

1

Myth and Gender Systems

Versions, modern and ancient

In what forms do we tend to encounter classical myths today?¹ Suppose a curious American eighteen-year-old (whom we'll call Sara) is intrigued by the tale of Demeter and Persephone as she sees it re-enacted in 'The Other Side', an episode of the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*.² Hades, king of the underworld, kidnaps Persephone, daughter of the goddess Demeter. The anxious mother appeals to Hercules for help, and when he refuses to interfere in a quarrel between gods Demeter unleashes storms of rain, sleet and snow to make him change his mind. Going below, he finds Persephone half in love with her captor and persuades her to leave only by describing the devastation Demeter is causing in her absence. But Hades is unwilling to let her go and Hercules must defeat him in a duel – before negotiating a compromise by which Persephone will spend six months of the year with her mother and six with Hades.

If Sara looks around for other versions of this myth, what is she likely to find?

First she remembers seeing Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* on her parents' shelf of old college texts. Here she finds a very different story from the one told in the TV show, though the plot is recognizable.³ Hercules is nowhere to be found. The central character is Demeter, and there is a long subplot about her failed attempt to adopt a human baby – a little boy. Persephone is a very reluctant bride, and the lengthy negotiations needed to end the famine on earth are carried on between Zeus and Demeter, with many divine intermediaries. Demeter is finally persuaded to accept the compromise by 'Rhea, the oldest of the gods', who is identified as Zeus'

Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth

mother. The story is framed by an essay in which Hamilton explains that Demeter and Dionysus were 'altogether different' from the rest of the Greek gods in the degree of their concern for human beings. Demeter in particular was 'always kind'; 'she was sorry for the desolation she had brought about' and compensated humanity by teaching them to sow grain and celebrate her secret rites.

At the local public library, Sara finds *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable*.⁴ All the names of the main characters have changed (to Latin, as Bulfinch explains in his introduction), and the story has some curious new details: Hades (now called Pluto) falls in love with Persephone (now Proserpine) when he is struck by one of Cupid's arrows. The family whose baby Demeter/Ceres adopts is poor, and the father plays a more prominent role in the story. Two water nymphs, Cyane and Arethusa, give Ceres the information she got from the Sun (Greek *Helios*) in Hamilton's version; when she learns where her daughter is, she goes straight to Zeus/Jupiter and 'implores' him to intervene.

At a used-book sale, Sara picks up a paperback from the 1960s called *The Greek Gods* by Evslin, Evslin, and Hoopes.⁵ In the chapter on Demeter, she finds yet another version of the story, in which Persephone is described as 'a flower child' whose job is to invent and name new kinds of flowers. The relationship between Hades and Persephone is straight out of a Harlequin or Mills and Boon romance:

Although she never forgot how he had frightened her ... , she admired the lofty set of his black-robed figure, the majestic shoulders, the great impatient hands, and his gloomy black eyes. But she knew that part of her power over him was disdain, and so kept flouting and abusing him ... (27)

It is not Hades who tempts her to eat the pomegranate seeds, but a strange boy, newly arrived in the underworld after being turned into a lizard by Demeter for laughing at her in her grief.

Sara's older brother, visiting for the holidays, shows her a graphic novel (for 'mature readers') he acquired in high school, in which the story of Demeter and Persephone is set in fifth-century Athens with

1. *Myth and Gender Systems*

a cast of supporting characters led by the philosopher Epicurus and including Plato, Aristotle, and a bratty little boy named Alexander (someday to be known as 'the Great').⁶ Here Demeter is a gigantic, voluptuous nude towering over the human characters; even her daughter is afraid of her, and has allowed 'Hadespoo' to stage the abduction to get around 'Mummy's' objections to their marriage. The role of negotiator is taken by Epicurus, who secretly advises Persephone to eat the seeds so Demeter will be forced to compromise. In fact, the whole episode of the 'visit to Hades' is framed by Epicurus' attempts to make sense of a world that seems intractable to his philosophical ideals of logic and moderation.

Sara's little niece comes to visit her, bringing a children's version of the myth called *The Pomegranate Seeds* by Laura Geringer.⁷ The story is close to that in the Evslin version, but with a tone more appropriate to a children's book. An interesting 'Author's Note' informs the reader that this version 'is inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Pomegranate Seeds," published in *Tanglewood Tales* in 1853, which emphasizes the coming-of-age theme and underplays Persephone's kidnapping'. The author adds, 'My Persephone is a more modern and outspoken girl than Hawthorne's. And like a present-day working mother, Demeter, though conflicted about leaving her daughter, must tend to her job.' Sara finds Hawthorne's version at the library (in a 1968 edition)⁸ and, given its age, is struck more by the similarities than by the differences between it and Geringer's. In neither does there seem to be anything sexual about the relationship between Hades and Persephone; he is her lonely old uncle, who just wants 'a merry little maid' ('a lively little girl' in Geringer) to keep him company in his gloomy kingdom. On her side, Persephone develops an affection for him that makes her willing to accept her six months in the underworld (reduced to three in Geringer). Zeus has disappeared from the story, so that there is neither confrontation nor negotiation between him and Demeter.

