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From Rape to Romance

Sexual Consent Negotiation in Romantic Retellings of the Myth of Persephone

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Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary retellings of the myth of Persephone in the romance genre as a platform where dominant gendered discourses of consent are challenged and disrupted and alternative discourses of sexual consent negotiation are fostered, as well as arguing that such retellings can be viewed as a new form of feminist revisionism. This thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on feminist theories, reception theories, fan studies, and popular romance studies. These theoretical frameworks contribute to the examination of dominant discourses surrounding sex and consent and its social implications, as well as the examination of how romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone may impact and potentially challenge these discursive constructions and concepts. Within the scope of this thesis, I examine the treatment and depictions of sexual consent negotiation in *Receiver of Many* by Rachel Alexander and *Persephone's Vow* by Ophelia Silk, both novels reflecting prevalent themes and trends seen in the recent romantic adaptations focusing on the relationship between Hades and Persephone. This thesis argues that by utilizing the myth's issues of consent as a way of exploring and presenting mainly gendered power imbalances, particularly those giving rise to female sexual compliance, as the main threat and obstacle to overcome in an unequal romantic and sexual relationship, these works display an apparent dissatisfaction towards dominant dichotomous and gendered discursive constructions of sexuality and consent. Moreover, this thesis contend that it is the deliberate changes and efforts made to the myth to engage in female-oriented sexual and romantic fantasies that enable these retellings to challenge and disrupt prevailing notions of sexuality and consent in means that may be unobtainable within academic circles and high literature. In particular, it is their proposed framework of sexual consent negotiation and relationship dynamics, particularly how the more powerful (male) partner should actively acknowledge and reduce gendered societal norms contributing to coerced sexual encounters, that provide an alternative discourse of how sexual consent should be ensured and made palpable. This discourse entails shifting the focus of women's sexuality from the periphery to the center, normalizing and providing a language for negotiating (and revoking) consent, and reframing some normalized sexual actions and behaviors as potentially coercive if not for deliberate and conscious efforts made to ensure that any consent given is authentic and substantial.

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1 Introduction

Greek mythology has been a topic of interest for many centuries and still enjoys great popularity in the literature of the 21st century. As seen in recent years upsurge of feminist retellings of Greek mythology, such as *Circe* by Madeline Miller (2018), *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) by Pat Barker, *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and *Stone Blind* (2022) by Natalie Haynes, and *Ariadne* (2021) by Jennifer Saint, to name a few, the feminist practice of revisionist mythmaking seems to have resurfaced in popular literature. However, parallel to the rising popularity of revisionist Greek mythology, in which writers are mainly invested in offering social or political commentary, retellings of the myth of Persephone have become especially popular in popular romance and erotic fiction, in which its primary purpose is to be a source of entertainment for female romance readers. This popularity is reflected both in the increased number of publications explicitly labeled as a romantic Hades/Persephone retelling or romance novel based on the myth of Persephone,[1] as well as the increase in recommendations and demands for retellings of the myth that portray Hades and Persephone as romantically involved.[2]

The fact that the myth has found a second life in popular romance may come as a surprise as the myth of Persephone, as found in Ancient Greco-Roman sources, tell the story of how the maiden-goddess Persephone was abducted and later compelled into marriage by Hades, the god of the Underworld. In an academic context, scholars and translation theorists have emphasized how the originary myth reflects the gender hierarchy and patriarchal ideals of the ancient cultures in which it originated (Arthur 16; Doherty 24-25; Fletcher 40; Foley 107-12; McCarter xxix), and a common argument has centered around to what extent the myth is comprised of sexual violence and sexism. Whereas some lean towards that the only form of coercion found in the myth is Persephone's unwillingness to be snatched away by Hades, others argue – some by rethinking the myth from a modern point of view, others by approaching the myth from the cultural context it was written in – that there are clear or at least strongly implied elements of sexual violence and sexism found in the myth (Foley 32, 36; McCarter xxxiv). Despite the academic claim that the myth is embedded in a patriarchal gender system and rape

[1] As of March 2023, there can be found nearly 500 works shelved as "Hades and Persephone Books" on the popular and immersive social networking platform for readers known as Goodreads.

[2] See for instance "10 Books About Hades and Persephone Retellings" (Jackson), "10 Books To Read If You Love Hades & Persephone Retellings" (Lindsey Reads), "The 25 Most Compelling Persephone And Hades Romance Book Retellings" (Silke), "Hades & Persephone Retellings: From YA to Steamy and Everything in Between" (Perez), and "Trope Rec Tuesday: The Epic Romance of Hades and Persephone" (Reyes).

culture, the new-found trend of romantic retellings has given rise to a Persephone/Hades fandom in social media and social networking platforms in which the pair has, in some ways, come to be viewed as an archetype of an ideal heterosexual relationship as affectionate, passionate, and consensual. Put differently, viewing Hades and Persephone as lovers have become "fanon," that is, an interpretation of the myth that has been adopted by many romance fans wholesale (Coppa 6), or as Driscoll describes it, a "wish-fulfillment fantasy based on the needs of individual writers rather than the reality established by shared source text" (89). As a result, romance writers and readers are subjecting the more conventional interpretation of the myth of Persephone, its canon, under pressure by constructing a new understanding of the myth in which particularly Hades is seen as an ideal romantic hero and heterosexual partner.

This thesis explores to what extent contemporary romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone challenge and disrupt dominant gendered and heterosexual notions of sexual consent in Western culture. This thesis will be based on two selected romance novels for in-depth analysis that are representative in terms of their commitment to the originary sources of the myth of Persephone and in representing dominant trends and themes within romantic and erotic renditions of the myth. The main focus of this thesis is to offer new insight into how female romance writers approach dominant understandings of sexual consent by examining how they actively engage with issues of consent found inherent in the myth of Persephone. Furthermore, this thesis aims to examine what ways the myth of Persephone is utilized to propose alternative practices of negotiating sexual consent and to contemplate if romantic reinventions of the myth of Persephone can be viewed as a new type of feminist revisionist mythmaking. I have grounded the theoretical framework for this thesis in feminist sexuality theory and consent research, popular romance studies, fan studies, and reception theory. It is at the intersection of these critical and cultural disciplines that one can locate romantic Hades and Persephone retellings, and thus my intent for using an interdisciplinary lens when analyzing the two selected texts.

My motivation for this thesis is three-folded. Firstly, romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone, especially those that are independently published, tend not to be sufficiently valued or recognized in an academic context, although these forms of retellings can be argued to be the predominant form of retellings of the myth in contemporary literature. Instead, these types of retellings, similarly to fanfiction and romance literature as a whole, tend to be perceived as a somewhat inconsequential and fruitless field of study, cast aside for more established retellings, what Lefevere refers to as "high" rewriting (3), that hold higher literary merit in an academic context in terms of offering deliberate and valuable commentary on larger social and

political issues. However, it is distinct to acknowledge that in "the era of dispersed digital cultures" in which emerging digital technology and media offer new and easier ways to produce, access, and engage with new forms of literary works, "ones whose members sit outside or alongside the kind of higher education disciplinary contexts" (Sanders 125), such 'low' rewritings are altering the landscape of reception and transformative literature studies, offering new and valuable insight that may have previously been unknown or unrecognized. In the matter of romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone, their works, from a text-to-text approach to reception, offer thus fresh insight into a modern and popular form of encountering and receiving classical myths today: retellings that are written and read mainly by 'ordinary' women, existing outside the more traditional feminist practice of revisionist mythmaking as it is primarily written for entertainment rather than to offer social or political commentary. Considering this, ignoring this development is renouncing the long-standing tradition of retelling myths (Doherty 33).

Secondly, I argue that by also approaching retellings from a fan studies perspective, new insight is provided to the writer's (and the readers') emotional attachment to the source text, defining retellings not only based on their transformative and creative relationship to other texts but also the devoted reader for whom the writer aims to provide enjoyment; entailing a reception structure centered on emotions. The latter is particularly valuable in terms of romantic retellings of myths in which the writer must ultimately conform to the expectations and demands of the romance genre. As pointed out by Henry Jenkins in his pioneering work within fan studies ("Textual Poachers" 30), the selection of which textual sources to be transformed or appropriated is not incidental but rather a meticulous process in which the selected texts "seem to hold special potential as vehicles for expressing the fans' pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests." As I will demonstrate in this paper, in the case of romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone, the myth seems to inhabit various latent textual elements of several popular romantic tropes (the arranged-marriage trope, enemies-to-lovers trope, and star-crossed-lovers trope) and the potential to construct and explore the idealized dark, mysterious and misunderstood Byronic romantic hero through Hades, despite, or rather because of, its subtextual elements of sexual violence.

Lastly, if it is ultimately the stories "where consent is a vast gray area between 'yes' and 'no,' mired in power relations and inequalities, that give us the most nuanced and productive engagements with questions of consent" (Popova, *Dubcon* 6), this thesis contends that romantic revisions of the myth of Persephone, a myth that is sometimes referred to as the 'Rape of Persephone,' should make a most compelling and interesting subject to research when it comes

to examining how female romance writers approach and potentially challenge dominant gendered understandings of sexual consent. To adapt a myth that is rooted in sexual violence and gendered power dynamics into a consensual (and commonly erotic) love story fitting for contemporary romance readers, writers must make changes to the plot found in the originary version of the myth, changes that ultimately compel the writers to engage with gray areas between rape and consent. As a result, what elements of the originary source the writer has chosen to alter, enforce, keep, or disregard in its romantic rendition of the myth of Persephone may reveal women's contemporary dominant understandings of sexuality and sexual consent. Seeing romance novels are predominantly written for women by women, a group who commonly identifies themselves as a subordinated group within popular culture and society as a whole, it is also logical to assume that their appropriations may engage critically with dominant understandings and views of sexuality and consent; challenging those ideas as well as deviating from them by creating own alternatives that are more fitting to their own ideology and social practices. Put differently, what messages regarding sexual consent do these interpretations of the myth convey? To what extent do romantic retellings reject or accept the standard components in the plot that is embedded in sexual violence and coercion? Do the depictions of Hades and Persephone's relationship dynamics comply with or dismiss conventional gender roles? Most importantly, how do their romantic and sexual interactions conceptualize what should be seen as normal (hetero)sexual behavior for men and women from a female standpoint, particularly when negotiating and establishing sexual consent?

1.1 Originary version(s) of the myth of Persephone

To examine how romantic revisions of the myth of Persephone engage with sexual consent negotiation and potentially disrupt dominant heterosexual understandings of sex and consent through their alterations of the originary plot of the myth, one must first examine the myth of Persephone as told from its primary textual sources. Two of the best-known and earliest textual depictions of Persephone and Hades can be traced to the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (650-550 BCE) and Ovid's version in the *Metamorphoses* (8 CE). Neither the *Hymn* nor Ovid's rendition, as is the case with all the many variants of the myth, can be argued to be canonical as "there were no stable versions of a Greek or Roman myth" (Foley 97) nor one version that was viewed as more authoritative than the other (Doherty 10). However, of all the variants of the myth that exist, it is primarily these two texts that are most frequently utilized as a source as they are not only viewed as "the best-known renditions" of Persephone's story (Fletcher 40) but also the

two texts that embody "most, but not all, of the details that appear in various combinations" in later renditions and retellings (Doherty 18). [3] When taking this into account, it is thus the *Hymn* and Ovid's rendition in the *Metamorphoses* that I will view and refer to as the "originary versions" (Derecho 40) of the myth in comparison with the selected romantic retellings.

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (as translated by Helen P. Foley) begins with Persephone, depicted as a young girl on the threshold of maturity and marriage (Foley 34), innocently playing and plucking flowers in a meadow. As she plucks one of the flowers, a narcissus, the earth ruptures, and Persephone is taken by Hades as he "snatched the unwilling maid into his golden chariot and led her off lamenting" (Foley 2). The flower, and her subsequent abduction by Hades, is a trap engineered by her father Zeus, who has agreed to give Persephone away in marriage to his brother Hades without Persephone or her mother Demeter's knowledge. Although Persephone tries to resist and calls out for help, she is helplessly taken to the Underworld "against her will […] by the designs of Zeus" (Foley 4). At the loss of her child, Demeter mourns by forsaking her duties as goddess of harvest and agriculture, making the earth barren, and ultimately forcing Zeus to order Hermes to bring Persephone back, whom Hermes locates in Hades' bed, "shy" and "strongly reluctant through desire for her mother" (Foley 20). As Hermes order Hades to return Persephone to her mother, much to Persephone's delight, Hades agrees, but not before claiming that he would be a good and honorable husband and that as his wife and queen, she would "have power over all that lives and moves" and "possess the greatest honor among gods" (Foley 20). Lastly, he gives her a pomegranate seed to eat before she is reunited with her mother. Persephone then recounts the happenings from her perspective in which she details the eating of the pomegranate as much more forcible than the previous account: "he stealthily put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it" (Foley 22), as well as emphasizing that the abduction was "much against my will" (Foley 24). As Persephone has eaten fruit of the Underworld, we learn that she is now bound to the Underworld and, as an extension, Hades himself. The text itself ends with a compromise mediated by Zeus: Persephone must spend one-third of her year with Hades in the Underworld, while the rest of the year will be spent in the upperworld with her mother.

Ovid's version in the *Metamorphoses* (translated by A. D. Melville), titled "The Rape of Proserpine," shares a similar structure and language as the *Hymn to Demeter*. However, it is

[3] For more information about other extant ancient Greek and Roman versions of the myth, see Foley 30-31

difficult to assert if and how much of Ovid's version is based on the Homeric *Hymn* (Fletcher 40). Although Ovid refers to Hades and Persephone by their Roman names, Dis/Pluto and Proserpine, I will refer to them henceforth by their Greek names for clarity and coherence, in addition to the fact that it is the latter that is predominantly utilized in contemporary romantic retellings of the myth. Similarly to the *Hymn*, Persephone is portrayed as an innocent and childlike maiden-goddess, playing and plucking flowers in a meadow when Hades "saw her, loved her, carried her away" and steals a terrified and screaming Persephone so hastily that she rips her dress in her struggles to break free (Melville 111). Conversely to the *Hymn*, no scheming plans or secret agreements are made between Zeus and Hades. Instead, Hades' actions in the *Metamorphoses* are deemed more excusable as they are primarily motivated by a spontaneous outburst of love and lust caused by Cupid's arrow, whose wounds are known to provoke love and passion. This is further augmented by Zeus, who defends Hades' actions to Demeter: "If we allow Things proper names, here is no harm, no crime, But love and passion. Such a son-in-law, If you, Ma'am, but consent, will not disgrace us" (Melville 115). Furthermore, as opposed to the *Hymn*, Persephone is not forced or tricked by Hades to eat any pomegranate seeds but is revealed to have accidentally eaten seven pomegranate seeds after "wandering, childlike" (Melville 115) around in the Underworld, thus arguably blaming Persephone's recklessness as cause for her entrapment in the Underworld rather than any coercions from Hades' part.

