

## **The Persephone Project**

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## Abstract

In contemporary works, Persephone has evolved from a kidnapped maiden goddess of myth to the loving partner of her former kidnapper. Persephone has also become a character of a “fandom” (a fan subculture) and “fanfiction” (stories about existing fictional worlds). On the social media website Tumblr and fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own*, fanfiction authors and fans all participate in the same tradition of story-making as the authors of mythology, and their texts are shaped by their culture's concerns and needs. For Persephone fans, a key concern is the agency of young women. Feminism, a contested contemporary movement, significantly influences how fanfiction represents this concern. These stories also romanticize a relationship predicated on kidnapping and a lack of consent. Despite their complexity, it is too easy to criticize fan works about Persephone for being “not feminist.” The goal of this thesis is to complicate the assumption these stories and beliefs are not feminist. More specifically, it will analyze how Persephone and her relationship with Hades are depicted in fanfiction and how this relates to contemporary trends in feminism. It is always more complicated than “feminist” and “nonfeminist.”

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In contemporary works, Persephone has evolved from a kidnapped maiden goddess of myth to the loving partner of her former kidnapper. Persephone has also become a character of a “fandom” (a fan subculture) and “fanfiction” (stories about existing fictional worlds). On the social media website Tumblr and fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own*, fanfiction authors and fans all participate in the same tradition of story-making as the authors of mythology, and their texts are shaped by their culture's concerns and needs. For Persephone fans, a key concern is the agency of young women. Feminism, a contested contemporary movement, significantly influences how fanfiction represents this concern. These stories also romanticize a relationship predicated on kidnapping and a lack of consent. Despite their complexity, it is too easy to criticize fan works about Persephone for being “not feminist.” The goal of this thesis is to complicate the assumption these stories and beliefs are not feminist. More specifically, it will analyze how Persephone and her relationship with Hades are depicted in fanfiction and how this relates to contemporary trends in feminism. It is always more complicated than “feminist” and “nonfeminist.”

I will first discuss what fanfiction is and how fan studies informs my understanding of fandom. Then I will discuss two extant ancient texts which help us comprehend the tradition into which contemporary fanfiction is entering: the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. While fan studies is one of the theoretical focuses of this paper, it here intersects with reception theory, which focuses on the reception and rewriting of classics in post-classical works. The oldest versions and the newest versions, “antiquity and modernity, past and present, are always implicated in each other, always in dialogue—to understand either one, you need to think in terms of the other” (Martindale 5). In the terms of fandom, mythology is part of

“canon,” in the fannish sense of a source text of a fan community, upon which “fanfiction” of Persephone is based. Understanding mythology can help us see some of the key differences between the past and present versions.

Mythology is not the only important part of this canon. I will also introduce some (commercially published) popular modern retellings of the myth, which may even be more influential than the myths themselves. As shall be seen, creations like *Hadestown* and *Lore Olympus* are intertwined with the very meaning of Persephone for fan readers. Both include depictions of Persephone in a romantic relationship with Hades. To some fans, they have become synonymous with the name Persephone and are the main context through which those fans talk about and understand Persephone.

We will then explore the beliefs of Perspehone fandom. While depictions of Persephone vary, the idea of Persephone’s choice is often prominent. Individual works of fanfiction (fanfics) emphasize Persephone becoming an agent in her story, and this is often associated with a positive relationship with Hades, her mythological husband and abductor. This relationship is commonly romantic, involving a deep emotional and sexual bond as well as marriage. This interpretation clashes with the view of some other fans and academics, such as Aimee Hinds. They believe erasing the kidnapping, which is the key feature of the Greek and Roman myth, harmfully reframes this abduction, non-consensual marriage, and rape<sup>1</sup> as a loving relationship. These readers often refer to this change as not being feminist. Clearly, feminism is part of the cultural moment that

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<sup>1</sup> A common fan argument not addressed by this thesis in detail is whether Persephone was raped or not. The argument centers around the use of the word “rape” when describing Persephone’s abduction. The word “rape” does, as many fans argue, come from latin *rapere*, meaning to take away or abduct. This abduction does seem to mirror part of Athenian marriage ceremonies. However, I want to make clear that explicit references to only abduction does not preclude Persephone being raped nor does it make her nonconsensually arranged marriage justifiable. Marital rape is a normative part of patriarchal marriage customs in Greece—but certainly not an excusable part. Whether or not Persephone herself (a fictional character/religious figure) was raped, marital rape was a prominent concern for women in the archaic Greek world, which is reflected in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*’s treatment of Persephone’s abduction.

shapes this fan community and their texts, which exist side-by-side with fans debating whether certain ideas are feminist ideas.

To clarify, my conception of feminism, when it is at its best, is a movement within a patriarchal power system that actively works towards equality between all people, primarily focusing on people who identify as women. However, what it means to be feminist is a contested and individual idea. While I just shared my ideas, there is no “true” version of feminism. However, based on my understanding of feminism, I plan to analyze how these fanfics represent (or do not represent) their key focus, the agency of a woman, and that agency’s relationship to the patriarchal power system. I will also touch on how these stories represent (or lack) a sense of collective feminism that moves towards action to change the patriarchal system and an intersectional conception of feminism.

Next, I will analyze these texts through the lens of the work of cultural feminist studies scholars and Aimee Hinds’ analysis of a similar idea in a published, commercial work. However, I will complicate this analysis by separating, as Janice Radway did, the content of the text itself from the process of the reader making meaning from the text, which in this case often functions to make readers feel empowered. This analysis will also be complicated by Roxane Gay’s concept of a “bad feminist” who enjoys things that are not necessarily considered “good” feminism but who nevertheless still believes in basic tenets of feminism. Personally, I have very particular ideas of what feminism is, and I fall into the trap of “[hoping] that women [and their texts] with a significant platform might be everything we need—a desperately untenable position” (Gay 313). These stories and their common tropes will not be condemned for not meeting the expectations of my definition of feminism. I do not want to reject other’s ideas of

feminism or the lived experiences of readers who enjoy reading fanfiction about Persephone. By considering the enjoyment of readers, despite the potentially harmful ideas within the text, I do not mean to say these texts are not reinforcing certain sexual and gender power dynamics and making possible the larger patriarchal power structure. These texts absolutely reinforce as well as challenge cultural ideologies.<sup>2</sup> However, that is not *all* they are doing.

In this thesis, it is important to me that I nonjudgmentally engage in the question of how “feminist” these texts and the beliefs they represent are. Underneath these texts are people, working to understand their own version of feminism and empowerment. The world of fanfiction is often conceptualized as a safe space for experimentation or for writers to express ideas that are not acceptable in published fiction. This includes both stories written in ten minutes that are not ever meant to be taken seriously and stories that have taken their author years of work to write. This context makes a certain level of non-judgment important when entering into fan spaces with the goal of academic analysis, as is recognizing that these works are created within a different context and for different purposes than most published and commercial literature. Through this study, we can see how this fan space conceptualizes feminism as compared to academic and commercial spaces with more traditional constraints and boundaries.

To help the reader understand this context, I will provide a window into this particular community and its depictions of Persephone to analyze the feminist dimensions of these fanfics. To this end, I will be writing with a dual perspective: that of a fandom participant and a guide to fandom, and that of an academic observer. I

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<sup>2</sup> The anonymity of the internet makes studying how these stories affect the readers difficult, but in the comments on each fanfic and what is posted on Tumblr we can know a few things for certain: some people genuinely enjoy and feel empowered by these stories, and people are willing to argue about them.

discovered the fandom of Persephone for myself when I was younger, which gives me knowledge helpful in exploring this community and also shapes my perspective of the fandom. In this situation, I see these two perspectives as mutually enriching, allowing me to understand the fan perspectives in order to analyze them. I will first frame my study of fan texts and fandom related to Persephone through some key tenets of fan studies.

### **Fan Studies: Communities and Texts**

Texts do not exist in a vacuum and neither do people. This understanding is at the core of fan studies and fanfiction. Fans exist in relationship with texts and media, as well as with each other. These relationships are what create fanfiction, fan spaces, and fandom itself. A fan's relationship with texts is what prompts them to write and read fanfiction. Storey writes, "Whereas most reading is a solitary practice, performed in private, fans consume texts as part of a community" (224). Not only are the fans themselves a part of that community, but so are many works beyond what is "canon" in a fandom. In the world of fanfiction, canon is a term that has been co-opted to mean the original text or work or what is in the original text or work. Among other things, the plot, characterization, and setting of the original text are all parts of "canon" and are described as "canon." However, fanfics are often influenced by more than just a singular text or series. This is especially true in the case of fandom centering on Persephone. Fans are almost as likely to be posting about the Persephone of *Lore Olympus* as they are about the Persephone of *Hadestown* (and extremely unlikely to be explicitly posting about the Persephone of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*) or all of the above. This is

partially because Persephone is not a copyrighted figure, and no authoritative mythological story exists, only the most well-known, and therefore the most influential, stories.

If I search for “Persephone” on Tumblr (as of late 2021 and early 2022, at least), I see many posts. In the tags, the poster self-identifies the content of their post. Several tags are repeated again and again: “#Greek mythology,” “#Lore Olympus,” and “#Hadestown.” Clearly, Persephone is thought of as a character of *Lore Olympus* or *Hadestown* as much as a character of Greek myths. These stories together shape fans’ ideas of who Persephone is. As Sandvoss says, “fan objects thus form a field of gravity, which may or may not have an *ur*text in its epicenter, but which in any case corresponds with a fundamental meaning structure through which all these texts are read” (65). Several of the above-mentioned texts, explored further in the next section, often form this textual field for fans of Persephone. These popular texts are also the lens through which they interpret other stories about Persephone. In my personal experience, some of the most common ideas in the fandom currently pre-date the wide-spread internet popularity of *Lore Olympus* or *Hadestown*. However, because “the hypertextuality of the Internet forces the reader/user into the active construction of the text’s boundaries” (Sandvoss 65), those boundaries can always expand to incorporate new texts. More importantly, the common threads between older and current ideas suggest that these stories became popular for Persephone fans because they fit well into the ideas already being expressed, the “fundamental meaning structure” that already existed. These more recent texts are now an important piece of how Persephone is understood and experienced by fans.

Generally, fan readers engage differently with works than other readers might. Foundational fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins explores reading and, based on Michel de Certeau's concept of an active reader "poaching" from texts, uses his terms to discuss how "readers fragment texts and reassemble the broken shards . . . in making sense of their own social experience" (28). De Certeau himself reframes a reader's consumption as a "secondary production" (qtd. in Storey 222) of meaning produced through the reader's consumption rather than passive acceptance. Fans, like any reader, filter stories through their own cultural context as they create meaning from what they read. Fanfiction and the discussions of fans makes that process of 'fragmentation' and 'reassembly' visible. According to Jenkins, the fan's reading experience is (as opposed to de Certeau's more nomadic and isolated characterization of most readers) a "social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers" (39). This is certainly visible in the dialogue between fans on social media like Tumblr, where they can share interpretations and have discussions, though less so on *Archive of Our Own* where isolated comments on stories are the main form of interaction. This community of fans is a key part of how certain depictions and beliefs become so ubiquitous.

We also find a plethora of unique methodological approaches for studying fans, fandoms, and fanfiction: "anthropology and ethnography analyze the fan subculture; media, film, and television studies assess the integration of media into fan practice and artworks; psychology examines fans' pleasure and motivation" and more (Busse and Hellekson 1). This diversity is likely because, like me, the academic researcher is often not just an academic researcher, but has a dual role of both fan and academic. They are

often motivated by personal interest in the fan communities they study. In academic articles, there is often a negotiation of the writer's status as both fan and academic, and the feminist work of self-reflexivity primarily takes place [in fan studies] through reflexive representations of the complicated and multiplicitous subject position of the acafan—a term widely used within fan studies to refer to the dual role of the academic-fan researcher. (Hannell)

In my own writing, I work to make my own affiliation with the fandom clear and view it as an asset that gives me a unique perspective. However, academics, like texts, do not exist in a vacuum with a complete and objective view of the subjects they study.

Understanding this context is a key facet of fan studies and the many disciplines from which fandom and fanfiction are approached.

This, however, brings us back to one basic question: what is fanfiction? Even this question is highly debated. The answer depends on who you ask and the nature of their interest in fanfiction. One common definition (the basis for the short definition provided on the first page of this thesis) is “the imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds” (see Busse and Hellekson, 5-6). However, this definition is (purposefully) exceedingly broad. It could easily apply to stories beyond what is posted as fanfiction. I believe it is more accurate to limit the general definition of fanfiction and define it by its specific cultural moment, which is shaped by copyright. However, attempting to do so with Persephone in particular is difficult because Persephone, as a mythological figure, is not under copyright.

Despite the freedom to turn stories about Persephone into published works, fans still post their writing about Persephone on fanfiction websites. So then what makes fanfiction written about Persephone fanfiction? If it is because it is not commercially

published, that complicates whether mythological depictions of Persephone would be considered fanfiction. However, since fanfiction is a specific cultural phenomenon, I believe, following the work of Tony Keen, myths (and fanfics) would more accurately be contained under the broader category of transformative works. The Organization for Transformative Works defines a transformative work as a work which “takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression,” an extremely broad category. Myth and fanfiction are each an extremely specific subset.

