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"It Ain't Right, and It Ain't Natural": Masculinity and Class Conflict in *Hadestown*

Alaina DiSalvo

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the musical Hadestown, which reinterprets ancient Greek myth for a modern audience. The narrative juxtaposes the relationship between deities Hades and Persephone with the struggles of Orpheus and Eurydice, illustrating themes of exploitation and social inequality. This paper looks at the standards of masculinity and femininity that are forced upon people, and how these strict roles harm everyone. This paper argues that Hades' control over Persephone and the labor force mirrors patriarchal and capitalist dynamics, where women and workers are commodified. Ultimately, it suggests Hadestown is a cautionary tale about reformist approaches within oppressive systems, advocating for revolutionary change. A Marxian analysis is used alongside contemporary feminist thought to explore these dynamics.

KEYWORDS

mythology; musicals; patriarchy; environmentalism; socialism

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Background

Hadestown takes an ancient Greek myth and transforms it into a story about industrialization, exploitative capitalism, and social pressures to adhere to cisnormative gender roles. Writer Anaïs Mitchell retells the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice within the context of Hades and Persephone's relationship. Hades is the god of the dead, and he marries Persephone, the goddess of springtime. She lives with Hades for half of the year, causing fall and winter, and returns to the land of the living for the other half, causing spring and summer. Orpheus marries Eurydice, but she dies shortly after their wedding. To retrieve her from the Underworld, he uses his musical talents to move Hades and Persephone to compassion. He earns a chance to bring Eurydice back to the land of the living, provided she follows behind him and he does not turn back to check that she is there. As he ascends, doubt overwhelms him. Just before exiting, he turns to see Eurydice behind him. In that moment of doubt, she is lost to him forever.

Hadestown opens by telling the audience that something is wrong: the seasons are out of sync, food is scarce, and people endure harsh winters and scorching summers. Why is this happening? Orpheus has an answer: "The gods have forgotten the song of their love" (*Chant*). Instead of existing in harmony with his wife Persephone, Hades has become a conqueror, a capitalist mogul, who spends his time exploiting the resources of the Earth— which is his wife's domain— in order to accumulate wealth and exert control over the many workers in his employ. In this play, the Underworld (or "Hadestown") is not a place that human souls go when they die, but is rather an underground factory where the desperate poor go to earn a living. Here, Eurydice makes the decision to work at the underground Hadestown factory because she is desperate for food and shelter.

Orpheus plans to alleviate this suffering by reminding Hades of his love for Persephone and securing Eurydice's release. Just as the original myth ends in tragedy, so does the musical: because of a moment of Orpheus' doubt, Eurydice is lost to Hadestown forever. In a metatextual aside, Hermes, the musical's emcee, insists that they will keep telling the story of *Hadestown* "again and again." Why? The answer isn't stated outright. But Hermes recalls fondly that Orpheus "could make you see how the world could be, in spite of the way that it is" (*Road to Hell* (*Reprise*)).

Hades and Persephone: Environmental Conquest as Masculine Performance

On the Hadestown stage, a couple sits on an elevated balcony, playing dominoes. The man is dressed in a harsh pinstriped suit, and the woman wears a frilly green dress, holding a paper fan. They engage as equals in their board game for about half an hour before joining the action on the stage down below. This is Hades and Persephone, the god of the dead and goddess

of springtime, displaying their most affectionate and respectful interaction until the climax. *Hadestown* highlights the separation between the gods, who observe from above, and the struggling humans below. Hades and Persephone represent a bourgeois class whose material interests shape the lives of the proletariat.