Although there are no explicit mentions of rape in the *Hymn* nor the *Metamorphoses*, several subtextual pieces of evidence strongly imply, especially when viewing it from a more modern standpoint, that Hades sexually assaults Persephone. Firstly, the Latin verb 'rapere,' which Ovid employed in *Metamorphoses* to describe the initial meeting between Hades and Persephone, suggests both 'raping' and 'snatching/seizing,' providing various ambiguous interpretations of what Hades' action truly entailed. The same uncertainties of whether the abduction should be translated as a sexual assault can also be found in translations of the *Hymn.* As Foley states in her translation commentary, it can be "difficult to find an appropriate English word to translate Hades' act of violent abduction" as contemporary usage of the word 'rape' "emphasizes sexual consummation, which is uncertain in this case" (Foley 32). Although Foley suggests that Persephone's cry for help could implicate the abduction entailing a sexual assault, as women in ancient Greek could by law incriminate their rapist and signify their reluctance to being raped by crying out in protest (36), she ultimately favors "seized" (hêrpaksen), "snatched" (harpaksas), and "suffering violence" (biazomenês) in her translation (32); thus, dismissing or at least not directly addressing the violation as sexual.

Conversely, recent contemporary English translation theorists are arguing the importance of rethinking and rewriting the myth from a modern point of view to clearly show and acknowledge the forms of sexism and sexual violence already inherent in the originary sources. To achieve this, they especially stress the importance of using plain and unambiguous language instead of euphemisms and censoring (McCarter xxix; Wilson 89). To demonstrate, Stephanie McCarter, the first woman in over 60 years to have translated the *Metamorphoses*, leaves no room for interpretation of what the Latin verb *rapere* entails in her translation of the title: "Pluto Kidnaps *and* Rapes Proserpina" (139; emphasis added) as opposed to Melville's translated title ("The Rape of Proserpine") which leaves the meaning of the word 'rape' much more open for interpretation. Other differences in language between the two translations are: "captor" (Melville 111) and "rapist" (McCarter 141); "whirled away" (Melville 111) and "rape[d]" (McCarter 141); "stolen" (Melville 113) and "snatched and raped" (McCarter 143).

Another subtextual evidence that may indicate that Hades rapes Persephone is related to how the abduction reflects elements of a patriarchal ancient Greek marriage rite, patrilocal exogamy, in which the husband would abduct or 'transfer' the bride by chariot to his home, often without her consent (Fletcher 40; Foley 32, 108; Doherty 25). In the context of marriage, sexual consummation between the bride and groom is seen as the actualization of marriage, and although the consent of the bride was of no relevance in Ancient Greek marriage rites, this is something that would be defined as rape from a modern standpoint. The *Hymn* strongly implies that Hades and Persephone have had sexual relations as Persephone is found by Hermes in Hades' bed, as well as implying that it was not entirely consensual as she is described as "shy" and "strongly reluctant" (Foley 20).[4] The same can be said for Ovid's version, in which one can assume that Hades, overwhelmed by lust due to Cupid's arrow, also engages in non-consensual sexual relations with Persephone. Correspondingly, the same can be argued in terms of Persephone's consumption of the pomegranate seed, an act that traditionally symbolized a bride's "transition to a new life under her husband's authority" and an acceptance of her social and sexual commitment to her husband (Foley 57). Furthermore, the pomegranate was typically associated with both male and female fertility and sexuality, in which the pomegranate's womb-shape and red blood-like liquid were its female features, and its seeds were associated with the male (Arthur 29; Foley 57). In this way, one can argue that the consumption of pomegranate seeds also symbolizes a sexual consummation of the marriage, especially in terms of how this

[4] In another translation by Jules Cashford, Persephone is found "seated upon a couch," (19) leaving it more open for interpretation whether they have consummated the marriage or not.

also physically binds Persephone to Hades' domain, and as an extension, to him in marriage. However, when considering Persephone's account in the *Hymn* of being forcibly fed the pomegranate seeds by Hades, the same part of the fruit that is associated with male ejaculation and seminal fluid, one can also argue that Persephone's consumption of the pomegranate seeds echoes sexual assault.

In short, the Greco-Roman representations of the myth of Persephone, especially through the characterization of Hades and Persephone, seem to convey gendered and dichotomous notions of sexuality: male sexuality as active, strong, powerful, and even dangerous and violent; female sexuality as passive, submissive, and ultimately irrelevant. The disregard of female agency and choice is especially emphasized by closely juxtaposing Persephone's fears and attempts to resist with the brute, powerful and lust-driven actions of Hades, as her many explicit mentions of unwillingness are constantly overpowered and overlooked in favor of male desires (Hades *and* Zeus), she is ultimately reduced to a passive sexual object for the male to conquer and dominate. Furthermore, depicting female consent as non-compulsory and female resistance as ultimately pointless and powerless against male sexual desires not only endorses sexual violence against women but also reinforces the understanding of male sexuality as something powerful and excusable that cannot be controlled and, subsequently, an encouragement of female oppression. The view of male sexual drives as privileged and unruly is especially clear in the *Metamorphoses*, in which Hades' violent abduction of Persephone is excused by Zeus, a representation of the patriarchy, as an act of infatuation. In other words, the depictions of Hades and Persephone in the originary version(s) of the myth of Persephone sustain gendered relations of power in which men and women enter a relationship on unequal terms and that women's choices and power when it comes to negotiating sex, and the relationship as a whole, are limited and rather ineffectual.

1.2 The disruptive potential of retellings and the role of gender

The act of evoking, altering, and retelling myths into new contexts, adapting them to fit new genres and audiences, is a long-standing and fundamental tradition, to the extent that it is even seen as imperative for the survival of myths across generations and cultures (Doherty 10, 37; Sanders 23,80). However, although the act of retelling involves the perpetuation of a myth, it is not necessarily equivalent to accepting or repeating the dominant views inherent in the myth (Doherty 11, 33; Sanders 126; Jenkins, "Reception theory" 175). As especially pointed out by fan scholars, the process of retelling, *receiving*, an earlier text is not passive but an active

process of selection, interpretation, negotiating, and modification, in which the author's actualization of certain latent textual elements and the disregard of other already existing textual elements can reveal the author's reception of the ideological construction of the originary myth, and subsequently, the ideological commitments of the author (Jenkins, "Textual Poachers" 31; Willis 39). The tradition of fan studies has also particularly acknowledged how authors of retellings actively engage with already existing texts to optimize them accordingly to their preceding social commitments and ideological principles, expanding, reshaping, filling the gaps, and/or challenging the original work and the dominant ideas that they reflect (Derecho 65; Jenkins, "Textual Poachers" 39; "Reception Theory" 175; Willis 51). These forms of retellings, retellings that "explicitly mark themselves as revisions, continuations, and insertions through replicating titles […], using established characters […], and/or using plots and dialogue recognizable from the source text" (Derecho 66), are also seen as particularly valuable in terms of how they may "offer a revised point of view from the 'original' […] voicing what the text silences or marginalizes" (Sanders 23). As the reading of such retellings involves a process of comparison, a layered reading in which the originary myth remains in the mind of the reader while reading the new version, issues, and views that have been repressed or oppressed within the original becomes accentuated through similarities and differences (Derecho 73; Sanders 126; Willis 40), causing retellings to have commonly been utilized as a way of offering social or political commentary, particularly by oppressed groups such as women (Derecho 71; Sanders 126).

One group in particular that has emphasized retellings' ability to disrupt dominant gendered and sexist notions are second-wave feminists, who argued for a feminist practice of revising and rewriting myths as a way of disrupting and correcting myths of patriarchal culture in the light of "female knowledge of female experience" (Ostriker 73). Feminist scholar and writer Alicia Ostriker refers to this act of altering and deconstructing prior myths as a way of disrupting patriarchy as "revisionist mythmaking," which "consists of a hit-and-run attacks on familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (73-74). By doing so, argues Ostriker, women writers become "thieves of language," stealing back the power of language and naming that has long been male-oriented (69). In addition, to accentuate the importance of revisionism for women, she further argues that they are "instructions for survival" (73), transcending it from solely being a product of creativity and interpretation to an essential and necessary exercise for women. Correspondingly, feminist poet and critic Adrienne Rich, define feminist revision as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction" and "an act of survival" entailing women not only

recognizing the male-centric assumptions imposed upon them but also actively refusing to accept them as they are "part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (18).

A recent study from 2022 by Milena Popova also emphasizes how retellings, more specifically erotic and romantic fanfiction, have the potential not only to disrupt and challenge dominant understandings of gender and sexuality but also encourage readers to put these alternative ideas to use in their own relationship praxis, thus arguing that "on issues of sexual consent in particular, fanfiction is a form of cultural activism" (*Dubcon* 166). Most interestingly, she points to how it is especially the apparatus appropriative and derivative works have at its disposal, "its dense intertextuality; its relative lack of concern about originality; its reuse of plots, characters, and settings; and its ability to explore a situation from multiple different angles and perspectives through side-by-side reading and repetition with a difference," that readers value when it comes to fanfiction's ability to engage with and disrupt dominant discourses in and around earlier texts, and offer alternative knowledge and ideas on gender, sexuality, and consent (*Dubcon* 151).

On the other hand, it is essential to acknowledge that not all authors of retellings have intended for their appropriations to resist or disrupt dominant ideas and discourses (Doherty 11; Jenkins, "Textual Poachers" 31). Instead, authors of retellings often reveal complex relationships between the original text's ideological constructions and the author's priorities and desires. This is especially the case regarding gender systems, as the gender systems found in Greek and Roman myths do not conflict with but rather reflect the dominant gendered notions and practices in contemporary Western society. As a result, many retellings may unconsciously reinforce conventional constructions of gender and sexuality, even though it might not be their intention, as these gendered notions are so embedded into their social practices that authors might not be aware of their subordination (Doherty 22-23; Jenkins, "Textual Poachers" 30-31). As follows, retellings of myths have ideological effects and implications regardless of authorial intent; whereas some might reflect dissatisfaction with dominant gendered discourses, others might reveal ideological conformity, acceptance, submission, or even cognitive dissonance (Doherty 11, 37; Jenkins, "Textual Poachers" 30, 32, "Reception Theory" 175).

1.3 Sexual consent negotiation in the light of dominant heterosexual discourses and scripts

It is distinct that this thesis first and foremost refers to sexual consent negotiation, rather than solely sexual consent, as the conceptualization of the latter is both ambiguous and diverse among scholars, particularly "regarding the conditions under which this agreement takes place" (Beres 97). Sexual consent negotiation as a term thus allows more room for approaching and examining potential gray areas of consent in the textual analysis of romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone, as it views sexual consent as a continuous and conditional process that primarily places the stress on both partners' willingness and desires to engage in the sexual activity rather than viewing consent as a simplified and ambiguous juxtaposition of yes/no. This approach to defining sexual consent aligns with feminist scholars such as Milena Popova (*Sexual Consent* 46), Melanie Beres (98), and Anastasia Powell (97). Although feminist academic approaches to sexual consent are manifold and varied, this thesis will within the scope of this paper focus on sex-critical approaches to sexual consent in which feminist scholars have become especially concerned with how social forces and operations of power influence the communication and understanding of consent, as well as the decisions to engage in sexual activity. In essence, they argue that conventional understandings and communication of sexual consent are rooted in gendered and heterosexual assumptions (see Allen, Burkett and Hamilton, Chung, Gavey, Hollway, Holland et al., Kelly, Potts, Powell, and Tolman).

One way of accounting for some of the ways social forces shape the conventional sexual consent negotiation process is through sexual script theory, the notion that humans follow a type of socially produced script for appropriate behaviors, cognitions, and emotions in a sexual situation (Gagnon and Simon 98). What is seen as normative and appropriate sexual behaviors are shaped by shared cultural ideals and social norms; it is learned from and reinforced by how sex is viewed in the media, popular culture, in school, and among friends and family. Put differently, sexual scripts reflect the dominant notions in society about how sex should work, such as who is commonly assigned which role in a sexual encounter, what each role entails, as well as what even counts as 'actual' sex, and in what order certain acts should happen. The understanding of sexual behavior as a socially produced 'script' can thus be used to recognize and examine the different gendered and exclusive positions men and women take in a sexual consent negotiation process, in which women are commonly seen as "passive gatekeepers" (Popova, *Sexual Consent* 80) and men as the active initiators of sex and "sexperts" (Potts 61).

One of the most prominent sexual scripts that have shaped the gendered power relations within conventional sexual consent negotiations is the vaginal-penile intercourse script, also known as the coital imperative. As the name implies, the script centers around the Western cultural dominant tradition of viewing vaginal sex that includes (male) penetration and

ejaculation as the only legitimate form of sex. Subsequently, all other sexual activities, such as kissing, touching, oral sex, or even flirting, are commonly seen as preliminaries (foreplay) to sexual penile-vaginal intercourse in which the ending point of sex is the male ejaculation (Gavey 119; Popova, *Sexual Consent* 81; Potts 34). The penile-vaginal intercourse script has become so indoctrinated in our society that initiations of preliminary activities are often interpreted as an uncontested signal of consent.

