

The Myth of Persephone:

Greek Goddess of the Underworld

Original Story and Interpretation by *Laura Strong, PhD*

It was a beautiful day like all the others in this land, the sun shone brightly in the sky, the hills were lush and green, and flowers blossomed from the earth. The lovely young maiden, Persephone, frolicked with her friends upon the hillside, as her mother Demeter sat near by, and her father Zeus peered down from the sky above. Laughter could be heard in between the young girls' whispered secrets, as they gathered handfuls of purple crocuses, royal blue irises and sweet-smelling hyacinths. Persephone thought to bring some to her mother, but was soon distracted by a vision of the most enchanting flower she had ever seen. It was a narcissus, the exact flower her father hoped that she would find. As she reached down to pluck it from its resting place, her feet began to tremble and the earth was split in two. Life for Persephone would never be the same again.

From this gaping crevice in the ground emerged the awe-inspiring God of the Underworld, Hades, and before Persephone could even think to utter a word, she was whisked off her feet onto the God's golden chariot. As the crack of the whip upon his majestic horses brought her to her senses, she realized she was about to be taken into the black depths from which he'd come. The thought of this brought terror to her heart, yet any screams of protest were soon lost within the darkness, as they descended quickly into the Underworld below.

While Persephone's cries could not be heard above the ground, the pain in Demeter's heart quickly alerted her to the fact that something was terribly wrong. She searched high and low for her dear daughter, who had vanished from both the heavens and the earth. Consumed by depression over the loss of her child, she soon ceased to remember her worldly duties as Goddess of Grain and Growth. As she watched the plants wither and die all around her, she felt her own hopes begin to fade as well.

At the same time, deep down in the realm of the dead, Hades hoped to explain his actions to the sweet Persephone. Professing his love, he told her of the plan her father helped deploy and begged her to stay and be his wife. Yet, Persephone longed for

something more, the comforts of her mother's home and a view of the lush green grass and blue sky up above.

Far above the darkness of the Underworld, her mother continued to wander the forlorn earth. Eventually she found her way to the town of Eleusis, where she rested by a flowing fountain. Stripped of all her vital energy, she appeared old and wrinkled beyond her years. Soon four young females found the aging Goddess, and agreed to take her home. Their parents were glad to offer the elderly woman lodging and a stable position caring for their little son. Wishing to reward the family for their kindness, Demeter attempted to offer the child the gift of immortality, by sticking him in the fire each night and removing him every morning before dawn. When the child's mother found him in the flames, she was horrified. Her mortal mind could not comprehend the actions of the Goddess, and she asked her to leave their home at once. This immediately brought back Demeter's fighting spirit, who surprised them by exposing her true self. The family begged the Goddess for forgive them and in return agreed to her demands: "A temple would be built in my honor, and you will teach the world my secret to immortality." Within no time, the town built a beautiful temple on the hillside, which the Goddess blessed before continuing on her journey.

Yet it didn't take long for Demeter's happiness to be replaced with rage, as she recalled the disappearance of her daughter. She flew to the home of Zeus and demanded that Persephone be found at once. She also questioned every immortal she could find and eventually uncovered Zeus' plot. In an attempt to appease Demeter's growing anger, he dispatched a messenger to retrieve their daughter from the depths.

Upon his entry to the Underworld, the messenger Hermes was amazed at what he found. Instead of finding a frail and fearful Persephone, he found a radiant and striking Queen of the Dead. She had adjusted well to her new position, saying she had even found her calling. The Goddess was now in charge of greeting the new arrivals and helping them adapt to their new life. While she wished to see her mother up above, she was torn by her desire to remain Hades' wife.

Hoping to comfort Persephone in her confusion, Hades came to his Queen's side. He gently kissed her forehead and urged her, "Do not fret, eat instead from this fruit I know you will like." As she pressed the red pomegranate seeds to her lips, she listened to his words. He told her he would miss her very much, but her duties as a daughter mattered too.

