

Spring 2017

Demeter and Persephone: Myth Interpretation

Miguel Feo-Orellana

Johnson & Wales University - Providence, MFeo-Orellana01@wildcats.jwu.edu

Pedro Lora-Torres

Johnson & Wales University - Providence, PLora-Torres01@wildcats.jwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/ac_symposium



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Feo-Orellana, Miguel and Lora-Torres, Pedro, "Demeter and Persephone: Myth Interpretation" (2017). *Academic Symposium of Undergraduate Scholarship*. 41.

https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/ac_symposium/41

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at ScholarsArchive@JWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Symposium of Undergraduate Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ScholarsArchive@JWU. For more information, please contact jcastel@jwu.edu.

Miguel Feo-Orellana & Pedro Lora-Torres

Dr. Church

ILS 4115

February 16, 2017

Demeter & Persephone: Myth Interpretation

Introduction

The story of Demeter and Persephone embodies the psychological culture and society in which it originated. This tale of the relationship between mother and daughter has taken many versions throughout history. However, the common theme that ties all the different stories together is the role women were subjected to in ancient culture. In this research paper, this ancient myth will be interpreted using a psychological interpretation, but may occasionally refer to a Feminist approach as is hard to separate the both. Furthermore, by utilizing this psychological method, it will help us better understand the societal role Men and Women played in ancient times. And how the myth was used to subdue women during ancient Greek society.

Analysis of the Myth

Women did not possess much power nor did they have a voice in ancient times, this much we know from the remains found in ancient artifacts and scriptures. It mattered not if they were a peasant, noble, or a goddess, at the end of the day they are were subjected to the will of men. A notable example of this can be seen in the text when Zeus agrees to give Hades, his brother, his daughter as a wife (Thury and Devinney 525). This section of the story embodies how men perceived women as nothing more than property, and a mean to appease the needs of men. Aside from the fact that Hades is the uncle of Persephone, neither Gods attempt to ask

Demeter nor Persephone for permission. This act as scholars later dub it the “Rape of Persephone,” does not only signify the physical abuse brought forth by Hades (Thury and Devinney 525). It also signifies the psychological damaged Persephone experiences, by having her innocence taking away so abruptly and forcefully. Further evidence that reinforces this claim is noted by the cry of help that goes unheard or ignored by the gods (Thury and Devinney 525).

Further, into the story, the readers are exposed to the regressive psyche of Demeter. The author does a great job of reminding the reader that the once powerful and revered Goddess, is reduced to nothingness and ends up wandering the earth in her solitude (Thury and Devinney 527). This statement encompasses the reality of the true power Demeter had over the situation, which was no power at all. Subconsciously this teaches the readers that even a powerful goddess, cannot reason with Zeus because her opinion does not matter. This idea that Demeter is helpless against the will of Zeus is a reiteration of the psychological dominance men had over women. By having Demeter surrender to Zeus will, it allows the author to encourage this idea of female obedience to their male counterparts. Furthermore, this subjugation by Demeter allows a society of the time to justify the actions committed by both Zeus and Hades.

The sequence of events that occur after the kidnapping contains the most obvious example of the attitude towards a women’s place in ancient society. The first in a series of events which occur when Demeter is subdued into such despair, that she is forced to become a house maiden for a noble family (Thury and Devinney 529). This action of becoming a mother to another child is Demeter’s way of trying to fill the void left in her life. A modern illustration of this is when a mother experience the “Empty Nest” syndrome after a child has moved out of from home(Emling). By having her experience this need to be a mother again, it helps feed society into this idea of needing to procreate to feel purpose in life. The idea of a women’s role

becomes most obvious when in line 140 from the text, it states "*in such task a befit a woman past her prime*" (Thury and Devinney 528). The book is also convenient in providing a side note citation, which interprets that quote into "*the main accomplishment of Greek women was to bear children*" (Thury and Devinney 528). This section of the text exemplifies the attitude both Women and Men felt about reproduction.