I would argue it is mainly the fact that an author intends these works to be fanfiction and writes them in the context of fan culture that makes them fanfiction. Authors identify their works as fanfiction by posting them on fanfiction websites or social media websites with tags identifying them as fanfiction. It may seem somewhat paradoxical to define a piece of fanfiction partially by the author identifying it as fanfiction, but at this point, fanfiction is its own genre with a culture, conventions, modes of posting, and discipline-specific jargon. Therefore, works that do not fit neatly into the definition of fanfiction (including even original stories posted on fanfiction sites) may still be considered fanfiction because the author writes and the reader reads in the same context as the genre of fanfiction. Therefore, fanfiction will be defined for this thesis as a genre of non-commercial, non-copyrighted texts identified as fanfiction by their authors written about existing (often fictional) characters or worlds.<sup>3</sup>

Fanfiction itself varies so greatly in quality and content from fanfic to fanfic that it is useful to contextualize their creation. For example, there is only as much editing

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the lack of editors and censorship, fan space is sometimes theorized as a more oppositional space. While this sometimes appears to be true (the popularity of same-sex couples in fanfiction, especially before more widespread acceptance of queer identities), it is not always the case (same-sex couples are often depicted as taking on traditional male and female roles).

done as the author wants. This may mean they read their work over, perhaps ask friends to do so, maybe request help from another fan on the internet as a “beta-reader,” or that there is no editing at all. Whatever the case, there is certainly no guarantee of professional-level editing. There are also huge variations in quality and quantity. For example, fanfics may range from drabbles (short pieces of writing) of 100 words to epics of 500,000+ words like the Harry Potter fanfic *All the Young Dudes* (for context, the longest Harry Potter book is *Order of the Phoenix* at approximately 257,000+ words). Fanfiction is also seen as a safe space to freely write and experiment with both style and content. “Tags” function as tools which label a fan work and help people to find them, but also function to warn readers of the work’s contents, such as potentially triggering material or simply tropes they do not want to read. This helps keep fan spaces safe, though it is not a perfect measure. Authors also tag relationships because another significant tendency of fanfiction and fandoms is that “ships” (or romantic relationships) are the central focus around which many fandoms revolve.<sup>4</sup>

When writing fanfiction, there is also normally no intent to earn money. Profiting from fanfiction verges towards copyright infringement and could endanger the legal ability to post fanfiction online, though there are fanfiction sites that skirt this boundary. One final important aspect is there is little to no way of knowing the age, gender, or any other identifying characteristics of the author unless they self-identify. Even when they do, there is no way of knowing if the author is telling the truth. This lack of knowledge is made possible by the anonymity of the internet. The internet is one of the primary mediums, but not the only medium, of fanfiction and fandom.

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<sup>4</sup> The strangest part of fandom centering on Persephone is that a male same-sex relationship is not the most popular ship, but unfortunately, that is not most focus in this thesis.

The emergence of the internet as a fan space intrinsically changed the way fandom exists. Websites such as Tumblr or *Archive of Our Own* are the primary medium we are exploring in this thesis. The internet has generally made fandom far more accessible to people who can afford computers and other technology but who cannot necessarily gather in person. The commonness of engaging with content in fannish ways also seems to have increased since the emergence of the internet into our daily lives (Busse and Hellekson 15-16). In terms of Persephone fandom, people who are considered fans in this thesis would not have had easy access to a community within which to share their interpretations and discussions without the internet. They may not have even known about fandom. The expansion of fandom and fannish behavior into the lives of people it would not have previously touched through both the internet and the changing media industry is a pivotal part of current fandom (Busse and Hellekson 15-16). It has changed the way readers experience texts and media about Persephone.

Now, we will turn to well-known non-fanfiction texts about Persephone. Extant ancient texts about Persephone are a fascinating area of study, as are contemporary published retellings. While they are where our study of Persephone begins, they are not where the study of Persephone has to end. Storey writes, “a commodity or a commodified practice which is judged to be banal and uninteresting (on the basis of textual analysis or an analysis of its mode of production), may be made to bear or to do, in its ‘production in use’, all sorts of interesting things within the lived conditions of a specific context of consumption” (221). However, a millennium of interest in Persephone has proved that many generations, authors, and readers have all absolutely found something interesting in stories about Persephone and made these stories do

something interesting “within the lived conditions of a specific context of consumption” as they rewrite them.

Fanfiction about Persephone continues this tradition, falling into the purview of reception studies, part of the field of classics which addresses the reception and rewriting of classics in post-classical works. One tenet of reception studies important for this thesis is that “most versions of reception theory stress the mediated, situated, and contingent (which of course does not mean the same as arbitrary) character of readings” (Martindale 4). Much of this thesis is focused on exploring what “mediates” and “situates” the fanfiction under discussion.

These fanfics are, in some ways, a fan’s consumption or, supposedly “secondary,” production process, made visible and tangible. It is what they have taken from the media they have consumed based on Persephone and how they have recreated it based on their own lives, experiences, and conceptions of romance, society, and gender. Therefore, the next step to exploring fanfiction about Persephone is exploring the texts which are the key pillars of current and past understandings of Perspehone.

### **Persephone in Myth & Media**

Every unique set of cultural and religious beliefs about Persephone is represented differently by authors writing about her. This is as true of a fanfic author as it is of Ovid when writing his *Metamorphoses*. This is not because fanfiction and mythology are the same concepts (as is a common claim among people involved in fandom).<sup>5</sup> Instead, I believe both fanfiction and mythology are types of transformative works and, in the case

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<sup>5</sup> See Keen and Willis for deeper discussion of the relationship, similarities, and differences between mythology and fanfiction.

of fanfiction about myth in particular, are “taking the stories of mythology and reinventing them in new forms” (Keen). Doherty asserts:

Changes of detail or emphasis from one version to another made it possible to shift and even reverse the point of a tale. The classical poets could and did make some rather controversial points by introducing the issues of their own times into their treatments of ancient stories . . . Thus the modern rewriting of myths is a continuation of ancient practice. (10)

This section of the thesis will first explore how both the author and culture affect the depiction of women’s agency and patriarchy in texts that are important to a fuller understanding of Persephone (and Hades) in ancient Greece and Rome. Then, we will look at how some texts both important to and representative of the stories told about Persephone today depict Persephone and her relationship with Hades, which are also influenced by contemporary cultural concerns.

Among the extant ancient Greek and Roman texts,<sup>6</sup> the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and the tale of Persephone’s abduction in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are two works that are key to our current conception of Persephone. As Parker writes “The normal condition of any Greek myth was as a welter of variants, no one of which was more authoritative than any other” (Parker 5). But these two are “the best known renditions of her story,” though not the earliest (Fletcher 40). No other sources are drawn upon as consistently as these two, which contain “most, but not all, of the details that appear in various combinations” in later retellings (Doherty 18). Fans do not always have knowledge of these exact texts, but the general details of them are commonly

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<sup>6</sup> See Foley 30-31 for more information about the extant ancient Greek and Roman texts.

known from the internet or other compendiums. Both depict the relationship between Persephone and Hades as an abduction but also a marriage.

In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (as translated by Helene Foley), the depiction of Persephone and Demeter's power and agency (or lack of it) and its relationship to patriarchal power are significant to understanding later fanfiction about them. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, believed by scholars to be composed around 650 to 550 BCE by an unknown author(s) (Foley 29),<sup>7</sup> depicts the story of Persephone's traumatic abduction and marriage. This depiction is in line with the contemporaneous norms of patriarchal marriage. Persephone has little agency, autonomy, or power. As the text begins, Persephone is depicted as a young maiden on the cusp of maturity and marriage (Deacy 401, 409). While she gathers flowers, she is entranced by a narcissus; it is a trap laid by Zeus, her father, and Hades, her uncle. Hades "snatched the unwilling maid into his golden chariot/and led her off lamenting" (Foley line 19-20). Despite her pleas, Zeus does not help Persephone, because he helped arrange his daughter's marriage to Hades. Persephone, like any young girl, does not have the power to escape.

This depiction of events is deeply linked to the Greek idea of marriage. McClure writes that in Athens marriage was a deeply traumatic and yet also normative experience for young girls. They were given by their fathers to their future husbands; Persephone "represents the archetypal bride: wrenched away from childhood innocence and the company of her mother and girlfriends, she is forced to dwell in a strange new home and submit to the will of its master" (McClure 66). Consent from the daughter or even the mother was not a consideration in the process, and they could only potentially play a role through social influence. Persephone's lack of power is represented quite

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<sup>7</sup> More information about the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* can be found in Foley, Rayor, and Parker, especially Foley and Parker.

literally by her abduction, but Demeter has no power as well over this process either, represented by how Persephone is married off without Demeter's knowledge.

Persephone and Demeter have little agency in this series of events due to the patriarchal norms of Athenian marriage.

Demeter mourns Persephone's abduction in the mortal world and makes the earth barren in her grief. Many humans die, meaning that the gods do not receive as many sacrifices, therefore Zeus is forced to return Persephone to her mother. Through her power as a goddess, Demeter is able to change the situation she is stuck in. She has both the power and agency to do so. Zeus sends Hermes to retrieve Persephone from the Underworld where he finds Hades "reclining on a bed with his shy spouse [Persephone], strongly reluctant through desire for her mother" (Foley line 334-344). Upon hearing Hermes' message, Hades tells Persephone "in no way among the immortals will I be an unsuitable spouse . . . you will have power over all that lives and moves," (Foley line 363-365). As DeBloois argues, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* depicts the myth from two perspectives, situating it specifically within the male and female understandings of marriage in ancient Athens, and likely other parts of the Greek world at the time. In fact, "when related through the female characters of the *Hymn* (Demeter, Persephone, Hekate) the emphasis is on violence, rape, and death. The male characters (Helios and Hades) interpret the same event as a marriage" (DeBloois 248) and even justify it because of the prestige of the husband and the honors he can give the wife. The patriarchy justifies itself and its treatment of women through this voice, but, interestingly, the *Hymn to Demeter* also gives weight to the female voice that represents these events. However, while Demeter has the power to change the course of the story,

Persephone does not seem to have power unless it is as Hades' wife or Demeter's daughter.

After Hermes' brings Zeus' orders, Hades secretly gives Persephone food, specifically pomegranate seeds, before she leaves the Underworld; this is reflective of the marriage customs of Greece (Doherty 25; McClure 73). Persephone joyously leaves and lovingly reunites with her mother. Unlike mortal women could, Demeter forces Zeus and Hades to return her daughter. But Demeter senses something is wrong. She knows that if Hades gave Persephone food in the Underworld then she is bound to return there for one-third of the year but can spend the other two-thirds with Demeter on Olympus. Persephone's return is only partial, and Demeter can only challenge the patriarchal power system, not beat it. Upon Demeter asking, Persephone explains that Hades "stealthily/put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it . . . seizing me by the shrewd plan of my father," repeating it was "much against my will" (Foley line 411-414, 432). Force is only mentioned when Persephone describes this situation to Demeter, potentially because this is the first time she is telling the story for herself. Some scholars, on the other hand, question if Perspehone is lying to Demeter and perhaps willingly and knowingly ate the pomegranate seeds (Foley 60). Regardless, Persephone's version represents the common female experience of ancient Greek, especially Athenian, marriages. Persephone is bound to the Underworld literally by the pomegranate seeds, but also symbolically by her marriage to Hades, which the seeds represent. She is not depicted with the power or agency to change this situation. Throughout the story, Persephone is pulled by outside forces (including Demeter) from situation to situation without the agency to choose for herself, and she is only allowed power through her

husband or mother. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* depicts the patriarchy and agency of young women in a way that generally reflects the norms of the author's culture.

This depiction is completely different from the way Persephone is often portrayed in fanfiction (as will be further explored later). As the world that shapes the story changes, so does the story. In fanfiction, she most often escapes from the control of Demeter and/or Zeus and finds happiness with Hades in the Underworld. Demeter and Persephone's once joyful relationship is warped beyond recognition in fascinating ways. However, these fanfic authors are not the first to rewrite these stories.

Ovid is another author who has retold this story. His work strongly influences contemporary depictions of Persephone, such as the beginning of *Lore Olympus*. In Book X of his *Metamorphoses* (translated by Frank Miller), Ovid writes about Persephone's kidnapping by Hades—or rather Proserpine's kidnapping by Dis. Ovid is a Roman author in the first century AD, the beginning of the Roman Empire. While Roman authors like Ovid based stories on the Greeks' myths, they, like any author, “adapted them to their own culture in ways both obvious and subtle” (Doherty 29). Ovid's version of Proserpine is rewritten to suit his cultural concerns and the story he is trying to tell. He generally follows the storyline set out in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. However, the way he portrays female agency and its relationship with the patriarchy, through the characters of Ceres/Demeter and Venus/Aphrodite, reflects the norms of the early Roman Empire rather than Greece.

In the *Metamorphoses*, after Ceres discovers the location of her kidnapped daughter, she turns to Jupiter/Zeus, Proserpine's father and king of the gods, for aid. While Demeter withdrew to the mortal world, Ceres, in distinct contrast to Demeter, appears angrily before Jupiter, “with dishevelled hair, and full of indignation,” (Miller

273). Ceres demands Jupiter return her daughter to her, sounding “self-assured in her position and anything but apologetic” (Doherty 29). Doherty argues that Ceres’ confidence reflects the situation of Roman women during the early Empire, especially women from higher class families (27-9); they “had more independence and public visibility than their Greek counterparts” (McClure 155). They were able to participate in politics, especially women in the imperial family who had influence on many important political figures (Doherty 27; McClure 172). Ceres has a similar position to women in the imperial family as the sister and former lover of Jupiter, king of the gods. Women like Ceres have power, but they still live within a patriarchal society; Ceres still needs to petition Jupiter as the Roman patriarch with absolute power over his daughter (McClure 176). Ceres frames herself as “suppliant” (Miller 275) before Jupiter because, like Demeter in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, Ceres needs Jupiter’s ultimate authority in order to get her daughter back.<sup>8</sup> Ceres has the agency to make changes to the world around her and even some power, but she must work within the patriarchal system in which she lives to accomplish her goal of getting Proserpine back. She cannot change that system.

Proserpine/Persephone generally remains without agency in the *Metamorphoses*—she unknowingly eats the pomegranate seeds that entrap her, “simple child that she was” (Miller 275) and gains power only from her marriage to Dis as the “great queen of that world of darkness, the mighty consort of the tyrant of the underworld” (Miller 273). Rape and sexual assault are not explicitly mentioned in regards to Proserpine herself, but Cyane and Arethusa, nymphs who take center-stage in Ovid’s version, talk in depth about rape as related to kidnapping. Additionally,

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<sup>8</sup> Although, Demeter almost blackmails Zeus into helping her, while Ceres asks for his help.

