An Old Song: Analyzing Hadestown

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Abstract: There is little doubt that adaptations of ancient myths have become more mainstream in recent years–providing unique, accessible ways for people to learn more about stories from antiquity. One such adaptation takes the form of a Broadway show: *Hadestown*, written by Anaïs Mitchell. This paper explores some of the significant ways in which *Hadestown* has taken its ancient Greek source material–the myths of two mortals named Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as the two divinities Hades and Persephone–and modernized it for a contemporary audience in a way that retains the heart and meaning of both stories. The paper deems *Hadestown* to be a successful adaptation through analyzing the musical's key plot points, the four primary characters along with their relationships, and the ways that Mitchell has thematically altered her iteration of the tale.

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And as the story continued to appear in literature, part myth, part legend, part folklore, it came to grips with three subjects: the mystery of life and death and rebirth; the all-compelling power of poetry and song; the tragic destruction of love and beauty when human emotion is not properly controlled.

— M. Owen Lee, "Orpheus and Eurydice: Some Modern Versions

Introduction

If you were to ask a mythologist to describe the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, they might describe a star-crossed romance and a visit to the Underworld, or an arrogant poet and a cruel god. Perhaps they would describe a snake bite and a love stolen too soon. Any of these would be fine answers. However, when faced with the same question, a growing number of people would describe New Orleans jazz, a red flower, and a cycle of hope. Anaïs Mitchell is responsible: a songwriter who spent over a decade developing her unique vision until it was ready for the Broadway stage.[1] Her creation, *Hadestown*, tells the well-known love story of Orpheus, a musical prodigy, and Eurydice, a young maiden.[2] In many ways, the musical follows the same plot as its predecessors: the two lovers meet and quickly plan to marry, but fate has other plans. Eurydice instead dies prematurely, and Orpheus embarks on a descent to the Underworld–also known as a *katabasis*–to retrieve her. Following a musical plea to Hades, King of the Underworld, the god allows Orpheus to try and lead his love back to the land of the living on one condition: he cannot look back at her until they have reached the surface, or she will return to the Underworld. Readers and audiences alike wait with bated breath to see whether

[1] Anaïs Mitchell, *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of Hadestown* (New York: Plume, 2020), 3.
[2] Anaïs Mitchell, *Hadestown* (New York: Concord Theatricals, 2021).

Orpheus will succeed in his task, and each iteration decides for itself whether the story will end in triumph or tragedy.

This paper explores how Mitchell's magnum opus, *Hadestown*, stacks up not only against its ancient sources, but also several preceding adaptations of the same story. It will begin with a look at the events of the myth and a thorough analysis of the four major characters–Hades, Persephone, Orpheus, and Eurydice–that includes their relationships with one another, then it will delve into the ways that Mitchell adapts ancient myth to cater to a modern-day audience, injecting contemporary themes to a timeless story of love, loss, and most importantly, music.

The Story

When looking at versions of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth from ancient times, it is clear that the stories did not place much emphasis on how the lovers meet, or the events leading up to their wedding–they very quickly arrive at Eurydice's death. A number of retellings say that a snake bite was responsible.[3] Beginning the myth this way seems to signify that whatever came before Eurydice's death is irrelevant, and that the importance of the tale lies within Orpheus' reaction to the loss and its consequences. Alternatively, Mitchell opts to begin *Hadestown* with the very moment that Orpheus and Eurydice first lay eyes on each other.[4] This way, the audience watches the two establish a relationship, making it all the more emotional when near the end of the first act, Orpheus' accidental neglect of Eurydice's material needs leads to her death.[5] Early on in the opening number of the Broadway adaptation, "Road to Hell," the audience learns that

[3] Ovid, "Book Ten," in Metamorphoses: *The New, Annotated Edition*, ed. Joseph D. Reed, trans. Rolfe Humphries, (Indiana University Press, 2018), 234; Vergil, "Book 4," in *Eclogues and Georgics*, trans. James Bradley Wells, (University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 168.
[4] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 7.
[5] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 34.

