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“Persephone’s Contemporary Dilemma: *Consent, Sexuality, and “Female  
Empowerment.”*”

by

Cassandra Elizabeth CerJanic

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Master of Arts in English

Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

COLLEGE AT CORTLAND

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Persephone's Contemporary Dilemma: *Consent, Sexuality, and "Female Empowerment."*

Greek mythology never strays very far from Western imagination. Though every few years literature involving the infamous Gods tapers off into the back of our collective minds, a resurgence soon follows. The late Romantic literary movement (as popularized by Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and John Keats) depended heavily upon Greco-Roman mythology to help illustrate characters that existed somewhere between the shadow of imagination and the truth of humanity. Perhaps in an attempt to harken back to Romanticism, contemporary poetry has once again given life to the Greek Gods. Mythological characters can be seen throughout the works of modern poets, and perhaps none so popular as Persephone, Goddess of Spring and Queen of the Underworld. She has become a proverbial battleground for narratives of consent and free sexuality. Yet, poets trying to alter one version of her story, traced back to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, end up making her a caricature instead. By centering Persephone's representation only on her rape and abduction, authors fail to subvert her problematic, questionable origins, and instead remain in a constant, futile struggle with it.

## POETIC MOVEMENTS MEET CONTEMPORARY DILEMMAS

Tackling contemporary poetry surrounding the figure of Persephone is not simply a matter of uncovering historical movements and contextualizing language through the centuries. While it is vital to trace the way Persephone has both blossomed and wilted as a character in our imagination, and take a critical look at what has contributed to her transformation in public eye, there are more factors at play than simply cultural trends. If Persephone is the content that this paper seeks to examine, then the poetry is the form – and without a fair look at the form, any work surrounding the content is rendered almost meaningless. While some believe modern tellings of mythology are inherently born out of historical study and serve as cautionary tales in our social narratives (like victim-blaming for rape), there are other factors that shape our contemporary interpretation<sup>1</sup>. Politics, perspective, and literary form can dramatically alter one poem’s message and destabilize the writer’s own desire for legitimacy within a subject. Depending on the decade, feminist confessional poetry was viewed as either liberating or completely constraining. It allowed for a woman to give her first person account – a way of “voicing” her seldom heard perspective. Yet, it later became construed as a female author’s attempt to write within a “masculine” style, and it was seen as counterproductive to the feminist literary movement. Similarly, rather than historic ideologies influencing the modern narrative, our current debates and concerns have altered our interpretation of past tales – which, while it is a complete disservice to the origins of myth and human experience, says volumes about our social climate. To insist that the tale of Persephone is a patriarchal attempt to warn ancient Greek women about the dangers of being a woman

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<sup>1</sup> I will discuss Erin Royden Zimmerman’s interpretation of myth, focus on rape culture, and plea for “making myth matter” later in this paper.

“asking for it” has no historical basis; our modern perceptions are not the perceptions of each and every culture on earth. Rather, our own discourse around slut-shaming, consent, rape and sexuality has reshaped our readings of mythology and ignited radically different poetic stories. By examining each of these elements, I do not merely seek to answer why third wave feminists have taken up Persephone’s story in such dramatic ways, but what the modern relevance of using sexually charged confessional poetry might be. And perhaps most difficult to answer of all, does tangling with “relevance” and criticizing confessional poetry which focalizes Persephone negate the work the form has done in giving women a voice? By pointing out the problem of modern confessional poetry, am I not also rebuking poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, thus casting their work in a poor light when their male contemporaries do not face such criticism?

I do not seek to cast all confessionals into a negative light by using Foucault’s theory on confession and silence, nor do I desire to argue that by some sexist catch 22, women cannot write in first-person lyric poetry simply because some believe them to be masculine forms that have been appropriated for the wrong reasons. Rather, in this paper I want to take a critical and fair look at confessional poetry surrounding a mythological figure that is center in a fierce debate on sexual consent. My concern is not with any writer that uses the confessional or lyric form to voice an expression of positive sexual experience or injustice over sexual assault. Instead, I will be looking at the context surrounding this fight to “tell” Persephone’s supposedly true account for her relationship with Hades, God of the Underworld, and what that can unfold when looking at our own political climate today.

Starting with the lyrical “form” these contemporary poets utilize, I will examine the arguments surrounding the poetic genre and whether or not feminists can truly have a voice within it. Then, I will continue by laying out the current political landscape and the era of consent anxiety that we live in, before moving onto Rita Dove’s own poem, *Persephone, Falling* and “asking for it” narratives. Seguing into the topic of sexual shame, female agency, and finally historicism surrounding the figure of Persephone, I will present the current dilemma surrounding both confessional and cautionary poetry regarding her: what does it mean to insist consent? When is a woman writer using a female figure not authentic? Why must presentations of female sexuality be political and not merely aesthetical? Can they ever not be political? As said, while there may not be one true conclusion – a single smoking gun that will revolutionize the way we approach present day poetry – this paper’s ultimate goal is to untangle some of the underlying problems surrounding one specific genre that has become a lightning rod for political, historical and feminist discourse, and explore the way opacity can do more powerfully subversive work than something plainly spoken.

### **LYRIC, THE LYRE, AND CONFESSIONAL CONTENT**

When speaking of contemporary Romantic poetry, there are varying definitions and criteria for the category. It can be a confessional or not at all; it can utilize the best of the lyric form while blending with kinetic poetry stylings. It can heavily rely on Greek Gods and creation myths, or grapple with a writer’s visceral thoughts and feelings.

This paper will examine four contemporary Romantic poems centering on Persephone, and while each poet has a unique approach – be it through a confessional telling, clipped cautionary metaphors, or fluid free verse that drags the reader down a

proverbial rabbit hole –they each rely on a lyric structure. This is important because lyric poetry is at the center of an ongoing debate about women’s voice in poetics, their agency, the authenticity of their work. For example, Steve Evans argues on a critical moment where women writers have, “the possibility of planting a first forward step into a space no longer organized and governed by phallic privilege” (Evans 3). His introduction, “After Patriarchal Poetry: Feminism and the Contemporary Avant-Garde” paves the way for the journal’s additional essay entitled, “Just one of the girls / normal in the extreme” by Lynn Keller. Keller pushes Evans argument even further by speaking of the period in which women poets of the sixties and seventies changed from a more “traditional” lyric form to the experimental. When citing Kathleen Fraser and her work, “Poem in Which My Legs are Accepted,” Keller suggests that Fraser sets her own body as the backdrop to the male figure in the poem. Though she praises her legs and illustrates them through the act of lovemaking with another man, Keller finds the masculine imagery (“the tense sinewy elegance of his two dark legs”) to be at the forefront, while her “pillow” like thighs are merely the canvas in which to paint his form. Keller goes on to explain that the lyric, at its core, is a masculine and patriarchal form of poetry:

Those foundational materials tend to silence the woman, identify her with nature, frame her in terms of the male gaze, and position her within masculine narratives of romance or of poetic inspiration. The beauties of poetry are bound up with the beauties of women, which are the proper possession of men. It is not surprising, then, that expectations associated with lyric involving, for instance, closure, coherence, the potential range of tone and voice, lyric cadence, and lyric beauty even in the less rule-bound forms common in the sixties, would still work against

impulses to radically reposition women and female subjectivities within the genre (55).

