a life-sucking zoologist named

¹ Although it's not my focus here, I would suggest that these emphases which are so prevalent in versions for children may pose problems of their own—by naturalizing the rape of a maiden and by valorizing a psychologically fraught connection between mother and daughter.

Edward—simply to escape her circumstances. However, another route to a wider freedom presents itself: Harriet is offered a position in the corps of a ballet company about to embark on a South American tour. Harriet joins the company unbeknownst to her father and aunt, and while performing in Brazil, meets Rom Verney, a wealthy British entrepreneur. Of course, they fall in love.

The myth of Persephone is first mentioned by Rom. When offering Harriet a pomegranate, he says to her, “Are you willing to take the risk? They’re dangerous things, pomegranates.” Classically educated Harriet continues the allusion and responds, “Oh yes....It would be no punishment to have to remain here in this place. Or to return. Not for five months or fifty” (174). Later, Harriet uses the myth as the basis for a personal ritual: she eats a pomegranate seed for every day that she hopes to stay with Rom. Harriet and Rom’s commitment to one another is serious, but their invocations of the Persephone myth are self-consciously playful or fanciful and not strictly indicative of their roles and relationship. As Persephones go, Harriet exercises far more agency than her ancient counterparts. She has not been snatched: she brought herself to Brazil, and it is she, not Rom, who initiates their sexual intimacy. Indeed, the caring and careful Rom is an unlikely stand-in for Hades, even if he is the one who first suggests the connection in jest.

Once the myth of Persephone has been introduced (about halfway through the novel), a reader may realize that Ibbotson has been orchestrating resonances between Harriet’s experiences and the myth all along—but not in a way that Harriet herself apprehends. Harriet’s home in Cambridge is relentlessly depicted as a cold, dark, and lifeless place, and in joining the ballet company, Harriet engineers her escape from a domestic underworld. Rom can be seen as a Demeter figure; consistently associated with bountiful resources and thriving gardens, he is able

to give Harriet the love her biological family could not. Harriet's aunt and father are the real avatars of Hades, an identity which their surname suggests: *Morton* with its echo of Latin *mors*, *mortis*, "death." When they realize where Harriet has gone, they deputize Harriet's presumed fiancé Edward to travel to Brazil and retrieve her. Although Edward's attempts are foiled, when Harriet eventually returns to Europe without Rom, her father and aunt intercept her at the dock to keep her from continuing her ballet training. They lock her in their attic where she wastes away until Rom rescues her. In making Rom both a lover and a life-giving substitute mother, Ibbotson transforms Demeter into a romantic hero and the myth of Persephone into a traditional love story.

With *The Dragonfly Pool*, we move to a younger audience. This middle-grade novel (published in 2008) is set on the eve of World War II and focuses on a group of students at an unconventional British boarding school called Delderton. Ibbotson cues readers early on about the myth of Persephone: on the first day of the new school year, the Delderton English teacher tells it to the students, and they begin discussing it as the basis for their annual play. Although Tally (the emotional core of the group) realizes that the story may be apt for a world about to descend to war, it is up to readers to explore how the myth is otherwise echoed in the lives of Tally and her friends. Tally herself takes on a Demeter-like role in her constant concern for others; she even comforts and helps her dormitory housemother, suggesting that age and status aren't the best predictors of a care-giving disposition we might label "maternal." Other characters also display features of Demeter. For instance, in a reversal of roles, Tally's friend Julia grieves for her mother, a Hollywood starlet: keeping her daughter at a distance in an effort to appear youthful, the mother is a perverse Persephone, while Julia channels her own sadness at their separation into her performance as Demeter in the school play. And the children's biology

teacher Matteo combines aspects of both Demeter and Persephone as he wanders the woods at night, mourning his exile from his homeland, the fictional European country of Bergania.

