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Fall 8-3-2012

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### Recommended Citation

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Persephone and Hades: A Study of Representation in Art and Culture

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Classical Myth

3 August 2012

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Ancient artworks which represent classical Greek myths most commonly depict the story's climax. Their subjects reveal that the ancient Greeks' taste for dramatic storytelling matched their reverence for each divine entity's embodiment, whether it was a natural phenomenon or an abstract concept. The former of these traits dominate the visual portrayals of the Pluto and Persephone myth, as can be seen in many artworks where the ancient Greeks chose to depict the moment where Pluto theatrically abducts Persephone and sweeps her away to the underworld. In fact, in visual art, it was characteristic of the Greeks to stress the exciting moment of a plot rather than the essence of a divine being. In the myth of Pluto and Persephone, perhaps the most interesting aspect of representing a climatic moment is that, taken out of context, viewers are left to speculate on three integral points: Why did he choose to abduct her? Where is he taking her? And, what happens after she is taken? Likely, the average Grecian's knowledge of their cultural myths came from verbal reiterations, with visual depictions serving as a later, secondary method of storytelling that was not meant to take the place of spoken word, but to reinforce the plot's points. Visual representations of Pluto and Persephone demonstrate that, although the ancient Greeks had faith in religion and the etiological explanations offered by it, in their daily life entertainment was paramount. This approach to the visual depiction of myth was not lost in later cultures and in many ways remained the same. Two well-known depictions, *The Abduction of Persephone* (FIG. 1) (detail of a wall painting in tomb 1, Vergina, Greece, mid-fourth century BCE., 3' 3 1/2" high) and *The Rape of Proserpina* (FIG. 2) (a marble sculpture by the Italian Baroque artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1621-22 AD., 9' 7" high), are separated by time and were created in distinct cultures, yet the approach remains the same: the entertaining excitement of the myth overrides its religious significance.

A discussion of Greek myth is important before exploring its representations in art. Myths that were born before and during classical antiquity continue to attract attention because of their timeless appeal to human interest. In the study of mythology there are countless myths to be considered because of not only the great amount of gods, goddesses and demigods, but also due to the many variations. Adding to complexity, and due to myths' nature of being primarily communicated orally, it is nearly impossible to trace their origin, although several ancient texts do help by giving a no-later-than date of circulation. Ancient visual artworks do the same. Visual artwork can add to the understanding of culture if we are able to decipher the culture's reasons for emphasizing and, by default, deemphasizing certain excerpts and messages of a narrative.

Concerning origin, one ancient text has been extremely helpful in uncovering the closest-to-original in the line of myth retellings. Penned by Homer in 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., *Homeric Hymn* is a collection of 33 anonymously written, celebratory hymns dedicated to individual Greek gods. Regarding the physical world, one of the most remarkable etiological stories to come from this text is the myth of Demeter in *Hymn to Demeter*. Demeter, the Greek goddess of harvest and fertility, came to be accredited with nature's cycles (the seasons) through the story of how her daughter Persephone became goddess of the underworld. In *Hymn to Demeter* the reader is presented with the myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades (= Roman Pluto) and the consequences of this act. The hymn appears simple, however this is deceptive.

In myth, Demeter and Persephone, the Two Goddesses, are mother and daughter, and ironically linked to one another through the tale of their separation. The conflict of their story begins when Persephone is given to Hades, by her father Zeus without Demeter's permission, to be his wife in the underworld. Hades' abduction of Persephone sets up a series of events that leads to the myth's supposed purpose—to explain the cyclical return of fertility to the land

during springtime followed by its disappearance during the winter. For this cause the myth is etiological. Persephone and Demeter, once believed to be goddesses, are modernly believed to be allegorical figures representing earth's fertility. Literally, Persephone can be symbolically understood as a seed within the earth's surface which retreats during the winter and returns as life during the spring. This leaves her grieving mother to represent a barren earth during Persephone's absence in nature's unfertile months. However, due to the realities of agriculture this interpretation may not have been true to the ancient Greeks.

