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Schiano, Sierra

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The 'Rape of Persephone' in Children's Media: Feminist Receptions of Classical Mythology

Sierra Schiano
University of California, Berkeley
Classical Civilizations
Class of 2017

Abstract: *In contemporary academic contexts, the 'Rape of Persephone' myth is a source of insight into the powerlessness of women in patriarchal, Greco-Roman society. In popular culture, however, the myth has found a surprising second life amongst children's media as the story of two unlikely, star-crossed lovers. Instead of simply rephrasing the myth as it is found in ancient sources, some Western authors and artists have changed the myth's plot and characterization of Hades and Persephone in order to transform this rape myth into a love story. In this paper, I explore the ways in which each adaptation deviates from the source material and reveals contemporary views of gender politics. On the one hand, there are some adaptations in which the 'Rape of Persephone' is altered just enough to be deemed appropriate for children. On the other hand, there are retellings in which the changes appear to not simply censor the myth, but to subvert the sexism inherent in the myth itself. I argue that this latter phenomenon is an act of feminist resistance against centuries of reception to the Classical myths that perpetuate the sexist gender constructs of ancient society. Ultimately, I believe these adaptations will draw young audiences to study Classical mythology and will also open up new discussions of Classical material and the ways it is received by modern society.*

In contemporary academic contexts, the 'Rape of Persephone' myth is a source of insight into the powerlessness of women in patriarchal, Greco-Roman society. It conveys the inherently imbalanced gender dynamics of the time, and the traits and actions that were considered acceptable for men and women. In popular culture, however, the myth has found a surprising second life amongst children's media as the story of two unlikely, star-crossed lovers. Instead of simply rephrasing the myth as it is found in ancient sources, some Western authors and artists – or, content creators¹ more generally – reframe the myth as a love story free of sexual violence and coercion. To do so, they must make changes – sometimes subtle, sometimes drastic – in regards to the plot of the myth, the characterization of the deities involved, and the relationship dynamics of said deities. In each instance, these changes should be viewed in contrast with the original myth in order to elucidate contemporary views of gender politics. I argue that there are two phenomena taking place with these altered versions of the myth. On the one hand, there are modern content creators who have adapted the 'Rape of Persephone' just enough so that it is deemed appropriate for children. On the other hand, there are content creators who make more radical changes that go beyond simply censoring the myth, but actually subvert the sexism inherent in the myth itself. I argue that this latter phenomenon is an act of feminist resistance against centuries of retellings of the Classical myths that perpetuate the sexist gender constructs of ancient society.

¹ By "content creators" I mean anyone involved in the production of a textual or visual adaptation of the myth. This term is particularly useful in the case of modern visual sources, where multiple people may be involved in the creative process (i.e. in an animated cartoon, a screenwriter, a producer, and an animator may all be involved in shaping the adaptation of the myth).

While authorial intent plays a role in the way each retelling of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ is shaped, it is impossible to discuss this intent without primary source material, such as interviews or author’s notes. Therefore, a more effective way to analyze these retellings is to discuss their overall impact upon the audience. In other words, what kinds of messages are conveyed to the audience via each adaptation of the myth? How is each character represented and how does this reflect or reject traditional gender roles? How do these characters interact with each other and how do they react to major components of the plot? How do these interactions construct what the audience is supposed to consider normal and acceptable behavior between men and women? In the case of adaptations that merely censor the original myth, these stories convey to the audience that violence against women is wrong, but that some power imbalance between men and women is acceptable. In sharp contrast to this, the more radical adaptations of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ communicate that relationships between men and women should not just be free of sexual violence, but that they should be based on mutual consent and equality. Considering the age group at which these modern retellings are aimed, I ultimately propose that these more radical adaptations of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ have the potential to shape their audiences’ understanding of gender politics in a positive way.

Let us begin by examining the ‘Rape of Persephone’ myth as told from primary textual and visual sources from antiquity. The earliest surviving version of the myth comes from the 7th century BCE *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The hymn starts with the innocent Persephone picking flowers while her mother, Demeter, is away. Persephone is lured away from her companions by a beautiful flower – a trap crafted by Zeus – whereupon Hades leaps out of the ground and kidnaps her. He drags Persephone away “against her will, and on his golden chariot [he] carried her off wailing” to the Underworld (19-20). From there, the hymn describes how Demeter, panicked, searches for Persephone. When Demeter learns that her daughter has been kidnapped to be the bride of Hades, Demeter flies into a rage and forsakes her duties as goddess of the harvest. She goes to Earth to grieve, and the hymn explains the foundation of the cult of Demeter at Eleusis. In an attempt to appease Demeter, Zeus sends Hermes down to the Underworld to convince Hades to return his bride. Hermes finds “the lord inside his house sitting on a bed with his shy wife very reluctant in her longing for her mother” (343-345), but when Hermes tells Persephone that she is to return to Earth, she “rejoiced and jumped up quickly in delight” (370-371). Hades seems to accept the pronouncement at first, but tries to sway Persephone, stating that, as the brother of Zeus, he would be a fitting husband to her. He adds that, if she stayed with him, she would be “queen of all that lives and moves,” and she will have “the greatest honors among the immortals” (365-366). Despite his initial acquiescence, Persephone later states that Hades fed her a pomegranate seed: “though I was unwilling, he made me eat it by force” (413). Because she has eaten the food of the Underworld, Zeus proclaims that Persephone must stay as Hades’ wife for half of the year, causing the winter season, before she can return to her mother and the land above, bringing spring and summer.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* can be broken down into several main plot points. There is the kidnap, the grief and rage of Demeter, the time spent by Persephone in the Underworld as Hades’ wife, the deception of the pomegranate, and the eventual compromise and creation of the seasons. The characters primarily involved are Hades and Persephone, and her parents Demeter and Zeus. Hades is depicted as aggressive and manipulative. Persephone is scared and powerless. Demeter is angry and distraught. Zeus is originally named as the instigator of the kidnap – “no one else of the immortals is responsible except cloud-gathering Zeus, who gave [Persephone] to Hades, his own brother, to be called his youthful wife” (77-80) – but eventually Zeus commands

