

FROM KORE TO QUEEN: FEMINIST TRANSFORMATION IN RACHEL SMYTHE'S LORE OLYMPUS

Taylor C. Ferguson

Department of English, Southern New Hampshire University, Manchester, NH

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Rachel Smythe's Lore Olympus as a contemporary feminist interpretation of the ancient myth "The Taking of Persephone." Focusing on the tumultuous relationship between Demeter and Persephone, the analysis explores how maternal control and female complicity reinforce patriarchal power structures. Drawing on the feminist frameworks from Simone de Beauvoir and Adrienne Rich, the paper argues Demeter's attempts to infantilize Persephone are born from her own trauma and fear of losing status within a male-dominated system. These actions result in Persephone lacking the knowledge and agency necessary to navigate her newly discovered adulthood, leaving her vulnerable to social repression and sexual violence. However, through Persephone's relationship with Hades, portrayed as a rare example of feminist male allyship, Persephone reclaims her autonomy, embraces her identity as a fertility goddess, and ascends to power as Queen of the Underworld. By contrasting Demeter's complicity with Hades's support, Smythe's Lore Olympus reframes classical mythology to expose feminine enablement of patriarchal control while simultaneously celebrating feminine resilience and transformation.

KEYWORDS

Lore Olympus, Rachel Smythe, Greek Mythology, Female Complicity, Feminine Agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Rachel Smythe's *Lore* examines and reinterprets the timeless myth "The Taking of Persephone" in her webcomic-turned-graphic novel, *Lore Olympus*. The comic explores contemporary takes on ageless problems, with the relationship between the main character and goddess, Persephone, and her mother, Demeter, at the centre of it all. Though the pair's relationship has been analysed throughout history, the new retelling depicts its issues as the root of many of Persephone's larger conflicts in her newly independent life. In Smythe's retelling, Demeter's attempts to infantilize Persephone directly lead her to experience her new adult femininity as a curse, which results in her sexual assault and imprisonment. It is only in experiencing a world beyond her mother's control that Persephone fully embraces her feminine potential as a fertility goddess. Rachel Smythe's *Lore Olympus*, in showcasing Persephone's transformation into a fertility goddess despite her mother's attempts to disenfranchise her, creates feminist literature that highlights female complicity in the patriarchal system and the feminine ability to move past the negative effects of the prescribed female role to claim power.

2. BACKGROUND

Primarily published on the Webtoon website, *Lore Olympus* is artist and writer Rachel Smythe's retelling and expansion of the "Taking of Persephone" myth. In the existing 250+ episodes,

Smyth depicts the goddess of spring, Persephone's adventures in adulthood and flashbacks of her restricted childhood, revealing that her path to Olympus, and later the Underworld, is not an easy one. Citing a dislike of the way Zeus runs things [1, Ep. 3], Demeter keeps Persephone isolated in the mortal realm during childhood. Despite Persephone exhibiting the desire for freedom that most teenagers encounter, Demeter does not let her leave the confines of their home without an escort [1, Ep. 62] and tightly controls the interactions that she has with other gods. It is that forced submission that causes the development of Persephone's hesitantly resentful attitude towards her mother and her grasp at escape by achieving a scholarship to attend school in Olympus [2, Pg. 3]. Though she initially blocks the attempt, Demeter is later forced to allow her daughter to go to Olympus, where Persephone experiences the negative repercussions of her childhood and the opportunities that adult life has in store for her. Through her retelling, Smyth provides a new feminist take on a centuries-old telling of a mother-daughter relationship within a patriarchally-led society.