The penultimate event that occurs before the conclusion of the myth is interpreted in a magnitude of ways. Some of the most popular theories argue that the psychological representation of the pomegranate fruit signifies the threshold Persephone crosses from adolescent to adulthood. However, this version emphasis on the theory that the relationship between Persephone and Hades is Symbiotic ("Persephone"). Other interpretations have the fruit represent the last aspect of innocence being taken forcefully by Hades ("The Rape of Persephone"). It could be argued that the latter of the two is a more literal interpretation of the original text. The pomegranate fruit does not only represent the loss of virginity; it is also a manifestation of Hade's claiming ownership over Persephone. By having Hades take Persephone's virginity, he guarantees that Persephone is his forever since sex out of wedlock is socially frowned on by society. Arguments can be made for or against this theory, and whether the act was consensual or not. However, what cannot be disputed is the trickery implemented by Hades to keep what he feels is his possession.

The closing paragraphs of the myth tries to have Zeus appear to be reasonable, as he comes to an accord over the situation with Persephone. However, it is only briefly mentioned that the reason Zeus agrees to any accord is because he is forced to deal with the wrath of Demeter (Thury and Devinney 533). An interesting reference is made on line 310 of the reading that reads: "She would have destroyed the whole race of mortal men with painful famine and

would have deprived the Olympians of glorious honor and sacrifices” (Thury and Devinney 532).

This quote arguably could be understood as some double entendre. One aspect has Persephone finding resolution after turmoil, thus having a women resolution prevail. The other has Zeus being reasonable in his action and allowing Persephone to join her mother. Both of these views envelope two separate approaches to a resolution that is not ambiguous as it is perceived. Because both aspects have one underlying principle that unites them, and that principal is the common cliché from the famous quote “*Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned*” (Congreve). There is a consensus that Zeus only agreed to find a resolution to the problem, only after Demeter famine personally affected Zeus directly. The action by Demeter and the Resolution by Zeus show the perception the Greeks had marriage equality. The text implies that the problems of women are not important until they become a problem of Men.

Current Pop Culture Reference

Current representation of the myth can be seen in blockbuster films such as *The Matrix: Reloaded*, and *Percy Jackson*. In both films, we are introduced to two different versions of Persephone, which represents the various interpretations of the myth over the ages. In the *Matrix: Reloaded*, we are exposed to Persephone who is a docile queen of the underworld that manipulates Neo to get revenge on her husband (“*Matrix Reloaded*”). The other Persephone adaptation has her as a vengeful goddess that resents her husband for his actions (“*Percy Jackson*”).

Reflection

The tale of Demeter and Persephone is a story that dives not only into the psyche of Greek culture but also the feminist view of women during that time. Throughout the research of this myth, the arguments presented tried to showcase the psychology that existed during that period. Through calculated research is our educated hypothesis, that the myth was used not only to explain the origin of the season but also used to educated the social standing of women among men.

Works Cited

- Congreve, William. "Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned." *The Irony of Phrases*, 8 May 2013, theirironyofphrases.wordpress.com/2012/06/15/hell-hath-no-fury-like-a-woman-scorned/.
- Emling, Shelley. "4 Things They Never Tell You About Empty Nest Syndrome." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 8 Oct. 2013, www.huffingtonpost.com/shelley-emling/empty-nest-syndrome_b_3956231.html.
- "Matrix Reloaded." *Matrix Wiki*, matrix.wikia.com/wiki/Persephone.
- "Percy Jackson." *Riordan Wiki*, riordan.wikia.com/wiki/Persephone.
- "Persephone." *Persephone - The Wife of Hades*, mythagora.com/bios/persephone.html.
- "The Rape of Persephone." *Persephone*, sjsupersephone.weebly.com/the-rape-of-persephone.html.
- Sheppard, David. "Demeter & Persephone." *Demeter & Persephone*, Tragedy Workshop, 2010, www.greek-myth.com/demeter_persephone.htm.
- Thury, Eva M., and Margaret Klopfle Devinney. "Demeter and Persephone." *Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths*, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 2017, pp. 519–537.