THE HOMERIC
Hymn to Demeter

Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays

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THE HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER

Translated by Helene P. Foley

Demeter I begin to sing,* the fair-tressed awesome goddess, herself and her slim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus** seized; Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, gave her, without the consent of Demeter of the bright fruit and golden sword, as she played with the deep-breasted daughters of Ocean, plucking flowers in the lush meadow—roses, crocuses, and lovely violets, irises and hyacinth and the narcissus, which Earth grew as a snare for the flower-faced maiden in order to gratify by Zeus's design the Host-to-Many,** a flower wondrous and bright, awesome for all to see, for the immortals above and for mortals below. From its root a hundredfold bloom sprang up and smelled so sweet that the whole vast heaven above and the whole earth laughed, and the salty swell of the sea. The girl marveled and stretched out both hands at once to take the lovely toy. The earth with its wide ways yawned over the Nyssaen plain; the lord Host-to-Many rose up on her with his immortal horses, the celebrated son of Kronos; he snatched the unwilling maid into his golden chariot and led her off lamenting. She screamed with a shrill voice, calling on her father, the son of Kronos highest and best. Not one of the immortals or of humankind heard her voice, nor the olives bright with fruit, except the daughter of Persaios; tender of heart she heard it from her cave, Hekate of the delicate veil. And lord Helios, brilliant son of Hyperion, heard the maid calling her father the son of Kronos. But he sat apart from the gods, aloof in a temple ringing with prayers, and received choice offerings from humankind.

* The following divine genealogy will assist the reader in following the text. Gaia (Earth) and Ouranos (Sky) are the parents of Rhea and Kronos, who are in turn parents of Zeus, Hades, and Demeter. Zeus and Hades are thus both sons of Kronos. Demeter and Zeus are the parents of Kore/Persephone.

** Hades

YMNOS EIS DHMHTRA

Δήμητρ', ἡ κομή της θεών ἄρχου', ἀδελφῇ, αὐτὴν ἤδε θύγατρα τοιούτῳ ἄριστῳ Αἰδονεύς ἠρπαζέν, δόκεν δὲ βαρύκτυπος εὐφόρος Ζεὺς, νόσφυν Δήμητρος χρυσαόρου ἀγλαοκόρου παιζούσαν κούρηι τού Ὀξεανοῦ βαθυκόλου, ἀνθέα τ' αἰνιγμένην ὥδε καί κρόκον καὶ ἤ ἴα καλὰ λειμών' ἰμα μαλακόν καί ἀγαλλίδας ἢ' ὄσικθον νάρκισσον θ', ὃν φύσε δόλον καλκυκιπίς κούρη. Γαία Δεός βουλήσα ταριξμεμένη πολυδέκτη θαυμαστόν γαιόντα, αὔξα τ' ὧ πάσιν ἰδέσθαι ἄθανάτοις τ' θεοῖς ἢ' θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποις: τού καὶ ἀπό δόξης ἐκατόν χάρα εὐεπεθυκεί, ὃ γάρ οὐδήτερον ὃ τ' ὃνισσαν εὐφόρος ὑπερεθέ γαία τ' ἐξώλος καί ἄμνυστόν οἴδιμα θαλάσσης. ἢ' ἵ' ἄρα θαμβήσα τού νεοτέρου χερούν ἄμφω καλάν θυμίω λαβέθεν, χάνε δὲ χθόνια ἐφαυλίαμ Νῦσιον ἃν πεδίον τ' ἔρισαν ἄναξ πολυδέκτων ὠς ιδίας ἄθανάτους Κρόνου πολυπόρων ὠῶς. ἀργάζατο δ' ἀκέσουαν ἐπὶ χρυσότητον ὄξωσιν ἢ' ὀλοφυρομένην. ἰδίχρετο δ' ἦ γόρα φωνῆ τεκμολυμένη πατέρα Κρόνιδην ὑπατόν καί ἄριστον. οὐδὲ τις ἄθανάτων οὐδὲ θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων ἠρμόζε ἐφαυλίαμ, οὐδ' ἄγλασκαρπον ἔλατο, εἰ μὴ Παρασίτος θυγατήρ' ἄταλα φρονέσσα ἄνευ εἰ ἐν τῶν Ἰπαθίας λυτοχρησίδους, Ἡνίλος τέ άναξ. Ὑπερίσχος ἀγλάος ϊός, κούρης τεκμολυμένης πατέρα Κρόνιδην. ὁ δ' ἴδοι ϊός ἀφαίρετο ποιμηλίαν ἐνι κηρ' ἄσφαλον ἀπό τούς ἀνθρώπους.
Against her will Hades took her by the design of Zeus
with his immortal horses—her father's brother,
Commander- and Host-to-Many, the many-named son of Kronos.
So long as the goddess gazed on earth and starry heaven,
on the sea flowing strong and full of fish,
and on the beams of the sun, she still hoped
to see her dear mother and the race of immortal gods.
For so long hope charmed her strong mind despite her distress.
The mountain peaks and the depths of the sea echoed
in response to her divine voice, and her goddess mother heard.
Sharp grief seized her heart, and she tore the veil
on her ambrosial hair with her own hands.
She cast a dark cloak on her shoulders
and sped like a bird over dry land and sea,
searching. No one was willing to tell her the truth,
ot one of the gods or mortals;
no bird of omen came to her as truthful messenger.
Then for nine days divine Deo*** roamed over the earth,
holding torches ablaze in her hands;
in her grief she did not once taste ambrosia
or nectar sweet-to-drink, nor bathed her skin.
But when the tenth Dawn came shining on her,
Hekate met her, holding a torch in her hands,
to give her a message. She spoke as follows:
“Divine Demeter, giver of seasons and glorious gifts,
who of the immortals or mortal men
seized Persephone and grieved your heart?
For I heard a voice but did not see with my eyes
who he was. To you I tell at once the whole truth.”
Thus Hekate spoke. The daughter of fair-tressed Rheia***
said not a word, but rushed off at her side
holding torches ablaze in her hands.
They came to Helios, observer of gods and mortals,
and stood before his horses. The most august goddess*** spoke:
“Helios, respect me as a god does a goddess, if ever
with word or deed I pleased your heart and spirit.
The daughter I bore, a sweet offspring noble in form—
I heard her voice throbbing through the barren air