that Persephone be returned to appease Demeter and bring order back to the land. Throughout the hymn, Persephone's single greatest advocate is Demeter. While her outrage comes partially from Zeus arranging Persephone's marriage without her, Demeter is also shown to fear for her daughter's safety and does everything in her power to rescue her. Persephone, for her part, seems to have a deep bond with her mother and also wishes to return home. The young girl does not express any desire to marry Hades and does not appear to be swayed by any of his arguments. Hades' motivations for kidnapping Persephone are never explored, beyond his desire for a young wife. Zeus' reasoning is equally mysterious, as he switches allegiances halfway through the hymn.

The Roman iterations of the 'Rape of Persephone' myth kept many of the same elements of the Greek original, but with a few key differences. Ovid's 1st century CE text, *Metamorphoses*, for example, also recounts the 'Rape of Proserpina.' In this version, the young girl, once again, is picking flowers until "Dis (Hades) saw her, was smitten, seized her and carried her off; his love was that hasty" (5.562-563). Unlike in the Homeric Hymn, there is no forethought on the part of Dis, nor any scheme set up by Jupiter (Zeus). However, when Ceres (Demeter) protests the theft of her daughter to Jupiter, the king of the gods responds, "this is not an injury requiring my retribution, but an act of love by a son-in-law who won't shame you" (5.699-700). Defending Dis' actions by claiming he will be a good husband and will bring honor to Ceres and her daughter is not an unfamiliar argument, as it too was used in the *Homeric Hymn*. Yet, *Metamorphoses* is the first surviving instance in which Dis' actions are deemed excusable because he was overtaken by love for Proserpina. Similarly, as to our knowledge, Ovid was also first to write that Dis did not force-feed pomegranate seeds to Proserpina, but that the young goddess actually consumed them herself without thinking of the consequences. This leads to the introduction of Ascalaphus, an underworld spirit who witnessed Proserpina eating the food of the Underworld and reported this to Mercury (Hermes) and Dis. In the end, once Jupiter announces the compromise of the seasons, Proserpina is "transformed." Ovid states, "she changed her mind then, and changed her expression to match it, and now her fair face...beams as the sun does" (5.743-744). It is not clear whether Proserpina is satisfied with the compromise because she is excited to return to her mother, or because she eventually grew to like Dis and enjoy living in the Underworld. This ambiguity may be one of the reasons why later authors and artists have felt comfortable introducing the idea that Persephone ultimately fell in love with her captor.

Ovid's retelling of the 'Rape of Persephone' in *Fasti IV* is practically identical in plot, characterization, and relationship dynamics. Both versions contain detailed accounts of the moment when Hades kidnaps Persephone. They recount the haste in which Hades claimed her and how her struggles were desperate enough to "rent the bosom of her robe" (4.449). Ovid also recounts Persephone calling out to her mother repeatedly and desperately. The overall tone captured through these descriptions is one of fear, confusion, chaos, and struggle. These elements, as laid down in both the Greek and Roman literary tradition, are also found in visual material culture from antiquity. For instance, a wall painting from the 4th century BCE tomb at Vergina, Greece is one of the most famous artistic depictions of the 'Rape of Persephone' (Figure 1). In it, a distraught Persephone attempts to lunge out of the grip of an immovable Hades. In her struggles, she reaches both arms out, most likely toward her mother or her playmates, or even toward the viewer themselves. Persephone is semi-nude – possibly for aesthetic purposes, but likely also to allude to her garment being torn in her struggles and the sexual nature of her kidnaping. Compared to the violent movement of Persephone's body, Hades

is powerful and solid. He grasps the reins of his chariot in his right hand and clutches firmly at Persephone with his left. His forward stance illustrates the urgency of the scene and his unshakable will. One can clearly see each figure's characterization and their relation to each other: Hades as aggressive and predatory, Persephone as terrified and powerless.