Orpheus is working on a song.[6] As the story progresses, his drive to complete the song blocks out all other aspects of his life, including his relationship. In this rendition, it is not a snake bite that kills Eurydice: instead, the cold and starvation take her as she tries to provide for herself and Orpheus on her own.[7]

The snake narrative does not completely disappear, however; it lives on as part of Hades' characterization instead. This is rather clever of Mitchell since it allows Hades to remain the only character associated with death without completely excluding a crucial part of the ancient myth. According to scholar Abigail Mason, Hades' depiction as a deadly snake is actually rooted in Christian values, reminiscent of The Snake in the Garden of Eden.[8] When Hades arrives for Eurydice, he does not merely take her to the Underworld: he tempts her to come of her own volition, much like The Devil–embodied by a snake–tempts Eve to eat the apple and bring about her own downfall.[9] There is little doubt that this parallel is intentional. At the beginning of "When the Chips are Down Intro," Hermes, the omniscient narrator, calls the exchange between Eurydice and Hades "songbird versus rattlesnake;" when Hades tempts Eurydice with coins she can use to send herself to the Underworld, the audience hears the sound of a rattlesnake.[10] It may seem antithetical for an ancient Greek myth to allude to Christian motifs, but the modern Western audience that *Hadestown* caters to has assimilated so much Christian culture over time that many references to the Bible feel almost secular to them, a part of everyday life. Take, for example, giving gifts during Christmas and resting on Sundays: both practices are rooted in biblical stories, but they have now assimilated into broader Western society. By the time Orpheus

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[6] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 6.
[7] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 44.
[8] Abigail Mason, "A Ticket to The Underworld: Classical Reception in Hadestown," (Pennsylvania State University, 2022), 42-43.
[9] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 44-47.
[10] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 44.

descends to retrieve Eurydice, the audience is more likely to root for her return as they associate Hades with the Christian Devil, and wish to see him outsmarted.

What the audience may not expect is to watch The Devil win once again. Despite Orpheus' failure only becoming a popular ending for the myth in the Roman period, Mitchell opts to use it: filled with "existential and inevitable" doubt, Orpheus turns at the last possible moment–losing Eurydice a second time.[11] It is not clear why the playwright selects this ending, but there are a number of possible reasons. One potential explanation is that the tragic conclusion has become the most well-known iteration of the tale over time, and perhaps Mitchell wished to keep what many modern audiences already know about Orpheus and Eurydice intact. Another possibility is that she felt Orpheus' misstep would lend itself to a better story in some way, allowing her to explore themes of dealing with grief, self-doubt, and failure. In contrast, more ancient versions prescribe different motivations. One prominent account comes from Ovid: a Roman poet whose magnum opus, *Metamorphoses*, collects and retells hundreds of Greco-Roman myths. In his account of the myth, Orpheus is so excited and eager to help Eurydice climb out of the Underworld that he turns prematurely.[12] Meanwhile, Virgil–Ovid's contemporary and a renowned poet in his own right–tells that madness strikes him suddenly, prompting him to forget his task.[13] The effect is the same: Eurydice disappears forever. Antiquity's Orpheus does not take it well, going into mourning for months or even years.[14] *Hadestown*'s Orpheus is unique, as the audience does not get to see past his immediate reaction to losing his love. His grief is left to the imagination, and the show goes on.

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[11] Mitchell, *Working*, 244; C.G. Perkell, "A Reading of Virgil's Fourth Georgic," Phoenix 32, no. 3 (1978): 217.
[12] Ovid, "Book Ten," 236
[13] Vergil, "Book 4," 169.
[14] Ovid, "Book Ten," 236; Vergil, "Book 4," 169.

