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The Myth of Persephone: Body Objectification from Ancient to Modern

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Claremont McKenna College

The Myth of Persephone: Body Objectification from Ancient to Modern

submitted to
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by
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INTRODUCTION

“You are allowed to like / no one, you know. The characters / are not people. / They are aspects of a dilemma or conflict” –I. Persephone the Wanderer, Averno, Louise Glück

The conflict in question seems straightforward: a man raping a woman. Ancient versions of the myth of Persephone’s abduction establish a stance on body ownership in which no one ever has complete ownership and control over his or her own body. Contemporary interpretations of the myth, depending on their narrator, support or reject this notion in varying degrees and reveal differing levels of acceptance of the abduction.

The myth of Persephone, or the rape of Persephone as it is often called, traces back to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, our earliest source of the story of the myth, in which he writes, “Aidoneus carried [Persephone] off from her mother; but wise Zeus gave her to him.”¹ The myth of Persephone has since been translated, interpreted, and reinterpreted by countless authors through the ages. From ancient authors to modern, twentieth century writers, the myth of Persephone has continued to be a rich literary inspiration. Recurring themes in the ancient and contemporary texts include body ownership, family, personal relationships, love and desire, consent, and wrongness.

The various contemporary works I will analyze interpret a range of issues present in the ancient myth—the relationship between Persephone and Pluto, the relationship between Persephone and her mother, the abduction itself, etc. In “Hades Welcomes His Bride” by A.E. Stallings, the author deliberately boils the myth down in this poem told

¹ Evelyn-White, Hugh G., translator. "The Theogony of Hesiod." *Internet Sacred Text Archive*, Evinity Publishing, 2011, www.sacred-texts.com/index.htm.

solely from the abductor's perspective. Most dissimilarly, Rita Dove's *Mother Love* explores in depth the relationship between a mother and daughter throughout difficult experiences, paralleling a contemporary duo with Persephone and Demeter.

In Greek mythology, the character Persephone is the daughter of Demeter and Zeus. As mythology has it, Persephone was abducted by Pluto (who was earlier known by Hades). Persephone's Roman mythological counterpart is called Proserpine, her mother, Ceres, her father, Jupiter, and Pluto, Dis. For the purpose of my thesis, since I include an ancient Greek source and an ancient Roman source, I will henceforth refer to the characters by their Greek names to avoid confusion, except where they appear otherwise in quotations. I will refer to Persephone's abductor as Pluto, not Hades—when I do refer to Hades, I am referring to the underworld itself.

When analyzing the myth of Persephone from multiple ancient sources, it is ideal to include distinct versions in order to get the most nuances out of the myth. I chose two texts whose authors differ chronologically, culturally, and stylistically. The Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" provides the earliest, most comprehensive account of the myth, dating back to the seventh century BC. The other source I am using, the *Metamorphoses*, is by the Roman poet Ovid. Written over six centuries later, the myth of Persephone is detailed in Book V (out of fifteen total).

The role of narration is a defining feature that distinguishes the different works I explore. Who is speaking, what he or she is saying, and why he or she thinks such things gives insight to the reader about what is *not* being said. The contemporary works I selected to examine utilize different characters as the narrator, and I chose to structure my thesis around the framework of narration. The narrator of Rita Dove's *Mother Love* is a

contemporary mother, a modern counterpart to Demeter. A.E. Stallings portrays two most different narrators, Pluto and Persephone, in “Hades Welcomes His Bride” and “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother,” respectively. D.M. Thomas employs Pluto as the narrator of “Pomegranate,” as well. Finally, in Louise Glück’s *Averno*, the narrator switches between Persephone and an omniscient third person narrator depending on the poem. Narrators achieve varying effects with their differing styles, adding layers of meaning to the myth of Persephone.

Whether the contemporary works I analyze seem to align with the notion of body ownership from the *Metamorphoses* and Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” or not is established in many ways. Perceived narrator bias, explicit disapproval, and emphasis on certain aspects of the myth all help to build a more complete picture of what each author intended to impart to his or her reader. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that any singular character ever has total control over his or her own body, whether they have control over another or not.

ANCIENT SOURCES OF THE MYTH OF PERSEPHONE

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose Latin title literally translates to "Book of Transformations" attempts a comprehensive chronicling of history from creation to the apotheosis of Julius Caesar. Naturally, many changes take place in the world over time throughout the poem, and the myth of Persephone transpires. The Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" details the myth as well, possessing both similarities and differences to the *Metamorphoses*. The Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" and Book V of the *Metamorphoses* contain a large number of situations in which characters are either physically transformed or their bodies are controlled against their will.

In the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," Zeus has indisputable, ceaseless ownership over Persephone, including the power to give her away in marriage without her consent. This is demonstrated when he grants Pluto permission to marry her. "[Persephone] was given away by Zeus, the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide. / Demeter did not take part in this" (Nagy 3-4). Also, the narcissus flower, "which was grown as a lure for the flower-faced girl / by Gaia [Earth.] All according to the plans of Zeus" (Nagy 9), proves that Zeus was instrumental in the plan of Persephone's abduction itself. What is more, when Persephone recounts her abduction to her mother later in the hymn, she says, "It [the abduction] was very much against my will" (Nagy 432). This statement by Persephone that it was "against her will" eliminates any ambiguity that her abduction was not by choice and that she was, therefore, not in control of her body. Zeus' control over Persephone is also evident when he orders the return of Persephone from Pluto following Demeter's statement, "that she would never send up the harvest of the earth, / until she saw with her own eyes her daughter" (Nagy 332-33). Zeus' authority extends to those

who love Persephone, evidently, as he is the only being who has the authority to impel Pluto to return her and, effectively, restore the fertility of the earth. Zeus is the obvious arbiter in the situation, even if it is Persephone's fate that is being altered.

Demeter establishes dominance over another's body, too. Due to her anger at Pluto, Demeter shuns the gods and wanders amongst humans for a while. When she comes upon the house of Keleos, she reveals her wish to Keleos' daughters: "To be honest about it, what I want is for you to name for me a house to go to, the house of someone, man or woman, who has children to be taken care of. / I want to work for them" (Nagy 138-39). Although she is honest about her intentions of desiring to take care of a child again, Demeter's following actions were certainly not disclosed. Keleos' wife Metaneira proceeds to give her son Demophoon to Demeter and instructs, "Take this little boy of mine and nourish him...till he reaches the crossing-point of life, coming of age" (Nagy 219-21). Metaneira merely wants Demeter to raise her son and keep him healthy until he could likely survive on his own, since he was late-born. However, when Demeter is later seen concealing Demophoon in fire, she explains, "Immortal and ageless for all days / would I have made your dear little boy, and I would have given him honor that is unwilting. / But now there is no way for him to avoid death and doom" (Nagy 260-61). Hence, Demeter overtook Demophoon's body and was in the process of giving one of the most significant possible bodily transformations to him—she was giving immortality to a mortal. While Demeter had good intentions in transforming Demophoon, she still took control of his own body and did what *she* pleased. Not only are her actions unable to be consented to by the young child, but also they oppose Demophoon's mother's instructions. Demeter's interaction with the young male

Demophoon in the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” exists as a striking counterpart to Demeter’s different interaction with a young boy in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter,” Demeter has positive intentions behind her transformation of Demophoon, but in the *Metamorphoses*, Demeter doles out a transformation as punishment to a young boy, “a rash, foul-mouthed boy [who] stood watching, and taunted her, and called her greedy” (*Metamorphoses* 5.451-52). Demeter turns the young boy into a tiny newt in response to his taunting, unlike her premeditated objective to transform Demophoon into an immortal being. The Homeric Demeter demonstrates herself to be a mother who fiercely longs to care for children, and attempting to turn Demophoon immortal is her way of expressing gratitude to the boy for occupying the role of the child for Demeter while Persephone is absent.