Though Keller immediately adds, “I do not claim that the traditions behind lyric prohibit all women from exploring alternative notions of subjectivity within the genre ... but [that Fraser was] among those who found herself unworkably constrained” it still presents a dilemma within the lyric genre (55). Lyric is a traditionally masculine form with a history of benefitting those with privileges granted by patriarchy. The word lyric itself comes from the lyre, and it was said in ancient Greek mythology that Hermes created the instrument for Apollo, God of music, poetry, art, and of course the sun. Complicating the image of the lyric form and Apollo himself, one of the most well known tales surrounding the God is his punishment of Cassandra for rejecting his advances. When his attempt to seduce her fails, he turns his promised gift of prophecy into a curse: while she will truly see the future, no one will believe her. This story is a poignant moment in Greek mythology in which people can still see relevance. Women through western history are rarely believed over the word of a man; their place, after all, was to be silent at the side of their husband or father. Beyond that, the origin itself is just the story of a man punishing a woman for not having sex with him. The form of lyrical poetry is born out of a myth that casts women down.

It is also no secret that the Romantics did just what Keller claims. The poetry of the most famous Romantics, Keats, Byron and Shelley, all “identify [women] with nature and frame her in terms of the male gaze.” The woman in later Romantic poetry is not truly a person at all, but rather a figure of representation – a portrait, an idea, a symbol. But even though the form is masculine, it ought not to render it inaccessible or



constraining for female writers. That Fraser chose to write in it should not be discredited or seen as less good or less relevant than her later experimental work. That her pillow-like legs “dance” as they wrap around the “sinewy” dark legs of her male lover should not automatically be questioned unless critics intend to sketch out schematics of all couplings in poetry, if only to figure out whether the woman is taking a “dominate” role in bed. This is important because sex is not far from any of these Persephone poems, and it is one of the overarching issues within the subject of hyper-consent, sexual autonomy, and pleasure. For all that Keller is right about unraveling lyric poetry, Fraser’s work, “Poem in Which My Legs are Accepted” is not simply “performing socially approved gender roles” as she claims. Fraser’s poem is about a woman receiving cunnilingus; it is she that “welcomes him joyfully” (Keller 54). If anyone has been made the ideal figure in this poem, it is the silent masculine presence that attends to her dutifully and gives her as much pleasure as she gives to him. Keller may have overlooked this aspect of the poem due to the way Fraser describes her legs at one point as “a pillow / white and plentiful with feathers for his wild head” (48-49). But, his head is not “resting,” and the imagery suggests that her legs are “pillow-like” in their plumpness (“strong, / plump, / never to be skinny”) rather than a passive object to be used (11-13). More importantly, the perspective or “gaze” in this poem is not masculine nor is it for a masculine audience. Fraser is not writing her experience for anyone to grant her legitimacy in her feelings; she is not setting the record straight, nor is she performing. Fraser is simply celebrating her body.

Gillian White argues for lyric poetry and defends authors against criticisms where they simply cannot win. In her book, *Lyric Shame*, she champions poets like Elizabeth

Bishop against readings that render their work, as a too-controlled “repression of the desire” – or in White’s words, shame (44). At the same time, fellow poet Anne Sexton was criticized for wanting to publish their works as they were seen by John Holmes, her mentor, as “very selfish—all a forcing others to listen to you, and given nothing to the listeners.” He added, “It bothers me that you use poetry this way. It’s all release for you, but what it is for anybody else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release?” (White 101). Lyric poetry, whether it is a confessional work or not, will always be a place of instability for women writers. They are criticized at every turn – for “repressing” desire or making a “spectacle” of it, for operating in a traditionally masculine genre and then for either subverting (thus, not true lyric poetry) or maintaining the status quo (thus subscribing to the patriarchy). Likewise, a critic faces the double bind of piecing apart such literature without trying to cast women’s voices as inauthentic. I do not seek to lump these Persephone writers in one category or another. The form in which they write in is valid always because it has to be; placing some sort of “gender lock” on lyrical poetry is antifeminist as it ultimately reestablishes the form as a male genre that women should not write in, and do not have the capacity to understand. For as good as the intentions of men like Steve Evans are, who hold onto the hope that women writers will have a space where “phallic privilege” will not be at the forefront of the genre, it is futile to resist traditional forms that women are already writing in and doing brilliantly with. We must, on some level, accept the Romantic and lyric style for what it is: a form that was championed by men only because they had the privilege to do so. Women who write within that style now are not trying to fit within a club for men – they are instead celebrating poetics in the way that they choose. Is there anything more feminist than reshaping something that has

previously been prohibited to women? And it is not the Romantic or the lyric that proves troublesome in some of these poems, but the content, which is often intentionally political, that makes up them. If there is any unique problem to be found within using this traditional style, it is when poets turn to the form in the context of sexual violence and rape. As lyric is a product of patriarchal cultures, anything written to blatantly and loudly confront the patriarchy wields less of an impact. A good poet can manage the feat, but the content will suffer from relying on tradition rather than subverting it – and by roughly grappling with sexual violence in such a way, the author is inadvertently writing for a male audience rather than a female one.

### **PRESENT DAY PROBLEMS**

It is no wonder that modern Persephone would become the poster child for the downtrodden woman. The most common version of her story says she is unfairly kidnapped, brought down to Hades' realm, and tricked into staying there by eating pomegranate seeds. Somewhere between her subsequent retrieval and six months of winter, Persephone becomes Hades' bride. In that grey area, rape is assumed to play a key role. If she was abducted and forced to stay, then ultimately became his bride as a result, would rape not play a factor? Greeks were not well-known for giving women autonomy, who were often viewed as the property of men. Mythology centering on Zeus featured him tricking and outright raping several women, thus sparking a catastrophic series of events wherever his libido took him. This was his right as both a man and the leader of the Gods, and little other reason was given to his actions beyond seeing a beautiful woman and wanting her. Even more troublesome are how these women were turned against by their surrounding cast mates. Callisto, one of Artemis' maidens, is

raped by Zeus and loses Artemis' favor for it. In the end, she finds herself among the stars -- the only place she finds peace from persecution. However, contemporary poets are not writing about Callisto or Leda (another woman raped by Zeus). The focus largely remains on Persephone and the shadowy figure of Hades. Perhaps their relationship resonates strongly with those who believe it to be one of the oldest human trafficking stories.

