

## Persephone's Relevance: Missing a Mythic Woman Breaking Boundaries

CW: this paper will discuss myths that include sexual assault, rape

Often neglected by scholars, Persephone's actions offer a significant perspective to examining female power in patriarchal mythology. Although the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* justifies patriarchal standards (Foley 1994, pp. 112-118), I question whether Persephone always acts under patriarchal control. Utilizing lines from both the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae*, I analyze Persephone's autonomous characteristics in comparison to other mythic figures, specifically Iphigenia and Antigone. While her mother takes the active role in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone herself resists patriarchal authority more clearly in Claudian's text—a text coming nearly 1000 years later than the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. As such, Claudian's version notably creates a developed sense of female autonomy comparable to Iphigenia and Antigone who are more often than Persephone the focus of scholarly research. I will show how the Persephone myth forms a crucial archetype for various characters' roles in breaking patriarchal confines because Persephone actively escapes and subverts patriarchal confines.

Persephone and Iphigenia are both sacrificed by their respective fathers Agamemnon and Zeus in order to appease a god, creating an undeniable parallel between them (Goff 2007; Claudian I.20-67). Goff's research on Iphigenia examines her role as a sacrificial victim in a ritual and how Iphigenia also accepts her role, claiming autonomy, in being sacrificed (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1374-1384). Persephone, however, does not go willingly to Hades (*Hymn* 16-21 and 30-37 & Claudian II.247-266). I argue that Persephone fights back as much as she can against the patriarchal power forcing an unwanted fate upon her. Her shouting (Claudian II.247-266) and

disruption of the plan (*Hymn 445-447*) thwarts complete patriarchal dominance, providing her with female autonomy within the confines of patriarchal boundaries.

*Antigone* is often researched for its relationship with political theory; scholars like Bonnie Honig have examined questions about the political aspects of Antigone and Creon's argument (2014, p. 399). Antigone objects to her uncle Creon's decision regarding her right to bury her brother (Sophocles 21-32). Creon makes it clear that his kingly authority will not budge (Sophocles 525), which ultimately brings about Antigone's death. Comparatively, I argue that Persephone's fight against patriarchal authority is more successful than Antigone's. Persephone may not completely overturn her fate as queen of the Underworld, but she does succeed in disrupting Zeus and Hades' plan (*Hymn 445-447*). Her fight against their patriarchal authority earns her a reprieve to exist liminally: part of the year she resides in the Underworld with Hades and the other portion she spends with her mother (*Hymn 445-447*). What some may see as only limited success in fact separates Persephone from other powerful women who attempt to overturn patriarchal authority because she partially overturns masculine power and therefore increases her own autonomous status.

Persephone's story anchors female power for other characters, like in Euripides' *Helen* (Swift 2009 & Rehm 1994), designing an archetype for powerful mythic women. Euripides includes a reference to Persephone within *Helen* and arguably turns Persephone into a distinct model for women in harmful situations, including myths depicting sexual assault. Yet Persephone remains in the background of much scholarly research due to the focus on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* alone. I have turned toward a new analysis of Persephone that highlights comparative research of mythic women and female autonomy, centering on Persephone herself, rather than Demeter or the women with whom I have compared Persephone.

Persephone's unwilling role in becoming queen of the Underworld, rather than acceptance of her position, demonstrates her personal agency, especially when comparing her passivity in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* with her active role in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae*.

### Bibliography

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