

IASION: A TRAGEDY

By Amy England
Illustrated by Mary Olson

Beard of Bees
Chicago
Number 8
February, 2004

flowers and wheatfield to eat from the indigo distance you are

BACKGROUND: Demeter and Iasion left the marriage of the future snakes Cadmus and Harmonia, and made their way to the thrice plowed field. They got muddy. Everyone knew what they'd been up to.

Intimate knowledge of Demeter's body either 1) made Iasion the first priest of the Eleusinian mysteries or 2) had to be punished with a) death by thunderbolt, b) death at the hands of his brother Dardanos, or c) death at the teeth of his own horses. Iasion's life was therefore from that point painfully bifurcated. Demeter gave birth to Ploutus, riches, also a euphemism for Hades, her brother, son-in-law, and enemy. Back then everyone would know this.

THE PLAY: Who wrote this play? How old is it? Did it win some prize? Was it performed? Renaissance thinkers considered this play a failure because the list of characters was so unreasonable. Modern thinkers consider this play brilliant because the list of characters is so unreasonable.

THE TRANSLATION: In 1959, the Greek archaeologist Sotirios Dakaris discovered the site of the Oracle of the Dead, the Nekyomanteion, where Odysseus spoke with the ghost of Tiresias. Now it seems possible that every proof of this discovery could also be proof of a well fortified farmhouse. The vaulted underground chamber could have been a cistern; the hallucinogenic lupine seeds could have been converted to a dietary staple by boiling them in water; any prosperous household might have kept such clay images of Persephone.

OTHER TRAGEDIES BY THIS MASTER: *Kore in Illinois*, *Kore in Hawaii*.

Characters

Hermes Psychopompos

Persephone, Queen of the Dead

Demeter as Fury

Dog-headed Hekate

Tiresias with two snakes

Chorus of all whom Demeter has caused to change: Iasion as bolt of lightning, a lizard, Demophoon the charred infant.

SCENE: *It is very dark.*

Hermes

They sent me, because I know the way, because I live there. To fetch Kore now Persephone. She's allowed back up, and then Demeter will set free her vegetable hostage. There will be shade again, and leafy interstices of branches, through which the road can barely be made out. Then won't I feel my old self (*dances*).

Persephone

You here? I thought I heard you here.

Hermes

Are you ready, sister or cousin? Shall we change our elevation?

Persephone

If you say so.

(*They get on the escalator.*)

Hermes

You'll find things changed, your mother's temper bad. You'll find the barley hail-flattened, and your favorite poppies with their red clothes fallen round them. Speaking of fallen clothes—

Persephone

Mother angry. Why is that?

Hermes

You know, she loves you, and you're gone. How blue your skin is. Are those diamonds?

Persephone

Ice. I still don't understand you.

Hermes

Sister, Cousin—

Persephone

Why call me that?

Hermes

I can't keep it straight. Your mother loves you. A knowledge that your stay seems to have erased.

In a play, Cadmus and Harmonia promise to suffer the chasm of appetite.

Persephone

One gains a perspective.

A man crossing an empty stage says, the barley eats our hands.

Hermes

Speaking of love —

Persephone

I wasn't.

Hermes

How is he, hmm? Your temporary lord?

Persephone

In what health, you mean?

Hermes

Passionate? Prostrate with lust? Heated, sullen, smug? What barnyard animal would you say he most reminded—

Persephone

I've been thinking about masonry a lot lately, and statues. Temples, lettered marble. Limestone so fine-grained it could portray the carved barbs of feathers. Granite is cruder; people lack their features. But then, you could be a lump of rock, with a few well placed protuberances, and suggest physical presence. I've been thinking about physical presence.

Cyriacus the visitor sketches a bust of, he says, Aristotle. Throughout the Renaissance, his picture was Aristotle's official face.

Hermes

Of all the gods and men I would most like to cuckold—

Persephone

Down there, no features, no feet. No bodies. The basalt sometimes cools in upright hexagonals, and takes a form that way.

Hermes

Pity how you've gone bald. Still, your head has a lovely shape. I'd fuck a woman with no head at all if it would goad Hades. Old sod. And you know, you've always been, for me, a kind of symbol—

Persephone

Really?

Hermes

A symbol of — Here, no need for that. Put your head back on.

Persephone

Am I still a symbol?

Hermes

Yes, of course, divine one, I don't idolize you for your head. Still, I find this all—

Persephone

And now?

Hermes

—a bit embarrassing. Not the arms! (If you shed your legs, too, we'll never get where we're going, and your mother will have *my* head!) You must know I'm not as easy to discourage as that. If I seduced your mere torso, Hades would still be offended, maybe even *more so*. Seeing you in this state! And I thought talking about fallen clothes was suggestive.