Dubbed “modern slavery” by the United Nations, human trafficking has become synonymous with rape in the past decade. According to published findings in *A Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* in 2014, over 79% of women forced into slavery are the victims of sexual exploitation (UNDOC 40). This staggering statistic compares to only 8% of male victims forced into similar sexual exploitation. This may be why new creative accounts of Persephone's abduction myth, especially when resurging back into the forefront of our collective conscience, continue to wrestle with the implication of rape. Any socially and politically aware person cannot escape the knowledge that worldwide, human trafficking generates billions of dollars in revenue each year. They cannot escape the knowledge that these statistics, coupled with the report that one in six women have been the victim of rape or an attempted rape, place our culture in a moment of panic regarding women, consent, and autonomy. Posters scattered across university campuses shout neon slogans about how “cool” consent is. Bloggers on the internet dissect their favorite show frame by frame in a heated discussion about whether *real* consent was given during a sex scene, or if it was a blatant celebration of rape. Women, rejecting the notion that their short skirts and high heels had them “asking for it,” protest with signs embracing the title of *slut*. In our state of sexual anxiety, the figure of

Persephone has become the metaphorical rope for people to play tug-of-war with. At one end of the spectrum, she is the heroine fighting back after being raped – and to the other far extreme, she is the sex-positive role model embracing her choice. Both of these choices, in their desire to wedge a figure of ancient myth into one politically charged, black and white slot, are deeply flawed.

### “ASKING FOR IT” NARRATIVES <sup>1</sup>

In her poem *Persephone, Falling*, Rita Rove uses the myth to voice anger and thinly veiled disgust over the way victims are still blamed for sexual assault. In the first stanza, the narrative focuses on the way Persephone had wandered alone into a field to pick flowers – only for Hades to “[claim] his due” (Rove 6). Sardonicly, the narrator exclaims, “No one heard her. / No one! She had strayed from the herd” (Rove 7, 8). The message is that the standout woman, the exceptional woman, can be a victim with which we sympathize. Persephone here “strays” from the crowd, which in Western culture has been constructed into a predominantly positive thing. Movies and novels alike feature unique female characters that are somehow “not like everyone else.” Through this distancing from other women, they are somehow elevated and more respected. That is the move Rove is making with her poem, but rather than being subversive, Persephone here upholds traditional norms. These lines play into the next stanza where the narrator takes a quiet, chastising voice through the use of parenthesis:

(Remember: go straight to school.

This is important, stop fooling around!

Don't answer to strangers. Stick

With your playmates. Keep your eyes down). (Rove 9-12)

Rove embraces the myth of Persephone as the ancient telling of a modern problem: woman steps out of line, wanders too far from the streetlights, and is raped for it. Her vision of Persephone is not an uncommon one, where the Goddess is violently raped after allegedly straying too far from her Nymph maidens. Hades, in his supposedly unrestrained lust for this girl, breaks through the earth and snatches her for himself. That Zeus practically gave away his daughter to him is not mentioned or discussed, just like Callisto and Leda. Those unsavory details would complicate the character of Persephone and clash with the way she is constructed into a victim. When we think of innocent maidens and cruel, villainous men, we envision girls snatched from their serene garden, only to be tied to railroad tracks. She is there to be the bait of some off-screen masculine hero, and any thoughts, feelings, or actions that render her beyond the spectrum of wilting, goodly woman are simply nonexistent. But, that is not a figure that anyone can truly relate to – that is a trope and tropes are not doing subversive work. They are patterns of representations in narratives, and the more they are used the less complex they become. In the case of Rove's poem, perhaps it is simply more compelling for her to exemplify a virginal maiden as a martyr, rather than a married woman like Leda. If we focus on Persephone only as a thing in which violence is acted upon, then like the young girl tied to railroad tracks, there is no need to dwell on her after setting aside the poem.

Rove's poem likely would not have had the same impact had she put the heroine in a compromising position. Unlike Persephone, Zeus approached Europa in disguise as a great white bull. So enamored with him, she put herself on his back and wandered off – and whether she desires Zeus or is raped remains entirely unclear. That level of autonomy, despite its obscured quality, is not even present in this poem. Persephone does

not even make a single decision for herself beyond stooping down to pick a flower. Rove intends to use this portrait of Persephone to criticize how young girls are brought up, but her message is muddled. Persephone allegedly has “one foot sink[ing] into the ground” though she has not actually done anything that warrants concern (Rove 14). Persephone cannot be compared to the culture around sexual shame and “asking” to be raped when there are no strong comparisons to draw to modern women and girls who are blamed for their assault. She is not Europa stroking the hide of the white bull with unchecked fascination. She is not strolling along the outskirts of a battlefield filled with men. She does nothing more than stoop down and pick a flower – yet Rove equates this to a woman’s right to feel safe when wandering home late at night. Unfortunately, Rove’s message here does not say anything new and instead presents the most normalized version of discourse surrounding the subject. While anger is always refreshing, the complexities of sexual assault, of victim blaming in which the one assaulted internalizes that burden of guilt, of abduction and human trafficking, are simply not in play within the poem’s content.

One reason that Rove’s *Persephone, Falling* falls short in the context of sexual assault and sexual autonomy is that it is a decidedly de-sexed poem. Persephone does not read as virginal, which would allude to an autonomous and masturbatory sexual drive, but rather wholly asexual and lacking one altogether. The only hint of sex – through rape – comes from Hades and the line that he “claimed his due / It is finished” (Rove 6, 7). By alluding to rape through “plucking” her virginity as Persephone “plucks” the flower from the field, Rove reinforces the power of sexual “purity.” Persephone becomes a “finished” woman because she is raped, making her virginity equal to her very own life. By being

“plucked” and “finished” by Hades, one can only assume that Persephone wilts afterwards in her ruination. Beyond this precarious assertion, it is a suspicious move on Rove’s part to make her central figure a maiden that does not speak or act with any independent agency. Instead of making Persephone a figure of action, as second and third wave feminism have done with female characters, Persephone is more like a product of a cautionary tale. Instead of subverting these tales through highlighting the problem of blaming women (as Rove tries to do), she instead undermines her own efforts by speaking solely for de-sexed women, thereby leaving the gendered binary (and all the stigma associated with it) intact.