*** Demeter
as if she were suffering violence. But I did not see her with my eyes.
With your rays you look down through the bright air
on the whole of the earth and the sea.
Tell me the truth about my child. Have you somewhere
seen who of gods or mortal men took her
by force from me against her will and went away?"  
Thus she spoke and the son of Hyperion replied:
"Daughter of fair-tressed Rheia, mighty Demeter,
you will know the truth. For I greatly revere and pity you
grieving for your slim-ankled daughter. No other
of the gods was to blame but cloud-gathering Zeus,
who gave her to Hades his brother to be called
his fertile wife. With his horses Hades
snatched her screaming into the misty gloom.
But, Goddess, give up for good your great lamentation.
You must not nurse in vain insatiable anger.
Among the gods Aidoneus is not an unsuitable bridegroom,
Commander-to-Many and Zeus's own brother of the same stock.
As for honor, he got his third at the world's first division
and dwells with those whose rule has fallen to his lot."
He spoke and called to his horses. At his rebuke
they bore the swift chariot lightly, like long-winged birds.
A more terrible and brutal grief seized the heart
of Demeter, angry now at the son of Kronos with his dark clouds.
Withdrawing from the assembly of the gods and high Olympus,
she went among the cities and fertile fields of men,
disguising her beauty for a long time. No one of men
nor deep-girt women recognized her when they looked,
until she came to the house of skilful Keleos,
the man then ruler of fragrant Eleusis.
There she sat near the road, grief in her heart,
where citizens drew water from the Maiden's Well
in the shade—an olive bush had grown overhead—
since it was a very old woman cut off from childbearing
and the gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite.
Such are the nurses to children of law-giving kings
and the keepers of stores in their echoing halls.
The daughters of Keleos, son of Eleusis, saw her
as they came to fetch water easy-to-draw and bring it
in bronze vessels to their dear father's halls.

ος τε βιαζόμενης, άτομο οὔκ ἰδόν ὄφθαλμοιαν.
ολλά οἱ γὰρ δὴ πᾶσσαν ἐπὶ χθόνα καὶ κατὰ πόντον
αἰθέρος ἐκ δῆς καταδέχεσαι ακτίνειοι,
νημειτέως μοι ἔνοικη φιλὸν τέκνοι ἐστὶν ὅπως
ὅτι τῷ νόσφιν ἐμεῖο λαβὼν ἀκούσαν ἀνίκητον
οἶχαι ἐκ θεῶν ἦ ταῖς ἔνθεοιν ἀνθρώποιν.
'Ως δέ, τὴν δ' ὑπερισσύνης ἦμεβετο μέθυθορ.
'Πειρίς ἦμικομοι λυγάτηρ Δήμητρος ἄνασσα
ἐλθήσεις; δὴ γὰρ μέγα ἀξίωμα ἄδεια ἐλείριφο
ἀχυρομένην περὶ παι δυνασφύρω; οὐδὲ τις ἄλλος
αῖτος ἀδανάτων εἰ μὴ νεφεληγερέτα Ζεῦς,
ὅσι μὲν εὐφόρ' Ἁιδής βαλαρῆς κεκλήθη ἄκοπτον
ἀυτοκασιονήτηρ; δ' ὄπω ξόφον ἤρεθεντα
ἀφράτος Ἰπποιος ἔγεν μεγάλα ἴάχουσαν.
ἀλλὰ θεὰ κατάσπα ἡγεῖσθαι γᾶν; οὐδὲ τί σε χρή
μᾶν αὐτῶς ἀπέλησιν ἔχειν χόλον; οὐ τοῖς ἀείς
γαμβρός ἐν ἀδανάτως πολυημάντῳ Λιοδανεύς
ἀυτοκασιονήτος καὶ ὁμόπορος· ἁμαρτὶ δὲ τιμήθη
ἐλάχης ὃς τὰ πρῶτὰ διάτριβα δοσίμα εὐγήθη
τοῖς μετανεάτει τοὺς ἐλλαχει κοίρανος εἶναι.
'Ως εἰπών Ἰπποιος εἴκλετο, τοι δ' ὑπὲρ ὄμιλης
ἡμίφως φέρον θὸν ἀμά ταύνίστεροι ὡς τ' οἰνονί
tὴν δ' ἁχος αἰνότερον καὶ κύντερον ἴκετο θυμὸν.
χωσαμένη δήπετα κελανεψί τοι Κρονιών
νοόφθεσισ θεῶν ἄγορην καὶ μακρὸν 'Ολυμπον.
ἄγετ' ἐστ' ἀνθρώπων πόλιας καί πίονα ἐρżą
εἴδος ἀμαλδέννου πολύν χρόνον· οὐδὲ τὶς ἄνδρον
εἰροδόν γίνουσκε λαβὴζον τοῖς γυναικών,
πρὶν γ' ὅτε δὴ Κελεοί δαήφρονος ἴκετο δόμα,
ὡς τὸν 'Ελευσίνως τυφύσης κοίρανος ἄνεν.
ἔζετο δ' ἐγγὺς όδοιον φίλον τετειμήνη ἦτο
Παρθενίως φρέάται οἷς ὑδραύλοντο πολίται
ἐν σκηνή, αὐτὼ ὑπὲρεθε περίκεις βήμανος ἐλατῆς,
γοὴ παλαιεγεῖν ἐναλλήγορος, ή τὸ τόκοι
ἐξητήται δῶρῳ τοῖς φιλοπετάνων Ἀροδότης,
πως τῷ τροφῷ εἰς θερμαπολούν βασιλῆων
παίδων καὶ ταῖς κατὰ δώματα ἔχεται.
τὴν δὲ Ἰδόν Κελεοί Ελευσινίδα νύμφας
ἐγχόμεναι μεθ' ὅδιον εὔρηκον δόρφα φέρον
κάλποι χαλκέημα φίλα πρὸς δώματα πατρός,
Like four goddesses they were in the flower of youth, Kallidike, Kleisidike, fair Demo, and Kalithoë, who was the eldest of them all. They did not know her—gods are hard for mortals to recognize. Standing near her, they spoke in words.

