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### Custody Battles: Reimagining Persephone's Plight

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DePauw University

Honor Scholar Program

Class of 2021

**Custody Battles:**  
**Reimagining Persephone's Plight**  
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## Part One: Abduction

### Introduction

The goal of this thesis is to hold an active conversation with the ancient Greek goddess Persephone. I learned how to translate Ancient Greek because I wanted to understand the context of the story of Persephone—from the abduction that began her plight to her becoming a ruler of the Underworld. To do so, I needed to read her ancient Grecian myth without the layer of separation between text and reader that is inherent to translated works.

While translated texts allow people to explore literature that otherwise would be inaccessible due to language differences, a translated text does not equate to the original text. Before the reader accesses a translated text, translators will have made decisions about definitions, about word placement, and about punctuation. Oftentimes, the translator, too, is separated from the original text: the editor who transcribed the text from its original document both will have decided where to place punctuation if the original language does not use punctuation like the language of the translation and how to revise the text if it is not complete.

Translators and editors are influenced by their positionalities, or the various identities that make up individuals. I enter into this project with the positionality of being a white cisgender woman who is a senior in college with a major in English writing and a minor in Ancient Greek. Additionally, disciplinary training influences translators. As an English major, I am trained in the discipline of literary analysis, but as a fiction writer and poet, I am also trained in the discipline of creative writing. As a scholar of Ancient Greek, I am trained as a classicist and have experience in translating texts such as Euripides's *Trojan Women* and Sophocles's *Antigone*. Therefore, I acknowledge that my positionality influences my translation of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.

To root out the systems of power at work in Persephone's story, I begin my journey with the *Hymn to Demeter*. The text "derives from a single mutilated manuscript of the early fifteenth century C.E., discovered in a stable in Moscow in 1777, supplemented by papyrus fragments" and tells the story of Persephone's abduction and Demeter's response to it (Foley 31). The second of thirty-three *Homeric Hymns* dedicated to gods and goddesses, the *Hymn to Demeter* "follows the tradition of oral epic in its diction, style, and narrative technique" (Foley 29). While deemed Homeric because of the thematic and linguistic similarities to Homeric texts, the author(s) of the hymn are unknown: ". . . the formulaic language agrees with that of Homer, but there are also a noticeably large number of words and phrases which are paralleled first in Hesiod" (Richardson 5). While the author(s) remain unknown, in regard to the date of origin "scholars argue for a date between 650-550 B.C.E. on stylistic and historical grounds" (Foley 29). Ancient Grecian dramatic texts and myths such as the *Hymn* show fictionalized instances of everyday life and the larger societal structures at play in Ancient Greece. Therefore, my analysis of Persephone's story in *The Hymn to Demeter* is twofold: a close literary analysis of Persephone's abduction and rise to Queen of Hades and a feminist analysis of the Ancient Grecian power systems at play in the *Hymn*.

The methodology of my project is grounded in feminist literary analysis. I begin with a close literary analysis of two words—"ἄρπάζω" (snatch away; overpower) and the adverb form of "λανθάνω," "λάθρη" (secretly; treacherously)—to trace how the definitions change throughout a translation and between translations. The juxtaposition of three translations of the same text shows how definition variance changes translations' inner workings: the same texts can tell different stories, which shows the biases of translators and the systems that influence them. For this project, I compare Martin L. West's translation, Helene P. Foley's translation, and my

translation. Martin L. West's translation, accessed through the online Loeb Classical Library, can be found in Harvard University Press's *Homeric Hymns. Homeric Apocrypha. Lives of Homer* (2003), which West edited and translated. West translates the *Hymn* into readable prose to maintain the Loeb mission of making Greek and Latin texts accessible and available. As a "scholar and teacher of courses on women in antiquity," Helene P. Foley developed *The Homeric "Hymn to Demeter": Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays* (1994), published by Princeton University Press, in an effort "to introduce general readers to the *Hymn to Demeter*" and to give readers contextual information "necessary to read the text in a knowledgeable and sophisticated fashion" (Foley xii). Foley posits that the *Hymn* emphasizes "female experience . . . especially on the relation of mother to daughter" (Foley xi). The Greek text of the *Hymn* that she translates is reprinted from the Oxford text of N. J. Richardson (1974), and Foley notes that her translation "is designed to be literal but readable, while following as closely as possible the original lines of verse" (Foley xiii). In contrast to West's and Foley's accessible translations, Richardson does not provide a full translation of the *Hymn*—only a summary accompanies the Greek text—and his commentary is dense and difficult to understand without a wealth of previous knowledge on ancient Grecian society and texts.

In my commentary and analysis of the *Hymn*, I respond to Foley; in turn, Foley responded to Richardson. With twenty years between Richardson's work and Foley's work and twenty more years between Foley's work and my own work, my thesis contributes a contemporary feminist approach in the genealogy of our translations. In my prose translation of the *Hymn*, I focus on sections that directly relate to Persephone and excluded sections from my translation that pertain to Demeter's time in the mortal realm apart from the gods and Persephone. The Greek text that translated originates from an online edition of *The Homeric*

*Hymns and Homerica* (1914), edited by Hugh G. Evelyn-White and accessed through Tufts's Perseus Digital Library.

After I compare the translations, I shift into a literary analysis of gender roles and expectations in the *Hymn to Demeter* to expose the power systems at work in the narrative, such as the patriarchal and honor-driven social system which the women were expected to navigate. Next, I present what I call a "feminist-resistant" reading of the myth: the *Hymn* tells the story of a mother and daughter who attempt to gain agency in a patriarchal society with varying success. This "feminist-resistant" reading opposes dominant power structures and centers marginalized perspectives. Interspersed within my feminist literary analysis lie my own reimaginings of Persephone's story to provide further feminist-resistant readings of her plight. The creative component of this project completes my methodology of feminist literary analysis because it shows readers how to complete feminist close readings of texts and how to write feminist-resistant reimaginings that do not play into the pervasive power systems in texts such as the *Hymn to Demeter*.

Feminist retellings of myths are too often romanticized. In my reimaginings, I share the Persephone unearthed from the Ancient Greek text—violence and trauma included. After all: Restoring agency to these women doesn't happen by denying them their trauma, or by removing the label of victim. They enjoy true agency when their authors allow them to rise above their victimhood and become survivors, or at the very least become women who deal with the world on their own terms. True feminist retellings recognize and don't repress their characters' liminality. (Hinds)

## Translation

I begin with my translation of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. My goal was not to maintain the poetic structures of the *Hymn*—such as meter, line breaks, and word order—but to offer a contemporary prose translation. The footnotes explain decisions that I made or questions that I had during translation—such as word choice, questions of agency, and contextual information—and situate my translation of the *Hymn* within the larger framework of feminist translation.

### *To Demeter*<sup>1</sup> from Ancient Greek to English

I<sup>2</sup> begin to chant about the fair-haired, revered goddess Demeter and her daughter<sup>3</sup> with delicate ankles,<sup>4</sup> whom Aidoneus seized, given to him by loud-thundering, wide-eyed Zeus, far from Demeter of the golden sword, bearer of the fruits of the earth, while playing with the full-breasted girls<sup>5</sup> of Oceanus and picking flowers—wild red roses and crocus, beautiful violets, irises and hyacinths, and narcissus—upon a soft meadow, which the land produced at the

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<sup>1</sup> The title is often translated as *Hymn to Demeter*, but the direct translation is *To Demeter*.

<sup>2</sup> "I" refers to the orator of the myth.

<sup>3</sup> Core characters in Homeric texts frequently are referred to by "noun-epithet combinations," or individual, specific descriptive phrases.

In her journal article, "Noun-epithet Combinations in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter," Gaisser says, "Noun-epithet combinations are the most demonstrably traditional elements in epic diction. More than other expressions they have been shown to be flexible, extensive, economical and capable of modification to suit special metrical and dramatic context" (Gaisser 114).

<sup>4</sup> This noun-epithet combination refers to Persephone, who is categorized often by physical attributes that sexualize her body yet emphasize her innocent nature.

<sup>5</sup> The nymphs being described as "full-breasted" continues the hyper-sexualized images of female bodies.

council for Zeus, pleasing the all-receiver, as bait for the budding girl,<sup>6</sup> wonderful and gleaming, at any rate being awe-inspiring for both immortal gods and mortal men.