Hades is the owner of a large corporation, but this is not the only source of his power. His control over electricity, oil, and coal worsens climate change. Hades also brings Persephone back to the Underworld far before six months have passed, making spring and summer unusually short. These efforts combined lead to famine and increased desperation for factory jobs. Aside from pure economic strategy, there is another motivation for Hades' decision to take Persephone underground early. As Orpheus explains, Hades is consumed by loneliness during Persephone's absence, and he feels intense jealousy at the thought "of his wife in the arms of the sun" (*Epic II*). The specific invocation of human imagery to describe the sun points toward Hades' jealousy being rooted in the fear of emasculation. His insecurity compels him to accumulate more power and resources, reflecting a constant struggle against feelings of inadequacy and the fear of being abandoned or overthrown.

Hades views relationships as purely transactional, which has left him unfulfilled despite his immense wealth and power. His obsession with material gain has caused him to lose sight of what he once cherished most: his wife, Persephone, and their mutual love. Immersed in a capitalist mindset, he feels disconnected from those around him and finds no joy in his relationships. Hades has "resolved personal worth into exchange value" and "reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (Marx and Engels 1848, p. 9). Persephone, valuing nature for its own sake, is entirely foreign to Hades and beyond his understanding.

As the goddess of springtime and the herald of summer, Persephone is intimately connected with the natural world. Therefore, by exploiting the earth for its resources of precious metals, oil, and coal, Hades is exploiting his wife. The connection between Persephone and the earth is made explicit in *Hadestown* and in ancient myth, but the connection between the earth and women, more generally, is a recurring concept throughout history.

This connection to nature is not purely aesthetic. In fact, it has real implications in regards to economic and social stratification. Maria Mies (1986) argues that the modern imperial system was built upon social divisions formed between racial, ethnic, national, and gender groups. Concurrent with the development of capitalism, patriarchal men began to "*externalize* or *exterritorialize* those whom [they] wanted to exploit" (p. 74). The logic behind this is clear: if a person or group is characterized as 'other,' it becomes much easier to inflict violence and injustice upon them. In *Hadestown*, Hades no longer thinks of Persephone as similar to himself. Rather, she is a foreign entity that must be conquered and subjugated in order to protect the

system.

Mies takes her argument a step further and contends that under the guise of legitimate scientific analysis, men in the age of industrialization would build "new machines" using natural resources, "by which he could make himself independent of Mother Nature" (p. 75). This framing adds clarity to the motivation behind Hades' actions. Hades is worried that without Persephone, he will have nothing to show for his life. Therefore, he hopes to take advantage of her resources to create a mechanized world, one in which, he hopes, he will eventually be able to succeed on his own terms.

Nancy Hartsock (2004) links the identification of women with nature to the capitalist economy: "Women *are* commodities [...] in obvious ways: most of the women in the world are disposed of and controlled by others" (p. 15). In this way, Hades' domination of Persephone can be extrapolated as a model for capitalistic gender relations. Women participate in the economy as part of the labor force, but they are also, often, the products being sold and the resources being extracted. This refers to women in the workforce, but also to women as objects of sexual desire and as the reproducers of the species. Women are exploited at every point in the capitalist process of production. As long as society prioritizes acquiring wealth over interpersonal respect and care, women will not achieve meaningful equality or liberation and men will not relate to women as fellow human beings.

Hades reveals more of his internal thought processes as the play goes on. He tells Orpheus that women are not to be trusted, and that the only way to reliably keep a woman by his side is to

"Hang a chain around her throat
Made of many carat gold
Shackle her from wrist to wrist
With sterling silver bracelets
Fill her pockets full of stones
Precious ones, diamonds
Bind her with a golden band" (*Chant* (*Reprise*)).

Hades' advice is multilayered. He contrasts the violent imagery of captivity with the allure of precious metals and jewelry. Rather than using physical violence, he exploits his wealth to entice Persephone to stay, believing she will choose to stay with him for the comfort he offers. Thus, Persephone faces a dilemma: be free and impoverished, or wealthy and enslaved.