Proserpine never gains the ability to make her own choices. They are made for her. The Fates, through the voice of Jupiter, “decree” Proserpine’s fate (Miller 275) of being bound to the Underworld if she eats its food, and Jupiter is ultimately the one who divides Proserpine’s time between Ceres and Dis (Miller 277). Jupiter maintains his role as a patriarchal authority who makes Proserpine’s choices for her. However, he is no longer the one arranging Proserpine’s abduction, like in the *Hymn*; he is merely reacting to it.

While Proserpine is without agency, another character whose choices have a huge impact enters the story: Venus (aka Aphrodite). Venus takes Jupiter’s role in precipitating the abduction. She prompts the entire series of events by convincing Cupid to shoot Dis, urging him with the words: “you conquer and control the deities of the sea . . . Why do you not extend your mother’s empire and your own?” (Miller 265). The words Venus uses are “clearly meant to suggest Roman imperial ambitions, but these are presented as a female’s bid for power over her peers within the ruling elite” (Doherty 28). Doherty asserts that this too represents how Roman women could have power in a similar way to Ceres. But once more, this power must be actualized by the men they are related to, in this case Cupid. Ultimately, Venus sparked the abduction through the means and agency available to her within the patriarchal power system. Regardless of whether her scheming has positive or negative consequences, she has the agency to change the narrative in the same way a rare few Roman women would be able to change their world. This addition to the story is Ovid’s invention as he manipulates the myth to suit his culture and purposes, associating imperial Rome with the actions of women to presumably make a point about the fledgling Roman Empire. Ovid writes with a specific

perspective and cultural context, in ways that suit him—quite like fanfiction authors do, though in massively different contexts.

Between Ovid and the current versions of Persephone, there is a period of more than a thousand years. In that time, people interested in both the historical and more literary aspects of Persephone have studied, rewritten, and adapted her mythology; many have worshiped her—all in constantly evolving ways. To narrow in on recent developments in scholarship and storytelling is to ignore many others. However, the work of feminists in the women's spirituality movement has significantly affected how Persephone is viewed today, especially on Tumblr.

Foley describes the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* as being of special interest to “Spiritual feminists interested in drawing on pagan traditions to (re)create a more female-centered religion” (168). To focus in on one example, Charlene Spretnak’s depiction of Persephone in her book *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* (1984) is a good example of this development in the interpretation of Persephone, focusing on the agency of female goddesses and the power of the mother-daughter bond in a pre-patriarchal world. Spretnak’s work and texts inspired by it are often referenced by fans when discussing the idea of a pre-patriarchal myth of Persephone. Spretnak follows in the work of theorists like Jane Ellen Harrison, Marija Gimbutas, and Robert Graves (23) who studied the theoretical idea that a perhaps matriarchal, more likely matrifocal or matrilineal, culture and the cult of a figure known as the Great Mother Goddess existed before our earliest written records of Greek and were later subsumed by invaders with a patriarchal society. This idea has been a contested one in the study of ancient Greece, but contemporary feminists’ interest in matriarchy and female-centered religion reveals the appeal powerful female figures have in a patriarchal society.

Spretnak's objective in her book is to reconstruct the lost myths of this possible earlier culture and cult before the patriarchal invasion, though she admits "no one could presume to reconstruct a long-lost oral tradition" (23). Due to the scant evidence for these pre-patriarchal stories, Spretnak's methodology is drawn from her other important influence: feminist spirituality based on a revision of Jungian psychology (29). Her methodology is very much based on the existence of archetypes and the collective unconscious, as well as spirituality. She describes that "once the research was completed . . . [she would] study all the index cards of information on a particular Goddess, meditate on that material, and then *become* that Goddess as much as possible before reconstructing her myth" (25, emphasis not mine). From this context, it is clear Spretnak's work is as much a work of fiction as it is a work of scholarship. But it is a work of fiction that still influences beliefs today.

Spretnak's story of Persephone emphasizes the bond between mother and daughter and the agency and ability of women to shape the world. Every part of the story is precipitated by Persephone's agency. Demeter's focus is on the life of plants above and not the souls of the dead below, but Persephone notices the souls of the dead seem listless, confused, and lost. She wants to help them. After talking to her mother, she journeys down into the underworld and becomes its "Queen" (Spretnak 115) to help the souls of the dead. She "received and renewed the dead" (Spretnak 116), helping them find rest. Persephone chooses to become the queen of the Underworld due to her caring nature and adventurously journeys to these unknown lands. In her absence, Demeter mourns and famine covers the earth. However, Persephone returns, and they both rejoice and "ran to each other and hugged and cried and laughed and hugged and danced and danced and danced" (Spretnak 118). Spretnak emphasizes the joyousness of

their reunion, alongside the power of both Persephone and Demeter as caretakers and rulers of the Underworld and the earth. Spretnak does not include Hades at all because she argues Hades' kidnapping of Persephone in later versions is the representation, both literally and symbolically, of patriarchal intrusion into the earlier matriarchal tradition (29, 107). In Hades' absence, Spretnak's Persephone becomes the agent of the story. Spretnak's feminist purpose is to explore a world where women and their relationships take center stage in religion and spirituality before, during, and (potentially) after a patriarchal world. However, later, fans will use (and warp) her work to argue for the existence of an ancient story in which Persephone voluntarily chooses to go to the Underworld and subsequently falls in love with Hades. This speaks to the fandom's draw towards a more daring Persephone and the idea of Persephone as the agent of the story, as will be discussed in further detail when analyzing fan texts.

In modern day pop culture, several key modern retellings have inspired significant interest in Persephone and her relationship with Hades. Some of the most well-known are the musical *Hadestown* and graphic novel & web comic *Lore Olympus*, by Rachel Smythe. *Hadestown* won 8 Tony awards during the 2018-2019 Broadway season and has over 400,000 "monthly listeners" on music streaming service Spotify (as of Mar. 4 2022), while the graphic novel version of the first part of *Lore Olympus* reached number one on the *New York Times* Graphic Novel bestseller list for November, despite that entire part of the webcomic being available for free on the internet. According to Webtoon, the website which *Lore Olympus* is initially posted on, the work has had over 900 million views (as of Mar. 4 2022). Both stories feature the relationship of Persephone and Hades, framing it as a story of love as compared to the

focus on abduction in the earlier versions of the mythology. When discussing the adaptation of myth, Doherty asserts

In their modern, adapted versions, the classical myths are ‘naturalized’ into our gender system—for instance, by making Hades and Persephone ‘fall in love’ with each other . . .

In marriage and other long-term sexual relationships there is an ideal of friendship and mutual desire between the partners. Thus all the modern retellings of the Demeter myth include some mutual attachment between Hades and Persephone, either predating the abduction or developing gradually after it.

(23, 30)

This change in how Persephone and Hades’ relationship is portrayed is visible in *Hadestown* and *Lore Olympus*, which both function within and adjacent to Persephone fandom. Persephone fandom is influenced heavily by these works. However, as was discussed above, Persephone fandom also existed before them. The similar ideas in these works draw Persephone fans to them and also draw *Hadestown* and *Lore Olympus* fans to Persephone fandom. They have a mutually dependent relationship, each influencing each other and often representing a story of love between Persephone and Hades. We will now explore how these stories represent that relationship.

In *Hadestown*, the stars of the show are Eurydice and Orpheus, and the main plot of the musical follows the fall and rise of their relationship. However, the relationship of Persephone and Hades is just as intertwined with the narrative. *Hadestown* draws on modern concerns to depict a complex and deeply troubled relationship between Persephone and Hades. Persephone is an older, unhappily married woman who is pulled between the mortal world, which needs her to bring growth and

prosperity (Hadestown, “Livin’ It Up On Top”), and her husband who has become increasingly bitter and jealous of her absences (Hadestown, “Way Down Hadestown” and “Chant”). This idea is likely inspired by the way women are often pulled between their work-life and home-life and the common expectation that women are caretakers, as well as Persephone’s mythological role in bringing spring. *Hadestown*’s Persephone hates the idea of returning to her husband’s town (aka the Underworld), singing that she needs “morphine in a tin/Give me a crate of the fruit of the vine/Takes a lot of medicine/to make it through the wintertime” (Hadestown, “Way Down Hadestown”). Her associations in mythology with spring, prosperity, and fertility are extended into a tendency for overindulgence in wine and drugs to get through hard times in her relationship. This is not a unique concern, but it likely resonates for many current viewers who are dealing with strained situations in their marriage and reflects the modern prevalence of divorce and the falling apart of marriages.

Persephone and Hades’ troubled relationship is even related to the contemporary climate crisis. The song “Chant” encapsulates the current state of this broken relationship and links it with current events. Persephone and Hades’ strained love and “wrath” are directly linked to the harsh weather and “broken” nature of the world Orpheus and Eurydice live in; they are “the reason . . . the seasons are wrong . . . why times are so hard/It’s because of the gods/The gods have forgotten the song of their love” (Hadestown, “Chant”). The disconnect between Hades and Persephone is framed as one between the increasingly industrialized and capitalistic world of “steel drums and automobiles” (Hadestown, “Chant”), represented by Hades, and the “natural” world of the “harvest . . . and people” that has been polluted by industrialization, represented by Persephone (Hadestown, “Chant”). In a key moment, Persephone claims that due to

Hades “oceans rise and overflow/it ain’t right and it ain’t natural” (despite the content of the play having nothing to do with the ocean), firmly linking this disconnect to the climate crisis (Hadestown, “Chant”). This song represents only one facet of a complex relationship between these two characters. This relationship is grounded in modern concerns despite its source in ancient texts.

Unlike the *Hymn* or the *Metamorphoses*, the basis of this relationship is portrayed as love, despite the currently fraught nature of their marriage. As Orpheus tells it, “the lady [Persephone] loved him and the kingdom they shared/but without her above, not one flower would grow” (Hadestown, “Epic I”). The story of their relationship, as told by Orpheus, excludes any kidnapping or even the presence of Demeter (aside from vague mentions of Perspehone’s mother and Mother Earth). In this variation on Persephone’s abduction, there is no abduction. This is purely a love story with the only conflict coming from Perspehone’s absence causing barrenness in the world above and Hades’ jealousy in the world below, instead of godly conflict between Hades, Perspehone, Demeter and/or Zeus. In fact, Demeter does not play a role at all, and Zeus disappears from this world entirely. However, allusions to the abduction and Hades’ past patriarchal control over Persephone still haunt the musical. Hades sings he must “shackle her [Persephone] from wrist to wrist with sterling silver bracelets” (Hadestown, “Chant (Reprise)”) in order to keep Persephone in his life. The relationship’s origins notwithstanding, the current state of their relationship is clearly dire. Overall, the musical is very much shaped by the concerns of modern America, from industrialization affecting the natural world to the depiction of a marriage that begins from love and grows more complicated with time.

Equally shaped by modern concerns in a very different way, *Lore Olympus*, a popular online graphic novel created by Rachel Smythe and hosted by the website Webtoon, takes place in a world quite similar to the contemporary Western one. Featuring Persephone and Hades, it depicts a highly-dramatized love story between the two as a young woman who is new to the big city and a powerful CEO enchanted by her. It has proved very attractive to its current readers. Young Persephone (once known as Kore, a reference to one of Persephone's religious cult titles) lived most of her life in the mortal world below with her mother, but moves to Olympus at the start of the story. She is starting college and living outside her mother's shadow for the first time. This places Persephone in a role which may be very relatable to younger readers. She is generally characterized as very innocent and caring but also intelligent—she is designed as an extremely sympathetic character. Hades is portrayed as a powerful, much older (2000 years to her 19 years), lonely business man stuck in a complicated and unhappy relationship with the nymph Minthe. However, meeting Persephone changes Hades' life forever, in a good way. The way Persephone is framed as special and able to change Hades' life is another key part of the draw to Persephone's character. Hades himself is also framed very sympathetically as both powerful and charismatic, but also caring and thoughtful. One further draw of this relationship is how it includes many common romantic tropes, such as Hades as the “misunderstood bad boy” who is both dangerous and kind.

The story of *Lore Olympus* begins when Persephone takes steps out of her comfort zone by going to a party, which indicates her readiness to explore more mature roles and relationships. At the party, Hades spots her and is instantly infatuated. He goes so far as to compare her beauty to Aphrodite's and to find Aphrodite lacking.

Aphrodite overhears this and becomes enraged; in a move seemingly based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Aphrodite (aka Venus) drugs Persephone with Eros (aka Cupid)'s help and leaves her in the back of Hades' car. This preserves the classic framework of Hades kidnapping Persephone and bringing her to the Underworld while simultaneously absolving Hades's blame in the abduction. When Hades arrives home in the Underworld, he discovers Persephone there—much to their mutual embarrassment. Persephone remains without agency in this first part of the story, but this plot device provides time for the two of them to bond and become interested in one another on a level beyond the superficial. It is Persephone and Hades' mutual interest in one another that prompts their friendship as it complicates the events to follow. From this point on, the story evolves, following romances, marriages, affairs, and friendships through an ever-growing roller-coaster of events.

The gods of *Lore Olympus* are described by a reviewer as “Kardashian-types” (“Lore Olympus, Vol. 1”), and this is quite accurate. In fact, the relationships of Greek mythology are almost primed to be spun that way, given the amount of relationships that we see as scandalous and taboo today. But there is also a very clear rewriting of the context and events of the classical myths. Persephone was certainly not accidentally taken to the Underworld in the ancient Greek and Roman myths, nor was she going to a more mature event (a party) with the intent to experience the world.<sup>9</sup> Smythe's writing nonetheless reflects her intent to write a romance. In later parts of the webcomic, she also explores how people in the modern world experience issues like sexual assault (not

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<sup>9</sup> The abduction taking place in a meadow in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* has been interpreted many ways by authors and scholars: both as a sign of childhood innocence and as a sign of maturity and preparation for the next stage of life, which often involves marriage (McClure 66; Foley 34). However, it should be noted that Persephone's maturity does not justify Hades' kidnapping of her.

between Persephone and Hades), infertility, and relationships with unbalanced power dynamics.