A hundred heads have been born from the root, and the branch smelled sweet, and both the far-reaching heaven above and all the land and the sea's salty waves smiled.<sup>7</sup> The amazed girl reached both of her hands to take the beautiful delight, but the wide-streeted earth yawned throughout the plain of Nysa: the All-Receiver,<sup>8</sup> by his immortal horses, rushed to her, the son of Kronos having many names.<sup>9</sup>

He overpowered<sup>10</sup> her, unwilling, upon his golden chariot and carried her off, wailing.<sup>11</sup> Then she shrieked shrilly with her voice, calling her father, the son of Kronos, the highest and best.

But not anyone of the immortal gods or of mortal men heard the sound of her voice, or the olive trees bearing beautiful fruit; only the delicate minded Hecate with a bright headband, daughter of Perseus, from out of her cave, and master Helios, bright son of Hyperion, were to hear the girl calling to her father, son of Kronos. But, he was sitting apart from the gods far away in his temple sought with many prayers, receiving good sacrifices from mortal

---

<sup>6</sup> "Budding girl" further emphasizes the contrast between Persephone's physical maturity and her sexual inexperience.

<sup>7</sup> The natural elements "smiling" at the abduction of Persephone gives a sense of spectatorship: the whole world watches the abduction as if entertainment.

<sup>8</sup> "All-Receiver" is another name for Hades. He receives all beings in death.

<sup>9</sup> Here is another noun-epithet combination for Hades.

<sup>10</sup> This is the first use of "ἀρπάζω," which is further emphasized by the addition of "ἄέκων," or "unwilling." Section Two: Descension expands on definition variance for "ἀρπάζω."

<sup>11</sup> Not only is Persephone unwilling but she also voices this unwillingness.

men.<sup>12</sup>

But the son of Kronos, having many names, the ruler over many and receiver of many, her father's brother, carried her off unwillingly by immortal horses at the suggestion of Zeus.<sup>13</sup> In fact, while the goddess yet saw both the land and starry heaven and the swift flowing sea full of fish and beams of sun, she yet hoped to see her dear mother and clans of immortal gods; meanwhile hope charmed her great mind of all of its distress.

So then peaks of mountains and depths of seas rang from her immortal voice, and her queen mother heard. Sharp pain seized her heart, and she tore the veil<sup>14</sup> around her divine flowing hair with dear hands. She threw down her dark veil from both shoulders and rushed, as a bird of prey, upon both the land and water searching. But nobody was willing to say the truth, neither gods nor mortal men, and of the birds of prey none came with a message of truth.

Then, for the following nine days Queen Demeter wandered the earth carrying blazing

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<sup>12</sup> Too busy receiving sacrifices and honor from men, Zeus does not hear his daughter's cries. His physical distance from the gods while she cries for him parallels Demeter's actions of retribution later in the myth. She leaves Olympus to hide amongst mortals after causing a famine in response to Persephone's abduction. She even refuses to listen to any pleas from the gods without Persephone's return.

<sup>13</sup> This second emphasis of Persephone's unwillingness is downplayed by the orator with the mention of Zeus's approval of the abduction.

<sup>14</sup> On one hand, mortal women often tore their hair or clothing in grief. On the other hand, "[d]ark clothing was not exclusively associated with mourning the dead. Furies or Erinyes wore it . . . The darkness of Demeter's clothing may thus suggest vengeful wrath as well" (Foley 37). The Furies, or Erinyes, were winged women who sought vengeance against men who committed wrongdoings.

pine-torches<sup>15</sup> in her hands, neither partaking of ambrosia or the sweet drink of nectar, nor throwing her body in bathing water—in mourning.

But when another tenth light-bringing dawn came, Hecate met her carrying a torch in her hands and spoke to her, and, bearing a message, declared<sup>16</sup> a promise: "Queen Demeter, leader of the seasons, giver of splendid gifts, what god of heaven or of mortal man has seized Persephone<sup>17</sup> and grieved your dear spirit? For I heard of her voice but saw not with my eyes who it was. But I saw quickly the whole truth."

So, then Hecate said next, and the daughter of the lovely-haired Rhea returned with not a word but darted quickly along with her, carrying blazing pine-torches between her hands. But

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<sup>15</sup> A bride's mother carrying pine-torches during the marital procession was a traditional component of ancient Grecian weddings. Therefore, in Demeter's use of pine-torches, and especially when Persephone eats the pomegranate seed, the "abduction comes to resemble marriage more fully" (Foley 108). However, pine-torches are carried by the Furies, too. Demeter carrying the torches both further parallels Persephone's abduction with mortal marriages and aligns Demeter with mortal mothers and also strengthens the image of Demeter as a vengeful mother.

<sup>16</sup> Women do not always have direct speeches in ancient Grecian texts. Instead, a man shares what the woman said through an indirect speech, which increases the distance between the original speaker and the audience and denies the woman agency. So, it is notable that Hecate, Demeter, Persephone, and Rhea each have moments of direct dialogue in the *Hymn*. These direct speeches lend to these goddesses having some agency. I address direct versus indirect speech in more detail in Part Three: Ascension.

<sup>17</sup> This is the first time that Persephone is mentioned by name before she becomes engaged to Hades (Foley 39). In the other instances, she is identified through child-like specifiers, such as "girl" or "daughter." Foley asserts that the use—and lack of use—of Persephone's name might mark "a change of identity" for Persephone or an "acquisition of powers" (Foley 39).

they came to Helios, who is the watcher of both gods and men.

And they stood in front of his horses, and the divine goddess inquired of him, "Oh Sun-god, do you have compassion for me, at any rate, a goddess, if at some time ever I warmed your heart and spirit with either word or work? I heard through the unfruitful sky the vehement voice of my sweet scion<sup>18</sup>—the girl I brought into the world, with a stately figure—as being overpowered by force; but with my eyes, I saw not. But—for with your rays you look down upon all of the earth and sea from out of the divine sky—tell me truthfully of my dear child, if you have seen her anywhere. Who has seized her by force without my will/unwillingly<sup>19</sup> and gone, of either gods or mortal men?" So she said.

But the son of Hyperion exchanged a speech. "Daughter of lovely-haired Rhea, Queen Demeter, I will tell you what I have seen: for I stand in awe of you and take great pity on you about your grieving for your child with long tapered ankles. Not any other deathless gods are blameworthy, only the cloud-compeller Zeus, who gave her to Hades, his own brother, to be called a blooming wife.<sup>20</sup> And he snatched her away to his chariot-horses to carry her under, shrieking, to the murky and vast gloom of the world below.

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<sup>18</sup> A scion denotes either a young shoot of a plant or a child, which bolsters the nature imagery of Persephone as a blooming flower.

<sup>19</sup> "Without my will" and "unwillingly" feature different nuances of agency. The first refers to Demeter's authority over Persephone as her mother, while the second refers to Persephone's individual resistance.

<sup>20</sup> This sentence has several noteworthy components. First, Helios tells Demeter that she should not blame Hades. Next, he places all of the blame on Zeus. It is also established that Hades is Zeus's brother and therefore Persephone's uncle, a jarring connection today but unusual in Greek mythology. Finally, Persephone is referred to as a "blooming wife," which continues the metaphor of Persephone as a blooming flower; however, Persephone is no longer the "blooming girl" but the "blooming wife."

But, Goddess, stop your great wailing, and do not be intent in vain to hold fast to your terrible and bitter anger. Aidoneus, ruler over many, is not a shameful son-in-law<sup>21</sup> among the deathless gods, being your own brother and sown together—and all-around honorable having obtained by lot a share when that first division was made in three ways being king of the place in which he dwells."

He spoke and called to the horses, and at his call they hastily carried the swift chariot with extended wings like birds of prey.

...<sup>22</sup>

But golden-haired Demeter, who sits away from all the blessed ones<sup>23</sup>, remains, wasting away with longing for her deep-girdled<sup>24</sup> daughter. Then she created a dreadful and horrible year upon the all-nourishing earth for mankind: the land would not send up that which is sown, for

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<sup>21</sup> A common theme in Homeric epics, Helios brings up the concept of "τιμάω," or honor and reverence ("τιμάω"). Mortal men seek honor and glory in battle along with material wealth so as to be remembered after they die; gods seek honor through sacrifices from mortal men. Helios argues that Demeter should cease her grief because Hades is an honorable match for Persephone; therefore, as a mother, Demeter has nothing over which to feel anger. That neither Persephone nor Demeter had any say in the matter is unimportant in Helios's mind because Persephone would receive honors from mortal men as the wife of Hades, and Demeter would receive honors as the mother of Persephone.

<sup>22</sup> In the text that I did not translate, Demeter abandons her perch in Olympus and instead retreats to the mortal realm.

