

# thersites

19/2024

Matthias Heinemann,  
Adrian Weiß & Christine Walde (eds.)

**Fantastic antiquities  
and where to find them:  
ancient worlds in  
(post-)modern novels**



## **Imprint**

### **Universität Potsdam 2024**

Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums  
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)  
<https://www.thersites-journal.de/>

### **Editors**

Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)  
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)  
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)  
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

**ISSN 2364-7612**

### **Contact**

#### **Principal Contact**

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

#### **Support Contact**

PD Dr. Christian Rollinger  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

### **Layout and Typesetting**

text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:

Left – Created with Microsoft Designer (DALL-E 3)

Right – Created with ChatGPT-4 (DALL-E 3)

### **Published online at:**

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol19>

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THAIS ROCHA CARVALHO

(University of São Paulo)

## Snatched from Spring

### Persephone as a paradigm for young adult fantasy heroines

**Abstract** Although often making direct appearances in YA fantasy literature as actual characters, Hades and Persephone – and their myth – can also be used as a paradigm based on which authors develop their characters and plots. This type of reinterpretation is at the core of two recently published books in the aforementioned genre: *A court of mist and fury* (2016), by Sarah J. Maas; and *Midnight sun* (2020), by Stephenie Meyer. In both books, some of the main aspects of the myth as well as distinguishable attributes from the gods are used to structure the relationship between the main characters. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse how Maas and Meyer appropriated elements from the Greek myth to create their own innovative versions of the rape of Persephone, especially concerning the love relationship resulting from these retellings.

**Keywords** Young adult literature, The rape of Persephone, *Twilight* saga, *A court of thorns and roses* series

## INTRODUCTION

The popularity of young adult (YA) books among readers is undeniable. Despite the difficulty faced by criticism to define the genre (something also shared by children's literature)<sup>1</sup>, readers' love can be seen in every social media – with the astounding phenomenon of BookTok being especially noteworthy<sup>2</sup> – as well as in the overall financial healthiness of the market<sup>3</sup>.

Usually having teenagers as main characters and focusing on relevant issues for the life experience of these young people who are no longer children, but also not yet adults, it would be natural for young adult literature to favour realism. However, it can be argued that the fantasy branch of YA runs just as strong, with the global success of the *Harry Potter* series being its ultimate coronation<sup>4</sup>.

Regarding the presence of Greek and Roman tradition in YA literature, it is impossible not to mention the *Percy Jackson* series, by Rick Riordan, whose serialisation began in 2005 and is still running strong, with recent book launches and a TV series being produced. Whereas retellings of Greco-Roman myths have only recently become a trend in adult literature<sup>5</sup>, Riordan's series, focusing on characters who are either children or teenagers inserted in the Greco-Roman world in a very unique way, can be considered somewhat a trailblazer in this regard.

Retellings or uses of the Greco-Roman universe as the scenario for new adventures are not, however, the only ways of employing Greek myths in contemporary literature. For instance, Greek gods can be depicted as a form of paradigm for character development and worldbuilding. For the ends of this paper, we shall focus specifically on the case of Persephone and Hades, and the myth of the goddess's abduction.

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1 Hunt (1996) 4.

2 See "TikTok is taking the book industry by storm, and retailers are taking notice". NBC News. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/tiktok-taking-book-industry-storm-retailers-are-taking-notice-n1272909>.

3 Campbell (2010) 33.

4 Campbell (2010) 13.

5 An earlier example is Madeline Miller's *The song of Achilles* (2011). However, it can be argued that myth retellings have only become truly popular in adult literature with *Circe* (2018), also by Miller. After its publication, a true profusion of titles, especially ones focusing on the female experience, have been published.

Although Hades and Persephone have directly appeared in YA fantasy literature as actual characters or as in more straightforward retellings of the abduction myth, they can also be used as a paradigm based on which authors develop their characters, plots, and world. A young and naïve girl, flowery landscapes, a mysterious man with darker powers are some of the myths' *topoi* often explored by modern authors in their imaginative, freely inspired retellings of Hades and Persephone's story. This type of reinterpretation is at the core of two recently published books in the YA fantasy literature genre: *A court of mist and fury* (2016), the second instalment in Sarah J. Maas' *A court of thorns and roses* series; and *Midnight sun* (2020), the most recent addition to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga.

In both books, even though the characters are not Hades and Persephone *per se*, some of the main aspects of the myth as well as distinguishable attributes from the gods are employed to structure the relationship between the main characters. It is especially interesting – and therefore a main goal for this paper – to notice how those aspects are used to develop the romance between them, thus constructing the heroines of the novels as versions of a Persephone that falls in love with Hades and wants to be snatched from her comfortable spring and taken into a darker world.