In the “Hymn to Demeter,” in addition to abducting Persephone to Hades, Pluto further takes ownership of her when he tricks her so she is never allowed to leave the underworld for good. Just as Persephone was setting out from Hades, by order of Zeus, to return to heaven, Pluto “gave her, stealthily, the honey-sweet berry of the pomegranate to eat, / peering around him. He did not want her to stay for all time / over there, at the side of her honorable mother” (Nagy 372-74). We can deduce that, like in the later *Metamorphoses*, the following orders from Zeus for Persephone to return to Hades are required as a result of Persephone eating food in Hades: “He [Zeus] assented that her daughter [Persephone], every time the season came round, / would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist underneath, / and the other two thirds in the company of her mother and the other immortals” (Nagy 445-47). Still, Pluto seizes ownership of Persephone without her knowledge a second time, as he tricks her into

doing something that requires her to come back to him every year. This Homeric succession of events (Persephone being tricked and *given* pomegranate seeds to eat) is envisioned differently in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Persephone wanders and "innocently" eats pomegranate seeds of her own volition. The Homeric version suggests a more cynical and calculated outlook on the metaphorical implications about love, whereas the Ovidian version seems to indicate that chance and fate plays a larger role.

The "Hymn to Demeter" contains incidents of gods exerting control over others in life-changing ways with varying intentions. The *Metamorphoses* delves further into the concept of justice and explores possible implications of ownership of another. In Book V of the *Metamorphoses*, Pluto demonstrates the most obvious ownership of another's body. He gains ownership of Persephone as his wife, physically and legally by mythological standards. In addition to gaining control over Persephone, though, he also takes her against her will. Pluto even steals ownership of Persephone's innocence. Pluto physically takes ownership of Persephone when he, "almost in a moment, saw [Persephone], prized her, took her" (*Metamorphoses* 5.395). The Latin verb Ovid uses to depict the action Pluto carries out here is "*rapto, raptare*," which can be defined as "to drag violently off, to ravage."² The verb itself provides the reader with enough information to determine that Persephone was being taken to a new location against her will. Then, only after a brief and failed attempt of a rescue by Cyane, "The earth, pierced [by Pluto's scepter], made a road to Tartarus, and swallowed [Pluto's] headlong chariot" (*Metamorphoses* 5.423-24). Thus, Persephone was carried away to Hades with Pluto in

² Mahoney, Kevin D. "Latin definition for: rapto, raptare, raptavi, raptatus." *Latdict*, latin-dictionary.net/definition/32882/rapto-raptare-raptavi-raptatus. Accessed 21 Oct. 2016.

his chariot, a realm in which she would have no authority compared to him. However, in the grand scheme of mythological rightness, Pluto had the legal rights to take Persephone as his wife. In Greek mythology, Zeus, Pluto's brother and the king of the gods, had ultimate authority. Zeus refers to Persephone's union with Pluto in marriage not as abduction, but instead, "the truth is it is love" (*Metamorphoses* 5.526). Therefore, by Zeus' judgment, Pluto has the right to marry Persephone because he loves her, despite Persephone and her mother's opposition to the union. Zeus further supports the union by stating, "[Pluto] would not be a shameful son-in-law for us" (*Metamorphoses* 5.526). These opinions and arguments are still futile, though—or, at least, they should be—because they pertain to situations of another being (Persephone) who, according to the nymph Cyane, should have been asked before marriage, as I will elaborate later in this chapter. Yet, Persephone is denied the ability to make her own decisions.

Even though Pluto has control over Persephone's body, the goddess Venus demonstrates her control over Pluto himself, supporting the idea that no one—not even those in control of others—has complete control over their own body in the *Metamorphoses*. Venus' decision to make Pluto fall in love changes the course of his life completely and is the sole determinant of his ensuing actions. Setting her sights on making Pluto fall in love, Venus tells her son Cupid, whose arrows supposedly cause their targets to fall in love with the next person they see, to "devise a path [to Pluto] for your swift arrows" (*Metamorphoses* 5.367). She gives orders whose effects clearly take over Pluto's body and cause him to indeed fall in love, regardless of his knowledge or desire to do so. Had Venus not decided to send Cupid's arrows towards Pluto, he would not have fallen in love with Persephone. Until Venus ordered Cupid to strike Pluto, the

king of the underworld, “drawn in his chariot by black horses, carefully circled the foundations of the Sicilian land,” tending to the concealment of his dark realm from the exposure to light (*Metamorphoses* 5.360-61). Pluto’s concerns were far from Persephone until Venus decided to exercise her control over him.

Persephone has ownership over characters in the *Metamorphoses*, too. Demeter’s body becomes physically overtaken with the pursuit of Persephone across the earth. After searching the whole earth, Demeter’s hair is described as “disheveled.” Also, when it seems like Demeter finally understands that Persephone was raped, she “beat her breast again and again with her hands” (*Metamorphoses* 5.472). Someone who is composed and in control of her own body would not beat herself “again and again with her hands.” Her anger, entirely a result of Persephone’s abduction, even leads her to condemn all the lands and make them infertile, which is an abandonment of her godly responsibility. Persephone’s control over her mother may not be deliberate or even recognized by Demeter; nonetheless, Persephone still maintains a power-like ownership over how Demeter acts. Persephone also exercises deliberate authority over Ascalaphus, who saw her eating in the underworld and incriminated her according to the Fates. Persephone transforms her onlooker into a bird, inflicting a bodily transformation against his will, just as she endured.

Demeter, in addition to being controlled by Persephone, actually claims ownership of Persephone herself, too, in many ways throughout Book V of the *Metamorphoses*. One striking instance of this is when Demeter appeals to her brother Zeus to allow Persephone to return from Hades. Demeter says to Zeus, “I can bear the fact that she [Persephone] has been raped, if he [Pluto] will only return her!”

(*Metamorphoses* 5.520-21). Demeter reveals that she is fine with the sexual abuse her daughter has endured, but only if Pluto returns Persephone. This sentiment connotes that possession of Persephone's physical being is the most important thing about her and that it is acceptable to inflict terrible things upon her. Additionally, the verb "to return" that is used in the previous quotation can have a double meaning. In one sense, Demeter wishes Persephone to be returned from Hades back to earth. An alternate meaning could be that Demeter wishes Pluto would return Persephone to her possession (as her daughter) from his own (as his wife). Demeter feels entitled to controlling her daughter and keeping her somewhere that she can continue to do so.

The only character to take a stance against controlling others' bodies in Book V of the *Metamorphoses* ironically endures a physical transformation against her will. When Pluto is on his way back to Hades with Persephone in tow, the nymph Cyane, "recognizing the goddess, cried out to Dis, 'No,' and 'Go no further!' / 'You cannot be Demeter's daughter [-in-law] against her [Persephone's] will: / the girl should have been asked, and not abused'" (*Metamorphoses* 5.414-16). Cyane makes clear her disapproval of Persephone's abduction against her will and even tries to prevent Pluto from doing so, telling him to "go no further." Cyane also alludes to the fear Pluto is instilling in Persephone while forcing her to marry him by giving an example (from her own experience) of how someone *should* become wedded to another: "'I wedded [my husband], but I was persuaded by talk and not by terror'" (*Metamorphoses* 5.418). Referring to Pluto's actions as "terror" indicates the lack of choice on Persephone's part, because no one desires to be terrorized. While Cyane acts as a moral figure attempting to right the god Pluto's wrong, she does so in a respectful manner. She prefaces her own

experience with marriage with the conditional: “‘If it is right for me to compare small things [her own] with great [godly]’” (*Metamorphoses* 5.416-17). Cyane does not want to speak too boldly or out of place, but she still wants to make her point and save Persephone. Unfortunately, Pluto prevails, and Cyane’s body diminishes into the water that she was in. This supports the notion that no one, not even the morally just characters in the face of injustice, can evade control over his or her own body. Pluto reinforces Cyane’s lack of control over her body when he “‘turned his royal sceptre with powerful arm, and plunged it through the bottom of the pool” (*Metamorphoses* 5.421-23). Since Cyane was transformed into the water that composed the pool, Pluto in essence thrusts his sceptre through Cyane’s body, confirming his dominance over her with a physical blow. In a sexually abusive sense, Pluto penetrates Cyane completely—his sceptre reaches all the way to the bottom of the pool.