3. DEMETER'S CONTROL OVER PERSEPHONE

A deeper look into the established protectiveness Demeter has for her daughter reveals it as more of an attempt to preserve Persephone as a child indefinitely, which, in turn, helps Demeter to retain her feminine status. The relationship between a mother and daughter is traditionally a complex one, serving as an avenue for the mother to "impose her own destiny on her child" [3, Pg. 295], and the Demeter-Persephone relationship of *Lore Olympus* is no exception. According to the myths on which *Lore Olympus* is based, Demeter was subjected, like most goddesses and many women of ancient Greece, to both rape and abandonment by her love interests, so it would not be unreasonable that she would seek to protect her daughter from such a fate [4, Pg. 581]. Due to these woes of her past and her previously established displeasure at the way Zeus runs things [1, Ep. 3], Demeter attempts to mold Persephone in her image, sans sexual and romantic trauma. In doing so, she also attempts to deprive her daughter of the "transformative aspects of the feminine," which will prevent Persephone from achieving maturity and ultimately usurping her [5, Pg. 328]. Isolating Persephone from other gods and keeping her tightly within her control under the guise of protection is an attempt to ensure that Persephone will not only not be subjected to the trauma that Demeter was, but also that Demeter's hard-won position within the patriarchal system will remain secure.

The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir asserts that a woman feels power over her child once it is born, which manifests in a feeling of ownership of the child [3, Pg. 539] and, while Demeter's initial overbearing nature could be attributed to her past, her repeated infantilization of the newly adult Persephone indicates that she relishes in the power over and ownership of her offspring. As she blossoms into an adult, Persephone desires to leave the sphere of her mother's influence and achieves a scholarship that would allow her to do so. Demeter's response to the attempt by Persephone is telling, as, instead of accepting her daughter's accomplishments, she tries to push her back into the role of child. Demeter insists that her daughter uses the scholarship to continue her homeschooling, which, of course, Demeter herself is in charge of. This insistence and her pointing out that Persephone will "be such a good role model for other girls" [1, Ep. 63] reestablishes Demeter's control while simultaneously reminding Persephone of her status as Demeter's child. When Persephone's desire for freedom and her being old enough to make decisions for herself is pointed out, Demeter quickly establishes that she knows what's best for her daughter [1, Ep. 63]. In one moment, Demeter not only asserts control over Persephone by guilt-tripping her into obeying but also establishes with her larger community that Persephone should be considered the eternal daughter of Demeter instead of the adult persona she is beginning to identify with.

In addition to keeping Persephone in the role of a child through isolation and infantilizing treatment, Demeter meets any attempt, by anyone, to establish that Persephone is no longer a child with anger, derision, and immediate dismissal [1, Ep. 64, 115]. It is only when faced with Persephone's undeniable temporary transformation into a vengeful goddess that Demeter is forced to allow her to move to Olympus [1, Ep. 64, 115]. While it appears that Demeter does this as an acknowledgment of her adulthood, it is so that other gods do not recognize her transformation from child to fertility goddess, which would cause some of them to want to claim her for their own means and would allow her to occupy the space of Demeter. Her continued view of Persephone as a child is made apparent in Demeter's near refusal to call Persephone anything but her old moniker of "Kore," which translates to girl and "stresses her persona as Demeter's daughter" [4, Pg. 581]. It can also be seen in the control she continues to exert on Persephone even while separated, as is shown by her fear that her mother will make her return home [1, Ep. 5, 24]. Fear serves to prevent Persephone from roaming outside the sphere of her mother's influence, which allows Demeter to maintain control over her daughter. In the rare instance where that control slips and Persephone expresses a desire for more in her life, Demeter reacts with anger, reminding her daughter that she "provided literal paradise on earth for" her and gaslights her daughter into believing that she should feel guilty for not feeling more appreciative [1, Ep. 115]. This effectively forces Persephone's compliance and her continued infantilization. Despite the strain that it puts on their relationship, Demeter continues to lord her power over Persephone through guilt and influence to force her to remain the eternal child.