Orpheus' musical powers play just as significant a role in the story as his emotions. His innate ability to bring anyone and anything to tears just by singing is one of the most consistent character traits he possesses. In one text analyzing Virgil's "Georgics," author C.G. Perkell writes, "The legend portrays Orpheus as a gentle man who, through music and magic, through unique harmony with nature, could accomplish feats impossible for others."[15] This ancient characterization single-handedly provides an explanation for Orpheus' motives in *Hadestown*: he is not simply working on a song, he is working on a musical cure for the weather crisis plaguing the entire world.[16] It may seem impossible–and even Eurydice has her doubts–but when he sings just the melody, a vibrant red flower springs up from thin air and shocks everyone, including Orpheus himself.[17] He soon learns that the melody he wrote is the same one used in an ancient love song about Hades and Persephone, and from there he deciphers that nature is out of balance because the two gods have "forgotten the song of their love."[18] Filled with a new understanding, he performs his finished song to Hades and Persephone when he arrives in Hadestown–the Underworld. It restores their love, and just as in Ovid's ancient tale, it convinces the immortal king and queen to give Orpheus a chance to save Eurydice–an opportunity they only provide because of how much his music moved them.[19] With nothing but his lyre, his larynx, and his love, Orpheus joins an elite club of ancient Greek heroes who can say that they have ventured to the Underworld and back. His story serves as a testament to the supernatural power of music, capable of moving any audience–ancient or contemporary.

Over the centuries, storytellers have utilized this sonic power to adapt the Orpheus-Eurydice story in various ways. Alongside this, many historians acknowledge that the

[15] C.G. Perkell, "A Reading," 216.
[16] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 13.
[17] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 13-15.
[18] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 16-17; Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 40.
[19] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 82-87; Ovid, "Commentary," in *Metamorphoses: The New, Annotated Edition* (Indiana University Press, 2018), 461.

myth is largely responsible for popularizing the new art of opera during the Italian Renaissance.[20] According to scholar M. Owen Lee:

> Other stories, most of them from Greek antiquity, had been presented before 1607, and often–as tragedies with incidental music, as mimes, masques, pastorals, and ballets. But it was Orpheus's story that effected [*sic*] the new art form in the making; it alone required that, for each of its dramatic climaxes, music be put in the mouth of its hero. In Monteverdi, the myth met its poet at last. And opera was born.[21]

Lee is accurate in his assertion: an adaptation of Orpheus simply cannot work unless he sings. His musical abilities are what make him stand out in the world of Greek mythology, and any attempt to tell his story without them alters the tale too significantly. On another occasion, Lee provides an example of an Orpheus adaptation–Jean Anouilh's *Eurydice*–that neglects his musicality and thus misses the point of the tale entirely, which is to display the power of music.[22] Following the birth of *opera seria*–"serious opera"–writers adapted the Orpheus-Eurydice myth to the genre over 50 times, including for Europe's first non-religious musical drama, Europe's first foray into proper opera, and Europe's first attempt at operatic reform.[23]

As a spiritual successor to *opera seria*, Broadway is yet another medium that suits Orpheus. Mitchell writes all of the dialogue in *Hadestown* with rhyme and meter in mind, and this way the audience never forgets the musical nature of the world they have entered.[24] It is also a great strategy to show off Orpheus' skill as much as possible, even if he is not the only

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[20] M. Owen Lee, "The Birth of Opera from the Spirit of Orpheus." In *A Season of Opera: From Orpheus to Ariadne*, (University of Toronto Press, 1998), 3.
[21] M. Owen Lee, "Birth of Opera," 8.
[22] M. Owen Lee, "Orpheus and Eurydice: Some Modern Versions." The Classical Journal 56, no. 7 (1961): 310.
[23] M. Owen Lee, "Birth of Opera," 11.
[24] Mitchell, *Working*, 1.

character speaking in this way. One other potential reason behind this choice comes from a historical standpoint: in ancient Greece, storytellers often recited myths in meter. By aligning herself with this old convention, Mitchell proves her attention to detail and cements her place in the mythological adaptation genre. The same can be said for her use of an ensemble that acts as a Chorus.[25] Ancient Greek texts show that when tragedians wrote their plays, a Chorus made up of minor, often unnamed characters existed and helped to provide exposition among other story elements. Mitchell certainly intended to do this, as *Hadestown*'s official book explicitly refers to the ensemble workers as a "Chorus." This is yet more proof of how much care the playwright took to consider the culture she borrows from.