It may not be enough to lean on feminism when unraveling different complications found in politically charged literature, such as the content found within Persephone narratives. By intersecting queer theory with feminism, we might be able to uncover why the current discourse of rape / consent is both so prevailing in our every day life, and yet so stilted. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner discusses the problem of a heteronormative queer movement. Though his work revolves around gay identity and sexuality, his critique of LGBT people attempting to “mature” with the movement lends itself to feminism and female sexuality as well. Speaking on an emerging ambivalence of identity, Warner states that leaders in the gay and lesbian movement “continue to be defensive about sex and sexual variance” and that they have “increasingly called for ‘new maturity,’ beyond mere sex” (45). The shift from a queer libertine community in the 1970s to a rigid and heteronormal modern conception is not unlike the shift in feminism. Towards the end of second-wave feminism, the sex wars emerged from debates centering on sex positivity and anti-porn movements. As a result,



the feminist movement became divided over the role of sex and a woman's sexual agency – causing anti-porn feminists to become more critical of pornography, sex workers, and libertine-like women who could be potentially preyed upon by men. Though the heart of the movement still concerns itself over patriarchy, reproductive rights, sexual assault and sexual autonomy, the way it presents itself (and conflicts with itself) is telling – and plays out through the examples in Persephone poetry.

Rove's poem represents what Warner warns against: a de-sexed, heteronormative, supposedly dignified movement where staying within the confines of appropriate culture will warrant rights in time. Warner's assertion that America is a "sex-obsessed, sex-phobic" culture is accurate and not only amongst gay communities (17). He points out that "women and gay people have been especially vulnerable to the shaming effects of isolation. [...] It seldom occurs to anyone that the dominant culture and its family environment should be held accountable for creating the inequalities of access and recognition that produce this sense of shame in the first place" (Warner 8). Rove misses the opportunity to really connect to readers and instead regurgitates the critique of teaching women and young girls to behave themselves. Rather than grab at the heart of the effects of rape – of these "shaming effects of isolation" a victim may face, or the way inequalities can validate one person's trauma while denying another's – her poem is the assertion that this is only a real problem for good girls that become victims at the hands of men. It is unlikely that she would have wrote this poem if her subject was more like Europa, getting tricked into following Zeus, or if her subject was male and shamed into silence, or if Persephone was a trans woman of color – who face violence at an inflated rate compared to any other group. For Rove, obsession and phobia over sex is simply an

extension of sexual panic. Human trafficking, rampant sexual assault, statistics of abortion and statistics of teen pregnancy are at the forefront of society's collective mind. Her two-stanza poem, intended to be a scathing critique of rape culture, reads more like a continuation of this moralistic dialogue. This is not a problem easily fixed by merely complicating rape or providing more representation. Persephone mirrors our own cultural trend of placing women who have suffered any trauma, change, or dubious event on a scale that ranks "one to rape." Her abduction becomes both synonymous with rape and also meaningless – as though abduction is only a concern when rape has been committed.

### **PERSEPHONE ASCENDANT**

Who wrote Persephone as a rape victim? Though the exact answer is impossible to find, it is wholly relevant when examining the representation of the character. Louise Anagnoson argues that, "Myths are the greatest gifts humans ever receive or create" and that they "have the capability to speak from the soul (14). This is why even today they are relevant to us, and the source of such controversy and debate. Anagnoson goes on to quote Ginette Paris, author of *Pagan Grace*, stating that myths are a "fundamental tale outside of time which tells about something which happened once, is happening now, and will repeat itself always different and always the same" (15). Our experiences have similar patterns throughout the history of humanity, but our politics and ways of interpreting those experiences are not. In our modern mind, it is almost impossible to reconcile Persephone's rape origin story as anything more than a celebration of silencing victims. Elizabeth Stanko points out that in intimate relationships, "rape and battering in particular – reported cases are far fewer than estimates of incidence. Silence about intimate assault... remains the norm" (25). Erin Royden Zimmerman believes the

“relationship between myth and contemporary concerns [make] the adaptation of these myths all the more delicate as a process” (1). She states:

[...] in adaptation, writers’ responsibilities become more complex. They must be aware of the commonly accepted metanarrative of a given text, often revealed by the repetition of certain themes across adaptations. They must also be aware of the metanarrative co-created by the author’s personal response to the text, essentially their contribution to the story’s discourse. ... Only then can a writer fully understand their intentions with the adaptation. ... To adapt any narrative, particularly one with a lengthy history as a classical Greek myth, is both a creative and political act. A political stance or at least lens must be chosen in order to address the text. (Zimmerman 2)

To give classical myth a lens and treat that lens as the “canon” or most authentic story, however, is disingenuous. Political stances and the lens in which to interpret it change over the course of years, decades and centuries. But Persephone’s myth continues to not sit well with many, including those that go to lengths to rewrite the myth into a narrative of consent. For Zimmerman, changing her rape to a consensual act is trying to untangle the politics from the text, which is not only problematic but also offensive to modern day rape survivors. Using Kathryn Ryan to support her argument, she states “rape myths ... are influential in the construction of sexual scripts and can create false ideas that cast rape as either erotic or inconsequential” (Zimmerman 2).

Zimmerman’s move to take an old myth and qualify it with modern culture is not uncommon. Every written text should absolutely be subject to ongoing dialogues and discourses. However, her assertion that “rape myths produce narratives [of] story rape

and post-rape experience in damaging ways for survivors and potential victims” might be a product of current debate (Zimmerman 2). In our quest to trace which representations are vitally important and which are harmful, many have taken a closer look at the way gendered violence is depicted throughout all forms of media. It is not difficult to find video games or films where a protagonist is subtly encouraged to rape or abuse women. This type of normalizing – or rape culture as it is commonly called – is often identified as the cause for western society’s staggering statistics of gendered violence. Representations are important, but we cannot equate ancient myth from another culture to our very own, just as we cannot equate foreign practices with our own and exalt or castigate them based on our western-centric belief. To compare modern problems and the age of consent we live in, with mythos that are working in a completely separate context, is unfair. If our culture truly believed that rape myths still (or ever) made people want to go rape people, then there would be more literature written about Callisto and Leda.

This becomes more questionable because our Persephone narrative is an inaccurate representation of Greek mythology, which harkens back to the question: who wrote Persephone as a rape victim? In the earliest versions of the mythos, which includes the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, there is no actual mention of rape whatsoever. The 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Homeric hymns merely call it the “abduction” of Persephone. In part three entitled *The Return of Persephone*, the Homeric hymn even states: “Now when all-seeing Zeus the loud-thunderer heard this, he sent Argeiphontes [Hermes] whose wand is of gold to Erebus [Hades], so that having won over Aides [Hades] with soft words, he might lead forth chaste Persephoneia to the light from the misty gloom to join the gods” (“Haides

Abducts Persephone: The Return of Persephone”). Hades then agrees, but leaves Persephone with these parting words:

“Go now, Persephoneia, to your dark-robed mother, go, and feel kindly in your heart towards me: be not so exceedingly cast down; for I shall be no unfitting husband for you among the deathless gods, that am own brother to father Zeus. And while you are here, you shall rule all that lives and moves and shall have the greatest rights among the deathless gods: those who defraud you and do not appease your power with offerings, reverently performing rites and paying fit gifts, shall be punished for evermore” (“Hades Abducts Persephone: The Return of Persephone”).