<sup>23</sup> Demeter's physical distance from the gods is an active form of resistance. She asserts her autonomy in the only way she can: she leaves the gods and ceases her duties as the goddess of harvest and fertility. In doing so, she dooms the mortals to famine and death.

<sup>24</sup> "Deep-girdled" emphasizes that Persephone has the physical maturity of a woman; she has breasts. Persephone continues to be viewed as a sex object.

well-crowned Demeter hid; the oxen dragged many curved ploughs fruitlessly in fields,<sup>25</sup> and much white barley fell upon the land to no purpose.

And thereupon she would have destroyed the articulate-speaking race of mankind altogether by a painful famine and would have deprived those who dwell on Olympus of the gifts of sacrifice both honorable and glorious<sup>26</sup> if Zeus had not observed and perceived in his mind.

...<sup>27</sup>

For she promised truthfully not ever to set foot on sweet-smelling Olympus and not let the earth come up with fruit until she saw her fair girl with her own eyes. But when the loud-thundering, well-seeing Zeus heard, he sent the Slayer of Argus<sup>28</sup> with a wand of gold into Erebus<sup>29</sup> in order that he might lead chaste<sup>30</sup> Persephone from under the murky gloom of the world below into the light among the gods, having persuaded Hades by soft words, so that her mother, in seeing her, might cease from her bitter anger.

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<sup>25</sup> A feminine noun, while "ἄρουρα" first translates to "tilled land" or "fields," it is later used as a metaphor for a woman as bearing children ("ἄρουρα"). Therefore, I posit that there is a parallel between Demeter's act of taking fertility from the lands and Zeus's facilitation of the abduction of her daughter. In denying the land its fertility, she also denies the gods "τιμῶν." Without a harvest, the mortals will die. Without mortals, the gods will not receive sacrifices. Without sacrifices, the gods will not receive the honor that they take as their due. Without mortals, the gods' lives have no consequence.

<sup>26</sup> Zeus only takes action because Demeter deprives him of the honor he sees as his due.

<sup>27</sup> This omitted portion of text details the gods' requests to Demeter to cease the famine.

<sup>28</sup> Hermes

<sup>29</sup> Erebus, in this instance, refers to the darkness of the Underworld.

<sup>30</sup> Here is a notable adjective for Persephone that lies in sharp contrast to "deep-girdled." Now the orator emphasizes Persephone's virginal and "pure" status as a maiden.

Hermes obeyed and at once hurriedly rushed downward under the depths of the earth, leaving the seat of Olympus. He found the lord having been within his chambers, sitting on a couch<sup>31</sup> with his shame-faced<sup>32</sup> wife, very much against her will,<sup>33</sup> yearning for her mother. But she was far away, devised due to the deeds of the feared gods.

But the strong Slayer of Argus, standing near, spoke. "Dark-haired Hades, who rules over who have perished, father Zeus has commanded me to lead noble Persephone out of Erebus among the gods in order that her mother may see her with her own eyes and cease from her wrath with the immortals from bitter anger out of dread, for she plans a great deed to destroy the feeble races of earth-born men by burying that which is sown under the land, and she would ruin the honors of the immortals. She holds onto her bitter anger and does not mingle with the gods but sits aloof from them within her fragrant temple dwelling in the rocky city of Eleusis." He

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<sup>31</sup>"λέχος" can refer to either a marriage bed or a couch used for meals, depending on the context of the sentence ("λέχος"). The definition used for this one word can heavily change the underlying meaning of this scene: do Hades and Persephone lie in their marriage-bed after consummating the marriage, or do they recline on a dining-couch? While the previous violent connotations of "ἀρπάζω" might lead a translator to choose marriage-bed, because Hades secretly feeds Persephone a pomegranate seed in this scene, I chose to define the word as "couch." I expand on my reasoning behind choosing "couch" in Section Two: Descension.

<sup>32</sup> In Homeric Greek, "αἰδοῖος" can mean "deserving respect" or "shamefaced" ("αἰδοῖος"). Persephone's possible emotions span from shame to offense. She also might act prudent. In other words, behave according to gender roles in Ancient Greece. So, from the orator's point of view, Persephone can be both "shamefaced" and "deserving respect": in outwardly subscribing to her expected role, she deserves respect.

<sup>33</sup> Though the gendered expectations of Persephone require her to act subservient to Hades, the orator notes that she is there "ἀεκαζόμενος," or against her will ("ἀεκαζόμενος"). She appears as gender and societal roles require, but her mind is still her own.

said.

And Aidoneus, the lord of those beneath the earth, grinned and nodded his assent<sup>34</sup> and obeyed the command of the king of the gods.

He hurriedly bid wise/fury-hearted Persephone, "Return, Persephone, to the side of your dark-veiled mother, and hold gentleness in your heart and strength in your soul, and do not be very exceedingly angry. I will not be a shameful husband among the immortals, own brother to your father Zeus. In being here, you will be lord<sup>35</sup> to all who both live and walk and have the greatest honors among immortals. And there will be retribution for all who do wrong and who do not appease your might with sacrifices or righteous gifts or who do not perform nimbly." He said this, and careful Persephone swiftly leapt up in joy.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, he treacherously<sup>37</sup> gave her a honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat, dealing out for the sake of himself, so that she might not stay there for all days beside revered, dark-veiled

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<sup>34</sup> "Grinned and nodded his assent" was particularly difficult to translate. "μειδάω" translates to smiling or grinning so as to show teeth ("μειδάω"). "ὄφρῦς" translates to a nod of assent, or it might denote "grief, scorn, pride" ("ὄφρῦς"). I take Hades's expression to mean that, though he outwardly agrees to return Persephone to Demeter, he does not intend to go through with that promise.

<sup>35</sup> The verb "δεσπόζω" translates to "to be lord or master" or "to gain the mastery of." Hades offers equal reign to Persephone; he does not call her consort or wife but "lord" ("δεσπόζω"). However, his offer of equal power does not negate the fact that he violently abducted her and tricks her into eating the pomegranate seed that binds her to him.

<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether Persephone leaps up from joy at the prospect of seeing her mother or at the honors Hades promises her. From Persephone's retelling of the abduction and Hades's treachery, I posit that she celebrates because she wants to return to her mother.

<sup>37</sup> "λανθάνω" can mean "secretly" and/or "treacherously" ("λανθάνω"). Usually, once someone has partaken of food in the Underworld, they cannot leave. Hades knows this rule, so he conspired to keep Persephone with him in the Underworld.

Demeter. Aidoneus, the ruler over many, made ready his immortal horses in front of and beneath his golden carriage.<sup>38</sup> And she mounted the carriage.

...<sup>39</sup>

When she [Demeter] saw her, she rushed forward like a maenad down a thick-shaded, forested mountain. And when, from the other side, Persephone saw the beautiful eyes of her mother, she leapt down to run to her, leaving behind the carriage and horses, and fell upon her neck and embraced her. But, while holding her beloved daughter in her arms, suddenly her soul suspected a treachery, and she feared something terrible.

She stopped her affection and straightaway asked by speech, "Child, you did not eat food when you were below? Speak out and do not conceal so that we both may know. For indeed if you did not then you shall dwell away from the loathed Hades and alongside me and your father the cloud-wrought son of Kronos and honored by all immortals. But if you partook of food you are going back under the depths of the land again to dwell a third portion of every year and two beside both me and other immortals. And when the land grows fragrant flowers of every kind in spring-time, you go up from there under the murky darkness back to the great wonder for the gods and mortal men. But speak and tell by what treachery he carried you off under the murky darkness and with what treachery did the All-Receiver deceive you?"

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<sup>38</sup> I find it notable that the word for "chariot" is used during Persephone's abduction but the word for "carriage" is used for Persephone's return to Demeter. For me, a chariot denotes war, while a carriage denotes travel. I argue that Hades knows that he has "won" his bride, either through consummation of the marriage or through the treachery of his feeding her food from the Underworld. Therefore, he does not need a vessel of war for their momentary return to the mortal realm.

<sup>39</sup> This omitted portion of text traces Persephone's path of return to the mortal realm.

Once more the very beautiful Persephone spoke to her, "I will tell you all truths, Mother, accordingly. When luck-bringer Hermes came, swift messenger for my father, the son of Kronos, and other heavenly ones, to return out of Erebus, so that you may see me with your eyes and cease your bitter anger and dreaded wrath against the immortals. At once I leapt up with joy, but he stealthily put in my [mouth] honey-sweet food, a pomegranate seed, and forced me to eat, unwilling, overpowering me. I will tell you how he overpowered me by plan of my father, shrewd Zeus, son of Kronos, and carried me off under the depths of the land, and will recount all that you ask."