"Who are you, old woman, of those born long ago?
From where? Why have you left the city and do not draw near its homes? Women are there in the shadowy halls, of your age as well as others born younger, who would care for you both in word and in deed."

They spoke, and the most august goddess replied:

"Dear children, whoever of womankind you are, greetings. I will tell you my tale. For it is not wrong to tell you the truth now you ask.

Doso's my name, which my honored mother gave me, On the broad back of the sea I have come now from Crete, by no wish of my own. By force and necessity pirate men led me off against my desire. Then they put into Thorikos in their swift ship, where the women stepped all together onto the mainland, and the men made a meal by the stern of the ship. My heart did not crave a heartwarming dinner, but racing in secret across the dark mainland I escaped from my arrogant masters, lest they should sell me, as yet unbought, for a price overseas. Then wandering I came here and know not at all what land this is and who lives here. But may all the gods who dwell on Olympus give you husbands to marry and children to bear, such as parents wish for. Now pity me, maidens, and tell me, dear children, with eager goodwill, whose house I might come to, a man's or a woman's, there to do for them gladly such tasks as are done by an elderly woman. I could nurse well a newborn child, embracing it in my arms, or watch over a house. I could spread out the master's bed in a recess of the well-built chamber and teach women their work.

So spoke the goddess. 'To her replied at once Kallidike, a maiden unwed, in beauty the best of Keleos' daughters.
“Good mother, we mortals are forced, though it hurt us,
to bear the gifts of the gods; for they are far stronger.
To you I shall explain these things clearly and name
the men to whom great power and honor belong here,
who are first of the people and protect with their counsels
and straight judgments the high walls of the city.
There is Triptolemos subtle in mind and Dioklos,
Polyxenos and Eumolpos the blameless,
Dochtios and our own lordly father.
And all these have wives to manage their households.
Of these not one at first sight would scorn
your appearance and turn you away from their homes.
They will receive you, for you are indeed godlike.
But if you wish, wait here, until we come to the house
of our father and tell Metaneira our deep-girt mother
all these things straight through, in case she might bid
you come to our house and not search after others’.
For her only son is now nursed in our well-built hall,
a late-born child, much prayed for and cherished.
If you might raise him to the threshold of youth,
any woman who saw you would feel envy at once,
such rewards for his rearing our mother will give you.”
Thus they spoke and she nodded her head. The girls
carried proudly bright jars filled with water
swiftly they reached the great house of their father.
At once to their mother they told what they saw and heard.
She bade them go quickly to offer a boundless wage.
Just as hinds or heifers in the season of spring
bound through the meadow sated with fodder,
so they, lifting the folds of their shimmering robes,
darted down the hollow wagon-track, and their hair
danced on their shoulders like a crocus blossom.
They found the famed goddess near the road
just where they had left her. Then to the house
of their father they led her. She, grieved in her heart,
walked behind with veiled head. And her dark robe
swirled round the slender feet of the goddess.
They soon reached the house of god-cherished Kelos,
and went through the portico to the place where
their regal mother sat by the pillar of the close-fitted roof,
holding on her lap the child, her young offshoot. To her they raced. But the goddess stepped on the threshold. Her head reached the roof and she filled the doorway with divine light.

Reverence, awe, and pale fear seized Metaneira.

She gave up her chair and bade the goddess sit down.

But Demeter, bringer of seasons and giver of rich gifts, did not wish to be seated on the silvery seat.

She waited resistant, her lovely eyes cast down, until knowing Iambe set out a well-built stool for her and cast over it a silvery fleece.

Seated there, the goddess drew the veil before her face.

For a long time she sat voiceless with grief on the stool and responded to no one with word or gesture.

Unsmiling, tasting neither food nor drink, she sat wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter, until knowing Iambe jested with her and mocking with many a joke moved the holy goddess to smile and laugh and keep a gracious heart—

Iambe, who later pleased her moods as well.

Metaneira offered a cup filled with honey-sweet wine, but Demeter refused it. It was not right, she said, for her to drink red wine; then she bid them mix barley and water with sweet mint and give her.

Metaneira made and gave the drink to the goddess as she bid.

Almighty Deo received it for the sake of the rite.

Well-girt Metaneira spoke first among them:

"Hail, lady, for I suppose your parents are not lowborn, but noble. Your eyes are marked by modesty and grace, even as those of justice-dealing kings. We mortals are forced, though it may hurt us, to bear the gifts of the gods. For the yoke lies on our necks.

But now you have come here, all that’s mine will be yours.

Raise this child for me, whom the gods provided late-born and unexpected, much-prayed for by me. If you raise him and he comes to the threshold of youth, any woman who saw you would feel envy at once, such rewards for his rearing would I give you."

Rich-crowned Demeter addressed her in turn:

"Hail also to you, lady, may the gods give you blessings. Gladly will I embrace the child as you bid me."
I will raise him, nor do I expect a spell or the Undercutter to harm him through the negligence of his nurse. For I know a charm more cutting than the Woodcutter; I know a strong safeguard against baneful bewitching.”

So speaking, she took the child to her fragrant breast with her divine hands. And his mother was glad at heart. Thus the splendid son of skillful Keleos, Demophoon, whom well-girt Metaneira bore, she nursed in the great halls. And he grew like a divinity,

eating no food nor sucking [at a mother's breast]; [For daily well-crowned divine] Demeter anointed him with ambrosia like one born from a god and breathed sweetly on him, held close to her breast. At night, she would bury him like a brand in the fire's might, unknown to his own parents. And great was their wonder as he grew miraculously fast; he was like the gods. She would have made him ageless and immortal, if well-girt Metaneira had not in her folly kept watch at night from her fragrant chamber and spied. But she shrieked and struck both thighs in fear for her child, much misled in her mind, and in her grief she spoke winged words. “Demophoon, my child, the stranger buries you deep in the fire, causing me woe and bitter cares.”

Thus she spoke lamenting. The great goddess heard her.