The main plot of the Ovidian and Homeric versions of the myth of Persephone is the same, but certain elements differ. In the Homeric version, the agency of Pluto’s abduction is entirely attributed to Zeus, while in the Ovidian version Venus is the entire underlying force that causes Pluto’s desire of Persephone. Another difference in the versions of the myth lies in Demeter’s emotional response to Persephone’s abduction. Demeter is depicted as angry more than anything in the “Hymn to Demeter,” but she is represented as predominantly sad and overwhelmed in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid’s version also differs in its origination of Pluto’s “decision” to abduct Persephone—Venus is the original agent who causes Pluto to fall in love with Persephone unlike the Homeric Pluto who seizes Persephone unanticipated and without explanation.

The Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* focus on different elements of body ownership, complementing each other. The “Hymn to Demeter” emphasizes the variability of those being controlled—Zeus has control of his daughter, while Demeter takes control of a stranger! The *Metamorphoses* places great importance on the wrongness of Pluto’s rape of Persephone; whereas in the “Hymn to Demeter,” Zeus is completely agreeable to giving Persephone away in marriage to Pluto without consent and only gets upset when Demeter lets all the crops on earth die, as a result of her grief. Nuances aside, criticism for Persephone’s rape is evident in both versions of the myth.

PERSEPHONE'S POINT OF VIEW IN CONTEMPORARY WORKS

Victims of abduction or rape may be conceived of as not having a voice of their own, since they were suppressed in other ways. Two contemporary interpretations of the myth of Persephone give the famous victim of Pluto a voice of her own. Each work unveils different, though not mutually exclusive, possibilities about what Persephone would think or feel in their existences. In A.E. Stallings' poem "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother," Persephone's character is depicted as somewhat accepting of her situation, and Stallings explores what Persephone's time in the underworld might look like. In Louise Glück's poetry book *Averno*, the focus lies on the horror and injustice that Pluto's actions themselves embody as well as cause to others. Both works expand on and depart from the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to create their own unique meanings.

In Stallings' "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother," Persephone writes about her relations with Pluto. *If* she took issue with Pluto's actions, one would assume she would be more forthright with expressing her troubles to her mother. However, it takes two whole stanzas before she mentions the man who abducted her, and when she finally brings him up, she describes his boredom with the dead: "My husband, bored with their [the dead's] babbling, neither listens nor speaks" (Stallings 27). Persephone does not consider Pluto's asserted control over her to be the most remarkable detail about him, but rather she chooses to mention his lack of engagement with the dead. This observation about Pluto could also be interpreted as enlightening about his relationship with Persephone. According to Persephone, Pluto "neither listens nor speaks," but it is unclear whether he only avoids conversing with the dead or if he avoids Persephone as well. If

one assumes Pluto does not listen to her, she seems at ease reporting this to her mother, which indicates her comfort with the current situation and the preceding events. The delay in Persephone telling her mother that she misses her further supports Persephone's acceptance of what Pluto did to her. Persephone begins the fourth stanza: "I miss you and think about you often" (Stallings 38). Waiting until line 30 to express that she misses her mother proves that being held away from her mother is not overwhelming Persephone. The reader can assume that if Persephone were not used to the underworld at all, then she would likely open her letter with an outpouring of longing sentiments for her mother and home. She never even says she is explicitly sad.

While on a surface level and through a literal interpretation of Persephone's depiction, Pluto may be represented as a decent character in this poem, closer reading exposes him to be a dominating figure, upholding the notion that Persephone does not have control over her own body. In the second to last stanza of the poem, Persephone writes, "My husband is a kind, kind master; / He asks nothing of us, nothing, nothing at all... While we learn idleness, a difficult lesson" (Stallings 47-50). First, Persephone notably refers to her husband by the title "master," which solidifies his authority over her and her body. Also, Pluto's kindness isn't determined by compassion or generosity, but rather it is measured by his lack of engagement with Persephone and the fact that he asks "nothing at all" of her. While he may not command her to do anything, which could be viewed positively in Persephone's situation, the thrice repeated "nothing" could alternatively reveal her boredom and displeasure due to her lack of duties. Moreover, Persephone could be trying to convince herself that he asks nothing of her, while alternatively she could feel that being kept in the underworld is too much in itself.

Another possible misconception regarding Pluto's positive depiction could be the interpretation that he teaches Persephone "a difficult lesson." One might wrongly consider Pluto's enabling her to "learn idleness" as benevolence, but really he is exercising active restriction on her. Pluto's decent façade may be a deliberate representation by Persephone to conceal her true unhappiness in the event that this "letter" got into Pluto's hands.

Persephone is the narrator, and she is somewhat accepting of having been abducted by Pluto. Her actions and recollections confirm that she does not have control over her own body, despite a seeming lack of concern about that in her letter. In this poem, Stallings focuses on an interpretation of Persephone's experience in the underworld. Describing one of her efforts, Persephone says, "[Burrowing animals] are useless for news of the upper world" (Stallings 10). Persephone's yearning to hear from the upper world demonstrates her implicit unhappiness with her present situation—she is so unsatisfied that she seeks out the help of others in an attempt to bring herself some comfort. Her endeavor to hear about the place that was once her home supports the idea that she does not have control over her body at the present, because if Pluto weren't detaining her in the underworld, she would not be there. Yet, writing as if she were keeping a journal, Persephone mentions instances of day-to-day life, which makes her seem rather content: "The dead are just as dull as you would imagine...I have tried to tell them stories, but they cannot attend. / They pester you like children for the wrong details" (Stallings 13-23). She tries to entertain herself by telling stories, but there is no hope for success, and she realizes this. It is interesting that Persephone desires to tell stories to the dead as a form of communication, while her husband "neither listens nor speaks."

Persephone seems to place a higher value on personal communication than Pluto, possibly as a result of her readjustment to the underworld. Persephone relinquishes the possibility of her happiness in the underworld and resigns to writing her experiences in a letter. The form in which Stallings chose to construct her poem—the poem one reads is supposed to be Persephone’s letter itself—conveys a latent desperation on Persephone’s part. Perhaps the poem is meant to be a covert call to action by Persephone to the reader.

Persephone’s futile efforts to hear about the world in which she used to reside are also paralleled in the closing lines of the poem—the hopelessness of news from the burrowing animals mirrors her attempts at writing letters to her mother, which she learns are unsuccessful. After Pluto found Persephone’s stash of letters, she says, “[My husband] never angers...My effort is futile, he says, and doesn’t forbid it” (Stallings 56-59). This harsh declaration could be interpreted as malicious and cruel in the sense that Pluto knows Persephone will not succeed, although he would never *stop* her from doing so—thereby promoting her continued disappointment. If he really cared about her happiness, he could help her achieve success. And, yet again, Persephone casts a glimmer of positivity onto her situation by using the emphatic double negative phrasing “doesn’t forbid,” which makes Pluto seem less restricting. But, considering his past actions towards Persephone, Pluto is still largely a malefactor.