To move from the commercial realm more toward the fan realm, another recent interpretation of Persephone is Nikita Gill's; her work is representative of common themes in current fan depictions, likely because Gill works at the intersection between commercial and fan. She began as a poet posting in a fan space, Tumblr, and only later became a published poet whose work has been considered by some literary critics and scholars. Many of her poems are feminist interpretations of fairy tales and mythology. Persephone appears in her work several times, and these poems have been shared on Tumblr. Her most popular posts have been reblogged or liked upwards of 10,000 or 20,000 times. Compared to other posts about Persephone (which, even on the most popular end, generally seem to have only 1,000-5,000 reblogs or likes), this is quite significant.

Gill often depicts the relationship of Persephone and Hades as one of mutual love. For example, she starts the poem "Persephone to Hades" by writing that "You are the kindest thing/that ever happened to me,/even if that is not how our tale is told" (Gill). This version of Persephone loves Hades for how he empowered her; she asserts that Hades saw how her strength "demanded its own throne" (Gill). She emphasizes Persephone's intrinsic power and her choice of Hades. Hades is the one who gives Persephone's power extrinsic form. She gains power through her husband like in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and *Metamorphoses*. While it is unclear whether Persephone was abducted in Gill's version, Gill addresses this change from abductee to partner with the words "even if that is not how our tale is told" (Gill). This turn is a clear departure from how the best known extant ancient texts depict this story. It is now

Persephone's agency which drives the focus of the poem rather than Hades' or Demeter's, but Persephone needs Hades in order to obtain the power which she "demands." A still-extant patriarchal power system underpins both ancient and contemporary texts.

Works by contemporary authors about myth are always in dialogue with ancient versions. They are both shaped by these older texts and warp their meaning to their own purposes. However, they are not only shaped by the oldest texts. Interestingly, Gill also adds, in a Tumblr post with the poem, that "there are versions of [Persephone's] story in existence that talk about her wandering into the Underworld on her own." She is very likely referencing the beliefs on Tumblr about pre-patriarchal Persephone, which are inspired by Spretnak's work. Gill's work is influenced by the fan context in which it was posted, similar to the fan works we will soon be examining.

What are the cultural forces shaping these depictions? Their focus on feminism and female agency is key, but their place within the world of fandom also makes fanfiction about Persephone unique. The next section of this thesis will explore that fandom alongside some of the most popular fanfics about Persephone.

### **The World of Persephone Fanfiction**

As with literary fiction, so many texts about Persephone exist in fandom that it is impossible to analyze or reference all of them. Therefore, we will focus on several of the most kudos-ed (or "liked") examples from fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), along with more reblogged and liked posts on Tumblr. I will analyze common ideas and how they are contested. My analysis deals primarily with the depiction of the

relationship between Hades and Persephone as a positive, and often romantic, one; it is by far the most popular way of representing Persephone. In the character tag “Persephone” on *Archive of Our Own*, the top four most popular relationships are all variations on Persephone and Hades being romantically involved. The next five are relationships that do not include Persephone at all, while the tenth is another version of Persephone and Hades. Approximately 2,506 of 4,571 (as of 3/15/2022), 54% of fanfics that include Persephone as a character, portray her in a relationship with Hades. In addition, any other depictions of Perspehone in a relationship with someone else must be less than or equal to the last relationship on the top ten list; therefore, any other single relationship has less than approximately 152 of the 4,571 (3.3%) fanfics to its name.

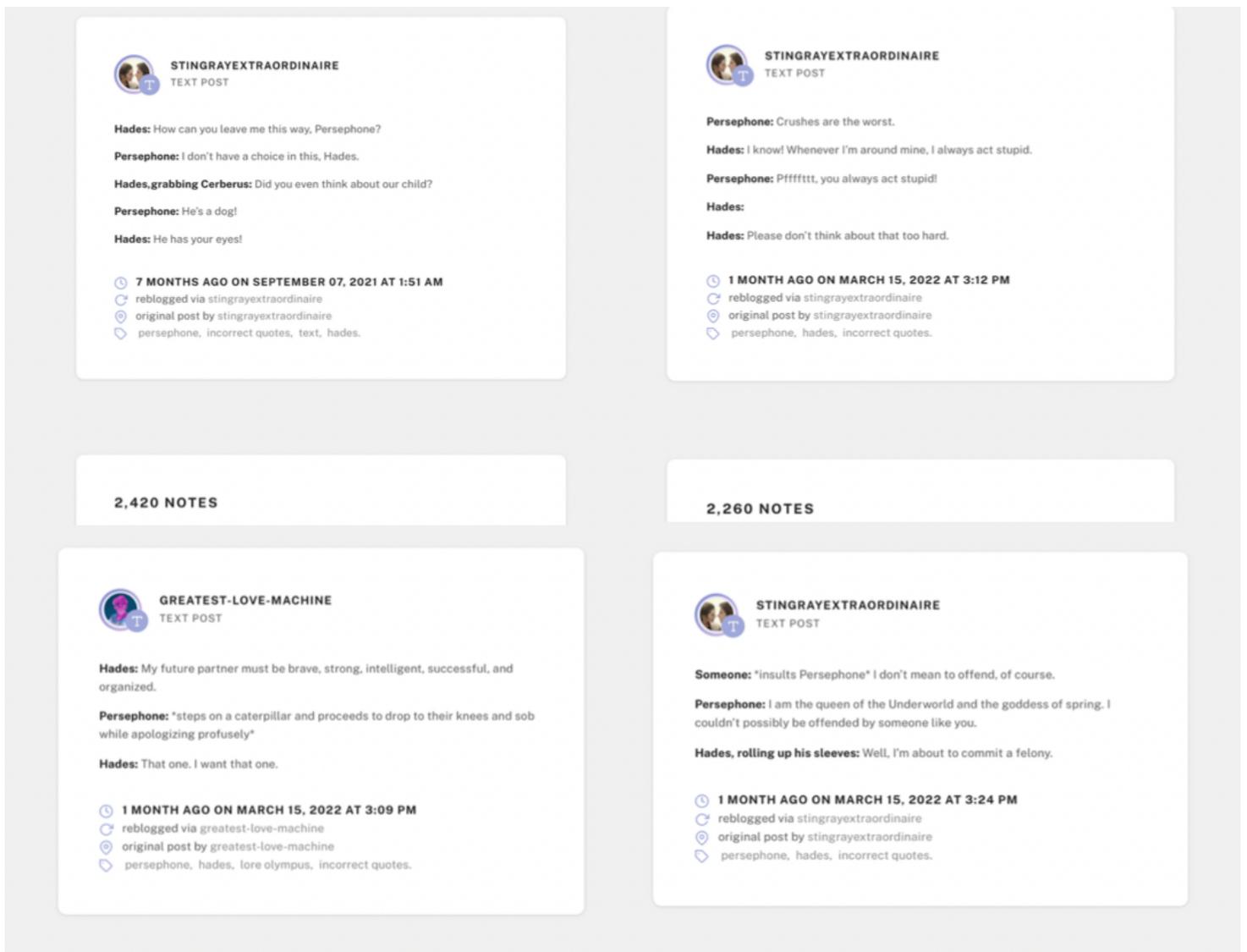
The popularity of Persephone and Hades as a couple is also reflected in the posts made about Persephone on Tumblr. While AO3 is a site where fanworks are posted, there is not much room for interaction, aside from the comments on particular stories. Therefore, lots of fandom activity happens adjacent to AO3 on sites like Tumblr. Looking at Tumblr reveals the context in which fans of Perspehone are reading fan works. Tumblr is a site with a wide variety of content and communities. Even within smaller communities such as fandoms or even “sides of tumblr” (ex: “science side of tumblr” or “vintage car side of tumblr”), there is no guarantee a community will share the same beliefs. In fact, arguments within fandoms are sometimes even more divisive than arguments between fandoms and can last for years (think Team *Captain America* vs Team *Iron Man*). Arguments about Persephone are often contentious and long-lasting as well, revealing the deep emotional attachment fans have to these ideas and characters.

There are metrics for determining the popularity of individual posts: likes and reblogs. Together, they are referred to as “notes.” When searching for something on Tumblr, you are either searching with keywords or for a specific tag. The first results you will see are the “Popular” posts, the posts with the most notes that fit the search criteria. Looking at “Popular” posts and the number of notes they get makes it possible to get a sense of the most prevalent ideas in a fandom, even if it is hard to place these numbers in context. It is difficult to know how many people saw the post and chose not to like or reblog it compared to the number of those who did. It is also impossible to know how many people are in a given fandom or community because people participate in so many different ways. Some only browse, and others passively reblog or like the content of others. Certain fans reblog a post only to argue with the initial poster, many create their own original posts, and the majority combine the above possibilities in ever-changing amounts. However, one way to get a glimpse of a community’s beliefs is through text posts.

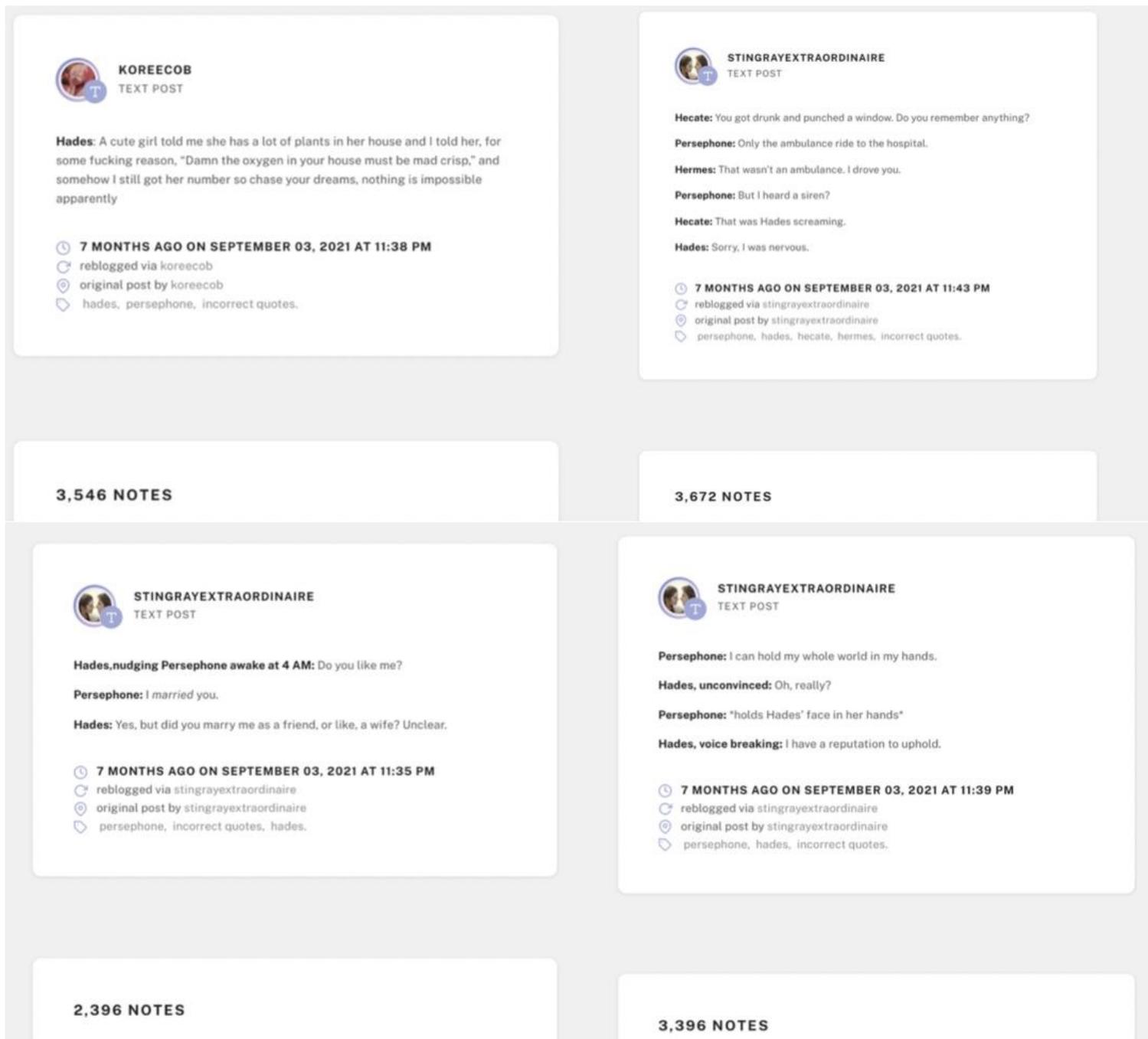
Some of the most common text posts found when searching “Persephone” on Tumblr are known as “incorrect quotes” posts. Incorrect quotes are quotes the poster thinks are funny (usually from other fandoms on the site) and that they believe might be spoken by characters they like, often in a humorous way. However, these characters never actually said these quotes and so they are “incorrect.” These posts are a useful tool for understanding how a fandom characterizes a character. A fandom has no obligation to be consistent or accurate to canon (in the fannish sense of the word), so the way a fandom or portions of a fandom interpret and portray a character may be wildly different from one another. By understanding the dialogue and actions commonly ascribed to a character in popular incorrect quotes posts, just like when puzzling out the

characterization of any figure in literature, these posts help us understand a community’s understanding of a character rather than a singular poster or author. Below are eight text posts with over 1,500 notes. They help give a sense of how Persephone is commonly portrayed.<sup>10</sup>

Fig. 1 & 2. @stingrayextraordinaire, @koreecob, and @greatest-love-machine, various “incorrect quotes” Tumblr posts, 2020-2021.



<sup>10</sup> The dates in these pictures are not the original dates these posts were posted.



