

On the Rape of Persephone: Violence Against Women, Now and in Antiquity

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The Rape of Persephone refers to the Ancient Greek myth in which Hades abducts Demeter's daughter Persephone (Hesiod 910-15). Although this myth is intended to explain little more than the change of the seasons, it is also a prime example of how violence against women was not only tolerated among the Greeks, but both expected and institutionalized. In this paper, I will explain the myth, discuss the meaning behind the Rape of Persephone, and explain how its metaphors are relevant in today's world.

The myth of Persephone and Hades is most famously told in the anonymously written Homeric Hymns. According to "Hymn 2 to Demeter," Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, was playing with some other goddesses in a meadow, when Hades, "Host of Many... the Son of Cronos, He who has many names," stole her away from her mother and friends (Anonymous 5-20.). Her mother, with the help of the goddess Hecate, learned from the only witness to the abduction, Helios, that Persephone's own father, Zeus, had given her to his brother to be his wife (Anonymous 40-90). In her grief, Demeter didn't allow any crops to grow for a year, and would have starved mankind to extinction if Zeus hadn't sent a messenger to Hades with instructions to let Persephone return to her mother (Anonymous 305-40). However, to ensure that she could never leave for good, Hades had tricked Persephone into eating some pomegranate seeds during her stay in the underworld (Anonymous 360-400). Because she tasted food in the Underworld, Persephone was doomed to return to Hades for one third of every year; during which her mother grieved, and no crops would grow (Anonymous 395-402).

The simplest interpretation of this myth is, of course, as an explanation of the changing of the seasons; Demeter grieves for one third of every year and allows no crops to grow, and the phenomenon of winter is no longer a mystery. While some scholarly sources interpret the story as a metaphor for the initiation of a girl into womanhood (Lincoln 223), I see it as a wider metaphor for violence against women.

At every step in the story, a female deity is harmed by a male: Hades and Zeus conspire to steal Persephone away from her mother; Zeus initially refuses to return Persephone to Demeter; Hades feeds Persephone pomegranate seeds without her consent. Constantly throughout the myth, both Persephone's and Demeter's displeasure is made exceedingly evident, with Persephone specifically being referred to as both "unwilling" and "reluctant" (Anonymous 33,343). Zeus cared about Hades's right to have a pretty wife more than his daughter's or his sister's wellbeing to the point that a compromise was only struck when Demeter threatened to drive humanity into extinction with a never-ending famine. Even after the compromise, Hades had found a loophole to keep his unwilling bride. Persephone, who did nothing wrong, and by all rights should have been free from Hades, continued to suffer after the agreement. This inequity is symptomatic of the blatant misogyny that was spread throughout the Greek World at the time, and shows how women were treated as second-class citizens at best.

Unfortunately, women's subservient position in society has not improved considerably in the last 2000 years. One publication by the Civic Research Institute reports that in child custody cases, there is a "pervasive bias against protective mothers vis-à-vis litigating fathers"(Hannah & Goldstein, xxxi). This legal inequity is analogous to Hades retaining partial custody of Persephone, despite having stolen her against her and her mother's wishes. One possible justification for Persephone's

punishment is that it was her own fault. If she hadn't eaten the pomegranate seeds, she would have been free. This is an example of a judicial system that blames the victim for the crime committed against her; another phenomenon that is widespread in the present day, particularly in cases of rape or sexual assault (George & Martínez, 110).

It is also important to point out the difference between casual violence and institutionalized violence. Casual violence would be an isolated or strictly interpersonal aggression. If the abduction and rape of Persephone had been a unique instance, and not a story that was relatable to countless women, it would have been an example of this. Instead, the myth depicts a society that treats women as inferior; that blames women for crimes committed against them. When violence against women becomes expected, and is perpetuated by the governing bodies of society, it becomes institutionalized. Whereas casual violence is a symptom of personal prejudice, institutionalized violence depicts a larger, cultural problem.

The myth of Hades and Persephone is one that is well-known around the world. Superficially, it appears to explain the annual coming of winter, but when more closely analyzed, it reveals an allegory for institutionalized violence against women; an epidemic that has existed for thousands of years.

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