In anger at her, bright-crowned Demeter snatched from the flames with immortal hands the dear child Metaneira had borne beyond hope in the halls and, raging terribly at heart, cast him away from herself to the ground. At the same time she addressed well-girt Metaneira: “Mortals are ignorant and foolish, unable to foresee destiny, the good and the bad coming on them. You are incurably misled by your folly. Let the god's oath, the implacable water of Styx, be witness, I would have made your child immortal and ageless forever; I would have given him unfailing honor. But now he cannot escape death and the death spirits. Yet unfailing honor will forever be his, because he lay on my knees and slept in my arms.
In due time as the years come round for him,
the sons of Eleusis will continue year after year
to wage war and dread combat against each other.
For I am honored Demeter, the greatest
source of help and joy to mortals and immortals.
But now let all the people build me a great temple
with an altar beneath, under the sheer wall
of the city on the rising hill above Kallichoron.
I myself will lay down the rites so that hereafter
performing due rites you may propitiate my spirit.”
Thus speaking, the goddess changed her size and appearance,
thrusting off old age. Beauty breathed about her and
from her sweet robes a delicious fragrance spread;
a light beamed far out from the goddess’s immortal skin,
and her golden hair flowed over her shoulders.
The well-built house flooded with radiance like lightning.
She left the halls. At once Metaneira’s knees buckled.
For a long time she remained voiceless, forgetting
to pick up her dear only son from the floor.
But his sisters heard his pitiful voice and
leapt from their well-spread beds. Then one took
the child in her arms and laid him to her breast.
Another lit the fire; a third rushed on delicate feet
to rouse her mother from her chamber.
Gathering about the gasping child, they bathed and
embraced him lovingly. Yet his heart was not comforted,
for lesser nurses and handmaids held him now.
All night they tried to appease the dread goddess,
shaking with fear. But when dawn appeared,
they explained to wide-ruling Kleos exactly
what the bright-crowned goddess Demeter commanded.
Then he called to assembly his innumerable people
and bid them build for fair-tressed Demeter
a rich temple and an altar on the rising hill.
Attentive to his speech, they obeyed at once and did
as he prescribed. It grew as the goddess decreed.
But once they finished and ceased their tool,
each went off home. Then golden-haired Demeter
remained sitting apart from all the immortals,
wafting with desire for her deep-girt daughter.
For mortals she ordained a terrible and brutal year
on the deeply fertile earth. The ground released
no seed, for bright-crowned Demeter kept it buried.
In vain the oxen dragged many cursed plows down
the furrows. In vain much white barley fell on the earth.
She would have destroyed the whole mortal race
by cruel famine and stolen the glorious honor of gifts
and sacrifices from those having homes on Olympus,
if Zeus had not seen and pondered their plight in his heart.
First he roused golden-winged Iris to summon
fair-tressed Demeter, so lovely in form.
Zeus spoke and Iris obeying the dark-clouded
son of Kronos, raced swiftly between heaven and earth.
She came to the citadel of fragrant Eleusis
and found in her temple dark-robed Demeter.
Addressing her, she spoke winged words:
“Demeter, Zeus, the father, with his unfailling knowledge
bids you rejoin the tribes of immortal gods.
Go and let Zeus’s word not remain unfulfilled.”
Thus she implored, but Demeter’s heart was unmoved.
Then the father sent in turn all the blessed immortals;
one by one they kept coming and pleasing
and offered her many glorious gifts and whatever
honors she might choose among the immortal gods.
Yet not one could bend the mind and thought
of the raging goddess, who harshly spurred their pleas.
Never, she said, would she mount up to fragrant
Olympus nor release the seed from the earth,
until she saw with her eyes her own fair-faced child.
When Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced,
heard this, he sent down the Slayer of Argos**** to Erebor
with his golden staff to wheedle Hades with soft words
and lead back holy Persephone from the misty gloom
into the light to join the gods so that her mother
might see her with her eyes and desist from anger.
Hermes did not disobey. At once he left Olympus’s height
and plunged swiftly into the depths of the earth.
He met lord Hades inside his dwelling,

**** Hermes
reclining on a bed with his shy spouse, strongly reluctant through desire for her mother. [Still she, Demeter, was brooding on revenge for the deeds of the blessed gods]. The strong Slayer of Argos stood near and spoke: "Dark-haired Hades, ruler of the dead, Father Zeus bids me lead noble Persephone up from Erebos to join us, so that her mother might see her with her eyes and cease from anger and dread wrath against the gods. For she is devising a great scheme to destroy the helpless race of mortals born on earth, burying the seed beneath the ground and obliterating divine honors. Her anger is terrible, nor does she go among the gods but sits aloof in her fragrant temple, keeping to the rocky citadel of Eleusis."

Thus he spoke and Aion, lord of the dead, smiled with his brows, nor disobeyed king Zeus’s commands. At once he urged thoughtful Persephone: "Go, Persephone, to the side of your dark-robed mother, keeping the spirit and temper in your breast benign. Do not be so sad and angry beyond the rest; in no way among immortals will I be an unsuitable spouse, myself a brother of father Zeus. And when you are there, you will have power over all that lives and moves, and you will possess the greatest honors among the gods. There will be punishment forevermore for those wrongdoers who fail to appease your power with sacrifices, performing proper rites and making due offerings.”

Thus he spoke and thoughtful Persephone rejoiced. Eagerly she leapt up for joy. But he gave her to eat a honey-sweet pomegranate seed, stealthily passing it by her, lest she once more stay forever by the side of revered Demeter of the dark robe. Then Aion commander-to-many yoked his divine horses before the golden chariot. She mounted the chariot and at her side the strong Slayer of Argos took the reins and whip in his hands and dashed from the halls. The horses flew eagerly; swiftly they completed the long journey; not sea nor river waters, not grassy glens nor mountain peaks slowed the speed of the immortal horses,
slicing the deep air as they flew above these places.

He brought them to a halt where rich-crowned Demeter waited before the fragrant temple. With one look she darted like a maenad down a mountain shaded with woods.

On her side Persephone, [seeing] her mother’s [radiant face], [left chariot and horses.] and leapt down to run [and fall on her neck in amicable],

[While holding her dear child in her arms], her [heart suddenly sensed a trick. Fearful, she drew back from [her embrace and at once inquired:]

“My child, tell me, you [did not taste] food [while below?] Speak out [and hide nothing, so we both may know.]  
[For if not], ascending [from miserable Hades],
you will dwell with me and your father, the dark-clouded [son of Kronos], honored by all the gods.