Persephone’s apparent ambivalence about her abduction and being held against her will could be a result of emotional paralysis due to underlying fear and sadness. Stallings could be attempting to inject positivity into Persephone’s circumstances and add a hopeful element to the myth in an area that neither the Ovidian nor Homeric versions

ever mentions (Persephone's experience in the underworld), except for Persephone's consumption of pomegranate seeds.

In Louise Glück's *Averno*, Persephone operates as both the narrator and the object of discussion by an alternate narrator, depending on the poem. This work, as an interpretation of the myth, emphasizes the wrongness of Persephone's abduction and rape and their negative and unalterable effects on her and also addresses rape in a contemporary light. In this collection of poems, Persephone's lack of control of her own body is confirmed, and the act of rape is characterized as completely unacceptable, justified in part by the disturbing effects it has on victims. In "Persephone the Wanderer" in Part I of the book, the narrator directly compares Persephone's rape to contemporary instances. The narrator asks, "did [Persephone] cooperate in her rape, / or was she drugged, violated against her will, / as happens so often now to modern girls" (Glück 16). Persephone was indeed violated against her will, so the condemnation of rape in this case is emphasized by the disturbance that abuse of this kind *continues* to affect girls. Finally, the narrator becomes more accepting of her abduction as the book progresses and even second-guesses her lack of consent.

In a series of poems under the heading "October" that could be interpreted as narrated by both a contemporary narrator and/or Persephone, the narrator writes, "didn't the scar form, invisible" (Glück 5). In the next section, the narrator declares, "violence has changed me" (Glück 7). Read from the perspective of Persephone, the "invisible scar" is undeniably the loss of her sexual innocence, having been raped by Pluto, which is unperceivable to the eye. So, while she might not be visibly changed, Pluto imposed change upon her through the stealing of her innocence—without consent—and he

certainly scarred her psychologically, too. The denunciation of Pluto's acts is clear in referring to them as "violence." The narrator goes on to assert, "you can't touch my body now" (Glück 7). While Persephone did not consent to the first time her body was touched unsolicited by Pluto, she now has the courage to say outright that he doesn't have permission to do so henceforth. Glück gives Persephone a voice after she has been abused, unlike in the *Metamorphoses* or "Hymn to Demeter," to express her firm decidedness that Pluto will not abuse her again.

Pluto's control over Persephone's body is also established with the simile in the next two stanzas of the poem. Referring to Persephone's annual return to her mother, the narrator claims:

As is well known, the return of the beloved
 does not correct
 the loss of the beloved: Persephone

 returns home
 stained with red juice like
 a character in Hawthorne— (Glück 16)

Pluto has "stained" Persephone with an experience and the defilement of her innocence, which cannot be regained. There is no action or operation that can reverse, or "correct," what has been done to her. The narrator even goes so far as to claim it is "well known" that Persephone bears the stain of "red juice," an allusion for the spilled blood upon the loss of a female's virginity. What is more, in the *Metamorphoses* and "Hymn to Demeter," the red juice would be attributed to the pomegranate seeds Persephone eats in

the underworld—she condemned *herself* to the stain. In this interpretation of the simile, Glück introduces the theory that Persephone implicated herself, in accord with her later reflections in the book that she *wanted* to go with Pluto.

Glück introduces the theme of belonging to further prove Persephone's lack of control of her body. The narrator poses the questions: "Is [Persephone] / at home nowhere? Is she / a born wanderer" (Glück 17). At the conclusion of the myth, since she must now split her time between two residences, Persephone doesn't even have control over her own body's whereabouts, as determined by the judiciary Zeus. The reader learns of another possible effect the rape had on Persephone—her perception of belonging. Additionally, Glück titles both poems in which she elaborates on the different versions of the myth of Persephone "Persephone the Wanderer." She chooses the word "wanderer" as the sole identifier of Persephone that is worthy of inclusion in the titles.

Persephone's relationship with other characters also serves to prove, in her point of view, that she has never had control over her own body. In Part I of "October," the reader learns, "she believes // she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter" (Glück 18). "Since she has been a daughter" refers to her relationship with her mother, because Persephone's father Zeus did not play a large role in her life. Therefore, just as she feels captive by her abductor, Persephone believes her mother has treated her like a prisoner—who does not have control or say in anything that goes on. The narrator goes on to assert, "in the tale of Persephone / which should be read // as an argument between the mother and the lover— / the daughter is just meat" (Glück 19). The idea that she would play a passive role, "just meat," in the story of her abduction shows that her feelings and desires are not considered, and her fate lies in the hands of others.

Persephone's perception about her loss of virginal innocence also demonstrates how she was violated against her will and is not pleased. In "Persephone the Wanderer" in Part I of the book, Persephone is in Pluto's bed and the reader discovers, "She also knows / she is not what is called / a girl any longer" (Glück 18). Persephone's inability to specifically conceive of "what a girl is called" reveals her confusion and shock in the matter. Had she communicated that she knew she was no longer a virgin in a matter-of-fact manner, one would assume Persephone was more content with what had happened to her. In "A Myth of Innocence," Glück reports:

One summer she goes into the field as usual
 stopping for a bit at the pool where she often
 looks at herself, to see
 if she detects any change. She sees
 the same person, horrible mantle
 of daughterliness still clinging to her. (Glück 50)

In this scenario, Persephone seems to indicate that her "daughterliness" is unwanted, since the narrator writes it is "still clinging," implying that it is strongly adhering to her and cannot be shaken, despite what Persephone may want. Persephone may have decided that, after her abduction and rape, she no longer wishes her defining character to be that of a daughter. While she may not be able to put her finger on what determines "what a girl is called," Persephone could be deliberately deciding how she *wants* to see herself.

The most drastic deviation of Glück's interpretation of the myth of Persephone from the Ovidian and Homeric versions appears in "A Myth of Innocence." Glück writes:

[Persephone] stands by the pool saying, from time to time,

I was abducted, but it sounds
 wrong to her, nothing like what she felt.
 Then she says, *I was not abducted*.
 Then she says, *I offered myself, I wanted
 to escape my body...*
 ...But ignorance

cannot will knowledge. (51)

Persephone's natural internal response to saying out loud that she was abducted (thinking it sounds wrong) verifies Glück's theory of Persephone's self-implication in the events that transpire. The "knowledge" the narrator refers to is the fact that Persephone was indeed abducted. This acknowledgment of what has happened to Persephone sparks the conclusion that even though Persephone really feels one way, some larger force inhibits her from believing it. Even uncertainty on Persephone's part ("ignorance") about what happened cannot change what she knows to be true ("knowledge").

The only aspect of her current situation that Persephone expresses acceptance about is death itself. In the first subsection of "Averno," the narrator, presumably Persephone, acknowledges, "You may not do a good job of it, but you go on [when you die] / something you have no choice about" (Glück 60). What holds her back from asserting that one will definitively be successful in carrying on after death is her own uncertainty about her ability to do so. Persephone's provisional acceptance of death, due to "having no choice" about it, could be similarly explanatory of her acceptance of her abduction and rape.

Glück departs from the Ovidian and Homeric versions of the myth when she proposes an alternative reason for why Persephone can never leave the underworld for good. In the *Metamorphoses* and “Hymn to Demeter,” Zeus is the arbiter of justice, requiring Persephone to return to the underworld for a portion of every year. However, in “A Myth of Innocence,” Persephone experiences a realization: “She also remembers, less clearly, / the chilling insight that from this moment / she couldn’t live without him [death] again” (Glück 50). In the previous stanza death is personified as a male figure, so if we take “him” to mean death, this realization reveals that death is the reason why Persephone must always come back to Hades—when people die, they are dead forever, as Persephone must eternally spend time in the underworld. In this reading, Glück is taking a stance on death as being a more powerful force than Zeus. On the other hand, Persephone could be symbolically expressing that death would henceforth be an inevitable part of her life as the queen of the underworld.