. . .<sup>40</sup>

"The land gave way from below, and out sprang the mighty all-receiver in his golden chariots, and he bore me away under the land, entirely unwilling. I shouted with a shrill tone. All of this I speak is true, though grieving."

Then, throughout the day, souls united and holding one another many times, their heart and soul warmed, embracing with love, stopping their grief and receiving and giving joys in their soul alongside one another.

. . .<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In this omitted portion of text, Persephone lists the names of flowers in the meadow and the names of her companions. Persephone's retelling closely mirrors the orator's retelling, except that she lists the names of the daughters of Oceanus and says that Artemis and Athena were with her. Persephone centers the female experiences of her companions and herself, while the orator does not.

<sup>41</sup> In this omitted portion of text, through indirect speech Zeus tells Rhea, Demeter's mother, to relay his ruling on the time that Persephone will spend with Demeter and the other immortals and with Hades and to convince Demeter to return to Olympus.

(Rhea to Demeter) "Come hither, daughter, for all-seeing and loud-thundering Zeus calls you to come among the tribes of gods, and has promised to give the honors that you will among the immortal gods. He has agreed that for every year your daughter shall go for a third under the murky nether darkness but two thirds with both you and the other immortals. So he declared to execute and nodded his head in assent. But go, my child, obey,<sup>42</sup> and do not rage excessively unceasing with the cloud-covered son of Kronos. Quickly foster life-giving fruit for men." So she spoke.

Well-crowned Demeter obeyed and quickly sent up fruit out of fertile fields. And all the far-reaching ground was heavy with both leaves and flowers.

. . .<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> While Rhea does tell her daughter not to challenge Zeus's ruling, she uses direct speech to do so, which denotes some form of agency. Rhea tells Demeter that, though Demeter is not happy with the ruling, she should accept it due to the honors that she has gained thanks to it.

<sup>43</sup> In the last lines of the text, the abduction has been resolved. The orator ends the *Hymn* in a traditional manner by recounting how Demeter begins the Eleusinian mysteries to honor Persephone and herself.

**tender steel**

I.

Mother tended to  
the girl she called daughter. i was  
to be her immortal-fresh flowers—  
a kept thing,  
my thorns shaved to enforce  
that i was  
smooth as a babe  
& bleeding regularly.  
she trimmed my stems until  
i was dependent on her  
nutrients & unable to hold  
my own weight—roots stuck  
suckling from her

i was  
a trophy on her highest shelf,  
protected from being plucked  
(or from plucking myself).  
she always told me that  
flowers lose their value at first fall  
and die from there

II.

now a woman, I become Persephone.  
Mother, purse your lips all you like,  
but close your purse strings;  
your words have no currency here.  
there is not a custody battle to be won, and  
your meadows are not my only home

I was  
forced to leave your meadow & forced to take a husband,  
but this underworld has taught me that I am not  
an object cursed to forever change hands;  
my body is not some-body to be stolen.  
you sanded down my thorns,  
so I grew from that treacherous pomegranate seed  
fresh armor forged from precious metals & steel

## Part Two: Descension

This section presents a case study of the definition variance of "ἄρπάζω" and "λάθρη." "Definition variance" refers to the range of definitions that can be applied to one word. A close literary analysis of the usage of "ἄρπάζω" and "λάθρη" in the *Hymn to Demeter* reveals how definitions can shift throughout a translation and between translations: throughout a translation because I compare definition variance in four instances of "ἄρπάζω" and two instances of "λάθρη"; and between translations because I compare Foley's translation, West's translation, and my own translation.

### Definition Variance of "ἄρπάζω"

The word "ἄρπάζω" appears four times in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon* offers the following definitions for "ἄρπάζω," which show a spectrum of violence: "snatch away; carry off"; "seize hastily, snatch up"; "seize, overpower, overmaster"; "captivate, ravish"; and "plunder" ("ἄρπάζω"). Therefore, translators must look at the surrounding context in each instance and take care not to rely on one definition of the word or on preconceptions of the *Hymn*. In the *Hymn to Demeter*, the definition variance of "ἄρπάζω" hinges on the presence and absence of other violent descriptions.

The first time that "ἄρπάζω" appears in line three of the *Hymn* for the first time. From this point forward, each chosen definition variance for "ἄρπάζω" is denoted by italics. Three translations of the lines 1-3 follow:

Ephraim's translation: I begin to chant about the fair-haired, revered goddess Demeter and her daughter with delicate ankles, whom Death *seized*, given to him by loud-thundering, wide-eyed Zeus. . . . (Ephraim 1-3; emphasis added)

Foley's Translation: Demeter I begin to sing, the fair-tressed awesome goddess, herself and her slim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus *seized*; Zeus, heavy thundering and mighty-voiced, gave her. . . . (Foley 1-3; emphasis added)

West's translation: Of Demeter the lovely-haired, the august goddess first I sing, of her and her slender-ankled daughter, whom Aïdoneus *seized* by favor of heavy-booming, wide-sounding Zeus. . . . (West 1-3; emphasis added)

In this instance, three translations show identical definition variations for "ἄρπάζω." Foley asserts, "the word *rape* emphasizes sexual consummation, which is uncertain in this case . . . On line 3, for example, I have translated the verb (*herpaksen*) as 'seized'" (Foley 32; emphasis in original). I chose "seized" because the speaker is the supposedly impartial orator of the *Hymn*, who is interested not in the violent nature of the abduction but in setting the scene. While the orator should be impartial, they downplay Hades's violence and trickery along with Persephone's lack of agency and instead emphasize Zeus's consent to the marriage.

"ἄρπάζω" appears for a second time in line 19, and the orator remains the speaker. In this case, though, they describe the abduction in more detail. The three translations follow:

Ephraim's translation: He *overpowered* her, unwilling, upon his golden chariot and carried her off, wailing. Then she shrieked shrilly with her voice, calling her father, the son of Kronos, the highest and best. (Ephraim 19-21; emphasis added)

Foley's translation: he *snatched* the unwilling maid into his golden chariot  
and led her off lamenting. She screamed with a shrill voice,  
calling on her father, the son of Kronos highest and best.  
(Foley 19-21; emphasis added)

West's translation: *Seizing her by force*, he began to drive her off on his golden chariot, with her  
wailing and screaming as she called on her father Zeus, the highest and  
noblest. (West 19-21; emphasis added)

The violent nature of the abduction is clear in all three translations, but each translator selected different definition variances: Ephraim chose "overpowered"; Foley chose "snatched"; and West chose "seizing her by force." On one hand, Foley and I emphasize the violent connotations of the abduction through our pairings of "overpowered" and "snatched" with "unwilling." On the other hand, West undermines Persephone's agency by omitting "unwilling" in favor of "with force," especially with the text's emphasis on Persephone's vocal resistance.

Persephone not only wails but also shrieks shrilly for Zeus (Ephraim 1-3). The orator reasserts the unwillingness of Persephone in lines 30 to 32: "But the son of Kronos, having many names, the ruler over many and receiver of many, her father's brother, carried her off unwillingly by immortal horses at the suggestion of Zeus" (Ephraim 30-2). The primary clause of this sentence gives further context to the abduction: Hades abducts an unwilling Persephone because Zeus suggests the match. Consequently, the sentence "serves to emphasize Hades's close relation to Zeus and thus his suitability as a bridegroom" (Foley 36). Hades's status as an honorable bridegroom for Persephone is an important theme in the *Hymn to Demeter*. Over the course of Demeter's search for Persephone and subsequent famine, Helios, Hermes, and Rhea tell Demeter directly that she should be satisfied with Hades as a husband for her daughter, and Zeus asserts

his approval indirectly through his arrangement of the abduction.

The third usage of "ἄρπάζω" falls on line 81. At this point in the narrative, Demeter searches for answers. She and Hecate go to Helios because, as the sun god, he looks "down upon all of the earth and sea from out of the divine sky" (Ephraim 69-70). The three translations follow:

Ephraim's translation: And he *snatched* her *away* to his chariot-horses to carry her under, shrieking, to the murky and vast gloom of the world below. (Ephraim 80-1; emphasis added)

Foley's translation: With his horses Hades *snatched* her screaming into the misty gloom. (Foley 80-1; emphasis added)

West's translation: He *seized* her, and was taking her on his chariot down to the misty darkness, while she screamed loudly. (West 80-1 emphasis added)

The speaker is Helios who, even being the god of the sun and watcher of proceedings both mortal and immortal, takes a stance that favors Zeus and Hades. Therefore, I chose an aggressive but not violent reading of "ἄρπάζω." Helios prefaces Hades's role in the abduction with a claim that, "not any other deathless gods are blameworthy, only the cloud-compeller Zeus" (Ephraim 77-8). After he tells Demeter about the abduction, he again attempts to negate Hades's guilt by telling Demeter: "But, goddess, stop your great wailing and do not be intent in vain to hold fast to your terrible and bitter anger. Aidoneus, the ruler over many, is not a shameful son-in-law among the deathless gods" (Ephraim 81-4). In addition to telling Demeter to cease her anger, Helios calls her anger "bitter" and useless.