But if [you tasted food], returning beneath [the earth,]
you will stay a third part of the seasons [each year],
but two parts with myself and the other immortals.

When the earth blooms in spring with all kinds of sweet flowers, then from the misty dark you will rise again, a great marvel to gods and mortal men.

By what guile did the mighty Host-to-Many deceive you?” Then radiant Persephone replied to her in turn:

“I will tell you the whole truth exactly, Mother.

The Slayer of Argos came to bring fortunate news from my father, the son of Kronos, and the other gods and lead me from Erebos so that seeing me with your eyes you would desist from your anger and dread wrath at the gods. Then I leapt up for joy, but he stealthily put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it.

For the rest—how seizing me by the shrewd plan of my father, Kronos’s son, he carried me off into the earth’s depths—

I shall tell and elaborate all that you ask.

We were all in the beautiful meadow—
Leukippe; Phaino; Elektra; and Ianthé; Melitè; Iachè; Rhodée; and Kallirhoe; Melibosis; Tyché; and flower-faced Okyrhoe; Khrýsceis; Ianeira; Akasté; Admeté; Rhodopé; Plouto; and lovely Kalypsô;
Styx; Ourania; and fair Galaxaura; Pallas,
rouser of battles; and Artemis, sender of arrows—
playing and picking lovely flowers with our hands,
soft crocus mixed with irises and hyacinths,
rosebuds and lilies, a marvel to see, and
the narcissus that wide earth bore like a
circle. As I joyously plucked it, the ground gaped from beneath
and the mighty lord, Host-to-Many, rose from it
and carried me off beneath the earth in his golden chariot
much against my will. And I cried out at the top of my voice.
I speak the whole truth, though I grieve to tell it.”
Then all day long, their minds at one, they soothed
each other’s heart and soul in many ways,
embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned grief,
as they gave and received joy between them.

Hekate of the delicate veil drew near them
and often caressed the daughter of holy Demeter;
from that time this lady served her as chief attendant.
To them Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced,
sent as mediator fair-tressed Rhea to summon
dark-robed Demeter to the tribes of gods; he promised
to give her what honors she might choose among the gods.
He agreed his daughter would spend one-third
of the revolving year in the misty dark and two-thirds
with her mother and the other immortals.
So he spoke and the goddess did not disobey his commands.
She darted swiftly down the peaks of Olympus
and arrived where the Rarian plain, once life-giving
udder of earth, now giving no life at all, stretched idle
and utterly leafless. For the white barley was hidden
by the designs of lovely-ankled Demeter. Yet as spring came on,
the fields would soon ripple with long ears of grain;
and the rich furrows would grow heavy on the ground
with grain to be tied with bands into sheaves.

There she first lighted from the barren air.
Mother and daughter were glad to see each other
and rejoiced at heart. Rhea of the delicate veil then said:
“Come, child, Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced,
summons you to rejoin the tribes of the gods;
he has offered to give what honors you choose among them.
He agreed that his daughter would spend one-third of the revolving year in the misty dark, and two-thirds with her mother and the other immortals. He guaranteed it would be so with a nod of his head. So come, my child, obey me; do not rage overmuch and forever at the dark-clouded son of Kronos. Now make the grain grow fertile for humankind."

So Rheia spoke, and rich-crowned Demeter did not disobey. At once she sent forth fruit from the fertile fields and the whole wide earth burgeoned with leaves and flowers. She went to the kings who administer law, Triptolemos and Diokles, driver of horses, mighty Eumolpos and Keleos, leader of the people, and revealed the conduct of her rites and taught her Mysteries to all of them, holy rites that are not to be transgressed, nor cried into, nor divulged. For a great awe of the gods stops the voice. Blessed is the mortal on earth who has seen these rites, but the uninitiate who has no share in them never has the same lot once dead in the dreary darkness. When the great goddess had founded all her rites, the goddesses left for Olympus and the assembly of the other gods. There they dwell by Zeus delighting-in-thunder, inspiring awe and reverence. Highly blessed is the mortal on earth whom they graciously favor with love. For soon they will send to the hearth of his great house Ploutos, the god giving abundance to mortals. But come, you goddesses, dwelling in the town of fragrant Eleusis, and seagirt Paros, and rocky Antron, revered Deo, mighty giver of seasons and glorious gifts, you and your very fair daughter Persephone, for my song grant gladly a living that warms the heart. And I shall remember you and a new song as well.
divinity. The poet's wish for a "living that warms the heart" (biston thimère) at 494 may hint that he has already been initiated in the Mysteries and hopes that the better life that they promise will become his own. The goddesses will send Ploutos to earth as a guest in the houses of those they love, to give them aphiōs (489), presumably "agricultural abundance." Demeter and Persephone love initiates prophrōmenēs (graciously, 487), and the poet asks here that they be prophrōmenes (494) to himself. (The word prophrōn is used elsewhere at 140 and 226 of Demeter's proposal to serve the household of Keleos assiduously, and of the daughters' concern to take care of the disguised Demeter at 138.) The identical request for a "living that warms the heart" is made at the close of the later Homeric Hymn to Earth (30) and a similar request is made at the close of the Hymn to Helios (31). Nevertheless, I would suggest that in the context of the Hymn to Demeter the poet is deliberately choosing a particular closing request and using a traditional closing to special effect. Hence he claims like other initiates a living (biston) from Demeter because he is an initiate.

BACKGROUND: THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES AND WOMEN'S RITES FOR DEMETER

Helene P. Foley

The Eleusinian Mysteries

The ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES were the most important of the widespread Greek mystery cults of antiquity. Our sources for the Mysteries include the archaeological evidence of the sanctuary buildings, inscriptions, representations on reliefs and vases, and references in literary sources. Eleusis was situated on a trade route where the roads from Attika, Boeotia, and the Peloponnesos meet and approximately fourteen miles west of Athens. Archaeological evidence for a possible cult at the site of the later Mysteries begins in the Mycenaean period (fifteenth century B.C.E.). Substantial remains begin in the late Geometric Age (eighth century B.C.E.); the Goths probably destroyed the sanctuary around 395 C.E. The first hall of initiation or Telesterion was built at the time of the Attic tyrant Peisistratos in the mid-sixth century B.C.E. on the site of a temple dating from the late-seventh or early-sixth century.