To this end, this paper is divided in four other sections: the next one presents some considerations regarding the myth of the rape of Persephone, its ancient source and its place on the Greek imaginary; the following two sections will delve into the contemporary novels and their key scenes concerning Hades-Persephone elements; and finally the last section is dedicated to final remarks.

## PERSEPHONE AND HADES IN ANCIENT GREECE

Our earliest source of the myth of Persephone's rape is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (HHD). Of unknown authorship, its composition dates around the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE and was likely composed for public recitation in the region of Attica<sup>6</sup>.

The HHD narrates the abduction of the goddess Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, by Hades, as well as Demeter's relentless search for her, which

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6 Richardson (1974) 5–12.



will end up taking the harvest goddess to the city of Eleusis and there found her Mysteries. Being the first literary attestation of the famous Eleusinian Mysteries, the HHD has commonly been interpreted by historians of ancient religion as a key to unlocking them, and consequently read in the search for information about what happened at the Telesterion temple<sup>7</sup>. The Mysteries, however, are one of Antiquities' best kept secrets, and since their aim was for the initiates to learn something about the afterlife, it was prohibited by law to speak of them. Only the ones who saw them could know, and so be a little more blessed in life, and in death, for knowing<sup>8</sup>.

Even though we do not know much about how the Mysteries were conducted, we do know the myth of Persephone's rape was at its core. With Persephone spending a part of her year in the underworld with her husband Hades, and the other at the surface with her mother Demeter, it only makes sense that she would be able to offer this privileged knowledge to her worshippers. The goddess abduction is also the centre of the action of the HHD.

Traditionally, the story has an etiological role, as a narrative that explains why there are moments when the earth flourishes and others when nothing grows from it. In the mythical logic, the feelings of the harvest goddess, Demeter, are responsible for this oscillation: when happy, accompanied by her daughter, Persephone<sup>9</sup>, the earth flourishes and is favourable to men; however, Demeter is saddened when separated from Persephone, and this reflects on the earth, which withers and remains infertile until the cycle begins again. To Burkert<sup>10</sup>, the myth should be understood as follows: Persephone is the grain that must descend to the earth in winter – mimicking the Greek practice of keeping containers with seeds underground during Winter – so that a new crop can grow; and return to the upper world when the grain blooms in Spring. It is, therefore, a myth that deals with life and death. Persephone's upward and downward movement causes something living to be taken to death, and something of death to life.

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7 Clay (2006) 203.

8 By the end of the HHD (480–2), we are told, “Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom” (translation by Evelyn-White 1914).

9 Or Kore, if we consider that Demeter never calls Persephone by this name in the entire HHD, referring to her only as “her daughter” (Carvalho 2019, 70).

10 Burkert (1985) 160.

Although that is not exactly what is narrated in the HHD, as it can be argued that the seasons already existed in the world of the Hymn<sup>11</sup>, the prominence of this life-death aspect remains. Persephone, as a daughter of both sky (Zeus) and earth (Demeter), marries the king of the underworld, and by moving through the spheres she shall be responsible for bringing some life to the world of the dead, and some death to the world of the living. She is a goddess who becomes dual in nature, showing different powers and significances when associated with the other two divine figures who are very important to her story.

Consequently, when associated with her mother Demeter, she is responsible for the earth's fertility, for the movement of seasons, and in the Mysteries she shall reveal some of the secrets of death to the lucky initiates.

But what about Hades? What does he represent in this myth? By abducting Persephone, is he taking her to marriage or to death? In a way, both possibilities are correct. To understand this dichotomy, we should have in mind what marriage meant for girls in Ancient Greece. The *parthénoi*, the young girls who were of age to get married, must leave the world they know, in their paternal home, and enter adulthood through marriage, starting to live in a new, completely unknown territory: their husband's home. It is not without violence: these girls must leave behind everything they know in favour of a new life<sup>12</sup>. In a way, getting married represents a symbolic death: the *parthénos* dies for an adult woman, a *gyné*, to be born, with all her responsibilities and duties. In this sense, there is no goddess who better represents the feminine meaning of marriage than Persephone.

Marriage was, however, the most important rite of passage for a Greek girl, a rite that would properly integrate her into society. Accordingly, in this symbolic death there is an underlying promise of a new, more fulfilling life. Which makes us wonder: was that the case for Persephone? Did her marriage to Hades significantly affect her existence as a woman and as a goddess?

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<sup>11</sup> E.g.: one of Demeter's epithets is *ōrephóre*, giver of seasons. Also, it is said in lines 401–403 that Persephone shall return to the world of the living "(...) when the earth shall bloom with the fragrant flowers of spring in every kind" (translation by Evelyn-White 1914) and not the other way around. For a more detailed discussion of this matter, see Clay (2006) and Carvalho (2019).

<sup>12</sup> Deacy (1997) 45.