Although Demeter's attempts at forcing Persephone to remain the eternal child are partially attributed to her negative feminine experiences, they can also be linked to her desire for relevancy and agency. Despite being a mythological world of gods, Olympus is still a patriarchy, and the existence of an heiress, such as Persephone, suggests an eventual transfer of power in a world where female power is hard to come by. Demeter's power was hard won both in mythology, where she is dubbed as being "a phallic woman" due to her power that rivals her male counterparts [6, Pg. 249], and in *Lore Olympus*, where she is a part of the Six Traitors' dynasty that helped to overthrow the Titans. While the feminine transition is considered a natural part of a life cycle that must occur for women to fulfill their supposed feminine destiny [7, Pg. 89] Demeter's being an immortal goddess means that a transition would only be prompted by the replacement of her by her daughter. By restricting Persephone, not allowing her to leave their home [1, Ep. 62], drugging other gods to forget her [1, Ep. 72] and beating those outside her control who would usher in Persephone's adulthood [1, Ep. 101], Demeter maintains a reality where she and Persephone are indistinguishable from one another [6, Pg. 250]. By doing so, she maintains her vanity regarding herself and her power because, in blocking Persephone's transition into a full goddess, she can prevent her transition into a crone [6, Pg. 250]. A lack of feminine transition ensures that Demeter will never again have to be subjected to the powerlessness that she endured in her youth, and, instead, will retain her hard-won position as a powerful goddess within a male-dominated society.

4. THE FALLOUT OF PERSEPHONE'S SHELTERED UPBRINGING

Due to Demeter's previously established desire to see Persephone remain in her Kore identity, Persephone is kept ignorant of her power as a female regarding both sexual and romantic interactions with those of the opposite sex. Within days of arriving at Olympus, Persephone is confronted with two potential suitors, Hades and Apollo, but is unsure of how to interact with either. Since it is traditionally the mother's responsibility to prepare her daughter to interact with male society, and Demeter decidedly did not teach Persephone this in her attempts to make her daughter the immortal child, Persephone is left vulnerable to men who might take advantage of her. Her vulnerability, in combination with her conflicting feelings about remaining a virgin for all eternity and her not knowing that she is a coveted fertility goddess, sets the stage for

Persephone's sexual assault [1, Ep. 24]. In her early encounters with Apollo, Persephone is convinced that it is okay for him to cross her boundaries because he's helping her [1, Ep. 22]. She also feels compelled to admire his physical appearance for the same reasons [1, Ep. 23] just as historically women have felt obligated to find traits they desire within the men who show them attention [3, Pg. 389]. When faced with blatant sexual advances from Apollo, Persephone is left unaware of what power she holds in the situation [1, Ep. 24]. She asks if she brought the situation on herself, if sex was supposed to be like that, and if it was too late to make Apollo stop [1, Ep. 24], demonstrating the full extent of her confusion and powerlessness. Her inability to take action in these moments culminates in her being raped by Apollo, a situation that contemporary researchers claim is made far more likely when the victim is naive and has a parent who is neglectful in teaching their child about safety in similar situations, much as the case in the Demeter-Persephone relationship [8, Pg. 197]. As such, Persephone's rape can be attributed directly to Demeter's failure to prepare her to deal with the intricacies of male society.

Unlike the trauma-filled interactions that she has with Apollo, her relationship with Hades exposes her to a healthy romantic relationship and helps her claim her feminine agency. Though some feminist scholars may argue that Persephone's rape would usher her into womanhood [3, Pg. 384], she still clings to her naivety, which she attributes to being a "dumb village girl" [1, Ep. 2, 31, 52], in her future relationship with Hades. Because she doesn't think that romantic love is something she gets to have, Persephone is unsure what a crush even feels like and struggles in her romantic interactions with Hades [1, Ep. 17, 42], though he had served to awaken in her the desire for a romantic partner [1, Ep. 115]. She also fears her rape will be, as rape historically has, attributed as being her fault and that Hades's view of her will be tarnished. He demonstrates himself as a feminist ally and as someone who genuinely cares about Persephone when he indicates to her that his view of her has not changed. Furthermore, he later positions her to claim feminine agency when he publicly declares her his equal and queen of the Underworld [1, Ep. 206], putting her in a position of power that no one can take from her. Ultimately, despite the emotional handicaps that her mother has placed on her, the Goddess of Spring learns to navigate both wanted and unwanted advances that come her way with the support of Hades as her partner.