This choice is not only Persephone's to make. Hades controls both his wife and his workers through similar coercive tactics. When he tries to lure Eurydice to work for him, he claims her only chance for food and shelter is to sign a lifetime contract with his factory (*Hey*,

Little Songbird). This reflects a broader trend in capitalism where workers face the illusion of free choice, needing to sell their labor for basic necessities like food, shelter, and healthcare. Karl Marx (1844) classifies "forced labor" as any work which is "not the satisfaction of a need but a mere means to satisfy needs outside itself." Forced labor reduces a person, in their own mind, to "nothing more than an animal" as they are compelled to engage in work that "does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies [the] flesh and ruins [the] mind" (p. 43). Hades stresses that he does not force anyone to work for him. Arguably, he is presenting a false idea of choice. Due to the intense economic pressures placed on them, his workers do not have any real freedom to choose whether or not they want to work in his factory. Likewise, due to the material conditions Hades has created, Persephone does not have the freedom to leave Hades if she so chooses.

The workers of Hadestown spend their days building a massive wall to separate their factory town from the so-called dangers of the outside world. They are indoctrinated to feel lucky for employment, and told the outside world is filled with ruthless people and extreme poverty (*Why We Build the Wall*). Hades keeps them terrified of the outside so they won't realize Hades himself is the cause of their suffering. Over time, the grueling labor completely erases their sense of identity (*Way Down Hadestown* (*Reprise*)). As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848) explain, the mechanization and stratification of industrialized labor causes work to "los[e] all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman." The Hadestown workers have become completely interchangeable with one another– they are "appendage[s] of the machine." They complete "only the most simple, most monotonous" work Hades assigns to them: swinging their pickaxes and building a wall to protect them from imaginary dangers (p. 14).

One stylistic choice in the portrayal of Hades is the extremely low tone of his voice. Hades' voice is *startlingly* deep: in one performance of the show, the crowd laughed the first time he spoke, suggesting they thought his overly-low tone was supposed to be a joke. The intimidating sound of Hades' voice is certainly reminiscent of his underground kingdom, but there is another layer to it as well. Judith Butler (1990) argues that "gender proves to be performance– that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (p. 25). Hades is, above all else, performing masculinity. This is not his natural voice– instead, it is an affectation meant to convey specific social status. Hades puts on a low voice because he is terrified of being seen as feminine or weak.

Further support for this idea comes in the middle of the second act. Orpheus successfully reminds Hades of a song he sang when he first fell in love with Persephone. Hades sings it once again, and his voice is barely audible and noticeably timid, hitting higher notes than ever before.

By singing this song, Hades humbles himself and embraces the feminine aspects of his character. Hades does have real love for his wife, but he hides it behind bravado and thundering shouts out of fear. Orpheus gets Hades to peel away his mask and engage with Persephone in a genuinely respectful and loving way.

Orpheus may fail in his personal journey, but he succeeds in reconciling Hades and Persephone. As the musical comes to a close, Hades allows Persephone to go back to the upper world right on time, putting the seasons back on schedule (*Wait for Me* (*Reprise*)). Over the course of this story, Hades acknowledges that the world needs balance. There cannot be unfettered masculinity without femininity. There cannot be winter without spring.

Orpheus and Eurydice: Reformism

Hadestown establishes traditional gender roles with Persephone and Hades, and then subverts them with Orpheus and Eurydice. Eurydice focuses on survival, seeking food, firewood, and shelter, while Orpheus detaches from the physical world to focus on his music and understanding the causes of disorder in their society. This division between the practical and the theoretical, the immediate and the far-away, can easily be envisioned as a gender divide. Hades and Persephone embody this contrast in a traditional, heteronormative way: Hades is fixated on the physical— mining, refining oil, and building walls— while Persephone drinks her cares away and tells wistful stories about the past. Hades is rooted in the present, while Persephone tries to escape it. This dynamic parallels Eurydice and Orpheus, with Eurydice as the practical Hades and Orpheus as the romantic, detached Persephone.