Barry B. Powell, in *Classical Myth*, offers a different interpretation—one that may be a more rational explanation of the myth than is often agreed upon. Powell states:

In the hymn, Korē returns in the springtime (line 415: “This was the day, the very beginning of bountiful springtime”), whereas in Greece the wheat seed is placed in the ground in the autumn, sprouts soon after, and grows through the wet winter. It does not sprout in the spring at all. What must be meant, then, some argue, is that the seed, Korē, is placed in the underground containers during the four hot, sterile summer months, until it is brought forth for the autumn planting. Although this interpretation accords with Korē spending one-third of the year in the house of Hades and two-thirds on earth, it disagrees explicitly with the hymn and with how the ancients themselves understood the story.<sup>1</sup>

This contradiction involving agriculture brings up a curious point. The etiological reasoning behind the myth seems to hinge on the agricultural truths matching those of the myth's plot (e.g., Persephone returns during spring symbolizing the return of the crop). This inaccuracy is vital to modern interpretations of the myth—it is possible that the Greeks did not use Demeter's hiatus as a substitute for a lack of science. Instead of allegorical figures symbolizing the seasons, this

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<sup>1</sup> Powell, Barry B., *Classical Myth* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2012), 249.

myth's message may have been more closely connected to the societal role of women. Perhaps this is the reason behind the interchangeable terms of Maiden, Kore, and Persephone in reference to Demeter's daughter. Kore and maiden are general terms for a young, unmarried female virgin. In visual art, Persephone may represent all young Greek females, and her depiction in the arms of Hades is symbolic of the lack of power and choice maidens had concerning their marriage partner.

Another interpretation of Persephone is presented by Jane Harrison, in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, as she suggests while referencing the design of an early red-figured skyphos (FIG. 3) found at Eleusis, "Mother and Maid in this picture are clearly distinguished, but not infrequently, when both appear together, it is impossible to say which is which."<sup>2</sup> Harrison's suggestion supports the idea that Demeter and Persephone are not a simple seasonal allegory. Based upon the design of the red-figured skyphos, she states, "the relation of these early matriarchal, husbandless goddesses, whether Mother or Maid, to the male figures that accompany them is one altogether noble and womanly, though perhaps not what the modern mind holds to be feminine," thus they seem to "halt somewhere half-way between Mother and Lover, with a touch of the patron saint."<sup>3</sup> It is possible that Demeter and Persephone may be the same person. The separation of these goddesses was also a traditional practice in ancient Greece. For instance, it was custom for Greek girls to be married-off/ taken from their mother when they were about fourteen years old. Later in life the cycle would return as they would have the experience of losing their own daughter to the same tradition. In these early depictions, sometimes Persephone appears holding a sheaf of grain, musical box, scepter or sistrum, but her most popular depiction is a struggle in the arms of Hades.

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison, Jane, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 273.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Harrison's interpretation is based on artwork found at a religious site, namely the temple at Eleusis. In this setting, the depiction is associated with stoicism and honorability, which lends to a solemn atmosphere. Participants at the Eleusinian Mysteries, a secretive cult dedicated to Demeter and, therefore, Persephone, performed sacred rites in a celebration of the return of the divine Kore. These annual celebrations did not emphasize the myth's entire narrative (only the return of fertility), so it is not surprising that the artwork found here depicts images of Demeter and Persephone in a state of calmness (independently sitting or standing while holding sheaves of grain). Another perspective is presented by Sarah Cristina Walters in the article (*Exploring the Myth of Demeter and Persephone: Mothers, Daughters, Vampires, Land, and Hope*) where she states that the Greeks created the myth of Demeter and Persephone in order to illustrate and "hope for a death that is free of fear."<sup>4</sup> However, Walters's interpretation is weak because the text and visual representations only serve to emphasize Persephone's fear.

