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Fruits of Mortality: Persephone's Pomegranate and Others

This paper concerns Greek religious beliefs (not just “mythology”). The pomegranate-seed Hades forces Persephone to eat while in the underworld (*Hymn to Demeter* 371-4, 411-13) binds her to him, but how? The pomegranate in this important religious myth, I argue, is a “fruit of mortality,” eating which renders Persephone mortal or partly so. Support for this can be found in mythic parallels, in etymology, and in the all-important connection of fruits of the earth, and fertility-goddesses, with mortality. This returns the focus of the myth of Demeter and Persephone to a religion of fertility and mortality.

Eating the pomegranate-seed binds Persephone to Hades irrevocably and automatically (393-4, 398), with a *magical* power (also seen at 372-3). This involves more than just a social bond by means of food (the common, inadequate explanation today), or even “the food of the dead” (Richardson 276). The pomegranate is a symbol of fertility, and the food of mortals, fruits of the earth, convey mortality.

Today, this myth is most frequently explained in terms of human social institutions, just as Greek religion canonically and unsatisfactorily is, and particularly in gender terms. Certainly it is an *unusual* ancient Greek marriage in which the bride spends half as much time with her husband as with her mother. Marriage *alone* is not enough to explain this *religious* story about themes of life and death.

You are what you eat. Immortals, of course, eat ambrosia, meaning “not-mortal.” Mortals are eaters of bread, grain, fruits of the earth. Eating a fruit of the earth is deadly, as plants grow and die. “*brome*” (394), I argue, is related to “*brotos*,” “mortal.” Decaying bread is the proof Gilgamesh receives of his mortality. Conversely, eating ambrosia (and golden apples??) can render human beings immortal.

In a little-known parallel, the Moirai (Fates, death) disable Typhon (Typhoeus) in his fight with Zeus, by feeding him, with trickery (again), “ephemeral fruits”, *ton ephemeron karpon* (Apollodorus 1.6.3). We should understand this significant adjective (*contra* H. Fränkel) as meaning “mortal” fruits. Typhon is one of several figures of this generation of gods who negotiate between mortality and immortality (Persephone, Demeter & child Demophon, Prometheus, demigods, *etc.*).

Indeed, we can even see the fruit eaten by Adam and Eve (*Genesis* 3) as a variation (with differences, of course) of a fruit of mortality. What they eat, a fruit of a tree, determines their nature: mortal.

The religious story negotiates between mortality and immortality. Persephone is both Olympian and queen of the underworld (sometimes her *full-time* role: Zuntz 1971); Demeter's gift of grain conveys mortality to human beings. The gift of grain comes after, not only Persephone's return, but also her significant, permanent binding to the underworld, to death, by means of a “fruit of mortality.” ([See the related Lenz abstract, APA 2003, online.](#))