Let's take a closer look at the HHD. The situation of the rape is well explained to the audience at the very beginning of the poem (1–39)<sup>13</sup>:

I begin to sing of rich-haired Demeter, awful goddess – of her and her trim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus rapt away, given to him by all-seeing Zeus the loud-thunderer. Apart from Demeter, lady of the golden sword and glorious fruits, she was playing with the deep-bosomed daughters of Oceanus and gathering flowers over a soft meadow, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises also and hyacinths and the narcissus, which Earth made to grow at the will of Zeus and to please the Host of Many, to be a snare for the bloom-like girl – a marvellous, radiant flower. It was a thing of awe whether for deathless gods or mortal men to see: from its root grew a hundred blooms and it smelled most sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the sea's salt swell laughed for joy. And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy; but the wide-pathed earth yawned there in the plain of Nysa, and the lord, Host of Many, with his immortal horses sprang out upon her – the Son of Cronos, He who has many names. He caught her up reluctant on his golden car and bare her away lamenting. Then she cried out shrilly with her voice, calling upon her father, the Son of Cronos, who is most high and excellent. But no one, either of the deathless gods or of mortal men, heard her voice, nor yet the olive-trees bearing rich fruit: only tender-hearted Hecate, bright-coiffed, the daughter of Persaeus, heard the girl from her cave, and the lord Helios, Hyperion's bright son, as she cried to her father, the Son of Cronos. But he was sitting aloof, apart from the gods, in his temple where many pray, and receiving sweet offerings from mortal men. So he, that son of Cronos, of many names, who is Ruler of Many and Host of Many, was bearing her away by leave of Zeus on his immortal chariot – his own brother's child and all unwilling. And so long as she, the goddess, yet beheld earth and starry heaven and the strong-flowing sea where fishes shoal, and the rays of the sun, and still hoped to see her dear mother and the tribes of the eternal gods, so long hope calmed her great heart for all her trouble ... and the heights of the mountains and the depths of the sea rang with her immortal voice: and her queenly mother heard her.

These lines present to us a girl who plays in nature, picking flowers and having fun with her friends. Even though she is a goddess, we have no information about her powers, or her *timai*, her godly attributions. It is safe to assume that,

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13 All translations of the HHD used in this paper are by Evelyn-White (1914).



up until this point, she actually did not have any. As the young daughter of Demeter, Persephone had no name and no powers of her own. This shall change with her marriage to Hades.

After Hermes descends to the underworld, at Zeus's orders, to retrieve the young goddess, Hades eloquently gives his bride a small speech (HHD 360–9):

“Go now, Persephone, to your dark-robed mother, go, and feel kindly in your heart towards me: be not so exceedingly cast down; for I shall be no unfitting husband for you among the deathless gods, that am own brother to father Zeus. And while you are here, you shall rule all that lives and moves and shall have the greatest rights among the deathless gods: those who defraud you and do not appease your power with offerings, reverently performing rites and paying fit gifts, shall be punished for evermore.”

In order to keep her as a wife, Hades appeals to Persephone's rational side, asking her to disregard her feelings and her mother's, and think about the advantages of remaining married to him, as queen of the underworld. If she previously had no *timai* of her own, as the queen of the dead she shall “rule all that lives and moves” (365), and since all beings eventually die, she shall be able to punish all those who do not worship her properly. What he offers her is finally becoming the “dreadful” Persephone the Greeks already know and that we can see in the Homeric poems<sup>14</sup>.

Whether she takes the pomegranate seeds by force or willingly<sup>15</sup>, by eating it Persephone accepts all the attributions and honours Hades promised, and becomes queen of the dead by his side – the girl who previously had nothing becomes a prominent part of the organisation of the cosmos.

Therefore, for Persephone, the narrative told in the HHD is the story of her transformation into an actual goddess, going from merely Demeter's daughter to the queen of the underworld, with her very own *timai*. Her marriage, as that of mortal girls, is transformative and a rite of passage, ultimately bestowing her a role in the Olympian society.

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14 In *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Persephone is often called *epainé Persephoneía*, dreadful Persephone, queen of the underworld and goddess of the dead. See Clay (2006) 252.

15 With how the scene is described and conducted in the HHD, there is ground to argue Persephone ate the seeds willingly. For a more detailed discussion, see Clay (2006) 252; and Carvalho (2019) 60–62.

With the myth and the potentials of its interpretation in mind, we can dive into the contemporary novels selected for this paper: *A court of mist and fury* (2016), by Sarah J. Maas, and *Midnight sun* (2020), by Stephenie Meyer.

### ***A COURT OF MIST AND FURY: FEYRE AND RHYSAND***

Sarah J. Maas's *A court of thorn and roses* series follows the life of Feyre Archeron, a young human girl living in a harsh high fantasy world where humans are oppressed by magical creatures called the Fae. While humans were given just a small strip of land and mostly live in poverty, which is the case of Feyre's family, the Fae are wealthy and have a vast land divided in seven courts.