Eurydice suffers unimaginable hardship and realizes that her only chance at survival is to work a degrading job. Eurydice does not want to leave Orpheus, who she deeply loves, but her hunger for a better way of life wins out. Eurydice's personal desires are completely subsumed by the material conditions of her life. Eurydice can "live only so long as [she] find[s] work," and she "find[s] work only so long as [her] labor increases capital" (Marx and Engels 1848, p. 13). Her options are to work to increase Hades' personal wealth or to starve to death. Once Eurydice makes the decision to sign her life away, the three Fates (personifications of negative thoughts and doubts) ask the audience: "Wouldn't you have done the same?" Abandoning the man she loves and going to work for an obviously cruel man seems like a horrible decision. But, almost anticipating this criticism of Eurydice, the Fates continue:

"You can have your principles
When you've got a bellyful
Hunger has a way with you
There's no telling what you're gonna do." (*Gone, I'm Gone*)

These lines hint at the musical's main message: individual beliefs and attitudes are largely irrelevant in the face of exploitative material conditions pressuring the entire world to fall in line.

Nancy Hartsock (2004) argues that "the global labor force is being feminized in several ways" (p. 14). She outlines three trends: more women are joining the workforce, workers face discipline once directed only at women, and popular work types trend towards what used to be classified as strictly women's work. The relationship between bourgeois and proletarian is hierarchical and imbalanced in a way that is reminiscent of gender relations. Arguably, to be a member of the proletarian class is a subordinated, feminized social position. This is reflected in Eurydice's description of Hades, which uses language simultaneously reminiscent of a medical doctor and a sexual predator: "I trembled when he laid me out. 'You won't feel a thing,' he said, 'when you go down. Nothing gonna wake you now" (*Flowers*). When Hades leads a propagandistic chant about the importance of factory work, Persephone dutifully echoes him along with the workers (*Why We Build the Wall*). In summary, employer-worker dynamics echo gender relations in Hadestown and beyond.

Orpheus' association with the feminine, due in part to his class position, is repeatedly reinforced with references to nature and life. Eurydice says that Orpheus' presence is like having "sunlight all around [her]" (*All I've Ever Known*). When Eurydice asks how Orpheus will be able to provide for her needs, the impoverished Orpheus insists that everything they need for a wedding will be provided by the trees, rivers, and birds. The song Orpheus is trying to complete, he insists, will bring the spring. As proof, he shows that when he sings a few notes of his new composition, a flower appears in his hand (*Wedding Song*). When Orpheus journeys to the Underworld to bring Eurydice back, he remarks that the "rocks and stones" are "echoing [his] song"— or, in other words, he feels his quest is supported by the natural world (*Wait for Me*).

Hadestown is a story about nature. There are two definitions of nature which both need to be taken into account in this analysis: nature as plants, trees, and wild places; and nature as what is typical, expected, or inevitable. The title of this piece comes from the song *Chant*, where Persephone chastises Hades for corrupting the natural world to build his factory:

"In the coldest time of year
Why is it so hot down here?
Hotter than a crucible
It ain't right, and it ain't natural."

Persephone's argument is twofold. Hades is evidently exploiting the resources of the natural (as in, wild) world to produce electricity, oil, and metals. But Persephone is also invoking the 'natural law'— the idea that things must follow the expected and traditional rules of the world. Hades' factory is a corruption of the environment and an overextension of his authority. Since the

natural world is Persephone's domain, she argues that Hades has no right to interfere with it. This raises an important question: is Hades' behavior an unexpected flaw in the system, or is it a natural consequence of the way the system is set up? Is he suddenly overextending his authority or simply achieving the goal he's had in mind since the very beginning?

