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Intimate Danger: Louise Glück and Women's Lack of Romantic Power

The lives of 20th-century women were vastly different than any other time previous. Only a few decades removed from chattel slavery, women were finally granted the right to vote, with workplace and education reform following soon after. Women might even be considered equal to men in the view of many. The reality is that change is a plodding glacier that takes immense time and effort to budge. Louise Glück bridges the past and present struggles women face by bending mythologies for dramatic effect, to bring forth a different point of view. In her three poems centered around Persephone, "A Myth of Innocence," "A Myth of Devotion," and "Persephone the Wanderer," Glück uses mythology to expose the lack of power women often have within their intimate relationships.

Using mythology to create new stories is not an entirely new concept. Irish poet W.B. Yeats used the rape of Leda, a Greek myth about Zeus turning into a swan to rape a woman, as a metaphor for his idea of art coming from an outside spirit and possessing an artist (Boeninger 1). Glück, however, takes apart the same mythological concept of swans, and rearranges it to depict relationship struggles (Boeninger 1). From there Glück runs with this concept throughout her body of work. Glück confronts her personal issues by way of filtering them through the lens of old myths (Morris 27). Many of her issues stemmed from the role women were expected to play in her time, and the limits still imposed on them despite having more freedoms than ever. This clearly weighed on Glück, creating a split between her role as a poet and her role as a woman

(Bonds 8). This split is the spark that caused her to mash together mythology and her real and present problems. A more specific recurring theme throughout her mythological poems is her use of Persephone, and the multiple angles at which she approaches the original story and breaks it down for her own needs.

In the first example, "Myth of Innocence," Gluck designs Persephone as a very real, living, and conscious human. It is told from her perspective, and centers around how she felt about her abduction. Usually, the story is told as a metaphor for the change in seasons, without the characters being flesh and blood "people." Persephone is like a real teenager, who hates her "horrible mantle of daughterliness" (Glück 532). She is no longer just a reason for the snow falling in winter; Glück has taken the old Persephone and built with her a new story, one that relates to her own issues. When Persephone wishes for something more from her life, "death appears like an answer to her prayer" (Glück 532). This short phrase is key to unlocking another "split" in Glück's writing: the way that she blurs lines between diametric subjects. She already likes to blur the line between Mythology and objective, modern problems, but she also likes to blur the lines between guilt, innocence, and victimhood for women. Persephone wanted something to take her away. "No one understands anymore how beautiful" her abductor and eventual rapist was, except for Persephone (Glück 532). Persephone blames herself for her assault saying, "I willed this" (Glück 533). Glück wants to display that not only is it physically dangerous to be a woman, but the mental toll that drags on a woman's mind can create conflicting thoughts on what it means to be a victim.

Blending opposites to reveal her thoughts is a central pillar to all Glück's work (Keniston 2). The contrast between victimhood vs. self-blame in "Myth of Innocence" alights the shame that Persephone feels after her assault. But Glück uses this idea of contrasting poles with a

multitude of concepts. Life vs. Death is another common trope in her writings. Within this, she explores the notion of survivors vs. the dead, and how they can be the same (Keniston 6-7). This point of view is used to within “Myth of Innocence,” as Persephone is often portrayed as dead in the myth, but she is also “dead” in the sense that her old self has died after her rape. She can no longer be the same as she was before her assault. Hades himself represents several conflicting concepts wrapped into one: “Death, Husband, God, Stranger” as Glück puts it in “Myth of Innocence” (533). Some of these can be broken down into more metaphors, such as a literal God vs. someone with a position of power over a woman. With Glück’s approach to poetry, an enormous amount of meaning can be jammed into a few short lines. Because of writing like this, there is a view that even poetry criticism must be reevaluated (McLane 38).

The poem “Myth of Devotion” can be viewed as a companion piece to the previously discussed “Myth of Innocence.” As the previous took the perspective of Persephone, “Myth of Devotion” does as Glück often does and takes the polar opposite perspective of Hades. The question then arises, who is Hades here? Glück doesn’t care to define him in “Myth of Devotion,” but clues can be gathered from “Myth of Innocence:” Once again: “Death, Husband, God, Stranger” (533). He represents multitudes. He is her husband, and her rapist. But his is also metaphorical. He is the “Guilt” and Terror” that “no lover ever imagines” (Glück page 541). He is the separation of “Persephone’s girlhood” from her current self (Glück 541). Again, we see the layers of meaning that Glück stacks together allowing us to view the world through the eyes of a woman who has been abused, and how it can be confusing, demeaning, and self-deprecating. This thread of innocence lost, and shame leads to another common part of Glück’s writing: motherhood.

The concept of motherhood is another ingredient that is often included in the mix of ideas that goes into Glück's views on intimacy for women. There is a major "split" here once again in Glück's ideas, where she creates what she views as polar opposites (motherhood and daughterhood) and then tries to "blend" them. The conflict between mothers and daughters appears quite often in Glück's poems, but she also connects them both to her idea of what intimacy means for women. There is a cost to motherhood, one which damages the mother physically and mentally; but there is also the cost that the mother puts on the daughter by bringing her into a world ruled by men (Bonds 3). And the only way to become a mother is through some form of intimacy, which feeds back into a vicious cycle. What Glück means to say by this is that a mother cannot protect her daughter from the same things that befell her, because they're both trapped in the same patriarchal world. Not only do women not hold any control within their romantic lives, but they also can't help their daughters escape the same fate.

Finally, in "Persephone the Wanderer," Glück explores the conflicting nature of motherhood and daughterhood. First, Glück accepts the original tale of Persephone and her rape at the hands of Hades, acknowledging that scholars are aware of the moral issues in this story (501). This is a set up for her later arguments, making the reader aware that she wants to dig deeper. What she really wants to ask is: what blame are we to assign to the mothers who allow or encourage this to happen to young girls? Glück writes Persephone "has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter" and alludes to "terrible reunions" implying that if she ever escapes Hades to see her mother again, she will disown her for her own rape (503). She even refers to daughters as just "meat" when it comes to a marriage agreement (504). Glück wants to inject a new argument into current academia that they aren't asking: What are all the factors that lead to Persephone being attacked? Why is Persephone the one being shamed? And finally, she ends the poem with

the punchline: “What will you do, when it is your turn in the field with the god?” (Glück 504).

Right here is the connection between and old story, and modern problems that women face.

Glück is asking her female readers to think of themselves in a position, in a relationship with imbalanced power dynamics, where someone in a position of power (a “god”) allows them to coerce a woman into doing something that they don’t want to out of fear, which was not only an issue throughout human history, but continues to be into our modern times.

The metaphorical cross that Glück bears is heavy. The concept of women as mere subjects to a man’s will during intimate encounters is a difficult idea for a girl to contend with, but the further idea that when you become a mother you are only forcing your daughter to also be a subject is harrowing. In Glück’s world, there is no escape for women. Despite the progress we have made as a society, if the culture is still male-centric, women will never be totally free.

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