Our focus is on the second book of the series, called *A court of mist and fury* (2016), when the romance between Feyre and Rhysand is developed. However, some considerations about the first book *A court of thorns and roses* (2015) must be made in order to locate the characters and the plot.

In the first book, driven by hunger and the harshness of Winter, Feyre ends up killing a wolf who, in reality, was a Fae in disguise. For that she is punished by being taken to the Fae lands, specifically to the Spring court. While at first she distrusts the place and its inhabitants, little by little she falls in love with the court and its lord, a Fae named Tamlin, which in the end leads her to face some trials and break a curse that has been haunting the Fae people<sup>16</sup>. Although she faces death, with the combined magic of all Fae lords she is turned into a Fae herself by the end of book 1. So, how does this girl, firstly characterised almost as a fairy tale princess ultimately becomes a Persephone? To understand it, we must analyse her relationship with a male character called Rhysand.

In the first book of the series, he is constructed as a villain, allied to the biggest enemy of the Fae people. In his very first appearance, when Feyre yet did not know who he was, she described him as follows<sup>17</sup>:

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<sup>16</sup> In this regard, the first book could be analysed as a kind of retelling of the *Beauty and the Beast* traditional fairy tale.

<sup>17</sup> Maas (2015) 189.

Everything about the stranger radiated sensual grace and ease. High Fae, no doubt. His short black hair gleamed like a raven's feathers, offsetting his pale skin and blue eyes so deep they were violet, even in the firelight. They twinkled with amusement as he beheld me. For a moment, we said nothing. *Thank you* didn't seem to cover what he'd done for me, but something about the way he stood with absolute stillness, the night seeming to press in closer around him, made me hesitate to speak – made me want to run in the other direction.

Rhysand has dark hair and pale skin, and his powers are aligned with darkness: the very night clings to him. As the story unfolds, Feyre's relationship with Rhysand gets furtherly complex, as he is an enemy to Tamlin and the Spring court, but ends up being an ally to her during the trials she must face to lift the curse, aiding her in more than one occasion.

By the end of the book, the curse is lifted, the true enemy defeated, and Feyre, now a Fae herself, makes the Spring court her home, beside the man she loves and fought to save, in a perfect fairy tale fashion.

By the beginning of the next instalment, however, things have changed. Traumatized by everything she went through, Feyre is haunted by nightmares and her own guilt. Life in the Spring court, however, goes on, regardless of her pain, and she is stuck planning her wedding to its lord. When the big day finally arrives, she hates everything about it, especially her "monstrosity" of a wedding gown<sup>18</sup>.

"You look beautiful," Alis said quietly. I was fairly certain her thoughts on the dress were the same as my own, but I believed her.

"Thank you."

"And you sound like you're going to your funeral."<sup>19</sup>

The mingling of wedding and funeral images is one of our first clues that Feyre is no longer the fairy tale princess from the first book, and is starting to step into other paradigms.

The wedding party is arranged in a garden decorated with flower petals, not unlike Persephone's flowery meadow. Differently from the goddess, however,

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18 Maas (2016) 38.

19 Maas (2016) 40.

who screamed not to be taken away from her flowery haven<sup>20</sup>, Feyre inwardly begs to be saved from hers<sup>21</sup>:

*Help me, help me, help me*, I begged someone, anyone. Begged Lucien, standing in the front row, his metal eye fixed on me. Begged Ianthe, face serene and patient and lovely within that hood. *Save me – please, save me. Get me out. End this.*

And prompted by it, Rhysand appears to take her away<sup>22</sup>:

I shouldn't have been surprised. Not when Rhysand liked to make a spectacle of everything. And found pissing off Tamlin to be an art form.

But there he was.

Rhysand, High Lord of the Night Court, now stood beside me, darkness leaking from him like ink in water.

He angled his head, his blue-black hair shifting with the movement. Those violet eyes sparkled in the golden faelicht as they fixed on Tamlin, as he held up a hand to where Tamlin and Lucien and their sentries had their swords half-drawn, sizing up how to get me out of the way, how to bring him down –

But at the lift of that hand, they froze.

Ianthe, however, was backing away slowly, face drained of color.

“What a pretty little wedding,” Rhysand said, stuffing his hands into his pockets as those many swords remained in their sheaths. The remaining crowd was pressing back, some climbing over seats to get away.

Rhys looked me over slowly, and clicked his tongue at my silk gloves. Whatever had been building beneath my skin went still and cold.

“Get the hell out,” growled Tamlin, stalking toward us. Claws ripped from his knuckles.

Rhys clicked his tongue again. “Oh, I don't think so. Not when I need to call in my bargain with Feyre darling.”

My stomach hollowed out. No – no, not now.