These posts depict Persephone in what Tumblr users consider as a close, positive relationship with Hades. "Persephone/Hades" (the slash indicates a romantic

relationship) or their (relation)ship's name "Persephades" is often in the tags of these posts, indicating this relationship is meant to be read as romantic involving, in this case, a deep emotional bond, often a sexual relationship, and often a marriage. The relationship between Persephone and Hades is warped to be whatever the poster and the fandom finds to be cute and/or funny. The fans' conception of what it means to be in a close and positive relationship is an idea that is then constantly reinforced by the repetition of these incorrect quotes using different characters, relationships, and fandoms. These interactions are idealized as the way that any relationship that fans find cute would interact with one another.

What is the relationship these posts idealize?

In these posts, Hades is depicted as loving, silly, a little bit stupid, insecure, and anxious, protective over Persephone, and generally wrapped around Persephone's finger. That is how the ideal male part of this heterosexual relationship is portrayed: a decent guy who is loving, safe, and comfortable, a friend and companion as well as a romantic interest. Persephone is often also portrayed as loving, silly, somewhat more long-suffering and serious at times, powerful and even willing to be violent. For example, in one of @stingrayextraordinaire's posts, Persephone is depicted as getting drunk and punching a window, for unknown reasons, while in the post by @greatest-love-machine, Persephone is extremely empathetic and caring to the point of comedy. In that post, Hades abandons any idea of what he previously wanted out of a relationship because he is so infatuated by Persephone. Both of these parts of Persephone's characterization together reveal how the ideal female part of this heterosexual relationship is depicted: innately likable, a caring but strong person who

can express her traditional femininity without that femininity being considered a weakness.

This characterization relates to a central facet of the fandom's fascination with Perspehone: her duality as "flower goddess and dread queen" (Garrity). Tumblr user @cheriespit writes, in a post that got over 5,000 notes: "get yourself a girl who can be both the goddess of spring and the queen of the underworld" (using the meme format "get you a \_\_\_\_ (man, girl, person, etc.) who can be both \_\_\_ and \_\_\_"). The interest in this duality likely comes from the way that it unifies flowers, spring, life, and caring (traditionally associated with femininity) and death, power and being a ruler, and judgment (traditionally associated with masculinity) within one figure, allowing room for both conforming to and defying traditional ideas of womanhood. Being strong and powerful is no longer considered an unfeminine trait for Persephone. In fact, being strong and powerful while maintaining traditional femininity is idealized as the goal.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the central focus of all of these posts is that these two figures are in a romantic relationship, as is the central fascination of most fandoms. This tendency is almost certainly an extension of contemporary society's prioritization of romantic relationships and the expectation that these relationships will fulfill people. However, there are still arguments within the fandom over the choice to depict Persephone and Hades in a relationship and how their relationship is depicted. A major point of contention is how some stories demonize Demeter in order to empower Persephone and make Hades sympathetic. As one Tumblr user puts it,

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<sup>11</sup> This fandom is also complicated in a different way than more popular (and more traditionally studied) fandoms by the overlap between it and neo-pagans. A community that identifies as hellenic polytheists and worships Greek (and other) gods also has a presence on Tumblr and uses many of the same tags as the fandom. Hellenic polytheists who worship Perspehone therefore exist adjacent to and even within the fandom of Persephone. Hellenic polytheists are very much a part of the debates that wrack the community of Persephone fans online. However, as previously mentioned, many would probably not take kindly to the way I treat Persephone as a character rather than a goddess/religious figure in this thesis.

if your feminist retelling of hades and persephone villainizes Demeter just to make hades the adorkable himbo maybe you missed the point and should look at how you reconstruct narratives, and why you still equate romantic fulfilment as the ultimate goal of female driven stories at the expense of female relationships. (@chaandajaan-moved)

@chaandajaan-moved makes an excellent point. The context of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* features how the mother-daughter bond is strong enough to thwart the complete success of the patriarchy. Coming from that context, the contemporary frequency of Demeter's demonization is a significant and often problematic shift in these stories. Based on its frequency in fanfics and other media, it is likely indicative of the influence of contemporary cultural perspectives on daughters' relationships with their mothers.

@chaandajaan-moved adds in the tags "#i love happy romantic hades persephone but ....maybe some critical thinking would be ok." This post has over 5,000 notes (as 3/16/2022), showing its popularity on Tumblr as compared to most other posts about Persephone (which seem to get 100-300 notes on average). Depicting Persephone and Hades in a relationship and believing that relationship would be cute or interesting can co-exist with believing it is not right to villainize Demeter, but it is telling that Demeter's villainization is so commonly linked with romantic Persephone/Hades in these stories and fanfics. @chaandajaan-moved call for "critical thinking" about how to write Demeter in fanfiction seems to be a more recent development in the fandom. The user refers to a "female-driven story" centering on "female relationships," which probably references the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* specifically. It may even be indicative of wider-spread understanding about Demeter's role in the Homeric *Hymn to*

*Demeter* and how radically different it has now become in fanfiction and other contemporary works.

Arguments in the fandom are commonly about whether erasing or reframing Persphone's abduction as a part of a romantic relationship is problematic (an argument that will be further explored later). However, an important point of contention within these arguments is whether an older version than the Greek and Roman ones existed, featuring Persephone willingly going to the Underworld and falling in love with Hades. As mentioned above, there is a possibility there is a pre-patriarchal version of this myth, but modern scholars have no actual record of this myth and what it may or may not contain. Authors like Charlene Spretnak characterize this potential myth from a matriarchal or matrifocal religion as a story that centers on the bond between mother and daughter as well as the daughter coming into her own power. Hades is absent. However, there is a belief, circulated strongly on Tumblr in 2015 and after, that a version of Persephone's abduction by Hades exists that involves no abduction at all. Its source seems to be Charlene Spretnak's retelling or, rather, a warping of Spretnak's retelling.<sup>12</sup> In most posts about the belief, Spretnak's work and works either directly or indirectly inspired by it are often shared as sources, alongside some very sketchy-seeming websites. But there are no even seemingly reputable sources to be found that include the presence of Hades as well as Persephone willingly going down to the Underworld. Nevertheless, this belief and the arguments surrounding it are now a part of the community of Persphone fans and the world beyond it forever.

The idea of this older version also allows fans to neatly evade the question of whether rewriting stories about Persephone without kidnapping and forced marriage is

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<sup>12</sup> To read further about this belief and see the sources of those who spread it, [see one of the most popular posts about it with over 260,000 notes \(as of 3/13/22\) from 2015](#) (@dusty-purple et al.).

problematic or not. The consistent attempt to ground the idea of Persephone willingly going down to the Underworld in sources and ancient versions rather than just confidently claiming it as a contemporary invention is partially due to a modern game of “telephone” in which Spretnak’s version is filtered through several stories and then retold in Tumblr posts. But this attempt is also due to an instinct to legitimize modern interpretations by grounding them in ancient traditions and using scholarly practices, such as citation, to attempt to definitely prove the “truth.” Every time this argument occurs, there is the inevitable question of: what are your sources? Even I address the same question above because present writers and thinkers, myself included, often look to the past with the idea that we can find definitive answers about it. But that is almost impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, being factual and “right” are very important ideas on the internet, especially on Tumblr, as is “proving” that you are right to as many people as you can convince.

In line with this effort to be “right,” there has recently been wider recognition of how Charlene Spretnak’s work influences this belief. Tumblr user @homeracist writes they would like to share a “:) friendly reminder that the story where Persephone wanders into the Underworld and decides to stay was written in 1978 by Charlene Spretnak :).”<sup>13</sup> The most fascinating piece of this history is the way that using Spretnak’s

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<sup>13</sup> Tumblr user @honorthe gods discusses this misconception in a [Tumblr post about Persephone](#) (@honorthe gods et al.) and also discusses many other points and debates influenced by their perspective as a modern Hellenic polytheist. To further explore the many debates of this fandom, some good starting places are this [2013 post about the opinions of different people who do or do not “ship” \(meaning, they do or do not believe certain characters should be in a relationship\) Persephone and Hades](#) (@topaz-and-turquoise et al.), and the 2015 post linked in the previous note. Another two places to begin are tumblr user @honorthe gods’s “Persephone” tag, and Tumblr user @therkalexander’s “essays” tag (also known as published author of fiction books (about Persephone and Hades) Rachel Alexander and fanfiction author and AO3 user KataCthonia). Newcomers looking into these posts should be aware of the fact that these are fans and people interacting on social media and in fan spaces, not academic authors. They are writing in a particular context with an expectation of a safe space. Therefore, replying to years-old posts without an understanding of fannish norms is inappropriate. The language used in these posts is also often colloquial and built upon years of references, so it may not always be comprehensible to

work to justify Persephone and Hades' romantic relationship truly warps Spretnak's intent, which was to imagine a world before the patriarchy. Her version of Persephone and her agency clearly resonates with recent readers, but to reincorporate Hades into that story is antithetical to the attempt to write pre-patriarchal stories. However, fanfiction authors and fans are no longer trying to write a pre-patriarchal story and are now writing for very different purposes. In fact, a text that aspires to be feminist (perhaps even post-patriarchal) should and commonly does respond to the power system currently in place. Therefore, the inclusion of Hades and the patriarchy may be inevitable in these stories. The question is how exactly Hades' role and relationship to Persephone are portrayed in them.

There is often continuity between these fanfics and Tumblr, but individual authors also deviate from the collective understanding. To emphasize the variety within the fandom, I will analyze multiple, shorter stories: the top four most popular fanfics (based on kudos) which include Persephone as a character that have less than 10,000 words (as of 3/15/2022), starting with the least popular of the four and continuing to the most popular.<sup>14</sup> All four of these fanfics are somewhat older, written in 2010, 2013, and 2014. The two written in 2010, "The Fruits of Hades" and "Here Thy Hands Let Fall

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outsiders looking in. See more about the ethics of interacting with fan content and data as an academic researcher or other outsider in Dym and Feisler, Kelley.

<sup>14</sup> The actual rankings are skewed by the massive popularity of the *Percy Jackson* series in which Persephone is only a minor character. A similar phenomenon seems to occur with a Korean web novel I am much less familiar with, *Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint*, and the use of mythological characters in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. By removing these three fandoms, a much easier to navigate image of the most popular works actually centering on Persephone emerges. In the 40 most popular works (based on kudos), 29 (72.5%) are tagged with Persephone and Hades in a relationship. Five more include that relationship without tagging it, often because Persephone is not a main character, bringing the numbers up to 34 of 40 (85%). The texts I look at will also be restrained by my knowledge of fandoms. For example, I will not be looking at texts associated with fandoms I do not already have knowledge of, such as *Hades* the video game. Additionally, "Here Let Thy Hands Fall the Gather'd Flower" was mis-tagged with only the relationship Persephone/Hades and not the individual characters. Therefore, it does not appear in this tag but it is the second-most popular fic (by kudos) about Persephone that I have found and so I have included it in my thesis.

the Gather'd Flower," were both written as part of Yuletide 2010, which is "the annual rare and obscure fandoms fic exchange" ("Yuletide 2010"). They were even written in response to the same prompt. "Kore" was written as part of Yuletide 2013.

Part of their popularity likely stems from the fact they were written long enough ago that they have had more time to be viewed and liked. However, this means they are a little disconnected from the very current Tumblr community described above. They were often written before the more recent trends I identified, though the older Tumblr posts linked in the footnotes would be approximately contemporary with the 2013 and 2014 fanfics. Nevertheless, these fanfics are popular even to this day. Fans continue to read and leave "kudos" on these stories. There are comments on them from the time of posting to the present. Despite any differences over time, however, one key idea has remained steady. In all of these stories, there is a concerted effort to write Persephone as having agency and the power to make the choices each version of her wants.

In the next sections, I will briefly sketch out the unique ways each author chooses to depict Persephone's agency. As was previously stated, I think of feminism as a movement within a patriarchal power system that actively works towards equality between all people, primarily focusing on people who identify as women. Therefore, I will address how these depictions represent Persephone's agency within the patriarchal power system. I will also touch on the representation of two other key topics of concern: collective, rather than individual, feminism that works towards change and intersectional feminism.

## “Some Unholy War”

In “Some Unholy War,” by AO3 user “omelet,” “omelet” reverses the traditional roles of Persephone and Hades: Persephone is the kidnapper and Hades is the one kidnapped. This works to empower this version of Persephone as the agent of the story while simultaneously evading the more sinister implications of kidnapping as analogous to marriage in the ancient versions. “omelet” makes it clear Persephone is powerful enough to keep Hades trapped and daring enough to try. With Hades at her mercy, Persephone spends time getting to know Hades and asking him questions, such as if he’s lonely. When Hades turns that very question back on her, “she loses a bit of her youthful exuberance, her expression suddenly a little pensive . . . ‘I don't have the time to feel lonely either. I guess we're a little of the same’” (“omelet”). There are hints, like this, that her motive for kidnapping Hades was her own loneliness and that she sees a kindred spirit in Hades. Throughout Hades’ captivity, he seems resigned to being nonviolently trapped.

He is also intrigued by Persephone. She is a much freer, wilder, younger character than Hades, who is the point-of-view character, but she also clearly feels bound to her duties as a goddess. Hades describes their roles and duties, presumably as god of the dead and god of spring (though this is not specified), with himself being “a necessary evil, just as you [Persephone] are a necessary good” (“omelet”). Despite being bound to the mortal world by her duty, Persephone is curious about the things beyond her home, especially the Underworld, and asks Hades many questions. Hades is transformed by his time with Persephone and falls in love. He can finally relate to the mortals he previously derided for doing anything for love, even attempting to thwart

death and necessity. When Zeus asserts his power over Persephone and removes Hades from her custody, Hades gives pomegranate seeds to Persephone. Persephone is backed in a corner and must choose between her role in constant service to others as a “necessary good”<sup>15</sup> and her own personal desire for companionship and the unknown. This story represents the agency of individual people, not specifically women, as a priority. Persephone and Hades are both in similar situations, and the pressures on Persephone are not unique to her because she is a woman. The story depicts a struggle between the greater good of society and the personal desires of individuals, as well as the eventual balance found between them.