After all, according to their honor-oriented patriarchy, Hades is a good match for Persephone. The gods are deathless and have no purpose in their limitless existence without mortals; Persephone, as the spouse of Hades and lord of the Underworld, will receive more devotional offerings and honors. Moreover, regardless of the additional honors that she will receive, Hades and Zeus have more agency and power. Olympus remains patriarchal, and it is only Demeter's famine that convinces Zeus to consider Persephone's return to the mortal realm. Since Helios advises Demeter to find satisfaction with Persephone's lot, and her own as well, I deem "snatched away" the appropriate definition variance.

The fourth use of "ἄρπάζω" does not come until Persephone's reunion with Demeter. In the passage, Persephone recounts the story of her abduction for her mother. The translations follow:

Ephraim's translation: I will tell you how he *overpowered* me by plan of my father, shrewd Zeus, son of Kronos, and carried me off under the depths of the land and will recount all that you ask. . . . The land gave way from below, and out sprang the mighty all-receiver in his golden chariots, and he bore me away under the land, entirely unwilling. I shouted with a shrill tone. (Ephraim 414-6, 429-33; emphasis added)

Foley's translation: For the rest—how *seizing* me by the shrewd plan of my father, Kronos's son, he carried me off into the earth's depths—  
I shall tell and elaborate all that you ask. (Foley 414-6; emphasis added)  
. . . the ground gaped from beneath,  
and the mighty lord, Host-to-Many, rose from it

and carried me off beneath the earth in his golden chariot  
much against my will. And I cried out at the top of my voice.

(Foley 429-33)

West's translation: As to how he *snatched* me up through the crafty design of Zeus my father, and took me off to the recesses of the earth, I will explain and go through it all, just as you ask. . . . the ground beneath gave way, and there the lord, the mighty Hospitable One, leaped forth. He went off below the earth with me in his golden chariot, for all my resistance, and I screamed aloud. (West 414-6, 429-33; emphasis added)

This final occurrence of "ἀρπάζω" is the only instance in which Persephone recounts the abduction. She makes it very clear that she did not want to go with Hades and resisted in any way that she could.

Therefore, the definition variance that I chose is "overpowered." First, she notes that the abduction was planned by "shrewd" Zeus. Even Persephone agrees that Zeus deserves the most blame, but she does not vindicate Hades completely. She uses the word "φέρων" twice in her retelling. Generally, "φέρων" means "to bear away" ("φέρων"). In my translation, I use "carried off" and "bore away." Foley uses "carried off" in both instances. West uses "took off" and "went off." While Foley and I make it clear that Persephone is abducted against her will, Foley's translation is less clear.

Persephone makes it obvious that she is unwilling. She explicitly comments that she is "πόλλ' ἀεκαζομένην"—not just unwilling but "entirely unwilling" (Ephraim 432). She even explains that she screamed when taken away. While readers are aware of this fact, Persephone directly asserts that she resisted Hades both physically and vocally. Foley notes:

The *Hymn* thus seems to emphasize the disparity in point of view between the goddesses and others in the poem, without explicitly questioning the "truth" of either view. In this passage Persephone acquires an articulate voice (beyond a cry for help) in the narrative for the first time; this may affirm that she has acquired an adult role and a partial independence from both Hades and her mother. (Foley 60)

Persephone's double use of "φέρων" in the same speech for which she uses "ἀρπάζω" once shows that she is aware of the violent connotations of "ἀρπάζω" and its weight. She understands that she will not be released from the deal that Zeus, Hades, *and* Demeter have struck, but she can assert her understanding of the politics at play and her resistance to being a pawn.

## Definition Variance of "λάθρη"

Two occurrences of the word "λάθρη" in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* are key to Hades's abduction of Persephone. "λάθρη" is the adverb form of "λανθάνω". On one hand, the Liddell and Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon* offers the following definitions for the verb form of "λανθάνω": "escape notice of"; "unawares, without being observed"; "unseen"; "make one forget"; and "forget" ("λανθάνω"). On the other hand, the *LSJ* lexicon offers the following definitions for the adverb form, "λάθρη": "secretly, by stealth"; "treacherously, imperceptibly"; "unknown to" ("λάθρη"). While the definitions for "λανθάνω" suggest a lack of observation, the definitions for "λάθρη" denote purposeful deception. Therefore, while definitions of "λανθάνω" and "λάθρη" address acts of forgetting, the surrounding context of the scenes show that definition variance depends on the intention of the speaker and the word's part of speech.

The first notable usage of "λάθρη" occurs when Hermes tells Hades that Persephone must be returned to Demeter. Hades has just elaborated on the many honors that Persephone will gain as his wife: ". . . I will not be a shameful husband among the immortals . . . In being here, you will be lord to all who both live and walk and have the greatest honors among mortals" (Ephraim 363-6). It is notable especially that Hades offers Persephone equal mastery over the Underworld. Found on line 372 of the *Hymn* in its adverb form, "λάθρη," the translations follow:

Ephraim's translation: Yet, he *treacherously* gave her a honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat,

dealing out for the sake of himself, so that she might not stay there for all days beside the revered, dark-veiled Demeter. (Ephraim 371-4; emphasis added)

Foley's translation: . . . But he gave her to eat

a honey-sweet pomegranate seed, *stealthily* passing it  
around her, lest she once more stay forever  
by the side of revered Demeter of the dark robe.

(Foley 371-4; emphasis added)

West's translation: But he gave her a honeysweet pomegranate seed to eat, *surreptitiously*,  
peering about him, to prevent her from staying up there for ever with  
reverend Demeter of the dark robe. (Foley 371-4; emphasis added)

There are multiple readings of these lines. Foley decided to "adopt the possibility that Hades is performing a magical rite to bind Persephone to himself by passing the seed around her or consecrating it," a possibility that Richardson discusses in his commentary on the *Hymn* (Foley 56). She acknowledges that "The phrase might also mean, among many possibilities, 'handing over or distributing the seed (to her),' 'turning it over in his mind,' or 'peering (furtively) about himself'" (Foley 56). West emphasizes Hades's secretive body language with his chosen definition of "surreptitiously." I read the word as Hades's ploy to guarantee the legitimacy of his marriage to Persephone and define "λάθρη" as "treacherously" because of the phrase "ἀμφὶ ἑ νομίσας," which I translate to mean "dealing out for the sake of himself" (Ephraim 373). Hades gives Persephone the seed because he thinks of himself. No matter the translation, Hades uses tools of verbal persuasion, and he diverts Persephone's will in favor of his desire.

To propose a feminist reading of this scene, there are two more possible interpretations. On one hand, Hades offers equal lordship of the Underworld to Persephone, but he does not see her as an autonomous adult because he does not allow her to accept or deny his offer. Instead, he forces her hand. On the other hand, Hades belatedly acknowledges Persephone's autonomy and

his previous disregard of it through an attempt to woo her with the currency of the gods—mortal recognition and honor. Another reading of the text claims that the pomegranate seed represents the consummation of the marriage, a reading that I address in more detail in Section Three: Ascension.

The second key usage of "λανθάνω" appears in line 411 when Persephone recounts her abduction to Demeter. The translations follow:

Ephraim's Translation: At once I leapt up with joy, but he *stealthily* put in my mouth

honey-sweet food, a pomegranate seed, and forced me to eat, unwilling, overpowering me. (Ephraim 411-3; emphasis added)

Foley's Translation: . . . Then I leapt up for joy, but he *stealthily*

put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it. (Foley 411-3; emphasis added).

West's Translation: . . . I at once jumped up in joy; but he *surreptitiously* got a pomegranate seed into me, a honey-sweet food, and made me taste it against my will. (West 411-3; emphasis added)

In this case, Foley uses the same translation from the first instance of "λάθρη": "stealthily." West continues to use "surreptitiously." I chose a different translation of "λάθρη" ("stealthily" instead of "treacherously") because Persephone emphasizes the force that Hades uses to make her ingest the seed: she tells Demeter that she was unwilling and that Hades overpowered her. Therefore, I argue that Hades uses trickery to get the pomegranate into Persephone's mouth and brute strength to force her to swallow the seed. This reading parallels the force that Hades uses during the

original abduction. Hades and Zeus planned the abduction, but it is only after Hades has Persephone in his grasp that "ἄρπάζω" enters the text.



