

Persephone and the Phoenix in Ami Polonsky's *Gracefully Grayson*

Grayson, the sixth-grade protagonist and narrator of Ami Polonsky's *Gracefully Grayson*, is a girl, but she is seen and treated as a boy. Protecting what she feels is her secret, she isolates herself from her classmates and uses her imagination to transform her "boys' clothes" into "girls' clothes." Tired of trying to be invisible, Grayson decides to audition for the school play and at the last moment reads for the part of Persephone rather than Zeus. When Grayson is cast as Persephone, her time spent practicing—and inhabiting—the role becomes a crucial step in privately and publicly owning her identity as a girl. I am interested in how Polonsky reshapes the myth of Persephone and how she makes Persephone and Grayson's experiences resonate with one other.

Within the world of the novel, the script of the play—titled *The Myth of Persephone*—is written by Grayson's Humanities teacher Mr. Finnegan, and Mr. Finnegan (called Finn by his students) also directs the production. Finn's play presents the Olympian gods as basically good. Gone is the political maneuvering between Zeus and Demeter which escalates the conflict in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* or the imperial ambition of Venus that sets off the story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Finn's benign characterization of the gods on Olympus lends stability to the world: the powers that be are okay; they are even forces of light. Hades' abduction of Persephone seems motivated by a desire for light in the dark Underworld, and the abduction itself becomes the kidnapping of a child rather than the rape of a maiden. While Finn's adaptation does not un-gender Persephone, it does de-sexualize her. Distancing Persephone from the brink of matrimony and avoiding the portrayal of Hades as a potential husband reinforce Persephone's identity as a child whose primary relationship is with her mother, Demeter. And

Persephone eats the pomegranate seeds because her mother, the goddess of growing things, is on her mind. It is not a trick on the part of Hades (like in the *Homeric Hymn*), nor is it something that Persephone tries to keep secret (as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). Instead, it simply stems from her longing for the comfort of home. A distraught Demeter longs for her daughter as well and enlists the help of Zeus in retrieving Persephone. Here again we see Finn's play departing from ancient sources, which figure Zeus as Demeter's antagonist (in the *Homeric Hymn*) or a neutral arbiter (in the *Metamorphoses*). In ancient myth Zeus is the father of Persephone, but Polonsky makes him Persephone's grandfather. This move erases the parental tension between Zeus and Demeter and softens, while also securing, the positioning of Zeus as both familial and cosmic patriarch. Polonsky's choice to present Zeus as a grandfatherly advocate for Persephone reinforces the general depiction of the gods as good and conveys a sense that things will come right in the end.

Characters in Polonsky's novel repeatedly mention that the myth of Persephone explains the change of seasons. Although this is a common feature of post-antique retellings of the myth, neither the *Homeric Hymn* nor the *Metamorphoses*—the two most prominent ancient literary renditions—has this aetiological bent. In those works, Persephone's cycling between upper and lower worlds coincides with seasonal changes but isn't explicitly their sole, root, or original cause. In presenting the myth as the reason for the seasons, the school play naturalizes Persephone's experience and thereby blunts the violence of the ancient story. The emphasis on the myth's connection to nature may also implicitly contribute to the novel's overall investment in cultivating empathy for Grayson: Polonsky works to get readers to see Grayson as a person rather than an aberration, someone who, like Persephone, participates in the natural order of things.

The Myth of Persephone is, fittingly, the spring play at Grayson's school. We begin the novel in the autumn and move with Grayson through the winter to the spring. Like Persephone in the Underworld, Grayson at the novel's start is lonely and going through dark times. Her grandmother dies, and her attempt to make a new friend at school—promising at first—proves disappointing. But as winter yields to spring, better days come for Grayson, and Grayson's performance in the play leads to her flourishing beyond the stage as well. Grayson's isolation dissolves as she finds support from various members of her community. Just as Persephone is attended by kindly Elves when she is above ground, Grayson makes friends with classmates who are also in the play. And various characters provide Grayson with Demeter-like or Zeus-like encouragement and aid. The teacher Finn realizes how important the play is to Grayson and remains committed to Grayson's playing Persephone when other adults question the casting choice. In response to the flak that Grayson encounters at school, Paige, the eighth-grader cast as Demeter, and her mother become protective maternal surrogates, all the more welcome because Grayson's own mother and father have died years before the start of the novel. Yet they too provide crucial support when Grayson's grandmother leaves behind letters which Grayson's mother had written when Grayson was young, and those letters make it clear that Grayson's mother would affirm Grayson's identity as a girl. The reassurance of the letters is heartening, and the photographs contained in them fortifies Grayson's recollection of her parents and their loving care. Grayson now lives with her aunt and uncle, and the uncle becomes Demeter-like in his desire to help Grayson live her identity openly. (Notice how Grayson's grandmother and uncle echo the play's Zeus and Demeter, but with a gender reversal.) Grayson's aunt, however, is more skeptical of the situation than her spouse, and she becomes one of the blocking figures of the novel, along with some bullies at school. Like Hades and the Shades, they are

representatives of the darkness at play in Grayson's life. Just as Persephone oscillates between the Underworld and earth, Grayson repeatedly mentions experiencing alternations of dark and light, bad and good: "White and black. Light and dark. And me, in the middle of it all. Gray. There's nothing else for me to do but walk through these columns of dark and light, so I do..." (215). I've tried to outline here, in broad strokes, the ways in which Polonsky makes Grayson's experience reflect Persephone's, but throughout the novel there are small details which connect Grayson's life to the myth—for instance, mentions of feeling frozen or of the sun finally coming out, or Grayson's memory of her mother handing her a piece of fruit. While some readers may be on the active look-out for such correspondences, for other readers they will go unnoticed but do real connective work nevertheless, knitting together the mythological and contemporary registers.

In Finn's play, Zeus intervenes to deliver Persephone from the Underworld; she does relatively little to save herself. By contrast, while Grayson is supported and helped by a variety of people, she is the one who takes some critical steps in her own rescue. She decides to audition for the play as a bid for self, and she also reads for the role of Persephone because she doesn't want to pretend any longer. She eventually goes shopping for actual "girls' clothes" instead of imagining them. When her arm is fractured by bullies at school, she resolutely asks for a pink cast, and she persists in the role of Persephone despite the injury, the bullying, and pressure from her aunt. In the final scene of the novel, Grayson excuses herself from class to change her clothes; she takes the sequin-heart T-shirt she was wearing underneath a thermal shirt, puts it on top, and adds clips to her hair. Grayson carries into the rest of her life the courage she musters in playing Persephone onstage. The role is, in a way, like the pink cast: a temporary aid that helps Grayson to become whole again.

Although Persephone receives a lot of air time in Polonsky's novel, the mythological phoenix—a bird reborn from its own ashes—is also a recurrent motif. A painting of a phoenix by Grayson's mother hangs in Grayson's room and serves as a touchstone to her lost parents as well as a symbol of freedom. We (and Grayson) learn from old letters that Grayson's mother incorporated the phoenix into the painting because Grayson had loved the description of the phoenix in a book of Greek mythology which her grandmother had sent as a gift. The young Grayson's interest in the phoenix proves prophetic. While the role of Persephone provides a Grayson with an intermediary step in understanding and owning her identity as a girl, the figure of the phoenix becomes a symbol for Grayson herself. When Grayson decides to lay to rest the assumption that she is a boy, she emerges openly and unapologetically a girl. Polonsky makes readers of *Gracefully Grayson* into witnesses not only of a figurative Persephone's return to earth but also of a phoenix's rebirth.

Rebecca Resinski

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