Figure 1: Wall painting at Vergina. Fred S. Kleiner, ed., *Gardener's Art Through the Ages: A Global History*, 14th Edition, Volume 1. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013).

The composition of this scene is also reflected in contemporary visual depictions of the 'Rape of Persephone' from Apulia. Many southern Italian vases from the 4th century BCE feature Persephone being taken away by Hades on a chariot, with varying degrees of emotionality. For example, an Apulian hydria by the Baltimore Painter (Figure 2) possesses a highly dynamic and emotional scene that holds many similarities to the wall painting at Vergina. In this painting, Hades clutches Persephone close to his body while she attempts to writhe out of his arms. Her hair has come loose in her struggle and both of her arms reach out to a fallen companion. The way that both Hades and Persephone involve their entire bodies in the scene conveys their desires in an immediate and dramatic way: Hades, to conquer, and Persephone, to resist. Conversely, on a volute krater painted by the Iliupersis Painter, the kidnap is a rather somber affair (Figure 3). Persephone calmly rides in the chariot beside Hades, with her gaze turned down and her body stiff. Hades appears less forceful, but still in control of the actions in the scene. I propose that this is not meant to convey Persephone's willingness to marry Hades, but simply her

acknowledgment of the inevitable and an expression of her powerlessness. In each of these depictions, the artist captures the sense of the entire myth in a single narrative moment. Through composition of each scene, the viewer can immediately understand the underlying emotions of the characters and their relationship to each other. In each image, kidnap is the catalyst for a sexual relationship between Hades and Persephone. Thus, Hades and Persephone's marriage is based on violence and coercion.



Figure 2: Apulian Hydria, Baltimore Painter, ca. 320-12 BCE; Macinagrossa collection: Bari, Italy. (LIMC, Hades #113)



Figure 3: Apulian Volute Krater, Iliupersis Painter, ca. 370-350 BCE; British Museum: London, England. (BMC F277)

Furthermore, I would like to clearly state that, while textual and visual sources are vague about what happens to the Persephone in the Underworld, there is plenty of sub-textual evidence to indicate to the audience that Hades sexually assaulted the young goddess. While the words used in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (ἄρπάζω – to seize, or carry off) and in the works of Ovid (rapio – to snatch, to drag off) are closer in meaning to “kidnap” than to rape as we understand it today (as any sexual activity performed on a person without their consent), these terms not only imply the act of kidnapping, but the institution of marriage-by-capture. In such an institution, sex without the female captive’s consent was to be expected, as the marriage needed to be consummated through sexual intercourse. In addition, when Hermes finds Hades “inside his house sitting on a bed with his shy wife very reluctant in her longing for her mother” in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (342-344), the text does not specify what Persephone is reluctant to do with Hades. But, given the context of the bed – most likely meant to represent the *marriage* bed – the scene takes on a subtly erotic undertone. It is likely that Hades was attempting to consummate their marriage through the act of sexual intercourse, but Persephone, miserable and homesick, did not wish to participate. This leads to the metaphor of the pomegranate. If one views the pomegranate as representing sexual intercourse, then it logically follows that Persephone cannot escape her marriage to Hades once she consumes the seeds because it was expected in the ancient world was that once a man and a woman were bound in marriage, they would remain so unless extenuating circumstance arose. The pomegranate itself also possesses many symbolically sexual attributes. For instance, its dark red color and round shape liken it to a woman’s womb. The fact that it is filled with seeds also hints at fertility imagery, since “seed” (σπέρμα) was a euphemism for semen. Given this context, the line in which Persephone explains, “but Hades secretly put in my mouth the seed of a pomegranate...though I was unwilling, he made me eat it by force” (411-13) can have no other meaning other than sexual assault.

As for how the characters are represented, Hades and Persephone fall into fairly sexist gender roles in each of the ancient retellings. Persephone has no agency or control over her own life. She lacks any sense of personality – in fact, at first she does not even possess a name, simply being referred to as κόρη, or “girl.”² Implied in the representation of Persephone is the belief that the ideal female is thought to possess no sexual drive. She is merely an object for the male to pursue and conquer. Hades, conversely, is portrayed as aggressive and manipulative. Through his characterization, male sexuality is defined as predatory and violent. Although Demeter subverts the Greco-Roman understanding of women in that she unabashedly expresses her desires and uses her great power to realize them, she is ultimately subdued by Zeus, who is the embodiment of patriarchy and male power. These characterizations lead to relationship dynamics between men and women that are inherently unequal. Persephone and Demeter represent two different kinds of women: one who is passive and submissive, and one who at first appears powerful but is ultimately impotent. Without exception, the male characters always dominate the female characters, whether by virtue of strength or deception.

