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Maternal Love Shown Through Punishment

Megan Donaty, '22

Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and grain, has control over how fertile a land is. In addition, she is also “the goddess of the love a mother bears for her child” (“Ceres, The Goddess”). Being associated with maternal love correlates well with the motherly instincts and nature Ceres displays in Ovid’s *The Story of Erysichthon (Erysichthon)* myth and Pluto’s Rape of Proserpina myth (found in Ovid’s *Minerva Visits the Muses* myth). In these two myths, Ceres demonstrates her natural ability as a mother to not only her own daughter, Proserpina, but also to her woodland nymphs. As a mother, Ceres places her children above herself, going to extreme measures to ensure their safety and well-being. Moreover, Ceres is not afraid to avenge her children and punish anyone who improperly treats her daughters; the punishments she instills on others correlates well with the crimes they have committed. One could say that Ceres takes her role as a mother very seriously. In the *Erysichthon* and Pluto’s Rape of Proserpina myths, Ceres’ maternal instincts and love come through clearly, since she does everything in her power to protect her children, ultimately revealing how Ceres shows her love to her daughters through affliction on others.

In the *Erysichthon* myth, Erysichthon blatantly ignores the warnings about how the grove he is in is sacred to Ceres. Erysichthon violates Ceres' revered grove by violently and ruthlessly chopping down one of her trees, which is actually a woodland nymph. This act was so cruel that "all the dryad sisters...went mourning" (Ovid, *Met.*, 205). The effects of Erysichthon's selfish act were intensely felt by the whole grove. One nymph prays to Ceres and asks her "to punish this impious Erysichthon" (Ovid, *Met.*, 205), and Ceres silently nods in agreement. When Erysichthon's act is brought to her attention, Ceres does not disregard it and fully believes it without needing more evidence or seeing it in person, displaying that even though the nymphs are not Ceres' biological daughters, she trusts them and respects them like a mother would respect and trust her own daughters. This also shows the strong bond Ceres has with her nymph daughters, a bond full of immense love and unwavering trust. Additionally, Ceres does not have any issues with punishing Erysichthon because by inflicting pain on him, she is defending and avenging her nymphs since he violated a mother/daughter relationship. Ceres is more than willing to punish Erysichthon for taking one of her daughters' lives and putting her other nymph daughters in extreme grief and pain. Through Ceres' actions and love towards her nymphs, Ovid

highlights how Ceres expressed her motherly love for her “daughters” by inflicting pain on others (like Erysichthon).

As a punishment, Ceres decides to make Erysichthon forever ravenous. Erysichthon can continuously eat food, “enough to feed a city, enough to feed a nation” (Ovid, *Met.*, 207); however, that mass amount of food will never be able to satisfy his hunger. Erysichthon is so selfishly desperate to end his starvation that he tries to sell his daughter in order to buy more food for him to eat. Eventually, Erysichthon eats himself in an attempt to satisfy his never-ending hunger. Overall, Erysichthon rightfully deserved this punishment from Ceres. Because Erysichthon was extremely greedy and placed himself over others, seen through how he disrespects Ceres’ grove and tries to sell his daughter, Ceres needed to punish him in a way that would cause him to understand how one should not be greedy or selfish and that it is wrong to deny one’s own daughter. Ceres’ punishment causes Erysichthon to exhaust the one thing he most cared about: his riches. This can be seen as an act of revenge on Erysichthon because he destroyed something she cared about-- her sacred grove and nymph daughter-- so Ceres will in turn take away what he cares for. Ceres’ punishment of Erysichthon fits the crime he committed as she slowly and painfully takes away his most treasured possession and makes him forever live in a greedy state of mind that he can never truly satisfy until he eats

himself. Moreover, since hunger makes a person deprived of something, this punishment on Erysichthon fits his crime because he took one of Ceres' nymph daughters away from her; therefore, Ceres forced Erysichthon to also feel deprivation by taking away his hunger, which is something he will always long for, just like how Ceres will always long for her dead nymph. Additionally, Erysichthon's reaction to Ceres' punishment on him highlights the parental differences between Erysichthon and Ceres. As Erysichthon is willing to sell his daughter for his own benefit, Ceres avenges her nymph by potentially risking her reputation in order to punish the man who killed her nymph and caused immense grief on her other nymphs, whom she sees as her own daughters. Erysichthon and Ceres can be seen as beings who both act in a rash ways out of love; however, Erysichthon acts rashly out of love for himself while Ceres acts rashly to express her love to her daughter-like nymphs.

When it comes to Ceres' own daughter, Proserpina, Ceres' maternal instincts are heightened.

In the *Rape of Proserpina* myth, Pluto takes Proserpina "in a rush of love" while she is innocently playing outside (Ovid, *Met.*, 119). Like any child, Proserpina is immensely scared and "called for her mother, her comrades, but more often for her mother" (Ovid, *Met.*, 119), thus showing the strong and trustful connection between Proserpina and Ceres.

Proserpina's kidnapping ultimately deprives Ceres of her only biological daughter, the one daughter Ceres must have the strongest connection and bond with.