As a study by Burkett and Hamilton demonstrated, many young women feel they have no real power or agency in the sexual consent negotiation process, as certain actions were interpreted as giving implicit consent. Once these actions were carried out, women felt that they had no other choice than to follow through with the default ordering and appropriateness of sexual behavior (penile-vaginal intercourse) as "it would be inappropriate to simply 'say no'" (Burkett and Hamilton 822). A similar conclusion have also been made by Powell (58) and Gavey (133) in which they established that several of the women in their studies expressed difficulty in saying 'no' to sex, especially if the sex had already been initiated, in fear of being socially sanctioned of 'leading him on' as well as their objection being ignored. Furthermore, the dominant notion of viewing penile penetration and the male orgasm as crucial features of 'real' sex reveal how society privileges male (hetero)sexual desires, causing some women to consent to unwanted sex due to conformity or fear of deviating from the default script, as well as a disregard for the female orgasm. The latter becomes particularly evident in cases where women follow through with the default penile-vaginal intercourse script even though they might prefer other sexual activities (Popova, *Sexual Consent* 85) and sexual self-help books in which female orgasms via clitoral stimulation only occur "as a detour on the road to coitus, a means of increasing the woman's receptiveness to penetration" (Potts 62).

Similarly to understanding the gendered power relations within sexual consent negotiation through sexual scripting theory, psychologist Wendy Hollway has proposed three dominant heterosexual discourses that shape our views of sex and gender roles in sex: the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive discourse ("Women's Power"; "Gender differences"). These three dominant understandings of sexuality are influenced by the Foucauldian notion of discourse which understands sexuality as a product of power, constructed and reinforced by dominant cultural ideas and social practices in the form of taken-for-granted 'truths' (Foucault). Hollway's proposed dominant heterosexual discourses emphasize not only "how the operation of power through discourse may shape our behaviour and go some way toward explaining why some individuals may choose to consent to unwanted sex" (Popova, *Sexual Consent* 70), but also how they indicate different sexual negotiating

positions for men and women; men as the active sexual subject and initiators of sex, and women as passive recipients of sex and objects of men's sexual desire (Hollway, "Women's Power" 64). This is perhaps most noticeable in what Hollway refers to as the "male sexual drive" discourse ("Women's Power" 63).

The male sexual drive discourse entails the heterosexual notion that sex is a biological necessity for men. It is not only 'natural' that all men should possess a strong, almost overwhelming sexual urge or need, but also reasonable that men will go to great lengths for sexual release as they are less in control of their sexual urges than women. It is, thus, within the terms of this gendered model of heterosexuality, women's role in responding to men's sexual needs and initiatives, either in the form of accepting or rejecting their sexual advances. As a result, as argued by Susan Kippax and colleagues (541), women are left with little to no space for effective negotiation within the terms of the male sexual drive discourse as they are solely "positioned as objects of desire" as well as their sexuality being "portrayed as absent or complementary to men's sexuality." Consequently, the privilege of men's sexual desires and needs, and the simultaneous disregard of female sexual presence, results in "the authorized suppression of a discourse of female sexual desire" (Fine 30-31), thus failing to provide a positive and autonomous female sexual subjectivity (Holland et al. 127). This is perhaps most clearly reflected in how sexual education presents sex for women as predominantly negative by solely focusing on the dangers of sexual activity and female sexual victimization (Fine; Fine and McClelland), thus policing women's sexuality while perpetuating the notion that men's sexuality is uncontrollable (Tolman 16).

Hollway also accentuates a second discourse that has contributed to shaping women's sexuality in relation to men, which she refers to as the "have/hold" discourse ("Women's Power" 65), drawing on a phrase often used in Christian wedding ceremonies. Within the terms of the have/hold discourse, women are seen as less interested in sex and more interested in a long-term and stable romantic relationship, casting sex for women as something that should only be used as a means to ensure and uphold a heterosexual relationship. Consequently, an independent female sexual subjectivity is discarded for women's desires for a relationship, adding to the idea already established in the male sexual drive discourse that women are less or not uninterested in sex. Furthermore, it places importance on women's monogamy and commitment, thus casting sex (for women) as something that should predominantly take place in a relationship to ensure and maintain a relationship, as well as stigmatizing those who display 'abnormal' amounts of female sexual urges. Similarly to the male sexual drive discourse, it

offers minimal space for effective negotiation by women (Popova, *Sexual Consent* 72-73; Potts 44).

The third dominant heterosexual discourse that operates along the side of the male sexual drive discourse and the have/hold discourse is known as the "permissive discourse" ("Gender Differences"). Originating from the 'sexual liberation' in the 1960s, the permissive discourse argues that sexuality and sexual urges are natural, regardless of gender, thus applying the same assumptions to women as men in the male sexual drive discourse. Put differently, the permissive discourse encourages women to express and explore their sexual expressions freely, on the same basis as men. At first glance, the permissive discourse appears to position women in the same negotiating position as men, however as feminist research show (See Allen, Bowers et al., Burkett and Hamilton, Chung, Gavey, Holland et al., Morgan and Zurbriggen, Popova, *Sexual Consent*, Potts, Powell, and Tolman), women's (and men's) heterosexual encounters are still heavily influenced by the male sexual drive discourse which generate pressures that disrupt women's sexual negotiations of consent, and that rather than achieving sexual liberation for women, the permissive discourse, in combination with other dominant discourses, creates an added pressure for women to engage in 'unwanted' sex. Amy Brown Bowers and colleagues point to how despite women supposedly having achieved sexual equality with men, many young women view sex primarily as "relationship hygiene" (326), in which their subjective sexual desire is regarded by themselves as nonessential. This demonstrates how many young women's sexual negotiating positions are still influenced by the male sexual drive discourse (privileges men's 'need' for sexual release in which women's sexual urge is unrequired) and the have/hold discourse (it is primarily women's responsibility to maintain the relationship, meaning she must strive to meet his urges regardless of her sexual desire or risk that men go elsewhere for sexual release). Women's pressure to fulfill their male partner's sexual expectations or needs not to risk harming or losing the relationship is also demonstrated in additional sexual consent research (Chung 451; Burkett and Hamilton 825; Morgan and Zurbriggen 524; Powell 63). Moreover, research shows how postfeminist and contemporary views of women as sexually autonomous "masks the ongoing complexities of the process of consent" (Burkett and Hamilton 817) and "encourage young women not to identify their relationships as violent, abusive or coercive as it is inconsistent with how a young woman should describe her identity" (Chung 452).

In her groundbreaking sex-critical work *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*, psychologist Nicola Gavey exposes connections between normative patterns of heterosexuality and men's sexual violence against women. Gavey argues that the dominant heterosexual

discourses established by Hollway and the penile-vaginal intercourse script, which has predominantly shaped our views of what 'normal' heterosexual sex looks like, comprise and subsequently sustain various sexual acts that are forced, unwanted, or non-consensual, causing rape to sometimes "slip by unnoticed as just part and parcel of normal sex" (203). It is important to note that Gavey does not define all heterosexual encounters as an act of rape, but that she rather accentuates the various gray areas between mutually consenting sex and sexual violence that are often classified as consensual within dominant gendered and heterosexual understandings of sex, although some women did not feel like they truly had a choice (128). Gavey thus questions the validity of women's consent in heterosexual encounters by demonstrating how although women appear to consent to, or even initiate, sexual encounters, they may do so not because they want to but because of a sense of pressure, obligation, and/or coercion caused by dominant heterosexual discourses. The possible ambiguity of consent and sexual violence is also explored by feminist researcher Liz Kelly who suggests that women's experiences of sex exist along a continuum from "choice to pressure to coercion to force" (54), rather than simply consensual or rape; further accentuating the gray areas of consent and that a woman does not have to be exposed to physical force or violence for the sexual encounter to be defined as non-consensual.

In response to dominant heterosexual discourses and scripts positioning an active, desiring, unruly male sexuality against a passive, weak, receptive, and lacking female sexuality, some feminist scholars call out for a "revamping of popular conceptualizations of sex" (Potts 260) and the need for alternative discourses that "challenges the gendered social rules that contribute to pressured sex" (Powell 175). Such alternative discourses include: disrupting the dominant view of penile-vaginal intercourse as the only valid form of sex (Gavey 211; Potts 260); facilitating and encouraging the development of autonomous, female-defined sexual desires and "the necessity of women's desire as a prerequisite to sex" (Gavey 210-211; Potts 263); and acknowledging the various forms of sexual pressure created by dominant gendered assumptions and social forces through "representation of these complicating narratives of gender and sexuality in the media" (Gavey 211-212; Popova, *Sexual Consent* 116-117; Powell 173, 175). The latter, offering alternative narratives and ideas in media and popular culture, seems to be a common denominator in deconstructing of all forms of dominant gendered assumptions of sex, consent, and sexuality. This notion is particularly championed by Popova, who argues that "media and popular culture have an important role to play in any future shift from a rape culture to a culture of consent" (*Sexual Consent* 126). Potts, on the other hand, is more reluctant to locate precisely where and how these alternative discourses might be

embodied but emphasizes the importance of it being constructed "*for and by women*" (263, emphasis in original).

1.4 Previous research on popular romance: reinforcing and resisting patriarchy

As demonstrated in the previous section, feminist scholars and research see social forces and practices, such as popular culture and media, as a key influence for constructing, reinforcing, and potentially resisting current gender-based sexual negotiation traditions and discourses condoning sexual coercion and violence within heterosexual relationships. Within the vast terrain of popular culture, it is particularly romance novels and pornography that have been pointed out as a key source of knowledge about common sexual behaviors and expressions of desires, as well as what sex and consent should typically be like, as these genres commonly and continuously portray sexual and romantic relationships (Driscoll 89; Gavey 75-76; Popova, *Dubcon* 8). Additionally, romance novels are predominantly written for women *and* by women, resulting in their depictions of supposedly ideal/unideal and accepted/unaccepted sexual and romantic encounters becoming an especially interesting subject matter for feminists when it comes to comprehending and dissecting women's dominant ideas of sex and consent (Popova, *Sexual Consent* 108).

Early popular romance studies in the 1980s have traditionally condemned romance novels for their problematic views of romance and sexuality, arguing that although popular romantic fiction is rooted in women's dissatisfactions towards patriarchal culture and masculinity, they ultimately encourage women to accept and adapt to patriarchy (Modleski 45; Radway 151, 157), thus claiming romantic fiction not only fails in challenging dominant heterosexual discourses but also reinforces them. This is primarily done, as argued by Janice Radway in her influential ethnographic romance study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, by not only encouraging women to interpret abusive and coercive relationships as romantic and problematic male behavior and brutality as expressions of affection but also to portray the female protagonist as the one who is responsible for changing her behavior and attitude, "reassuring her that standard female development does indeed lead to emotional rewards" (Radway 157). Thus, Radway argues, romantic novels first allow the female reader "to express in the imagination anger at men that she would otherwise censor or deny" before ultimately suggesting "that such anger as the heroine's is, in reality, unjustified because the offensiveness of the behavior prompting it was simply a function of the heroine's inability to read a man properly" (Radway 214-215). The same conclusion is also made in a

study of Harlequin romances by Tanya Modleski, in which she points out that "most romances are concerned with girls 'outgrowing' their resentment of the male, with their learning to forego identification with him and to form instead an erotic attachment to him" (45). Additionally, although female desires and sexuality were 'accepted' in romance fiction, they were commonly depicted as solely happening within a relationship and as "something to be exchanged for love and used only in its service" (Radway 126, 169). As a result, early popular romance studies seemed to demonstrate how popular romantic fiction further perpetuated dominant heterosexual discourses by portraying the female protagonist as being solely responsible for nurturing the relationship, as well as failing in providing a positive and active female sexual subjectivity.

On the other hand, more recent popular romance studies indicate that a change in popular romance and the academic approach toward the genre and its readers. Both Pamela Regis and Catherine Roach emphasize how not all female romance readers approach romance fiction uncritically and that they are "free to ignore, skip, stop, disbelieve, dislike, reject" what feminist scholars, popular romance research, or even the romance writers themselves, view as the core messages, and instead make up their own meanings of the texts (Regis 13; Roach 6). Moreover, Roach contends that contemporary romantic fiction *can* be seen as a protest against patriarchal rape culture by simultaneously "functioning as a fantasy antidote to patriarchy" and "teaching women to refuse to accept such limits and threats as normative and empowering them to expect or demand better for themselves" (2, 9). It should be noted that the former has also been suggested by Radway, who speculated if the romance novel should be viewed as at least partly subversive of patriarchal culture as it posits a value system that is very different from the value system of patriarchy, in terms of how it provides the female romance reader with narratives they feel 'malnourished' of in patriarchal society, such as "emotional gratification," "nurturance," and "attention" (212). The most subversive element of the romance genre with the potential to truly change and challenge the typical romance novel's endurance of dominant heterosexual discourses of sex and sexuality, however, is highlighted by Roach as the subgenres of erotica and paranormal/fantasy (8), whose increasing presence in the romance genre are offering new, and more graphic, sex-positive romance narratives that explore previously restrictive sexual taboos.

2 Recontextualizing issues of consent and rape culture

2.1 Introduction to the selected works and a note on methodology

To examine the depictions of sexual consent negotiation in romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone and to what extent they challenge and disrupt dominant heterosexual notions of sexual consent, I have chosen a small selection of novels from the romance genre that are centered around the relationship between Hades and Persephone. To confine my immersion of romantic Hades/Persephone works, I chose to exclude works that are solely inspired by or 'loosely' based on the myth, reading instead a wide range of Hades/Persephone romance works that not only openly announce themselves as romantic retellings of the myth, but also deliberately engage with the originary ancient Greco-Roman versions. Additionally, I chose to focus on romantic retellings that embody sexually explicit scenes as these, in particular, engage with themes concerning consent and sexuality. I then narrowed my selection down to six novels to read further in-depth before settling on *Receiver of Many* by Rachel Alexander and *Persephone's Vow* by Ophelia Silk, both encapsulating dominant trends and themes that occur in contemporary romantic retellings of the myth.[5]

It is important to note that one of the most central issues of selection does not only come down to the relationship between the selected texts and their ability to be representative but also the importance of acknowledging the multitudes of retellings which explicitly draw on the exact precedent text as each interpretation, albeit contradictory, are equally valid and authoritative, expanding the myth's archive and providing insight to the various receptions of the myth as a whole (Derecho 64-65; Hellekson and Busse 7; Hutcheon 9; Willis 37). In other words, when selecting specific texts for close analysis, one must aim to find texts that can be representative of romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone while keeping in mind that one cannot privilege a particular interpretation as 'accurate' since "alternative and competing readings can and must coexist" (Hellekson and Busse 8). To illustrate, of the six novels I read further in-depth, five of them (including *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow*) explicitly dealt with and discussed consent and power imbalances found in the originary versions of the myth. In contrast, one deliberately presented Hades' abduction of Persephone as a sexual assault,

[5] All citations to *Receiver of Many* (hereafter cited as R) are taken from *Receiver of Many* (Kindle Edition, 2015), and all citations to *Persephone's Vow* (hereafter cited as P) are taken from *Persephone's Vow* (Kindle Edition, 2022).

dismissing consent altogether and utilizing the myth's subtextual elements of sexual violence to explore its potential as a sexual rape fantasy for women. However, as this approach to the relationship between Hades and Persephone was significantly atypical when compared to other romantic retellings of the myth, I ultimately chose not to elect it for further in-depth analysis in this paper, albeit its interpretation being just as valuable when it comes to the comprehension of romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone as a whole.

