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Introduction

NEGOTIATING EMPIRE

> To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything.
>
> —JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE, *ITALIAN JOURNEY* <*1786–1788*>, TRANS. W. H. AUDEN AND ELIZABETH MAYER (NEW YORK: NORTH POINT PRESS, 1982), 240

SICILY, THE triangular island that all but touches its neighboring Italian peninsula, is a land rich in history and myth. Many of those accounts tell of invasion, yet there is one, the myth of Proserpina, that enables the island also to play a different role. In the Roman form of that myth, the goddess Ceres' daughter is abducted on Sicily by Hades, the god of the underworld, while she is picking flowers with her friends.[1] After she disappears, her mother travels throughout the world in search of her, learning only late in the process that her daughter has been taken to the underworld. In the most common ancient version of the myth, Ceres travels to Hades and negotiates her daughter's return, a negotiation necessitated by the fact that Proserpina ate a number of pomegranate seeds while there. Proserpina returns to Sicily for part of the year; the rest of the year she spends in the afterlife.[2]

From Roman antiquity through the Middle Ages, the history and culture of Sicily join with the myth of Proserpina to help poets shape a narrative of Western empire. Sicily's strategic location has been studied as key to many civilizations, from the Western development of the Greek world to the conflict of Muslim and Norman cultures in the Mediterranean, while the abduction and recovery of Proserpina has been used to explore a wide range of topics,

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including female maturation and the origin of the seasons.[3] Her story has also been used to present empire as a form of rape. Yet from the moment in the orations against Verres (70 BC) when Cicero praises Sicily as both Rome's first overseas province and the mythic location for the tale of Proserpina, the island comes to offer poets a setting for forces resistant to empire and a location for displaying and even reclaiming what empire had subsumed. In the poetry we will investigate, Sicily enables a discussion of empire in terms of balance, loss, and negotiation by authors as separated in time and culture as Vergil, Claudian, and Dante. Analyzing why and how such an affiliation remains meaningful throughout a time of great cultural turbulence is the project of this book.

It is no coincidence that the literary representation of Sicily in the Latin literary tradition is rooted in the rhetoric of Cicero, since rhetoric as a genre explores the interdependence of language and culture. Nor is it surprising that Dante's concerns about the nature of Purgatory and the process of redemption are likewise situated, at least on some level, on Sicily. From the time Cicero identifies Sicily as both the first province and the location of the abduction of Proserpina, the notion of empire becomes linked inextricably with a dual negotiation: in texts that draw on Cicero, empire becomes perceived and described in terms of issues of loss and recovery, and these abstract concerns are thereby granted a specific location, a "local habitation and a name."

The texts studied here all explore this cluster of ideas: the poets draw on Cicero, either directly or indirectly, and all are engaged in the process of debating the nature of effective government, whether it be the Roman Empire rising during the time of Vergil and Ovid, the changing empire in the time of Claudian, or the new vision of imperium Dante proposes in the *Commedia*. In every case Sicily offers a setting for negotiating empire: it is as important that these texts take place on Sicily as it is that they bear only a passing resemblance to the Sicily of their day. At the same time, the myth of Proserpina not only remains identified with the island, but offers in its narrative a means for revising the very shape of empire. That tale, known perhaps most widely through the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, is often read as an agricultural or maturation myth and was situated originally in the eastern Mediterranean. Through the course of the texts studied here, though, it comes to be centered on Sicily and to offer a myth of Western empire, even while critiquing it.[4] Take for instance, Vergil, who, as we shall see, argues in the first book of the *Georgics* (1.39) that if Octavian should conquer the underworld, Proserpina, wooed anew (*repetita*), might choose not to return to her mother, but opt instead to spend the year with Octavian in Hades. If this were to happen, the cycles of seasons, crops, and

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animals—everything that makes Italy Italy in the *Georgics*, and everything traditionally ascribed to the annual return of Proserpina—will no longer exist. Vergil encourages Octavian to expand his rule, but not to conquer the underworld and encounter Proserpina, which would meddle with the agricultural balance of Italy. Yet in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's lines counter Vergil's plea, as they show Venus and her other son, not Aeneas but Cupid, primed to do just that, to conquer the underworld in the context of the Proserpina tale.[5] Like Vergil, Ovid sees this form of imperialism as destructive of Italian culture. But by revisiting Venus's conquest of the underworld in the context of other imperial texts, Ovid launches his own understanding of empire, which is less about Italy and more about poetry. As we shall see, Ovid's interest in empire is split: in the political world he presents it as destructive; in the poetic world, he sees it as creative. For Ovid, conquering the underworld means, above all, gaining control of the future of poetry. In Ovid's hands, empire becomes a textual strategy.