When looking at the most crucial plot elements of the ancient Orpheus-Eurydice myth, it is clear that Mitchell does an outstanding job remaining true to her source material for *Hadestown*. She may make a few changes, but ultimately these changes are either minor or completely justifiable as she embarks on her own journey to adapt such a famous tale. The fact that she successfully maintains the heart of the story is especially impressive when considering that a number of previous renditions have tried and failed to modernize it. Largely, this comes down to Mitchell's knowledge of when to keep plot points consistent and when to change them around: there is intention in her work, not simply change for change's sake.

Character Relationships

It would be difficult to analyze the relationship between Hades and Persephone in *Hadestown* without first understanding some early versions of their story. The earliest known

[25] Mason, "A Ticket," 7.

account of the myth comes in the form of a *Homeric Hymn* to Persephone's mother, Demeter.[26] In this iteration, Hades asks for Zeus' permission to marry Persephone, and Zeus provides his blessing.[27] Hades locates Persephone while she is among the flowers and to grab her attention, he cultivates "a flower wondrous and bright, awesome for all to see, for the immortals above and for mortals below."[28] She is instantly enamored with the plant, and he takes this opportunity to forcefully kidnap her and bring her to the Underworld. Following a severe reaction from Demeter that threatened to send the human race to starvation, Zeus sends Hermes to retrieve the girl.[29] Upon his arrival, Hades seemingly agrees to return Persephone to her mother, but before she can leave, he places a pomegranate seed in her mouth and she has no choice but to swallow it. Now that she has consumed food in the Underworld, she cannot permanently leave. Instead, she agrees to spend one-third of the year with Hades and the other two-thirds above ground. This version of the myth places blame for the incident squarely onto Hades' shoulders, and rightfully so. He willingly neglected Demeter and Persephone's feelings and used force to steal and keep his bride.

However, what if he was not fully responsible for his actions? What if, instead, Cupid's arrow struck him? This is the narrative that Ovid chooses to convey in his retelling of the myth. The Roman poet portrays the love goddess Aphrodite as the culprit: jealous that several Olympians have rejected her domain–including Hades and Persephone,–she orders Cupid to make Hades fall for Persephone, and Hades carries out the kidnapping in a similar fashion to the Homeric story, only this time without Zeus' consent.[30] With this one narrative choice, Ovid succeeds in deflecting the blame for kidnapping Persephone away from two male gods and

[26] Ovid, "Commentary," 433.
[27] Helene P. Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter : Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 2-4
[28] Foley, *The Homeric Hymn*, 2. Note the parallel to the red flower in Hadestown.
[29] Foley, *The Homeric Hymn*, 18-20.
[30] Ovid, "Book Five," in *Metamorphoses: The New, Annotated Edition* (Indiana University Press, 2018), 119.

making a goddess responsible. This is not the only way that Ovid introduces some female agency, though: when Persephone is in the Underworld, she voluntarily eats a few pomegranate seeds and seals her own fate.[31] Again, Hades seemingly is not fully at fault, and this version of Persephone must now spend half of each year underground–the length of time that Mitchell uses for *Hadestown*.[32]