“You try to break the bargain, and you know what will happen,” Rhys went on, chuckling a bit at the crowd still falling over themselves to get away from him. He

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20 HHD 20–21.

21 Maas (2016) 42.

22 Maas (2016) 43–44.

jerked his chin toward me. “I gave you three months of freedom. You could at least look happy to see me.”

I was shaking too badly to say anything. Rhys’s eyes flickered with distaste.

The expression was gone when he faced Tamlin again. “I’ll be taking her now.”

“Don’t you dare,” Tamlin snarled. Behind him, the dais was empty; Ianthe had vanished entirely. Along with most of those in attendance.

“Was I interrupting? I thought it was over.” Rhys gave me a smile dripping with venom. He knew-through that bond, through whatever magic was between us, he’d known I was about to say no. “At least, Feyre seemed to think so.”

Snatching Feyre from her Spring, Rhysand, a lord of night and dark powers, brings her to his own court: the Night court, where a different reality from that she got to know in the Spring court awaits her. In the Night court, Feyre will meet new places and people, heal from her trauma, and learn how to use the powers hidden within her new Fae body.

A game of back and forth begins between the characters, and while Feyre does not know all the secrets of the Night court, she is allowed back to Spring and Tamlin. Deciding to know, however, is like eating the pomegranate seeds – there would be no turning back<sup>23</sup>:

If you come with me, there is no going back. You will not be allowed to speak of what you see to anyone outside of my court. Because if you do, people will die – my people will die. So if you come, you will have to lie about it forever; if you return to the Spring Court, you cannot tell anyone there what you see, and who you meet, and what you will witness. If you would rather not have that between you and your friends, then stay here.

As Persephone ate the pomegranate, and was thus bound to remain in the underworld for part of the year, Feyre decides to go, to discover everything there was to know about the Night court, embraced a new life, learnt about her powers, and finally fell in love with Rhysand.

In the second half of the book, as they are well into the path of falling in love for each other, Rhysand speaks of his own view of himself, and how he feels to be perceived by his peers<sup>24</sup>:

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23 Maas (2016) 130.

24 Maas (2016) 421–422.



I am the dark lord, who stole away the bride of spring. I am a demon, and a nightmare, and I will meet a bad end. He is the golden prince – the hero who will get to keep you as his reward for not dying of stupidity and arrogance.

If all the more subtle signs – the merger of weddings and funerals, the flowers, the dark powers, etc. – were not enough to place the reader within the realm of the myth of Hades and Persephone, the line above does the trick, showing us the author was well aware of her references while building her characters.

From then on, Feyre realises her feelings and ends up marrying Rhysand, becoming the High Lady of the Night court, not unlike the dreadful queen of the Greek underworld.

As Persephone, Feyre begins her story with few powers of her own, living in an idyllic world of flowers. A dark lord disrupts this reality, bringing her to a darker, more complex world, from where she will ascend as a queen. Feyre's meadow is the garden of her wedding day, from where she is somewhat forcefully removed, taken away from her Spring. Differently from the Greek goddess, though, it is not from a mother she is separated, but rather her fiancé.

As Hades, Rhysand is an older man, with dark hair to match his dark powers, who decides to abduct a girl from Spring and bring her to his secluded realm, from where she cannot be rescued.

The main differences between Hades and Persephone and Rhysand and Feyre (as shall also be the case in our next example) is the love shared between the protagonists and the consent surrounding the female character experience. Firstly, Hades and Persephone's myth is not a love story, but one of how an important divine marriage was carried out. Secondly, while Feyre is not taken away willingly, she chooses to remain at the Night court and allows herself to fall in love with its lord. Persephone, however, is abducted and then forced into a marriage with Hades. This adjustment, of course, fits the modern sensitivities of the books' audience. Written in the 2010s, it would be inconceivable for a love story to be developed following an actual rape.

In this version, Hades actually falls in love with Persephone, and abducts her in order to protect her from the threats of her falsely innocent Spring, offering her his realm and aiding her in the ascension of her powers so they can rule side by side as king and queen.

### **MIDNIGHT SUN: BELLA AND EDWARD**

The *Twilight* saga was a worldwide phenomenon in the late 2000s, early 2010s, mostly because of its cinematic adaptation. Instead of a high fantasy world, here we have the story of a regular teenage girl, Isabella Swan, finishing her high school years, who ends up meeting a non-conventional vampire, Edward Cullen, and falling in love with him.

The very premiss of the story has its protagonist leaving her sunny reality and exchanging it for a darker, gloomy place<sup>25</sup>:

In the Olympic Peninsula of northwest Washington State, a small town named Forks exists under a near-constant cover of clouds. It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and its gloomy, omnipresent shade that my mother escaped with me when I was only a few months old. It was in this town that I'd been compelled to spend a month every summer until I was fourteen. That was the year I finally put my foot down; these past three summers, my dad, Charlie, vacationed with me in California for two weeks instead. It was to Forks that I now exiled myself – an action that I took with great horror. I detested Forks. I loved Phoenix. I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city.