Persephone chooses to eat pomegranate seeds (off-screen) presumably so she can continue to be with Hades and explore the Underworld. In the end, Hades asserts he became Persephone’s “consort,” continuing to reinforce the idea Hades is the one with less power. It is central to this fanfic that Persephone is powerful and bends the King of the Underworld and other gods to her will, driving forward both the story and her relationship with Hades in every situation, except when Zeus forces her to release Hades and Hades gives her the pomegranate seeds. However, even in that situation, Persephone actively makes the choice to eat the pomegranate seeds and bind herself to the Underworld.

There are little to no explicit mentions of this society as a patriarchal one, though patriarchal biases could implicitly underpin the way Hades assumes he will be powerful enough to free himself from Persephone. Furthermore, a patriarchal hierarchy is behind Zeus being the only one powerful enough to stop Persephone’s plan. If these smaller details intentionally reference this, then Persephone undermines these assumptions and

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<sup>15</sup> Hades has a similar role in constant service to others as a “necessary evil;” if it were not for Hades also taking on this role, I might say this references a role women are often expected to take on.

hierarchies, consistently getting her way despite the forces working against her. However, there is generally no explicit recognition of this, as her problems are not linked to the patriarchal power system in the first place; there are no mentions of the very real concerns of women regarding sexual assault that underpin most ancient versions of this story. There is also little to no sense of collective feminism that moves towards action against a patriarchal system. Only Persephone's individual struggle is mentioned, and it is disconnected from (as was said above) the concerns of women as a whole. Furthermore, there seem to be no efforts to represent intersectional feminism in any way. Both the reality of the patriarchy and the very real power and sexual dynamics that affected and still affect people in patriarchal societies are generally evaded in this story in favor of depicting Persephone's individual power and agency.

#### "The Fruits of Hades"

"The Fruits of Hades," by AO3 user "Lesserstorm" interacts more directly with the traditional patriarchal power dynamic between men and women as the story slowly reveals more about the characters and their lives. It empowers Persephone by portraying her as pulling the strings behind the scenes of the story in the small ways she can. However, "Lesserstorm" also emphasizes how powerless Persephone is to the whims of other gods, especially the male gods, until she gains power and protection by being in a relationship with Hades. After Persephone is kidnapped by Hades, she has a very real fear of being assaulted. She is brought to have dinner with him every night and stands up to him every night by refusing his food. However, Hades never assaults her, never crosses Persephone's boundaries, and never forces her to eat the food, nor does he

or anyone else ever enter her room in the Underworld; “each night she retires to her room to sleep alone” (“Lesserstorm”). Through these dinners, Perspehone gets to know Hades and vice versa. It is slowly revealed Persephone set herself up as bait for Hades after he had a dramatic blow-out fight with Zeus. Hades kidnapping her enrages Zeus. However, she precipitated her own kidnapping in an effort to escape Zeus, who is sexually interested in her, and her mother, who uses her as a tool in the “never-ending power struggles” of Olympus (“Lesserstorm”). Demeter is depicted as a horrible, uncaring mother throughout the whole story. Persephone also reveals the fact that most “nymphs adopt a kind of protective camouflage around the gods” (“Lesserstorm”) due to the power imbalance between them and the constant threat of sexual assault and/or rape. But as Persephone and Hades play games of “petteia” (an ancient strategy game) and get to know each other, the at-first unbalanced petteia win-loss tally evens out as their relationship slowly reaches equal footing. However, Persephone still refuses to eat the food of the Underworld, asserting, “a forced choice is not a free choice” (“Lesserstorm”).

Eventually, Perspehone is forced to choose between returning to Olympus without any protection from the whims of Zeus (and the games of her mother) or staying in the Underworld. Ultimately, she is still trapped within a patriarchal system where choosing Olympus or the Underworld means she has no guarantee she will be free or safe. However, Persephone has the agency to choose Hades and ensure no one can change her choice by eating the pomegranate seeds. She chooses the lesser evil: the man who, despite kidnapping her to get back at Zeus and not regretting it, has respected her boundaries at every turn, who has come to know and seems to respect her intelligence and opinions, and who she has come to trust and feel affection towards. It is through

choosing to stay, marry, and have a romantic relationship with Hades that Persephone gains the power to be politically untouchable by Zeus or Demeter.

One key piece of this fanfic is how Persephone acknowledges she is trapped in a situation in which she has little to no power except over how she chooses to present herself, who she chooses to trust, and the man at whose mercy she chooses to throw herself. Persephone's active choices are what give her power and possibilities in this story, from sparking her own kidnapping to actively choosing to eat the pomegranate seeds and be in a relationship with Hades. "Lesserstorm" has a very clear focus on depicting Persephone's agency and the agency of women in general, represented by other nymphs, within a patriarchal system that gives them very few options in life. The existence of rape and sexual assault as well as the power dynamics that exist within relationships with men are not erased like they are in some fanfics. There is absolutely, despite the limited number of characters, a collective sense of womanhood established through Persephone's revelations about nymphs. However, there is no action, much less collective action, towards changing that patriarchal system. Persephone gains the power she does have by marrying Hades, within the system, not despite it; more importantly, she does not explicitly use that power to help change the system for others. Additionally, Persephone is depicted as a white (probably, she is only ever referred to as "pale" ("Lesserstorm")), upper-class, abled, and cisgender woman, and there are no explicit mentions of women who are not in privileged positions. Hephaestus, who is traditionally depicted as disabled, is mentioned, and Demeter makes ableist comments about Hephaestus, which horrifies Persephone. But that is the closest the story comes toward addressing intersectionality, which is barely anything at all. Womanhood and

the agency of women within a coercive patriarchal system are the greatest focus of this story.

“Here Thy Hands Let Fall the Gather'd Flower”

In “Here Thy Hands Let Fall the Gather'd Flower,” by AO3 user “Cinaed,” Persephone works to escape from the restrictive expectations of womanhood, as represented by both Demeter and Zeus. This story is told from the perspective of Hades, starting from when Persephone is a young girl. As Persephone grows up, she becomes close to Artemis and even wants to join Artemis' hunters. Athena says that Persephone “. . . wears the garb of Artemis and runs through the woods without care for her appearance. Or so Demeter complains” (“Cinaed”). Unfortunately, both Demeter, who despairs of her daughter's impropriety, and Zeus, who is sexually interested in this version of Persephone, seem determined not to let Persephone join Artemis. After hearing about this, Hades remembers Zeus' “fondness for the chase . . . [his] delight in finding the most unwilling women and softening their hearts towards him—or, if that failed, using his powers as king of the gods to break their will and take what he pleased” (“Cinaed”). This knowledge is what Athena uses to convince Hades to help her. Athena orchestrates a plan for Persephone to hide in the Underworld so Zeus and Demeter cannot find her. Artemis, on the other hand, is convinced Hades has tricked Athena and will attempt to marry Persephone himself. This leads to an initial misunderstanding between Persephone and Hades. Athena has “managed to convince Persephone that this [measure] was necessary, not pleasant” (“Cinaed”). However, Hades' choice to build a throne for Persephone brings this misunderstanding to a boiling point. Hades merely

believes his guest deserves a throne out of respect for her role as a goddess, but Persephone is outraged by what she sees as Hades' attempt to make her his consort.

After this misunderstanding is cleared up, Persephone finally feels comfortable enough in the Underworld to act as she normally does—she takes off her sandals, and she does not wear “any sort of footwear in her time in the underworld, not since she'd first discarded her sandals” (“Cinaed”). Persephone explores the Underworld, fascinated by this strange land and also by how shades are judged by Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aeacus. Persephone, the goddess of spring, and Hades bond over gardening as Hades “tend[s] the flowers” (“Cinaed”) in the Fields of Asphodel, the neutral part of the Underworld. Persephone even finds herself in the role of helping to judge a soul. However, when she moves to eat the food of the Underworld, Hades panics and warns Persephone that the food can bind even gods to the Underworld. He thinks to himself, “The idea of Persephone staying here was...well, it had some appeal, if Hades was honest with himself, but the idea of Persephone trapped unwillingly for the rest of time was horrifying” (“Cinaed”). Hades firmly believes Persephone's choice is the most important thing. In the Underworld, Persephone experiences the freedom to be herself and to explore the world around her, even taking on powerful roles which she never expected.

Eventually, when Hermes comes for Persephone, it is revealed the gods believe Hades kidnapped Persephone. Persephone's return is demanded by Demeter and Zeus, despite the happiness and freedom she has found in the Underworld. After hearing this, Persephone wears the same “miserable, angry [look] one she'd worn in the field of Enna, when she'd thought she had no choice or voice in her own life” (“Cinaed”). But Persephone must leave with Hermes. Afterwards, Hades discovers Persephone deliberately chose to eat seeds from a pomegranate so she would be able to come back to

the Underworld, presumably because she has the freedom to be herself in the Underworld and because she is close to Hades and all of the Underworld's inhabitants. Despite the romantic tint to Hades' thoughts and the lead-in toward a romantic relationship, there is no "official" romantic relationship between them in the actual story.

This fanfic has a focus on the agency of Perspehone to make choices for herself. These choices are framed by references to a patriarchal power system, represented by Zeus and Demeter, who both attempt to enforce the traditional expectations of women, as sex object and proper young woman, respectively, upon Persephone's life. Athena and Artemis both work to help Persephone escape the system trapping her (though they both have different ideas about how to do that). However, none of the characters work toward dismantling the power system itself, they only work within it. Persephone is again depicted as a white (probably, she is only ever referred to as "pale" ("Cinaed")), upper-class, abled, and cisgender woman. There is a singular mention of "the distant east, where other gods dwelled" ("Cinaed"). Additionally, there are no women who are not goddesses mentioned throughout the story, so most of the women we meet are (despite the acknowledgement of patriarchal power system) quite privileged. Overall, intersectionality is of little-to-no concern. The primary concern is the relationship between Persephone and Hades, and how it changes both of their lives.

"Kore"

There is a quite different set-up in "Kore," by AO3 user "oneiriad," which is the most popular fanfic (ranked by kudos) in the "Persephone" tag. The title "Kore" is a

reference to one of Persephone's cult titles and means maiden (McClure 60). The story of Persephone's abduction by Hades in myth often indicates her transition into a more mature role as a wife and woman. However, it is not *Persephone's* coming-of-age story. It is a shift the world imposes on her. In "Kore," on the other hand, Persephone herself is the most active agent in the story and pushes her journey along at every turn.

"oneiriad" weaves anachronistically modern items, a very contemporary tone, and contemporary identities into a vaguely ancient Greek setting in order to empower Persephone to choose from a number of potential roles. Persephone's journey is sparked by the fact that she has "an absolute and total conviction she is not, ever, under any circumstance, going to" go through childbirth or marry—"the idea that she'd ever tie herself to some man or god in that way - well, to be frank, it's never even occurred to her." However, Persephone is expected to do both, so she works to avoid this future.

She consults her relatives (and fellow gods) who each introduce her to new, more mature roles (Aphrodite introduces her to her own sexuality, Artemis to the possibility of being attracted to women, Athena to the idea of being transgender). But Persephone finds none of these possible roles are a good fit for her. With the help of Hermes and her other younger family members, she schemes to marry someone who will not be interested in her so she will not have to be married emotionally or sexually. Persephone eventually stumbles onto the solution of marrying Hades who, as the god of the dead, is not interested in sex. According to Athena, "sex and procreation and all that, those are the concerns of the living - and he's not living" ("oneiriad"). In "Kore," Hades comes up to the mortal world to recapture ghosts escaping from the Underworld. Nymphs, satyrs, and gods often attempt to grab onto his chariot as a common adrenaline-filled dare or game. Hades tolerates this because, as Artemis says, ". . . I think Uncle Hades gets a bit

lonely downstairs. We never do seem to get around to visiting him - though who can blame us. It's so gloomy down there" ("oneiriad"). But Hades never brings anyone back down into the Underworld, and no one ever wants to go down into the Underworld with him—not even the other gods.

In order to catch Hades' attention enough to put her plan into action, Persephone trains her body physically; she "jump[s] and run[s] in circles until she wants to scream from the cramps in her legs" ("oneiriad") in order to leap onto Hades' chariot; she is one of the few to fully succeed. When Hades tells her to get off, Persephone refuses. She demands entrance to the Underworld, and Hades, who is depicted as lonely, is not opposed to having her there. In this story, they seem to have a more familial relationship, rather than a romantic or sexual one. After a few days of observing the workings of the Underworld, Persephone implements a new organization system that makes managing the overwhelming masses of the Underworld far easier for Hades, who is extremely appreciative. When Hecate comes to bring Persephone back to her mother, Persephone insists she was abducted. Hades, grateful for help, plays along saying, "oh, yes. Certainly. Absolutely. I abducted her fair and square. You can't have her, she's mine now" ("oneiriad"). When Hermes arrives with the news Demeter is causing famine in order to get Persephone back, Persephone and Hades together concoct the "nonsense" story Persephone ate the food of the Underworld and cannot return to the mortal world ("oneiriad"). Finally, Zeus (who is a sympathetic character for once) intervenes to help craft a compromise that placates Demeter.

The conditions of Hades and Persephone continuing to have their (fake) "relationship" are that Persephone must visit her mother and that Persephone and Hades must marry. Demeter, interestingly enough, is depicted as hyper-focused on

Persephone marrying the way Demeter sees fit throughout the story. Persephone, however, does not want to force Hades to marry her unwillingly and acknowledges her own role as the instigator who kickstarted this entire situation. Although marrying Hades was her intent, she believes Hades, “shouldn't be forced to marry” her (“oneiriad”). Hades, on the other hand, is more than happy to marry her in order to have her help organizing the Underworld.