**only**  
his daughter  
when  
useful,  
her girl  
when  
needed,  
and  
his woman  
when  
wanted

a mediator  
aboard & against,  
a maiden  
about & around,  
a meteor  
above & across

and after taken from that meadow?  
after the crops rise and the famine settles?  
the cycle begins anew.



### Part Three: Ascension

#### Close Literary Analysis

There are two key settings in the plight of Persephone: the meadow where the abduction takes place and Hades's bed chamber where he forces her to eat the pomegranate seed. A feminist comparison of these spaces unveils the patriarchal, honor-oriented society Persephone is forced to navigate.

The *Hymn to Demeter* opens in a meadow of blooming flowers. The orator begins with one sentence that spans eleven lines and introduces the main characters of the *Hymn*, gives the first setting of the story, and establishes the liveliness of an unnamed girl's company:

I begin to chant about the fair-haired, revered goddess Demeter and her daughter with delicate ankles, whom Aidoneus seized, given to him by loud-thundering, wide-eyed Zeus, far from Demeter of the golden sword, bearer of the fruits of the earth, while playing with the full-breasted girls of Oceanus and picking flowers—wild red roses and crocus, beautiful violets, irises and hyacinths, and narcissus—upon a soft meadow, which the land produced at the council for Zeus, pleasing the all-receiver, as bait for the budding girl, wonderful and gleaming, at any rate being awe-inspiring for both immortal gods and mortal men. (Ephraim 1-11)

While Demeter, Zeus, and even Hades are named, Persephone is not. Instead, she is Demeter's daughter "with delicate ankles" and the "budding girl, wonderful and gleaming" (Ephraim 8-10). Persephone is not an autonomous individual at this point in the narrative. Instead, the orator sexualizes and objectifies her body and the bodies of her female companions, "the full-breasted girls of Oceanus" (Ephraim 5).

Therefore, I propose two possible images for this moment. One image shows a girl who has just come into her body, her limbs lanky and tan from playing in the meadow with older girls, hips and breasts transitioned from child-body to woman-body but mind still free to play among flowers without being self-conscious. In this first image, "Persephone is still a child. . . Greek poetry represented a girl's childhood as a protected physical space, an idyllic existence" (Foley 127). In a second image, though, "The adolescent girl's attraction to the seductive narcissus and the location of the rape in the flowery meadow . . . suggest Persephone's readiness for a new phase of life" (Foley 127). This second image focuses on the unnamed girl-woman's body, her tunic cinched at the waist to accentuate a burgeoning figure and the fabric of her low neckline framing her newly found breasts. The girl-woman is enthralled with the newfound power in her changing body, but she has not yet encountered the risks of men identifying her as a woman. She feels safe to play in a meadow, yet is surrounded by floral imagery that evokes fertility and budding sexualization. The orator's narration of the abduction falls somewhere between these two images.

Through the meadow's multi-layered sexual innuendos, the first sentence of the *Hymn* proposes a traditional ancient Grecian mythological abduction sequence. In regard to the setting: Girls in myth are traditionally carried off, often from a chorus of maidens, while gathering flowers in a meadow . . . Meadows in Greek myth are liminal sites, associated not only with a transition to sexuality and fertility but with the underworld . . . The motif of abduction from a meadow and a group of maidens suggests the girl's readiness for marriage. (Foley 33-4)

Demeter's physical distance from Persephone "suggests that Persephone moves toward maturity and independence from her mother" (Foley 32). The separation of mother and daughter, however,

does not invite abduction, especially with Persephone's company in that meadow. The daughters of Oceanus "are water deities . . . who, like all nymphs, protect and nourish the young" (Foley 33). While the meadow denotes Persephone's advance toward sexual and intellectual independence, she expresses this sexual curiosity in a supported and protected environment. Persephone's sexual curiosity is just that: curiosity. At this stage of the *Hymn*, she is not ready to enter the world, and Persephone's later recollection of the abduction supports this state of mind. While the supposedly impartial orator's take on the abduction "combines the vocabulary and images both of marriage and of rape" to present "a balanced—or ambiguous—explanation of what has happened to Persephone, Persephone's later rendition of the abduction reveals that she was surrounded and protected both by the daughters of Oceanus and by the goddesses Artemis and Athena (DeBloois 253). The orator's position as an impartial storyteller is called into question, especially because Athena and Artemis are powerful goddesses who subvert the patriarchal power system of the gods through their decisions to remain virgins and reject marriage.

In omitting the presence of Athena and Artemis during the initial abduction—and if Persephone's recollection of the abduction is considered an absolute truth—the orator purposely sways their audience's opinions toward abduction-marriage, rather than abduction-rape. As with the dual images of Persephone proposed earlier, the orator "stands as mediator between two varying accounts" but is influenced by the power systems at play in ancient Greece:

. . . when related through the female characters of the *Hymn* (Demeter, Persephone, and Hekate) the emphasis is on violence, rape, and death. The male characters (Helios and Hades) interpret the same event as a marriage. Each of the characters views the events in a different way, according to his or her own role and gender. (DeBloois 248)

If the narrator purposely removed Artemis and Athena from their original places in the meadow, then they omit two women who subvert female gender roles in several spheres. These goddesses destabilize the patriarchal and marriage-oriented Greek society: Athena and Artemis give mortal women direct examples by which they can destabilize the submissive societal positions forced upon them. By including Artemis and Athena in her retelling, Persephone situates "her experience in a context of individualized female presence" (Foley 126). But, the Greek gods did not experience marriage like the mortals who prayed to them.

A marriage between gods did not mean the separation of a daughter from her family, and "neither divine marriages nor rapes required the same kind of change of residence to which the mortal bride was often subject; nor did they require loss of independence on the part of the female Olympian" (Foley 106). Thanks to the common community between the gods, "their marriages are in essence endogamous (between insiders)" (Foley 106). However, Hades and his realm are different, due to the inaccessibility of the Underworld. Before Persephone, only Hermes could travel between the mortal realm and the Underworld, so "Persephone is subjected to an extreme form of virilocal exogamy in which she is permanently denied access to her parents" and is more closely aligned with mortal women than immortal goddesses (Foley 107). This shared trauma between Persephone and mortal women allows her to bridge the mortal and immortal realms.

Consequently, Persephone's wedding parallels a mortal marriage rather than a marriage between immortals. In ancient Greece, "polis" (city-states) were made up of "oikoi" (family units and households) each run by a male head (Pomeroy 180). The "oikos" served as "the primary unit of production, consumption, and reproduction," but the social institution of marriage "sustained the oikos" (Pomeroy 180, 183). Mothers were not required to be present at the time of

betrothal, and it was the father and future husband who settled the dowry (Pomeroy 183). When it came to the marriage itself, "for respectable girls there was no alternative to marriage . . . the traditional Athenian marriage took place at night, and the central event was the procession, in which a chariot driven by the bridegroom carried the bride to the home of her future husband . . . torches lit the way" (Pomeroy 183-4). A pre-marriage custom for girls was "to dedicate her dolls and other toys to Artemis to mark her transition to adulthood" (Pomeroy 183). Keeping these Athenian customs in mind, Hades's abduction of Persephone more closely parallels the marriage process for mortal women rather than a marriage between gods. Zeus agreed to give Persephone to Hades to marry. Hades brings her, unwilling, to his realm by golden chariot. Demeter even carries a torch in her search for Persephone. Finally, Artemis's presence in the meadow as Persephone picks flowers represents the mortal premarital custom of girls dedicating their toys to Artemis.

In fact, "Persephone's marriage with Hades, who lives in a world inaccessible to mortals and immortals alike" exposes Persephone and Demeter to "the sufferings and limits imposed on humankind" (Foley 88). Despite these many parallels, though, Athena is present in that meadow, and Hades and Zeus lure Persephone to the baited flower. Hades overpowers Persephone physically, and she uses her voice to express her unwillingness. But, though the separation of Persephone and Demeter causes the goddesses pain, their separation indirectly gives Persephone an ability not before seen of a god. Persephone's marriage to Hades forms a link between the Underworld and the mortal realm: "Mortals now have an ear in the underworld, and the universe has a link between heaven, earth, and the world below" (Foley 89). The mortal elements of Persephone's marriage humanize the gods in a way not seen before, and "Hades becomes for the first time accessible to mortal prayers . . . the god received cult offerings almost exclusively as

the husband of Persephone" (Foley 89). In Persephone's partial separation from Demeter and the violent component of Hades's abduction, married women gain a goddess with whom they can relate—one who understands their pain and trauma. By focusing on the pain of Persephone and Demeter, "the *Hymn* reveals the problematic side of marriage for the bride and develops its narrative on the divine level as conflict between genders" in ancient Greece (Foley 104-5).