For a thousand years from our earliest written testimony, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the Mysteries brought happiness and solace to initiates from the Greek world and later from the whole Roman Empire. The Hymn itself refers in detail only to the mythical origins of preliminary rites at Eleusis that could be revealed to outsiders and culminates with the founding of the cult and veiled references to the promises it offered to the initiate. References to the Demeter/Persephone myth apparently played a role at every stage of the rites, however, and it seems likely that the Hymn might illuminate some aspects of the Mysteries and their meaning for the initiate even if it reveals no details about the most secret proceedings.

1 Mylonas 1972 and others may be overly optimistic about the Mycenaean evidence. See Darque 1981 and Parker 1988: 102n.31 for citation of recent views, including as yet unpublished papers. Graf 1974:77, however, argues that the wide diffusion of the cult in Ionia indicates that it antedates the intrusive migration in the late Bronze Age.

2 On these controversial archaeological points, see e.g. Mylonas 1972. Imperial decrees of 390-91 C.E. also prohibited the celebration of pagan cults and thus helped to assure the demise of the cult of Demeter and Persephone.

3 Mylonas 1972:ch. 3.
PART I: TEXT, TRANSANSLATION, COMMENTARY

At least by the classical period (480–323 B.C.E.), the Mysteries were open to all persons who spoke Greek and had not committed murder: male or female, slave or free, Greek or Greek-speaking foreigner. Only the expense of initiation (fifteen drachmas or the equivalent of about ten days’ wages by the fourth century B.C.E.) could have precluded initiation for those qualified. A great civic festival, the Mysteries nevertheless effected no change in the civic status of the individual, such as creating citizens or initiating them into adult roles. The rites were conducted by priests descended from two families. The Euthyphradai provided the chief priest, or Hierophant (“he who shows holy things” or “makes them visible”), assisted by two priestesses; and the Kerykes provided the torchbearer or daktulos (assisted by a priestess) and the sacred herald or hierokeryx. The chief priestess of Demeter lived at the Demeterion; several other women, the Panagiae or Mellissae, may have helped to carry sacred objects from Eleusis to Athens and back.

All initiates, at least from the fifth century B.C.E. on, had to undergo a preliminary stage of initiation at the Lesser Mysteries at Agrai near the banks of the Ilissos River in Athens before undertaking the final initiation at Eleusis. The Lesser Mysteries, which took place in the spring at the Metron near the Thea, involved preparation and purification for the Greater Mysteries, and, one source reports, “an imitation of the story of Dionysos.” Several ancient sources state that the Lesser Mysteries were celebrated in honor of Persephone. Some of the preliminary rites shown on the two reliefs representing Herakles discussed below may have occurred at the Lesser Mysteries, at least from the fifth century on. The Lesser Mysteries were said to be founded in order to permit Herakles to be initiated into the Mysteries.

At Eleusis there were two stages of initiation. The first stage of initiation, the mystēria (pl. mystai) is one who closes his eyes and/or keeps his mouth shut. The final stage is described as epoptēs, the one who sees. The initiants, those who were being initiated for the first time, were individually sponsored and directed by initiates called mystagogoi, or leaders of the mystai. One could and did attend the festival more than once, as an initiate, as a would-be epoptēs, as a mystagogos, and again thereafter. The Mysteries, then, were apparently an experience worth repeating.

The Festival of the Greater Mysteries lasted a week or more. It occurred in the autumn month Boedromion (September/October) shortly before the

BACKGROUND: THE MYSTERIES 67

fall plowing. On the thirteenth of the month, the ephebes, young men of military age, left Athens for Eleusis to escort holy objects (hierai) on the following day to the Eleusinion at Athens. These objects were carried in boxes tied with ribbons by Eleusinian priestesses. On the first official day of the Mysteries, the mystai, or initiants, gathered at the Stoa Poikilē in the Agora for the prōrhēs, the proclamation made by the hierokeryx that “those impure in hands or incomprehensible in speech” (that is, murderers or barbarians who did not speak Greek) should not participate. On the sixteenth, the mystai marched to the sea in the bay of Phaleron to purify themselves by bathing and washed a pilgret that each would sacrifice immediately after returning to the city “on behalf of him or herself.” On the seventeenth there may have been a sacrifice to the two goddesses and on the eighteenth the mystai stayed indoors for the Epiphania, a festival for the god of healing Asklepios. Fasting may have occurred at this time.

On the nineteenth, the mystai and their mystagogoi left for Eleusis in procession on the Sacred Way from Athens to Eleusis. The procession included the sacred objects in closed chests, as well as a statue of Iakchos, a minor deity associated with Dionysos, whose name derived from a ritual cry at the procession. Branches called bakhos (myrtle tied with wool) were swung to rhythm. The day’s march to Eleusis included stops for sacrifice, prayer, singing, and dancing. On a bridge over the Kephisus River at the boundary between Eleusis and Athens, veiled or masked figures, a man and/or a prostitute (perhaps a man disguised as a woman), offered insults and obscene gestures to the mystai. Probably at this point, the descendants of the legendary king Krokos bound the right hand and left leg of each mystes with yellow woolen thread. Another ritual bath occurred at the salt streams on the Eleusinian side of the bridge. The mystai were welcomed at Eleusis and broke their fast. Kornai, circular earthenware dishes with tiny cups holding grain, peas, and beans, may have been carried in honor of the goddesses at this time. On this night the women apparently engaged in a pannychis, a night of song and dance that included aiōnios language.

