

Ryan Crawford wrote us after Lust to say

Your episode on "Lust" was fantastic. Thanks again for being open to a few more thoughts about the song and its origins!

It has always made me think of the myth of how Persephone became the unwilling Queen of the Underworld.

The Myth:

Persephone, daughter of Demeter (goddess of the harvest), was out in a field one day picking flowers. Hades, god of the underworld (and Persephone's uncle), had seen her beauty and apparently became overcome by lust. Zeus, king of the gods and Persephone's father, gave Hades permission to go kidnap his own daughter. (YIKES.) So Hades erupted from the earth in his chariot and raped her. Then he abducted her and took her down to the pits of hell.

(Men are the worst.)

Demeter looked all over the earth for her daughter. Even with the torches of the goddess Hecate, she couldn't find Persephone. In Demeter's grief, crops failed and harvests rotted. The famine caused mortals everywhere to starve.

Eventually this famine forced Zeus to answer his followers' prayers for food. So he commanded Hades to release Persephone from the underworld to appease Demeter, so that crops might grow again. Hades complied, but before he did, he tricked Persephone into eating some food from the underworld: pomegranate seeds. She didn't know it at the time, but because Persephone ate food in this realm, she was cursed to return to the underworld each year.

And so Persephone's fate was sealed without her consent: she would live out most of her life in the world of the living with her mother, who would allow crops to grow during those happy months. Upon her return each year, spring would begin. But Persephone would also be required to return to the underworld for a few months each year. During those sad months, Demeter would become depressed, fields would wither, and winter would

come. The ancient Greeks used this story to explain the circle of seasons. But it also represented a key dichotomy in the human psyche: a goddess of nature and spring, striving for the happiness of her innocent youth, but she's also the queen of the underworld, haunted by her past trauma and forced to join her rapist in a realm of dead people.

Absolutely the most fucked up joint custody arrangement ever.

My Take:

Hades and Persephone have always come to my mind when listening to "Lust." A woman is tumbling, "tripping" into the "Underworld" and "Afterworld," returning to a man. Her veil (which could be considered the veil between the living and the dead) "tears and rages," and she questions if he's "real or a ghost-lie" in this land of the dead. Pomegranate seeds, which are ruby-red (and also fucking delicious) could be described as "crystalline from the vine." Even the lyric "sifting through the grain of gold" reminds me of Persephone, who was often depicted with a sheaf of grain to symbolize spring and nature's fertile bounty.

For me, the whole song used to depict the lingering effects of sexual trauma and the aversion to sex because of it. But after listening to your episode on "Lust" and listening to the interview clips, it's clear Tori's talking about consensual sex and matrimony; not only consensual, but something she actively wants! Which is a huge healing experience for a sexual assault survivor. But maybe the song lends itself to a few possibilities.

I have three theories.

1. I wonder if the man in the song (I'll be so bold as to say Mark) is the Hades figure. Maybe Tori thinks of this Hades as Persephone's original abductor, and Persephone finds herself struggling to reconcile her sexual desire with her past trauma. They're in direct conflict with each other. "Tripping" at his door, "coiling" in a protective posture as her veil "tears and rages" in a struggle, while "he waits till she can give," as if he's resentfully sitting on the bed, wondering why his wife won't make love to him tonight.

2. Or, more hopefully, the man in “Lust” might represent a new kind of Hades to Tori, and she’s considering that perhaps this shade of Hades isn’t the same shade of the Hades that assaulted her, forced her into the underworld, into grief and trauma. And she finds she’s willing to run back through the underworld, to the husband she chose. She walks “through the grain of gold” in the field outside the entrance to the underworld, and she returns to her husband. She can’t get to his room fast enough, “tripping at [his] door,” and “he waits there” patiently for her to come back to him. He doesn’t pressure her. He just waits there “till she can give.”

3. OR, (and this is my favorite theory), maybe the man isn’t Hades at all. Maybe Hades was the original rapist and kidnapper, but the man in the song is actually Hermes. As the messenger of the gods, Hermes was considered a trickster deity (a “prankster,” if you will). And in some tellings of the myth, Hermes is responsible for retrieving Persephone from the underworld. My favorite version explains that Hecate, the witchy “wayshower” goddess with coiling pet snakes, whose torches lit the darkness and revealed paths forward (“lift your lamp honeyyyy”), rescued Persephone from Hades – with help from Hermes. So what if the man in this song (aka Mark) is actually represented by Hermes, and in this story, he becomes Persephone’s lover. And he visits her, even when she’s trapped in the underworld (aka mentally stuck in her own trauma memories). And she navigates out of and “through the underworld, into [his] room,” and when she lies about being okay in Hades’ trauma dungeon (“everything is fine, Mark, I promise”), Hermes doesn’t buy it (“that’s horseshit, Tori. Tell me the truth”). “And when the woman lies, you don’t believe her.” He sees her; Hermes recognizes that Hades doesn’t listen to Persephone’s pleas to release her (“she isn’t heard”). So he helps her tear off her wedding veil from her marriage to Hades, and waits patiently for her to express herself honestly, and he informs her that Zeus had ordered her release to the surface world (“his secrets can be told”). Hecate frees Persephone, Hermes leads them back home, Demeter welcomes her daughter back, and the world is balanced again.

Then Hermes and Persephone exchange all the gender nectar they can muster.
The Dolls Angle:

When Tori performed “Lust” on the Posse tour, she always performed as herself – or as TerraTORies, the Tori “doll,” who is considered to be based

on earthy, maternal Demeter. I felt strongly that Tori was referencing this myth from her own personal perspective and her marriage with Mark, but also from a mother's perspective as Demeter, honoring her daughter Persephone (aka Clyde).

Even though it was always Tori in Tori drag singing the song on that tour, the song appeared in shows with each of the dolls. And the goddesses they're based on each have something to say about the myth. According to many tellings of the myth, Artemis (aka Isabel) witnessed Persephone's abduction in that field of flowers, but she couldn't stop Hades. Athena (aka Pip), was Persephone's sister and a goddess of war and wisdom: She likely would have been enraged on Persephone's behalf. Aphrodite (aka Santa), goddess of love, helps paint a new picture for Persephone; that love and sexual romance is still possible for her even after so much trauma. And Persephone (aka Clyde) could share her own story of violence, healing, and being able to trust again.

Thanks so much for letting me wax on about this. Y'all invite such wonderful mental and emotional space for those of us who've been noodling on this song for the last 23 years! I appreciate it so deeply.

Your lusty listener,

-Ryan