Starting college in the fall, Sara enrolls in a mythology course and decides to ask her teacher for help in sorting out all these versions. The teacher refers her to recent translations of two ancient texts: the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the second half of Book 5 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁹ In these two very different works, Sara recognizes

Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth

most, but not all, of the details that appear in various combinations in the versions she had found on her own. The ancient works, however – one Greek and the other Latin – are themselves separated by at least six hundred years, a far greater gap even than that between Hawthorne and Geringer. Sara is surprised to find that in the *Homeric Hymn* – by far the oldest available version of this myth – Demeter is portrayed as more powerful than in most subsequent versions. Motivated by anger as much as by grief, she is capable of destroying the human race and wiping out the privileges of the gods by ‘hiding’ the seed and not letting it grow. Far from appealing to Zeus for help, she ignores a whole string of his emissaries – who offer her gifts and ‘whatever honours she would choose among the immortals’ – until he himself capitulates and sends the messenger god Hermes to bring back Persephone. The real negotiator in this version, though, is the goddess Rhea, who by the logic of the story seems to be chosen because she is *Demeter’s* mother (though she is Zeus’ as well): she calls Demeter ‘child’, and their meeting is a joyful one like that of Demeter and Persephone (lines 458-60). While the goddesses must accept the permanence of Persephone’s marriage and Hades is repeatedly described as a worthy match for her, there is no attempt to justify his abduction of her or to portray any emotional ties between husband and wife.

In Ovid’s version, despite the fact that Dis (the Roman name for Hades – Pluto is actually another Greek name) is smitten with desire for Proserpina, there is still no mutual affection, and the theme of rape is reinforced by a long digression in which the nymph Arethusa describes her own attempted rape by the river Alpheus. Arethusa’s ultimate escape, like that of the better-known Daphne when pursued by Apollo, requires her transformation into something non-human – in her case, a spring. In fact, no fewer than seven such transformations are described or alluded to in this retelling of the myth, which is subordinated to the larger themes and narrative framework of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Not only does Ceres change the boy who laughs at her into a lizard, but the underworld spirit who reports that Proserpina has eaten the pomegranate seeds is

turned into a screech-owl by Proserpina herself. The story as a whole is presented as the Muse Calliope's entry in a singing contest,

18

1. *Myth and Gender Systems*

one of those fatal contests in which mortals dare to rival gods. Predictably, the mortals, daughters of Pierus, lose and are changed to magpies for their arrogance. While Ovid clearly relishes these transformations as displays of his own virtuosic performance as a poet, he also explores what we would call their psychological dimension. Thus he dwells on the appropriateness of the new form a character assumes, and on the trauma of being 'taken away from oneself' (*sibi ablatus*, line 546). It is not surprising, given this latter focus, that so many of the metamorphoses should result from rapes or attempted rapes.

I have drawn out this series of examples to underline a number of points about the myths in both their ancient and modern versions. The most obvious of these points – that the myths have continued to attract tellers and audiences for close to three thousand years – is also in a way the most puzzling, since it should be clear from my brief survey that the stories change radically from one version to the next, even when the versions are contemporary with one another. Retellers ancient and modern have freely altered the motives of the characters, the sequence of narrative events, and the point(s) of view from which they are told. What is more, these narrative building blocks, themselves so variable, have been used to evoke a vast range of themes: the love of mother and daughter, to be sure, but also the daughter's fear of the mother and manipulation of the husband, the husband's desire for a wife, even the poet's (and humorist's) virtuosity and the philosopher's desire to make sense of 'illogical' reality. What, then, is the myth of Demeter and Persephone 'about'? The answer must be that it has an enormous range of potential meanings, only some of which have yet been tapped.

If a myth is so variable, does it make sense even to call it 'a' myth? Does a myth exist as something more than, or other than, a series of discrete texts and images? Ordinary language usage would suggest that it does: we speak routinely of 'the myth of Demeter and Persephone'. All that *survives* from the ancient world is a congeries of texts and visual images, some datable, some not. But there must

have been innumerable versions of these same stories – oral performances and informal retellings as well as texts and works of art – that have been lost. And most classical myths continued to be