In this small town, constantly covered by clouds, where sparse sunlight shines, this perfectly ordinary human girl shall discover a darker reality: vampires – and potentially other supernatural beings – exist and walk among humans, a constant threat for their lives.

In the first book of the series, *Twilight* (2005), the myth of Persephone and Hades is not directly mentioned<sup>26</sup>, but it is possible to catch some allusions to it, as can be seen in the examples below<sup>27</sup>:

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25 Meyer (2005) 3–4.

26 With one noteworthy exception: Hades's name is cited once, interchangeably with "Hell". "That's none of your business, Mike', I warned, internally cursing Jessica straight to the fiery pits of Hades" (Meyer 2005, 221). It is a curious word choice, since it is never repeated, and the character do use the word "hell" in other instances with similar meaning.

27 Meyer (2005) 87–88.

“I think your friends are angry with me for stealing you.”

“They’ll survive.” I could feel their stares boring into my back. “I may not give you back, though,” he said with a wicked glint in his eyes.

Edward alludes to stealing Bella away from her friends and not returning her to them, such as Hades did to Persephone. Another possible clue is Bella describing Edward’s beauty as that of the Greek gods<sup>28</sup>:

But outside the door to our Spanish class, leaning against the wall – looking more like a Greek god than anyone had a right to – Edward was waiting for me. Jessica took one look, rolled her eyes, and departed.

The most important allusion to the myth, however, is the fact that the culmination of the characters’ romance happens in a flowery meadow. After some incidents, long talks, and the revelation of Edward’s true nature, one big secret remain to be unveiled: what is it that happens to him under direct sunlight? To show her, Edward takes Bella to a secluded place in the city’s woods<sup>29</sup>:

I reached the edge of the pool of light and stepped through the last fringe of ferns into the loveliest place I had ever seen. The meadow was small, perfectly round, and filled with wildflowers – violet, yellow, and soft white. Somewhere nearby, I could hear the bubbling music of a stream. The sun was directly overhead, filling the circle with a haze of buttery sunshine. I walked slowly, awestruck, through the soft grass, swaying flowers, and warm, gilded air. I halfway turned, wanting to share this with him, but he wasn’t behind me where I thought he’d be. I spun around, searching for him with sudden alarm.

In this idyllic location, kept apart from the eyes of the human world, filled with flowers and the loveliness of nature, not only shall Bella see with her own eyes the extent of Edward’s dark nature – contradictorily, the fact that his skin sparkles under direct sunlight –, but she shall also witness his physical strength and have explained to her the lust he has for her blood.

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28 Meyer (2005) 206.

29 Meyer (2005) 259.

This knowledge marks a threshold: she can either walk away from him forever or accept to enter this darker reality. Out of love for Edward, Bella decides to stay.

If in *Twilight* we have but allusions to the Greek myth, in *Midnight sun* (2020), the reference becomes rather explicit. This book, the latest addition to Meyer's saga, is not exactly a new story, but a retelling of the events of *Twilight* in Edward's first person point of view.

As in the first book, the first allusion comes in a mention of a kidnapping<sup>30</sup>:

My rage dulled a bit with the sudden black humor. I tried to imagine how the girl would react to my kidnapping her. Of course, I rarely guessed her reactions right-but what other response could she have besides terror? I wasn't sure how to manage that, though kidnapping her. I wouldn't be able to stand being close to her for very long. Perhaps I would just deliver her back to her mother. Even that much would be fraught with danger. For her.

This kidnapping, however, is one that would return Bella to her mother – the mention of the mother-figure being quite significant –, and not take her away. Differently from *Twilight*, however, in *Midnight sun* we have more than one direct mention of Hades and Persephone's myth.

The first one happens in a restaurant, while Edward is watching Bella eat<sup>31</sup>:

Suddenly, as she ate, a strange comparison entered my head. For just a second. I saw Persephone, pomegranate in hand. Dooming herself to the underworld. Is that who I was? Hades himself, coveting springtime, stealing it, condemning it to endless night. I tried unsuccessfully to shake the impression.

As he gets closer to Bella, Edward is suddenly keenly aware that, by associating herself with him, Bella was stepping away from her sunlit Spring, and starting to thread into a darker world. This worry will follow him as he deepens the association with Persephone in his mind<sup>32</sup>:

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30 Meyer (2020) 98.

31 Meyer (2020) 236.

32 Meyer (2020) 374.

If only I could make myself safe for her, right for her, make myself fit into that happy picture for every second of the time that she allowed me. I wondered again how I could make this happen – be with her without negatively impacting her life. Stay in Persephone’s spring, keep her safe from my underworld.