It should go without saying that any relationship, let alone marriage, founded upon rape is not in line with feminist values. Feminism promotes the social equality of the sexes, and, by extension, the belief that men should respect the desires of women by allowing them control over their own bodies and the course of their lives. The ancient Greek and Roman versions of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ myth are highly sexist because they normalize sexual violence against

²Hugh G. Evelyn-White, trans., *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914). line 8. Accessed April 2, 2017.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0137%3Ahymn%3D2>

women through the depiction of rape, and perpetuate gender inequality in the way each character embodies sexist gender roles. Each rendition of the myth portrays the violent treatment of Persephone as a natural and inevitable part of life for women. Such stories perpetuated female subjugation by communicating to young women that they, too, would be raped by their husbands on their wedding night. The myth also suggests to older women that they are ultimately powerless to save their daughters from violence, and that they have no choice in their daughter's future husband. There is another angle from which to view the myth that focuses on the 'Rape of Persephone' as a metaphor for the death of the soul.³ From this angle, one could argue that the myth conveys more about both men and women's fear of death, than about women's fear of rape or marriage. However, the themes of rape and death are ultimately inextricable, and women could dread both at the same time. In the context of this study, I consider the parallel between rape and death as merely an aspect of the myth that instilled even greater fear in its female audience.

Since there is no single originator of the myth, we, as modern readers, cannot determine whether the authors or artists intended for their work to encourage the subjugation of women, or whether it merely reflected the prevailing attitudes of the time. Yet, regardless of the intentions of the myths' creator(s), the effect upon the audience of the myth is the same. To a female audience, the story teaches women to fear men and male sexuality. To a male audience, the story reinforces men's conviction that they can and should dominate women, and act without thought to their wishes and well-being. As the myth was retold century after century, it communicated to each successive generation the normalcy of patriarchy and female oppression, and thus influenced ancient Mediterranean and Western society.

Moving on to modern interpretations of the of the 'Rape of Persephone,' Rick Riordan's short story "Persephone Marries Her Stalker (Or, Demeter, the Sequel)," is an example of a modern retelling of the 'Rape of Persephone' that makes superficial changes to the myth in light of modern sensibilities, but does not ultimately challenge the rampant sexism of the myth itself. In his adaptation, Riordan maintains most of the plot elements found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, but invents scenes that happen just before and after the abduction. For instance, Riordan includes a scene in which Hades, lovesick and pining for Persephone, asks his brother Zeus for advice on how to woo her. Zeus advises Hades: "take what you want... I suggest kidnapping... You'll have plenty of time to convince the young lady to stay with you in the Underworld."⁴ This motivates the otherwise spineless Hades to kidnap Persephone. While in the Underworld, the naïve and spoiled Persephone throws "epic tantrums," in which she "tore up her bed...kicked the walls...smashed plates and refused to eat anything...[and] refused to leave her room."⁵ Hades tries to win her over by apologizing for the abduction, asserting what a great husband he will be, and showering Persephone with compliments. At first, Persephone is unmoved by his advances, but she eventually feels conflicted and touched by Hades' devotion. When Hermes comes to free Persephone from the Underworld, she is remorseful and does not celebrate as in the *Homeric Hymn* or the *Metamorphoses*. Eating the pomegranate is portrayed as a careless accident, but Persephone is not distraught at the outcome. By the end of the story, the narrator states: "the whole experience kind of forced [Persephone] to grow up. She fell in love

³ Ian Jenkins. "Is there life after marriage? A study of the abduction motif in the vase paintings of the Athenian wedding ceremony." (*BICS 30*. London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1983).

⁴ Rick Riordan, "Persephone Marries Her Stalker (Or, Demeter, the Sequel)," *Percy Jackson's Greek Gods* (New York: Disney * Hyperion, 2014), 74.

⁵ Riordan, *Percy Jackson's Greek Gods*, 88.

with Hades and made a place for herself in the Underworld.”⁶ Thus, Riordan wraps up the adaptation with a happy ending for all.

The greatest difference between Riordan’s ‘Rape of Persephone,’ and the ancient versions discussed so far, is the way in which Riordan characterizes each god. In “Persephone Marries Her Stalker,” Persephone is a “spoiled, sheltered, over-privileged kid.”⁷ Her mother’s protectiveness drives Persephone to be self-centered. Hades is described as an “old gloomy dude” who develops a crush on Persephone that grows into a full-blown obsession due to Hades’ loneliness.⁸ At first, Hades holds all of the power in their relationship, as he is the one who kidnapped Persephone. But, during their time in the Underworld, there is a slight dynamic shift as Persephone violently rejects Hades, and Hades becomes desperate to make Persephone love him. This desperation lends itself towards Hades’ characterization as less aggressive than previous incarnations. It even makes Hades seem reasonable and Persephone seem abusive.⁹ The situation also seems less dangerous because Persephone reacts with irritation, not terror. Riordan attempts to paint Hades as a more sympathetic character by consistently blaming the abduction on Zeus and his bad advice. By expanding on parts of the earlier mythical tradition which state that Zeus helped Hades abduct Persephone, Riordan refocuses the characters’—and the reader’s—anger on Zeus, instead of Hades.