It certainly would have been clear to Mitchell that for *Hadestown* she needed to make significant changes to the Hades-Persephone relationship: in order to make Hades work for her modern narrative, he must be a redeemable character who loves Persephone enough to try and mend their relationship despite their differences. Furthermore, if the two never had a loving marriage, then Orpheus' song would lose the majority of its meaning for the audience. To rectify this issue, Mitchell changes the narrative surrounding the immortal couple, adding some lyrics that imply that their love has always been mutual and consensual. For example, when Hades first falls for Persephone, the lyrics merely say that he "took her home," and there is no indication of violence, coercion, or trickery.[33] In "Epic I," there is a line that Orpheus sings: "the lady loved him and the kingdom they shared," and later in this same verse, the song reveals that the only reason for Persephone to spend half of the year aboveground was so flowers could bloom, all of this removing any possibility that she was initially unwilling to be in the Underworld full-time.[34] One other notable point is that Mitchell ensures to cast Persephone as an older woman, matching the age of Hades' casting.[35] It is possible that she has done this to minimize any implication that Hades went after Persephone when he was a middle-aged man and she was a young

[31] Ovid, "Book Five," 124.
[32] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 18.
[33] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 18.
[34] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 18.
[35] Mason, "A Ticket," 4.

girl–something that the ancient versions of the story suggest–but that would also have undermined his character's likeability.

While the marriages between Hades and Persephone and Orpheus and Eurydice are certainly some of the most important character relationships in *Hadestown*, the show also includes several other notable dynamics among its four main characters. One overarching parallel to address is the immortal ascent and the mortal descent present in the story: to retrieve Persephone, Hades must ascend to the land of the living; to retrieve Eurydice, Orpheus must descend to the land of the dead.[36] In both cases, they embark on their journey out of love–but also doubt. In "Epic II," Orpheus highlights Hades' insecurities, singing:

> He thinks of his wife in the arms of the sun
> And jealousy fuels him
> And feeds him, and fills him
> With doubt that she'll ever come
> Dread that she'll never come
> Doubt that his lover will ever come back[37]

Hades' fear of his wife leaving him is deeply reminiscent of Orpheus' reservations regarding Eurydice on their way back from the Underworld. In a song aptly titled "Doubt Comes In," Orpheus shows a self-conscious side to himself that the audience has yet to see: "Who do I think I am? / Who am I to think that she would follow me into the cold and dark again?"[38] Both characters do not deem themselves worthy of their wives, and their attempts to keep their loved

[36] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 32-49.
[37] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 35.
[38] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 94.

ones happy end up driving them away–Persephone preferring the living world and Eurydice preferring the Underworld as a result. Ultimately, this connection is the epiphany that Orpheus needs in order to convince Hades to let Eurydice go, and he sings: "[...] I know how it was because he was like me / A man in love with a woman."[39]

Persephone and Eurydice have their own complicated relationship brought about by Hades and his decision to bring Eurydice to Hadestown. As she dies, Eurydice partakes in a duet with Hades, "Hey, Little Songbird."[40] In the song, Hades seems to be hinting that he wants to have an affair with Eurydice as he sings, "You'd shine like a diamond down in the mine [...] And I could use a canary."[41] The concept of a woman dying and becoming a "Bride of Hades" was not unfamiliar to ancient Greeks.[42] After all, the ancient Greek word *kore* did not only mean "young woman"–it was another name for Persephone. When Eurydice accepts Hades' offer and gives her life away, she takes on a pseudo-Persephone stature; the goddess does not take well to this, immediately retaliating against her husband by distributing alcohol to his workers.[43] Despite limited face-to-face interactions between Persephone and Eurydice, Mitchell still succeeds in creating a sort of tension and understanding between them as Hades' chosen ones.

One thing that ancient versions of the Orpheus-Eurydice and Hades-Persephone myths lack significantly is character depth. In order to adapt these stories for the Broadway stage, Mitchell had to find ways to flesh out these characters and expand on their relationships with those around them, and in the process, she gave them the agency and empathy they so desperately lacked. It seems that she was successful here as well, weaving together the intricacies

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[39] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 80.
[40] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 43.
[41] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 43-44.
[42] Mason, "A Ticket," 31.
[43] Mason, "A Ticket," 31; Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 57.

of these mythological figures until she created a tapestry telling the timeless story of doubt, hurt, and love.