Cicero, Vergil, and Ovid, then—or Cicero and Vergil through Ovid—use Sicily as the setting for questions relating to empire, and the myth of Proserpina as key to its understanding. Equally central to this debate, however, is the context Ovid establishes, one that sets the three writers in conversation about empire (and one that mimics the poetic competition where the tale is told). Stephen Hinds has noted the affinity between Sicily and poetic debate in particular, and landscape and intertextuality in general.[6] He also emphasizes the importance of the myth of Proserpina to the literary history of Sicily.[7] Here I will argue something slightly different: that for these writers, starting with Vergil and continuing through the Middle Ages to Dante, poetic treatment of Sicily, which often entails consideration of Proserpina and her abduction, is presented as both mimetic of the origins of empire and central to their critique. What this suggests is that for these writers empire offers a way of thinking that enables intertextual dialogue even as it refines and debates the political pros and cons of this form of power. Moreover, Ovid's move here is key, for as we shall see, the extension of empire into the future, and beyond this life, becomes central to considerations of empire during the Middle Ages. Throughout the tradition, that very debate is signaled by the presence of Sicily.

In short, Cicero's version of the Proserpina myth, which explicitly ties the story to both Sicily and empire, establishes parameters for the Latin literary discussion of empire that follows.[8] It is, of course, itself based on Greek events and Hellenic stories and myths of Sicily, yet these will not concern us here. Nor will we consider other imperial narratives of Sicily: the Athenian expedition, for instance, offers an antitype for the expansion the Romans accomplish later,

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particularly in their failed approach to Sicily as protocolony. But our story begins with Cicero. Cicero situates the myth in the Roman world, a move Ovid gladly follows. By the same token, Vergil will acknowledge the Greek past in an effort to provide the underpinnings for what he presents as the truly Roman future, but our focus here will remain on the Latin tradition following Cicero.[9]

In addition, Cicero uses the myth of Proserpina to establish key factors about empire. Underlying the Verrine orations rests a particular version of the myth of Ceres and Proserpina: the crucial speech suggests that if Verres returns the goods stolen from Ceres' shrine, Sicily will be restored to its pristine status and the promise of empire will be fulfilled. In this scenario empire offers the means for rediscovering the time before Proserpina was abducted, and the myth is presented as non-cyclical: that is, once righted, the empire will not break apart again. This version of the myth of Proserpina, in other words, is not about seasons and agricultural cycles. Rather, it is presented as a myth of a golden age, lost but capable of recovery and, once recovered, sustained. As such, Sicily serves as a reminder of the past that remains a resistant force in the present, since the basis of a good empire, even Cicero suggests, is a negotiated balance between past and future. This fact will become crucial in the deployment of the myth throughout the period we are investigating.

Because this Ciceronian, and imperial, version of the Proserpina myth differs from other variants, it is possible to track, and it provides a cogent starting point for this study. In the texts we will look at, the treatment of the Proserpina story plays a central role, and because of its dual message it works well as a foundation myth. The myth of Orpheus could, perhaps, have served to speak of loss; other stories speak loudly of expansion. Yet the tale of Proserpina, especially in Cicero's and Ovid's hands, is well suited to represent the complicated textual narrative of empire that speaks of expansion and displacement against a backdrop of wholeness. It is significant that Vergil omits the story of her abduction and recovery, while including many other Sicilian myths—stories of Polyphemus, Arethusa, Scylla and Charybdis, for instance—as well as, suggestively, other variants that could well be alluding to aspects of the Proserpina story. And yet he focuses on Sicily and he does so in an imperial context. The island is in the center of the action of the *Aeneid*—literally—between Carthage on the west and Rome to the north, and it is where the action of the poem starts, *vix e conspectu Siculae telluris* ("barely out of sight of the Sicilian land," *Aen.*1.34). But rather than talking about it as a land of the golden age, Vergil inverts Cicero's myth of imperialism and asserts one that is rooted in the crux between the promise of Augustan propaganda and the cost

