

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between the ancient Greek myth of Persephone and the poetry of contemporary U.S. women poets. Since myths do not have a single or authoritative version, they are open to re-writing and are palimpsestic in nature; thus myth in general serves as meta-narrative and is constantly re-written in different contexts. Works of four contemporary American poets are analysed: Louise Glück, Rita Dove, Jorie Graham and A.E.Stallings. These poets create alternative versions of the myth of Persephone; for Glück, Dove, Graham and Stallings, among many other women poets, the Persephone myth presents an opportunity to deal with the heritage of the classical era and themes of love, death and mother-daughter relationship. The potential for rewriting is apparent when considering the two main sources of the myth, the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter” and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* which also present slightly different narratives concentrating on particular aspects of the Persephone myth. Each of the four poets approaches myth in a slightly different manner, while working with the basic motifs contained therein.

The objective of the thesis is to describe the differences and similarities between the four revisions of the Persephone myth and to comment on the lasting influence of myth in contemporary poetry. The interpretation of the mythical story thus becomes crucial. Louise Glück presents myth as a way to approach the self; her poems can be analysed on the basis of psychoanalysis. She fragments the Persephone myth and the trauma which it describes and repeats or revises these parts. Rita Dove, on the other hand, depicts Persephone as a wayward daughter, and her loss as a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood, towards an identity independent of Demeter. She negotiates tradition both in the content and in the predominantly sonnet form she uses and contemporizes the myth on several levels in various poems. Jorie Graham also writes in fragments and from various points of view at once; her poetry is reminiscent of a film montage. For Graham, myth is a covering for another story, revealed through re-interpretation. A.E.Stallings re-writes it from differing viewpoints of Hades and Persephone, concentrating especially on their relationship and the life-death dichotomy as the basis of this myth. The thesis maintains that the Persephone myth became so wide-spread and popular among contemporary women poets because it contains themes such as the tension between life and death, describes the relationship of the three characters complicated by their respective roles, and allows the women poet to deal simultaneously with tradition and imbue the story with contemporary meaning.