Glück’s Persephone further differs from her Ovidian and Homeric counterpart in her sentiments towards returning to her mother every year. On the final page of the book, the reader learns, “Persephone / was used to death. Now over and over / her mother hauls her out again—” (Glück 76). The use of the verb “to haul” means that it takes force to carry Persephone back from the underworld and, therefore, that she does not wish to do so. Since, by the very end of the book, Persephone was apparently “used to death,” Demeter could be causing more trouble for her, imposing a readjustment to both worlds on her “over and over.” Persephone might also disapprove of *anyone* telling her what to do now, after Pluto inflicted relocation and rape on her.

The contrast between Stallings' Persephone, who deals with the challenges of living with Pluto, and Glück's Persephone, paralleled by a contemporary daughter with her own concerned mother, combines to form a fresh and intriguing look at Persephone's role in her abduction myth as a whole. Glück's interpretation and focal criticism could be layered onto Stallings' poem to fuse into a single insight about Persephone's inner beliefs. Does Persephone share the sentiment of abhorrence that her mother and the rest of the Olympians feel towards Pluto after her abduction? If so, Stallings' Persephone most likely suffers from repressing her honest thoughts.

DEMETER'S POINT OF VIEW IN CONTEMPORARY WORKS

Dealing with loss is a personal matter, and one can experience an array of emotions and reactions. In the rape of Persephone myth, Demeter endures the loss of her daughter. Three contemporary sources reinterpret Demeter's response, concentrating on three separate components of her suffering—hopelessness, acceptance, and her daughter's absence. In Rita Dove's *Mother Love*, Demeter and the contemporary mother dealing with the loss of her own daughter are depicted navigating incomprehensible misfortunes and descending into the abandonment of hope. In "Persephone" by D.M. Thomas, Demeter makes a bitter attempt to come to terms with Persephone's absence. In Louise Glück's *Averno*, Demeter seems focused on the empty space left by her daughter in their relationship as opposed to the abuse Persephone endures.

Throughout *Mother Love*, Dove sets Demeter's loss of Persephone in comparison to another mother's "loss" of her own daughter in another sense. The actions and sentiments of the mothers in this collection of poems suggest a strong denunciation of Persephone's abduction and rape by Pluto, but it also reveals a direct correlation between Demeter's happiness and the possession of her daughter. In the Foreword to *Mother Love*, Dove gives some explanation as to why she juxtaposes Demeter with a modern mother and seems somewhat aligned with the Olympian critique of Persephone's abduction: "The Olympians disapprove of the abduction but are more shaken by Demeter's reaction, her refusal to return to her godly work in defiance of the laws of nature; she's even left her throne in Olympus and taken to wandering about on the earth disguised as a mortal" (Foreword xi). Dove is establishing that even the Olympians don't

think Demeter, as a goddess, should have this much power over others—imposing a famine on the mortals of earth.

The progression of sentiments a mother feels when dealing with loss begins when the contemporary mother abandons her efforts to maintain her physical appearance following the loss of her daughter:

Blown apart by loss, she let herself go—
wandered the neighborhood hatless, breasts
swinging under a ratty sweater, crusted
mascara blackening her gaze. (10)

Maintaining physical composure is no longer a priority of the contemporary mother. The “crusted mascara” indicates that she has not even taken the time to remove what trace of personal upkeep she has left. The depiction of the mother “wandering” could also indicate that, without her daughter, she has no definite course of action and does not know what to do with herself—she is “wandering” in a “ratty sweater.” Dove is portraying Demeter as a mother who has no reason to give attention to personal upkeep without her daughter in her life—her daughter is her motivation.

In the subsequent poem, likely set in a similar chronological time after losing her own daughter, Demeter remains somewhat composed despite her concern and upset, and she asks Persephone, “Are you having a good time? / Are you having a time at all?” (Dove 11). Demeter is attempting to receive any knowledge about Persephone she still can. Her desperation is exposed when she follows her question about Persephone having a *good* time by asking a question that ultimately just begs for any response. Demeter is not content being out of touch with her daughter and goes on to recount how she is

constantly being reminded of her daughter. She will take any interaction she can get from her daughter.

The feeling of isolation and helplessness a mother in Demeter's situation would feel is portrayed in the poem "Persephone Abducted." Dove writes, "No one can tell a mother how to act: / there are no laws when laws are broken, no names / to call upon" (13). The "broken laws" the narrator mentions probably refer to the lack of permission given in the abduction of a daughter from her mother. The ensuing absence of laws evokes both the helplessness of Demeter (because there is no predetermined law for her to refer to in this state of lawlessness) as well as her feeling of isolation (there is no one to "call upon" or tell her what the next step is). In the myth, Zeus, the king of the gods, has omniscient judicial authority and, therefore, determines all laws in a sense. However, the unspoken, accepted laws of personal relationships between mother and daughter seem to have been broken when Persephone was stolen from her mother without either of their consent.

The next depiction from the mother's grieving process is the divulgence of the only exception to inconsolability. In the poem "Mother Love," Dove writes, "Any woman knows the remedy for grief / is being needed: duty bugles and we'll / climb out of exhaustion every time" (17). This statement, when considered in regards to Demeter's care of Demophoon in the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," could provide justification for her actions. It is hypocritical, however, to assert that, in order to heal one's own grief and to supply the feeling of being needed, one must essentially deprive *another* person of the feeling of being needed. This argument, though, does fall in line with the correlation of Demeter's happiness and the possession of her daughter—now, at least, she possesses

another child to take care of, which contributes in part to her happiness. The dual modern mother/Demeter's narration tone is resigned with the fact that "climbing out of exhaustion" is something all women must do when necessary. Demeter even recapitulates the cycle by actively seeking someone else to take care of. Describing her reaction to young Demophoon as she concealed him in fire each night, Demeter says, "Poor human— / to scream like that, to make me remember" (Dove 17). Demophoon's screams remind Demeter of the screams Persephone let out when being abducted; yet the mother carries on, actively taking control of the mortal boy's body and inflicting the same pain on Demophoon's mother as she herself endured.

In "The Bistro Styx," Dove portrays the contemporary mother meeting her daughter at a bistro, presumably after a large span of time and for the first time since the daughter moved to Paris. After hearing about her daughter's life and work, the mother asks in the penultimate stanza:

"But are you happy?" Fearing, I whispered it
quickly. "What? You know, Mother"—

she bit into the starry rose of a fig—

"one really should try the fruit here."

I've lost her, I thought, and called for the bill. (Dove 42)

This scene and the mother's reaction depicts a mother who truly cares about the happiness of her daughter, who doesn't seem to care herself—or, at least, she doesn't care to talk about it. The mother's question echoes her earlier question about if her daughter was having a good time. The daughter dodges the question her mother asks her

by turning the answer around onto her mother and interjecting her speech by her biting into a fruit, only to resume it by commenting on the fruit. The mother is hopeless in discovering if the daughter is truly satisfied with her life and decisions, and this is how Demeter must feel when losing Persephone—she is being kept in the underworld and there is no hope in getting her back. It is imaginative of Dove to interpret Demeter’s “loss” in a way that contemporary women could more closely relate to. This contemporary daughter is still alive and even in communication with her mother, but she is lost in another sense. In Dove’s interpretation of the myth, the daughter is the one making the decision to bite the fig—recalling the pomegranate Persephone ate in the Ovidian and Homeric versions—which is a metaphor for the sealing of her fate and the inability for her mother to prevent her loss.