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that promise might entail. The myth of Proserpina is relegated to the background by Vergil, yet hovers at the edges, guiding his choices of narrative, especially in *Aeneid* 5. As we shall see, Vergil stages his myth of empire in the time between her loss and recovery.

Ovid, by contrast, explicitly echoing Cicero's *Verrines* and Vergil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid* in his Ceres tale in book 5 of the *Metamorphoses*, frames the Proserpina tale as a myth of Western empire. Ovid's evocation of Cicero's *Verrines* here affirms the imperial role Sicily plays in the *Metamorphoses*, even as it critiques the version Vergil presents. The fact that that narrative in particular echoes the start of the *Aeneid* suggests that Ovid is remarking on Vergil's choice not to foreground Proserpina in his poem of empire. In Ovid's treatment, her recovery and expansion, far from absent, are relegated to the realm of poetry. Always the keen rhetorician, Ovid distinguishes between good and bad empire precisely in terms of good and bad rhetoric, which he, in turn, identifies with his own understanding of empire and that of Vergil. The basis of imperial culture Ovid presents as rhetorical—language creates empire through a seductive use of words—which is useful for the poets and disastrous for mankind. Ovid suggests, I will propose, that the very mechanism that creates empire, which he identifies as the aggressive approach to time and space, is the very one that nonetheless enables poetic interaction and growth. Intertextuality in his hands is modeled on a form of imperialism. While Ovid criticizes Augustus for his imperialism, he also celebrates the poetic possibilities of such an approach; he applauds the one and condemns the other.

In Ovid's wake, Sicily remains a locus for poetic debate, most notably for Seneca, but also in authors, pagan and Christian, who turn to the Roman past for poetic inspiration, such as Claudian. Yet, strikingly, Sicily itself is redefined, since the debate moves from Enna, where Cicero and Ovid focus, and Drepanum, where Vergil's interest lies, to Mt. Etna and the straits of Messina. The tale of Proserpina is still key, though the abduction, too, moves from Enna to Etna, and in the late antique and medieval texts about Sicily that touch on the ancients and empire, it is Etna that increasingly gains prominence. Etna's role in the conception of empire is determined by a series of factors. Above all, the fact that it is volcanic and erupts periodically enables it to offer the Christian world an image of the underworld and a passage to it, a means, in other words, for everyman to explore the expanded empire Venus proposes in the *Metamorphoses*. Yet as it becomes merged with Enna, the site of Proserpina's abduction, it acquires some of the beauty of that site and, as such, comes to offer a location where wonder and horror coexist. First a locus of poetic debate,

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Etna rapidly becomes a site for testing the soul; as the idea of an intermediary space between Hell and Heaven that will become Purgatory gains traction, and the empire of the soul and the expansion of the empire into the afterlife gain prominence, Mt. Etna comes to serve a key role.[10]

Moreover, the best-known version of the Proserpina tale during this time, that of Claudian, offers its own set of variants. As transmitted, the narrative, indeed, sets the story on Etna, but concludes before Proserpina is found by her mother Ceres in the underworld. This text was sufficiently canonical that well into the thirteenth century Claudian became one of the *sex auctores* featured in medieval classrooms, arguably to teach students aspects of *Romanitas*. When this tale was coupled with other well-circulated texts about Etna, such as the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great that link the volcano with Gehenna-like punishment, it came to serve a different purpose from that of the tale in Cicero, Vergil, or Ovid. Instead, it offers a narrative that speaks of departure and loss.