So, she climbed into the chariot and bid her husband farewell, as Hermes sped them off to the middle realm of mother earth, the home of her devoted mother.

The flowers sang joyfully of her return, while her mother beamed with pride. Yet, the child that she had born and raised had changed while she was gone. She had grown into a goddess, one both beautiful and wise and the more that Demeter inquired about her experiences below, the more she came to worry that the life they knew was gone. She recalled a declaration Zeus had made from the heavens up above: in order for Persephone to return to the home and life she had known, the young goddess must be as pure as the day she left her mother's side. However, the ruby stain upon her lips spoke of the beauty's fate. Persephone had tasted of the fruit of life. It could not be erased.

Even so, Zeus loved his daughter too much to send her back to Hades without the hope of returning to her mother's abode above. So, each spring Persephone comes back with the flowers that pave her way, to tell the story of rebirth, hope and harmony. And each fall when she leaves again for the Underworld below, her mother mourns and winter comes, while she waits for her return. Yet, for Persephone there is no remorse. She looks forward to the time she spends as Hades' Queen and wife, and to guiding those who have lost their way to the next phase of their life.

Interpreting Persephone's Myth

The myth of Persephone is one of the oldest of all Greek myths. Her story is a personification of some of the most universal concepts about life and death. In her youth, Persephone represents the powerful bond between a mother and a daughter and the often difficult transition from maidenhood to marriage. As the Goddess of Springtime and Rebirth, she is eternally connected to the cycles of the earth, which lies barren in her absence and bloom again each spring with her return. And her initiatory experience in the realm of the dead is such a powerful experience that it changes her life forever. It is after this transformation that we remember her most for her role as the Greek Goddess of the Underworld.

As the Queen of the Underworld, Persephone is often portrayed as a force to be feared. In Homer's *Iliad* (written c. 750-725 BCE) she is described as "grim Persephone" in direct contrast to her husband Hades, the "mighty Zeus of the Underworld." In the *Odyssey* (written c. 743-713 BCE), she has become "dread Persephone" or the "awesome one," whom mortal men mistrust. We see this when Odysseus pays a visit to the House of Death.

He worries that the vision of his dead mother, which slips through his fingers and "dissolves like a dream," is just "some wraith that great Persephone sends my way to make me ache with sorrow all the more?" (11.244-45). But his noble mother answers: "This is no deception sent by Queen Persephone, this is just the way of mortals when we die" (11.248-249). Yet, when the dead surround him at the end of his visit, he still flees in fear that "Queen Persephone might send up from Death some monstrous head, some Gorgon's staring face!" (11.725-29). The Goddess receives similar treatment in Hesiod's (c. 700 BCE) *Theogony* where she is described as "awful Persephone," who is always at the side of "strong Hades." Neither of these classic works mentions anything about the life she led before becoming the Queen of the Dead or the radiant beauty that attracts Hades enough to want her for his bride.

There are other stories that view Persephone in a more flattering light. The most famous of these is the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, which was written by an unknown author sometime between 650-550 BCE. The hymn describes Persephone in such complimentary terms as radiant, noble, and thoughtful. The Greek lyric poet Bacchylides (c. 520-450 BCE) who, like the hymn, refers to the Goddess as "slender-ankled" (*Odes* poem 5, line 55), echoes these same sentiments. The tragic playwright Euripides (c. 480-406) also sees her in her full glory as "Persephone, fair young goddess of the netherworld" (*Orestes* line 960). In addition, he brings up the duality of her nature and her relationship with her mother when he refers to her as "the goddess of twofold name, Persephone and the kindly goddess Demeter [ü]" (*Phoenissae* line 680).

