**The Rape of Persephone: An Ancient Tragedy Becomes a Modern Romance**

**Brittney McKinley, Class of 2021**

Simply put, I spent the Summer of 2020 researching the myth of Hades and Persephone. The complexity of this task lies in the very nature of myth, which is inherently flexible and ever-changing. The oral history of mythology means that every time the story is told, it is reborn and changed slightly from its original form (if an “original form” ever existed at all). Myths are presented differently throughout time, depending completely on who is telling the stories and why. For example, in medieval times we employed myths as allegories to teach lessons about Christian morality and “good” behavior. In the Enlightenment era, myths were seen as evidence of ignorance in earlier, primitive cultures; while in the era of Romanticism, myths were believed to reveal emotional and primordial truths that spanned time and space. As time passes, myths are perceived by varied audiences, and thus are retold differently every time.

While this dynamic nature is true for every myth, I have always been particularly struck by the myth of Hades and Persephone and how their story has been altered to fit our modern views. This story was told first in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, circa 6th century BC, where the young goddess of spring, Persephone, is stolen from her mother’s realm on earth and dragged unwillingly by the god of the dead, Hades, into the underworld to become his wife and queen. Persephone’s heartbroken mother, Demeter, searches everywhere for her kidnapped daughter and when she finds nothing, she lays waste to the human world by allowing no food or vegetation to grow. A deal is eventually struck that Persephone will spend a third of the year with her captor-turned-husband in the land of the dead, and the remaining two thirds with her mother in the land of the living. This ancient telling was used by early Mediterranean peoples to explain the cycle of the seasons from budding spring to barren winter. However, it was also thought to have illustrated the loss and grief a mother feels when her daughter makes the transition from maidenhood into womanhood, as marriage was often seen as a metaphorical death of her youth.

Our modern retellings of this myth fundamentally contrast the ancient story of rebirth and maternal grief. Instead, we often tell this myth as a dark romance, where Demeter is framed as an overbearing and controlling figure in young Persephone’s life. It is only through Hades, a dark and misunderstood bad boy, that Persephone can achieve true freedom. There is a complete switch in roles between Demeter and Hades, where Demeter is now the jailer and Hades is the savior. What is even more striking is the modern portrayal of Hades and Persephone’s relationship as consensual and romantic, when the Homeric Hymn describes what is effectively a story of rape and captivity. Modern authors and artists rearrange the tragic myth to absolve Hades of his selfish crimes, and instead paint an empathetic and romanticized love interest for Persephone—thus giving the story a wildly different ending and meaning.

Captivated by the stark contrast between these modern renditions and the ancient version of the myth, I set out under the guidance of Professor Barbara Weiden Boyd to research further into this story. I began by reading through all mentions of Hades and Persephone in ancient literature, from small sections from Plato’s *Cratylus* that discuss Persephone’s names, to mentions of the underworld in Homer, to long passages detailing the entire myth in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. After familiarizing myself with ancient renditions of the myth (which in between themselves have very interesting differences), I began to consume modern retellings in whatever form I could find. I read educational anthologies of mythology like Edith Hamilton (1942) and Robert Graves (1955), and I read young adult romance novels like *A Touch of Darkness* by Scarlett St. Clair (2019) and *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah J. Maas (2016). I also listened to Anais Mitchell’s critically acclaimed play *Hadestown* (2006) and combed through Rachel Smythe’s ongoing, Eisner Award nominated webcomic *Lore Olympus* (2018), among many other renditions. With every new source, I worked with Professor Boyd to highlight the differences and similarities between these modern retellings and the ancient source material, all the while asking why we rewrite this myth the way we do.

I want to organize the information I spent this summer collecting into my Honors project, consisting of a lengthy paper that explores and analyzes these differences and ultimately confronts a difficult set of questions: Is the modern retelling of this myth simply a biproduct of time and the dynamic, ever-changing nature of myths? Or is this a dangerously romanticized version that encourages problematic sugar-coating of what was originally a myth about sexual abuse and loss? I am hopeful that this project will not only provide answers to these questions, but also further contextualize what modern culture values and prioritizes instory-telling.

**Faculty Mentor: Barbara Weiden Boyd**

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