New Meanings

Simply taking two myths from antiquity and presenting them in a musical format would not be enough to create a compelling story in the 21st century. It also would not be nearly as effective at touching hearts, provoking thought, and providing social commentary–three things that make *Hadestown* so brilliant. The story must be modernized to some extent in order to maximize its effect on the audience. Mason echoes this sentiment by saying, "*Hadestown* updates these myths such that people across many walks of life and vast age ranges can relate to and empathize with the ancient characters and their stories."[44] The most obvious way that Mitchell accomplishes this is in the setting: while she keeps the location and time period of events ambiguous, she acknowledges that her inspiration for it was New Orleans in the American Depression Era.[45] This influence is especially noticeable in the music style–jazz and folk–as well as in the set that resembles a speakeasy aboveground and an industrialist factory underground.[46] Further alterations come in the form of reshaping the original characters to be more emotional and more human all around, and Mitchell accomplishes this in part through modernization. Through these updated characters, she is able to address numerous modern-day issues, most notably capitalism and substance abuse.[47]

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[44] Mason, "A Ticket," 2-3.
[45] Mitchell, *Hadestown*.
[46] Nia Wilson, "Hadestown: Nontraditional Casting, Race, and Capitalism." Tdr 65, no. 1 (03, 2021): 188-189; Mitchell, *Working*, 145.
[47] Mason, "A Ticket," i.

When it came to humanizing the one-dimensional ancient characters, Mitchell had her work cut out for her. "Theogony," one of the most well known accounts of Greek cosmology from the archaic period, only mentions Hades and Persephone's relationship and roles as King and Queen of the Underworld once: "There, in front, stand the echoing halls of the god of the lower-world, strong Hades, and of [the] awful Persephone."[48] "The Homeric Hymn to Demeter" and "Metamorphoses" provide some extra information, but it remains fairly limited–the poems rely primarily on epithets and sensory language as opposed to what the two gods think, feel, and say. This is not to mention the fact that the former is a story about Demeter's reaction to Persephone's abduction, so naturally it focuses much less on Persephone's relationship with Hades.[49] As for Orpheus and Eurydice, the myths are slightly better at giving Orpheus some depth, but Eurydice remains incredibly lifeless: a mere vehicle to drive the plot forward. Mitchell would spend years working diligently to flesh out each of these characters in unique ways.

Mitchell has claimed that Orpheus was the most difficult character to get right. In one book, *Working on a Song*, Mitchell elaborates on how she needed to completely reshape him when she realized that she had made him entirely too arrogant.[50] The result, "New Orpheus," is what *Hadestown* has today. Mitchell made this change because she knew that her protagonist needed to be likable and earnest: how else would he be able to convince the King of the Underworld to love again? He needed to consistently tap into his emotions and vulnerabilities, as well as show pure love towards Eurydice, not ownership. Besides, an arrogant man alone cannot possess the sheer power that Orpheus acquires through his emotions and vulnerability–powers strong enough to convince stones to move out of his path to the Underworld.[51] Mitchell's "New

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[48] Hesiod, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*, trans. Hugh. G. Evelyn-White, vol. 57 (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1914).
[49] Hesiod *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns*.
[50] Mitchell, *Working*, 19.
[51] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 66.

Orpheus" is gifted–but also naïve and self-conscious; he needs a mentor, Hermes, to help guide him on the right path and encourage his music.[52] This is a significant leap from the Orpheus portrayed in antiquity and in Mitchell's first attempts at writing him, but having the protagonist be worthy of rooting for is a pleasant change, even if he is not perfect.