Duality is a driving force in many renditions of Persephone's story. In her younger years she is often called Kore, the grain or corn maiden, yet once she has made the terrifying transition into womanhood she is mostly referred to as Persephone. She also plays a role as the winter Goddess of the Underworld, who cyclically changes into the springtime Goddess of Rebirth, which are two very different personifications of the same deity. Günther Zuntz explains that "no farmer prayed for corn to Persephone;3 no mourner thought of the dead as being with Kore4" (77). Her duality is also seen as she plays a continuous role as the feminine counterpart to either her husband, Hades, or her mother, Demeter. Kerényi sees this double role in even more black and white terms when he says that: "One of her forms (daughter with mother) appears as life; the other (young girl with husband) as death" (107). The ability to integrate all these aspects of her dualistic life as wife and daughter, innocence and wisdom, death and rebirth are what makes Persephone such a powerful goddess.

Other interpretations of her story focus on Persephone as one aspect of the Triple-goddess, a powerful feminine archetype where maiden, mother and crone are seen as one. While the three parts of this trinity are sometimes seen as Demeter, Kore and Persephone, many modern authors focus on Demeter and Persephone's relationship with the moon-goddess, Hecate. In the Hymn to Demeter, Hecate is the only one, besides the sun-god, Helios, to hear Persephone's cries during her abduction. When Persephone returns from the Underworld, Hecate vows to serve her as her "chief attendant." Some scholars, such as Patricia Monaghan, even go so far as to explain that: "The Greek world was divided into three parts, in honor of the Threefold goddess," with Hecate wandering the sky, Demeter ruling the surface of the earth, and Persephone ruling the world of the afterlife (252).

While there may be some ancient clues to indicate that Persephone could have ventured down to Hades on her own, most versions portray the "abduction of Persephone" as a central part of her story. The earliest known artistic representation of her tale can be found on "a painted wine cup from Phaistos dating from the middle Minoan period (just before 2000 BCE)" that "shows two companions crying out while Kore disappears into the earth's chasm beside the 'flower of deception'" (Lincoln 169).

The flower that lures Persephone to her fate is the narcissus. According to Robert Graves, Persephone's narcissus, "also called leirion was the three-petalled blue fleur-de-lys or iris," which flowers in the fall at the time of her abduction and is sacred to the Triple-goddess (85.1). Yet most versions of the story, including the Hymn to Demeter, say that Persephone was wandering through an entire meadow of beautiful flowers including roses, crocuses, violets, irises and hyacinths, when the most lovely of them all caught her eye. It was the sweet-smelling narcissus with one hundred blooms, "a flower wondrous and bright, awesome to see, for the immortals above and for mortals below" (lines 10-11). Enchanted by the beauty of the flower, Persephone is caught off guard when Hades suddenly emerges from the earth. As he whisks her away in his "golden four-horsed chariot," there is no doubt that anyone would cry out from such a startling event (March 312). Maybe it was the only way he knew to woo such a beautiful young goddess who had no reason to travel to his Underworld domain.

There is also conflicting evidence as to who was actually there to witness Persephone's abduction. Helios and Hecate were the only names mentioned in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, but other versions say a water-nymph named Cyane was there and tried

to stop the proceedings. Yet one thing is certain, once Persephone is determined to be missing, Demeter is driven to despair.

During Persephone's absence, Demeter loses all interest in her duties as the Goddess of Agriculture. Some stories say she roamed the earth in search of her daughter for nine days, and others mention a nine month hiatus. In the Hymn to Demeter, it isn't until after she has traveled to Eleusis that Persephone's mother is finally overcome with such rage and depression that: "For mortals she ordained a terrible and brutal year on the deeply fertile earth. The ground released no seed, for bright-crowned Demeter kept it buried" (lines 305-307). In any case, the barren landscape is what sets the stage for Persephone to return again each spring as the Goddess of Rebirth.