Furthermore, it is distinct that both the works selected for in-depth analysis have been independently published, thus operating outside the corporate censorship of the shrinking number of large conglomerates and being able to reach a broad audience due to dispersed and immersive digital platforms. As they are both independently published, one might also categorize these works as a type of fanfiction, seeing as they are "texts written based on another text, and not for professional publication" (Hellekson and Busse 5). On the other hand, I still seek to avoid defining these works solely as fanfiction, as this line of thinking may be too narrow. For one, the selected works seem to have transcended beyond fanfiction as its fiction, although written outside the traditional literary marketplace, is still intended for commercial publication and is commonly viewed by its readers and writers as novels rather than fanfiction. Secondly, solely defining the works as fanfiction also seems to situate them outside the larger tradition of myth retellings, labeling them less merited than other classical receptions. However, in a sense, one can argue that all retellings of myths, including the Homeric *Hymn* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, can be defined as fanfiction if one emphasizes fanfiction's engagement with and appropriation of other texts (Hellekson and Busse 6).

Nevertheless, one should also recognize the selected works' identifying characteristics of fanfiction as this contributes significantly to our insight and understanding of the works' reception of the myth of Persephone. Considering this, I will in this paper first and foremost use the definition proposed by Derecho, defining the selected works as a subgenre of archontic literature; "literature composed of texts that are archival in nature and that are impelled by the same archontic principle: that tendency toward enlargement and accretion that all archives possess" (65). Similarly to how Derecho argues that fanfiction is another subgenre of this broader literary tradition of derivative and appropriative writing, I contend that these independently published retellings are another subgenre, inhabiting traits which ties it to classical reception and "high" rewriting (Lefevere 3), as well as possessing identifying characteristics of fanfiction. This connects the selected works with the broader literary tradition of retellings in which its mode of publication is recognized, but still not restricting it from being recognized in the same matter as other retellings published 'professionally.' Moreover, seeing

as a majority of the renditions of the myth of Persephone found in the romance genre are independently published, this seems to highlight the current proliferation of platforms and access in global and digital cultures; a development and trend that is subjecting the concept of canon in myths to increasing pressure (Sanders 125) as well as giving insight into how modern rewriting should not be seen as an isolated continuation of a text, but a product of the specific expectations and desires of the fan community they are being written in and for (Jenkins, "Reception Theory" 175; Textual Poachers 39), "one that happens within, because of, and for a particular community" (Coppa 9). This way of approaching modern retellings also aligns with and expands on notions within appropriative and reception studies which claim that myths are comprised of multiple 'canons' and communities for whose knowledge, emotional investment, and objective for engaging with the myth may differ (Doherty 37; Sanders 126). Moreover, as these works are independently published, they are also able to potentially challenge and disrupt dominant discourses more freely, as well as able to incorporate more explicit sexual language and taboo themes, such as rape, that the more established publishing houses may not have necessarily, thus more likely to offer alternative discourses.

Both *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* appropriate and illustrate the myth with resemblances to the originary versions: Persephone is abruptly kidnapped while plucking flowers and brought to the Underworld in Hades' chariot, all while she is screaming for help and resisting; Zeus, Persephone's paternal figure, has consented to and partly orchestrated the abduction; Persephone is isolated and confined in the Underworld with Hades after she has been snatched; Demeter turn the earth barren in anger as a response to her daughter's abduction; and Persephone ultimately remains in the Underworld with Hades as his wife and queen for one third to half of the year. However, the two works both depart from the originary versions by mainly focusing on the time Persephone spends with Hades in the Underworld before she is brought back to her mother, a narrative missing from the originary versions. This is a common trend found in romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone, filling this silence and gap in the source text with their own imaginative activity, facilitating and constructing their own, more profound, understanding of the characters' relationship and intimacy. Additionally, both stories are told primarily from Persephone's point of view, although the point of view shifts every so often to Hades, as well as Demeter, in *Receiver of Many*. To tell the story from Persephone's point of view, a point of view that is only touched briefly upon through dialogue from daughter to mother in the *Hymn* and missing from Ovid's version, also provides the ability to reframe certain plot scenes from the myth as romantic without considerably altering key plot elements, rather adding to and elaborating on the originary version of the plot. In addition, it provides a

voice to a female character that has previously been ignored, rooting the story in female experiences and knowledge. On the other hand, the choice of including Hades' perspective seems to be similar to the dual perspective utilized in many popular romance novels, allowing the reader "greater knowledge of the hero than the heroine herself possesses," making the reader able to reinterpret certain actions that might seem ominous at first glance (Radway 140). Lastly, at most importantly, both stories also differ from the originary versions of the myth by accentuating that it is ultimately Persephone's own choice to remain in the Underworld as Hades' wife and queen of the Underworld.

What makes the two stories a complementary pair for analysis can first and foremost be found in their different characterizations of Persephone, as well as their contrasting approaches to the 'canonical' abduction and implied rape, which in turn impact the relationship dynamics of said characters and their sexual consent negotiation. In *Persephone's Vow*, the abduction of Persephone is quickly revealed to be a misunderstanding, a ruse set up by Zeus, in which Hades was left to believe that Persephone was expecting his chariot to bring her to the Underworld as she wanted, requested even, to marry him. As Hades never physically abducts Persephone, sending only his chariot to retrieve her, he does not learn of Persephone's unwillingness until *after* she is brought to the Underworld when it is revealed that it is already too late for Persephone to return as "those who enter the Underworld can't leave it" (P 18). When they meet, and he learns the truth of Zeus' trickery, he sincerely apologizes, stressing how he would never have brought her to the Underworld if he knew she did not consent as well as promising to help her find a way home. Additionally, he also encourages Persephone to explore the Underworld while she is there, resulting in her taking an interest in his job as caretaker of the dead, aiding him in some of his problems. The abduction thus makes rise to a partnership and friendship between the two that slowly evolves into a casual romantic and sexual relationship. She also pities Hades, who believes that no one will ever love him as he is the ruler of the dead. However, although they eventually realize they love each other, Persephone is still determined to return to the upperworld as she is unwilling to remain trapped forever in the Underworld. It is not before Hades has returned Persephone to her mother and the world above with the use of his heart that Persephone truly accepts that she loves Hades and wants to be with him. With the help of her mother, Persephone finds a way to bind herself to both the Underworld and world above, not needing to relinquish her freedom in order to remain in a relationship with Hades.

Silk's retelling of the myth is thus an example of a romantic rendition that makes rather radical changes to the originary versions of the myth. Not only have the subtextual elements of sexual violence been eliminated, but the characterizations of Hades and Persephone

significantly differ from the originary versions. To specify, although their physical characterizations comply with conventional gender characteristics, this version turns the tables on conventional gender roles by portraying Persephone as a strong, independent, and headstrong female character and Hades as the more passive, modest, and emotional character, traits typically viewed as feminine. The same can be said for their sexualities. Whereas Persephone is portrayed as more active and eager, Hades is depicted as predominantly sexually passive and modest, more concerned with finding love and a committed relationship. Although sexism is still very present in the story, primarily through Zeus, who is acting as a representation of the patriarchy, the Underworld is recontextualized as an escape from patriarchal practices and forces, a safe space for Persephone to explore and develop her sexual self without judgment or repercussions.

Conversely to *Persephone's Vow*, *Receiver of Many* incorporates and makes explicit the Greco-Roman versions' subtextual elements indicating that the abduction entailed non-consensual sexual relations between Hades and Persephone. In *Receiver of Many*, Persephone has been promised to Hades in marriage since she was born, a take on the popular arranged-marriage romance trope. However, as this arrangement becomes ill-favored by Demeter, who chooses to hide Persephone from Hades and men in general as a result of her own negative experiences with male Olympians, Hades must conceal his identity and secretly 'court' Persephone by appearing in her dreams and the form of the wind. When Demeter finds out, she desperately decides to transform Persephone into a tree to prevent Hades from taking her as his wife, a transformation that can only occur so long as Persephone remains a virgin. Hades is thus 'forced' to kidnap Persephone and rapidly take her virginity in the chariot on the way to the Underworld as a way of hindering Demeter from transforming Persephone into a tree. Persephone must then remain in the Underworld with Hades as he wishes to prevent her from further harm, and as she is now formally his wife and queen of the Underworld as they have sexually consummated their marriage. Although they spend almost every night together in bed, Persephone still feels conflicted about her feelings towards Hades, feeling like a prisoner being sexually attracted to him. As a result, Hades tries to introduce her to her role as queen, encouraging her to develop her divine powers and authority, all while hoping that it might help her accept and enjoy her position as queen and his wife. As she adapts to her role as queen, it is ultimately revealed that Persephone is the ultimate sovereign over the Underworld, born to rule it. In contrast, Hades, who was given the title, is reduced to her consort, turning the tables and the playing field. Persephone then happily accepts her place as Queen of the Underworld,

and as she realizes that she has been in love with Hades for some time, she wishes for them both to rule over the Underworld equally as husband and wife.

In Alexander's rendition, Persephone is characterized, at least in the beginning, as an innocent and curious, yet powerless, young woman, much like the originary versions of the myth, who as well as being dependent on and subordinate to her mother, is relatively sexually ignorant, a result of her mother's overprotectiveness. However, as she becomes separated from her mother's overprotectiveness in the Underworld and can explore and establish her sexuality and autonomy, Persephone becomes portrayed as more powerful, self-assured, and strong. Furthermore, Hades is depicted as more sympathetic than in the originary versions. Although his strength and power are equivalent to his characterization in the Greco-Roman versions, he is portrayed as kind, understanding, and respectful towards Persephone, with a genuine wish for Persephone to love him and rule over the Underworld with him as equals.

2.2 Establishing (gendered) power imbalances

It is significant that rather than removing or censoring Hades' brute abduction of the unwilling Persephone, both *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's* Vow utilize it to serve as the primary concern of the romance story, constructing and presenting the power imbalances it causes as the main obstacle to overcome in the development of their romantic and sexual relationship. By constructing and focusing on a romantic and sexual relationship that is distinctly comprised of power inequalities, especially referencing and problematizing them in scenes centered around their sexual activities and encounters, both works explore potential issues of consent found in an unequal relationship in their romance renditions of the myth. As the construction of these power imbalances play a crucial role in my interpretation of the works' depictions of and approaches to sexual consent negotiation, it is worth highlighting them.

In *Receiver of Many*, the inequalities caused by the abduction seem to echo the possible gendered inequalities commonly identified in the social and legal institution of marriage, accentuating how marriage as an institution may produce and reinforce gender imbalances. Similarly to the history of marriage customs and laws, as well as the conventional narrative structure of the ideal romance as pointed out by Radway (134), the abduction removes Persephone from her social and emotional safety and familiarities, as she is forced to leave her family behind to become a part of her husband's household. As a result, she becomes financially and socially dependent on Hades for basics like shelter to emotional reassurance, access to information, and guardianship. As Hades is the sovereign of the Underworld and one of the

three most powerful deities, he also possesses immense political and social power, putting Persephone in an inferior position of power both within their relationship (private domain) and outside their relationship (the public domain), as she is entrapped in "a kingdom where he held absolute power" (R 169), resembling the inferior position most commonly held by a wife. Furthermore, by presenting Persephone's abduction and marriage consummation as the only way to save Persephone from becoming a tree, her abduction further plays on the history of marriage customs and laws, highlighting women's importance of securing marriage for protection and financial security. For Persephone, an unconsummated or failed marriage with Hades could thus potentially result in death, or at least financial, legal, social, or personal repercussions, resulting in her having little to no power on her own when it comes to negotiating her position within the relationship.

Persephone's inferior position of power is also accentuated in *Receiver of Many* by situating the story in the social and historical context of the Greco-Roman versions of the myth, repeatedly referencing how social forces and customs promote a female acquiescence to sexual advances within marriages and thereby further exacerbating the power imbalances constructed and highlighting them as primarily gendered. This is perhaps best demonstrated in a warning given by Demeter to Persephone about marriage:

> It is what is expected of wives. They must submit to the demands of their husbands. If she did not, he would have taken it from her anyway and with greater harm to her. When women fall foolishly into the bonds marriage— or worse and more often these days, when they are sold by their fathers— then they are obligated to submit their bodies to their husband. The woman you saw today only chose to go along with him to avoid more pain than he had already caused her. (R 39)

The passage above greatly echoes Gavey and other feminist theorists' highlighting of problematic elements of dominant discourses, in which women are positioned as passive objects of male arousal, thereby primarily representing female sexuality as absent or only complementary to male sexuality and in no position to negotiate meaningful consent (Gavey 100-101; Hollway, "Women's Power" 64; Kippax et al. 541). Moreover, it accentuates and acknowledges the sexual pressure women feel within marriage, in which sex is seen as a wifely duty and an expected way to maintain the relationship. Rather than glossing over and ignoring power differences between men and women in heterosexual negotiations and simply assuming that women's sexual choices can be easily asserted as well as respected, *Receiver of Many* recognizes and underscores the potentially powerless and vulnerable positions women have in heterosexual encounters due to social forces, the options being physical abuse or emotional and

social sanctions. As this lecture also happens in the initial part of the story, problematic 'naturalized' notions of consent and sexual practices related to marriage are made visible and established as potentially coercive, placing the relationship between Hades and Persephone and their handling of sexual consent under scrutiny even before it has been introduced.