Riordan changes the myth in this way in order to make a romantic relationship between Hades and Persephone seem less reprehensible. He makes no explicit references to sexual assault, nor does he hint at such through symbolism or subtext. However, in Riordan’s attempt to create an equal power dynamic between Hades and Persephone, he develops an unsympathetic characterization of the victim, Persephone, and a sympathetic characterization of the perpetrator, Hades. Riordan’s desire to give the myth a comedic tone also threatens to trivialize the horrors of kidnapping and forced marriage. The fact that Persephone eventually falls for Hades and his proclamations of love and devotion – despite his creepy and obsessive nature – further reinforces the suggestion put forward by Ovid, that Hades’ actions are forgivable because they were motivated by his desperate love for Persephone. However, Riordan uses scathing author’s notes and snappy asides by the story’s narrator to condemn the actions of Hades and Zeus, and voice his disapproval of the sexist elements of the story. I suspect that Riordan wished to maintain many of these elements, but have the narrator point them out as sexist, in order to lead his readers to think critically about the Classical myths and the culture from which they originated. At the same time, this does not negate the fact that Persephone is represented in an unsympathetic manner, which trivializes the severity of her treatment and portrays it as an ultimately positive experience which led her to mature. Moreover, despite all of Persephone’s attempts to gain control over her situation by throwing “tantrums,” she is still ultimately at the mercy of Hades. Though Riordan hints that Persephone eventually learned to love Hades, she is never shown to willingly consent to marrying him within the story itself. Thus, while Riordan does effectively communicate to his audience that kidnapping women is wrong, he does not denounce the nonconsensual aspects of Hades and Persephone’s relationship either.

Conversely, the Canadian cartoon *Mythic Warriors: Guardians of the Legend* (1998) subverts the audience’s expectations of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ from the beginning. The

⁶ Riordan, *Percy Jackson’s Greek Gods*, 94.

⁷ Riordan, *Percy Jackson’s Greek Gods*, 71.

⁸ Riordan, *Percy Jackson’s Greek Gods*, 72.

⁹ Particularly the line: “Hades took [Persephone’s] abuse and told her he was sorry that she was angry. “I do love you,” he promised.” Riordan, *Percy Jackson’s Greek Gods*, 89.

episode titled “Persephone and the Winter Seeds” starts off with what appears to be Persephone’s abduction. As can be seen in Figure 4, Hades clutches a screaming Persephone to his side as he drives his chariot through an Underworld-esque landscape. However, the cartoon quickly reveals that Hades is actually trying to help Persephone *escape* the Underworld. As the audience soon learns, Persephone ran away from her overprotective mother. She meets Hades, who tells her of his loneliness in the Underworld and how he has never known love or friendship. Persephone hopes to prove to Hades that “once you love you can never be lonely,” and vows: “I’ll stay with you for a while, and we will laugh and dance and become great friends, and when I leave, you will have memories to warm the rest of your days.”¹⁰ The idealistic Persephone enjoys her time in the Underworld, and while the pair experience some romantic moments, Hades never pressures Persephone into a marriage, let alone a sexual relationship. During this time, a nameless servant to Hades (likely based on Ascalaphus) with a vendetta against Demeter tries to tempt Persephone to eat the food of the Underworld. However, when Hades realizes this, he stops Persephone and proclaims, “You’re too good a person to be tricked like this.”¹¹ He informs her of the risks of eating the food of the Underworld, but this does not prevent Persephone from succumbing to the temptation presented by the nameless servant and eating a few pomegranate seeds. Despite this, Hades respects Persephone’s longing to return to her mother, and helps bring her back to the world above in his own chariot. Demeter then calms her anger at Persephone’s disappearance and respects her daughter’s need to be independent. At the end of the episode, Hades requests that Persephone stay with him for three months of the year and she happily consents.



Figure 4: Hades helps Persephone leave the Underworld. Jim Craig, “Persephone and the Winter Seeds,” 1998.

¹⁰ Jim Craig, “Persephone and the Winter Seeds,” *Mythic Warriors: Guardians of the Legend* (Toronto: Nelvana, Marathon Media, Hong Guang Animation, 1998), Youtube video, 6:54 – 7:06.

¹¹ Craig, “Persephone and the Winter Seeds,” 1998, 12:15 - 12:30.

In this cartoon, Persephone is characterized as adventurous but reckless. Her personality develops in reaction to her mother's overprotectiveness. Demeter's controlling nature is ultimately what drives Persephone to leave, but it is clear that both mother and daughter deeply care for each other and are able to reconcile their differences. While Demeter must learn to allow her daughter the autonomy to make her own decisions, Persephone must also learn to listen to her mother's advice and be wary of the intentions of strangers (namely the unnamed servant of Hades). Persephone is also characterized as compassionate and loving, which shapes her relationship with Hades. Persephone takes pity on Hades, who is portrayed as lonely, awkward, and passive. Not only does she initiate a relationship with Hades, she also dictates the pace at which they grow closer. The Hades of *Mythic Warriors* is a far cry from his Greek and Roman predecessor. He is patient, understanding, and completely non-aggressive. He does not deceive Persephone in any way and even helps bring her home, despite the fact that he will miss her. The equality prevalent in Hades and Persephone's relationship allows them to enjoy a close friendship, with hints at a future romance. They mutually consent to their relationship and genuinely care about each other's emotional wellbeing.