Persephone's reunion with her mother is bittersweet. She has consumed the fruit of the dead, either on her own accord or as a trick of Hades. In any case, she has been transformed and will be forced to stay at least part of each year in his domain. Most stories say she stays there for three months every winter, at which time Demeter mourns and lets the earth go bare. Other stories tell of a six month absence in the Underworld. Either way, life for the young goddess will never be the same. Persephone is now a wife and Queen, who has been initiated into the mysteries of the Underworld.

Bruce Lincoln believes that "at some point in prehistory, probably prior to the arrival of the Indo-Europeans in Greek regions (ca. 1800 B.C.?), a ritual resembling that described in the myth was actually performed for some or all women in these regions upon their arriving at puberty" (167). As the Greek population grew and moved towards the cities, there was a decline in initiatory rites of passage into adulthood. The ancient puberty initiations were modified to become elite Mystery initiations, which with the rise of democratic ideals eventually became accessible to the entire population, except barbarians and murderers.

The Eleusinian Mysteries, which focus on the tale of Demeter and Persephone, were the best known of all ancient Greek initiatory rites. For centuries they have been studied in the hopes of gaining insight into their immortal lessons. Contemporary psychologist James Hillman believes that: "Aspects of the psychological mystery of Eleusis still take place in the soul today. The Persephone experience occurs to us each in sudden depressions, when we feel ourselves caught in hatefulness, cold, numbed, and drawn downward out of life by a force we cannot see, against which we would flee" (49). While a strict code of secrecy

has revealed very little information about the actual experience, there are many records of the transformative power of the initiation. "Reliable ancient testimony tells that the Mysteries guaranteed a better life and a different and probably better fate after death" (Foley 70). The words of the Greek lyric poet Pindar (c. 518-438) "tells us that 'blessed is he who has seen this and thus goes beneath the earth; he knows the end of life, he knows the beginning given by Zeus'" (Foley 70).

Another great mystery surrounding the story of Persephone is whether she was just swept away by Hades or actually raped. A clue to solving this discrepancy may be found by examining the transition that occurs in her story as it is translated from Greek to Latin. There is no mention of rape in any of the early Greek texts, but we start to see its introduction with the coming of the Romans near the turn of the century. According to the research of Bruce Lincoln, all Greek sources describing Hades' action use the verb *harpazein*, meaning "to seize, snatch, carry off," which connotes thievery and violence, but does not imply rape. In later Latin translations of the texts the word *raptu* is used instead, which does imply "abduction, seizure, rape" (Lincoln 168). The Greek travel-writer Pausanias from the second century CE mentions the rape of Persephone numerous times in his ten book series, the *Description of Greece*. The concept of Persephone's rape is also covered extensively in the footnotes of the *Library (Bibliotheca)*, which was written in the 1st or 2nd century CE, yet attributed to the earlier Greek scholar Appolodorus (c. 180-120 BCE). The *Library* also contains a second version of Persephone's story that suggests she may have never been abducted in the first place, but was instead born in Hades to her prolific father Zeus and the Underworld goddess Styx (bk.1, ch. 3, sect. 1).

During this same period, we see many indications of the demise of this proud and powerful Greek goddess. According to Appolodorus' *Library*, Persephone does not even live in Hades, but in Tartarus. To the Greeks, this is "a dark and horrible region far below the earth" (March 367). She no longer dwells in the home of the ancestors and mighty warriors from the past, but in the gloomiest part of Hades, where evildoers are condemned to stay forever. The stories of Appolodorus also portray Persephone as less than proud in her actions. It is the first time we hear of Persephone's squabbles with Aphrodite. Their friendship is torn apart over a beautiful baby named Adonis. Aphrodite is so enchanted with the child that she steals him for herself and hides him in a chest that she leaves in Persephone's care. Curious, Persephone peeks into the box and decides to claim the child for own. The conflict then goes before Zeus, who decides that Adonis should spend part of the year with each goddess. Most versions of the tale say the time is equally split between

the two, yet other portrayals say he spends a third of the year with each goddess and a third of the year on his own to recover from them both.