The way these gendered social forces might give rise to or reinforce power imbalances between Hades and Persephone caused by the abduction, and subsequently potentially result in female acquiescence, is also highlighted through Persephone's notions, both through her fear of being pressured into sex as well as how she perceives these situations as to be expected in a marriage. For one, she calls attention to how marriage as a social and legal institution can legitimize and construct gendered power imbalances and female sexual compliance, impacting her bodily and sexual autonomy: "She was no fool— by every law she knew, Hades could still demand his rights to her body as her husband" (R 279). Additionally, Persephone reveals an internalized pressure to engage in sex with her husband despite not wanting to in her response to Hades after he declares that the two together should work out how their marriage should work: "That's not how it works, you know. […] The husband decides the workings of the marriage. […] I mean, I was actually surprised that you didn't come to my bed these past three days. You were within your rights to —" (R 328-329). Persephone's response not only reflects the discursive construction of sex within marriage as a 'wifely duty,' as it references to and legitimizes both the expectations of regular sexual intercourse as generated by their marriage and how taking care of his sexual needs is seen as an obligation by Persephone, regardless of her desires. The wording in particular, especially the use of the word 'rights,' implies a sense of privilege and authority on Hades' part when it comes to specifying the terms of their sexual relationship, as well as their relationship as a whole.

In *Persephone's Vow*, the power imbalances between Hades and Persephone are presented as less severe, mainly due to how the subtextual elements of sexual violence in the myth have been cast aside, as well as how the abduction does not initially cast them into an intimate relationship. Moreover, by just partly adapting the gender system inherent in the myth, depicting a 'modernized' version of the myth within the patriarchal context of ancient Greco-Roman culture, the power imbalances that are presented become particularly highlighted when read side-by-side with the originary myth. Most importantly, it accentuates Persephone as the less powerful within the relationship despite her 'postfeminist' depiction. To paraphrase, the abduction becomes a symbol of the disregard of female choice and consent that might occur despite women supposedly being presented as equal to men, unmasking deep-rooted gendered inequalities and problematizing present-day notions and approaches to consent, which assume

that women are innately free and autonomous beings who can just say no and that those 'no's' will always be respected. To demonstrate, despite Persephone being characterized as autonomous and sexually emancipated, confidently turning down suitor after suitor, all while expecting her refusals to be respected (P 5-6), she still experiences her autonomy being revoked and disregarded, becoming physically overpowered and forced to the Underworld in favor of male desires. This is especially underscored through Zeus, functioning as the representative of the patriarchy, as he is not only responsible for robbing Persephone of her choice to consent to the relationship but also legitimating Hades' ability and authority as a man to disregard Persephone's choices if he wants to: "You could make her willing, if you really wanted to. Sure, she'll be difficult at first, but she'll come around with enough persuasion. They always do" (P 56). Here it also becomes clear that Zeus is not only talking about Hades' ability to disregard Persephone's choice to marry but also her sexual boundaries and bodily autonomy, indicating that Hades should and can sexually take her by force if he has to.

However, another crucial power imbalance caused by the abduction in *Persephone's Vow* can be narrowed down to how it prevents her from leaving the Underworld, directly affecting her independence and choices, entrapping her in Hades' domain. Persephone's inability to leave the Underworld is underscored on several occasions as the main obstacle in her romantic relationship with Hades: "The fact that I can't leave is the only problem […] If it weren't for that, I'd be very happy here" (P 108); "The only barrier between us being together long-term is the fact that I am trapped here. I wouldn't be able to stand that, you know" (P 108-109); "I'm imagining my future with Hades. But that future has always been contingent on my freedom. I could not be happy without that" (P 120). Persephone also condemns the abduction and the disregard of female choice and consent that it symbolizes, casting the action as non-consensual and problematic, regardless of any joy it might have ultimately caused: "There were plus sides to the situation, after all: meeting Hades, getting to know him, falling for him. But that doesn't change the fact that she'd never been given the choice to do any of that" (P 122). Persephone's inability to accept her situation in the Underworld, as she was never given a choice to consent to it, despite Hades treating her with the utmost respect and even after she realizes that she is in love with Hades, clearly demonstrates how *Persephone's Vow* presents true equality and mutual autonomy as the primary condition for achieving a genuinely affectionate and consensual heterosexual relationship. In fact, it is not before Persephone is given the freedom to choose and obtain her independence that the couple can achieve their happy ending and romantic triumph.

Considering this, both *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* thus seem to express "women's dissatisfaction with the current asymmetry in male-female relationships" (Radway 129), mainly by utilizing the abduction as a way of exploring and presenting power imbalances, particularly those giving rise to female acquiesce, as the main threat and obstacle to overcome in an unequal romantic and sexual relationship. However, by positioning the stories, either partly or wholly within the context of ancient Greco-Roman marriages, romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone are not only able to recognize these power inequalities as largely gendered but also to disclose their dissatisfaction with present-day discourses of sex and consent. In particular by calling attention to and condemning the myth's underlying notion of female sexual compliance in heterosexual relationships and the disregard of female sexuality in favor of male sexual desires, reframing its perspective on female consent by rooting them in female sexual experiences. As a result, these romantic renditions ultimately recognize and continuously reference the different negotiating positions men and women undertake in sexual encounters in a way that other popular romance novels may gloss over or ignore, keeping the issue of consent the focal point of their stories. With this in mind, I argue that, in particularly this matter, romantic retellings are not that different from traditional feminist revisionist mythmaking as their depictions of Persephone and Demeter's views on their sexual consent negotiating positions and illustrations of women's expected roles within heterosexual relationships, particularly the institution of marriage, are "retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered," changing and correcting the myth through "female knowledge of female experience," some of the key characteristics Ostriker points to when describing feminist revisionist mythmaking (73).

3 Renegotiating consent

> oh my lord the -*steamy, heart aching, goo goo eyes*- romaaaance!! It's official now Hades is the real deal for me, ladies. The way he loved his Persephone **sigh** — incomparable to any other couples i've read about (I KNOW that's some major claim i'm scared for myself too). He's just tooth-achingly-sweet, super loving, very gentle, mature, passionate, affectionate and sO patient with Persephone throughout the entire book and i desperately demand a Hades for myself this instance!! (alluringB)

Although *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* may arguably resemble feminist revisionist mythmaking in terms of their critique of the myth's constructions of sexuality and consent, these writers still differs from the more traditional feminist revisionists by the fact that they are still very much part of the romance genre. This means that the reader is expecting a happy ending that involves Hades and Persephone romantically triumphing, and the writer is determined to provide them with one, making it an impossible option to solely present and thereafter accept that Hades and Persephone's relationship is ultimately coercive in the same manner a traditional feminist revisionist may.

The romance novel's ultimate need to conform to the romance genre's expectations of a 'happy ending' is also what Radway and Modleski point to as the romance novels' ultimate reversion to patriarchal beliefs and reinforcement of dominant discourses. They both argue that this romantic triumph is presented as highly dependent on the heroine's ability to overcome her anger and dissatisfaction towards men and undergo "a complex process of self-subversion" in which she learns to accept that the hero's problematic (sexual) behavior is solely *her* inability to read him properly and thus her responsibility to change and conform in order ensure a happy and satisfactory relationship (Modleski 37, 43, 45; Radway 157, 214-215). In other words, according to Radway and Modleski, any initial expressions of dissatisfaction towards the patriarchal and dominant discourses of sex and consent made by romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone will ultimately prove useless and counterproductive when having to eventually depict the romantic relationship between Hades and Persephone as the most favorable outcome, reconciling women to "patriarchal society and reintegrates them with its institutions" (Radway 217).

Conversely, I will in this chapter demonstrate that is especially the deliberate efforts presented by *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* as necessary to engage in sexual and

romantic fantasies and ensure a happy romantic ending that allow them to truly challenge and disrupt dominant understandings of sexuality and consent and offer alternative discourses that are more in concurrence with feminist sexuality theorists' call for a "revamping of popular conceptualizations of sex" (Potts 260) and negotiation models that "challenges the gendered social rules that contribute to pressured sex" (Powell 175).

3.1 Alternative approaches to negotiating and ensuring consent

As established in the previous chapter, by constructing largely gendered power imbalances as the main threat and obstacle to Hades and Persephone's relationship, *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone' Vow* both keep the issue of consent the focal point of their stories, as this ultimately indicates that the different and unequal negotiating positions men and women undertake in sexual encounters are problematic for their ultimate romantic triumph. As a result, active and conscious work of minimizing power imbalances is presented in both works as having a pivotal role in facilitating genuine and meaningful sexual consent between unequal partners in a relationship.

In *Persephone's Vow*, Hades is proactive about making sure that Persephone knows how much he respects her independence and choices instantly after the abduction, explicitly distancing himself from Zeus' objective of marrying her without her consent and stating how he has "no intention of marrying an unwilling bride" (P 18). To make his regret over his role in the abduction more apparent, he even sinks to his knees in front of Persephone, begging for forgiveness and surprising Persephone greatly with his signs of submission, putting them on equal footing. Moreover, he ensures that Persephone feels comfortable and at ease by providing her with the necessary space and privacy, refraining from initiating contact, specifically contact that resembles courtship or encourages sexual activity. These efforts include providing her with her own bedroom, encouraging her to explore and engage with the Underworld, asking for permission to accompany her whenever he later encounters her, and even trying to hide his physical attraction towards her (P 28). As a result, Persephone feels safe enough to establish some boundaries early on and is reassured that these will be heard and respected. The latter is especially demonstrated in how Persephone later answers her door in the nude, showing no signs of distress of it potentially being Hades at the door, as she states that he has "proven himself to be trustworthy" (P 49). Persephone's confidence in Hades here thus showcases how Hades' conscious actions have proved successful in terms of building trust between them. Most importantly, it is Hades' conscious efforts that result in Persephone entertaining the idea of

exploring and initiating a casual sexual relationship with Hades while trapped in the Underworld. It should be noted that Persephone's forwardness and incentive for being the first to initiate any romantic or sexual activity between the two is also connected to Persephone being presented as relatively sex-positive and autonomous, and not exclusively a result of Hades' efforts. However, Hades' passivity and conscious efforts to make her feel at ease are still represented as a significant reassurance for Persephone, aiding her in her decision.

What is significant when Persephone initiates their first kiss, is how Hades reacts by remaining completely still, not responding to her kiss nor initiating any contact that might be interpreted as enthusiasm or compliance: "he doesn't touch her. He doesn't hold her. When she presses against him, he doesn't retreat from her, but he doesn't pull her closer either" (P 68). This confuses Persephone greatly, who stops kissing him, having interpreted Hades' passiveness as a sign of him not being sexually attracted to her and just trying to reject her politely. However, when Persephone tries to talk with him afterward, Hades surprises her by apologizing for having made her feel she had to kiss him, revealing that his passiveness was a sign of him being worried about having done anything to pressure her into kissing him, and an attempt to diffuse the situation and minimize any sexual pressure he might have caused Persephone: "I'm not sure how I did it, exactly. But clearly I did something, something that pressured you into kissing me […]. I'm not sure what it was, but I still apologize for it" (P 75). Here it becomes evident how attentive Hades is to him being the more powerful partner in the relationship and how this might affect and influence any consent that is given, as he is shown questioning the authenticity of her consent as well as making conscious efforts to ensure that Persephone has the space to reject or withdraw from the sexual activity. It is not before Persephone reassures Hades of her willingness, explicitly stating that he did not pressure her into anything and that she kissed him solely because she wanted to, that Hades truly accepts her consent as sincere, permitting himself to kiss her and become a more active sexual participant (P 77). This scene, in particular, also seems to be attentive to the problematic aspect of the permissive discourse, in which one may assume that women's initiation of sexual activity is equivalent to believing women are in the same consent negotiating position as men, masking the complexity of consent (Chung 450; Burkett & Hamilton 817, 821; Kippax et al. 542). Rather than doing so, Hades is attentive to any potential factors that might have caused added pressure for Persephone to engage in 'unwanted' sexual activity, not truly accepting Persephone's consent before he can explicitly ask her for it.

The importance of building trust and managing power imbalances in an unequal relationship to ensure meaningful and genuine consent can be given (or revoked) can also be

found in *Receiver of Many*. Like *Persephone's Vow*, Hades is seen providing Persephone with the space and privacy she desires, as well as trying to keep his distance and "cautiously trying not to touch her too much" (R 97). However, as Hades and Persephone's relationship is initially more intimate and fragile, having already consummated the marriage without Persephone's explicit consent and regularly engaging in sexual activity, the efforts made by Hades to build trust within their relationship are shown as more extensive and critical than in *Persephone's Vow*. In particular, he is shown to consciously managing and minimizing the various power inequalities in their relationship by reminding Persephone of her choices and powers within their relationship and explicitly trying to empower her by demonstrating that he perceives her as an equal with phrasings such as "You may be my wife, but no one owns you, Persephone" (R 99), "this is our marriage. I'm fairly sure that we get to decide what things we should and shouldn't enjoy together" (R 328), and "You are my equal" (R 329). These reassurances commonly occur after Persephone has pointed out their unequal relationship, resulting in Hades functioning as a sort of mender of Persephone's, and consequently the reader's, understanding of women having to be submissive to their male partner's (sexual) needs, particularly within marriage, explicitly opposing and condemning these notion.

However, Hades' necessity to continue to contradict Persephone about her subject position as wife while at the same time regularly having sex also reveals that the power imbalances between them are still very much there. The fact that Persephone continues questioning and doubting her power and agency in the relationship may indicate that she is still not at ease enough to deny any potential unwanted sexual activity. With this in mind, it is significant that *Receiver of Many* portrays Hades' primary way of ensuring that any consent from Persephone is genuine as careful observation of her emotional and physical cues during their sexual relations. To illustrate, Hades is seen continuously reassuring Persephone of her sexual choices and power to stop the encounter at any time and explicitly asking for her consent on multiple occasions throughout the encounter. Although this is commonly the case in all of their sexual encounter, this is most clearly demonstrated in their first sexual encounter after their consummation, in which Hades shows extra care to explicitly ask for Persephone's consent throughout and being significantly attentive to her reactions. It should be noted that this sexual encounter develops from an apology by Hades about their first time, an attempt to put her more at ease by underscoring how their first time was not what he would have wanted and that there should have been "much more tenderness, so much more consideration" (R 124). Here Hades' response indicates that he perceives their first time as inadequate and unfavorable due to his lack of attentiveness to her needs and desires, underscoring feminists' call for the importance

of perceiving female desires as prerequisite for all sexual relations (Gavey 201-211; Kippax et al. 542; Potts 263). In addition, Hades reveals a sense of responsibility to ensure that the sexual encounter is positive for Persephone.