At her wedding, Perspehone reunites with her mother and is “surprised at how much she finds she has missed Demeter” (“oneiriad”). She is also given a book by Athena: “*Understanding Asexuality*,” (“oneiriad) which implies that “asexuality” may be the identity Persephone eventually accepts as her own. In the end, her unique path to discovering herself is driven by her own choices. She has the ability to be herself and accept or reject the possibilities others guide her toward. These paths are made possible for her by way of the modern anachronisms and identities. They also work to make the story more relatable for a specific modern audience. Persephone is the active agent behind every part of the story. Even though the pomegranate seeds mean very little in this story, Persephone both literally and symbolically chooses to eat the food of the Underworld and chooses to stay.

Persephone’s agency is a key aspect of this story in a unique way. It is very different from the other three stories in that she is not at all romantically or sexually involved with Hades, but also because her journey takes a very different form than the other three fanfics. While Persephone is once more precipitating her own “kidnapping,” she never fears or expects the control of Hades or the interest of Zeus the way she does in “The Fruits of Hades” or “Here Thy Hands Let Fall the Gather’d Flower.” While Persephone still works to escape patriarchal expectations of womanhood, in “Kore,” the

source of them is generally Demeter. There is also little to no acknowledgment of the patriarchal power dynamics so key to the ancient versions, especially the ubiquity of sexual assault and marital rape. While Persephone receives help from many gods and goddesses along her journey, none of it leads toward any attempt to change the system in which they are all trapped. In this case, the privileged gods and goddesses are all free to be themselves even within an oppressive system. The only attempts to call attention to the patriarchal power system come from Persephone's (as described above) and Athena's stories.

However, both Persephone and Athena are also eventually able to work within the patriarchal system to find their own freedom and do not feel the need to change the system. Athena, who is depicted as transgender,<sup>16</sup> expresses his dissatisfaction with the patriarchal system of power when he describes Zeus' lack of acceptance. Throughout the story, Zeus is consistently described by others as a barrier between the slippage of the modern items and concepts into the ancient world ("don't tell Zeus" (oneiriad) about them is the common refrain). According to Athena, he seems to also be a barrier to the more fluid modern identities and is described as maintaining the patriarchal system. Yet, when he actually appears in the fanfic, these descriptions are defanged by Zeus' reality. He is portrayed as friendly and easygoing; he does not actually care about the items from the future or Athena being transgender—though he is “waiting for the boy [Athena] to show some spirit and elope with her [his lover] like a proper son of mine” (“oneiriad”). Zeus has a particular and traditional idea of what a man should be, but is otherwise not depicted as the power upholding the patriarchy. In Perspehone's story, Demeter is left as one of the only characters upholding the patriarchal power system

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<sup>16</sup> It is notable that Athena, who is typically one of the only female gods who is involved in traditionally male concerns, is depicted as a transgender man in this story.

Persephone is trying to escape. Demeter herself is ultimately depicted as a loving, but overbearing mother who would do anything for her daughter, but she is still the representative of the patriarchal ideas that she has clearly internalized, even anachronistically modern ones, such as worrying about her daughter living in “sin” with Hades (“oneiriad”).

This story makes some moves toward a more intersectional conception of feminism by introducing characters who are not straight or cisgender and discussing some ways in which their oppression intersects with the patriarchal power systems. However, it does not go any further than that, and it does not go as far as including non-white, non-high-class, or disabled characters. As mentioned above, there is little reference to collective action to change the oppressive power systems, and there is only a little bit of a sense of solidarity between characters within these power systems.

Overall, these stories represent the topics of concern in a variety of ways. But there are some trends. There is a focus on women’s agency and sometimes an acknowledgment of the patriarchal system or one of the other two concerns, but rarely more than one. Intersectionality and collective sentiment, much less action, are often not addressed. The common emphasis is on Hades as an ideal romantic partner who offers freedom from the constraints of patriarchy and Demeter as the overbearing guardian of the values of the patriarchy. There is also an emphasis on working within the patriarchal power system to make the best of a bad situation (which is of course its own legitimate form of resistance), but not on changing the power system like feminism prioritizes.

It is also notable that where other readers and writers have identified power in the idea of Demeter as a mother whose grief cripples even the gods and forces them to

bring her daughter back to her, current fanfiction and other commercial retellings often turn Demeter into a controlling, borderline abusive parent. Only some versions have maintained Demeter's relationship with her daughter. This is visible in the strained relationship Persephone has with her mother in three of the fanfics discussed above. Demeter is practically non-existent in "Some Unholy War," but she is one of the main antagonists (and an uncaring mother) in "The Fruits of Hades." In both "Here Thy Hands Let Fall the Gather'd Flower" and "Kore," Demeter represents some of the different kinds of patriarchal expectations that some mothers have for their daughters, such as maintaining "propriety," marrying, and having children. Given the lack of focus on these concerns in ancient texts, it is clearly modern influences shaping the fanfic authors' depictions of Demeter.

However, an idea tying all four stories together is that they all depict a positive (and often romantic) relationship between Persephone and Hades. Most of them depict a powerful Persephone, whether that power comes from herself or her relationship with Hades. Persephone is a full character with a complex motivation and personality in each story. The romantic plotlines are not terribly cliched, even if they are sometimes based on repetitive tropes, romantic or otherwise. Each of these fanfics also plays with the commonly known details of the mythology itself (most often referencing the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* specifically) to write a story that empowers Persephone to take a more active role in fascinatingly different ways. This agency is consistently represented by Persephone choosing to eat the pomegranate seeds and bind herself to the Underworld. The question then becomes, given all that they fail to do: are these stories feminist? Writing a female character with choice and agency is not the only important part of feminism.

### **Feminism: But are the Fanfics Feminist?**

All audiences, fans especially, do not blindly consume and accept the stories they read. As can be seen from the debates I place alongside the stories I analyze, these ideas are constantly being discussed, reinterpreted, and reconstructed. These stories and fan communities are active sites of struggle between ideas and ideologies. Therefore, none of them are solely influenced by feminism or traditionally patriarchal ideals.

A central thread of all four of these stories is to present an empowered Persephone who chooses to enter the Underworld of her own free will and/or to eat the pomegranate seeds and stay with Hades. This choice is as subversive as it is complicit in patriarchal ideas. This choice turns the ancient story of a girl having no choice in her future into one in which her choices determine her future and bring her power. But this is always a binary, coerced choice between only two options. That is not a real choice for Persephone. These fanfics also often dodge the complicating factor of the kidnapping in various ways. While Persephone was abducted and had no choice in her marriage in older versions, as was justified by the male characters in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* as beneficial for her, her marriage is ultimately rewritten into something actually good for her in the fanfics, mirroring that justification, predicated on the idea it is now her “choice.” This is clearly a complicated issue, one which Aimee Hinds addresses.

On the website *Eidolon*, which publishes non-formal scholarship, Aimee Hinds argues that to push aside themes like coercion and violent rape “or wilfully write them out . . . is at best irresponsible, because doing so continues to validate dangerous tropes and leads to actual harm.” She even responds to “Persephone to Hades,” by Nikita Gill,

as well as the comments Gill made in the Tumblr post added to this poem (this is the same poem and post this thesis looked at earlier). Hinds determines that

while Gill's reception work is sound (based on her interpretation of the sources), her feminist agenda is misguided. Gill's poem doesn't deserve to be policed on the grounds that it changes Persephone's story, but it does deserve critique for its suppression of themes that have the potential to be problematic today.

This is absolutely right. Rape, especially marital rape, is still a very real problem. Hinds argues that "Although Persephone's abduction might have been unproblematic in ancient Greece, to tell it as a romance today erases the experiences of both ancient and modern women." Persephone's story is mythological and is not the story of a specific historical woman or girl. However, this story, especially in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, represents the marriage experience of many women and girls in the places where it was told and retold; it even represents the experiences of modern women and girls who are given by their parents into arranged marriages with men. They existed and still exist. Their story is the one still being erased and rewritten by subsequent retellings such as fanfiction.

On this subject, "The Fruits of Hades" is extremely notable for its careful attention to the existence of these issues and norms, through it doesn't deal with sexual assault or rape itself. "Here Thy Hands Let Fall the Gather'd Flower" also addresses sexual assault, but only obliquely and in mentions. Despite this history, there are many readers who read Nikita Gill's poems and view them as feminist. In fact, because the most common way of depicting Perspehone in contemporary times is in a relationship with Hades, some fans may not know or understand this history at all as it is subsumed

by the contemporary depictions. There are also many fanfiction writers who write similar stories, which are viewed as empowering and enjoyable.

What feminism is and means is a very personal matter. These retellings display a particular, select kind of feminism. They are associated with empowerment by their readers but are also complicit with patriarchal ideas. To understand this, it is useful to turn to Janice Radway's work on romance novel reading. In the 1980's, Radway studied a small group of older British women who vociferously read romance novels. The content of these novels is influenced by patriarchal conceptions of womanhood, manhood, and romance, much like fanfiction about Persephone. Radway found it meaningful to distinguish the meaning and function of the act of reading from the content of the text itself. This distinction "empowers us to question whether the significance of the act of reading itself might, under some conditions, contradict, undercut, or qualify the significance of producing a particular kind of story" (Radway 210).

Radway discovered that the readers she was studying found empowerment in the act of reading and refusing the emotional labor of motherhood (211) and that they were driven to read these books by the dissatisfaction they had with their own marital situation, trying to instead fulfill these needs with the romance depicted in the books (215). Radway ultimately leaves it unsettled whether the content of the books merely placates the dissatisfaction that leads the reader to seek them out in the first place. The book certainly creates a fantasy of fulfillment, and this may reposition women back into the limitations of the traditionally female domestic sphere and the role they wished to escape by reading (212, 214). But Radway finds a singular conclusion cannot be made because "romance reading originates in very real dissatisfaction and embodies a valid, if

limited, protest” (220), despite how the romance novels relevant to Radway’s study do not often challenge “the very system of social relations whose faults and imperfections gave rise to the romance and which the romance is trying to perfect” (215). Like Radway did, it is useful to separate how current fanfiction about Persephone often makes its readers and fans feel empowered (the meaning made by the act of reading) from how it also clearly perpetuates certain misogynistic ideas and storylines that can be harmful (the narrative content itself). This allows us to hold both of the realities to be true and to not reject the enjoyment of readers.

Fanfic writers and readers are clearly dissatisfied with patriarchal norms, but instead of Hades, Demeter (as discussed above) and Zeus, who sometimes treats Persephone like a sexual object, now often represent these norms. However, the fanfics frame the solution to Persephone’s problems and dissatisfaction as marrying the “good” man who will respect her, rather than changing the system itself. The fanfics make Hades into that man, regardless of the abduction that starts this relationship in many myths. Similar to Radway’s romance novels, this creates a fantasy about how happiness can be achieved through marriage within the patriarchal system. Radway observes the “fantasy also suggests that the safety and protection of traditional marriage will not compromise a woman's autonomy or self-confidence” (215). Similarly, Persephone’s agency, power, and ability to rule is not threatened by her relationship or marriage, like in “Some Unholy War,” and this is often bolstered by her marriage, like in “Kore.” Persephone’s power sometimes comes solely from being married to Hades, like in “The Fruits of Hades.” In this way, the fanfics may even work to placate the dissatisfaction of readers with patriarchal norms and prevent actual change. However, this fantasy can also be seen as a “utopian” (Radway 215) impulse to imagine a better, more equal

relationship dynamic within the flawed power system to which these stories are responding, an aspiration readers seek out of “dissatisfaction, longing, and protest” (Radway 215).

The fanfics sometimes do take the step of criticizing both the ancient and modern systems of power that restrict the rights of women, but, like with Radway’s romance novels, the authors do not consider “truly radical suggestions that women do not need men to define themselves or to be happy” (220). Overall, these fanfics often, but not always, construct heterosexual relationships and marriage as a source of happiness, freedom, and power. Of the four fanfics, “Kore” is the true exception (though marriage is certainly part of Persephone’s happy ending in that fanfic). There is also no explicit relationship in “Here Thy Hands Let Fall the Gather’d Flower,” but the story does have a romantic tint. Interestingly, even in stories without a romantic relationship, Hades is still a central, positive character. Marriage to Hades is now inextricably a part of Persephone’s story in a positive way as readers and writers struggle with the role men and the patriarchy play in their lives today. Hades’ role, like Demeter’s, reveals the contemporary issues with which the authors and readers are grappling.

In her scholarship, Radway also addresses how romance novels were produced and consumed. The experience of reading romance novels was individual and isolated, “mediated by the distances that characterize mass production and the capitalist organization of storytelling” (212). According to Radway, this consumption happens separately, and “The women join forces only symbolically and in a mediated way in the privacy of their individual homes and in the culturally devalued sphere of leisure activity” (212). This did not normally create a community or promote feminist activism working towards structural change. However, the context Radway explores is very

different from the one in which fanfiction is read and produced. First of all, the continuing legal existence of fanfiction depends on it not being a commodity authors profit from. Fanfiction is currently produced adjacently, but not in direct relation, to the capitalist economy and the pervasiveness of consumer culture. Fanfiction is influenced by the readers (the consumers) who otherwise also participate in consumer culture. But fanfiction itself does not have to sell. With many other fandoms, there is a canon that is produced by an industry with the intent to earn money and sell products. However the fandom of Persephone has no such definite canon. *Hadestown* and *Lore Olympus* are commercial works associated with her character, but they are not the basis of the entire canon.

More importantly, fanfiction is produced and consumed most often in communities of fans, not in isolation. It is certainly not mass produced, and authors and readers (while separated by the distance of the internet) often exist in the same fan spaces online. Contact between authors and readers is not only easy, but common. Fanfics are even directed towards a community already predisposed toward taking what they want and leaving the rest, not the general population. However, similar to the readers Radway studied, fanfiction reading generally tends to be a leisure activity performed in private. The reading of fanfiction is also often devalued, specifically as the concern of “crazy fangirls.” Whether this reflects reality or not, reading fanfiction is often associated with women and is devalued because of that, quite like romance reading. But fan communities and fanfiction are certainly more communal than Radway’s romance reading. Activism is even a possible outcome of a fandom (parts of the Harry Potter fandom have more famously participated in activism), though that outcome is not guaranteed. No activism has come out of this community of fans as far as

I can tell. Nevertheless, this is a different context of reading and writing, one that is less commodified than commercial writing. Fanfiction is produced within a community with very different rules and structures than other commercial or academic contexts producing writings about Persephone or feminism.