This belief in the two types of nature is another characteristic that unites Persephone and Orpheus. Orpheus believes he has both types of nature on his side, but his view is distorted. His optimism makes him imagine good intentions and happy endings where they don't exist. Early in the musical, Orpheus is asked to toast Persephone. The audience has already seen that she is a rather inconsiderate, self-interested alcoholic, but Orpheus's toast is glowingly positive. His words reflect not who she is, but who she *could* be. His toast reveals more about his worldview than it does about Persephone herself:

> "To the patroness of all of this, Persephone
> Who has finally returned to us with wine enough to share
> Asking nothing in return except that we should live
> And learn to live as brothers in this life
> And to trust she will provide
> And if no one takes too much, there will always be enough
> She will always fill our cups
> And we will always raise them up:
> To the world we dream about
> And the one we live in now." *(Livin' it Up on Top)*

Orpheus believes Persephone will solve all his problems and restore society to its harmonious past. However, this past is nothing more than a fantasy. The world has never been free of flaws, and Persephone certainly isn't able or willing to fix everything in the present. In fact, right after this toast, she is brought back to the Underworld by Hades. There is no proof that life has ever been free from prejudice, hierarchy, and violence. So why does Orpheus cling to this idea? Like many before him, he imagines a perfect matriarchy— a goddess-worshiping, woman-led society free from patriarchy's ills. Cynthia Eller (2011) explores the psychological roots of this belief within feminist movements:

> "Feminists have found in matriarchal myth license to hope that just as male dominance had a beginning in ancient times, it can have an end too: that oppression of women is not our only cultural heritage, but merely our most recent." (p. 5)

Imagining a matriarchal past has social utility. It is much easier to advocate for something if it has been done before, and is therefore provably attainable. Eller goes on to explain that because

this conception of the past is not rooted in historical fact, it can instead be seen as an indicator of the "cultural needs and desires" of its proponents (p. 13). Orpheus longs for social cohesion. He wants to live in a world where resources are apportioned equitably and compassionately. So, he imagines that this kind of world used to exist, and that he can bring it back if only he fixes what has gone wrong in Persephone's marriage. He ignores Eurydice's pleas for help finding food and firewood in order to work on replicating Hades and Persephone's love song *(Chant)*. He believes more than anything that if he succeeds, all of their material problems will disappear.

This belief does help Orpheus in some circumstances— not because it's true, but because of how strongly Orpheus believes it. As long as Orpheus maintains his belief in the imminent restoration of an egalitarian society, he succeeds. On his way to the Underworld, Orpheus is confronted and belittled by the Fates. They insist that his quest is doomed to fail, and that he has an overinflated sense of his own self-importance. He doesn't reason with them, or fight them. Instead, he starts to sing. His rendition of Hades and Persphone's love song forces the Fates into hiding— figuratively forcing back his doubts and fears *(Wait For Me).*

Once in the Underworld, Orpheus foments a workers' uprising. He publicly questions Hades' rule, and the Hadestown workers agree with what he has to say. The language he uses is remarkably radical, and remarkably critical of Hades:

"I believe that with each other we are stronger than we know
I believe we're stronger than *they* know
I believe that we are many, I believe that they are few
And it isn't for the few to tell the many what is true." *(If It's True)*

Orpheus invokes the language of worker unionization and socialist ideology. Specifically, Marx and Engels (1848) write that, in contrast to minority movements of the past, "the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority" (p. 19). The bourgeois class is miniscule compared to the size of the proletariat. What keeps the proletariat from assuming power is a lack of understanding of this social imbalance— a lack of class consciousness. The most successful unionization efforts are those that understand that there is power in numbers, and leverage their numbers against the owning class to carve out better working conditions.

Hades recognises the threat Orpheus poses to his power, and fears it. He also recognizes that no matter what he does, there will be problems. If he refuses to let Orpheus leave with Eurydice, he'll "have a martyr on [his] hands," inspiring further rebellion in the workers. But if Hades allows him to go, "[he's] never gonna get 'em in line again" *(Word to the Wise).* So, Hades comes up with a third option. Orpheus can leave with Eurydice as long as she walks behind him, and he doesn't turn around to make sure she's there. If Orpheus fails after being

given a chance, Hades knows, the rebellion amongst his workers will be quashed. Unlike in the original myth, it is not just Eurydice that Orpheus tries to save. If he successfully leads Eurydice out of the Underworld, the workers of Hadestown will follow. The workers implore him to "show the way," saying that "if she can do it, so can we" *(Wait for Me (Reprise))*.