The flowers in the meadow where Persephone is abducted allude to images of death and marriage. Flowers often denote sexual metaphor, and in Greek comedy, "certain plants and flowers are associated with the female sexual organs," especially the pomegranate and rose; even a meadow can have sexual connotations during representations of women as land sowed or ploughed during sexual intercourse (DeBloois 249). On the specific flowers listed, "roses are associated with eros, and the narcissus, like many other flowers that grow from bulbs and produce fruits, was thought to be an aphrodisiac" (Foley 34). In addition, many of the flowers are associated with the underworld: "The hyacinth, the narcissus, the violet and the crocus (as well as the pomegranate) are all associated in later myth with young heroes . . . who fell victim to untimely death at an earlier age" (Foley 34). The flowers lead to a trap for Persephone, though. It is when Persephone reaches for the narcissus that Hades abducts her.

The abduction circumstances and setting forces Persephone to empathize with mortal women and brings to light the patriarchal society in which both immortals and mortals navigate, but Hades's treachery with the pomegranate seed reveals the honor-oriented undertones of the power structure. Translations of the exact setting differ:

Ephraim's Translation: He found the lord having been within his chambers, *sitting on a couch* with his shame-faced wife, very much against her will, yearning for her mother. (Ephraim 342-44; emphasis added)

Foley's Translation: He met lord Hades inside his dwelling,

*reclining on a bed* with his shy spouse, strongly reluctant

through desire for her mother. (Foley 342-44; emphasis added)

West's Translation: He found its lord within his mansions, *seated on his couch* with his modest

consort, who was full of resistance from longing for her mother. (West

342-44; emphasis added)

The word that is emphasized in each translation is "λέχος," and its definitions range from "couch, bed" to "marriage-bed" ("λέχος"). While Foley translates "λέχος" to "bed," West and I choose "couch." With the violence of the abduction and the sexual intention of Hades, a logical translation of "λέχος" is "bed," but dining on couches was a common practice in ancient Greece. If Hades's abduction of Persephone represents the mortal wedding procession, a meal would closely follow her arrival. With my choice to translate "λέχος" as "couch," I show Hades's actions as his forcing Persephone into her new role as his wife; he insists that she eat the pomegranate seed, which symbolically represents her acceptance of her newfound domestic role.

The question of the pomegranate seed is the final key sequence in the abduction of Persephone. As discussed in Part Two: Descension, the translation of "ἀπάζω" changes Hades's motives. I chose to translate this moment as a completely selfish act on behalf of Hades: he wants Persephone to remain in the Underworld with him, and forcing her to eat the pomegranate seed accomplishes his goal. After all, "In many folktales, eating the food of the dead prevents a return to the world above" and, "When a bride eats food in her husband's house, she accepts her transition to a new life under her husband's authority" (Foley 56). The pomegranate itself further denotes sexual action, as they symbolize blood and death along with fertility and marriage (Richardson 276). While Hades is not concerned with fertility, he does want to bind Persephone

to him; he uses the pomegranate seed to permanently trap her—with some success.

How far does Hades go to bind Persephone to him? Is the pomegranate meant to signify only Persephone's ingestion of food from the Underworld, or does it signify a sex act between Persephone and Hades? Hades's feeding unwilling Persephone might suggest rape, and, if a sex act does occur, by eating the pomegranate seed *and* consummating the marriage, Persephone becomes "symbolically committed both socially and sexually" to Hades (Foley 57). Quite literally, Hades forces his seed on Persephone, and, with this ingestion, Hades cements Persephone within the feminine gender role that Zeus and he expect of her. But, in eating the pomegranate seed—and regardless of any sex act that might have occurred—Persephone also gains the honors that come with a marriage to Hades.

The honors that Persephone earns as the wife of Hades subverts the power structure that Zeus and Hades seek to continue. Hades tries to lessen the blow of his treachery by offering Persephone three things: "rule over all living things on earth, honors among the gods, and vengeance against those who wrong her or fail to propitiate her with sacrifices and gifts" (Foley 55). With these honors, Persephone becomes the first god who has positions in all three realms: for two thirds of the year, she has a place at Demeter's side both in Olympus and on the mortal plane, and for the final third she rules the Underworld and is equal only to Hades. He even promises her, "I will not be a shameful husband among the immortals . . . In being here, you will be lord . . ." (Ephraim 364-5). He does not promise to offer her honor as his consort or his wife but as a lord; Persephone gains not only the honors that come with being one half of the ruling pair of the Underworld but also the responsibility of being an equal ruler to Hades. This wording implies that Hades now sees Persephone as an autonomous being. Though he tricks her with the pomegranate seed, this reading suggests that he accepts the repercussions of her ire so long as

she rules with him for part of the year. With this new responsibility, Persephone "has honors in three spheres, she will be able to mediate, as no other deity can, between them" (Foley 55). Ironically, the abduction that Zeus orchestrated forever modifies the Olympian institution (Foley 112). With the continued treachery of Hades—and in binding Persephone to him and within their patriarchal power system—Persephone gains more honors than Hades and even Zeus.

Persephone does not destabilize the immortal social hierarchy by refusing to navigate it, like Athena and Artemis. She unsettles the honor-oriented power structure by gaining more honors than any other god; she subverts the power structure from within it.

## Resistant Reading

A surface-level reading of Hades's abduction in the *Hymn to Demeter* reasserts the power that male gods—Zeus and Hades—have in their patriarchal society. Hades abducts Persephone with the permission of her father, Zeus, and her mother, Demeter, starves mortals to see her daughter again. In the end, Persephone returns to her mother for two thirds of the year; for the other third, Persephone lives as the wife of her abductor while separated from her mother and the other gods. With a feminist-resistant reading of Persephone's abduction, I present that the plight of Persephone is not a story of defeat but a fight for female agency in a male-dominated, honor-oriented patriarchal society.

The *Hymn* centers female experience with its emphasis on relationships between women. Unlike most ancient Grecian myths, in the *Hymn*, "male characters serve as remote and marginal (though critical) catalysts to the action, while the narrative concentrates on the experience of female protagonists in a female role" (Foley 123). In addition to the central role of female relationships, Persephone and Demeter's bond strengthens the "intergenerational chain of relations from mother to daughter" (Foley 123). From the beginning of the myth, listeners are positioned in traditional feminine spaces. According to the orator, the abduction takes place in a meadow full of flowers, and the daughters of Oceanus keep Persephone company. When Persephone gives her story of the abduction, she reveals that Athena and Artemis were also present. While the orator focuses on the names of the flowers in the field, Persephone's rendition focuses on her companions; thus, her version of events locates "her experience in a context of individualized female presences" (Foley 126). When readers see Persephone next, she sits with Hades in his Underworld chambers. Before Persephone returns to Demeter at Zeus's order, Hades feeds Persephone a pomegranate seed. Though Persephone sits in Hades's chambers in his realm,

the pomegranate can represent *her* sexuality. In eating the fruit, Persephone gains honors as Hades's partner that sets her apart from the entire Olympian institution of gods. Finally, when Persephone returns to Demeter, they enter the mortal realm before Demeter's temple. In addition to each key setting in the *Hymn* being spaces of female power, the direct speeches spoken by goddesses further emphasizes the importance of female roles.

Direct and indirect dialogue in Greek mythological texts gives power to or takes power from characters. Direct dialogue is "language that reproduces both the content and the expressive or subjective features of the represented utterance" (Beck 54). One degree separates the speaker and listener. In indirect dialogue, however, two degrees separate the original speaker and the listener: the indirect speech's content "is subject to the interpretation of the reporter" in addition to the listener (Beck 54). So, indirect speech "attributes the representation of the original utterance to a reporting narrator and generally provides the content but not the subjective aspect of the speech act" (Beck 54). In the *Hymn*, female goddesses have direct dialogue; in fact, their speeches encompass the majority of the myth, while male gods' direct dialogue navigates between female characters.