Immediately after Persephone's request for Hades to demonstrate how things should have transpired, he promptly exhibits greater thoughtfulness, actively ensuring her consent. This attentiveness to her consent is evident throughout the sexual encounter by reminding her that he is willing to stop at any time before kissing her, looking into her eyes for approval when removing her clothing, asking her if he should keep going before removing even more clothing, stopping before touching her any further by seeking eye contact and asking her explicitly if this is still what she wants. As he undresses, and Persephone reveals to the reader through her thoughts that she is worried if it is going to hurt when he enters her, he is also shown being significantly attentive to her reactions:

> "Are you alright?" Aidon startled her. He ran a hand down her shoulder, feeling her shake. "It's just—" She licked her dry lips. "I'm afraid it will hurt again." He cupped her face and kissed her forehead. "We can stop anytime you want. Say the word and I'll stop right now." Persephone looked into his eyes, burning yet sincere as he stroked her cheek and sighed. He meant every word of what he said. "I don't want to stop— not now. Not yet. But if I do… do you promise?" "I promise." (R 129-130)

In this sexual encounter, although Persephone does remain the more passive recipient of sex, presented similarly to how women are positioned in the male sexual drive discourse as solely accepting or rejecting male sexual advances (Hollway 64), she is still left with much more space for effective and meaningful negotiation due to Hades' continuous work of ensuring that Persephone can comfortably withdraw her consent at any time. This depiction of Hades also stands in stark contrast with the findings made by Burkett and Hamilton (822) and Powell (58), in which women felt like they had no real power in the negotiation of sexual consent due to how traditional sexual scripts position certain sexual actions such as kissing or touching as equivalent to consenting to coitus. Instead, Hades is shown to view sexual consent not as a taken-for-granted juxtaposition of yes/no, but as a continuous and potentially conditional process. As a result, Persephone is able to withdraw her consent and say 'no' to unwanted sex without the fear of harming her relations with Hades.

As demonstrated in the examples above, it is primarily Hades that is depicted in both works as the partner who ensures that the negotiation of sexual consent occurs, as well as the one who actively tries to minimize any power imbalances that might create unequal negotiation positions and affect the validity of any consent given. As a result, the portrayals of Hades in

Receiver of Many and *Persephone's Vow* suggest that it is primarily the male partner's duty to manage sexual boundaries and facilitate sexual relations as he is shown as holding the most power. This significantly differs from traditional approaches, which emphasize women's responsibility for communicating and enforcing sexual boundaries and relationships (Burkett and Hamilton 821). Moreover, these depictions of Hades also differ from Modleski's (45) and Radway's (157, 214-215) findings that popular romance stories mainly accentuate it as the woman's duty to sustain and nurture their relationship by accurately interpreting their male partner's behavior and emotions and responding accordingly. These depictions also seem to provide an alternative framework that encourages men to be more attentive to their partner's reactions and consent, particularly their capacity to recognize ambiguity and take proactive measures to determine whether their partner is giving consent.

However, although both *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* initially demonstrate this responsibility as falling on Hades, they also seem to suggest that this responsibility ultimately falls on the most powerful partner, regardless of gender. Furthermore, when comparing the initial sexual encounters with the ones occurring later on in the novels, one can see how this responsibility of ensuring a negotiation of genuine consent is eventually shared more equally as their relationship dynamic and negotiation positions become more equal. In addition, they seem to showcase that the responsibility may alternate depending on who is the most powerful at that moment. This can for instance be seen in *Persephone's Vow* in which the responsibility of respecifying the terms of their relationship after they have become friends falls primarily on Persephone. Here, Persephone is mainly depicted as the more powerful partner from an emotional standpoint due to how she is the more sexually pursuant and emotionally unsusceptible, only looking for a casual 'fling.' In contrast, Hades is presented as the more emotionally vulnerable and exposed due to his loneliness and transparentness about his desires for marriage. As a result, Persephone is the one who feels responsible for reaching out to Hades and communicating her intentions to make sure that Hades knows what his consent may entail and to make sure that Hades knows that her consent is conditional:

> I can't be your wife, I can't be anything so permanent as that, but I'd like to be something to you. I'd like you to be something to me. I'd like to kiss you and I'd like for you to kiss me back, I'd like to hold you and be held […]. I understand if you don't want that […] If what I *can* be isn't enough, if it will cause you too much pain, then – (P 75-76)

By doing so, Persephone puts them on more equal footing within their sexual encounters emotionally wise, as it acknowledges Hades' desires and potential emotional pain if her sexual intentions are not made clear enough. Additionally, emphasis is put on the importance of

explicitly specifying the terms of the sexual encounter *before* engaging in sexual relations, thereby suggesting that the process of negotiating sexual consent, particularly when it comes to casual sexual relations, should begin already prior to the commencement of the sexual encounter to be utmost effective and meaningful for both parts, as well as occurring as a conversation rather than a one-sided and simplified question in which one's role may potentially be limited to a passive recipient and crucial information may be lost.

An equally interesting exchange of positions of power is found in *Receiver of Many* after Persephone learns that she is the true sovereign of the Underworld. Not only is it revealed that Persephone is the ultimate ruler, but that Hades was only given the lot and title due to their promised marriage arrangement, thereby positioning him as inferior to her in legal, financial, and political standings, ultimately reversing their roles. As a result, Hades suddenly becomes insecure about *his* agency and power in the relationship: "After what they'd learned, he felt there was no reason for her to love him equally […] At best, he was her consort, her servant. Her pet. He worried that she merely tolerated his affections and reluctantly surrendered to what cravings he could rouse in her body" (R 463). Hades' newfound doubt of his agency and position, particularly within their sexual relationship, especially accentuate how power inequalities impact sexual consent in terms of how inequalities may generate pressures that disrupt or limit both the negotiations of sexual consent and the consent given. Furthermore, as Hades' wording, positioning himself and his sexuality as secondary or complementary to Persephone is also commonly associated with the perception and role of wife as constructed by dominant heterosexual discourses, *Receiver of Many* seems to accentuate further the sexual pressure women feel within marriage, only this time by turning the tables. This claim is reinforced further by showing Hades drawing parallels between his new position and Persephone's old one, suddenly questioning the consent that Persephone has previously given as he realizes how little sexual agency he now inhabits himself: "Or worse, that this whole time she had submitted to whatever husbandly rights she assumed he had over her body, and had learned to make it enjoyable, but ultimately he had been taking her against her will" (R 463).

However, what becomes most interesting is how in their subsequent sexual encounter, Persephone is shown as the one reading Hades' emotional and physical reactions and expressions, even stopping their sexual activity and encouraging him to talk to her when she notices that his facial expressions are blank. Furthermore, as Hades reveals his doubts and insecurities tied to his new and less powerful position, it is Persephone who is depicted as the one taking upon the responsibility of minimizing power imbalances and putting them on equal footing by easing his concerns and underscoring how she perceives him as an equal. In this

scene, two things particularly become prominent once again. One, Persephone's decision to stop the sexual activity and reassure the consent given by Hades due to his blank facial expression, an expression commonly indicating someone being absent-minded or possessing a low degree of enthusiasm, once again demonstrates how sexual consent, although given, is represented as potentially invalid or worthless if deliberate efforts to assert and negotiate the accountability of said consent has not been made. And as a result, casting some taken-for-granted heterosexual encounters as potentially coercive. Secondly, an alternative discourse of consent is presented in which the best way to ensure meaningful and genuine sexual consent in an unequal relationship is by managing and minimizing any power imbalances and potential pressure, a responsibility that falls on the more powerful partner.

3.2 The male sexual drive discourse and male/female sexuality

As previously established, the male sexual drive discourse is arguably one of the most dominant and uncontested understandings of male sexuality, shaping normative and appropriate sexual scripts and impacting other conventional understandings of sexuality and consent. Within the terms of this discourse, male sexuality is positioned as active and paramount, while women are subsequently situated as the passive objects of male sexuality, a sexuality that is commonly overlooked in favor of a biological 'uncontrollable' male sexuality. As a result, within the context of romantic and sexual relationships, women are commonly left negotiating heterosexual encounters based on a negotiation model which centers around responding to and satisfying male sexual needs, ultimately encouraging female sexual compliance (Burkett and Hamilton 825; Powell 64). As already demonstrated in this paper, the male sexual drive discourse is also distinctive in the myth of Persephone, making it logical that romantic retellings in which not only the abduction but also the gender system inherent in the myth are incorporated that the male sexual drive discourse is approached and dealt with, revealing whether its impact on consent negotiation models is challenged by such retellings or reinforced as natural and inevitable.

Receiver of Many does not necessarily disrupt nor challenge the male sexual drive discourse in terms of its idea of the male sexual drive as naturally more powerful. With language such as "he fought to keep his hands away from her breasts" (R 44), "he pulled himself away with difficulty" (R 48), "the need to be with her— within her— had bordered on pain" (R 58), and "straining between holding himself back and pressing onward" (R 48), Hades is depicted as possessing strong, almost uncontrollable, sexual urges and desires, as well as always being

interested in or wanting to engage in sexual activity with Persephone. As a result, *Receiver of Many* seems to both accept and sustain the dominant understanding of male sexuality as biologically stronger and more intense, which at times are difficult to restrain, particularly when encountering visions of a woman's body. The clearest example can perhaps be located in a scene occurring shortly after Hades has taken Persephone's virginity on their way to the Underworld, in which Hades, "despite his guilt, and exhausted by the journey of the living world," suddenly feels himself "harden painfully" at the sight of the sleeping and naked Persephone, still greased with Hades' semen and her blood (R 125). The language utilized above indicates that Hades is not entirely in control of his sexual desires, almost portraying him as a victim of his own sexual needs as he seems to suffer by using the word 'painfully.' However, what is significant is how Hades is then illustrated as hastily covering Persephone's naked body before rushing out of the room, "fighting his desire for her the entire way" (R 125), despite his sexual urges as uncontrollable to the point where it is agonizing to not succumb to them. In doing so, the scene challenges the male sexual drive discourse in terms of how it constructs the male sexual drive as too powerful for men to control, making it, in some cases, an excuse for men to act upon their sexual urges regardless of the female partner's sexual desires or wishes, instead arguing that men can and *should* actively restrain themself from succumbing to their strong sexual urges.

Not only is Hades depicted as actively governing his sexual desire, but he is also shown consciously concealing it from Persephone to lessen any sexual pressure it might create. As demonstrated in a later scene in *Receiver of Many*, Hades is depicted lying to Persephone about his sexual desires to ease her mind and diffuse the situation. This is related to Persephone tentatively and anxiously declaring that she has no intention of having sex with Hades before entering his private bedroom, fearing that she is "treading on very dangerous ground" as he is her "lord husband" (R 317). Here Persephone reveals anxiety related to the invitation to the bedroom, fearing that it is equivalent to a request for sex that she cannot refuse due to the discursive construction of wifely or womanly 'duties' to attend to her male partner's sexual needs as relationship hygiene. In addition, it echoes the anxiety of everyday women who have experienced or are afraid of their sexual choices, particularly their sexual refusals, being rejected, misinterpreted, or ignored in favor of their male partner's sexual needs (Burkett and Hamilton 826; Gavey 128, 133). Hades responds with "annoyance at himself" for putting Persephone in an uncomfortable situation before trying to diffuse the situation by explicitly declaring that "sex is the furthest thing from my mind, right now," even though it is revealed that he is lying: "Liar, he thought. When is making love to her ever far from your mind?" (R

317-318). Here Hades' response seems to indicate a sense of self-awareness of how his sexual desires might significantly add to the sexual pressure already caused by other power imbalances, ultimately choosing to conceal them to diffuse the situation and make Persephone more at ease.

A similar observation applies to *Persephone's Vow*, in which Hades explicitly states to Persephone that he is aware of and acknowledges how his sexual attraction may cause added pressure or discomfort in an already unequal relationship and that he is actively trying to conceal them as a result of this: "I mean, I *did* abduct you to be my bride. […] Even though you know I did not intend any harm, I understand why my finding you physically attractive might be unwelcome. I was doing my best to hide it, and I apologize if I've made you uncomfortable" (P 29-30). As a result, both works thus emphasize the substantial impact male sexuality has on the negotiation of sexual consent, particularly its ability to situate women in sexually compromising and coercive situations as a result of women feeling responsible to partake in sexual relations as relationship hygiene. In addition, their portrayals of Hades appear to disrupt the prevalent discourse that excuses men's sexually inappropriate behavior due to their supposedly uncontrollable and dominant sexual desires, especially when pressuring or coercing their partners. Rather, they seem to point to a need to encourage and promote men's reflections on their sexual desires, particularly their way of communicating such and its potential impact on any consent their partner gives.

In both works, Hades' attempts to manage and curb his sexually potent desires are also portrayed as directly influencing Persephone's own sexual urges, suggesting a link between women's sexual desires and their sense of safety and control. Although this correlation might be self-explanatory, the need to feel safe and in control to fully enjoy sexual relations, it is still significant how both works actively incorporate Hades' attentiveness to her sexual boundaries, his priority of her needs above his own, as almost an aphrodisiac for Persephone. One such example from *Persephone's Vow* is worth quoting at length to demonstrate:

> She probably shouldn't like it as much as she does—the strength of him, the size of him, how easily he could wrench control from her if he wanted. But this is Hades: sweet, gentle Hades, who blushes and averts his eyes at the idea that he might make her uncomfortable with his attraction. She knows that, if she said the word, he'd stop, he'd step away. There just isn't a single part of her that wants him to. (P 77)

What is most significant with the passage above is that rather than portraying Hades' intense sexual urges and physical advantages as primarily causing stress and anxiety for Persephone, they are portrayed as increasing her own sexual desire. This is primarily due to a sense of trust

having already been established and her realizing that he is managing his sexual desires out of respect for her sexual boundaries and desires. The same rendering is also found in *Receiver of Many* in which Persephone realizes "how dangerous her forwardness could be" as she takes the lead in their kissing and he responds by tightening his arms around her, "his control starting to slip" (R 47). At first, Persephone becomes distinctly aware of how her kissing might entice him to the point where her sexual choices and boundaries might be rendered useless if he is overcome with his biologically strong desires. However, as she realizes that he has no intention of doing so, despite being able despite his physical advantages and strong desires, her concern is quickly transformed to desire, even promoting her to partake and indulge in the sexual encounter more enthusiastically: "Physically, he could easily overpower her and take whatever he wanted. But he didn't. […] Kore felt the world tilt back and squeezed her legs tighter around him. She was entirely at his mercy. […] If he tried to take her now, he could. But he didn't" (R 47).