In the poem “Demeter Mourning,” the author emphasizes the dependence of Demeter’s happiness on her daughter. Dove opens the poem by explicitly stating, “Nothing can console me” (48). The poem further demonstrates the distress a mother undergoes, since no matter the pleasures provided to alleviate her pain, she is unable to perform her typical duties: “You may bring silk / to make skin sigh... / still, / nothing is sweet to the tooth crushing in” (Dove 48). The goddess of harvest and agriculture, Demeter presided over the grains and fertility of the earth. Therefore, the lack of ripeness (“sweet to the tooth crushing in”) would be attributed to her failure to maintain a successful harvest on earth. The whole earth relies on Demeter for this duty, so her failure to do so supports the idea that something drastic has captured her attention and energy. Even other Olympians, as Glück writes in the Foreword, are shocked at Demeter’s “defiance of the laws of nature” (xi). Demeter continues, “one learns to walk

by walking. / In time I'll forget this empty brimming, / I may laugh again at / a bird,
perhaps, chucking the nest— / but it will not be happiness, / for I have known that”
(Dove 48). It is clear that the consolation she referred to in the first line of the poem is an attempt to make her feel better about the “empty brimming” she experiences due to her daughter’s absence. The oxymoronic phrase “empty brimming” also draws attention to the impact the feeling of being without her daughter has on Demeter. In addition to being inconsolable, Demeter’s daughter is the only thing that can bring her happiness. The emptiness caused by her daughter prevents her from being happy ever again. The reader draws the conclusion that, while Demeter is inconsolably unhappy with Persephone in Pluto’s possession, she is content possessing Persephone for her own happiness. This gives rise to the question of justice in having possession over others’ bodies. Glück would argue in favor of this possibility, since in *Averno* the mother presents the idea that the daughter *must* be in the possession/attached to her mother at all times.

The cyclical nature of a mother’s sentiments when experiencing loss is exposed in the poem “Demeter, Waiting.” In Part VI of the book, Demeter reverts back to extremism, this time with violence and aggression towards the earth. In “The Search” from Part II of the book, Demeter herself is described as “blown apart,” a victim of intensely disturbing feelings. And now, the goddess proclaims, “She is gone again and I will not bear / it...I will wail and thrash / until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes / over” (Dove 56). Presently, Demeter imposes death onto the humans of earth who are deprived of fertile food, going beyond her previous depictions. Demeter’s sadness transforms into anger, and she directs it towards the earth. Dove clearly outlines the progression of Demeter’s anger from the beginning to the end of *Mother Love*.

As opposed to Dove's attempt to delineate the progression of feelings a mother endures with the loss of her daughter, in D.M. Thomas's "Persephone," the author conceives an attempt by Demeter at coming to terms with Persephone's absence. Written in the first person, the narrator, Demeter, confesses why she is supposedly glad Persephone lives with Pluto. The first stanza is composed of describing undesirable places where Demeter has seen Persephone. In the second stanza, Demeter discloses, "sometimes...it has been enough to imagine you...knowing that a light still burns / somewhere...and that, through you, day runs into day / without a break, the light uninterrupted" (Thomas 28). Persephone is the "burning light." Not only does Demeter only say it is "enough," or adequate, to imagine her daughter, but she could also be sarcastic. Thomas uses repetitive language in the first stanza to draw out Persephone being stuck in all three of the terrible, undesirable situations. In a completely new stanza, then, it is revealed that "sometimes" it is apparently enough—meaning it's really *not* enough.

Demeter's bitterness becomes evident in the third stanza. She sarcastically says, "So I am glad you [Persephone] opened your legs to Hades / and agreed to go with him into his dark kingdom...your thoughts rooted in the living, / a white aspen among the black poplars" (Thomas 28). She is not *truly* glad her daughter "opened [her] legs to Hades," though. She even describes Persephone's life in the underworld with bitterness, reminding Persephone that her "thoughts [are] rooted in the living," emphasizing how Persephone's thoughts are in vain as she is now among the dead. Demeter also emphasizes how out of place Persephone is in the underworld, referring to her as "a white aspen among the black poplars." Demeter's close attention to Persephone's decisions

demonstrates her stake and care in her daughter's affairs—but her bitterness is still perceivable to the reader.

In Louise Glück's *Averno*, most of Demeter's interest seems to lie in her relationship with her daughter, whom she objectifies, and the emptiness she feels when Persephone is abducted as opposed to the abuse inflicted upon her daughter. Glück's Demeter suffers from Persephone's absence, reminiscent of the "empty brimming" that Dove's Demeter grapples with. Tracking the sentiments of Demeter and all mothers, the narrator asserts, "the daughter's body / doesn't exist, except / as a branch of the mother's body / that needs to be / reattached at any cost" (Glück 75). In this subjective interpretation of the purpose of a daughter's body, the narrator, communicating mothers' supposed opinions, reduces daughters to bodies, and then those bodies to a mere "branch of the mother's body." Demeter's reduction of Persephone as an object is reminiscent of Glück's interpretation that Persephone "is just meat" (Glück 19). Not only does the mother believe she ought to control her daughter's body as she sees fit (with permission to do so "at any cost"), but she is not considering the daughter's perspective in circumstances. In both the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when she loses control of Persephone after her abduction, Demeter certainly goes to every measure to get her back—and eventually gets to see her for a certain portion of each year. This pursuit of justice based on the mother's desires transfers the intentions of returning Persephone from, say, saving Persephone from Pluto's rape and abduction to the restoration of a hypothetical "branch," or part, of Demeter that was for some time detached. Demeter would rather resolve her own feelings of emptiness than rescue her daughter from the underworld, just as in the *Metamorphoses* when Demeter tells Zeus, "I

can bear the fact that she has been raped, if he will only return her!” (5.520-21). Demeter is essentially presuming that she is more of the victim in Persephone’s abduction than Persephone is.

Glück also demotes Persephone’s humanity in the second “Persephone the Wanderer” poem. Dove describes the relationship between Demeter and Persephone: “We have here / a mother and a cipher: this is / accurate to the experience / of the mother as // she looks into the infant’s face” (73). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a cipher can be defined as “a person who fills a place, but is of no importance or worth, a nonentity, a ‘mere nothing.’”³ Persephone acts as a placeholder that brings Demeter comfort and a sense of security. Demeter’s need to fill the place of her daughter would explain why in the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter” she takes control of Demophoon—she just wants someone, anyone, to fill it.

The story of Persephone is often written in congruence with her mother Demeter’s story. In the Homeric Hymns, Persephone does not get her own hymn, but rather her story is intertwined with her mother’s in the “Hymn to Demeter.” In Rita Dove’s *Mother Love*, the relationship between Persephone and her mother is fleshed out amidst poems regarding modern mothers and daughters. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, much of the poem following the introduction of Persephone’s character involves Demeter’s sadness and her efforts to get her daughter back. The coalition of Persephone and Demeter inspires much more complexities regarding the myth of Persephone and its effects on Demeter.

³ "cipher | cypher, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 30 November 2016.

PLUTO'S POINT OF VIEW IN CONTEMPORARY WORKS

In each of the contemporary works I analyze from Pluto's point of view, he is depicted differently than in his traditional mythic portrayal. In "Hades Welcomes His Bride" by A.E. Stallings, Pluto seems to make efforts to be considerate, but he still comes off as patronizing. In Louise Glück's *Averno*, Ovidian assumptions about his character are challenged as Pluto is represented as a dedicated lover of Persephone—he is thoughtful and strives to be honest. In "Pomegranate" by D.M. Thomas, Pluto takes on a pitiful father role for Persephone and they have a mutually pleasing relationship.