At the most crucial moment, Orpheus' prophetic insight and optimism fail him. He loses his faith in his own ability to change the world. He starts to bend to Hades' will, and become certain that Hades' power over them all is absolute and unbreakable. When Orpheus turns around, it is not just Eurydice he dooms to a life of backbreaking, degrading labor. Orpheus had the opportunity to revolutionize his entire society, but failed to do so. The play ends there— except for a few more words to the audience, to make sure they understand the importance of what they have just witnessed.

Near the end of *The Communist Manifesto,* Marx and Engels critique earlier socialist thinkers. Their choice of words is important: instead of calling these earlier thinkers incorrect, they call their conception of the class struggle "undeveloped" (p. 97). These thinkers, in Marx and Engels' view,

> "...consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favored. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without the distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society? Hence, they reject all political, and especially revolutionary action; they wish to attain heir ends by peaceful means, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of such example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel." (p. 98)

This description unquestionably applies to Orpheus. Orpheus believes that all people are fundamentally the same, regardless of class. For example, when Orpheus recalls the story of Hades and Persephone's first meeting, he says, "And I know how it was because he was like me: a man in love with a woman" *(Epic III)*. Orpheus fails to see the glaring differences, in class and in gender expression, between himself and Hades.

Orpheus is opposed to revolutionary thought. He believes that by improving the lives of the bourgeoisie (Hades and Persephone), the system will begin to function the way it was supposed to function. This is the largest disagreement between Orpheus and the authors cited above: Orpheus believes that the system was intended to be fair, whereas Marx and Engels believe it was intended to be unfair. In their view, the system is not broken– rather, it is functioning exactly the way it was intended to function. Their view necessitates massive

upheaval and eventual revolution in order to achieve any meaningful social change. While being peaceful and conciliatory feels intuitively right, this approach is "necessarily doomed to failure."

This discussion centers in on the main question *Hadestown* asks: why does Orpheus fail? While Orpheus mends Hades and Persephone's marriage, the industrial system that sustains Hades' power remains intact. Orpheus seeks flexibility within the hierarchy but doesn't challenge its existence. This refusal— or, perhaps, inability— to destroy the system altogether is why their story ends in tragedy. On a personal level, his lack of belief spelled his failure. But if *Hadestown* is an allegory for larger social phenomena, then Orpheus failed because he did not overthrow the existing system. Hades is still in power, workers are still being exploited, and the proletariat are still in need of assistance. Eurydice will always go back to Hadestown. While this system still exists, what other choice does she have?

At the end of the play, Hermes explains that even though this story is a tragedy, they will continue to "sing it anyway" *(Road to Hell (Reprise)).* Why? Because Orpheus came so close. He had a lot of the right ideas. He was not incorrect in his approach, but simply "undeveloped." His actions "correspond with the first instinctive yearnings of that [proletarian] class for a general reconstruction of society" (Marx and Engels 1848, 98). This applies both to the social constructions of gender and of class. Orpheus attempted to lessen the strictness of gender roles and class divisions, but he did not attempt to eradicate these classifications altogether.

In his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), Marx notoriously makes the following statement: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (Thesis 11). In other words, it is not enough to "see how the world could be." Orpheus had the right interpretation. His method of enacting change spelled the end for him. Had he not left the Underworld according to Hades' demands, he would have maintained strength in numbers as he united with the workers. Then, he may have gone back to the upper world with a true change in his material circumstances. Orpheus didn't complete the journey, but he did begin it. Orpheus questioned the hierarchical systems of oppression, but that was only the first step. By aligning himself more fully with the interests of the working class, Orpheus could have broken down these systems and created a more equitable world.

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