For some unstated reason (or perhaps a fragmented translation), Persephone who had already eaten pomegranate seeds of her own volition, tells her mother that he had placed them in her mouth. She already knows by Hades’ confession that should she accept him, she will be his wife and Queen of the Underworld. There is no rape mentioned whatsoever – just a blatant abduction and an admittedly awkward courtship. More importantly, this is an exchange of power between the two gods. While there may be trauma associated with the abduction that we do not see through this text, Hades gives Persephone the power to “punish” those who “defraud” and “do not appease” her; if she held nothing but contempt for him, would she not unleash said power onto him in turn? There is plenty of evidence that it would have been within her power to do so.

This origin myth plays directly into subsequent stories surrounding Persephone that see her as an empowered ruler in the Underworld. From the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., she is most commonly referred to as “Dread Persephone” and “Dread Empress.” Homer

himself in *The Odyssey* writes, “You must visit the house of dread Persephone and of Hades, and there seek council...” (*Odyssey* 10. 495). She inspired fear more than Hades ever could, as her revenge was swift and just. She was practiced in the art of necromancy and presided over the oracles of the dead (“Persephone Goddess”). In *The Iliad*, Persephone punishes crimes of betrayal and murder through the use of the Erinyes, otherwise known as the Furies. The prominence of the Eleusinian Mysteries (otherwise known as massive cult rituals) speaks to her importance among Greek people, as well. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, her mother Demeter was revered for her domain over the harvest, while Persephone was revered for her domain over the dead. Supposedly worshipping Persephone and learning her secrets could secure a better afterlife than swimming along the dreary River Styx for all eternity. In short, Persephone was powerful, foreboding, and ruled the Underworld just as Hades had promised her.

The sudden change from dreaded Queen and Goddess to victim raises alarming questions, though. Why did she become a victim of rape by the end of the first century B.C., and why was her myth more commonly known as “The Rape of Persephone?” These questions are better left to historians who may be able to trace the trends and shifts in discourses in Greek culture at the time. Whatever the case, Persephone was not originally a victim of rape and to criticize writers for working against that narrative as Zimmerman does is unfortunately reasserting her own stance. She argues for a more careful retelling of myths that keeps true to the political origins of the work, but by stressing the rape of Persephone she is dismissing a more impactful origin. Persephone at her conception was not the celebration of rape and a man’s power over a woman; she was the triumph of strength, wit, and power.

## MICHEL FOUCAULT & STRUGGLING WITH A DUBIOUS ORIGIN

Despite being a formidable Goddess and dreaded Queen of the Underworld, Persephone remains a figure torn between desexualizing hysteria and hypersexual prowess. When discussing her myth as a rape narrative, there can be no middle ground. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Michel Foucault discusses the degenerative effects of identification and naming. He writes:

... we have arrived at the point where we expect our intelligibility to come from what was for many centuries thought of as madness; the plentitude of our body from what was long considered its stigma and likened to a wound; our identity from what was perceived as an obscure and nameless urge. Hence the importance we ascribe to it, the reverential fear with which we surround it, the care we take to know it. Hence the fact that over the centuries it has become more important than our soul, more important than our life (Foucault 156).

Foucault uses the invention of the homosexual in the late nineteenth century to criticize the obsession western society has over identity and naming. Once something is given a name, it takes on a life larger than itself – and it cannot simply be unsaid. The importance, reverential fear, and care used with the title become critical to its meaning. It signifies so much more than a sex act; it signifies physical and mental presence that was once never attached to sodomy. This criticism is not unique to sexual identity, however. The identity of rape victim encounters many of the same problems. Critics voice concern over the modern-day rape victim and insist there is much more at stake than simply naming or rewriting an ancient myth. Many find that politics can never be separated out from narrative, and when something is represented and said, it cannot be unsaid, nor can

the potential damage or fallout be undone. But, this is not merely a Foucauldian argument about the nature of power struggles and power relations. The concern ascribed to the rape victim is much like the concern people ascribe to the homosexual; as Foucault states, “it has become more important than our soul, more important than our life” (156). To ignore Persephone’s rape would not only be an implicit act of endorsing rape, it would be an act of rape-erasure that further victimizes people.

Sexual assault is abhorrent and unquestionably a product of culture, but it is suspicious that we have come to a point in time where the identity of rape victim, or rape survivor, is absolutely needed. Perhaps the desire for identification comes from a history of shaming the victim. In many cultures across time, raping a woman is either seen as a violent act against the husband or father, or a way of staking a claim. It is very possible that to be a “rape-survivor” is born out of a need to feel accepted and empowered. However, there is a glaring problem not unlike the use of homosexual: “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault 43). Surviving sexual assault and rape has turned into *being* a survivor of rape. It is no longer just an event of deep physical and psychological trauma, but a fact of ourselves, something written beneath our names along with our astrological sign and, though Foucault laments it, sexuality. The identity of rape-survivor has become commoditized into something that can be slapped onto bumper stickers and twenty-dollar t-shirts. “This is what a Survivor looks like,” one hoodie reads on [cafepress.com](http://cafepress.com). “Rapists don’t come with WARNING signs...” another bumper sticker reads – and though they certainly do not wear t-shirts that broadcast their identity as a rapist, the people they assaulted now certainly do.



The problem with respecting the rape origin of Persephone's story is that she was not originally written as a victim of rape, and the identity of "rape victims" (rather than just a person raped or assaulted) is a modern invention. As seen, it took eight centuries to change the story to one of rape. Like the invention of the homosexual in the nineteenth century, what was stated and create cannot be undone; if the identity of rape victim has been attributed to Persephone, which it most certainly has been over centuries, then it cannot be completely erased. No matter how hard one tries to rewrite Persephone as having consented, they are ultimately remaining in struggle with the rape narrative and prescribing to it. Foucault points out "where there is power ... resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. [...] Instead, there is a plurality of resistances" (96). It is not that writing Persephone as a consenting woman is a futile effort. It is absolutely an act of resistance from the way she is otherwise represented. Whether an overeager Hades snatches her, or she consents by "jumping" into the hole in the ground, these poets are still writing for one particular origin story that, as a metanarrative, would label Persephone as having been raped.