Sicily in the Middle Ages is increasingly studied as a location of encounter between a vast array of cultures, producing extraordinarily complex results in settings such as the court of Frederick II.[11] However, the Latin thread is not entirely lost, and the version of the myth acquired via Claudian does not remain unchallenged. Following the ancient version of the Proserpina myth through the Middle Ages leads us through a series of texts, all of which touch on Sicily and the new Christian empire expanded and defined by the Crusades, while also introducing elements of purgatorial redemption into the story. Cicero's Verrine orations re-enter the mainstream at a key moment, shortly before the first Crusade, and in the Christianized texts the return of Proserpina provides an opportunity for discussion of purgation and redemption in the context of a new form of empire, where language is shown to be an instrument of redemption, and the empire created and brought about through language is one that extends into the afterlife through the redemptive Word.

But the Proserpina myth is also significant in its medieval use because of its reliance on the Western Latin tradition. While the myth originated in the Greek East, one of the effects of the *Verrines* in locating the myth on Sicily is to insist that that story, and the imperial tales that develop from it, are rooted in the western Mediterranean. Though Sicily is indeed a crossroads of many kinds—north and south, east and west, Arabic and Christian—those authors that chose the version of the Proserpina myth found in the Verrine orations also chose to highlight a classical, Latin-based, Western version of the narrative of empire. To put this another way: the tales we are following here are ones that deliberately return to the myth of empire as spelled out during Roman

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imperial times because that myth offers a network of arguments about loss, balance, and negotiation.

The approach to empire that fascinates these medieval authors, then, is the one developed by Cicero and expanded by Vergil and Ovid. Choosing to foreground the version of the Proserpina myth found in the *Verrines* is a political choice made by the poets. It may be read allegorically, but it remains set on Sicily, and while it comes to include elements of purgation and redemption not found in the original, it also does not reflect the reality of contemporary Sicilian life, such as events at the court of Frederick II. What it does reflect, however, is a humanistic trend begun most likely in Rheims in the years leading up to the first Crusade, a trend that downplays the political realities, opting instead to suggest that the Proserpina myth offers a model for present-day imperial growth. Having chosen to locate the Proserpina myth on Sicily and assert that it is a myth of the Romans, not the Greeks, Cicero offers later writers a vehicle for arguing whether there exists a Western strength and Latin continuity that can be rediscovered. The blatant denial of the power of the East in Sicily is a political statement asserting the strength of the Roman West, in the Crusades and in imperial history in general, but it is one founded on a return to origins.[12]

This association of purgation and redemption with the Proserpina myth and Sicily is adopted by Dante in the *Commedia*, where it is affiliated with a new sense of empire, one focused on the future, while drawing on the need for an on-going negotiation with the past that Cicero's text introduced. Empire, according to Dante, is as much about the community of poets as it is about government. *Imperium*—good empire, the best kind of government—in the *Commedia* then, is a community of man sustained and defined by the vision of the poets; since language is now potentially redemptive, the role they play is crucial. In particular, the figure of Ulysses, and his associations with Sicily in a variety of texts, set the scene for what Dante will argue in *Purgatorio* about the necessities for good government and the possibilities for empire. Far from serving a negative function in the *Commedia*, the literary portrayal of Ulysses is a key source for the typological persona Dante will assume in *Purgatorio*, even as the poetic competition between Ovid and Vergil is highlighted through the textual references to Sicily. From the end of *Inferno*, where the Ulysses canto occurs, to the last cantos of *Purgatorio*, Dante moves us through the depictions of Sicily and Proserpina from Cicero, Vergil, Ovid, and others to introduce two key elements essential to his understanding of empire which is bolstered by poetic vision and redemption through poetic community.