The Telesterion, or hall where the Mysteries took place, could hold several thousand persons at a time (see the map of Eleusis, Fig. 6). The building was fundamentally different from the standard Greek temple. Almost at the center was the so-called Anatokoron, a rectangular stone construction with a door at the end of one of its longer sides. The throne of the Hierophant stood there, and no one but he could pass into the Anaktoron. A fire burned

4 For later evidence on Eleusinian sacred officials, see Clinton 1974.
5 Stephanoj of Byzantium under the entry Agro. See further Parker 1989.
6 Schola on Aristophanes Ploutos 1013; Athenaeus Deipnosophistae 6.254D; Hippolytus Refutatio omnium haeresium 5.8.
7 The name is associated with the Greek word for “blood” or “color,” and as a “bright mystes,” among. See also Clinton 1974. For further speculations, see Burkert 1983.276, n. 8.
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on its top through an opening in the roof. There was no room for elaborate machinery in this dark and crowded hall; the lack of windows, the Anaktoron, and the numerous pillars that held up the building impeded visibility.

The preliminary stages of the Mysteries from the thirteenth to nineteenth Boedromion purified the mystai and put them in the proper mental and ritual state to participate in the final secret rites. The Hymn alludes to certain of these preliminaries: fasting, washing, purification by torches, sacrifice, and the wearing of special clothing (and amulets). On the Lovatelli urn and the Torre Nova sarcophagus we see illustrated the veiled initiate (Herkale) sitting on a ram's fleece (see Fig. 3). At some stage a boy initiated "from the hearth" (the only child among adults) said and did certain things on behalf of all initiates.

We cannot reconstruct the well-kept secret of the actual initiation, or telete. The majority of our specific knowledge comes from hostile witnesses who often received their information secondhand: the early Christian fathers. Clement of Alexandria gives the password, or syntheim, of the Mysteries: "I fasted, I drank the kykeon (a drink of barley, water, and herbs), I have taken from the chest (kiste), I worked, and deposited in the basket (kalathos) and from the basket into the chest" (Protreptikos 2.21.2). This password may demonstrate that the initiate has performed proper preliminaries, but we do not know what objects are moved from chest to basket and back. Clement hints that they were objects of an obscene nature, perhaps representations of genitalia, but they may also have been tools, perhaps a mortar and pestle for grinding the barley for the kykeon. The rites took place in darkness until a great light shone when the Anaktoron was opened and the Hierophant appeared (Plutarch Moralia 81c, IG II 2 3811, Hippolytos Refutatio omnium haeresum 5.8.40, IG II–III 3811).

Aside from the display of sacred objects and sights, spoken words and sounds certainly played some role in the ceremony as well. Initiates seem to have experienced in some form the sufferings and reunion of the goddesses. Later sources tell us of a mystic drama in which the abduction of Persephone and the wandering and mourning of Demeter were re-enacted (Clement Protreptikos 2.12.2). Active participation in or elaborate representation of such a drama, however, would have been inhibited by the organization of space in the Telesterion. The mystai may have "seen" Kore (Papyrus d. R., 11).

See the Commentary on lines 33–50, 48, 190–211, and 210 for further detail on these preliminaries. Some commentators attribute certain of these preliminaries to the Lebost Mysteries. See nn. 6 and 7 above. The Hymn suggests that at least at this early period they were a part of the rites at Eleusis. See the parody of some of these preliminaries at Aristophanes Clouds 254–68.

11 At a later stage, girls may have been eligible. See Mylonas 1972:236–37.
Terror, anxiety, and bewilderment turned to wonder and clarification (Plutarch Moralia 47a); darkness turned to light. Aelius Aristides ("Eleusinios," Orations 19.2) describes Eleusis as "the most frightening and the most resplendent of all that is divine for humankind." As Plutarch (frag. 168 Sandbach = Stobaeus Anthologium 4.52.49), drawing on the Mysteries, describes the soul at the moment of death:

The soul suffers an experience similar to those who celebrate great initiations . . . Wandering astray in the beginning, tiresome walkings in circles, some frightening paths in darkness that lead nowhere; then immediately before the end all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat, and amazement. And then some wonderful light comes to meet you, pure regions and meadows are there to greet you, with sounds and dances and solemn, sacred words and holy views; and there the initiate, perfect by now, set free, is lost from all bondage, walks about, crowned with a wreath, celebrating the festival together with the other sacred and pure people, and he looks down on the uninitiated, unperfumed crowd in this world in mud and fog beneath his feet. 18

Similarly, the Hipponion gold leaf depicts mystai and Bakchoi in the underworld proceeding on a sacred way to eternal bliss, 19 and in Aristophanes' Frogs the chorus of mystai are shown engaged in joyous song, dance, and festival in the world below (448–55). Plato's Seventh Letter (334b7) stresses "the kinship of souls and bodies" produced by participation in mystery rites. It seems clear then, that the secret rites did not pass on any secret doctrine or worldview or inculcate beliefs, but that its blessings came from experiencing and viewing signs, symbols, stories, or dramas and bonding with fellow initiates.

Reliable ancient testimony tells us that the Mysteries guaranteed a better life and a different and probably better fate after death. The Hymn asserts that initiates are fortunate (alhoi) but that noninitiates do not have the same lot after death (480–82); Ploutos (agricultural abundance) visits the house of those the goddesses love (486–89). For Isokrates (Panegyrikos 4.28), the mystai "have better hopes for the end of life and for all eternity." Pindar (fr. 137a) tells us that "blessed is he who has seen this and thus goes beneath the earth; he knows the end of life, he knows the beginning given by Zeus." A fragment of Sophocles (frag. 837 Radt) closely echoes the Hymn: "Thrice blessed are those mortals who have seen these rites and enter into Hades: for them alone there is life, for all others is misery." For Cicero the initiate at

18 Trans. Burkert 1987:91–92. See also the passage inspired by the Mysteries at Plato Phaedrus 250bc.

19 The gold leaves, generally found in grave mounds, apparently instructed the dead initiate in Bacchic/Orphic rituals (probably related or similar to the rites at Eleusis) about what to do and say as he or she entered the world below. On the Hipponion gold leaf, see G. Fors and G. Pagliaro Carraelli 1974 and West 1975.
important part in the proceedings may also help to illuminate those aspects of the *Hymn* that occur in a female world. Because the Thesmophoria in particular is generally thought to be a very early Greek ritual, its proceedings and its related myths could have influenced Eleusinian rites and myths and explain in part the prominent role of women in both. Before considering the significance of these rites, I will summarize briefly two representative rites of Demeter, the Thesmophoria and the Hallow, in which women played the central or exclusive role. 24