The bust is set in a niche in Chora to represent a saint. It is recut so the eyes are open.

The archaeologist aligns the Cyriacus drawing with the bust, the closed eyes with blindness and Tiresias, the recutting job with error.

A man digging finds a marble hand without fingers.

The Illustrated London News takes pictures.

(But Persephone refuses to restore herself, and Hermes is forced to hold the head and arms awkwardly behind her.)

Persephone

He gave me a lot of presents.

Hermes

He?

Persephone

The old sod. A gold snake for my arm.
A forest of coal trees. A pet fossilized
archaeopteryx.

Hermes

Imagine his face, broken along the flaw
of appetite.

Persephone

I wouldn't take them.

“In [burial] S220 the head had been removed and placed outside the left foot. Where the skull would normally have been were lumps of pitch.”

leafy interstices of branches, through
which the road can barely

barley

“While it is painful to do so, scholarly conscientiousness and the duty to record what I know require me to amend this report as follows: a marble torso (of a youthful Hermes, to judge from the photograph I have seen) was found in the Theater excavation and is now in Prague...”



Hermes

What is that flashing? Where your throat is broken. Flashing and then black. Striking.

Persephone

I ate some seeds. I don't know why. They were so cold and pretty.

the hallucinogenic lupine seeds could have been converted to a dietary staple

Hermes

That could cause trouble later.

Persephone

Garnets in the throat. My voice forked in two. You hear it?

a euphemism for Hades,

Hermes

Your voice sounds like always, but underneath—

painfully bifurcated.

Persephone

Like the drone of a bagpipe. Have you been to Delphi? Heard the voice there?

Hermes

Yes, yes. Wheezing through the little tunnels like a flock of bees. Gives me the willies.

Persephone

And the high voice says, "You are saved if you never see yourself," or, "this woman's son will conquer his father," and mortals hear a path by which death can be avoided. But the under voice, the drone, prophesies the same end for everyone. Monotonous, but harmonizing with every variable future.

Attempt to reroute swollen river through orchestra of theater ends in disastrous flood.

Hermes

I've led enough down this path to be bored by that profundity. Not our problem, is it? And I've been trying to tell you that there are distractions. Will you take these? I'm not your porter.

Persephone

(Puts her arms back on, takes her head)

He's made a seat for me. The basalt columns rise up to form the seat and arms. It looks out onto this central place, this arena of holes. Sometimes it drains the dark like a sieve, and sometimes it's formed by the mouths of pipes that dribble trails of verdigris, and sometimes it's that hive pattern I spoke of, and the dark is solid. Always the empty arena stares at one, as if a thousand eyes saw too much to see anything. Always this completed, pointless pattern. But what you keep suggesting — part of no pattern I can think of. The more I consider it, the more my lack of attraction for you seems like a good sign. *(Puts her head back on.)* Let's have at it.

Hermes

My lady, here we are.

Persephone

What's wrong? You wanted to a minute ago.

underground chamber could have been a cistern;

gone. How blue your skin is. A new cosmetic?

Some workmen unearthing red benches come upon copulating snakes and do not disturb them.

Excavating the "Temple Ionique" gets put off until previous excavators can publish findings, which they never do.

Pitch. I don't understand you.

Hermes

Little Kore, how droll you are. You know a joke from a true proposition.

Demeter

Daughter.

Persephone

Pardon?

St. Tiresias

The answer is women.

(Lightning flashes)

Demeter

Will you let it rest?

“Repeatedly since then, on moonlit nights, we have joined the local population in folk dances and Bacchic revels in the orchestra. On such occasions, as one watched from the top of the cavea the choruses dancing around the orchestra floor, one felt that a faint echo of what once existed had survived and was now being heard again.”

Persephone, Queen of the Dead

Demeter as Fury

(Lightning flashes) bolt of lightning, a lizard, charred infant.

SCENE: *It is very dark.*

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AMY ENGLAND is the author of two books of poetry: *The Flute Ship Castricum* (2001), and *Victory and Her Opposites* (scheduled for release in 2004), both from Tupelo Press. *Iasion: A Tragedy* is extracted from the latter book. She is also the co-author, along with Rikki Ducornet and Catherine Kasper, of *The Books of Ubar*, scheduled for release by The Minister of Whimsy Press in 2005. She teaches poetics, surrealism and creative writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

MARY OLSON is a visual artist and professor of English literature at Tuskegee University. Her book *Fair and Varied Forms: Visual Textuality in Medieval Illustrated Manuscripts* is available from Routledge Press.

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Chicago, IL

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