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What links Vergil to Dante further is a belief that at its heart the business of empire is best mapped out by the poets. Vergil's case is, on the surface, more obvious, though the reality of it may be slightly more complex. The *Aeneid*, written in part to establish a link between Augustus and the gods and justify the enormous imperial expansion Augustus was undertaking, is indeed a story of empire. Yet the epic tells that story in a complex way, laying the groundwork for what was taking place, pointing out the pitfalls encountered along the way and, perhaps most importantly, using the medium of poetry to articulate what the potential for empire might be. Alessandro Barchiesi employs the term "geopoetics" in his discussion of a similar, complex interplay between poetry and politics in the *Aeneid*, a term he defines as "the dynamics formed by the representation of the world, in particular its geopolitics, when it encounters the active participation of the poetic text in the making, aetiology and transformation of this world."[13]

Dante's situation is in some ways richer than that of Vergil, for in the *Commedia* the role of poetry, and of his epic, in the matter of empire is paramount. *Inferno* presents an empire that is devoid of the illumination of poetry, but *Purgatorio*, that space that so mimics our world even as it shows us its potential, is the place in the *Commedia* where poetry and politics go hand in hand. The ascent up the mountain of Purgatory is a climb of self-discovery for Dante, yet it is also a journey towards and, in a sense, into poetry, even as the communities of penitents he encounters along the way become increasingly models of humane governance. As such, it is *Purgatorio* that plays out the ways in which poetry and civil community work together, and those, in Dante's hands, are the fundamental elements of true empire.

For Vergil and Dante, then, empire is guided, at some stage, by the poets. Both the *Aeneid* and *Purgatorio* evince this bias, and this assertion is made all the clearer by the fact that both take such advantage of Sicily. The island of Sicily, with its story of Proserpina, offers to each of these poets a setting for framing imperial vision. Although Dante's vision of empire includes the beyond, Sicily remains the *point de départ*, even as the scope of that vision moves from this world to the next, and the capacity of poetry to affect empire shifts from powerful story-telling to actual redemption.

The story of Sicily that follows in Cicero's wake, then, is a story of two seemingly unrelated things: poetic competition and the strategies of—and resistances to—Western empire. How these two factors are treated, how they interact and how they are valued, shift with each poet, yet they are both always present. In what follows I will lean heavily on arguments made by Stephen Hinds and David Quint, Hinds for his assertions about the importance of

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poetic rivalry in treatments of Sicily, Quint for his foundational observations about the relationship of epic to empire.[14] Yet my purpose here is rather to trace how the myth of Proserpina guides the relationship of poetry, poetic competition, and definitions of empire in the changing political worlds from Vergil to Dante and how the negotiation related to her return maps onto prevailing notions of empire. The balance her story proclaims between power and subjugation, and past and future, offers each of these poets a narrative for the critique of empire, and that discussion centers on the island of Sicily. The nature of empire changes radically from Cicero's republican notions to Dante's eschatological ones—and from rhetorical to redemptive powers of language—yet literary treatments of Sicily continue to offer an arena for that discussion. My project overall, then, is dual: on the one hand, I examine texts associated with Proserpina, Sicily, and empire from Cicero to Dante; on the other, I use the conversation of the poets about Sicily as a test case for the ways in which literature can and does serve a unique role in offering a space for negotiation. As Susan Wolfson has argued, "there is a loss in discounting literary agency in the world, and a loss, moreover, in neglecting literature itself as a context in which the ways of the world are refracted by oppositional pressure, critical thinking."[15] Put more generally, the thrust of my argument is about literature and the kinds of space a literary text creates and inhabits that in some real way helps to formulate a political vision that acknowledges complexity.

Different as they may be, however, each of the poets asserts a fundamental connection among these elements, arguing for the importance of poetic negotiation in the framing of political visions. Empire rises from many things, but in the hands of these poets in this tradition, poetry offers a space for political deliberation, a space reified by the island of Sicily and mythologized by the tale of Proserpina. While the Roman tales focus on the abduction and rely on that as a means for discussing the problems of imperial expansion, both in the political and poetic realms, the high medieval versions of the story train their gaze first on her loss, then on her return and the necessity for negotiation that entails. As a result, the tale of Proserpina, as told by Cicero and adopted by a long series of authors, offers an index to the changing needs and understanding of empire, from Augustan territorial expansion to Christian spiritual redemption, and the return of Proserpina comes to serve, at least in part, as an allegory of the Christianization of the classical tradition. The empire of poetry, along with its political counterpart, is also redefined, as the ability to conquer the afterlife through the language of love becomes itself a way to negotiate a relationship with the past.

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