In *Persephone's Vow*, the male sexual drive discourse is also challenged even further, endorsing a non-traditional sexual script in which sex is not positioned as a way for women to attend to their male partner's sexual needs and achieve relationship harmony by presenting the male ejaculation neither as the primary objective nor a requirement of the sexual encounter.

> From her place in his lap, she can feel him growing hard. It's not the first time this has happened, and she's never truly done anything about it. He never comments on it, even after they finish kissing. If he does have to handle it, he simply does so quietly without telling her. He doesn't make it her responsibility. (P 93)

As Gavey argues (115), within the terms of the male sexual drive discourse and the coital imperative, women may potentially be perceived, both by society and themselves, as being unfair or 'cruel' if stopping the sexual encounter before taking care of their male partner's sexual needs, as well as, combined with the permissive discourse, risk being accused of 'leading him on.' As a result, many women end up having coitus despite not wanting to because they feel it would be inappropriate to refuse, having normalized complying with unwanted sexual activity to avoid potential emotional or social sanctions (Burkett and Hamilton 822; Potts 44; Powell 58). However, as seen in the passage above, *Persephone's Vow* diverts from this heterosexual and gendered model of sex by presenting Hades' erection as neither Persephone's obligation nor concern. Significantly, this is due mainly to Hades' behavior, in terms of how he resorts from indicating that it is Persephone's responsibility, never commenting on it nor revealing any dissatisfaction towards Persephone for not making any efforts. By doing so, Persephone does not experience coercion or manipulation into accommodating any sexual

activity she does not want, ultimately exempting her from being left to negotiate the sexual encounter where satisfying male desires is the primary aim.

As a result of Hades actively governing and concealing his sexual desires and not presenting his sexual release as Persephone's responsibility nor the objective of their sexual relations, Persephone is no longer positioned as the passive object of her male partner's sexuality. Instead, due to how Hades tends to resort to a more passive role in sex when it comes to initiating sex as an attempt to minimize sexual pressure and power imbalances, Persephone is given the necessary space to take on a more active sexual role and embrace a more positive sexual subjectivity by becoming the prime initiator of sex:

> They kiss, frequently. And that hunger, that need for him, only grows. She knows Hades feels it, too, but he never quite crosses that threshold, even in the moments where he takes control. Either he's nervous or he's waiting for her to break that boundary, and knowing Hades, she knows which is more likely. (P 92)

The passage above clearly demonstrates how Hades is actively thinking about potential issues of consent. This can be seen in how Hades refrain from initiating any sexual activity, transferring that decision to Persephone, "waiting for her to break that boundary," as a way of ensuring that she only participates in sexual activities she feels comfortable with, as well as not feeling coerced to overstep her sexual boundaries in response to his sexual desires or wishes. Considering this, *Persephone's Vow* suggests that palpable sexual consent is more easily ensured and dependable if the sexual activity is initiated by the female (less powerful) partner rather than given in response to intentional male enticement. If not, emphasis is nevertheless put on a women-centered sexual discourse (Kippax et. al 542). The portrayal of Hades' sexual passivity thus disrupts the dichotomous understanding of male sexuality as active and female sexuality as passive, as it enables Persephone to take a more active role in which she is allowed to become acquainted with her desires to engage in sexual relations, endorsing and facilitating the development of a more active and autonomous female sexuality and subjectivity. Additionally, the depictions of Hades' sexual conduct, particularly his sexual passivity, resist the conventional expectations that prioritize hyper-heterosexuality as a measure of masculinity, where sexual intercourse becomes a means for men to assert both their masculinity and heterosexuality.

This can also be seen in *Receiver of Many* in which the prevailing representations of femininity and female sexuality as passive and submissive are disrupted by ultimately representing Persephone as more powerful than Hades, and subsequently, calling attention to how Persephone's strength is not seen as a problem for Hades nor their sexual relations. To

exemplify, when Persephone's divine powers are shown to be greater than Hades', Persephone is shown worrying over her strength and dominance, potentially resulting in Hades feeling "emasculated" and thereby not wanting to be with her anymore (R 196). However, rather than being upset, Hades is shown being aroused, even revealing that he has never desired her as much as he does right now, resulting in the two having sexual intercourse, portrayed relatively equally in terms of desire, enthusiasm, and participation. In doing so, traditional patriarchal norms that may seek to limit or marginalize women's (sexual) subjectivity are challenged through Hades' sexual behaviour, as well as resisting hegemonic masculinity.

3.3 Representing complicating narratives of consent

In this chapter, I have until now demonstrated the various ways *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* challenge dominant ideas of consent and sexuality by offering alternative sexual scripts and negotiation models that are grounded in the lived sexual experiences of women, constructing new perspectives and approaches to consent to show us what an ideal sexual encounter might look like when active measures are taken by both parties to dismantle rape culture, gendered power imbalances, and sexual pressure. However, in this section, I will proceed to look at an additional way they may potentially challenge dominant understandings of sex and consent. More precisely, how they challenge the binary notion of rape and consent by highlighting and exploring the existence of a significant gray area between the two by representing complicating narratives of consent. Such narratives create a space for discussion and understanding of consent ambiguities, although often neglected in dominant discourses of sexual violence and representations of consent found in popular culture (Gavey 211). It should be noted that the gray areas between mutually consensual sex and sexual violence have already been shed some light on by endorsing alternative sexual scripts, as these ultimately indicate that some normative heterosexual encounters should be seen as potentially coercive if not certain efforts have been made. However, some depictions also further acknowledge the challenge of distinguishing between consensual and dubious consent or outright sexual assault, creating room for the reader to confront and tackle the ambiguity and discomfort that may arise when society deems something as 'not rape' despite some experiencing it as not entirely consensual either. These representations are most apparent and reiterated in *Receiver of Many*, due to how the writer has chosen to not only incorporate the gender hierarchy found in the ancient Greco-Roman versions of myth but also to actualize the myth's latent textual elements of sexual violence. The novel also contains a warning of its treatment of consent in the foreword (R 6),

alerting and preparing the reader to the story's complex representation of consent already before they have begun encountering it, prompting the reader to adopt a method of being receptive to new and unconventional understandings of consent. As most of the ways *Receiver of Many* explores the gray areas of consent can be argued to derive from the abduction and the sexual encounter it gives rise to, this will serve as the main demonstration in my discussion.

The dichotomous understanding of consent is complicated first and foremost by incorporating nonconsensual aspects to the sexual encounter occurring during the abduction, despite also accentuating Persephone's sexual attractions and bodily reactions. Remarkably similar to the originary versions of the myth, Persephone is brutely abducted by Hades in his chariot and depicted as distinctly resisting by "beating her hands against the hard plates of his golden cuirass until they were sore and bruised" and crying out for help, begging him to let her go before she realizes who he is (R 81-82). Moreover, the coitus happens without explicit consent being given, nor is an environment created in which consent can be given or declined. The encounter itself is described as hasty and brute while Persephone, whose clothes have been incinerated on the way to the Underworld, is clinging to Hades in a naked embrace in an attempt to not fall out of the chariot, leaving her naked and 'accessible.' The coitus itself is then ambiguously initiated by Hades saying that he is sorry and that he wishes "there were more time and some other way" (R 86-87), before he moves his loincloth aside and "grasp her below the tailbone, his fingers burying into her flesh" (R 86), sliding her naked body gradually down his while still riding the chariot. Persephone herself is described as unaware of what is happening until the moment that he is about to enter her, in which "every jump of the chariot slid her closer to him until that heat parted her folds" (R 87).

Although Persephone is primarily presented as a passive sexual recipient, she is described as partly participating as well, fervently returning his kisses before the coitus is initiated, adjusting and easing herself against him while he is inside her, searching for eye contact, and kissing him back in the act, although "trembling, […] her heart at war with itself" (R 88). By emphasizing Persephone's sexual attraction, as well as continuously referencing her bodily reactions being in direct conflict with her mind with phrasings such as "She felt herself burning for him as her mind battled between the truth of the man encircled by her naked body and the feel of his tongue tasting and possessing him" (R 86), the sexual encounter is complicated further, indicating a certain sense of willingness from Persephone, albeit also signs of resistance. This is mainly related to how Hades is not quite a stranger to Persephone but a man she has already had sexual relations with, although having been in the dark about who he truly was until her abduction. Indeed, just prior to the abduction, the two participate in a sexual

encounter in which Hades, embodying the wind, sexually stimulates Persephone to the extent that she reaches climax. As a result, Hades is not positioned as a mere stranger abducting and assaulting Persephone in the dark but as a familiar lover whom Persephone has shown great interest in having sexual relations with previously.

However, despite Persephone bodily reactions indicating willingness, she is also seen flinching in pain and feeling sore as she wakes up the day after the abduction (R 93), as well as sobbing aloud when thinking back to the sexual encounter, revealing conflicting feelings of her participation (R 95). To clarify, Persephone seems not to regret the sexual encounter in itself, as she has desired to have coitus with Hades, but seems ambivalent when it comes to the circumstances of their sexual encounter: its rashness, her inability to control it, the uncertainty of what it meant for their relationship, and Hades' secrecy. In other words, their lack of communication and her lack of power in negotiating the sexual encounter. As a result, the sexual encounter is not portrayed as an outright rape. However, it is not brushed off as consensual either, instead reflecting the possible ambiguity of consent and sexual violence. This ambiguity and complexity are also called attention to by depicting a more clear-cut sexual assault, in which a minor character is seen as drugged and raped by a stranger (R 164). This depiction allows the writer to explore the "continuum of sexual violence" (Kelly) further, representing various female experiences of 'unwanted' sex with different degrees of coercion and lack of choice.

On the other hand, when reading the sexual encounter and Persephone's reactions side-by-side with popular romance studies, one may point out how they seem to echo the words of Modleski and Radway, placing Persephone in circumstances where she cannot be held responsible for the 'consequences' of her sexual responses, making her free "to enjoy the pleasures of her sexual nature without having to accept the blame and guilt for it usually assigned to women by men" (Radway 142; Modleski 51). In addition, describing her as "bewildered by her reaction and appalled that she cannot control her body as successfully as she can control her mind," continuing to "hate the hero for his mistreatment of her although it is quite clear to the reader that what the heroine takes to be hatred is, in fact, disappointment that the man she has fallen in love with has not treated her as the precious beloved she would like to be" (Radway 143). As a result, one can speculate if the sexual encounter is solely another demonstration of romance novels teaching women to conform to dominant discourses, encouraging her to interpret a man's problematic behavior as affectionate and thereby indicating that the heroine's anger was unjustified and solely her inability to read him and his intentions properly. After all, Hades' actions and motives are deemed somewhat justifiable to

the reader as he is doing it out of love, the only way to save her life, and Persephone eventually forgive him for his actions.

However, I argue that whereas Radway and Modleski suggest that the heroine's resentment is ultimately portrayed as resulting from her failure to understand her partner, thereby resulting in romance novels encouraging compliance with dominant consent and sexuality discourses, *Receiver of Many*'s treatments of its issues of consent ultimately renders it different. Instead, it confronts the complex and problematic aspects of Hades' actions, leaving his accountability and agency open to scrutiny. This is primarily done by incorporating situations and discussions about consent between Hades and Persephone, both in terms of Persephone accusing Hades' of his actions (R 229), reframing the sexual encounter as partly non-consensual and unacceptable, and depicting Hades as showing signs of remorse as well as taking responsibility for his actions, acknowledging their problematic aspects regardless of his honorable intentions. The latter is demonstrated most clearly when Hades not only explicitly condemns the conventional notions and norms surrounding male treatment, especially male sexual treatment, of women in the "world above," not only taking a stand against these notions but also condemning and taking responsibility of his actions that might have resembled these:

> I forget these things sometimes; I let the ways of the world above, the way I spent the first half of my life, influence me too greatly. I should have told you the whole truth the moment I swept you into my chariot. I should have trusted you. You are not a little girl that needs to be sheltered— that much is plain and evident by the strength you possess and the responsibilities you've placed on your shoulders of your own accord. Doubting you, underestimating you, was my gravest mistake. (R 330-331)

In this passage, Hades acknowledges his abduction of Persephone and his decision to commence their sexual intercourse without discussing it with Persephone as distressing and regrettable. Additionally, Hades is seen taking full responsibility for his actions. Rather than Persephone being described as having learned to read her partner more properly, it is Hades who is shown as having learned to read Persephone properly.

Most interestingly, he seems to declare that his actions were particularly unfavorable as they were influenced by dominant discourses of the world above, letting the ways of the world above influence him too greatly, revealing a clear discontent towards these notions and behaviors that might result in the disregard of female consent as well as a disapproval of himself for having succumbed to these. His disapproval of the ways of the world above, and his actions resembling these notions, is underscored several times during this conversation, particularly

highlighting the commonly overlooked and unquestioned societal standards of the world above that serve as a cultural framework that contributes to the mistreatment and rape of women:

> This is not the world above […]. The scales have been tipped so far out of balance, and my realm deals with the consequences of that disparity daily. Females are chattel up there, and it's getting worse every century. I would betray every principle I ever held if I consigned you to that lot. (R 329)

Especially the latter greatly resembles the arguments made by Gavey, who points to, as well as strongly contests, how normalized heterosexual behavior and actions work as a "cultural scaffolding for rape" (2). By distancing the Underworld from "the ways of the world above" (R 330), the Underworld becomes rather interestingly presented as the ideal society, a society that is very similar to our society, yet very different from the world above when it comes to the male perception and (sexual) treatment of women.