Fortunately, this is not the only way to read the character of Persephone and her origin in the Underworld. In her essay, "Seduction and Rape in Greek Myth," Mary R. Lefkowitz ascribes the language of abduction (and subsequent eating of the pomegranate) to an "act of ritual magic, rather than a euphemism for sexual intercourse" (31). Further, she asserts that the translation of the Greek myth does not equate to violent rape and Persephone's dreadful existence, but rather a sudden loss of her mother and subsequently, the transformation into a silent and aloof figure. This silence is particularly interesting when one examines the way Foucault denounces confession as truth. If confession and

“inner truth” are not authentic as real human experience (and perhaps nothing is authentic at all), then can Persephone’s silence truly be taken as the silence of a victim? It is more likely that our modern notions of rape, patriarchy and forced-silence have rendered Persephone’s behavior as not an act of strength, but as something she has been strong-armed into. Anagnoson illustrates the discrepancies in Persephone’s own version of the tale – that it is fleeting, short on details, and ultimately does not add up. In her words: “Persephone is silence” (Anagnoson 93). It is very possible that we are not meant to understand the motivations and decisions Persephone makes; she is, after all, a Goddess, and we the readers are merely mortals.

### **INSISTING CONSENT**

It is not necessarily wrong that writers with such a strong desire to resist the rape origin turn into one of blatant and outspoken consent. In their pursuit of creating a sex-positive, empowered Persephone, contemporary poets Nan Fry and Jeannine Hall Gailey each write works that feature the character admitting to her relationship with Hades in first person. Yet, their need to “confess” their consent and sexual relationship with Hades is still laced with deeper complications. Beyond staying inside the metanarrative of the rape origin, the desire to confess is merely a desire to authenticate oneself – and in this case, authenticate the story of Persephone:

The obligation to confess is [...] so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power

weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. (Foucault 60)

Confessing her sexuality in the context of the poem and myth does not liberate her from an overbearing mother or society's tightly held belief about what happened. By writing Persephone's first-hand account of the story, she is merely operating in a "ritual of discourse" (Foucault 61). It is not a bold assertion of her free sexuality; it is a move that keeps her within the power relationship with rape. One cannot "confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a [...] authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile" (Foucault 61, 62). In the case of these confessional poems where Persephone consents, she is confessing to the reader of the text. It is then up to us as an audience to validate her confession as authentic, to judge it as rape or consensual, and to deem it worthy as a "real" relationship. They do not escape or step outside rape discourse, or the struggle over defining what equals acceptable sexual behavior. Confession is not liberation, and Persephone is not being unshackled by enthusiastically recounting her sex life to us.

### **FROM PERSEPHONE'S LETTERS TO DEMETER <sup>2</sup>**

Nan Fry's Persephone quickly attempts to subvert the story of sex being forced upon her by erotically admitting to her relationship with Hades. Her confession comes in the form of a letter written to her mother, Demeter. With a cool, self-satisfied voice, Persephone confrontationally writes, "You've got it all wrong, Mother / flaunting your grief" over her own alleged kidnapping and rape (Fry 1, 2). By "flaunting her grief," Demeter is no longer a despondent, inconsolable mother, but a woman seeking comfort

and attention in the public eye. Demeter is a celebrity posing for the tabloids, or a local mother getting her fifteen minutes of fame on Fox News. She “flaunts” rather than the origin myth where she actively seeks vengeance and retribution for her daughter by forcing the world into a deep winter. Here, Demeter is likened to something false and fake, while Persephone’s account is supposed to be truth. Demeter is a public, fabricated entity while Persephone is the private, “real” one. Yet, if Persephone has to confess in the form of letter to her mother, it cannot truly be taken as an act of privacy. She is engaging in a public spectacle the same as her “flaunting” mother, and though Demeter showcases her grief, Persephone absolutely displays her sexuality. The binary here is a classic representation of “Madonna / whore” that unfortunately pits the two against one another rather than angrily addressing the society that would cast them in such roles.

Her sexuality is not just stated as fact, either. She uses erotically electric vocabulary to expose her sex life with Hades. In the second stanza, she insists she’s “learning new words / like *pomegranate*, / a word you can suck on” (Fry 9-12). Though the pomegranate is supposed to be symbolic of her courtship and stay with Hades in the Underworld, here it signifies something else. Pomegranate becomes a word charged with phallic meaning, and by “learning” to “suck on” it, she is alluding to learning new sexual experiences with Hades. He becomes her teacher, but while the shape of the pomegranate, a symbol of fertility, would better symbolize her breasts or genitalia, it instead becomes the stand-in for his penis. Hades is instructing her on how to perform oral sex for himself. This is further highlighted by the following lines:

*pom*—thick and round, a bittersweet  
bulge, *e*—the one you slide over

to get to *gran*—a slow swelling,  
 cancer or the rose, it doesn't matter,  
 then *granate*—a stone stopping  
 you hard and cold (Fry 13-18).

The “thick and round... / bulge” combined with the “slow swelling” of the word absolutely stands in for male genitalia. She “slides” over it as she takes the word in little-by-little until she gets to the “root” of the word, where she must stop “hard and cold.” This becomes Persephone’s sexual liberation as she verbally fellates the word pomegranate in her letter, but ironically it does not speak of her pleasure. It is centered around Hades’ pleasure first and foremost. While she could absolutely take apart the *feeling* of the word pomegranate through his oral ministrations, she does not. He is not servicing her with sex, which makes her need to confess her pleasure even more suspect. It begs the question why she needs to write home about how happy she is giving blowjobs all day in the Underworld. Further destabilizing Persephone’s autonomy is the way the poem reads for a male gaze rather than a female one. She is servicing a man both literally and metaphorically through the lyrical form and phallic content.

It is hard to buy Persephone as a sexually liberated woman when she must authenticate her experiences to an audience. There is no symbolic statement of her own orgasm or anything approaching it. Later in section three, Persephone speaks of taking apart the word “return,” but it has less to do with her sexual drive and more to do with her own fertility. While “*Re* is a reel pulling [her] back... *Turn* / is the worm biting, / smooth swell of the belly / the detour that brings [her] home” (Fry 38-43). The “smooth swell of her belly” is likened to returning home to Hades, which suggests filling a spouse’s

obligation to reproduce for her partner. The fact that we see his pleasure through her attention, her fertile drive, and her public display of what is otherwise a completely heteronormalized relationship does not actually make this poem subversive of gender roles in the slightest. It is merely trying to rewrite the rape version of Persephone's myth by insisting she enjoys her stay in the Underworld. Fry is trying to recreate Persephone's origin, but continues to struggle with the rape discourse.