Thus, "Persephone and the Winter Seeds" is an example of an adaptation of the 'Rape of Persephone' myth that makes radical changes to the original story in order to subvert its sexist foundations. Rather than being raped or kidnapped, Persephone willingly chooses to stay in the Underworld in order to teach Hades about friendship. Because the cartoon portrays the lead female character as active and independent, and the main couple as participating in a balanced and consensual relationship, the creators of *Mythic Warriors* successfully create a feminist love story out of the 'Rape of Persephone.' By eliminating acts of violence from the story, the content creators shift the genre of this story from 'rape myth' to 'love story.' In addition, the story focuses on Persephone's personal development instead of her traumatic abduction, thus encouraging the audience to identify with and learn from Persephone as she matures and becomes more self-assured. By re-contextualizing the story as bildungsroman for Persephone, the myth becomes relevant for its new intended audience.

To elaborate, the audience and the performers of the 'Rape of Persephone' myth have changed drastically since antiquity. By performers, I mean anyone who had some creative involvement in the production of each version of the myth. This includes composers of written or oral poetry, playwrights, stage actors, chorus members, authors, artists, storyboardists, animators, etc. By audience, I mean anyone who heard, observed, or read such a production of the myth. In ancient Greece and Italy, adult men primarily participated in these roles. While women were sometimes allowed to observe the performances of the myth¹² and were likely to witness artistic representations of the myth, they were usually barred from the creative process¹³. This partially explains why the ancient versions of the 'Rape of Persephone' contain sexist themes. Because few women had direct creative control over the performance of mythology, they did not have a voice by which to express any kind of dissatisfaction with the misogynistic and patriarchal

¹² "It is perfectly possible that there were no rules affecting or controlling attendance at the theater, but the likelihood must be that, of all the categories, Athenian women and slaves would be the least in evidence." Graham Ley, *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 34.

¹³ "Young women did sometimes sing in processions" or "among their female friends in groups like those that gathered at the symposium." However, these performances were, in the case of processions, part of a group performance led by men, or, in the case of female groups, segregated from male audiences, and therefore not likely to be written down and remembered. In the case of visual representations of the myth, archaeological evidence, such as pottery inscriptions, suggests that artists were often male.

Eva Stehle, *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4 & 6.

system of the ancient world. Rather, male voices – content with the status quo and keen on perpetuating the subjugation of women – were the most prevalent at the time, and are the only ones that survive today. Nowadays, however, women are much more involved in the creative process behind retelling of the ‘Rape of Persephone.’ For instance, the story of “Persephone and the Winter Seeds” was created by Kathy Slevin and the *Myth Warriors* cartoon itself is based on a book series written by Laura Geringer. This increase in female involvement in the production of adaptations of the Classical myths is likely why some of the modern reinterpretations of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ feature feminist mores. Now that women have a voice in popular media, they can protest the negative treatment of women in real life through their work.

Yet to fully understand why the myth was retold in these ways, one should also consider the way ancient and modern audiences conceptualize the veracity of the myths. In ancient Mediterranean cultures, myths and folklore were not just stories – they were religious truths. Conversely, in modern Western society, Classical mythology is considered fictional entertainment – particularly, children’s entertainment. The audience shift toward children, aged eight to eighteen, explains why modern authors and artists eliminate the actual “rape” from the ‘Rape of Persephone’. While some still include kidnap, neither of the modern reinterpretations discussed in this study explicitly or implicitly references sexual violence. This is because rape is generally considered an unsuitable topic for children, and even teenagers. The modern emphasis on Persephone falling in love with Hades and growing to enjoy life in the underworld also reflects the idea that children’s media should contain a happy ending. Death is also not considered a suitable topic for children, or at least not one that is often included. This is probably why authors and artists downplay the parallel between Persephone’s rape and the death of the soul. In conclusion, many of the modern changes to the ‘Rape of Persephone’ reflect the way Westerners think children’s entertainment should function. It can contain some danger and tension, and even act as a cautionary tale, but it should also be fun and enjoyable to experience. While darker, more serious modern interpretations of the Classical myths certainly exist and are mainly targeted at adult audiences, the ‘Rape of Persephone’ is typically not one of these myths.¹⁴

The primary audience shift from adult men to young children leads one to consider the potential effect both the ancient and modern versions of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ could have on present-day audiences. As Foster and Simmons explain in *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of ‘Classic’ Stories for Girls*, children are “vulnerable to ideological manipulation” and the “main tendency of children’s writing is to accommodate the youthful reader in the cultural and social hegemony of the age and, at the same time, to define desirable value systems.”¹⁵ Consider then, what cultural and social hegemony would be imparted to young modern readers of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* or the *Metamorphoses*. For boys, the manipulative and aggressive behavior of Zeus and Hades would communicate to them that such actions are acceptable ways of interacting with women. For girls, this myth, along with the plethora of other rape myths in Classical mythology, suggests a world in which rape and violence against women are a frequent and unavoidable part of life. This is magnified by the fact that narratives often

¹⁴ Contemporary works of Classical reception aimed at adult audiences typically focus on myths featuring mighty heroes – i.e. *Hercules* (2014), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Troy* (2004) – rather than cosmological vignettes featuring minor goddesses.