I think the time has come for Persephone to regain her dignity as the great Goddess of the Underworld. Other scholars are also working to restore the original stories of the lost and ancient goddesses. Help may even be on the way from another synchronistic source. Archeologists and other researchers are continuously digging up new information from the past. An example of this is the return of the Hymn to Demeter, which was lost for hundreds of years until it turned up again in a stable in Moscow in 1777. Other findings may one day help the credibility of the stories that portray Persephone in all her feminine glory.

One of these ancient stories was able to open my own eyes to the positive power of Persephone. The tale was put together by Charlene Spretnak while she was researching the Pre-Hellenic goddess myths. The story is unique because there is no mention of the Goddess' abduction into the Underworld, but what really caught my attention was the idea of Persephone as a psychopomp. While Greek philosophers such as Sophocles and Plato have acknowledged Persephone as a "welcomer of the dead," most myths do not tell this aspect in her story. In Spretnak's version of the myth, Persephone explains to her mother that there are spirits who "drift about restlessly" and "hover around their earthly homes" because they do not understand their state. She then volunteers to go down to the Underworld and initiate them into their new life. While at first resisting Persephone's desire, Demeter comes to understand her motives and leads her to "a long, deep chasm and produces a torch for Her to carry." When Persephone finally arrives in the Underworld, she stands on a rock, with her torch, a vase of her mother's grain, and a large bowl of "pomegranate seeds, the food of the dead." As her aura increases in "brightness and warmth," she introduces herself as Queen of the Dead, and explains to the spirits that they have left their earthly bodies. She then beckons "those nearest to step up onto the rock and enter Her aura," where she embraces them, looks into their eyes, feeds them pomegranate seeds, and offers them a blessing for renewed "tranquility and wisdom" (111-116).

Persephone, the ancient Goddess of the Afterlife, still has much to teach us all today. If we listen carefully to her story, we may even be able to regain some of the ancient knowledge that was lost with the last Eleusinian initiate. Persephone still possesses the power to help us discover the wisdom within that was able to convince many Greeks that "death is not an evil but something good" (Foley 71).

Works Cited

- Ann, Martha and Dorothy Myers Imel. *Goddesses in World Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Apollodorus. *The Library*. Trans. Sir James George Frazer, 2 vol. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. 1921. *The Perseus Project*. Jun. 2000. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
- Bacchylides. *Odes*. Ed. Diane Svarlien 1991. Based on trans. from Maehler's *Die Lieder des Bakchylides*. (Leiden 1982) and R. C. Jebb's *The Poems and Fragments*. (Cambridge 1905). *The Perseus Project*. Jun. 2000. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
- Euripides. *The Complete Greek Drama*. Ed. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. 2 vol. Trans. E. P. Coleridge. New York. Random House. 1938. *The Perseus Project*. Jun. 2000. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
- Foley, Helene P. Ed. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.
- Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Vol 1. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993. [Click here for Vol 2](#).
- Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths*. 2 vols. London: Penguin, 1960.
- Hesiod. "Theogony." *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*. Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1914. *The Perseus Project*. Jun. 2000. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
- Hillman, James. *The Dream of the Underworld*. New York: Harper, 1979.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 1990.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 1996.

Kerényi, C. "Kore." *Essays on the Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*. By C.G. Jung and C. Kerényi Trans. R.F.C.

Hull. Bollingen Ser. XXII. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969. 101-155.

Lincoln, Bruce. "The Rape of Persephone." *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time*. Ed. Christine Downing. Boston: Shambhala, 1994. 166-172.

March, Jenny. *Cassell Dictionary of Classical Mythology*. London: Cassell, 1998.

Monaghan, Patricia. *The New Book of Goddesses & Heroines*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1998.

Spretnak, Charlene. *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths*. Boston: Beacon, 1978.

Zuntz, Günther. *Persephone: Three Essays on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia*. London: Oxford UP, 1971.