### **PERSEPHONE AND THE PRINCE MEET OVER DRINKS** <sup>3</sup>

*Persephone and the Prince Meet Over Drinks* by Jeannine Hall Gailey is another first person account of the myth. Persephone speaks to an audience about her modern meeting with the God of the Underworld, and once more tries to shake free from the abduction and rape narrative. However, in Gailey's poem Persephone is dramatically infantilized. In the opening line, she admits, "At first I thought, Daddy?" which harkens back to the original myth where Hades is the brother of Zeus, her father (Gailey 1). The physical similarity between her father and this "ravishing" stranger catches her attention immediately. Further stressing this pseudo-incestuous attraction comes in the way he "treats [her] like a grown up" and buys her drinks (Gailey 8). Although it is implied Persephone is young, it is not outright stated she is underage and that the relationship is pedophilic in nature. Rather, their mutual attraction depends upon their stark age differences. Her youth and eagerness to call him "daddy" suggests she is taking on a subordinate role, contrasting his authoritative, patriarchal presence in the poem. While that is not outright problematic, especially in a sexual relationship where dynamics are often free and unyielding to social norms, he then begins to ply her with drinks. At one point, as she sips upon her pomegranate cocktails, she loses track of how much alcohol

she actually consumes. Persephone wonders to herself, “How many is this? Four? Five? Six?” (Gailey 11). Six pomegranate drinks directly references the amount of seeds that forced her to stay in the Underworld, yet there is an unspoken darker connotation. Having more drinks in her system as a much older man “[treats] her like a grown-up” does not subvert rape – it nearly outright implies it. Her agency in this poem is subject to question even when she insists, “I knew what I was doing. / I was prepared for a long dance with death” (Gailey 17, 18). Her consent has become destabilized by her own inability to track her alcohol and distinguish Hades from her father. However, it is possible Gailey’s wished to directly address the conflicting themes within Persephone’s myth. Alcohol, with its debilitating effects, can cloud one’s judgment, making it impossible to make a clear decision. Date rape often relies on intoxicated partners, either through drugs or alcohol, who lack the ability to say no. Thus, consent is not actually established, and *Persephone and the Prince Meet Over Drinks* continues a traditional rape narrative.

#### **A MYTH OF INNOCENCE** <sup>4</sup>

There is no way to establish a first-hand consensual account for Persephone without entering a discourse on what it means to re-write rape. Confession is a compulsion and it does not automatically authenticate experience. A Persephone that moans with joy and lustfully screams, “I consent, I consent, I consent!” does not shake the story of her rape from the back of our mind. It does not step outside that narrative, but only continues to struggle with it over and over again. Yet, writing a different take on the myth is not a futile effort altogether. There are ways to step outside the rape discourse without struggling with it. If confession cannot truly bring truth to the story, then there is no need for Persephone to give her take on what happened.

Louise Glück's *A Myth of Innocence* is not Persephone's strong insistence that she consented to being pulled into the Underworld and into her husband's arms. Rather, it is a complicated tale that lacks a final answer. Persephone cannot put a word to her feelings and what it means to be taken; she understands that her life exists in a haze of grey, and this, too, is an extension of that. Keeping with the beginning of the myth, Persephone "goes into the field as usual," but this time it is not to mindlessly pick flowers. Instead, she stops at a pool of water to view herself and "see / if she detects any changes" (Glück 1,3). Her discomfort soon becomes palpable as she looks at herself, not unlike any young person staring at themselves in the mirror and pointing out their own flaws. For Persephone, the "horrible mantle / of daughterliness still clinging to her" that she dreads seeing the most. Demeter stripped the world bare to get Persephone back from Hades -- it was Demeter's demand that made it happen, not Persephone's decision to return (Glück 5, 6). Her "daughterliness... clinging to her" means that she is eternally treated as a youth that cannot make choices for herself. Persephone wants to be seen as her own person, and not an extension of her mother without any autonomy.

Made worse is the realization that her uncle, Zeus, is watching her. The male gaze is not wholly removed from this poem; in fact, here it presents a moment of total alarm. In Greek mythology, Zeus often raped women and slept with relatives, forcing them to bear his children. To be watched closely by Zeus is to be an eventual target to his cruel lust. Yet, Persephone's behavior is not constructed for a male audience, and she does not make that connection. Instead, she laments that, "everything in nature is some way her relative" (Glück 8). She is not only the prize of Demeter, but also connected to every other God of Olympus – and even Zeus desires to stake his claim to her. It is the final



straw for her, and Persephone thinks/prays, “I am never alone,” right before Hades appears, “like the answer to a prayer” (Glück 9, 10, 11). Her reaction is not fear, nor is it the sudden insistence that he take her immediately. She does not throw herself face first into the gaping chasm without thought. Instead, Persephone quietly reflects that “no one understands anymore / how beautiful he was,” but that she knew and remembered (Glück 13, 14). Although it is only a snapshot thought, the line is a tendril of her desire blooming deep within her. As if temporarily outside her own skin, not being watched by everything in nature that feels authority over her, Persephone can admit desire to herself. In those final moments, as Hades takes her into his arms, she knows that Zeus still continues to watch. Whether or not Hades is saving her from being at the mercy of Zeus is left unsaid -- his motivations are just as unclear as whether or not she prayed for him.

Leaving the poem there might read as the character insisting her consent to the abduction, but the rest of the poem radically destabilizes Persephone’s certainty. As she is brought down into the darkness of the Underworld, her memory begins to slip into a grey area. The one that holds strongest is “the chilling insight that from this moment / she couldn’t live without him again” (Glück 22, 23). That single tendril of Persephone’s desire, formerly locked away in some dark place, blossoms into something thorny and consuming. She experiences a death of her former self; the girl that “daughterliness” clings to is no more, whether because she has had sex or a deep revelation goes unsaid. However, this is not even a wholly celebratory moment. While Persephone escapes the “mantle” of daughter, she earns another through her position as wife of Hades. It is unclear whether or not this is “good” or “bad” – but it does not have to be either.

Our literary heroines do not need to be sold in easy to market packages; she does not have to be strong or weak, sexual or chaste. She does not have to use a male's perspective that often renders her as these things, in order to be heard. She simply needs to be. Her experiences must be as complex and tremulous as her male counterparts. And most importantly, no matter what that experience is – whether she is traumatized, sexually autonomous, chaste, or anything else – the visceral content that makes up her story must be just as thought out as the eyes that frame the text. A writer cannot make groundbreaking feminist, queer, or inclusive work by continuing the tradition of inadvertently writing solely for men. Desire is not just present in this poem, but of the previous confessionals as well. Yet, desire is not the issue; rather the problem rests within a desire that has to be qualified for a voyeuristic audience.