The effects of Persephone's forced naivety are not limited to relationship issues, and her lack of knowledge regarding the workings and consequences of society leads to her temporary imprisonment within her mother's responsibility in the mortal world. Persephone's naivety regarding the workings of Olympus's society can be seen in her many interactions with its residents. Since she has not been allowed a phone [1, Ep. 11] and has had limited contact with the immortal world, she is unaware of its social workings. This lack of awareness is seen in moments where she shows naivety to what the paparazzi mean when they accuse her of "sleeping her way to the top" and she claims that it sounds like a lazy thing to do [1, Ep. 36]. Her naivety extends to more serious matters as well, as realized when Persephone gets comfortable with her friends and she reveals the story of her transition from Kore, the girl, to Persephone, which includes an unauthorized act of wrath on mortals [1, Ep. 62]. Unfortunately, the act of wrath is a direct result of both Persephone's naivety and lack of control over her new adult powers, a fact that is used against her when she is put on trial for the previously mentioned act of wrath. Due to the risk to his reign, Zeus not only keeps with the male tradition of fearing her solo female power [3, Pg. 160] but also fears the power that she, as a fertility goddess, could provide to his adversaries [1, Ep. 189]. He then uses her vulnerable position to confine her to the mortal realm until a time of his choosing, relegating her to her mother's duties and reestablishing his male power. Because she is unaware of the workings of Olympus's society, Persephone does not have the tools to combat Zeus's decision and spends 10 years imprisoned not only within the mortal realm but within the identity of her mother that she had so tried to escape.

5. PERSEPHONE'S TRANSFORMATION

Despite being relegated to her mother's shadow and identity for much of her life, Persephone finds refuge and power in the Underworld, because it is beyond her mother's influence and allows her to become closer to her love interest, Hades. Largely due to her connection with her mother, but partially because she has the potential to become that which her mother represents, Persephone is unable to completely separate herself from her mother's influence in the mortal realm or Olympus [9, Pg. 135]. Fortunately, her travels to the Underworld provide a respite that neither of the other realms could. The possibility of the freedom it could offer is suggested as early as Persephone's first accidental visit to the Death God's realm when her hair begins to grow uncontrollably and she sprouts plant life around her [1, Ep. 3]. Shortly after, another visit to the Underworld prompts the initial suggestion from Hades that she is a fertility goddess is made to both Persephone and the reader, a suggestion that she is quick to reject due to her mother's continued influence on her [1, Ep. 42]. Much as her abduction to the Underworld in original myths helps her find her voice as she merges with the earth [10, Pg. 49], each visit to the Underworld prompts a new revelation about Persephone's personality and draws her further from the overbearing presence of her mother. In myth and history, marriage or an intense bond between male and female signifies the separation of mother and child and the transformation of their relationship [10, Pg. 50]. While a lot of Persephone's self-discovery can be attributed to her being outside of her mother's sphere of influence, more of it can be credited to her participation in what is dubbed the perceived natural life cycle of a woman, where she transitions from child to wife or potential wife, and thusly finds her feminine identity [7, Pg. 89]. In the new realization of herself, Persephone can be both creator and destroyer, is empowered by Hades to speak for herself and share her ideas, and is given the power to rule alongside him, allowing her to eventually embrace her full potential.

Hades's influence does more than liberate her from her mother's control, as it also sets the stage for Persephone to embrace her identity as a fully in-control fertility goddess able to withstand the overbearing power of her male counterparts and ascend to her role as the Queen of the Underworld. As Persephone becomes immersed in the Underworld and in Hades, her bursts of power grow stronger and she grows more familiar with them, utilizing them to defend herself and create things around her [1, Ep. 41]. Her growth is seemingly put on hold when she is banished to the mortal realm, but, when she emerges back into the Underworld, she does so as a fertility goddess capable of battling Kronos [1, Ep. 206]. The completion of her transformation into womanhood supports the idea that neither society nor her mother can "regulate [or] control the female body" and they must respect femininity in all its forms [9, Pg. 130]. It also offers a symbolic relief from both patriarchal and maternal control, as her submission to others is no longer something that can be imposed on her [9, Pg. 130]. Where the mother-monster that is the fertility goddess was previously "objectified and rejected [by] outside [society] and inside [Persephone's] self," her final emergence and acceptance of the Underworld leads to her acceptance of the womanly part of her [9, Pg. 131]. In her final acceptance of womanhood, as represented by her power as a fertility goddess, Persephone defeats Kronos, a representative of overall male power, as well as female subjugation and oppression. In defeating Kronos, she also finds the will to accept her potential role as Queen of the Underworld and the mantle of feminine power.