Like romance novels, the texts, their readers, and their communities are mediated and shaped by the sites which these fan communities inhabit. The two sites this thesis focuses on are *Archive of Our Own* (AO3) and Tumblr. Both of these sites have different structures and objectives. *Archive of Our Own* is a project run by the Organization for Transformative Works, a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of fan creations and projects related to fandom. *Archive of Our Own* itself is funded solely by donations (mainly for the cost of the servers) and is powered by volunteer-labor. It is a site made and run by fans themselves and is dedicated to preserving all fanworks, regardless of how “good” they are or how taboo they might be. It also has strong ties to feminist agendas; this is particularly evident in how Francesca Coppa, a fan studies scholar and co-founder of AO3, characterizes the site as “what information science looks like in a feminist universe” (qtd. in Lothian & Stanfill). However, this relationship with feminism means that AO3 sometimes replicates the same blindspots as the white feminist movement. Acceptance of all fanfiction, regardless of content, has been problematized by the experiences of fans of color with racist content, and this was brought to more public attention by recent reckonings with racial justice (Lothian & Stanfill). Lothian and Stanfill “argue that AO3 falls short on its promise of inclusion as a consequence of the progressive, feminist, predominantly white community whose norms were encoded into the archive.” This blindspot is a consistent issue with white feminism, a subject that will be discussed more shortly.

Our other website of interest is Tumblr, a social media site and business, run with the intention of earning money through ad revenue. As seen through its ban of sexual content and certain tags, Tumblr puts an eye toward being marketable and appropriate. Indeed, the “architecture of many of these popular media platforms is capitalist and corporate” (Banet-Weiser et al.). This context is important to acknowledge because in feminist cultural scholarship there has sometimes been, as Angela McRobbie critiques, a celebration of the pleasure created by consuming pop culture works influenced by feminism which elides the aspects of consumer culture, such as a focus on goods and products, that go hand in hand with this feminism. This also ignores the “capacity within such media forms for transforming progressive principles into new forms of constraint” (McRobbie), such as the focus on choice in postfeminism, as will soon be discussed.

The effects of consumer culture are especially visible on another social media site containing content about Persephone: Instagram. After only ten minutes of browsing the “Persephone” tag on Instagram, posts about her began to appear in my Instagram feed, quickly tending towards ads and posts with the objective of selling Persephone-related commodities to me. In comparison, Tumblr has ads but they often seem not to be targeted ads like on Instagram. On Tumblr, the content of the ad has little to do with the content of the posts the user searches out. As we see from this brief comparison, both sites shape these online communities and their commerciality. They are the framework in which fan texts about Persephone are produced and shared.

Returning to the fan texts themselves, Roxane Gay’s concept of a “bad feminist” is also useful to complicate the idea of these texts as nonfeminist. Gay self-identifies as a “bad feminist.” She lives in ways that do not match up with stricter ideas of feminism or

how ‘good’ feminists are ‘meant’ to behave, but she still believes in the core issues of feminism (Gay 317-318). An important part of this dichotomy for Gay is that the most prominent kind of feminism is generally focused on white, middle- or upper-class women and their concerns. Labeling this version of feminism as the right or “essential” feminism can be a very problematic idea; it erases the lives and experiences of many other women (Gay 308) and is unintentionally exclusionary at best. Gay even questions how her own hopes for feminism are potentially essentializing (308). In many ways, my own idea of what feminism is and should be is essentializing. In laying out my definition of feminism, I imply other forms of feminism are less legitimate and “worse” than my own version what feminism can be at its “best.” I do this for the purpose of narrowing my analytical focus to key concerns, but it nevertheless implies a “true” or “right” feminism.

Gay emphasizes how freeing it was for her to realize that not every person or text must meet all of the expectations of feminism. I believe that the same idea can apply to the authors of fanfics, especially because of the context in which fanfiction is written and read (as a leisure activity open to experimentation and silliness where imperfection is allowed and even sometimes celebrated). It is not necessary for these stories or their authors to check every box on my list to be considered feminist by their readers, especially for the people they make feel empowered. A “bad” feminist text is still a feminist text. More importantly, there is no obligation for a text to be a “good” feminist text, especially in the realm of fanfiction, though I personally believe it should be a goal.

However, the way these stories function reveals certain beliefs about feminism. The general trends of these four fanfics mirror larger trends in contemporary feminism and thinking about feminism. What version of feminism is visible within the popular

fanfiction about Persephone? Rosalind Gill's "postfeminist sensibility" certainly influences them. Gill explains that the term "postfeminist" materialized in the 1990's and refers to a cultural change in how feminism is represented. Those with a postfeminist sensibility think of feminism as a one-time movement which is over, supposedly ushering in a new era of "female autonomy, agency and choice" (Banet-Weiser et al.). McRobbie associates this change in perspective with an "emerging post-feminist language of personal choice, freedom and independence" (McRobbie) in which feminism is "'taken into account' yet 'repudiated'" (qtd. in Banet-Weiser et al.). Beatrice Frasl argues that a postfeminist sensibility "constructs and idealizes a type of subjecthood, and therefore also femininity, congruent with neoliberal values: one that values individualism and personal freedom over solidarity or collectivity . . . it also sidelines structural critique" (Frasl). Postfeminist thinking is evident in the four older fanfics I analyzed.

Postfeminism frames choice as creating empowerment, which obscures the systems within which these choices exist. For example, emphasizing that traditional femininity is performed by choice obscures the way that traditional femininity is valued and reinforced, even coerced, by patriarchal power systems. These stories frame Persephone marrying Hades by choice as often romantic and happy, but this also works to obscure the way that heterosexual marriage is expected and encouraged, even coerced, by the same system. Independence, personal freedom, and romance are often placed above other concerns, such as changing the power systems which are shaping the stories and bringing intersectionality into the story. They also emphasize a very individual feminism. The goddess alone escapes or rises above the limitations of patriarchy through her marriage to the "good" man. The underlying structure which

traps her and threatens violence is often addressed but there are few moves towards changing to the system itself, only the individual situation of Persephone.

Frasl also delves into how postfeminism views femininity. A postfeminist sensibility constructs femininity not only as inherently heterosexual and heteroromantic, but also puts the longing for romantic fulfilment at the centre of women's performances and expressions of gender. It is therefore also a regressive mode that constructs female narratives and female identities almost always in relation to men.

This is absolutely what I described above in my analysis of older fanfiction about Persephone above, but now some fans question that way of thinking. The language Frasl uses to describe the construction of “female narratives . . . always in relation to men” vividly brings to mind @chaandajaan-moved's critique of stories about Persephone that villainize Demeter. Depicting a female character with agency is no longer the end-all, be-all of empowerment in fandom, now there are questions about how Demeter is commonly depicted and about the prioritization of romantic relationships over other relationships.<sup>17</sup>

Frasl also emphasizes McRobbie's “definition of postfeminism as a ‘double entanglement’ of feminist and antifeminist discourses.” In a strange way, feminism is still a key piece of the postfeminist sensibility because it celebrates an equal power dynamic between men and women, but it also rejects certain parts of feminism and

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<sup>17</sup> My thesis does not analyze newer fanfics because of the popularity of older ones, but it would be interesting to see how newer stories have changed and stayed the same. Newer media, especially *Lore Olympus* (which is inclined in the postfeminist direction), would certainly have more influence but so would feminism from an era in which postfeminism is less popular.

obscures the fact that an unequal power system still exists.<sup>18</sup> All four of the fics (but not all Persephone fanfics) take place in an ambiguously ancient setting (except “Kore” which brings quite a bit of the contemporary into the past). They all respond to ancient but often still extant and relevant patriarchal inequalities. Therefore, the need for feminism is not conceptualized as “over” in these stories; dissatisfaction with the patriarchy still resonates with authors and readers. But because of the ancient, mythical setting, these problems and the need for feminism are generally placed in the past rather than the present. Additionally, feminism is not addressed by the authors in the fanfics or their author’s notes. Of the contemporary fan texts I have mentioned, only Nikita Gill seems to claim her work is feminist (though fans debating these concepts sometimes refer to texts with these relationship dynamics as feminist). Within the fanfics themselves, empowerment and agency instead of feminism (as is characteristic of postfeminist thinking) solve the problems of patriarchal inequality, often through romance. Therefore, these works are heavily influenced by postfeminism. They have a complex relationship with feminism and accept many feminist ideas, but they do so in ways which sometimes reinscribe patriarchal values.

Rosalind Gill also comments on “which versions of feminism garner visibility--the largely white, heteronormative, corporate and neoliberal-friendly versions.” Gill denies “there is 'one true feminism' - but I am struck again and again by which versions get to be seen and heard, and which remain marginalised”

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the word “postfeminism” is revealing. If feminism actually “accomplished” its goal, it would be more accurate to call the world “post-patriarchal.” But a hypothetical “post-patriarchal” world is also too definitive and simplistic an idea because the world is never on a straightforward path to progress. I would go so far as to say that patriarchy and the other power systems it intersects with are so pervasive we will never be able to create a truly post-patriarchal world. However, feminism would actually be a necessary component needed in order to *maintain* a hypothetical “post-patriarchal” world because anti-feminist backlash will always exist. It seems that people who believe in postfeminism just want feminism to be over, not the patriarchal power systems which sparked the need for feminism.

(Banet-Weiser et al). The same holds true in these popular fanfics. Intersectional feminism, in its many forms, could be addressed through these retellings. However, there is very little mention of class, disability, the gender binary, and race.<sup>19</sup> How these factors affect and modify a feminist agenda is invisible in these narratives. By virtue of goddess-hood, Persephone is not a middle- or lower-class figure. She does not experience poverty. Because of her goddess-hood, these stories rarely seem to touch on how ability and disability affect life experiences (except for the occasional mention of Hephaestus). The gender binary is only rarely challenged as being anything other than natural. Finally, there are few mentions of the races of the characters in the fanfics, but when there is a mention, the characters are often white. Though Persephone is sometimes depicted with darker skin in more recent fanart, especially *Hadestown* fanart, this does not appear in the older, most popular fanfics. The very specific brand of feminism exhibited in these stories is not intersectional or moving towards structural change in any real way.

However, do fanfiction writers have any obligation to address these issues in leisure writing and reading? No. Additionally, due to the anonymity of the internet, it is also difficult to know whether the people writing these stories have the education or ability to respectfully write about these identities in their stories. It's entirely possible some authors might perpetuate stereotypes in an attempt to be inclusive and address intersectionality.

But the absence of these issues is still notable. It replicates some of the common blindspots and failures of mainstream feminism and reinforces similar ideas about those concerns not being important. The feminism in these stories is often individual,

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<sup>19</sup> This list is not meant to be comprehensive. It is simply a more concrete starting point, because it is difficult to analyze a lack

not intersectional, not focused on activism, very focused on romance, influenced by postfeminism, and emphasizes the young woman, modern woman, and the privileged woman over all other people. It is a very different kind of feminism than my definition.

However, I am being careful in my analysis here to not make judgments. A hierarchy that depends on the judgment and the invalidation of some kinds of feminism is inherent in almost any analysis of feminism. Often, the classicist or feminist scholar approaches the popular text from a place of authority as an academic who is “better informed” and has the backing of academic authority, such as theory or more first-hand knowledge with the extant versions of the myth. Theory often has authority over culture, even “high” culture. “High” culture is often valued over “pop” culture, and “pop” culture often over “fan” culture. In fact, this call to authority to legitimize one’s thinking is also mimicked in some of the fan discourses in Persephone fanfiction, which derive authority from citing the ancient sources and utilizing scholarly formulations.<sup>20</sup> However, this hierarchy ignores that the fan is doing exactly what any writer, whether they are a writer of myth, published fiction, academia, or other texts, is always doing: choosing what story to tell, how to frame it, how to change it in the context of the world they live in, and how to make it serve their purposes.

The cultural contexts in which fanfiction and ancient mythology are created, and their purposes, are extremely different from one another. Nevertheless, ancient Greek and Roman authors wrote and storytellers retold stories about mythology within a complex tradition of many different variations, contributing their own reinterpretations and ideas to that tradition as the years passed. The same can be said of the fanfic author. Fanfiction is a unique phenomenon, but its tendencies are not. Like any kind of writing

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<sup>20</sup> Some of the posts and blogs linked earlier give good examples of this, especially Tumblr users @honorthegods and @KataCthonia.

or meaning-making activity, different people create different meanings because of the world they live in.

Persephone often functions as a liminal figure, straddling the boundary between death and life, youth and adulthood, even the patriarchal and the matriarchal. In this thesis, I have followed in Persephone's footsteps and straddled the boundaries of the academic and fan worlds. Although I am in some ways still a newcomer myself, my familiarity with the strange lands of fandom and academia helps me guide readers through some of the most important facets of fandom and fanfiction through a more academic lens. By balancing the concerns of both, my access to these two realms helps to draw them into conversation with one another and analyse how fans depict Persephone and reflect contemporary attitudes toward feminism.

Stories about Persephone have always been stories about women and, as they are rewritten, they often represent changes in attitudes toward women. Due to feminism's significance, it is natural Persephone's depiction now includes the process of negotiating what it means to be a woman or a feminist within a still patriarchal society. The construction of Persephone, feminism, and romance are all contested in this fandom. The most popular fanfics about Persephone often reinscribe certain patriarchal beliefs. This is not to say fanfiction about Persephone is not feminist. Stories can never be described simply as "feminist" and "not feminist." Fanfiction about Persephone is "badly," (Gay) imperfectly feminist because it reflects the lives and beliefs of the people who write it: always a work-in-progress.

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