With the myth now as the author’s explicit paradigm, the meadow scene gains an additional layer of importance, one even the characters are aware of – not Bella, as we already know that, in the story told in her point of view, there are no direct references to neither Persephone nor Hades. However, for Edward, the myth becomes the image through which he expresses and understands his feelings and misgivings concerning Bella’s safety<sup>33</sup>:

In her thoughts, suddenly another vision replaced the first. A gasp of relief choked through my lips when the horror was removed. But this vision was not much better. Alice and Bella, arms around each other, both marble white and diamond hard. One too many pomegranate seeds, and she was bound to the underworld with me. No way back. Springtime, sunlight, family, future, soul, all stolen from her.

*It’s sixty-forty... ish. Maybe even sixty-five-thirty-five. There’s still a good chance you won’t kill her.* Her tone was one of encouragement.

“She’s dead, either way; I whispered. “I’ll stop her heart.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant. I’m telling you that she has futures beyond the meadow... but first she has to go through the meadow – the metaphorical meadow – if you catch my meaning.” (...)

*All her paths are leading to one point – all her paths are knotted together. Whether that point is in the meadow, or somewhere else, she’s tied to that moment of decision. Your decision, her decision. Some of the threads continue on the other side. Some... (...) You know that I love you, so listen to me now. Putting this off won’t change anything. Take her to your meadow, Edward, and – for me, and especially for you – bring her back again.*

Alice, Edward’s sister who can see the future, knows that the meadow is a pivotal point in his relationship to Bella. What happens there: whether Bella accepts him for what he is or not, whether he is able to keep his thirst for her blood at bay or not, shall shape the future.

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<sup>33</sup> Meyer (2020) 388–389.



Getting into the long-awaited meadow, therefore, it is impossible for Edward to avoid thinking of Bella as Persephone<sup>34</sup>:

I wished I could see her face. I could imagine how lovely the place would be on a day like this. I could smell the wildflowers, sweeter in the warmth, and hear the low burble of the stream on the far side. The insects hummed, and far away, birds trilled and crooned. There were no birds nearby now – my presence was enough to frighten all the larger life from this place. She walked almost reverently into the golden light. It gilded her hair and made her fair skin glow. Her fingers trailed over the taller flowers, and I was reminded again of Persephone. Springtime personified. I could have watched her for a very long time, perhaps forever, but it was too much to hope that the beauty of the place could make her forget the monster in the shadows for long. She turned, eyes wide with amazement, a wondering smile on her lips, and looked back at me. Expectant. When I didn't move, she began walking slowly in my direction. She lifted one arm, offering her hand in encouragement. I wanted to be human so badly in that moment that it nearly crippled me.

They go through the meadow, and as we know, Bella accepts Edward's vampiric nature while he conquers the urge to take her blood. As a Persephone, Bella accepts to be taken away from her Spring and into the underworld of Edward's existence.

As their relationship progresses, the difficulties they have to face are no longer Edward's misgivings about being near her, but an actual foe: another vampire who decides he wants to drink Bella's blood. By the very end of the book, we can find Edward's last mention of Persephone and her myth<sup>35</sup>:

"I promise you I will never do anything to hurt her." I said the words, and I meant them in the strongest way – I would give anything to keep Bella happy and safe – but I wasn't sure they were true. Because what would hurt Bella the most? I couldn't escape the truest answer. Pomegranate seeds and my underworld. Hadn't I just witnessed a brutal example of how badly my world could go wrong for her? And she was lying here broken because of it.

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34 Meyer (2020) 429–430.

35 Meyer (2020) 759.

In a similar fashion as Rhysand, Edward sees himself as the villain of the story, especially in matters concerning Bella<sup>36</sup>:

I owed her honesty. Still, I tried to smile, to make my words sound less threatening. “What if I’m not a superhero? What if I’m the bad guy?”

Consequently, what he desires is to step away from his role as Hades, avoiding taking Bella away from her Spring – he would rather stay away and, most definitely, he does not desire to see her turned into a creature like himself<sup>37</sup>:

When I’d poured out my heart to her distant God, I’d begged for strength. This much he’d given me: I felt no desire at all to see Bella immortal. My only want, my only need, was to have her life untouched by darkness, and that need consumed me.

While his wish is granted for the first three books in the saga (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, and *Eclipse*), by the fourth and final book (*Breaking Dawn*), after defeating many foes, graduating high school, and getting married, Bella is finally turned into a vampire. Her descent was slower than Persephone’s and even Feyre’s, but eventually Bella fully embraced her darker side, gaining and strengthening her own powers.

As in the case previously analysed in this paper, the decision to enter this underworld is made by the female character of her own free will, in a desire to stay together with the person she loves. This decision allows Bella to stay with Edward, and to outgrow her human frailties as well, tapping into her own supernatural potentials.