Artwork within temples is largely austere, so it is not surprising that during the Classical era divinities are depicted without theatricality. In fact, there are examples of Persephone being portrayed in the Classical severe-style, yet the most well-known representations show a moment of great storytelling. These portrayals are not found at sacrificial sites. The previously mentioned, renowned artworks entitled *The Abduction of Persephone* and *The Rape of Proserpina* offer the viewer specific points of a narrative. A discussion on narrative is opened upon viewing these works.

The myth concerning the Two Goddesses and Hades begins with a young Persephone plucking flowers alone in a field. Hades, the god of the underworld and brother to Zeus, approaches her and offers her a flower (a narcissus). Persephone freely accepts the gift, though it

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<sup>4</sup> Walters, Sarah C., *Exploring the Myth of Demeter and Persephone: Mothers, Daughters, Vampires, Land, and Hope*. (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses: Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2000), 7.

is not directly handed to her. In Homer's *Hymn to Demeter* it is Earth who grows a narcissus "for the flower-faced maiden in order to gratify by Zeus's design the Host-to-Many/ a flower wondrous and bright, awesome for all to see/ for the immortals above and for mortals below."<sup>5</sup> This moment is followed by the often-depicted and thrilling abduction, as Hades physically and forcefully takes her in his chariot to be his bride in the underworld. Homer writes:

From its root a hundredfold bloom sprang up and smelled  
so sweet that the whole vast heaven above  
and the whole earth laughed, and the salty swell of the sea.  
The girl marveled and stretched out both hands at once  
to take the lovely toy. The earth with its wide ways yawned  
over the Nysian plain; the lord Host-to-Many rose up on her  
with his immortal horses, the celebrated son of Kronos;  
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.<sup>6</sup>

In two of the most well-known depictions of Persephone and Hades, *The Abduction of Persephone* and *The Rape of Proserpina*, the viewer is presented with a reenactment of Hades' merciless act. The earlier of the two, *The Abduction of Persephone*, is a wall fresco on the interior of the Tomb of Persephone. In this mural the seminude figure of Persephone is shown in a pose diagonal to the picture plane, an artistic technique that creates dynamic, implied movement. Her arms are raised and her red-colored garments propel backwards in the wind. Hades holds her breast in his left hand, while his other steers the chariot that seems to be rushing into the viewer's space at a three-quarter angle. This fresco's artist is speculated to be Nikomachos, an artist active during 4<sup>th</sup> century BC in Vergina, Greece (a small town located in

<sup>5</sup> Agha-Jaffar, Tamera, *Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth* (London: McFarland & Company, 2002), 173.

<sup>6</sup> Homer, Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *Hymn to Demeter* (Boston: Loeb Classical Library, 1914), Print.



Northern Greece, within the region of Central Macedonia—the site of the Tomb of Persephone, called so because of its frescos' subjects). This piece of Macedonian art was created during Greece's Late Classical period, which is marked by the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE and extends to the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. In this time, Phillip II, King of Macedon, defeated Athens in 338 BCE in the Battle of Chaeronea only to be assassinated two years later in 336 BCE, which left his son, Alexander III, to be his successor. Alexander III, better known as Alexander the Great, went on to conquer most of the known world at the time, including Babylonia, Egypt, Syria and the Levant to name a few. Greek culture expanded rapidly and began to see a rising taste for violent and intensely dramatic narratives. Artwork from this period is notable for its humanizing forms, nudes, and emotive/ expressive narratives—the previous Classical period favored a calm, noble detachment.

As the prelude to the Hellenistic period (323-146 BCE), the Late Classical period experienced a burgeoning importance for storytelling, which is the standout characteristic of *The Abduction of Persephone*. When attention is consistently given to a certain point in a narrative it helps to define the values for that culture. Case in point, Greek culture began to favor depictions of violence and high drama at the time of Alexander's conquests, therefore the shift is a part of the culture's transition into ideas centered on human accomplishment, or humanism. This is not to say that religion was abandoned. Mythical subject matter is indeed a dominant component of the art produced in Late Classical Greece—the change in representations indicates that the art of storytelling was only developing and, also, gaining prominence.

