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Mythological Abductions and Rapes: Women's Life-Rituals in Art

The mythologies surrounding the rape and abduction of women have been frequently interpreted as tales that reinforce the stereotyped attitudes toward women and sex in the male centered society of Classical Greece, supporting the notion that women were subservient to the whims and desires of both gods and men; used as pawns to satisfy male sexual needs. Perhaps the most famous of these myths is that of Hades and Persephone. With its many possible interpretations (literary, eschatological, socio-cultural), this myth is in many ways a paradigm for the interpretation of other myths involving rapes and abductions (especially chariot abductions) and for illustrating the difficulties inherent in such interpretations. Some scholars have viewed this myth within the limited approach of a dualistic framework, suggesting either an actual act or a metaphor, while others have seen them as narratives and cultural signs (E. Keuls; M. Lefkowitz). In addition, scholars who examine these depictions with broader cultural referencing have seen reflections of ancient wedding ceremonies (J. Oakley), funerary rites (C.A. Sowa) or indeed both (I. Jenkins). As these images engaged several levels of interaction, from the decorative to the narrative to the societal, a more multi-faceted interpretation than has previously been offered is needed.

An examination of the tale of Hades' abduction of Persephone through its two primary surviving narrative sources, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and the Vergina Tomb Painting, demonstrates how this myth depicted many stages of women's life-rituals, including both marriage and funerary rites. A (broadly) social constructionist analysis of these sources shows how one specific myth can be used to examine issues of gender roles in society and how the visual depiction can operate on many levels, referencing several stages of a woman's life. Artistic depictions of other abduction myths, such as the abduction of Helen by Theseus, the Rape of the Leukippidae and the struggle and ensuing marriage of Peleus and Thetis, illustrate how the interpretation of abductions can vary visually and how this too mirrors the ancients' varied view of the act. There are several commonalities present, however, thus illustrating the overall benefit in viewing this category of myths (chariot abductions) within a broader cultural and gender related framework. In addition, by using the Athenians' varied and contextual definitions of rape' a better understanding of the images depicting abductions can be gained (A. Stewart). The interpretations of previous scholars illustrate how a 'gendered' view can lead to differing conclusions, perhaps suggesting varied meanings from the start. Such a multivalent approach helps to illuminate the manner in which these myths reflected women's roles in society and how the artistic depictions of these myths illustrated a woman's many life-rituals.