The children and Matteo travel to Bergania for a dance festival, and Matteo is briefly reunited with his childhood friend, the king. But when the king is assassinated by Nazi operatives, the children devise a plan to smuggle Karil, the 12-year-old prince of Bergania, out of the country. And it is Karil who becomes the most persistent Persephone figure in the book. Although Bergania is a flourishing country, Karil's royal duties have sequestered him in an underworld of sorts. Guarded by the protocol-loving Countess Frederica who has raised him since his mother's death, Karil feels imprisoned in the Berganian palace. This "underworld," however, pales in comparison to the possible horrors of Colditz, the prisoner-of-war camp to which the Nazis plan to send Karil upon capture. When the British students—a collective Demeter!—help him to escape Bergania, Karil thinks he is finally free to forge his own identity alongside his new-found friends, but his relatives whisk him off to their dank and decrepit London home where they nurture the last remnants of their once-splendid aristocratic trappings. This is a Hades from which Karil must rescue himself, and he does. Disregarding his grandfather's plans for him to attend a stuffy, conventional boarding school, Karil bolts for the train that will take him to Delderton and reunite him with his friends. In this book, children can be Demeters, and Persephone can save *himself*.

In both novels, Ibbotson summarizes the myth of Persephone, ensuring that readers who haven't encountered the story elsewhere won't be out of the loop. She also provides a multitude of verbal details making each novel's plot resonate with the myth of Persephone. Underworld settings and Hades figures are flagged with words conveying darkness, cold, and artificiality, while the bounty and well-being that come from careful cultivation connect people and places to

Demeter; deep grief for absent dear ones also ties characters to the goddess of harvest. Flower-like purity, vulnerability, and risk attend the books' Persephones. Alongside these clear markers, there is flexibility in Ibbotson's deployment of the myth. In *The Dragonfly Pool*, a variety of characters move in and out of these mythical identifications, and (as is the case with Matteo) some characters exhibit traits of more than one of them. In both novels, which mythical figure a character mirrors does not necessarily depend on age, social role, or gender—both the fixity of identities and the power hierarchies so apparent in the ancient myth become fluid.

Ibbotson repurposes the myth so that it supports her own focus in each novel, be it the romantic plot of *A Company of Swans* or the celebration of friendship and self-actualization in *The Dragonfly Pool*. The emphases found in many other recent renditions are side-lined. With biological mothers largely absent from the plot of both of Ibbotson's novels, the emotional connection between Demeter and Persephone is transformed into a range of affective bonds, and the myth is not used to valorize the mother/daughter relationship in particular. Nor does Ibbotson tie the myth tightly to the seasonal cycle: in both books Ibbotson illustrates that people make places (as well as one another) flourish or perish. Ibbotson's human instantiations of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades all bear some responsibility for their surroundings, actions, and fates. In fact, Ibbotson makes some of her human characters more efficacious and self-determining than their divine counterparts: both Rom and Karil successfully exercise an agency that exceeds that of Demeter or Persephone. Perhaps it is not coincidental that both of these characters are male substitutes for female figures in the myth. While Ibbotson may innovate the myth by casting men in these roles, she nevertheless adheres to expectations of gender and genre. Rom as the romantic hero cannot fail, and though Karil may be helped by his friends, the

narrative seems to need him to score a decisive victory for himself in order to fully and climactically come into his own.

Unlike Harriet's father, Dr. Morton, who treats the field of Classics with his pedantic and death-like touch, Ibbotson introduces her readers to the myth of Persephone through play. Not only do the characters within the books engage the myth in a playful or recreational way, but the novels themselves are also presented as pleasure reading. And yet, Ibbotson has a pedagogical purpose. In addition to teaching readers the myth of Persephone, she has both Harriet and Tally model how a young person might see the myth in their own lives. But none of the characters within the novels recognize the extent to which their stories echo the ancient one—Ibbotson leaves that interpretive move to her readers. While Ibbotson gives readers the pleasure of learning the myth and of tracing its workings throughout the characters' perilous situations, such hermeneutic play primes readers (without pushing them) for a more serious next step, beyond the pages of a book: the application of the mythic lens—with both the courage and comfort it offers—to the challenges, risks, and relationships of the readers' own lives.

Rebecca Resinski

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