For Eurydice, Mitchell wanted a resourceful young woman with an active role in her own story–something that previous variations of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth lacked significantly.[53] She meets Orpheus as a fully-grown individual with her own experiences and personality, and she does not fall for him immediately. In fact, she thinks he is crazy and idealistic until she sees with her own eyes the magic that he possesses.[54] However, when death comes upon her after a long night in the cold, she faces an impossible decision: stay alive and starve, or descend to Hadestown and leave Orpheus behind. This shift is significant, as it places the choice in Eurydice's hands. The young woman's rational, instinctive side takes over, and she accepts death as the better option.[55] She is the one to give herself up to Hades, and she must face the consequences of her actions when she arrives in Hadestown, establishing a much more compelling narrative than if she had simply died of a snake bite. The agency that Mitchell adds to Eurydice is part of a broader attempt to empower her female characters, ultimately making them more relatable to modern women.

Hadestown also has political commentary to make, particularly about the harm of industrial capitalism on society. The Underworld itself is a mining town known as Hadestown, and Hades, the "compulsive industrialist," is at the helm.[56] When people die, they take a train to the Underworld; once there, Hades puts them to work. Hermes describes it as a terrible place:

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[52] Mason, "A Ticket," 16; Mitchell, *Hadestown*; Mitchell, *Working*, 30.
[53] Mitchell, *Working*, 28.
[54] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 13-15.
[55] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 46-47.
[56] Mitchell, *Hadestown*.

Everybody hungry, everybody tired

Everybody slaves by the sweat of his brow

The wage is nothing and the work is hard

It's a graveyard in Hadestown[57]

Mitchell claims that her inspiration for this setting was America's increasing gap between the wealthy and the impoverished, as well as the sense of futility that comes with being in the working class for an entire lifetime.[58] This is especially clear in the scene where Eurydice begins working in Hadestown. She expresses concern over how emotionless the other workers are, and the Fates tell her:

They can hear

But they don't care

No one has a name down here

Mister Hades set you free

To work yourself into the ground

Free to spend eternity

In the factory

And the warehouse

Where the whistles scream

And the foremen shout

[57] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 30.
[58] Mitchell, *Working*, 83.

And you're punchin' in [....]

And you can't punch out[59]

As eternal laborers for Hades, the people of the Underworld have lost themselves and become nameless cogs in a machine. Eurydice responds to this information with utmost terror, and in that moment it is clear what Mitchell really thinks of neoliberalism and industrial capitalism.

The same is true of Persephone, who has become deeply disillusioned with her husband and his neoliberal outlook, claiming that what he is doing to the Underworld "ain't right and it ain't natural."[60] The springtime goddess laments all of the harm that industrialization causes for humans up above who now face an unnatural weather cycle, leading to starvation and harsh temperatures. Despite his wife's distaste, Hades remains insistent that he does it all for her, as a monument to their love. His stubbornness leads to resentment from Persephone, and to reprieve herself of her marital problems, she turns to alcohol.[61] Mason notes that she seemingly begins the story as a party drinker, but once she returns to the Underworld she begins to show signs of substance abuse, using it as a coping mechanism for when she is with Hades.[62] The strained marriage only worsens, and it all comes to a head when Hades brings Eurydice to Hadestown. Persephone finally sobers up when Orpheus arrives, asking for a chance to bring Eurydice back. She argues with Hades, declaring that "[she's] had enough"–both of alcohol and of Hades' behavior.[63] By including this narrative for Persephone, Mitchell incorporated a modern issue and used it as an opportunity for the goddess to experience growth, depth, and agency. Most notably,

[59] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 60-61.
[60] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 35-42.
[61] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 39.
[62] Mason, "A Ticket," 23-25.
[63] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 73.

she did it in a way that not only is unique but in a way that fits Persephone's role as Goddess of Spring–the perfect time of year for turning ripe grapes into wine.