Of these rites for Demeter, the most important was the Thesmophoria. This ancient rite was celebrated in different ways throughout Greece. In Attika the rite lasted for five days from the ninth to the thirteenth of the month Pyanopsion, at the time of the fall plowing. On the ninth of a festival called the Sterna, the women celebrated the return of Demeter with an all-night ceremony that included ribald jesting. On the tenth there was a local celebration at Chalimous. Women performed a sacrifice to Demeter and danced on the shore at nearby Koitas. The first day of the Thesmophoria proper was called the *anodos* (way up) or sometimes the *kathodes* (way down). The name *anodos* was said to refer to a procession up to the Thesmophorion, which was probably located on the hillside of the Pnyx in Athens (this was near the site of the popular assembly, a juxtaposition that was not lost on ancient comedians like Aristophanes, who in his *Thesmophoricaeae* [Women at the Thesmophoria] jestingly imagines the women instituting their own assembly); but it was also a term used to describe the ascent of the two goddesses from one sphere of the universe to another. The festival seems to have been dominated by citizen wives but may have included concubines and unmarried women (though probably not slaves). 25 Two prominent women were elected to preside over the rites. Women remained chaste during the period of the festival (the priestesses at the Thesmophoria were also unmarried). They did not wear crowns, because Persephone was captured while gathering flowers, and they could not eat pomegranate seeds that had fallen to the ground. They encamped in huts on the hillside. The second day was called the Nestea, "fast," or the Meskh, "middle day." The women fasted seated on the ground on beds made from willies and other anaphrodisiac plants; they imitated "the ancient way of life" before the discovery of civilization and mourned, probably in imitation of Demeter, for Persephone. 26 Men were excluded, and no public business


26 See Diodorus Siculus *Bibliotheca historica* 5.4.7 and Plutarch *Moralia* 378E.

or sacrifices were done in the city. Prisoners were released during the Thesmophoria. The final day was called the Kalligeneia, a day celebrating fair offspring. Probably the feast known to have occurred at the festival took place on this day. Our best ancient source (a scholion to Lucian's "Dialogue of the Courtesans") tells us that the festival was celebrated in accordance with the Demeter/Persephone myth. 27 When the earth opened for Koré, a swineherd named Euboulus was swallowed with his swine in the same chasm. In honor of Euboulus, piglets were thrown into the chasms of Demeter and Koré along with wheat cakes in the shape of snakes and phalli as well as the cones of the prolific pine tree. The rotted remains of the piglets are drawn from underground *megara* (probably pits) by women called Bailer (anastria) who had purified themselves for three days. They clapped and shouted as they descended to scare away snakes who were said to live in the chasms. The remains were mixed with the seed about to be planted in order to produce a good harvest.

Piglets are symbols of the fertility of animals and humans and of an agricultural rather than nomadic life-style; 28 they were also associated with female genitalia. This mixture of offerings raw and cooked are a thank offering to Demeter because she civilized humankind with her gift of grain. There are no good explanations of the role or time of some other rites in the proceedings. At one point women beat each other with a woven bark scourge called a *morosion*; a sacrifice called "the penalty" was performed, and a ceremony called "the Chalcidian pursuit" was held. 29 Aischronogia—ritual abuse, jesting, and "obscene" language (language improper for use at other times)—played a role in this and all other exclusively female festivals for Demeter, as well in the rites at Eleusis. 30 We are told that this custom derived from Demeter's laughter at coarse jokes when she was grieving for Korrē. A Christian source says that the women also worshiped a model of the female pudenda. 31

The festival contains many elements typical of seasonal fertility rites cross-culturally: mortification (fasting, mourning, sexual abstinence), purgation (the penalty sacrifice?), invigoration (the rite with the piglets, *aischronogia*, and beating with the *morosion*) may have been designed to drive out deathlike forces and make room for fertile ones), and jubilation (feasting). 32 As the Lucian scholion states explicitly, the rites both link and promote the repro
duction of humankind and agriculture. The exclusion of men from the first festival apparently led to myths of bizarre punishments inflicted on males who spied on the rites, as well as comedies (especially Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*) about the nature of this separate society of women.\(^{33}\)

The Halae was a festival of Demeter and Kore (Dionysos seems to have been included here as well) held at Eleusis in midwinter during the month Posideon (December/January). It was apparently a fertility festival celebrated for the sake of planted land at a time when the growth of the new shoots were slowed or arrested by cold weather. The rite was said to have originated in a mythical incident where wine was introduced into Attica. Dionysos gave wine to Ikarios, who was killed by shepherds maddened by the effects of the unknown drink. Punished by a permanent “state of shame,” they consulted the oracle at Delphi, which instructed them to make and dedicate clay sexual organs. The festival was founded in memory of this incident. In the view of some scholars, this actiological myth was a late addition to a rite of Demeter, designed to explain certain features of the rite. In this festival women again performed *stichomythis* and held up and probably are representations of male and female organs. The priestess whispered something secret concerning *klepismenia* (adultery) into the ears of the women. The male archons, or leaders, furnished tables inside the sanctuary for the women loaded with wine and with food of all kinds—though certain foods including pomegranates were prohibited. While the women feasted, the men remained outside expounding stories of the introduction of Demeter's agriculture into Athens.\(^{34}\) Other sacrifices to the gods were performed at this festival, some by the priestess of Demeter/Kore, and judging from the amount of wood ordered for the festival, a bonfire may have taken place.

Apparent Greek society thought women had closer connections than men had to both the hidden wellsprings of fertility and to death, the festivals of Demeter exploit this connection. Indeed, as Sherry Ortner has argued, human culture generally tends to associate women with nature and the supernatural.\(^{35}\) The growth of both human child and the seed occur out of sight; women are thus associated with the hidden sources of the fertility they produce. Women also played an important and intimate role in rites for the dead and in mediating between this world and the next. In addition, festivals of Demeter offered women a time to join other women in celebrating myths concerning social transitions from childhood to marriage and motherhood. They were permitted an exceptional autonomy—to *act*, speak, eat, and drink in ways not permitted to them in ordinary life. They left home and family for rites they themselves presided over; they had their


\(^{34}\) Our main source for this rite is again a scholion to Lucian (Rabe 1971 [1906]:279–81).