Glück's work is so important because she does not seek to unravel the narrative into easily digestible bites. There is no sure answer to where morality rests within the poem and to whom it is written for. The latter half of the poem features Persephone standing once more at the pool of water once she has returned from the Underworld, thinking over and over whether or not she was truly abducted or whether she offered herself to Hades. All of it sounds wrong to her, because "ignorance / cannot will knowledge" and Persephone had no idea for what she was asking (Glück 33, 34). Yet, simply not knowing what she wanted does not outright reinforce a theme of rape. The poem, and Persephone's position, is far too complex for that. It does not seek to answer with certainty for the audience, because she cannot even answer for herself whether she had been kidnapped by Hades, or whether she had begged him to take her from Zeus' spying gaze. The poem ends:

She can't remember herself as that person  
 but she keeps thinking the pool will remember  
 and explain to her the meaning of her prayer  
 so she can understand  
 whether it was answered or not (Glück 41-45)

Somewhat ironically, Persephone seeks the answer from someone else – not unlike how poets attempt to answer the myth with their own writing and interpretation. To say she consented would not shake loose the thoughts of rape in someone's mind, and to say she did not consent outright “sounds / wrong to her, nothing like what she felt” (Glück 28, 29).

In a world of trigger warnings and consensual panic, society seeks black and white answers about how sex works. There are never grey areas, because grey areas threaten to jeopardize political movements. If someone were to admit their consent was dubious, it might destabilize discussions around what constitutes as rape, and what rights victims of rape have to prosecute their rapists. In queer and feminist movements, when libertine sex is celebrated, it looks like a direct assault on traditional marriage values, which can hinder political movements. Had Persephone given the reader a clean-cut answer, it would have unfortunately said nothing at all. Her silence here, her refusal to give us a yes or a no, is far stronger than any confession could ever be. Power rests within opacity, in not subscribing to the rules of current discourses that change daily based on the ebb and flow of our political climate. And it is that opacity that makes us uncomfortable *because* of rape. While we fight to not “blur” its lines, we are allowing the tools of rape discourse to bleed out into our every conversation, rendering them not as

complex topics that need to be carefully and consciously parsed out, but rather turned into black and white modes of thought. Opacity upsets the status quo because it will not aggressively take part in it. Our sexual anxiety is not soothed with a poem like *A Myth of Innocence*; it does not allow itself to pick sides or lean towards sex positivity or abuse awareness. It simply is. It simply “happened once, is happening now, and will repeat itself always different and always the same.”

## NOTES

1. *Persephone, Falling* by Rita Dove

One narcissus among the ordinary beautiful  
 flowers, one unlike all the others! She pulled,  
 stooped to pull harder—  
 when, sprung out of the earth  
 on his glittering terrible  
 carriage, he claimed his due.  
 It is finished. No one heard her.  
 No one! She had strayed from the herd.

(Remember: go straight to school.  
 This is important, stop fooling around!  
 Don't answer to strangers. Stick  
 with your playmates. Keep your eyes down.)

This is how easily the pit  
 opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground.

2. *From Persephone's Letters to Demeter* by Nan Fry

You've got it all wrong, Mother,  
 flaunting your grief,  
 stripping the sycamore  
 down to a ghost tree.  
 We revel in skeletons,  
 find the clean lines  
 sensuous and economical.  
 The dead sing us songs  
 I'm learning to answer.

I'm learning new words  
 like *pomegranate*,  
 a word you can suck on:  
*pom*—thick and round, a bittersweet  
 bulge, *e*—the one you slide over  
 to get to *gran*—a slow swelling,  
 cancer or the rose, it doesn't matter,  
 then *granate*—a stone stopping  
 you hard and cold.  
*Pomegranate*—a word you spit out,

the snick of seeds  
against your teeth.

2.

I remember planting, the small furrows.  
And the coat of rabbit pelts  
you wore. When I was small,  
I'd sit beside you and blow into the fur.

I remember dusk  
stitching the tulips shut  
and throngs of azaleas,  
their white throats  
open to the moon.

I remember the peach  
spattered with red,  
furred yellow sun,  
and all that juice  
let loose on my tongue,  
and the pit, its secret  
bloody mouth at the center.

3.

I want to learn the language of return.  
*Re* is a reel pulling me back,  
the hook in the mouth,  
the bud on the rose. *Turn*  
is the worm biting,  
smooth swell of the belly,  
the detour that brings us home.

I want the ice to melt,  
the slow dripping that feels like loss  
and is a loosening, a letting go.  
The sluggish floes will crack and heave,  
the river stretch like a snake in the sun.  
Then the floods of summer, the dense  
green banks, the sun pumping  
juice through the peach, the earth  
furred with a pelt of grain.

That dance you taught us—  
I'll learn its language in my body:  
lift and flail to beat the grain  
from the husk, remembering to save

some to return to you, remembering  
that I will return here, a seed.

3. *Persephone and the Prince Meet Over Drinks* by Jeannine Hall Gailey

At first I thought, Daddy?  
squinting in the shadows when I saw his face,  
alone at the bar.  
So many similarities to the picture  
Mother keeps on the mantel,  
that squared jaw, those cold grey eyes.

His ravishing grin drew me in,  
The way he treated me like a grown-up.  
He bought me cocktails, whispers  
of pomegranate in the bottom of the glass.  
(How many is this? Four? Five? Six?)  
I laughed and laughed, though he wasn't joking.

And so what if, at the end of this story,  
with a ring on my finger and a castle  
to boot, you find out that my prince  
is a prince of nothing but darkness?  
I knew what I was doing.  
I was prepared for a long dance with death.

4. *A Myth of Innocence* by Louise Glück

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 changes. She sees  
the same person, the horrible mantle  
of daughterliness still clinging to her.

The sun seems, in the water, very close.  
That's my uncle spying again, she thinks—  
everything in nature is in some way her relative.  
*I am never alone*, she thinks,  
turning the thought into a prayer.

Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer.

No one understands anymore  
 how beautiful he was. But Persephone remembers.  
 Also that he embraced her, right there,  
 with her uncle watching. She remembers  
 sunlight flashing on his bare arms.

This is the last moment she remembers clearly.  
 Then the dark god bore her away.

She also remembers, less clearly,  
 the chilling insight that from this moment  
 she couldn't live without him again.

The girl who disappears from the pool  
 will never return. A woman will return,  
 looking for the girl she was.

She 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*. Even, sometimes,  
*I willed this*. But ignorance

cannot will knowledge. Ignorance  
 wills something imagined, which it believes exists.

All the different nouns—  
 she says them in rotation.  
*Death, husband, god, stranger*.  
 Everything sounds so simple, so conventional.  
 I must have been, she thinks, a simple girl.

She can't remember herself as that person  
 but she keeps thinking the pool will remember  
 and explain to her the meaning of her prayer  
 so she can understand  
 whether it was answered or not.



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