## **FINAL REMARKS: BELLA, FEYRE, PERSEPHONE, AND THE HEROINE’S JOURNEY**

In 1949, Joseph Campbell would develop, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a model for the common heroic narrative, popularly known as “the hero’s journey”. In several steps, this model describes how heroes (especially male

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<sup>36</sup> Meyer (2020) 157.

<sup>37</sup> Meyer (2020) 828.

ones) leave their homes, set out to have transformative adventures and then return. Years later, in 1990, confronted with the fact that this model did not suit the female experience, Maureen Murdock would develop a new model, focused on women.

Questioning Campbell himself about the place of women in the journey, his answer was, as Murdock describes, “deeply unsatisfying”<sup>38</sup>:

In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realize that she’s the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realizes what her wonderful character is, she’s not going to get messed up with the notion of being pseudo-male.

Saying women are “there” denies them their own journey of self-discovery, and their reconnection with their own womanhood as well embracement of their feminine nature, which, for the author, is the main goal of this task. Loosely based on Campbell’s hero’s journey, Murdock developed a “heroine’s journey” which, in its composition, has a pivotal stage that resonates deeply with the myth of Persephone: a “descent to the underworld to meet the *dark feminine*”<sup>39</sup>. By plunging into this underworld, the heroine can reconnect with a darker side of her identity, and thus be ready to rise and face the other challenges of life.

In the myth, as shown to us in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, we can summarise Persephone’s journey as follows: once an innocent *parthénos*, who plays and gathers flowers in an idyllic place, she is abruptly removed from this environment by the god of the dead, who takes her to a world of darkness. There, she is forced to become his wife and is given, in return, darker powers which she never had before. As she reemerges to the world of light, Persephone is transformed: no longer a child, she is the queen of the underworld, with her very own attributions and marked identity.

We can observe similar paths for the two contemporary fantasy heroines analysed in this paper.

Feyre is a human girl forcefully removed from her human world, and taken to a magic world where she starts to learn about other realities and love. Once settled into this world and even having become magical herself, she is forced, by a lord of darkness, to plunge deeper, learning more of the world’s politics and

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38 Murdock (1990) 18.

39 Murdock (1990) 19.

starting to control her own powers. Ultimately, she married the lord of darkness, becoming a lady of darkness herself, hence ready to face the other intricacies of her world.

Bella is a teenage girl who leaves her sunny city and mother behind to live in a gloomy town where she will be faced with creatures she did not know existed in her world. Falling in love with a vampire, she is forced to embrace this new reality, dealing with the dangers that are now inevitable – even if her vampire boyfriend will not take her blood, maybe other, evil vampires will. In the end, she will become a vampire herself, developing new powers and being ready to face dangers in order to protect her new family.

Each series, *A court of thorns and roses* and *Twilight*, deal with the myth in different perspectives, but the patterns – the *topoi* – are visible: an oblivious girl whose innocence will eventually end; a male character with known associations to dark powers; references to meadows and flowery environments; a kidnapping – either real or metaphorical; and finally the ascension of the female character as someone more powerful.

For Persephone, this ascension was achieved by leaving her mother and marrying Hades, an union that grants her a whole new realm of influence. For Feyre and Bella, heroines for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience, these ascensions are enabled by their falling in love with the men who dwell in those darker realms and choosing to be with them, and not by being kidnapped or victims to violence. Even if Rhysand and Edward feel like they are forcefully snatching the girls away from their comfortable Springs, Feyre and Bella use their own two feet to walk to their metaphorical underworlds.

Maas and Meyer use the paradigms of the myth, adding their own creative twists, in order to craft narratives in which new versions of Persephone and Hades fall in love and rule together in their very own underworlds. But mostly, these new stories focus on the female experience and the journeys of the female characters to find a place in their worlds. If before Feyre and Bella did not quite fit in their realities, after meeting and falling in love with Rhysand and Edward, now they do.

If Persephone was given front stage in her myth, what would be the story she would tell? Did she also feel dislocated and only found a place to belong once in the underworld? Although they are not strictly Persephone, Feyre's and Bella's narratives seem to tell a version of the story in which Persephone would have answered "yes".

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Thais Rocha Carvalho

PhD candidate, University of São Paulo

Departamento de Letras Clássicas e Vernáculas (DLCV-FFLCH)

Av. Prof. Luciano Gualberto, 403 – Sala 04 – 2º andar

05508-010 – São Paulo/SP – Brazil

throchacarv@gmail.com

#### **Suggested citation**

Carvalho, Thais Rocha: Snatched from Spring. Persephone as a paradigm for young adult fantasy heroines. In: *thersites* 19 (2024): Fantastic antiquities and where to find them. Ancient worlds in (post-)modern novels, pp. 312–333.

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol19.280>