¹⁵ Shirley Foster and Judy Simmons, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of ‘Classic’ Stories for Girls* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1995), 9.

invite readers “to adopt a position of close identification with that of the protagonist.”¹⁶ Given this perspective, the ancient versions of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ communicate to a young female reader that she could be raped or kidnapped at any point in her life and would be powerless to save herself. Similarly, the myth expounds upon the dangers of the outside world as a whole and encourages girls to stay at home with their mothers. In addition, the myth teaches that boys should be active and girls should be passive, and that their relationships are inherently unequal.

On the other hand, a modern retelling of the ‘Rape of Persephone,’ like “Persephone and the Winter Seeds,” conveys a worldview in which the opposite is true. Women can be active, while men are passive. Relationships should be founded upon consent and equality, and the outside world should be safe and accessible to both genders. This is not true of every modern retelling of the ‘Rape of Persephone,’ however. As we have seen, Rick Riordan’s adaptation imparts upon its readers that men should not force their affections on women, but women should give men who show them affection a chance, regardless of how unwanted that affection is. While both of these adaptations are more progressive than their ancient predecessors, it is evident that they convey different understandings of gender politics to their audience. Due to the impressionability of younger audiences, each interpretation of the myth has the potential to influence future generations’ understandings of gender roles.

To elaborate, I argue that works of reception of the Classical myths have the potential to shape cultural understandings of gender through the way they portray men and women and the interactions between them. This argument is founded upon two basic principles. First, the assertion that Classical texts and images are still culturally active presences that influence the way contemporary Western society thinks. Second, the understanding that there are systems of representation in modern society which are structured around a gender binary and which have the power to either propagate inequality, or resist it. The first principle is derived from Charles Martindale’s meditation on Reception theory in *Redeeming the Text*. Martindale asserts that texts—in this case, Classical texts—“can be read so variously, that meanings proliferate” and that no reading “is a purely subjective or private one[,] rather it reflects public argument, and institutional practices and questions.”¹⁷ Thus, each reading of the ancient versions of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ and its reinterpretation into a modern work of fiction is a valid way of interacting with Classical material, and that no retelling – no matter how much it differs from its source material – is objectively ‘wrong.’ Martindale’s theory also implies that each work of reception does not only reflect the beliefs of the individual author or artist, but also the cultural beliefs held by society at large. A creator cannot be separated from the cultural context in which they create their work of fiction, and even if their piece works counter to the conventional wisdom of the time, it is still influenced by it, and cannot be viewed as if in a vacuum. Concurrently, the assertion that “classical texts, images, and ideas are culturally active presences” which remain relevant to this day, comes from Lorna Hardwick’s article “(Why) Do Reception Studies Matter?”¹⁸ Harwick contends that “the growth of reception studies in recent years contains an explicit claim that classical culture will continue to be a significant strand in [Western] cultural history.”¹⁹ Whether this manifests as the continuation of Classics as an academic discipline, or as

¹⁶ Foster and Simmons, *What Katy Read*, 12.

¹⁷ Martindale, *Redeeming the Text*, 1993, 11 & 5.

¹⁸ Lorna Hardwick, “(Why) Do Reception Studies Matter?” *Reception Studies: New Surveys in the Classics* #33, *Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112.

¹⁹ Hardwick, “(Why) Do Reception Studies Matter?,” 113.

the growth of children's literature and popular media with Classical themes, both prove that modern Westerners continue to be interested in, and influenced by, ancient folklore and art.

The second principle is founded upon Vanda Zajko's argument in "'What difference was made?' Feminist Models of Reception." Zajko states: "feminist modes of analysis depends upon a belief that systems of representation structured around the binary of sexual difference continue to propagate imparity."²⁰ In other words, the way men and women are represented in media influences the way contemporary society conceptualizes the gender binary. Considered in tandem with Foster and Simmons' argument about how children's media socializes young audiences to contemporary cultural hegemonies, one can see how popular media influences the gender ideology of the youthful audience that consumes it. An additional nuance to Zajko's argument is that these systems of gender representation have been historically sexist, and, because of this, they continue to promote sexism. However, although individual authors and artists are influenced by traditional gender mores, they are also capable of recognizing the negative aspects of these mores and choosing to contradict them in their work. The fact that not every author or artist recognizes, or is willing to change, every sexist aspect of the ancient version of the 'Rape of Persephone,' explains the core difference between Rick Riordan's and *Mythic Warrior's* versions of the myth. Given that Riordan wishes to present the 'Rape of Persephone' as a love story, he does not do enough to challenge the historically sexist systems of representation of men and women inherent in the myth. As it is, Riordan's retelling dangerously normalizes relationships based on dubious consent and gender inequality. Of course, creators such as Riordan are under no requirement to write out the sexism of the 'Rape of Persephone,' but if this is the case, they should not also try to frame the myth as a love story.