In Stallings's "Hades Welcomes His Bride," Pluto makes efforts to welcome Persephone to the underworld, but his actions are patronizing. Stallings' interpretation of the myth in this poem does not alter any major plot points, but rather she explores what Persephone's arrival in the underworld would look like and creates a more in-depth character profile of Pluto. In this poem, Pluto has enough consideration to give Persephone a tour, but his speech is backhanded. When showing Persephone around and pointing out their thrones, Pluto says to her, "And here you shall be queen, my dear, the queen / Of all men ever to be born. No smile? / Well, some solemnity befits a queen" (Stallings 4). Pluto's sarcastic question about Persephone's lack of smiling suggests that he thinks she *should* be smiling—a patronizing and patriarchal assumption. Regardless if she is happy or not, Pluto assumes she should be happy about whatever he provides for her. Also, when Pluto concedes, "some solemnity befits a queen," he is implying that there is a level of solemnity (perhaps even that of Persephone) that is *not* befitting. Pluto treats Persephone condescendingly, despite his surface-level kindness.

Pluto continues the tour and also shows Persephone a room for herself: “Here is a room / For your diversions. Here I’ve set a loom / And silk unraveled from the finest shrouds / And dyed the richest, rarest shades of black. / Such pictures you shall weave!” (Stallings 4). The room is supposed to serve as a place for Persephone to carry out hobbies and activities in the underworld, but Pluto refers to them as “diversions.” This conveys that he already knows she will be trying to distract herself from being there, but he does not care. Plus, Pluto essentially limits her activities, by the material provided, to stereotypically female tasks such as weaving, asserting superiority over what she *should* be doing. So, while Pluto does give Persephone silk of the “richest, rarest shades of black,” his intentions probably aren’t to appeal to Persephone’s taste in luxurious silk as much as they are to attempt to keep her busy and from being as miserable as possible. Pluto doesn’t even ask if Persephone enjoys weaving on the loom; he assumes superiority in their marriage from the beginning.

Pluto additionally patronizes Persephone by assigning her friends. He tells her, “For you I chose those three thin shadows there, / And they shall be your friends and loyal maids... They have / Not mouth nor eyes and cannot thus speak ill / Of you” (Stallings 4). But if they are just being *demande*d to be her friends and maids, how could anyone ever be sure that they really consider themselves her friends, as true friendship is rooted in a desire to be such? Plus, if these “thin shadows” do not have mouths or eyes, as Pluto continues to tell Persephone, how could they be supportive, communicative companions as friends should be? Stallings is likely invoking Ascalaphus from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, who was the only person to see Persephone eat pomegranate seeds while in the underworld, preventing her from ever leaving for good. Stallings may be using

these eye-less “friends” as juxtaposition to the one in the myth who sealed Persephone’s fate with his sight. Stallings’ Pluto is taking measures to make Persephone feel comfortable, a luxury not enjoyed by her Ovidian counterpart. Still, Pluto’s potentially considerate act is restrictive and condescending towards Persephone.

Another seemingly considerate act of Pluto is his careful creation of his and Persephone’s bedroom: “I had [our bedroom] specially made after great thought / So you would feel at home...But without the garish stars and lurid moon” (Stallings 4). He is recognizably being considerate, so Persephone will “feel at home,” yet he spoils the gesture with a qualifying statement that presumes his preferences are superior to hers. He created their room without, what he considers, “the garish stars and lurid moon,” which are quintessential features from the world of the living that Persephone probably enjoys very much. Pluto does not care what effect this may have on Persephone or if she would prefer to have them, and he speaks disdainfully about parts of the world above.

Finally, the reader concludes that Pluto engages with Persephone in the closing lines of the poem. Pluto answers, presumably in response to Persephone, “What? That stark shape crouching in the corner? / Sweet, that is to be our bed. Our bed. / Ah! Your hand is trembling! I fear / There is, as yet, too much pulse in it” (Stallings 4-5). Notably, Persephone is not given an actual voice—we only hear responses to her. It is emphatic that Persephone’s trembling hand (which suggests fear or anxiety) is pointed out in concurrence with her lack of voice, both literally and figuratively in the poem, as both aspects reduce her to an inferior of Pluto. Persephone’s opinion is not mentioned or taken into account by Pluto, as far as the reader knows. Alternatively, Persephone’s trembling hand could be a negative reaction to her unfavorable prospective bed, which is described

as a “stark shape.” If so, her reaction indicates that, even when experiencing displeasure, Persephone does not have the right to voice her opinion or she feels uncomfortable doing so, given Pluto’s patronization. Pluto lives up to his mythic portrayal—assertive, entitled, and disagreeable—in Stallings’ “Hades Welcomes His Bride,” but he also takes on a deceitfully considerate appearance that veils his patronization of Persephone.

In Louise Glück’s *Averno*, the myth of Persephone is reinterpreted in “A Myth of Devotion,” in which there is a reversal of one of the defining elements of the myth—Pluto’s heartlessness. In “A Myth of Devotion,” Glück harks back to the *Metamorphoses*, in which Pluto was struck by Cupid’s arrow and filled with uncontrollable desire for Persephone. Glück explores what the story could have looked like from Pluto’s perspective if he supposedly *did* love Persephone. The dedication of this hypothetically loving Pluto is demonstrated by the hard work he does for Persephone: “When Hades decided he loved this girl / he built for her a duplicate of earth, / everything the same...A replica of earth / except there was love here” (Glück 58). Despite the evidence of Pluto’s devotion to Persephone (desiring to make the transition easier “on the young girl”), this quotation actually begins with a paradox. If Pluto’s love were real, he wouldn’t be able to “decide” that he felt it for someone—real love is uncontrollable. For example, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Pluto is struck with Cupid’s arrows, and “almost in a moment, saw [Persephone], prized her, took her: so swift” (5.395). This immediacy stems from the arrow’s overwhelming power and ability to “overcome all,” according to Venus (*Metamorphoses* 5.366). Real love’s own power would not be able to be harnessed by Pluto. Furthermore, Pluto claims that the only difference between earth and his duplicate earth was the presence of love in his duplicate. But love certainly exists on earth, so his

love must be different, unless he is simply referring to his *own* love. If Pluto truly thought he was the only source of love for Persephone, his attempt to create an entire world to her liking could have been well-intentioned, since he strives to give her everything the world has to offer and more (his love). That being said, Pluto still takes on a distinctly dissimilar portrayal in this poem compared to the traditional myth. By titling the poem “A Myth of Devotion,” Glück is asserting that whatever follows is just that—a myth, or not necessarily true as it is. Positioned amidst poems of burning fields and the death of one’s spirit, maybe Glück created this poem with the intention of bringing the reader relief. The relief might be even greater because the devoted, loving character in this poem, Pluto, is unexpected and likely assumed to have the opposite nature. Pluto’s apparent devotion is a surprise, a relief, and an though experiment.

Glück also purposefully changes the duration of time Pluto waits before abducting Persephone compared to the *Metamorphoses* myth. In the *Metamorphoses*, as explained above, Pluto’s abduction was instantaneous, immediately when he saw Persephone. In *Averno*, though, “[Pluto] waited many years, / building a world, watching / Persephone in the meadow” (Glück 58). Glück gives Pluto the qualities of persistence, patience, and focus in her version. He is not a rash, love-struck abductor, and instead he is determined to work for “many years” making an entire *world* before he makes his move. The narrator then asks:

Doesn’t everyone want to feel in the night
the beloved body, compass, polestar,
to hear the quiet breathing that says
I am alive, that means also

you are alive, because you hear me. (Glück 58)

If this is true, then Pluto's actions could be explained by his desire to feel alive, surrounded by Persephone and a world that more serves as a tool for him to feel like he is in a living setting as opposed to a coping mechanism for Persephone. Additionally, he might spend so much time watching Persephone before building his recreation of the world so his own was as realistic as possible, which might cause her to forget it wasn't the real world and in turn would make Pluto feel more truly alive.