The kidnapping of a child is the worst thing that can happen to any mother; additionally, it is incredibly cruel and disrespectful, especially when the child is the daughter of a powerful goddess. Cyane, a nymph, is the first to learn about Proserpina's abduction. Cyane becomes extremely frustrated, emotional, and "grieved for both violations" (Ovid, *Met.*, 120). This ultimately shows that Proserpina was not only like a sister to her, but that Cyane respects Ceres so much because of how kindly Ceres treats her and the other nymphs, as seen in the aforementioned *Erysichthon* myth. Either way, Cyane sees Ceres like a mother to her and knows that Ceres will be completely distraught over the disappearance of her biological daughter.

Ceres partakes on a long journey to try and find Proserpina where she "was looking for her daughter, in every land, on every sea" (Ovid, *Met.*, 121). Throughout this search, Ceres shows her dedication to her daughter and preserves through challenges to try and find Proserpina. Additionally, while searching, Ceres does not rest or drink, since she is too focused on finding Proserpina. This highlights how Ceres willingly puts her daughter before her own basic needs, like rest and hydration. Ceres sacrifices her biological needs so she

does not waste any time in searching for Proserpina, therefore displaying Ceres' extreme maternal instincts. Unlike Erysichthon, Ceres is able to ignore her bodily cravings because she loves her daughter so much: the safety of Proserpina occupies Ceres' mind and makes her ignore her basic needs. Meanwhile, Erysichthon can only think of his basic needs (his hunger) instead of the safety of his daughter as he tries to sell her, again displaying how he does not have the same parental instincts Ceres has as he cannot place his daughter before himself.

When Ceres ultimately finds evidence of Proserpina's fate, she is emotionally distraught. Upon seeing Proserpina's girdle lying on the surface, Ceres immediately "beat her breast in sorrow, and tore her hair" (Ovid, *Met.*, 122). This reaction emphasizes how knowing her daughter was raped almost destroys Ceres. Because of her rage of seeing how her daughter was definitely taken away from her and violated, Ceres curses the land of Sicily by taking away its ability to be agriculturally rich (Ovid, *Met.*, 122) since that was the place where she found the hardcore evidence of Proserpina's kidnap. The nymph Arethusa comes across Ceres during her time of despair and tries to calm her down and tells Ceres to not be angry with Sicily and slightly explains what actually happened to Proserpina. During this interaction, Arethusa calls Ceres "mother" (Ovid, *Met.*, 122). This conversation

between the two again shows Ceres' motherly impact on the nymphs even though they are not her biological daughters. Because of their variation of a mother-daughter relationship, Arethusa feels comfortable enough around Ceres to call her mother, try to calm her down, and reveal the truth to her. Without that motherly influence Ceres has over her nymphs, this would probably not have been possible; therefore, Ceres would not know the truth behind Proserpina's fate and Sicily may have been punished more harshly.

In order to get Proserpina back from out of the Underworld, unfortunately not forever, Ceres must strike up a deal with Pluto. In this agreement, Ceres is forced to agree to split up Proserpina's time between the two of them as Proserpina will spend the winter with Pluto in the Underworld and then be reunited with Ceres for the rest of the year. Despite her power to agriculturally destroy any land, like Sicily, Ceres does not have enough power to usurp Pluto; leading to her own personal punishment: having to share Proserpina. Sadly, strong maternal love cannot always prevail over strong, powerful forces. However, Ceres will always have the power to strongly love Proserpina. Even though this is a harsh punishment for Ceres because she is not permanently reunited with Proserpina and must give her up for a season, Ceres is willing to do this because any time with her daughter is worth it. Ceres missed Proserpina so much and

thought she lost her daughter for a long enough time that she would ultimately not skip out on the opportunity to be with her daughter even though it is for a limited time. This shows Ceres' motherly nature as she is willing to agree with anything in order to see her daughter again.

In the Pluto's *Rape of Proserpina* myth, Ceres shows how love can be a demonstration of power and punishment on others. One could argue that Ceres loves Proserpina so much because she has an intense desire to be reunited with her and punishes others (the people of Sicily) when Proserpina is taken away from her. Additionally, because of her strong love for Proserpina, Ceres afflicts a harsh punishment to both the Sicilians and the Sicilian environment. Innocent people, who may have no idea what is going on with Proserpina's disappearance, suffer because of how distraught Ceres is over losing her only biological daughter. Oddly enough, Ceres expresses love in a violent way by hurting others emotionally and physically, as if her love is too powerful to control within a caring and delicate manner. Ultimately, this myth shows the negative side of love, specifically maternal love. Ceres's actions showcase how love is connected with affliction and that love sometimes cannot really stand on its own, it must be shown in a powerful way through violence.

The *Erysichthon* and Pluto's *Rape of Proserpina* myths highlight how powerful Ceres is as a maternal figure,

since she demonstrates how much she loves her biological and nonbiological children (the nymphs) by punishing others. Moreover, the two myths discuss how love is an irrational emotion, as Ceres shows love by acting impulsively with her punishments to mortals in both myths. As seen in these two myths, love, especially maternal love, can be so overwhelmingly powerful that it causes some to act in rash ways. Despite how these myths were told thousands of years ago, people in modern society still act strangely and punish others because of love. For example, mothers still violently defend their children, people give up vital organs for dying family members, and there are stories where humans (especially mothers) willingly sacrifice their lives to save their loved ones. Thus, love, especially maternal love, is such an overwhelmingly powerful force that it is able to control mortals and even immortals.

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