

Persephone and Hades in Popular Romance: Retellings vs. Intertextual Metaphors

Retelling the story of Hades and Persephone has become a major phenomenon in popular culture in the past few years, with scores of new versions in different media appearing every year (Tartar 2021, 47). This paper contrasts the use in popular romance of the ancient Greek story of Persephone and Hades as a retelling versus its use as an intertextual metaphor. The comparisons are significant since they evoke different ways of engaging the story as an archetypal pattern to explore sexuality and relationship, revealing the ongoing vitality and complex nature of the myth. As Wendy Doninger explains, while no two retellings of a story “are quite alike,” the variants establish important patterns (1998, 41).

Romance novels, almost exclusively written and read by women, are in many ways a reaction to, an interrogation of, feminism. However, romance novels should not be seen as a rejection of feminist concerns, but rather as a way of problematizing issues of sexual desire and identity that feminism raises (Kamble, Selinger, and Teo 2021). In popular romance, the Persephone and Hades story/metaphor pushes boundaries in uncomfortable ways: What is the line between rape and consent? When is a marriage forced? How can female desire be acknowledged by dominant men? Though answers vary, popular romance asserts that the agency and personhood of the heroine must be valued.

To explore a modern retelling of Persephone’s love story, I will analyze Scarlett St. Clair’s 2019 novel, *A Touch of Darkness*, which is classified as a fantasy erotica romance and is one of the most popular current retellings of the myth according to both Goodreads and Amazon ratings. Though placed in a contemporary, if fantastic, setting, the Greek gods appear as real beings whom mortals both idolize and fear. Retellings may be vastly different from the original

Greek story, but characters and narrative structures still overlap with traditional sources that make readers think about the effects of the variations. St. Clair conflates the Hades figure of Greek mythology with the Devil of Christian legend, which causes Persephone to ask whether Hades is ethical in his treatment of lost souls.

To examine intertextual metaphors, I will analyze Elizabeth Hoyt's 2017 *Duke of Desire*, which is an historical romance set in England in 1742. Though intertextual metaphor can be in the voice of a narrator, more often it is the characters themselves who connect the Hades and Persephone story with their own situation. The characters forge a psychological interaction with elements of the myth, leading to self-reflection about issues of sin and goodness, force and consent, and loss and love. This is true of Iris Daniels, Lady Jordan, who finds herself kidnapped by members of the Lords of Chaos, a secret society that uses ancient cult symbols for personal power and sexual exploit. At first Iris thinks Raphael, the Duke of Dyemore, is a diabolical member of the group; but later she sees him as a tragic Hades figure who is trying to uncover and stop their secret, violent deeds.

While modern retellings and metaphors can obscure ancient sources, they also promote an interest in problems embedded in the Persephone and Hades myth. I will argue that modern romance novels reflect tensions evident in ancient Greek sources (e.g., rape; Deacy and Pierce 2002), as seen in pictorial representations of the relationship between Persephone and Hades, which vary between a violent abduction (Vergina Macedonian tomb painting, 4th c. BCE) and the two gods sitting calmly side by side in the underworld (Codrus Painter, Attic red-figure vase painting, 430 BCE). As is true in the *Hymn to Demeter*, popular romance uses the story of Persephone and Hades to explore how death and darkness can be balanced with life and light.

Though both Persephone and Iris are abducted in the modern romances, neither is raped nor forced to stay with the hero. Each is given chances to choose her future path and relationship with her abductor, including escape. While the novels have much in common, the retelling in *A Touch of Darkness* focuses on gods who have supernatural powers that can easily be abused to harm others; while the very human characters in *Duke of Desire* struggle to find the resources to combat their enemies, though they are members of the aristocracy. Each romance author presents a scenario where the dark nature of the story is the catalyst for the redemption the characters undergo.

Bibliography

Deacy, Susan, and Karen F. Pierce, eds. *Rape in Antiquity*. Bristol Classical Press, 2002.

Doniger, Wendy. *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth*. Columbia UP, 1998.

Kamble, Jayahree, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo, eds. *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Routledge, 2021.

Tatar, Maria. *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces*. Liveright Pub., 2021.