Mitchell has written *Hadestown* as a love letter to the human condition; it takes its audience on an emotional journey that reckons with the best and worst parts of being alive. They get to watch love bloom and prevail, but they also watch it slip away. The show does not shy away from sadness–in fact, the very first song indicates what is to come:

> It's a sad tale; it's a tragedy
> It's a sad song
> We're gonna sing it anyway[64]

There is a lesson here: do not turn your back to the difficult things in life, but rather embrace them and continue to find joy despite the hardships.[65] The same is true of how *Hadestown* treats mistakes. None of the four main characters are perfect, and each of them makes at least one major mistake or immoral decision: Orpheus does not hear Eurydice, Hades does not listen to Persephone's wishes, Eurydice chooses to go with Hades, and Persephone runs away from her marital struggles. Each of these choices plays a major role in the hardships that befall the characters and the tragic ending. Despite everything, the audience roots for them anyway. During the song "Gone, I'm Gone," after Eurydice chooses the Underworld, the Fates–who usually act as the voices in the characters' heads–turn and directly address the audience:

> Go ahead and lay the blame

[64] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 5.
[65] Mitchell, *Working*, 63.

Talk of virtue, talk of sin

Wouldn't you have done the same?

In her shoes, in her skin[66]

They dare the audience to hate Eurydice for leaving Orpheus alone. They ask the uncomfortable question directly, forcing the audience to confront their own morality: wouldn't anyone have done the same? When Orpheus makes his fatal mistake at the end of the play, none of the characters scrutinize or criticize him–they simply repeat what they said at the beginning: "It's a sad song."[67] Then, as the audience takes in their despair, a glimmer of hope appears as the stage resets to how it looks in the opening number, and Eurydice and Orpheus enter, locking eyes once again–as if for the first time.[68] Orpheus may have failed this attempt, but maybe if he just tries one more time, he will succeed. This is where the play ends. After the show's curtain call, there is an encore in which the company raises a glass to Orpheus.[69] Mitchell elaborates on the meaning of this final scene, saying: "We raise our cups to Orpheus not because he succeeds, but because he tries. We understand implicitly that there's value in his trying and even in his failure."[70] This encore, and this quote, perfectly encapsulate the entire production–a final reminder to the audience that what matters most is trying. After all, failure is just one more chance to try again.

Modernizing myth while keeping its soul intact is not an easy thing, yet Mitchell once again does an expert job striking the perfect balance. The additional contemporary subtexts she

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[66] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 47.
[67] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 98.
[68] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 101.
[69] Mitchell, *Hadestown*, 103.
[70] Mitchell, *Working*, 255.

selects feel like logical inclusions that expand upon the ancient stories, rather than take away from their impact.

Conclusion

For M. Owen Lee, there is a clear set of criteria that adaptations of mythology must meet for him to deem them successful: "Any serious treatment [adaptation], however modern, must grasp the sources–ritual, legendary, dramatic–of the myth it uses; it must then present the same mysteries, ask the same questions, outline the same triumph and tragedy."[71] This paper has argued that despite numerous changes that Mitchell makes to both the Hades-Persephone and the Orpheus-Eurydice myths, *Hadestown* proves itself to be a phenomenal retelling of ancient Greek mythology. The major changes that she makes only serve to improve the source material and make it more accessible to modern audiences who may or may not be familiar with the stories the play is based on. It also brings about more ways for these audiences to empathize with and understand the choices each character makes, often prompting inward reflection as one considers what they have seen. This is crucial: these moments of self-awareness are what make stories worth telling in new and compelling ways, thus keeping them alive. At the end of the day, Mitchell is still tackling the millennia-old mystery of what death and the afterlife are like, as well as delving into the intricacies of magic and connection with nature. She also uses the production to engage in questions about what it means to live and to love, and why it is so important to keep trying despite the pain it brings. Lastly, Mitchell selects an ending to her adaptation in which Orpheus fails–the ultimate tragedy–for her audience to mourn and confront their despair. Yet after everything, the tone of the final song is triumphant, because maybe, in one life or another,

[71] M. Owen Lee, "Orpheus and Eurydice," 312-313.

Orpheus was just a little bit stronger. Perhaps somewhere out there, in a sea of failed attempts, there is one Orpheus who saved his Eurydice–and this alone is reason enough to keep telling their story.

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