Most significantly, Hades, as the primary representative of the Underworld, as well as explicitly distancing himself from other men by labeling himself as "not like other gods" (R 329), becomes the ideal heterosexual male partner, an archetype in terms of how men *should* behave towards women in their romantic and sexual relationship. This portrayal of Hades and the Underworld strongly resembles the words of Roach in which "romance does deep psychic work for its readers by functioning as a fantasy antidote to patriarchy, to the extent that it is still a man's world out there," particularly in terms of how "the female readers get that fantasy paradox of an alpha male who is string and dominant, yet also caring and sensitive; sexy and desired, yet devoted totally to the heroine and her sexual pleasure; indeed he is helpless and lost without her love" (9). In the case of *Receiver of Many*, Persephone, and thus the reader is not encouraged to accept Hades' problematic behaviour nor any male behavior indicating a disregard for female consent. As a result, its complex narrative of consent contributes to normalizing discussions of past sexual encounters as potentially coercive and non-consensual. Instead, it is Hades' conscious and continuous efforts of making amends for his actions and reading of Persephone's behavior that is emphasized as essential for Persephone ultimately choosing to excuse the abduction, achieving their ultimate romantic triumph and fulfillment in their relationship.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have presented and explored depictions of sexual consent negotiation in two contemporary retellings of the myth of Persephone found in the romance and erotic genres, *Receiver of Many* by Rachel Alexander and *Persephone's Vow* by Ophelia Silk, both encapsulating dominant themes found within the recent trend of romantic retellings centered around the relationship of Hades and Persephone. The objective of this thesis has been to discuss to what extent these romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone challenge and disrupt dominant gendered and heterosexual notions of consent and sexuality by their treatment of the myth's inherent elements of sexual violence and patriarchal rape culture, and to explore in what ways female romance writers utilize the myth of Persephone to suggest alternative approaches to navigating sexual consent. Drawing from these findings, this thesis aims to consider whether these romantic renditions of the myth can be defined as a new form of feminist revisionist mythmaking.

When viewing *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow*'s receptions of the myth, particularly their changes to the plot, the characterization of Hades and Persephone, and their relationship dynamics, in contrast with the ancient Greco-Roman versions of the myth, it becomes clear that both retellings express frustration and discontent towards discourses that give rise to notions of female sexual compliance and disregards of female sexuality and desires but also challenge these notions through their changes. *Persephone's Vow* becomes an example of a romantic retelling that makes rather radical changes to the myth as a way to subvert the sexism and sexual violence inherent in the myth, not only eliminating the subtextual elements of sexual violence from the abduction but especially challenging and disrupting the originary versions' gendered and binary understandings of sexuality. This is especially made possible by depicting Persephone with traits traditionally reserved for men, being more sexually pursuant, headstrong and free-spirited, and Hades with stereotypically feminine traits, such as being the more emotionally vulnerable and sexually passive, and more concerned with finding love and establishing a serious, long-term relationship. In doing so, the dominant portrayal of female bodies as passive and receptive counterparts to male sexuality is contested, allowing for the emergence of female-oriented and female-defined autonomous pleasures and forms of sexual expression, as well as challenging the myth's, and the contemporary discourses it echoes, authorization and privilege of male sexuality and the male orgasm. Correspondingly, the idea that women are less interested in sex than men and more interested in a long-term and stable romantic relationship, casting sex for women as something that should predominantly take

place within a relationship, and putting the responsibility for ensuring this on women, is challenged.

On the other hand, *Receiver of Many* exemplifies a romantic retelling that attempts to subvert discourses perpetuating patriarchal rape culture by making the subtextual elements of sexual violence in the myth, or at least those indicating Hades and Persephone engaged in partially nonconsensual sexual relations explicit, directly addressing and confronting patriarchal approaches to consent and its scaffolding of rape culture by incorporating complex and dubious narratives of sexual consent from women and men's contrary point of view. By doing so, *Receiver of Many* accentuates the difficulty in differentiating between unequivocal consent, questionable consent, and outright sexual assault, particularly regarding sexual relations within stable and long-term heterosexual relationships such as marriage. And as a result, the binary conceptualization of consent is challenged and allows readers to grapple with and address the ambiguity and discomfort that can arise when society categorizes certain experiences as 'not rape' despite some experiencing them as less than fully consensual. Furthermore, by utilizing the sexual violence and sexism inherent in the myth to explore and represent complicating narratives of consent, *Receiver of Many* helps normalizes and encourages discussions within relationships in which past sexual experiences are reframed and identified as partially coercive. In doing so, it challenges normative heterosexual discourses such as the permissive discourse in which women commonly preclude from using terms such as 'non-consensual' or 'sexual assault' when defining their unwanted sexual encounters due to how such discourses encourage women to refrain from identifying their relationship as coercive as it is contradictory to the idealized image of a young woman's sexually free identity (Burkett & Hamilton 828-829; Chung 452, 453; Powell 58). Additionally, by ultimately restoring agency to Persephone, depicting her as confronting the problematic aspects of Hades' actions and establishing sexual boundaries by saying 'no' to sex, the prevailing idea that female sexual compliance is normalized under the guise of love is disrupted, questioning societal expectations regarding femininity and sexual communication and providing a language for negotiating the terms of a sexual encounter. As this agency and self-assertiveness are developed in tact with Persephone developing and coming to terms with her sexuality, an autonomous female sexual subject is promoted, challenging masculinist assumptions about femininity in which sexual refusals are seen as emasculating and distasteful.

In addition, both *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* accentuate the substantial impact power imbalances have on the negotiation of sexual consent, particularly its ability to situate the inferior partner in sexually compromising and coercive situations. This is mainly

done by presenting the abduction and the disregard of female consent that it represents as the primary challenge and barrier to overcome in Hades and Persephone's romantic and sexual relationship, keeping the issue of consent the focal point of the story. It is not until the power imbalances caused by the abduction are actively opposed and eradicated that their relationship is deemed truly satisfactory, as seen in Persephone not willing to accept the relationship until she is fully free to choose for herself in both stories. Moreover, by positioning the story within the patriarchal and cultural context of the myth, *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* ultimately highlight and problematize how external power imbalances caused by social forces and cultural practices may limit women's powers and choices when it comes to negotiating sex, recontextualizing present-day notions of consent and sexuality to explore and disclose their dissatisfaction with 'naturalized' heterosexual scripts.

These dominant sexual scripts are then further challenged by transforming Hades from a representative of patriarchal rape culture and its disregard of female consent in favor of male desires to an idealized male partner who is significantly conscious and considerate of how his position in society and, thereby, his sexual expressions and behavior, might affect the validity of any consent that his female partner gives. By depicting Hades as actively working to establish trust with Persephone by respecting her autonomy and sexual decisions, refraining from behaviors that might pressure her into unwanted sexual encounters, and being attentive to her reactions and expressions during their intimate moments to ensure ongoing consent, both stories ultimately challenge the traditional discourse around the male sexual drive. In particular, this disruption entail the undermining of the notion that men have less control over their sexual desires, which, in turn, can partially absolve them of accountability for their actions when aroused. In fact, rather than absolving men of responsibility for their actions when sexually aroused, *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* cast them as predominantly responsible for ensuring palpable consent, as well as eliminating the underlying notion of expected sexual miscommunication due to the belief that 'men cannot interpret signals.' Lastly, emphasis is also put on the interpretation of consent in itself, challenging the simplified understanding of consent as a yes/no question or a non-verbal assumption to engage in sexual relations, encouraging instead explicit communication of consent and a mutual establishment of sexual boundaries and expectations before, during, and after sexual relations in order to ensure satisfactory and palpable consent from both parties.

If feminist revisionist mythmaking can be defined as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" in which women "awaken" by not only gaining awareness of the male-centric assumptions imposed upon them but also

actively reject them (Rich 18), *Persephone's Vow* and *Receiver of Many's* treatment of the myth of Persephone's elements of sexual violence and patriarchal rape culture position such romantic retellings of the myth prominently within this feminist literary tradition. As this thesis has established, both these retellings share resemblances with traditional feminist revisionist mythmaking, serving as "retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered," rectifying and transforming myths through a lens of "female knowledge of female experience" (Ostriker 73) by constructing new perspectives on the representation of female consent in the myth of Persephone, grounded in the lived sexual experiences of women, accentuating and problematizing notions inherent in the myth that may limit women's powers and choices when it comes to negotiating sex before reevaluating these ideas and consequently the social and literary traditions that uphold them.

On the other hand, one cannot ignore that romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone are first and foremost written for entertainment, not for political and social commentary, as can especially be seen in how they must ultimately conform to the demands and criteria of the romance novel, a genre that feminist scholars have typically condemned. To illustrate, Hades and Persephone do ultimately end up happily married in both works, sustaining and encouraging the institution of marriage although having spent the initial part of their novels accentuating how it may generate and uphold disparities based on gender, particularly in which ways the role of 'wife' as constructed within discourses surrounding marriage may influence and limit female consent and sexual choices. However, I contend that relying solely on the argument that romantic retellings cannot be classified as feminist revisionist mythmaking due to their association with romance and erotic genres is inadequate. This position particularly overlooks the insight provided by Ostriker, who asserts that revisionism is intricately linked with formal experimentation, emphasizing the need for new meanings to generate new forms that disrupt patriarchal literary traditions (88). Considering how feminist scholars (Chung 449; Driscoll 89; Gavey 75-76; Popova, *Dubcon* 8) also point to how the discursive construction of what is deemed 'romantic' and 'sexy' can significantly impede a woman's capability to negotiate sexual consent, as well as her expectations, and thereby, her ability to establish and enforce boundaries regarding sexual activity, one should assume that the romance and erotic genres are the ideal platform for re-entering and rewriting myths that are entrenched in patriarchal rape cultural and male-made assumptions of female sexuality and consent. This is particularly due to the ways they utilize the discrepancies between the myth and the traditional structure and values of the romance genre, a predominantly female-oriented field of literature mostly known for being a "fantasy antidote to patriarchy" (Roach 9), to draw attention to the

myth's, and the dominant discourses it echoes, problematic ideas of consent and sexuality. Here I particularly accord with Roach's prediction and argumentation of the disruptive potential of erotica and paranormal/fantasy romance literature, which highlights these subgenres' capacity to offer "new and highly effective literary means for women to use romantic fiction as a way of working out their position within the culture" (2). As myths naturally inhabit latent textual elements associated with both the romance subgenres of erotica (deal substantively with sexual and romantic subject matters from courting to sexual intimacy to coitus) and fantasy (set in an alternative and imaginative universe and involving mythical or supernatural beings with magical powers), one may argue that the romance genre is the optimal platform for the feminist practice of revisioning myths, ideal for intimately actualizing and exploring a myth's various latent textual elements and to propose new literary means to recontextualize and reevaluate male-made assumptions of sex, sexuality, and consent from a female perspective.

By having to conform to the romance genre's expectations and requirements of a happy ending involving the depiction of a mutually affectionate couple emerging victorious in love, these retellings are also especially able to disrupt dominant discourses of sexual consent within heterosexual relationships by offering alternative perspectives and solutions of how consent should and can be made palpable "to the extent that it is still a man's world out there" (Roach 8). As this thesis has demonstrated, I argue that it is precisely these key changes that enable romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone, similarly to feminist revisionists, to confront and dismantle prevailing sexual norms and discourses surrounding sexuality and consent through "female knowledge of female experience" (Ostriker 73). For one, rather than glossing over the sexual violence inherent in the originary versions of the myth, both retellings either deliberately condemn it through radical changes to the plot or the characterization of Hades and Persephone or explore these issues by making them explicit, recognizing rather than repressing Persephone's trauma as a result of her consent being disregarded, and subsequently, Hades' accountability.

Additionally, retellings situated within the romance genre have a notable ability to render the myth incapable of serving as "foundations of collective male fantasy" by turning the tables (73), rewriting and reasserting it as an image of female sexual expression and identity, truly becoming "thieves of language" (69) by 'stealing' and altering the myth's canon over and over again to the point where its message has been metamorphosed from the disregard of female consent and sexuality to the significance and concern of it. Rather than utilizing the myth to accentuate Persephone as a sexual victim, solely recognizing her sexual experiences as negative and perpetuating the missing discourse of female sexuality in which sexuality for women is

taught only as something to fear (Gavey 163; Fine 30-31; Tolman 12-13), utilizing it to engage in sexual and romantic fantasies serve as a potential mean to shed illuminate and challenge established sexual norms, prompt reflection on consent, and present alternative narratives that can foster a culture of consent that places female sexuality at the forefront; means that may be inaccessible or insufficiently regarded within academic circles and 'high' literary traditions. To some romance readers, this has become indistinguishable from the myth of Persephone and serves as the primary framework through which these fans discuss and comprehend the myth. To demonstrate, although both *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* approach the myth of Persephone in very different manners, similarities between their alternative approaches to consent negotiation still become prominent when reading them side-by-side. Perhaps most interestingly, when further juxtaposing this rather similar discourse that emerges in both *Receiver of Many* and *Persephone's Vow* with recent sexual consent research and feminist sexuality theories, it becomes evident that the sexual script proposed in both works strongly aligns with the proposed necessary demands and calls made by feminist sexuality theorists in order to challenge and transform dominant discourses of sex and consent (Gavey 210-212; Popova, *Sexual Consent* 116-117; Potts 260-263; Powell 173-175; Tolman 206).

Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that not all romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone can be argued to be categorized as a form of feminist revisionism, as a comprehensive evaluation of all the various renditions of the myth within the romance genre is not achievable within the scope of this thesis. Howbeit, I still contend that as fans of romantic retellings of the myth of Persephone tend not to read solely one retelling, but several of them, romantic retellings of the myth remain in a position in which they are allowed to explore issues of consent in a profoundly nuanced way and truly challenge dominant discourses of sex and consent as the same themes, plots, characters, settings, and issues of consent are explored from, as Popova has similarly foregrounded as the disruptive discursive potential of fanfiction, "a multiple different angles and perspectives through side-by-side reading and repetition with a difference" (*Dubcon* 151). Considering this, when approaching even the more atypical romantic retellings in which the myth's subtextual elements of sexual violence or issues of consent are glossed over or not sufficiently treated, readers will most likely juxtapose this retelling with other romantic renditions previously read, as well as the originary versions of the myth itself, thereby creating a space for intricate explorations and reflection of consent-related matters by unveiling subtle differentiations and parallels. And as a result, encourage reflection, discussion, and ultimately, revamping of contemporary notions of consent and 'naturalized' heterosexual practices and behavior.

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