At the end of the poem, Pluto's own thoughts are documented, and it is revealed that Pluto's "love" is not genuine. Glück discloses what he wants to say to Persephone in addition to what he actually says, "[Pluto] wants to say *I love you, nothing can hurt you* // but he thinks / this is a lie, so he says in the end / *you're dead, nothing can hurt you*" (59). The only difference between what he wants to say and what he actually says is that he wants to say, "I love you," but instead he says, "You're dead." Therefore, the lie he considers telling and does not end up saying is that he loves Persephone. Another reading of the difference in these two statements could be that Pluto's love won't be enough to protect Persephone from things "hurting her," and that what will actually protect her will be the fact that she is dead, so nothing can harm her further. Still, if Pluto's love is real, it may not be enough to protect her, which devalues it, too. Even if his love isn't genuine, Pluto demonstrates honesty and consideration for Persephone! He deliberately stops himself from lying to Persephone and attempts to make her transition to living in the underworld easier. His persona in this poem is vastly different from the angry ravisher in the *Metamorphoses* who "could scarcely contain his wrath" (5.420) when Cyane tried to stop him or the selfish abductor in the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" who actively "drove

away as [Persephone] wept” (20)—if he cared about her, he wouldn’t proceed to do something that makes her weep. Glück’s Pluto thinks twice before speaking, let alone acting.

Pluto assumes another significantly different role in “Pomegranate” by D.M. Thomas. In this poem, Pluto is represented as pitiful, somber, and even victimized. One of the biggest creative licenses Thomas takes is transposing the mythical abduction of Persephone by her uncle into a contemporary situation of a child caught between divorced parents. If Thomas seeks to make Persephone relatable, this interpretation of the myth may do that, but his Persephone prefers Pluto to Demeter, coloring the interpretation.

As the narrator, Pluto reflects, “Each year more clearly you can see [Persephone]...as she picks up her bag and her coat, drifts out to face / the statutory six-months with her mother” (Thomas 33). Pluto is implying that Persephone only leaves because of the law, and if it weren’t “statutory,” Persephone wouldn’t be going, or wouldn’t want to go. Persephone’s necessary departure seems like a grievance for her—the verb “face” suggests that Persephone does not want to spend the six months with her mother and that it will be a challenge to endure. Pluto and Persephone’s relationship in this poem is much closer than in the *Metamorphoses* and the Homeric “Hymn to Demeter.” Persephone even begs upon her departure for the six months, ““Father, must I go?”” (Thomas 33). In this poem, Pluto is a character whom Persephone wants to spend time with, unlike the man who abuses her in the myth.

The departure of this poem from the ancient pagan myth of Persephone is solidified when the narrator, Pluto, invokes the Christian God. Pluto refers to

Persephone's mother, recalling that she wished he were left with nothing after abducting her daughter. Pluto goes on to clarify that, "God knows I have never reviled / [Persephone]" (Thomas 33). This appeal to God—who is the highest form of judgment in Christianity—persuades the reader to believe Pluto's claims of innocence. The reader pities Pluto for the punishment and torture (Persephone's absence) he apparently endures due to false accusations. This poem may be intended to open one's eyes and help the reader understand the formerly unknown truth of the myth. If so, the "truth" is based in the conception that Persephone gave her consent and actually enjoys Pluto. This interpretation, however, generates a statement about the injustice of the situation, too. Perhaps Thomas hopes that the reader will henceforth consider avoiding doling out premature punishment, because the alleged victim of Pluto in his poem, Persephone, is actually not a victim of the god Pluto by any measure.

Another potential reading of "Pomegranate" employs the sexual and inconsiderate elements inspired by the ravisher of the *Metamorphoses*. In that case, the tender references Pluto makes to his daughter in the poem are instead sick and twisted. Vocabulary like "statutory" and "courts" prompts the reader to be concerned about the overall situation, no matter the identity of the offender. In the second stanza, though, Pluto refers to Persephone as, "rounded, no longer the child / the courts shared between us, as a pomegranate cleft" (Thomas 33). By "rounded," Pluto could imply that Persephone's body is now more filled out in certain areas, as she is a post-pubescent female. Moreover, a "pomegranate cleft" brings to mind the clefts of a female bosom and derrière. In the final stanza, Pluto narrates Persephone's departure, "My green shoot, Kore, dawdles now" (Thomas 33). "Green shoot" could be an allusion to Persephone,

also called Kore in Greek mythology, as a green—or young, tender, or immature—sexual partner, whom he now watches hungrily as she walks away. If the reader adheres to a sexual reading of the poem, Pluto embodies an even more extreme and perverted character than in the Ovidian myth. Thomas could be expressing what he thinks most situations don't accurately portray on the outside—in his own example, the myth of Persephone is not elaborated sufficiently to reveal the potential evils of her abuser.

Since the myth (in its Ovidian and Homeric Hymn forms) does not disclose every single detail of the events that transpire between Persephone and Pluto, Stallings, Glück, and Thomas cast their own perceptions onto the characters and bring different meanings to the myth. No author explicitly states any morals or dictums that ought to be abided by, given his or her interpretation of the myth. Instead, the reader can construct his or her own idea of the myth, its characters, and the engagements, and take from it his or her own understanding.

CONCLUSION

Considering multiple or larger works from the same author inspired by the same topic can produce more general insights—combining conclusions from multiple narrators’ actions and thoughts lead to larger indications about the author’s intentions regarding the scenarios around the myth of Persephone. Each of Stallings’ poems I analyzed, “Hades Welcomes His Bride” and “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother,” utilizes a different character from the myth of Persephone as a narrator (Pluto and Persephone, respectively). Closer inspection of their speech and actions reveals a similar tendency in their behavior. Pluto is deceptively considerate towards Persephone in the poem from his perspective, and Persephone is surprisingly ambivalent, yet she demonstrates instances that reveal her grief, in the poem from her perspective. With both characters, what they say and how they act seems disparate from their intentions or true feelings. This could be a cynical aspect that Stallings chose as undervalued or underrepresented in the reality of the events of the myth of Persephone and decided to emphasize in her own works.

Glück portrays the points of view of Persephone, Demeter, and Pluto throughout her book *Averno*, and each character suffers some internal conflict. It is made clear that Persephone did not consent to Pluto’s abduction, yet she is depicted as conflicted about her feelings regarding her consent. Demeter seems more affected by Persephone’s absence than what actually happened to Persephone, but she is also very vocal about inquiring about Persephone’s own happiness. Finally, Pluto explicitly states his conflict between saying what he *wants* to say to Persephone and telling the truth. The dual nature of characters of narration adds a degree of uncertainty to the reader’s understanding of

what the author's want to represent—this may be intentional as it corresponds to the fragile dispute about Persephone's abduction.

Another compelling strategy of analysis is paying attention to thematic connections or similar unique ideas and how they relate. For example, there is a parallel between Glück's description of Persephone as a "wanderer" (as she is called in two poem titles) in *Averno* and Demeter's wandering around the earth in Ovid and Homeric "Hymn to Demeter." The representation of two dissimilar characters by the same action of wandering is intriguing. Perhaps Glück realized that Persephone's character could embody the same trait as her mother and added it as an element of mother/daughter connection.

An unusual concept the reader grapples with is the idea that Demeter and Persephone both have control over each other in some way. If this is true, must we determine one's control to be stronger than the other's? Since their control over each other is of different types, I do not think it is possible to dictate one as greater than the other. Thus, characters can be controlled by more than one person, control more than one person, and be controlled by someone whom they also control.

Given the ambiguity today regarding consent in certain situations, with alcohol, drugs, and other factors further complicating matters, the enduring questionability surrounding the ancient myth of Persephone seems particularly relevant. The *Metamorphoses* and Homeric "Hymn to Demeter" provide a solid jumping off point for Dove, Glück, Stallings, and Thomas to explore certain aspects in more depth and take creative liberties, their works pieces of art themselves.

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