6. FEMINIST IMPLICATIONS

While traditional depictions of the Demeter-Persephone relationship have left Persephone voiceless and focused on Demeter's grief, Smythe's retelling instead develops Persephone's voice and explores Demeter's part in forcing her daughter to submit to the patriarchal system.

Historically, Persephone has been represented as “submissive and compliant in the face of gods that objectify and control her,” but the focus of these controlling actions has primarily been Hades. Smythe’s reimagining of Demeter as someone who reinforces the male-dominated status quo ultimately creates feminist literature that explores more modern feminist issues of feminine complicity in subjecting other females to patriarchal rule. Within the patriarchal system, “the female is everywhere subsumed under the male,” [7, Pg. 42], but still retains power over her children. Demeter is both part of such a system and a rare woman with power equal to her male peers. Due to this, she has the option of nurturing the growth of her child’s feminine potential so that Persephone can achieve feminine power in her own right, or repressing her daughter’s power, which makes her vulnerable to patriarchal influence. Through her own experiences, Demeter is aware of what happens to an ill-prepared woman subjected to patriarchal society. While Demeter resists the outside influence of other gods when raising her daughter, her actions as a mother, be they from protectiveness or a fear of powerlessness, make her complicit to the patriarchal system because she failed to prepare Persephone to live within it. This complicity makes Demeter culpable for the negative events that Persephone must endure upon her arrival to Olympus. By depicting this, Smythe creates feminist literature that explores the potential role that a woman can have in subjecting other women, especially their daughters, to a vulnerable existence within a patriarchal system.

In spite of her mother’s actions, Persephone is able to find feminine power due to the assistance of her lover and feminist male ally, Hades. Sociological research has discovered that male allyship in feminist movements is especially important in patriarchal societies that create barriers to feminine advancements in power [11, Pg. 255]. Because he is part of the male-dominated system that holds power, Hades’ allyship is especially important, as he is in a unique position to enable Persephone to claim access to her own power. He does this by restoring her confidence through his reaction to her rape, defending her in his denials of his brother, and empowering her by bestowing upon her a role equal to his own by naming her Queen of the Underworld. In doing those things, he puts her in a position to unlock her feminine potential and access her power as a fertility goddess capable of taking on Kronos. Smythe’s depiction of Hades as an ally contributes to feminist literature that reflects changing sentiments among society and provides a unique look into the potential that modern male feminists have to affect the overall female condition.

7. CONCLUSION

Rachel Smythe intentionally made her “godly characters as psychologically ‘human’ and having to deal with the same problems that plague humanity,” so it stands to reason that Demeter, as a woman in ancient times, is a product of the patriarchy who would impose a similar fate on her daughter. For fear of becoming a victim of such a system, Demeter essentially sacrifices her daughter, leaving her vulnerable to all of those who would use her to further their own means. Despite this, or perhaps as one of the workings of a patriarchal system, Persephone finds and comes into power after being bolstered by her lover. By creating a narrative that contains male allyship to combat the feminine complicity, Smythe crafts a depiction of a woman who is not only able to withstand the influence of those who would control her but can, ironically, ensure that she won’t be subjected to the power of anyone ever again, transforming her from victim to victor.

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AUTHOR

Taylor C. Ferguson is a graduate student at Southern New Hampshire University. She lives in Fort Worth, Texas, where she is also a full-time secondary teacher with a passion for analysing various aspects of Women/Gender studies and patriarchal power structures.