Almost two thousand years later Gian Lorenzo Bernini created his artistic interpretation of Hades and Persephone with *The Rape of Proserpina*, a 9' 7" high, marble sculpture. Of the title, in its archaic definition "rape" translates to "abduction". As like the Late

Classical period, art in seventeenth century Italy is characterized with a dramatic interaction with the spectator. This period is referred to as Baroque, meaning “misshapen pearl,” and takes much of its inspiration from Rome’s Late Classical era (e.g., clarity of narrative, appeal to senses, and idealized forms). Bernini, an Italian sculptor with great virtuoso, worked during the Counter Reformation, a catholic revival which began with the Council of Trent (1545-63 AD) and ended with the Thirty Years War (1648 AD). *The Rape of Proserpina* is a monumental sculpture similar to *The Abduction of Persephone* in subject matter and point in narrative. With *The Rape of Proserpina*, Bernini depicts a screaming, teary and nude Persephone being carried into the underworld by Hades. Hades is shown striding powerfully forward, his garment billowing backwards; his figure is that of an ideally proportioned, muscular male, having a full beard, mature facial features, and a crowned head. In contrast to *The Abduction of Persephone*, Bernini chose not to depict a chariot. This omitted feature allows Bernini to accentuate Hades’ overwhelming physicality. Bernini, a master of detail, crafted this sculpture to be incredibly naturalistic and realistic—one of the most admired elements of this work is how Bernini carved the marble in such a way that Persephone’s figure appears soft and fleshy in the tight grasp of Hades.

*The Abduction of Persephone* and *The Rape of Proserpina* are identical in point of narrative and distinguished by their medium and display of technical skill. Both are standout works and an archetype of their period. In the Baroque era, Catholicism dominated both religious and political practice, thus the Greek mythical subject of *The Rape of Proserpina* had little to do with a united cultural belief in the etiological explanation it offered. Like the ancient Greeks, seventeenth century, Italian culture was fascinated by the entertaining theatricality provided by the story of Hades and Persephone. This specific depiction only references mythical etiology

because of the chosen subject matter, and not through any direct intention to honor the goddess's connection to agricultural fertility.

Greek myths served many functions in ancient Greece. When analyzed from a historical perspective the myth of Persephone and Hades contains etiological and cultural truths for the society in which it was created. These truths, such as young maidens entering into arranged marriages, do not necessarily translate into seventeenth century Italian or postmodern Western culture, yet there is an underlying timelessness to the message. The Greeks themselves were the first to be self-conscious about their own traditions and throughout time became increasingly critical and suspicious of their gods' realities. Scholars today and several thinkers in ancient Greece acknowledged that there are non-coincidental, conceptual similarities between the form and psychology of men and gods. In sixth century BCE, Xenophanes of Colophon stated, "In my opinion mortals have created their gods with the dress and voice and appearance of mortals."<sup>7</sup> Just as in the Christian Bible, the Greeks conceived man being made in God's image. Ultimately, the myth of Hades and Persephone illustrates that through the centuries human interest has concerned mortality and human qualities of character. Using symbolism and allegory, the underlying message of myths nearly always refers to the human experience—these experiences are relatable to economics, politics, nature, morality, mortality, love, societal roles and/or family. The unique quality of the Persephone and Hades myth is its complex narrative which can be interpreted as a physical allegory (earth's seasons), a psychological allegory (the separation of mother and daughter), or a combination of both. In visual representation, this myth continues to entertain by drawing upon the same emotions it drew upon in both antiquity and the Baroque era. In art, the massive attention given to Persephone's abduction overrides the myth's broader

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<sup>7</sup> Powell, Barry B., *Classical Myth* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2012), 685.

religious message. To the ancients, and throughout all ensuing time, Persephone has had a relatable character, and her story is timelessly relevant to human emotion and experience.

Illustrations



FIG 1

Fresco

*The Abduction of Persephone*, detail of a wall painting in tomb 1

Vergina, Greece

Mid-fourth century BCE



FIG 2

Marble

*The Rape of Proserpina*

Artist: Gian Lorenzo Bernini

Italy, 1621-22 AD

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