Conversely, *Mythic Warrior's* version of the 'Rape of Persephone' earns its new genre as a love story by resisting both the sexism of the ancient versions of the myth and the sexism that remains in modern Western society. By using media with Classical themes as a platform on which to explore gender politics, these "popular cultural forms can be seen as 'sites of opposition' and 'sites of resistance' for a range of groups who wish to open up the possibilities for the creation of new sites of meaning and knowledge."²¹ In this case, the sites of opposition are children's media interpretations of the 'Rape of Persephone,' the group wishing to create new sites of meaning are feminists, and the thing being opposed is the sexism that has persisted in Classical mythology for centuries. Thus, depending on the way in which each adaptation of the 'Rape of Persephone' is told, it can either reflect and reinforce Western society's historically sexist understandings of gender, or resist and reshape these understandings by imparting feminist beliefs to young, impressionable audiences.

I believe the way this myth is reimagined by the creators of *Mythic Warriors* shows a positive trend toward reclaiming the Classics for female audiences. To be fair, in recent decades, women's contributions to the academic study of Classics have not gone unrecognized. Nevertheless, non-academic female audiences have had very little in the way of positive female representation in Classical literature and folklore. Mainly, men in Greco-Roman mythology are often represented as heroes and adventurers (Hercules, Perseus, Odysseus), whereas women are usually represented as damsels in distress (Andromache, Penelope), or evil witches or monsters (Medea, Medusa). More often than not, scholars, stating that they are inaccurate and incorrect,

²⁰ Vanda Zajko, "'What difference was made?' Feminist Models of Reception," *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, ed. Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), 200.

²¹ Ann Brooks, "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Representations and Resistance." *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* (. London: Routledge, 1997), 189.

have rebuffed feminist interpretations of the Classical myths.²² And yet, one must remember that in the study of Reception, all interpretations are valid and worthy of consideration.

Some scholars raise the concern that modern audiences who are unfamiliar with the ancient versions of the Classical myths will be misled by these adaptations. These uninformed audiences may come to think that ancient Greece and Rome were thoroughly progressive societies in which women and men possessed equal rights, and in which men valued female consent. Since this was certainly not the case, one could argue that preserving the ancient versions of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ is much more important than experimenting with modern interpretations. In response, I assert that preservation of the ancient renditions of the myth and exploration of potential modern reiterations are both worthwhile endeavors that can exist simultaneously, without coming into conflict with each other. So far, no modern retelling of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ has become so popular that it threatens to replace the importance or fame of the ancient works. Rather, I believe that being exposed to adaptations of Classical mythology through children’s media inspires children to have an interest in the study of Classics, which will culminate in their reading of the ancient texts on their own or in school. As older teenagers and young adults, these readers and observers will be of an age where they can critically examine the material they are consuming and recognize the misogynistic aspects of ancient Mediterranean society. They will be able to recognize that the versions of the myth from their childhood differed from the ancient sources, and come to think critically about why contemporary authors and artists chose to alter the myths.

Moreover, any reader or observer who could grow up and continue to discount the existence of rape, despite the overwhelming, real-world evidence around them, probably carries misogynist views beyond the bounds of someone who was simply misled as a child. Despite this, I believe that content creators should not be limited by the potential abject sexism of their audience. In other words, there will always be people who are uninterested in reevaluating and altering their bigoted beliefs. But I believe that these people are in the minority compared to others who are willing to reconsider the ideologies with which they were raised. Critics should recognize that authors and artists have the potential to influence this latter group of people with their work. Furthermore, if no one ever recreated the ‘Rape of Persephone’ as different from the ancient Greek or Roman versions, or voiced the desire to resist the sexism of the ancient world in general, one might begin to think that there is nothing undesirable or abhorrent about this sexism. Remaining silent for the sake of historical accuracy, above all else, poses just as much of a risk of normalizing rape, violence against women, and gender inequality in the modern day.

Such questions and concerns indicate that there is still much to explore in regards to the potential social impact of reinterpretations of the ‘Rape of Persephone’ myth in children’s media. Since these reinterpretations are still a fairly recent phenomena, only time will tell if they do indeed draw young audiences to study the Classical myths and to think critically about gender politics and sexism in both the ancient and modern world. This is a trend I have observed in some of my peers, and one I hope will continue among future young readers and observers. I look forward to the possibility that some of my peers will also create their own interpretations of Classical mythology, and thereby open up new discussions of Classical material and the ways it is received by modern society.

²² Liveley describes how 2nd and 3rd wave feminists were sharply critiqued for their attempts to “recover the reality of women’s lived experience, or to reappropriate the texts of canonical male authors.” Liveley, “Surfing the Third Wave? Postfeminism and the Hermeneutics of Reception,” 2006, 64.

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