Therefore, direct and indirect dialogue shows gender roles on a structural level of the text. The *Hymn* "uses direct and indirect speech in different and complementary ways so as to emphasize the relationship of Persephone and Demeter, and more generally of mothers and daughters" (Beck 54). When direct dialogue appears, it connects a mother-daughter relationship, and "[t]he subjective/expressive power of direct speech correlates with points in the poem where Demeter's role as a mother or mother-figure is central"; on the other hand, "the specific properties of indirect speech are exploited to create distancing effects of various kinds" (Beck 57). For instance, during Persephone's abduction, the orator reports that she wailed for Demeter

and Zeus, but they do not report the direct language that Persephone uses. While Persephone does use her voice to call for help, the orator represents her as "a captive young girl powerless to prevent her own abduction" (Beck 58). She is not only powerless against Hades during the abduction, her cry for help is both unsuccessful and "almost entirely unheard" (Beck 58). Persephone has no agency.

In contrast with that moment of powerlessness, Demeter's separate requests for help from Hecate and Helios each include direct speech. In fact, Demeter's request for help from Hecate "is the first direct example of direct speech in the poem" (60). And, though unable to help Demeter, Hecate sends Demeter to Helios, where Demeter asserts her will through direct dialogue. With these two speeches, the:

. . . expressive force focuses on the dearness of Persephone as a daughter. Both the use of direct speech to represent this particular speech . . . and the content of the speech itself demonstrates that direct speech is used to dramatize the importance of the mother-daughter tie between Demeter and Persephone. (Beck 60)

Helios's response to Demeter minimizes Demeter's pain as a mother, but he gives her the information that she requested. His "direct speech dramatizes the difference in perspective between the males of the poem and the females about the grief that Demeter experiences when her daughter is kidnapped" (Beck 61). Thus, on one hand, Demeter's direct speeches assert the importance of the relationship between mother and daughter and gives Demeter agency. While Demeter does not get her daughter back entirely, Persephone will return to her for the majority of each year. If Demeter had kept up the famine in the mortal realm, the mortals would have died out entirely; without the mortals, the honor-based hierarchy of the gods will have been destroyed entirely.

Demeter threatens the power structure in which the gods navigate to get her daughter back. In doing so, Demeter "softens the boundaries between mortals and immortals . . . Demeter's famine reveals that the gods are dependent on humans" and "brings the earth into a new and more beneficent relation to the powers above and below" (Foley 115). Therefore, Demeter asserts her autonomy and forces Zeus to bend his will to hers. Most importantly, Demeter's challenge to the patriarchal power structure gives Persephone the opportunity to gain an autonomous voice for herself:

. . . the mother's intervention (along with Zeus's subsequent command) produces a change in Hades. He (in Persephone's version of the story) forces her to eat the pomegranate seed . . . but offers the girl a powerful role of her own as queen . . . he gives Persephone a social identity independent from that of her mother . . . among the dead Persephone comes to have an awesome power and autonomy that is matched by few other female divinities in the cosmos. (Foley 129)

Persephone's lack of direct speech in the beginning of the myth shows her lack of agency. Only once she has eaten the pomegranate seed and returned to Demeter does she give a direct speech. Though Persephone does not have a direct speech until the end of the *Hymn*, her direct speech "is the longest speech in the *Hymn*," and "it is the last directly-reported exchange of speeches between two characters" (Beck 72). In sharp contrast with the nearly voiceless Persephone at the time of her abduction—and even in the Underworld—"here the young goddess not only has a voice, but has (nearly) the last word in the *Hymn* as a whole . . . by the end of the poem she can tell her own story" (Beck 72). Therefore, the direct speeches express the power and autonomy of characters—and the process of them finding and fighting for that agency. Might the pomegranate that Persephone ingests represent her breaking point? Just when Persephone sees the end of her

trauma, Hades forces the pomegranate seed on her—and, with the seed, newfound honors and responsibilities as a Lord of the Underworld. Once Persephone has the protection of these honors, she speaks out. She voices her plight, and she reclaims her agency as an autonomous individual.

Though Persephone and Demeter remain subject to the patriarchal and honor-oriented power structure of the immortals by the end of the *Hymn to Demeter*, Demeter asserts her autonomy by forcing Zeus to compromise in her custody battle for Persephone, and Persephone transforms from a nearly voiceless girl at the complete mercy of the Zeus and Hades to a Lord of the Underworld. She gains mobility between the three realms that is matched by no other god, and she receives honors as a Lord of the Underworld and as the daughter of Demeter. Persephone does not dismantle the societal system that she navigates. She encounters trauma at the hand of that system until, reascended to the mortal realm, she wields her newfound honors and power—given to her by that forced pomegranate seed—to reclaim her agency. Persephone completes her transformation when she voices her trauma and gives a direct recitation of her plight.

**above / below**

the first time

Hades

made me

go down,

he treated me like

a machine:

just another

midnight oil rig,

moist & ready

and only there to

serve Him,

but

—sometimes—

he too

is a midnight rig,

and his oiled

machine

bought me

a kingdom

and lead

me to my

voice



## Conclusion

To conclude my thesis, I bring together the creative pieces dispersed among the scholarly analysis. The purpose of the creative portion of this project is to take an active role in feminist reimagination of Persephone's abduction in the *Hymn to Demeter*. With these pieces, I focus on Persephone's point of view, which does not enter the *Hymn* until her return to Demeter. I did not want to underemphasize or overemphasize the violence done to Persephone. Instead, I was curious about what happens after the abduction. At the beginning of the *Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone is nearly voiceless and without agency; by the end of the myth, she gains honors through her role as Hades's wife and agency through her unrivaled ability to travel amongst the three realms and through her direct speech. My creative pieces imagine Persephone's arc from immortal girl to immortal queen during the *Hymn to Demeter* and who she might become thereafter.

"Part One: Abduction" concludes with a narrative poem entitled "tender steel." I finished a version of this poem, which I called "Persephone Takes her Dog for a Walk," a year ago. In that first incarnation, I played into the romanticized version of the *Hymn to Demeter* that first introduced me to the story of Persephone. When I reopened this piece, I noticed that romanticization and wrote a reimagining of that first creative retelling. Thus, "tender steel." Both reincarnations play into the personification of a floral Persephone that Demeter aims to isolate in her meadow, but, while my first version of this poem ends with Persephone marrying Hades to spite Demeter, "tender steel" focuses on Persephone's formation of armor to protect her will.

I separated "tender steel" into two sections—"I" and "II"—to show her transformation. "I" plays with the idea of Demeter as an ultra-controlling mother who treats Persephone as a young girl not mature enough to make autonomous decisions in the hope that her purposeful

ignorance of Persephone's physical and intellectual growth will keep Persephone from growing. The passive voice denotes Persephone's lack of agency on a structural level of the poem. "II" takes place after Hades's abduction of Persephone. The passive voice turns to active verb choices, and Persephone identifies that she sees herself as an autonomous being through her change of the self-referential "i" to "I." In my "Resistant Reading," I suggest that Persephone's forced ingestion of the pomegranate seed represents her breaking point. That seed not only ties her to Hades and the underworld but also guarantees the honors that Hades promised her. Therefore, in "tender steel," it is from that pomegranate that Persephone grows her armor and finds her voice.

"Part Two: Descension" closes with a poem entitled "only." In the *Hymn*, Persephone moves amongst the roles of Zeus's "mediator," of Demeter's "maiden," and of Hades's "meteor." In this poem, I meditate on Zeus's, on Demeter's, and on Hades's expectations of Persephone: Zeus expects her to move between Demeter and Hades every year—expects her to find contentment with the lot that he gives her as her father; Demeter presumes that Persephone will be available to her for their entire immortal lives; and Hades assumes that she can find pleasure as his wife and Queen of the Underworld, though separated from her mother and the other gods for a third of every year. In "only," I propose these roles and question the reality of these expectations.

"Part Three: Ascension" culminates in a piece entitled "above / below." The first piece that I wrote for my thesis, I decided that it concludes my reimaginings best. Split into two sections, the first stanza addresses Hades's abduction and the sexualization of Persephone. Zeus and Hades expect Persephone to easily and quietly transition from maiden to wife; they expect her to serve as a cog in the patriarchal society of the gods. "[S]ometimes" indicates Persephone's

literal descent into the underworld along with the simultaneous death of her maidenhood and birth of her agency. In the section stanza, Persephone tells her audience directly that Hades's desire makes him easy to control. Hades's and Zeus's sexualization of Persephone force her to take up the gendered role of wife, but her role as wife presents her with honors enough that she not only tells her story but is heard. Though Persephone becomes cemented in the ancient Grecian, honor-oriented patriarchal society in the *Hymn to Demeter*, she subverts that same system by obtaining honors and roles in each realm.



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